The Fool Errant eBook

The Fool Errant by Maurice Hewlett

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INTRODUCTION

The top-heavy, four-horsed, yellow old coach from Vicenza, which arrived at Padua every night of the year, brought with it in particular on the night of October 13, 1721, a tall, personable young man, an Englishman, in a dark blue cloak, who swang briskly down from the coupe and asked in stilted Italian for “La sapienza del Signer Dottor’ Lanfranchi.” From out of a cloud of steam—for the weather was wet and the speaker violently hot—a husky voice replied, “Eccomi—eccomi, a servirla.” The young man took off his hat and bowed.

“Have I the honour to salute so much learning?” he asked courteously. “Let me present myself to my preceptor as Mr. Francis Strelley of Upcote.”

“His servant,” said the voice from the cloud, “and servant of his illustrious father. Don Francis, be accommodated; let your mind be at ease. Your baggage? These fellows are here for it. Your valise? I carry it. Your hand? I take it. Follow me.”

These words were accompanied by action of the most swift and singular kind. Mr. Strelley saw two porters scramble after his portmanteaux, had his valise reft from his hand, and that hand firmly grasped before he could frame his reply. The vehemence of this large perspiring sage caused the struggle between pride and civility to be short; such faint protests as he had at command passed unheeded in the bustle and could not be seen in the dark.

Vehement, indeed, in all that he did was Dr. Porfirio Lanfranchi, Professor of Civil Law: it was astonishing that a bulk so large and loosely packed could be propelled by the human will at so headlong a speed. Yet, spurred by that impetus alone, he pounded and splashed through the puddled, half-lit street of Padua at such a rate that Mr. Strelley, though longer in the leg, fully of his height, and one quarter his weight, found himself trotting beside his conductor like any schoolboy. The position was humiliating, but it did not seem possible to escape it. The doctor took everything for granted; and

besides, he so groaned and grunted at his labours, his goaded flesh protested so loudly, the pitfalls were so many, and the pace so severe, that nothing in the world seemed of moment beyond preserving foothold. Along the winding way—between the half-discerned arcades, palace gateways, black entries, church portals—down the very middle of the street flew master and pupil without word spoken.

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They reached the Pra, skirted its right-hand boundary for some hundreds of yards, and came to the door of a tall, narrow, white house. Upon this door the doctor kicked furiously until it was opened; then, with a malediction upon the oaf who snored behind it, up he blundered, three stairs at a time, Strelley after him whether or no; and stayed not in his rush towards the stars until he had reached the fourth-floor landing, where again he kicked at a door; and then, releasing his victim's hand, took off hat and wig together and mopped his dripping pate, as he murmured, "Chaste Madonna, what a ramble! What a stroll for the evening, powerful Mother of us all!" Such a stroll had never yet been taken by Mr. Francis Strelley of Upcote in his one-and-twenty years' experience of legs; nor did he ever forget this manner of being haled into Italy, nor lose his feeling of extremely helpless youth in the presence of the doctor, his tutor and guardian. But to suppose the business done by calculation of that remarkable man is to misapprehend him altogether. Dr. Lanfranchi's head worked, as his body did, by flashes. He calculated nothing, but hit at everything; hit or miss, it might be—but "Let's to it and have done" was his battle-cry.

The lamp over the door of his apartment revealed him for the disorderly genius he was—a huge, blotch-faced, tumble-bellied man, bullet-headed, bull-necked, and with flashing eyes. Inordinate alike in appetite, mind and action, he was always suffering for his furies, and always making a fine recovery. Just now he was at the last gasp for a breath, or so you would have said to look at him. But not so; his exertions were really his stimulant. Presently he would eat and drink consumedly, drench himself with snuff, and then spend half the night with his books, preparing for to-morrow's lecture. Of this sort was Dr. Porfirio Lanfranchi, who had more authority over the wild students of Padua than the Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor and Senate put together.

The same lamp played upon the comely and ingenuous face, upon the striking presence of Mr. Strelley, and showed him a good-looking, good-tempered, sanguine young man of an appearance something less than his age. He was tall and supple, wore his own fair hair tied with a ribbon, was blue-eyed and bright-lipped, and had a notable chin—firm, square at the jaw, and coming sharply to a point. He looked you straight in the face—such was his habit—but by no means arrogantly or with defiance; seriously rather, gravely and courteously, as if to ask, "Do I take your precise meaning to be—?" Such a look was too earnest for mere good manners; he was serious; there was no laughter in him, though he was not of a melancholy sort. He pondered the world and its vagaries and examined them, as they presented themselves in each case, *upon the merits*. This, which was, I think, his strongest characteristic, should show that he lacked the humorous sense; and he did. He had no time to laugh; wondering

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engaged him. The life of the world on its round showed him miracles daily; he looked for them very often, but more frequently they thrust themselves upon him. Sunrise now—what an extraordinary thing! He never ceased to be amazed at that. The economy of the moon, too, so exquisitely adapted to the needs of mankind! Nations, tongues (hardly to be explained by the sublime folly of a Babel), the reverence paid to elders, to women; the sense of law and justice in our kind: in the leafy shades of Upcote in Oxfordshire, he had pondered these things during his lonely years of youth and adolescence—had pondered, and in some cases already decided them *upon the merits*. This was remarkably so in the matter of Betty Coy, as he will tell you for himself before long. Meantime, lest I keep Dr. Lanfranchi too long upon the threshold of his own house, all I shall add to my picture of his pupil now is that he was the eldest son and third child of Squire Antony Strelley of Upcote, a Catholic, non-juring, recusant, stout old gentleman of Oxfordshire, and of Dame Mary, born Arundell, his wife; and that he was come to study the moral and civil law at this famous University of Padua, like many an Englishman of his condition before him. He was twenty-one years of age, had as much money as was good for him and much more poetry than enough in his valise—to say nothing of the germ of those notes from which he afterwards (long afterwards) compiled the ensuing memoirs.

Dr. Lanfranchi had not said “Accidente!” more than twice, nor kicked his door more than half a dozen times, before it was opened by a young and pretty lady, who held a lamp above her head. She was, apparently, a very young and very pretty, rather little, lady, and was dressed with some care—but not more than her person deserved—in black and white. Her dark hair, which was high upon her head, was crowned with a large tortoiseshell comb. She held the lamp, as I say, above her as she curtseyed, smiling, in the way. “Be very welcome, sir,” she said, “and be pleased to enter our house.” It was charming to see how deftly she dipped without spilling the lamp-oil, charming to see her little white teeth as she smiled, her lustrous eyes shining in the light like large stars. It was charming to see her there at all, for she was charming altogether—in figure, in face and poise, in expression, which was that of a graceful child playing housewife; lastly, in the benevolence, curiosity and discretion which sat enthroned upon her smooth brow, like a bench of Lords Justices, or of Bishops, if you prefer it. This was none other than Dr. Porfirio’s wife, as he then and there declared by grunts. “Mia moglie—a servirla,” he was understood to say; and pushed his way into his house without ceremony, while Mr. Strelley, with much, kissed the hand of his hostess. The salute, received with composure, was rendered with a blush; for this, to be truthful, was the very first hand ever saluted by the young gentleman. The fact says much for his inexperience and right instinct at once.

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Quite at her ease, as if she were the mistress of a well-kissed hand, was Signora Aurelia Lanfranchi, for that was her name, and had been so for rather more than two years—quite at her ease and most anxious to put Strelley there. Relieving him of his cloak and hat, of his sword, pistols and other travelling gear, in spite of all protestations on his part, she talked freely and on end about anything and nothing in a soft voice which rose and died down like a summer wind, and betrayed in its muffled tones—as if it came to him through silk—that she was not of the north, but of some mellower, more sun-ripened land. She was in fact of Siena, a Gualandi by birth, and extremely proud of it. Strelley was so informed before he had been four-and-twenty hours in her company. But now, having spoiled him of his defences, she invited him into the salone, wooed him thither, indeed, with that sidelong head and sort of sleek smile with which you coax a cat to come to your knee. Mr. Francis would have followed her singing to the bonfire on such terms.

At the table, which was liberal, was the learned doctor seated already, napkin to chin. Mr. Strelley was shown his place, and expected to take it while the fair housewife waited upon the two; and when he seemed timid, she raised a wail of pretty protest and dragged him by the arm towards the chair. It was absurd, it was preposterous, he was robbing her of her pride. She had eaten long ago—besides, it was the woman's place, and Nonna was in the kitchen, ashamed to appear in the state she was in. Signor Francesco must please her in this—she would be vexed— and surely he would not vex his hostess. To this wilful chant the doctor contributed his burden of "Che! che! S'accommodi!" and rapped with his knife-handle upon the table. Old Nonna, toothless, bearded and scared, popped her head beyond the kitchen door; to be short, insistence went to a point where good manners could not follow. Mr. Francis sat himself down, and Donna Aurelia, clapping her little hands, cried aloud that victory was hers. "Quick, quick, Nonna, these signori are at table!" She stormed into the kitchen, and speedily returned with a steaming and savoury dish. She dispensed the messes, she poured the wine, she hovered here and there—salt? pepper? cheese? yet a little bread? Madonna purissima, she had forgotten the mustard! No! it was here—it was here! There must have been more rejoicings over the recovery of the mustard than were made for the victory of Lepanto. Betweenwhiles she talked gaily or pathetically or intimately of things of which the guest had known nothing, but immediately felt that he now knew all; the moral lapses of this professor or that, the unparalleled slight offered to Signora Pappagallo by Donna Susanna Tron, the storm of rain and thunder on Tuesday week—-no, it must have been Monday week; a scandal in the Senate, a duel in the Pra, how the Avvocato Minghini was picked up dead in Pedrocchi's—a meat-fly in his chocolate! Sparkling eyes, a delicate flush, quick breath, a shape at once pliant and audacious, flashing hands with which half her spells were woven—all these, and that wailing, dragging, comico-tragic voice, that fatal appeal of the child, trained by the wisdom of the wife, completed the rout of our youth. Before supper was over he was her loyal slave.

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She insisted upon showing him his quarters. They were not, it seemed, upon this floor, nor the next below—no, but on the next below that. Signor Francesco must follow her as, lamp in hand, she went downstairs, her high heels clattering like Spanish castanets. She opened his door with a key which she then handed over to him: she showed him his bedroom, his saloon. "Your citadel, Don Francis," she said, "your refuge from my heedless tongue. Your chocolate shall be brought to you here, but we hope you will give yourself the trouble to dine with us. Generally my husband sups too late for your convenience. He is always at the cafe till nine o'clock. He sits there with his friends and hears the news, which he knows beforehand as well as they do. And when they have done, he tells it all over again to them. This is the way with men; and I sit at home and make my clothes. This also is the way with women, it seems. There is no other." She stayed a few more minutes, chattering, laughing and blushing; then with a sudden access of shyness wished him "felicissima notte," and held him out her hand. Mr. Francis stooped over it, and saluted it once more with profound respect.

He was long in going to bed. He wrote furiously in his diary after a space of restless contemplation, when he roamed across and across the room. But now I must leave his raptures and himself to his own pen, having got him inmate of a household where by ordinary he might have lived a blameless three years. If, however, he had done that, I don't suppose the singular memoirs which follow would ever have been written.

CHAPTER I

MY EXORDIUM: A JUSTIFICATORY PIECE

If we soberly reflect upon the part which the trappings and mantlings of men have played in their affairs, we shall not hesitate, I believe, to put into that category many things which have hitherto been considered far less occasional. What is honour but a garment? What money but a walking-stick? What are fine manners but a wig? If I professed, instead of abhorring, the Cynic school of philosophy, I might go on to ask what were love but an ointment, or religion but a tinted glass. I can thank my Redeemer, as I sit here in my green haven, with the stormy sea of my troubles afar off, beating in vain against the walls of contentment, that through all my vicissitudes I was never tempted to stray into such blasphemous imaginations. Fool as I have been, and fool as I have declared myself upon the forefront of this very book, I have never said in my heart, *there is no god*; but much and loudly have maintained the affirmative. And although I have been sadly, wickedly, detestably errant from His way, there is one divine precept which I have never failed to keep, and that is, *love one another*. All other affections, additions, accidents, accessories of men, however, from the lowest, which is Money,

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to the highest, which is Polite Education, I have been able to discard without concern or loss of self-respect. This fact alone should furnish good reason for my Memoirs, and commend them to the philosopher, the poet, the divine, and the man of feeling. For true it is that I have been bare to the shirt and yet proved my manhood, beaten like a thief and yet maintained myself honest, scorned by men and women and yet been ready to serve my fellows, held atheist by the godly and yet clung to my Saviour's cross. In situations calculated to excite the contemptuous ridicule of the meanest upon earth I have been satisfied that I was neither contemptible nor reasonably ridiculous, and that while I might herd with ruffians, and find in their society my most comfortable conversation, I was the richer, partly for that I had lost in choosing to consort with them, and partly for what I had gained. As having nothing, yet possessing all things; as poor, yet making many rich—the boast of St. Paul, the hope of St. Francis of Assisi! in those pithy antitheses is the summa of my experience.

Eldest son, but third child, of my parents, I was born upon the 4th of October, in the year 1700; and for that reason and another (to which I shall shortly allude) was named Francis, after the great Champion of our faith commemorated upon my birthday. The other reason was that, oddly enough, my mother, before my birth, had dreamed of him so persistently and with particulars so unvaried that she gave my father no option but to change the settled habits of our family and bestow upon me the name, which he despised, of a patriarch whom he underrated. Her dream, repeated, she told me, with exact fidelity and at regularly recurring periods, was that she could see St. Francis standing on a wide sea-shore between sand-dunes and the flood of waters—standing alone there with an apple in his hand, which he held lightly, as if weighing it. By and by, said my mother, she saw three women come slowly over the sandhills from different points, one from the south, one from the north, and one from the west; but they converged as they drew near to St. Francis, joined hands, and came directly to him. The midmost of the three was like a young queen; she on the side nearest the sea was bold and meagre; the third was lovely, but disfigured by a scar. When they were come before St. Francis, after reverences, they knelt down on his right hand and his left, and the queenly woman in front of him. To her, courteously, he first offered the apple, but she laughingly refused it. She of the scar, when it was held before her, covered her face with her hands and shrank away; but the hardy woman craned her head forward and bit into the apple while it was yet in the saint's hand. Then the young queen would have had it if she might, but was prevented by the biter, and the two clamoured for it, silently, by gestures of the hands and eyes, but with haste and passion. At this point, said my mother, her dream always ended, and she never knew who had the apple. She fretted greatly because of it, and was hardly recovered after I was born.

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My father, who disliked all women except my mother, and, Catholic as he was, had scant respect for the mendicant orders, hated this dream, hated to be reminded of it, hated the name which he had been persuaded into giving me, and, as a consequence, I believe, never loved me. For unnumbered generations of our family we had been Antonys, Gerards, Ralphs, Martins; the name of Francis was unknown to the tree; he never ceased to inveigh against it, and foretold the time when it would stand out like a parasite upon its topmost shoot. "Your Italian ecstatic," he told my mother, "began life by running away from his father and only came back for the purpose of robbing him. He taught more people to live by singing hymns than ever were taught before, and preached the virtues of poverty, by which he intended the comfort it was for the blessed poor to be kept snugly idle by the accursed rich. It never occurred to him to reflect that, if everybody had been of his opinion, everybody would have starved, the world would have stood still, and neither St. Ferdinand of Spain, nor St. Edward the Confessor, nor Don John of Austria could have become famous. As for your women and apples, the conjunction is detestable. Cain was the result of one woman's desire for an apple, and the siege of Troy that of another's. I don't wish this boy to grow up either murderer or pretty Paris."

The like of this speech, often repeated—indeed, never omitted when so I happened to fall into some childish disgrace—may be imagined. It made an outcast of me, an exile from my nursery days. I grew up lonely, sullen, moody. I could not meet my father with any comfort to either of us; and though I loved my mother, and she me, that cold shadow of his prejudice seemed to be over my intercourse with her, to chill and check those emotions which should glow naturally when a son stands in the presence of his mother. To be brief, I was an unhappy, solitary lad, with sisters much older and brothers much younger than himself; cut off, too, by reason of religion, from the society of neighbours, from school and college. Such companions as I could have were far below me in station, and either so servile as to foster pride, or so insolent as to inflame it. There was Father Danvers, it's true, that excellent Jesuit and our chaplain; and there were books. I was by nature a strong, healthy, active boy, but was driven by sheer solitariness to be studious. If it had not turned out so, I know not what might have become of me, at what untimely age I might have been driven to violence, crime, God knows what. That there was danger of some such disaster Father Danvers was well aware. My faults, as he did not fail to remind me week by week, were obstinacy and pride of intellect; my weaknesses, lack of proportion and what he was pleased to call perversity, by which I suppose he meant a disposition to accept the consequences of my own acts. I freely admit a personal trait which will be obvious as I proceed.

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Trivial as it may seem, and does, at this time of writing, I must record an instance of it, the last I was to exhibit in England. Never vicious, I may sincerely say convinced, rather, that women are as far above our spiritual as they are fatally within our material reach, it was by my conduct to a woman that I fell into a way of life which nobody could have anticipated. In my twentieth year, in a moment of youthful ardour, I kissed Betty Coy, our dairymaid, over the cheese-press, and was as immediately and as utterly confounded as she was. I remember the moment, I remember her, a buxom, fresh-coloured young woman, rosy red, her sleeves above her elbows, her "La, Mr. Francis, what next?"—I remember all, even to my want of breath, suddenly cooled passion, perplexity and flight. It is a moot point whether that last was the act of a coward, but I can never allow it to be said that in what followed I showed a want of courage. I devoted a day and night to solitary meditation; no knight errant of old, watching his arms under the moon, prayed more earnestly than I; and when I had fully made up my mind to embrace what honour demanded of me, I sought out the girl, who was again in the dairy, and in solemn form, upon my knees, offered her my hand. Father Danvers, walking the terrace, was an accidental witness of my declaration, and very properly told my father. Betty Coy, unfortunate girl, was dismissed that evening; next day my father sent for me. [Footnote: I need only say further of Betty that she, shortly afterwards, married James Bunce, our second coachman at Upcote, and bore him a numerous progeny, of whose progress and settlement in the world I was able to assure the worthy parents.]

It would be idle to rehearse the interview between an angry father and an obdurate son. The more I said the angrier he got: the discrepancy between us made a reasonable conclusion hopeless from the first. When he cried, Did I mean to disgrace my name? and I replied, No, but on the contrary I had been wishful to redeem it—"How, you fool," said he, "by marrying a dairymaid?" "Sir," I answered, "by showing to the world that when a gentleman salutes a virtuous female it is not his intention to insult her." I was too old for the rod or I should have had it. As it was, I received all the disgrace he could put me to—dismissed from his presence, confined to my room, forbidden any society but that of Father Danvers and my own thoughts. My infatuation, however, persisted, and threatened to take the dangerous form of *fraud*. I could not for the life of me see what else I could do to recover the girl's fair fame, hopelessly compromised by me, than exhibit to the world at large the only conceivable motive of my salute. I knew, immediately I had done it, that I could not love Betty Coy, but I believed that I could prove the tender husband.

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Correspondence to this effect—all on my side—with her parents decided mine to hasten my removal abroad. It had always been intended that I should study in Padua, rather than in Paris or Salamanca, if for no better reason than that that had been Father Danvers' University, and that he knew many of the professors there—among others, Dr. Porfirio Lanfranchi, who became my host and guardian, and had been class-mate and room-mate of our chaplain's. These things matter very little: I was not consulted in them, and had no objections, as I had no inclinations, for any particular residence in the world. Before my twenty-first birthday— I forget the exact date—the hour arrived when I received on my knees my mother's tearful blessing, embraced my brothers and sisters, kissed my father's hand, and departed for Oxford, where I caught the London mail; and, after a short sojourn in the capital, left England for ever.

I conceive that few further prolegomena are necessary to the understanding of the pages which follow. Before I touched the Italian soil I was, in the eyes of our law, a grown man, sufficiently robust and moderately well-read. I was able to converse adequately in French, tolerably in Italian, had a fair acquaintance with the literatures of those countries, some Latin, a poor stock of Greek. I believe that I looked younger than my age, stronger than my forces, better than my virtues warranted. Women have praised me for good looks, which never did me any good that I know of; I may say without vanity that I had the carriage and person of a gentleman. I was then, as I have ever been, truly religious, though I have sometimes found myself at variance with the professional exponents of it. In later years I became, I believe, something of a mystic, apt to find the face of God under veils whose quality did not always commend itself to persons of less curious research. On the other hand, I do not pretend to have kept the Decalogue of Moses in its integrity, but admit that I have varied it as my occasions seemed to demand. I have slain my fellow-man more than once, but never without deliberate intention so to do. If I have trespassed with King David of Israel, I feel sure that the circumstances of my particular offence are not discreditable to me; and it is possible that he had the same conviction. For the rest, I have purposely discarded many things which the world is agreed to think highly necessary to a gentleman, but which I have proved to be of no value at all. I will only add this one observation more. For my unparalleled misfortunes in every kind of character and dangerous circumstance I am willing to admit that I have nobody to thank but myself. And yet—but the reader must be judge—I do not see how, in any single case, I could have acted otherwise than as I did. What, then! we carry our fates with us from the cradle to the grave, even as the Spinning Women themselves wind that which was appointed them to wind, and ply the shears and make fruitless their toil when they must; and all that we acquire upon our journey does but make that burden more certainly ours. What was I but a predestined wanderer—and fool if you will—burdened with my inheritance of honourable blood, of religion, of candour, and of unprejudiced enquiry? How under the sun could I——? But let the reader be judge.

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I left England early in September, made a good passage to Genoa, and from thence proceeded by easy stages to Padua. Arriving there by the coach on the night of October 13, I was met by my host and tutor, Dr. Porfirio Lanfranchi, and by him taken to his lodgings on the Pra della Valle and introduced to the charitable ministrations of his young and beautiful wife—the fair, the too-fair Donna Aurelia, with whom, I shall not disguise from the reader, I fell romantically and ardently in love.

CHAPTER II

AURELIA AND THE DOCTOR

It was, I know very well, the aim and desire of this beautiful lady to approve herself mother to the exile thus cast upon her hands, and it was so as much by reason of her innate charity as of her pride in her husband's credit. To blame an ambition so laudable would be impossible, nor is blame intended to lie in recording the fact that she was a year my junior, though two years a wife. Such was the case, however, and it did not fit her for the position she wished to occupy. Nor indeed did her beauties of person and mind, unless a childish air and sprightly manner, cloudy-dark hair, a lovely mouth and bosom of snow, a caressing voice, and candour most surprising because most innocent, can be said to adapt a young lady to be mother to a young man. Be these things as they may—inflaming arrows full of danger, shafts of charity, pious artillery, as you will—-they were turned full play upon me. From the first moment of my seeing her she set herself to put me at ease, to make me an intimate of her house, to make herself, I may say in no wrong sense, an inmate of my heart—and God knoweth, God knoweth how she succeeded.

Aurelia! Impossibly fair, inexpressibly tender and wise, with that untaught wisdom of the child; daughter of pure religion, as I saw thee at first and can see thee still, can that my first vision of thee ever be effaced? Nay, but it is scored too deeply in my heart, is too surely my glory and my shame. Still I can see that sweet stoop of thy humility, still thy hands crossed upon thy lovely bosom, still fall under the spell of thy shyly welcoming eyes, and be refreshed, while I am stung, by the gracious greeting of thy lips. "Sia il ben venuto, Signer Francesco," saidst thou? Alas, what did I prove to thee, unhappy one, but il mal venuto, the herald of an evil hour? What did I offer thee in exchange for thy bounty but shame and salt tears? What could be my portion but fruitless reproach and footsore pilgrimage from woe to woe? But I forget myself. I am not yet to disinter these unhappy days.

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It is not to be supposed from this apostrophe that when I fell at once to love my master's wife I saw in her more than my lamp and my saint, the gracious presence which should "imparadise," in Dante's phrase, my mind. I was an honest lad, very serious and very simple. Perhaps I was a fool, but I was a pure fool: and he had been a very monster of depravity who could have cast unwholesome regard upon a welcome so generous and modest as hers. I declare that she was never anything to me but a holy emanation, not to be approached but on the knees, not to be looked upon but through a veil. So from this page until near the end of my long history she will appear to the reader. I never had an unworthy thought of her, never an unworthy desire. I never credited her with more than charity towards myself; and if I gloried in the fact that I was privileged to love so wondrous a being, the thought humiliated me at the same time. I was conscious of my nothingness before her worthiness, and desperate to fit myself for her high society. A noble rage for excellence possessed me; like any champion or knight of old I strove to approve my manhood, only that I might lay the spoils of it at her sacred feet.

By origin Aurelia was a Sienese, the daughter of the ancient, noble but reduced family of Gualandi, and had, without knowing it, caught the fancy of Dr. Lanfranchi when he was in her native city upon some political question or another. At the age of eighteen she had been made the subject of a marriage treaty between her mother and this learned man of fifty—a treaty conducted by correspondence and without any by-or-with-your-leave of hers. It may be doubted whether she had done much more than see and quiz her husband until she was brought to his house, to be mistress of that and slave of its master. Doing violence to the imaginations of a lover, I can look back upon her now with calmness, and yet see no flaw upon her extraordinary perfections. I can still see her lovely in every part, a bright, glancing, various creature, equally compounded of simplicity and common sense. Her greatest charm was precisely what we call charm—-a sweetly willing, pliant disposition, an air of gay seriousness, such as a child has, and a mood which could run swiftly, at the touch on some secret spring, from the ripple of laughter to the urgency of tears. She was very devout, but not at all in our way, who must set our God very far off if we are to consider His awful nature; she carried her gaiety with her into church, and would laugh in the face of the Blessed Virgin or our Saviour just as freely as in that of the greatest sinner of us all. Her carriage and conversation with Heaven were, indeed, exactly those which she held towards the world, and were such that it was impossible not to love her, and yet, for an honest man who desired to remain one, equally impossible to do it. For although she was made in shape, line and feature to be a man's torment and delight, she carried her beauties so easily, valued them so staidly, and considered them so unaffectedly her husband's property, that he would have been a highway thief who had dared anything against her.

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Here, indeed, was to be reckoned with that quality of strong common sense, without which she had been no Tuscan girl. She had it in a remarkable degree, as you may judge when I say that it reconciled her to her position of wife to a vast, disorderly, tyrannical man nearly old enough to be her grandfather. It enabled her to weigh the dignity, ease and comfort of the Casa Lanfranchi against any romantic picture which a more youthful lover could paint before her eyes. I am convinced—the conviction was, it will be seen, forced upon me—that not only was she a loyal, obedient and cheerful, but also a loving wife to this huge and blusterous person, of whom nevertheless she was a good deal afraid. For if he fondled her more than was becoming, he stormed at her also in a way not tolerable.

When Dr. Lanfranchi met me on my arrival, I remember that he took my hand in his own and never let go of it until he had me in his house. This made me feel like a schoolboy, and I never lost the feeling of extreme youth in his eyes. I believe now that his terrific silence, his explosive rages, mock ceremoniousness, and startling alternations were all parts of his method towards his pupils, for my experiences of them were not peculiar. I have seen him cow a whole class by a lift of his great square head, and most certainly, whatever scandalous acts may have disgraced the university in my time, they never occurred where Dr. Lanfranchi was engaged. Burly, bulky, blotched as he was, dirty in his person, and in his dress careless to the point of scandal, he had the respect of every student of the Bo. He was prodigiously learned and a great eater. The amount of liquid he could absorb would pass belief: it used to be said among us that he drank most comfortably, like a horse, out of a bucket. His lectures were extraordinary, crammed with erudition, which proceeded from him by gasps, jerks, and throttled cries for mercy on his failing breath, and illustrated by personalities of the most shocking description—-he spared no deformity or defect of any one of us if it happened to engage his eye. Sometimes a whole hour's lecture would be consumed in a scandalous tale of Rome or Naples, sometimes indeed it would be a reminiscence of his own youthful days, which policy, if not propriety, should have counselled him to omit. Yet, as I say, he never lost the respect of the class, but was feared, served, and punctually obeyed.

It was much the same at home—that is, his methods and their efficacy were the same. In private life he was an easy, rough, facetious companion, excessively free in his talk, excessively candid in the expression of his desires, and with a reserve of stinging repartee which must have been more blessed to give than to receive. Terrible storms of rage possessed him at times, under which the house seemed to rock and roll, which sent his sweet wife cowering into a corner. But, though she feared him, she respected and loved the man—and I was to find that out to my cost before my first year was out.

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Meantime that year of new experience, uplifting love and growth by inches must ever remain wonderful to me—with Aurelia's music in my ears and Love's wild music in my heart. Happy, happy days of my youth!

"Dichosa edad y siglos dichosos aquellos, a quien los antiguos pusieron nombre de dorados!" cried the knight of La Mancha; and I may call that Paduan year my age of song. It ran its course to the sound of flutes, harps, and all sweet music. I never knew, until I knew Aurelia, that such exulting tides of melody could pour from human throat.

When Aurelia rose in the morning and threw open her green shutters, if the sunlight was broad upon the Pra, flecked upon the trees, striking the domes and pinnacles of the Santo with fire, she sang full diapason with that careless fling of the voice, that happy rapture, that bravura which makes the listener's heart go near to burst with her joy. If rain made the leaves to droop, or scudded in sheets along the causeways, she sang plaintively, the wounded, aggrieved, hurt notes of the nightingale. Her song then would be some old-remembered sorrow of her land—of Ginevra degli Almieri, the wandering wife; of the Donna Lombarda, who poisoned her lover; or of the Countess Costanza's violated vow. So she shared confidences with the weather, and so unbosomed herself to nature and to God. Meantime she was as busy as a nesting-bird. She made her doctor's chocolate, and took it in to him with the gazette or the news-sheet; she would darn a hole in my stocking, on my leg, without pricking me at all, look me over, brush me, re-tie my hair, pat me into order with a critical eye, and send me off to my classes or study with a sage counsel to mind my books, and a friendly nod over her shoulder as we each went our ways. She would go to mass at the Santo, to market in the Piazza; she would cheapen a dress-length, chat with a priest, admonish old Nonna, the woman of the house—all before seven o'clock in the morning; and not before then would she so much as sip a glass of coffee or nibble a crust of bread. On Sundays and Festas she took her husband's arm and went to church as befitted, wearing her glazed gown of silver grey, her black lace zendado. She took a fan as well as a service-book— and happy was I to carry them for her; she had lace mittens on her hands and a fine three-cornered hat on her head. She looked then what she truly was, the thrifty young housewife, who, if she was as lovely as the summer's dawn, was so only by the way. And thrifty she proved herself. For when she had kneeled and crossed herself twice towards the altar, she pulled up the shining silk gown all about her middle and sat down upon her petticoat.

Exquisite, fragrant, piteous Aurelia! Is it wonderful that I loved her? And who was I—O heaven! What sort of lover was I to disturb her sweetly ordered life? To that I must next address myself, cost me what it may.

CHAPTER III

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MY DANGEROUS PROGRESS

I was fairly diligent during my year of study at Padua, fairly punctual in attendance at my classes and lectures, fairly regular in my letter-writing home. I acquired no vices, though there were plenty to be got, was not a wine-bibber, a spendthrift, nor a rake. I was too snug in the Casa Lanfranchi to be tempted astray, and any truantry of mine from the round of my tasks led me back to Aurelia and love. To beat up the low quarters of the town, to ruffle in the taverns and chocolate houses with sham gentlemen, half frocked abbes and rips; to brawl and haggle with vile persons and their bullies, set cocks a-fighting or rattle the dice-box in the small hours—what were these pleasures to me, who had Aurelia to be with? From the first she had taken her duties to heart, to mother me, to keep me out of harm's way, to maintain her husband's credit by making sure of mine. These things she set herself to do with a generous zest which proved her undoing. Slowly, and from the purest of motives, her influence upon me, her intercourse with me grew and spread. Slowly the hours I spent with her extended—unperceived by her, exquisitely perceived by me—until, at the date to which I am now come, near a year after my entering the university, I may say there was not a spare moment of the day, from my rising to my going to bed, which was not passed with Aurelia.

To make the full import of this plain to the reader I must particularise to some extent. My own rooms, I have explained, were in the same house, two storeys below the Lanfranchi apartment. In them I was served with my chocolate by old Nonna the servant, and was understood to leave them at seven o'clock in the morning and not to return until midday, when I dined with my hosts. The afternoons were my own. I was at liberty to take horse exercise—and I kept two saddle-horses for the purpose—or to make parties of pleasure with such of my fellow-students as were agreeable to me. At six I supped with Aurelia alone, and at seven I was supposed to retire—either to my own room for study and bed, or into the town upon my private pleasures. These, I say, were the rules laid down by Aurelia and her husband at the beginning of my residence in Padua. By almost imperceptible degrees they were relaxed, by other degrees equally hard to measure they were almost wholly altered.

The first to go was the practice of taking my chocolate abed. One morning Nonna was late, and I rose without it. The same thing happened more than twice, so then I went upstairs to find out what had hindered her. There I found my Aurelia fresh from Mass and market, drinking her morning coffee. Explanations, apologies, what-not, ensued; she invited me to share her repast. From that time onwards I never broke my fast otherwise than with her. So was it with other rules of intercourse. The doctor was a machine in the ordering of his life. His chocolate at six, his clothes at eight; he left

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the house at nine and returned at noon. He left it again at two in the afternoon and returned at nine in the evening; he supped; he went to bed on the stroke of ten. Except on Sundays, high festivals, the first, the middle, and the last day of carnival, through all the time of my acquaintance with him, I never knew him break these habits but once, and that was when his mother died at Mestre and he had to attend the funeral. On that occasion he must rise at six, and miss his dinner at noon. He was furious, I never saw a man so angry.

I cannot tell how or when it was that I first spent the whole of my afternoons in Aurelia's society, nor how or when it was that, instead of leaving her house at seven in the evening, I stayed on with her till the stroke of nine, within a few minutes of the doctor's homecoming. It is a thing as remarkable as true that nothing is easier to form than a habit, and nothing more difficult to break. Formed and unbroken these habits were, unheeded by ourselves, but not altogether unperceived. There was one member of the household who perceived them, and never approved. I remember that old Nonna used to shake her finger at us as we sat reading, and how she used to call out the progress of the quarters from the kitchen, where she was busy with her master's supper. But my beloved mistress could not, and I would not, take any warning. It became a sort of joke between Aurelia and me to see whether Nonna would miss one of the quarters. She never did; and as often as not, when nine struck and I not gone, she would bundle me out of doors by the shoulders and scold her young mistress in shrill Venetian, loud enough for me to hear at my own chamber door. Aurelia used to tell me all she had said next morning. She had an excellent gift of mimicry; could do Nonna and (I grieve to say) the doctor to the life.

The end of this may be guessed. Privilege after privilege was carelessly accorded by Aurelia, and greedily possessed by me. At the end of six months' residence those three still evening hours existed, not for the blessedness of such intercourse alone, but to be crowned by the salutation of an adorable hand; and when I retired at last, it was not to my bed, but to my window; to the velvet spaces of the night, to the rustling trees, the eloquent congress of the stars; to sigh my secret abroad to those sympathetic witnesses, to whisper her name, to link it with my own; to tell, in a word, to the deep-bosomed dark all the daring fancies of a young man intoxicated with first love. And from privilege to privilege I strode, a fine conqueror. A very few months more, and not only was I for ever with Aurelia, but there was no doubt nor affectation of concealment on my part of how I stood or wished to stand before her. I postulated myself, in fine, as her servant in amours—cavalier I will not say, for that has an odious meaning in Italy, than which to describe my position nothing could be wider of the truth. I did but ask liberty to adore, sought nothing further, and got nothing else. This, upon my honour, was ever the sum of my offence—up to my last day of bliss.

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You would have supposed that she could hardly have misunderstood the state of my affairs, had I said or done nothing. So quick-witted was she, it is inconceivable. But as time went on, and success with it, I quite got out of the way of concealment, and spoke of myself openly as her slave. She used to laugh at me, pretend to think me an absurd boy; and now and then threatened (and that half in jest) to tell her husband. I know very well that she never did. The padron, we used to call him to each other, having taken the name from old Nonna. It was one of our little foolish jokes to pretend the house an inn, he the landlord, and ourselves travellers met there by hazard. We had a many familiar, private sayings and nicknames of the sort, secret cues to look across the table when he was there, and smile at each other—as when he railed (as he was fond of doing) at Tuscan ways and speech, at the usage of Siena, her own country, or when (after his meal) he made a noise, sucking his teeth. Sweetly pleasant, dangerous days—were they as lovely to her as to me? How can I tell? There was no doubt but she knew me thoroughly. The little pleasant encroachments of mine, stolen upon her unawares, were now never checked—I am speaking of the end of my first year, when I could hold her hand unreproved, and kiss it as often as I pleased. I took and kept, and exhibited to her without embarrassment, little trifles of hers—a hair-ribbon, a garter, a little trodden Venice slipper; if she asked for them back, it only provoked me to keep them closer to my heart. She saw no harm in these foolish, sweet things: she felt herself to be my senior; by comparison with her position, mine was that of a child. To the very end she maintained the fiction that she was my foster-mother, responsible to my parents for my advancement in education and morals. Assuredly she taught me her tongue and kept me out of gross iniquity; but equally certain is it that I learned more than Italian.

I learned, however, to be very fluent in that, for, inspired by love of Aurelia, I attacked it with extraordinary passion. All Italy, and above all Tuscany, took sacred air from her; there grew to be an aureole about everything which owned kinship with her. I was a severe ritualist, as every lover is: it became a blasphemy in me to think of Aurelia in any form of words but those of her own honey tongue. And that was of the purest in the land. She had very little Venetian at any time, and kept what she had for her husband and household management. To me she employed her native speech, not the harsh staccato of Florence, a stringent compound of the throat and the teeth, but the silken caressing liquids of Siena, the speech of women to their lovers, of St. Catherine to her Spouse. So I became expert in Tuscan, and after the same fashion in Tuscany also. She was deeply and burningly proud of that land of art and letters; she knew something of its history, something (if not much) of its monuments. Such as it was

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it sufficed me. Inspired by her, I began the study of literature, and if at first I read disingenuously, I went on to read with profit. The “Vita Nova” of Dante enabled me, perhaps, to touch upon topics with her which I could not have dared to do without its moving text; but it won me to the heart of the great poet. I walked the dire circles of Hell, I scaled the Mount of Purgatory, I flew from ring to ring of the Heaven of pure light. Aurelia was my Beatrice; but the great Florentine and his lady were necessarily of the party. And then I began, as men will, to take the lead. Aurelia had exhausted her little store when she had named Giotto and Dante: I took her further afield. We read the Commentaries of Villani, Malavolti’s History of Siena, the Triumphs of Petrarch, his Sonnets (fatal pap for young lovers), the Prince of Machiavelli, the Epics of Pulci and Bojardo, and Ariosto’s dangerously honeyed pages. Here Aurelia was content to follow me, and I found teaching her to be as sweet in the mouth as learning of her had been. I took enormous pains and consumed half the night in preparation for the morrow’s work. I abridged Guicciardini’s intolerable History, I hacked sense out of Michael Angelo’s granite verses, weeded Lorenzo of disgustfulness, Politian of pedantry. The last thing we read together was the Aminta of Tasso; the last thing I had of her was the “Little Flowers of St. Francis,” a favourite book of her devotion. My Saint, she called St. Francis of Assisi—as in one sense no doubt he was; but, “Aurelia,” I had replied, kissing both her hands, “you know very well who is my saint. I should have been named Aurelius.” She had said, “It is a good name, Aurelio. There are many who have it in my country.” “You shall call me nothing else, “said I then; but she shook her head, and hung it down as she whispered softly, “I like best Francesco,” and then, so low as to be hardly audible, “Checho,” the Sienese diminutive for my name of Francis. Old Nonna came in to hound me from the room. That night—it was my last but one—Aurelia came to the door with me, and let me kiss her two hands again.

I have come to the hour of my destruction—the 16th of June, 1722. The smouldering fires which had laboured in my breast for nine months burst into a flame which overwhelmed both Aurelia and me. I committed an unpardonable sin, I endeavoured to repair it with an act of well-nigh incredible temerity. What occurred on that night is, in fact, the origin of these Memoirs and their sole justification. The dawn of that momentous day found her a loving and honoured wife; and its close left her, innocent as she was, under the worst suspicion which can fall upon a good woman. It found me a hopeful gentleman of means and prospects; and I went out of it into the dark, a houseless wanderer, to consort with profligates, thieves and murderers.

CHAPTER IV

FATAL AVOWAL

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I shall not deny that the overnight's tenderness may have wrought in me the dangerous ecstasy which was to prove so cruel a requital of it; for it is of the nature of love to be inflamed by the least hint of a neighbouring, answering fire. I believe that I could have been for ever Aurelia's mute, adoring, unasking slave, but for the fact that she had sighed, and whispered me "Checho," and twice suffered me to kiss her hands. Fatal benevolence that lifted suddenly the meek! Fatal wealth bestowed that made the pauper purse-proud! I had passed the night in a transport of triumphant joy; throughout the day succeeding it I felt my wings. "Nunc," I could exclaim with Propertius.

"Nunc mihi summa licet sidera contingere plantis." And that exalted strain, which was my perdition, alas, was hers also!

That which followed was a very hot still night, with thunder in the Euganean hills; and Aurelia may have been lax or languid, or in my miserable person some of the summer's fire may have throbbed. It was late, near nine o'clock; already old Nonna had given three warnings of the hour, and was only delaying the last while she stirred the ingredients of the doctor's minestrone over the fire. The knowledge that she must come in, and I go out, shortly, at any moment, fretted my quick senses to fever. I looked for ever at Aurelia with a wildly beating heart; she, on her side, was aware of my agitation, and breathed the shorter for the knowledge. She sat by the open window mending a pair of stays; at her side was her work table, upon that her three-wicked lamp. I leaned over a chair exactly in front of her, watching every slight tremor or movement, just as a dog watches a morsel which he longs for but is forbidden to touch. Thrice a dog that I was! I felt like a dog that night.

We had read little and spoken less; the airless night forbade it; for the last half hour no words had passed between us but a faint, "Ah, go now, go now, Checho," from her, and from me my prayer of "Not yet, not yet—let me stay with you." Aurelia was tired, and now and again put down her work with a sigh, to gaze out of the window into the soft deeps of the night, gemmed as it was with fireflies and wavering moths. How prone is youth to fatuous conceits! I imagined that she suffered with me; I identified her pains with mine; I thought that she loved me and had not the heart to bid me begone. That new wicked feeling of triumph, that new exultation in manly strength, that delirium, that poisonous frenzy, came flooding over me. Some gesture of hers more than commonly eloquent may have set me on fire; I may have seen her tremble, I may have guessed a tear. More insensate folly than mine can be lent by youth on less security than this. For there sat I quivering with love, and there before me, unlaced, in loose attire, in all the luxury of lassitude, breathed and sighed the loveliest of women. I cannot explain what I dare not extenuate: dowering her with my own madness, I forgot her honour, my own, the world, and God. I leaned forward towards her, took her languid hand, and, holding it in my own, said quietly—very quietly, "I love you—you are my soul."

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She laughed gently, then sighed. “You must not say so to me, even if it is true,” she said. I repeated the words, “I love you—you are my soul,” and she was silent.

I said, after a pause, during which I could hear the furious beating of my heart, “I am at my prayers, in my church, before my altar. Your eyes are the candles, your heart is the altar stone. I kneel—” and I did kneel. Then she grew alarmed, and was for stopping me.

“Checho,” she said, “this is foolish, and I must not listen. I beg you to get up; I know it is late. Please to ask Nonna what’s o’clock. I am serious.”

“And I,” I said, “am serious. The time is full—the time is now. Oh, Aurelia,” I said urgently, “my saint and my lamp—”

“Hush, hush,” she said, and tried to regain her hand. “No, but you must be quiet. Listen!” But I could not now be stopped.

“Oh,” I cried out, “I have been silent too long, and now I must speak. For six months I have been silent; but now there is death in silence. I shall die of love, and it will be you that will have killed me.” I knelt again, and again said, “I love you.”

“Oh, no, no,” she said, but her protest was fainter. I repeated it, and now she made no protest. God help me, I thought her won. I flung myself violently near, and in my agitation knocked over my chair. As that fell backwards, so fell I forwards to her knees. I clasped them closely, studded kisses on her hands, I raised my face to hers, and saw her the lovelier for her pale terror. She was speechless.

“Listen to me, Aurelia, youngest of the angels,” I began, and just then old Nonna burst in upon me crying “Ruin!” I sprang to my feet, and Aurelia away, her work table went down, the lamp with it; we were all three in darkness.

“Ruin!” said Nonna, “I tell you, ruin! That wretched boy—the padron is on the stair.”

Aurelia shrieked that she was undone; Nonna, who had flown back into the kitchen, returned with a lamp. I saw my beautiful mistress distraught and ran forward to comfort her. She shrank from me with horror, as well she might. “Farewell, lady,” I said, “I will go to meet what I deserve.”

I took my cloak, hat and sword, and went to the door, but Nonna caught me by the skirt, and, “Is he mad then?” she cried; and, “What are you about, Don Francis? Will you meet the padron on the stair and let him up to see this wreckage? Madonna purissima, what is one to do with a boy of this sort?”

“Let me go,” said I, “to my proper fate. I know very well what I have done.” It may be that I did, and I hope that I did; but very certainly I did not know what to do next; nor did

Aurelia. Sobbing and trembling she lay upon Nonna's breast, imploring her to save us both. I heard the professor clear his throat upon the floor below, and knew that I was too late. Nonna took the command.

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She flung open the door of the clothes-press, and, “In with you,” says she to me. “Little fool! a pretty state of things!” She turned to her mistress, “Mistress, go you down and meet him. Keep him at the door— hold him in talk—hug, kiss, throttle, what you will or what you can, while I set this to rights.” Aurelia, drying her eyes, flew to the door; and Nonna then, taking me by the shoulders, fairly stuffed me into the clothes-press, among Aurelia’s gowns, which hung there demurely in bags. “Keep you quiet in there, foolish, wicked young man,” said she, “and when they’ve gone to bed maybe I’ll let you out. If I do, let me tell you, it will be because you have done so much folly and wickedness as no one in his senses could have dared. That shows me that you are mad, and one must pity, not blame, the afflicted.”

All this time she was working like a woolcarder at the disordered room, but could not refrain her tongue from caustic comments upon my behaviour. “Wicked, wicked Don Francis! Nay, complete and perfect fool rather, who, because a lady is kind to you, believes her to be dying for your love. Your love indeed! What is your precious love worth beside the doctor’s? Have you a position the greatest in the university? Have you years, gravity, authority, money in the funds? Why, are you breeched yet? Have you tired of sugar-sticks? What next?” So she went on grumbling and scolding until the doctor came grunting to the open door with Aurelia upon his arm.

He was, as usual, out of breath and angry. He was also, I judged, embarrassed and fretted by the ministrations of Aurelia.

“My curse,” I heard him say, “my undying curse upon the man who built this house. Twice a day am I to scale a mountain? Wife, wife, you strangle me!”

“Oh, dear friend! Oh, dear friend!” ’Twas the voice of Aurelia. “Are you come back to your poor girl?”

“Hey,” cried he testily, “do I seem to be absent? I wish you would talk sense. These infernal stairs rob us all of our wits, it seems.”

“I am very foolish,” said Aurelia, and I heard her trouble in her tones. “I have been waiting so long—so very long.”

“There, my child, there,” said he, and kissed her. “Now be pleased to let me into my house.” With a sigh, which I heard, she released him, and he came stamping into the room. I trembled in my shameful retreat.

The reflections of a young man of sensibility, ear-witness against his will of the chaste and sanctioned familiarities of a man and wife, must always be mingled of sweet and bitter; but when to the natural force of these is added horror of a crime and the shame arising from discovery of utter delusion, the reader may imagine the stormy sea of torment in which I laboured. In a word, I was to discover a new Aurelia—Aurelia the

affectionate wife, the careful minister; not the adored mistress of a feverish boy, the heroine of a Vita Nuova, the Beatrice of a, I fear me, profane

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comedy, the beloved of Aminta and the Pastor Fido. I own that I was dismayed, wounded in my tenderest part, at the discovery. Aurelia had suddenly become a stranger to my heart. I was nothing, less than nothing, to her now that she was alone with her husband. Beside the care of his appetite for food, my labours upon Guicciardini—the toil of a month of nights—was as the work of an ant in the dust. Beside her interest in his gossip of the schools, the coffee-house, the street corner, my exposition of the Sonnets of Petrarca was as the babble of school children at play in the Pra; beside her attentions to his clumsy caresses, her tenderness to me hour after hour was but the benevolence of a kindly woman to a lad left on her hands. Oh, bitter tonic discovery! How bitter it was I leave my reader to determine. I do not feel equal to the task of relating all that I overheard; if I could have stopped my ears, I would have done it. She tempted him, beguiled him to eat, to praise her, to be at ease, to love her. With that liquid tongue of hers, which would have melted a flinty core, she talked of his and her affairs; she was interested in his commentary upon the Pandects, she was indignant at the jealousy of Dr. This, she made light of the malice of Professor That. With flying feet from table to kitchen and back, with dexterous hands at bottle, platter or napkin, she ministered to his slightest whims. She refused to allow Nonna to wait upon him; she must do everything for him for this once.

And when, amid his flung ejaculations and bolted mouthfuls, between his “Non c’e male,” his “Buono, buono!” his “Ancora un po’,” or “Dammi da here,” he could find time to ask her what this new alacrity of hers meant on such a hot night of summer, with a touching falter of the voice I heard her reply, “It is because—it is because—I have not always been good to you, Porfirio. It is because—of late—this evening—I have much wished for you to be here. It is because——”

“Cospetto!” I heard the doctor cry, “what is the meaning of this? Come here, my dear.” And then, when she went to him and sat upon his knee, I heard him murmur his endearments—ah, and I heard her soft and broken replies! And I knew very well that in her heart she was reproaching herself for what I alone had done, and by her humble appeal for kindness was craving his forgiveness for offences for which I could never hope to be forgiven.

These terrible discoveries, far from making me cease to love Aurelia, increased incalculably while they changed and purged my love. Pity and terror, says Aristotle in his Poetics, are the soul’s cathartics. Both of these I felt, and emerged the cleaner. By the tune Aurelia had coaxed her husband to come to bed, and had gone thither, with a kiss, herself, I was half way to a great resolve, which, though it resulted in untold misery of body, was actually, as I verily believe, the means of my soul’s salvation. Without ceasing for a moment to love Aurelia, I now loved her honestly again. I could see her a wife, I could know her a loving wife, without one unworthy thought; I could gain glory from what was her glory, I could be enthusiastic upon those virtues in her which to a

selfish lover would have been the destruction of his hopes. In a word, I loved her now because she loved another.

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There is nothing remarkable in my possession of feelings which no honourable man should be without; nor can I see that what I was moved to do, in consequence of having those feelings, was any way out of the common. If the sweet subservience and careful ministry of Aurelia had moved her husband's admiration, how much the more must they have moved mine! And what is more natural to the ardent explorer than to announce his discoveries? I had learned that I had loved an angelic being; what wonder that I desired to inform the one person in the world who had a right to know it, that such was my extreme privilege? Of this I am content, reader, to be judged by thee. If my enthusiasm was extravagant, surely it was pardonable. Judge me then as thou wilt, and as thou canst, for the end of this chapter of my history is cardinal.

But there were these moving considerations also. If Aurelia had tacitly reproached herself to her husband with what were my crimes, and only mine—was it not my bounden duty to save her before it were too late? Must I not avow what, as it seemed, she was on the point of avowing? If she—pure innocent—believed herself guilty and needing forgiveness— whereas I and I only was that monster—in a few moments' time, when she should be with her husband in the innermost shrine of the Temple of Hymen, I might be sure she would take upon herself the guilt, and alone receive my punishment. Could I endure the thought of this, miserable that I was? Could I suffer such a sacrifice and wear the livery of man? I knew that I could not. "Out, therefore, of thy hiding-place, sinner," I bade myself, "and get the vice scourged out of thee."

These were a part of my reflections, this was my plain resolution. Generous, honourable, they seemed to me then—honourable alike to Aurelia and to her husband. The doctor had replenished his glass, and was leaning back in his chair. He had released some of the buttons of his vest, and they had flown to their repose. He was looking down at the table, where he twisted the glass about; he was thinking of his wife, of her sweet humour, innocence and purity—of everything which I so adored and had dared to tarnish. He was frowning and smiling at once at his thoughts. I heard him say to himself, "That's a good girl—that's a good girl of mine"—when I walked out of the cupboard and stood, pale but composed, before him at the opposite side of the table. Even then, so absorbed he was in his mellow humours he did not hear me. "Eh, la Madonna!" he mused—"as good as gold!" He stretched his legs out to the full and glanced with lazy luxury round about his room. Then he saw me.

CHAPTER V

DISASTER

"Light of Light!" he said in a horrible whisper—and again, "Very God—"

"Doctor Lanfranchi," said I seriously, for my passion lifted me up, "Doctor Lanfranchi, she is better than refined gold."

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He did what I suppose he had not done for many years; he crossed himself over the face. “Bless my soul!” he said.

“Sir, sir,” I admonished him, “you little know of what excellent substance that saint is compact. Sir—”

I might have continued I know not how long upon a theme so noble, but for his astonishment, which, though it kept him stupid, must have a vent. “Who the devil—” stammers he, “What the devil—” It amazed me, and vexed me greatly, that I could not make him understand whom I praised. I went close to him, I touched him on the shoulder.

“Hearken to me, doctor,” said I, “Donna Aurelia, your lady, is as it were an angel of Heaven—and I”—I said it with sorrowful grimness—“and I have better reason to know it than you.”

He felt my touch, and recoiled from it: he looked at me half askance, from under knitted brows and between blinking lids, as if he thought me a spirit. “Paradise of God,” says he then, “who is this?” His glance lighted upon the cupboard doors set open; he frowned and said, with difference: “And who are you that speak of angels?”

“Sir,” I replied, and my convictions were never more firmly in my words, “my name is Wretch, and I am unworthy to live. I am that vile thing once called Francis Strelley, now brought to confusion and conscious of his horrible offence. Sir! Sir!” I said wildly, “Donna Aurelia is the handmaid of high Heaven.—While I, while I—O God!” emotion poured its hot flood over me. I fell to my knees.

In the painful silence which ensued, and no doubt seemed longer than it actually was, I suppose that he collected some half of the truth, and in the manner of him who sees but half, distorted it to be greater than the whole. His manner towards me altered very materially; he resumed his authority.

“Get up,” he said, croaking like a raven; and at first I thought that I dared not, and immediately after knew that I dared. I sprang to my feet, and faced him, livid as he was. “Doctor Lanfranchi,” said I, “I have overheard you-by accident—as you praised her. I have heard you call her good. Ah, and in agreeing with you I can testify that you spoke more truth than you dreamed of. No saint in Heaven is so good as she, but it has been required of me that I should grope in Hell before I could see Heaven in her soul.”

He held himself from me by doing violence to his own person—caught at his cravat and gripped it with both hands.

“What are you saying? Say that again. Of what do you accuse yourself?”

“Of sin,” I said. He looked at the cupboard, then with chilly rage at me.

“What were you doing in there?” he asked; and that was a terrible question, since there I never ought to have been.

I asked him would he hear me? He nodded his head and sat grimly down by the table, at which of late he had so happily reclined. He covered his mouth and nose with his hand, but kept his piercing eyes upon me. Disconcerting! but even so, had he listened in silence I might have made him see the truth.

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“Sir,” I began, “it is true that I love, and have always loved, your wife; and it is true that I have been wicked enough to declare my passion. But it is also true that by her, and by her alone, I have been convinced of my presumption.” Here he held up his hand.

“Stop there. You say you have been convinced. How were you convinced? Where were you convinced? Let me understand you. Was it in there?” He jerked his hand towards the fatal cupboard.

“Yes,” I replied, “it was in there. I was forced to overhear your conversation with Donna Aurelia, which proved to me that I am less than nothing to her, and that you are all the world.”

He snorted, scoffing at the thought. “We shall see soon enough,” he said bitterly, “who and what I am.”

I continued: “If you think that I have injured *you*—I say nothing of my lady or of myself—you are horribly deceived. On the contrary, I have done you a service. You have the proof to your hand that you are the husband of a pattern among ladies.” Here, once more, he looked at the cupboard, and “Ma!” he said, and shrugged. After this, so long as I could speak to him, he tapped his foot.

“Punish me,” I advised him; “use me as you will; kill me—I shall not defend myself. I have never yet refused to take the consequences of my acts. But over my dead body, if you are a true man, you will give thanks to God for the gift of such a wife as you have.”

I was indignant, honestly, and, as I think, rightly so; but again he misunderstood me.

He got up and threatened me with his great forefinger. “Enough of your sermons, sir,” he said. “Have I lived and taught sucklings all these years to be told my duty to God Almighty? Will you teach me, forsooth, for what I am to give thanks, and whom I am to correct or chastise? Wait you there, young gentleman—wait you there until I know more about you and my pattern lady.” He turned his back upon me, and, wrenching open the chamber door, called harshly upon Aurelia. Immediately—and no doubt she had been quaking for the summons—my adored mistress came trembling out, her hair tumbled about her shoulders, her hands at her neck. Her feet were bare upon the flags, her great and mournful eyes loomed hollow in her face. They were my instant reproof, for now, and now to the full, I saw a fatal consequence of my enthusiastic action. Unhappy Francis, what hadst thou done? Thou hadst intended to abase thyself in her service—-and betrayed her. Thou hadst intended to honour, and condemned her to dishonour! Alas, thou hadst gone near to ruining the purest and loveliest of women by revealing those very things which proved her so.

The doctor, at his pitch of most savage and relentless calm, pointed to me and the cupboard—to the criminal and his lurking den together. “Look at those, woman,” he

said ominously, deliberately, but she could not or would not; and, before she could collect her wits, what must need old Nonna do but make bad worse, and, running, thrust herself in between, and wag her hand under the doctor's nose.

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“Eh, eh, eh, what a bother about nothing!” says this amiable old fool. “Let us pray all together to the Madonna that you be not sorry for this. She has done nothing, padron—nothing at all. He alone is wicked—by Diana the Mighty I swear it—and it was I who put him in the cupboard, and therefore know what I am saying. She—a lamb of our Saviour’s flock! Madness! Are you jealous of a boy without a beard? Do you conceive that your lady could listen to a voice that sang among milk-teeth? Ah, do you listen, rather, padron, to me and the truth, for we are at one together, the truth and I.” She stayed for breath.

“Hag,” said the doctor, “you are lying. This fine young man has confessed to me the agreeable truth. Madam,” he turned to Donna Aurelia, “here is a confessed lover of yours. Pray have you anything to say?”

“He is very foolish, he is very wicked; I have often told him so, often and often,” says Aurelia, twisting her hands about. “To-night he has said what he should not—and I believe he knows that very well. I had intended to tell you, if you had come sooner, as I wished—ah, and as I asked you, Porfirio—you would have heard it all from me. That is all. I was frightened—Nonna popped him in the cupboard—how he got out, how you found him there, I know not. But he has done me no harm—nor you neither, Porfirio. That I swear before the saints in Heaven.” The doctor glared at her—then took her by the wrist.

“Lies, lies, woman!” he said furiously. “He convicts you himself. He came out of the cupboard of his own act.”

She stared in amazement, and forgot the pain he was giving her. “He— came—out? But——Is he mad?”

“No, madam,” said I; and, “No, by Heaven!” cried the doctor, “for I have no doubt at all but that he intended to provoke me to anger and then to run me through the body with that sword of his.”

I threw up my arms at such a monstrous suspicion. Aurelia, who had been gazing at me as if she feared for my reason, now looked down.

“Please to let go of my wrist,” she said, “you are hurting me, Porfirio. I know no more than you do why he came out of the cupboard; but of course you do him a wrong. He did not mean anything of the sort—he is of a good heart—incapable of murder. And now, please, Porfirio, let go of my wrist.”

But he did not; his rage, gathering in volume, bade fair to convulse him.

“I intend to have the truth from one of the three of you before I let you go,” said he. “From you I require to know why you put him into the cupboard.”

“It was very silly,” said Aurelia, “since he had done no harm. Nonna, why did you put him into the cupboard?”

“Diana!” cried the old woman, “where else was I to put the boy?” The doctor’s laughter was terrible to me. I took a step forward.

“I will tell you, sir, the reason of both your puzzlements,” I said. “I was put into the cupboard because Donna Aurelia was rightly ashamed of me, and I came out because I was honestly ashamed of myself.”

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“Ha!” said he, “so now we have it.”

“You shall have it now,” I replied. “I was honestly ashamed of myself, and honestly glorious that I had been rebuked by so noble a lady. Sir, it is true that I love this lady.” Aurelia gave a shocked little cry, but I went on. “It is true that I kiss her feet. Sir, I worship the ground she presses with them—it is holy ground.”

He scoffed at me. I said, “My feelings overcame me—I sinned—I am utterly unworthy. Punish me for my sin as you will, I shall not defend myself. But do not, and do not you, madam, I entreat, punish me for the one thing I have done this night of which I may be rightly proud.”

“Bah,” said he, “you are a fool, I see. And now, madam——”

“Yes, Porfirio,” said she, poor soul.

“You, and that she-wolf over there—what have you to say?”

“I say,” said Nonna, “that the young gentleman is out of his wits.”

Aurelia said, “I am wretched. He was very foolish.”

“You have deceived me,” he thundered at her, “made a fool of me at your ease. You spoke your wheedling words, and he was in there to listen, and to laugh, by my soul! You coaxed, you stroked, you sidled, you whispered, and he was in there laughing, laughing, laughing! Oh, madam, you talk of his young foolishness, but you make your profit of my old foolishness.”

“It is false,” said Aurelia. “I never did it.”

“By my soul,” says he, “I’ll not be contradicted. I say that you do. O Heaven, is this your duty, your gratitude, your thanks due to me? Why— why—why—what did I take you from? What did I make of you? Your wretched mother——”

She looked up with flashing eyes. There was danger to be seen on its way. “She is not wretched.”

“Then she should be, madam,” he said. “She is parent of a wicked, false—”

Aurelia, crying, shook to get free. “No, no! Be silent. You shall not say such things.” She stamped her foot. “It is absurd, I won’t have it,” she said. He gave a strangling cry of rage and despair, released her and rushed towards the cupboard. Dramatically, he flung his arms towards it as if he would shake off his two hands and leave them there. “Explain that, woman,” he screamed. “Explain it if you dare——”

She was now equally angry, with patches of fire in her cheeks. “I shall explain nothing more. You will not believe me when I do. My mother will understand me.”

“Then she shall—if she can,” says the doctor, “and as soon as you please.” Aurelia peered at him. “What do you mean, sir?”

“Why, madam, that you shall go where you are best understood.”

“What!” she cried, “you mean—? You cannot mean—Oh, preposterous!”

The doctor was looking at the cupboard. “Ay, and it is preposterous, and I do mean it.”

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She stared at him for a moment, perplexed, then flew into a towering and ungovernable rage. “Ah,” she cried, and she shook in every member. “Ah, now you may mean what you please, for I have done. Do you dare to suspect me? Do you dare to treat me as an infamous woman? Oh, oh, do you dare? You shall have no need to repeat it. I will go to my mother’s house—I will go now—now—now. Nonna, my cloak and shoes—at once. I have been good—I have always tried to be good—and do you faithful duty. I have known what I ought to do—I have been proud to be Dr. Lanfranchi’s wife. I thought I would show to my people that a girl of Siena could be proud, even of a Venetian pig, if he were her husband. Ah, but no more, no more. No, I will work elsewhere, for better wages— you have seen the last of Aurelia.” She was superbly beautiful as she turned, pointing to me. “This youth—this mad, incomprehensible youth— what harm has he done *you* compared to what he has now done to me? He loves me, he says—I don’t understand his love—but why should he not? Am I to fall in love with everybody who says that? Do you think you are the only one? And—and—why!—-you have never said that you loved me: no, you have not. You just took to me, and made me work—your servant or your doll—your plaything when you were done with the cafe—me, a Gualandi of Siena—and you, a pig of Padua. Good Heaven, for what do you take me, sir? Did you find me in the street? Is my family one of wretches? Oh, what a man you are; ungrateful, cruel, hard as the grave. Yes, yes, Nonna, fold me close in my cloak; it will keep me from such cold as this.” She stood, cloaked and ready: we all stood—the doctor like a rock, I like a man dead at his prayers.

She looked from one of us to the other, to me second. “You told me that you loved me, Don Francis,” she said. “I am going to my mother. Will you take me?”

I never loved her so well as at this moment when I said, “Madam, I dare not do it.”

She blushed, I know she was mute with astonishment. I thought old Nonna would have torn my eyes out. “Dog!” she called me, “son of a dog.”

“I dare not go with you, madam,” I repeated. “I love you too well. I have done you so much wrong, meaning to do right, that I dare not now risk an act which I know to be wrong. Oh,” I cried, as my distress grew, “oh, unsay those words, Aurelia! You could not mean them, they were not yours.”

She tossed her head, and shrugged. “I will be careful not to say them again, at least,” she said. “They evidently distressed you. Come, Nonna— we will leave these gentlemen.” The doctor never moved—I followed her with my eyes. One more look from hers would have drawn us both to our destruction. I thank God at this hour that she never showed it me. She went out and shut the door behind her. Neither of us moved until we heard the street door bang. We had been waiting for that.

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“Now, Dr. Lanfranchi,” said I, with a glance at my sword, “I am ready for you how and when you please.”

With a howl like that of a miserable maniac he leapt upon me, tripped and threw me flat upon the flags. I remember the stunning shock of my fall, but remember no more. I learned afterwards that he had pitched me out on to the stairs, and that I fell far.

CHAPTER VI

I COMMENCE PILGRIM

I arose from bed, some two or three days after the terrible occurrence related—and how I had got into it, except for the charity of the doorkeeper, there’s no telling. I arose, I say, to a new heaven and a new earth: a heaven impossibly remote, an earth of sickly horror, an earth of serpents and worms, upon which I crawled and groped, the loathliest of their spawn. I surveyed myself in the glass, faced myself as I was—I the wrecker of homes, the betrayer of ladies, love’s atheist! Pale, hollow-cheeked, with eyes distraught, there was good ground for believing that when Dr. Lanfranchi threw me upon my worthless skull he had jogged out my wits.

The facts were otherwise, however. Resolution came back upon the crest, as it were, of the wave that brought me full knowledge; the more disastrously showed the ruin I had made, the more stoutly I determined to repair it.

The surgeon who attended me was perfectly discreet and told me nothing more than that Professor Lanfranchi had left Padua and was gone to Venice. Not so the custode of the house: it was from him I had the rest. Dr. Lanfranchi had taken his keys with him and had left no directions. Donna Aurelia had been twice to the house since her first departure from it, and had been unable to get access. The second time of failing, said the custode, she had “lashed into the street like a serpent from a cage. And nobody,” he added, “nobody in this town, and nobody under heaven’s great eye, can say where she has gone. Perhaps she is dead, sir; but I believe that she is not. Pretty and snug lady that she was, it’s my belief she will fret after her comforts, and that if she get them not from one, she will have them from another.” Old Nonna had also disappeared, he said, which was better than things might have been; but the strongest ray of comfort shed upon me from this worthy fellow’s store was this, that Donna Aurelia had returned to her house. Plainly, if she had been thither twice, she could be induced thither a third time. It must then be my business to induce her, and to see to it, if possible, that she was properly received upon that occasion.

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Here was a duty plainly set before me—my first and greatest reparation, which no other tie must hinder, to accomplish which I must shrink from no hardship however severe, no humiliation however bitter. Another lay closer to my heart, I'll allow, the words of pardon which I hoped to sue forth from the dearest lips in all the world—for I could never hope to be happy until the being whom, most loving, I had most offended could consent to assure me of my peace. This, however, I resolutely put by as a selfish pleasure which I must not expect to enjoy until I had earned it. However natural might be the impulse which urged me to find Aurelia, fall at her feet, anoint them with my tears, I must withstand it until I could be sure of her honour saved. Now, was that surety to be gained first from her or first from her wrathful husband?

I turned to the custode, who stood smiling and rubbing his chin in my doorway. I said, "Beppo, I am in great perplexity. It is idle to deny that I am the immediate cause of all this misery, for you know it as well as I do."

He said that he had guessed something of what I was so good as to tell him. "There was, as I understand, a little misadventure with a cupboard door," he said; "but who can contend with Fate?"

"It has been my fate," I said, "to bring ruin upon the lady whom I adore. My sin is worse than that of Hophni and Phineas, and I would that the requital might be as theirs was, save that I can make it more bitter yet."

"Why," says he, "what was done to those gentlemen?" I told him that they were slain with the sword; to which he replied that, so far as he had ever heard, the doctor was nothing of a swordsman, and that he knew I had some proficiency in fence. "I hope then," he added, "that your honour will succeed where those other gentlemen failed; but if you ask my advice, I say, leave the doctor alone, and comfort the little lady."

His gross misapprehension of every merit of the case nettled me: I saw it was useless to talk with a person of his condition, and that instant action was my only safety. I must go, on my knees if must be, to the feet of Donna Aurelia, I must put myself entirely at her service. Should that lie in spurning me with her heel I must endure it; should she bid me go and receive public chastisement from her dangerous husband, I would assuredly go. Tears, stripes, hunger, thirst, cold, heat, loneliness, nakedness, unjust accusation, ridicule, malicious persecution—all these I would cheerfully undergo; and if one or any of them could repair her misfortunes, then they would be repaired. The custode said that he believed they could not, but I bade him be silent and begone. "Wretched Venetian," I cried at him, "thou art incapable of comprehending anything but victuals. If I tell thee that I have lacerated an angel and deserve the sword, thou speakest of my skill in fence! I waste my breath upon thee. Comfort the lady, dost thou dare to say? What comfort can she have but in my repentance? What have I to offer but devotion?"

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“It is just that which I advise your honour-” he began, but I was now embarked upon the waters of adventure, cheered with the prospect of action, impatient to begin my voyage. Astonishment cropped his period midway; he gaped as he saw what I did. I threw upon the floor my sword and finely laced coat; I threw my vest, ruffles, cravat, watch, rings, after them. I kicked into a corner with my foot my buckled shoes, my silk stockings, my fine gilt garters. Upon the top of the heap I cast my Paris hat, my gloves and brooch. “There lies,” I said, “the sinful husk of Francis Strelley. Let the swine nozzle and rout in it for what they can find to their liking. And here,” I cried, standing before him in shirt and breeches, barefooted, bareheaded, without a coat to my back, “here, good man, stands the naked soul of that same Francis, which shall go shivering forth to declare his shame, to meet his penance, to stand begging at the door of the Holy Place for the mercy which he has shown himself unworthy of.”

About my disordered hair I tied Aurelia’s ribbon, round my upper arm I placed her garter, to my neck, upon a silken cord, I hung her Venice slipper. In the bosom of my shirt I placed the little book of devotion which she had given me, and the “Aminta” of Tasso in which we had last read together. “Farewell, Beppo,” said I; “you may not see Francis again.”

“Where are you going, sir?” he asked me, wondering.

“To Siena—to Aurelia—to Heaven!” and he held up his hands.

“You are never going to Siena as you are,” he cried; and I asked him how else he would have me go.

“Your honour will take cold in the chest,” says he, “that’s very plain; but long before that can declare itself your honour will be lodged in the madhouse. And what is Madam Aurelia to say, by your leave, to an undressed young gentleman which she declined to say to a dressed one? Let me tell you, young sir,” he added with a sneer, “Siena’s not the only city in Italy where there are madmen.”

“Man,” I said, “what is it to me, do you suppose, whether I am in a madhouse or a prison this night? I intend for Siena, and shall certainly get there in good time. Now I will ask you to leave me.”

“Tis your honour is for leaving, not I,” said he, “and though I shall be taking a liberty, it’s in a case of bad-is-the-best I do believe.” He took off his jacket and put it on the bed.

“What are you proposing, Beppo?” said I.

“A strait-waistcoat,” said he, and came at me with determination.

I was his master in a very few minutes, for I was much stronger than he reckoned for. When I had him at my discretion, I let him get up and thus addressed him:

“I have every reason to be extremely offended with you,” I said, “but I believe that you have acted honestly. Let me, however, recommend you not to interfere in the private and personal affairs of gentlemen until you have fitted yourself to understand them. I am going upon a journey in a manner which appears becoming to one who is responsible for these lamentable troubles. I shall leave my property here in your charge, but will ask you to accept such of those articles as are on the floor as may be of use to you. When you see me again it will be as your indulgent master; but he who now bids you farewell is unworthy to shake your hand.”

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He nevertheless took my hand and kissed it devotedly immediately afterwards he had fallen upon my discarded trifles.

“Excellency! Excellency!” he cried, gasping, “what bounty! what splendour of soul!” He fingered my watch, listened to it. “It goes yet— it is a famous watch!” He babbled like a happy child. “Mechlin stuff, every thread of it!” He smoothed out the lace ends of my cravat. So he ran through the silly things one after another—shoes which he could not wear, a sword which he could not use, a coat which must exhibit him a monkey—he grovelled before me and would have kissed my foot, but that I shrank from him in disgust. “Horrible, venal Venetian,” I said, “thou hast shown me one more degraded than I.” He was out of sight with his bundle of treasures before I could finish my reproof, and I busied myself with my last preparations.

I wrote two letters: the first was to Dr. Lanfranchi, the second to my father. To the doctor I said what was, I think, becoming, namely, that his wife was as spotless as the snow, and that the very blackness of my guilt did but show her whiteness more dazzling. I added an expression of my undying sorrow for having brought misfortune upon her whom I must always love, and him whom I had once respected, and assured him that I did not intend to rest until I had repaired it. This I addressed to the university.

I explained briefly to my father the reason of my temporary absence from Padua; and upon reconsideration of my plans, desiring to avoid any affectation of extravagance, added a cloak, a small bundle of clean linen, a staff and a few gold pieces to my thin equipment. At four o’clock in the afternoon I went out into the street and directed my steps towards the gate of San Zuan.

Leaving Padua, I turned and looked for the last time upon her domes and towers. “Farewell, once proud city, now brought low by my deed,” I said. “Keep, if thou must, the accursed memory and name of Francis Antony Strelley, gentleman—Poisoner of Homes, Stabber-in-secret, Traitor in Love. I leave him behind me for the worst thou canst do. He that quits thee now is another than he: Francesco Ignoto, Pilgrim, in need of Grace.”

Then I addressed myself stoutly to the hills; and it is a circumstance worthy of remark that the further I pushed the more certainly I recovered my spirits. I suppose there never was yet in this world a young man to whom the future did not appeal more urgently than the present, or who would not rather undertake an adventure without a shilling to his name than in his post-chaise and four. It is, I take it, of the essence of romance that the lady’s castle-prison of enchantment lies beyond the forest, across the hills or over sea; and most assuredly that damsel who is to be won by means of a courier leading a spare horse is as little worth your pains as she whose price is half a guinea. I, in that commencement of my pilgrimage, then, was happy because I was doing something, and hopeful because I could not see my way!

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CHAPTER VII

I AM MISCONCEIVED AT THE HOSPITAL

I am conscious that the reader may find much to condemn in my last chapter. He may think my schemes chimerical, my methods undisciplined; he may say that I am perverse. I shall only urge in defence of what I did that I deeply loved, and had deeply injured, the lovely Aurelia. She had departed from me in misunderstanding and anger; she did not believe in my devotion, she could not understand my behaviour. Was it surprising, then, if I felt that I must find her at all costs? Was it wonderful that I wished her to know of my repentance, or that I wished to repair my wrong-doings? For eight months I had enjoyed daily and hourly communion with her—and I don't pretend to say that the horrible loss of that had a good deal to do with my precipitate departure, any more than that the hope of finding her was what gave the spring to my feet and brought back the young blood to my heart. No pilgrim to Loretto or Compostella more longingly set his eyes to where he believed his hopes to lie than did I watch for the first sign of the Apennines, which barred my way to Siena. Having thus briefly defended myself against misconception, I shall say no more on that head.

After my first night under the stars—wondrous night of wakefulness and hopeful music, throughout which I lay entranced at the foot of a wooded hill and was never for a moment uncompanioned by nightingale, cicala and firefly—I began to suffer from footsoreness, a bodily affliction against which romance, that certain salve for the maladies of the soul, is no remedy, or very little. Crossing the hills, over burning roads, through thorny brakes or by slopes of harsh grass, my heels and the balls of my toes became alarmingly inflamed; and an acacia-spine, lodging in the sole of one foot, made matters no better. That second day of mine I could barely hobble twelve miles, and nothing but resolution could do that much for me. The night came and found me ill; I slept not; though I had provided myself with food, I could not touch it. Luckily, I was discovered by some shepherd boys early in the morning and directed to the town of Rovigo at some half a league's distance, where they said there was a hospital.

Seeing that my foot was now so bad that the touch of a hand upon it was torment, I think it had gone hard with me if Rovigo had stood another half-league away. I shall not readily forget the noble charity of one of those boys, who, seeing the inflammation set up by the thorn in my foot, ripped off the sleeve of his shirt and bound it round the instep—my first experience of the magnanimity of the poor, but by no means my last.

I limped into Rovigo and learned the direction of the hospital, at whose gate I was kept with a sorry crew of wretches for a mortal hour while the brother-in-charge finished his siesta.

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Two friars, a soldier disguised in drink, a young Jew, and myself completed the company, which was allowed to make itself free of a flagged and whitewashed hall, absolutely devoid of furniture, and smelling at once sour and stale. I am sorry and ashamed to remember that the Jew was the only person of my four fellows in misfortune who kept up any semblance of manners or proper reserve. He differed, indeed, markedly from the others, not only in his behaviour, which was at least conformable, but in his appearance of alacrity and cheerful health. Seeing that I suffered as much from the ribaldry of my fellow-guests as from my bodily pains, he came and sat by my side, and encouraged me with the assurance that it was far better to wait for the brother-in-charge to awake in the course of nature than to disturb him out of his sleep. "Mighty little chance for me, for example," he said, "if Brother Hyacinth don't have his nap to the full. He'll be as savage as a starved wolf, understand, and will send a man to hell sooner than to admit him if he have a good foot left to take him there."

"Why, then," said I, "he will never send me for sure, for I have no feet."

"Be not so sure, dear sir," returned the Jew. "You don't know Brother Hyacinth as well as I do. There was a fellow came here on a day all spent and bleeding. He had lost a toe under a coach-wheel. If you will believe it, this dear host of ours bade him go walk on his hands, and offered him the cloister to get perfect in. Now, with me, I know it will go hard, unless those fools cease their din." The two friars had been dicing with the soldier, and had won his boots. Each had taken one from him, and were now wrangling who should have both. I was struck by the sinister expression of one of them, a Capuchin of great strength, with a long white beard. More than enough of him in due course. I told the Jew that my case was so bad I cared not greatly whether I was received or no. A man, I said, could die anywhere. "Why, yes," he said, "so he can—and live anywhere also. One is as easy as the other, if you but give your mind to it. But one thing I will tell you," he added, "it is not so easy as you might think to live cheaply when you have the means of living dear. I shall be lucky if I spend this night as I desire—but you will see. Hush! here is our man." I had been about to ask him what was his malady, for he appeared to me the picture of health, and shining with it; but just then a square-headed religious, with small angry eyes and prominent bones, came into the hall, attended by a clerk, a sleek young fellow, who called out "Silence," and was instantly obeyed. The two friars were on their knees in a trice, and chattering their Hail Marys; the soldier, after some efforts to rise, had managed to lift himself by the wall, and, being propped up against it, was saluting all and sundry with great impartiality. The Jew only was good enough to help me with the support of his arm.

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His was the first case. “Your name?” said Brother Hyacinth, and was answered “Giovanni-Battista-Maria-Bentivoglio.”

“Write,” said Brother Hyacinth to his clerk, “Jew, name unknown, active liar.” This done, he continued his questions.

“Your means?”

“Alas, none,” replied the Jew.

“Search him,” said Brother Hyacinth.

The clerk thereupon turned out his pockets, which were empty of everything but holes. Not content with that, however, he felt all over his body, and when he had, as I may say, drawn all the coverts blank, knelt down and pulled off the man’s shoes. The Jew was unable to repress an exclamation, which I naturally set down to his disgust at the indignity. But I found that this was not so. The clerk very neatly picked out a small key from between his toes and held it up to his master.

“I thought as much,” said Brother Hyacinth. “Go.” The young Jew sighed, shrugged, and stood back without a word; and while I was considering what his imposture could have been it was my turn.

Brother Hyacinth examined me with keen displeasure. “Who are you?” he asked me. I told him “Francesco-Antonio Strelli”—and he bade the clerk write these names down. “Nationality?” he asked next. I told him “Inglese.” One of the friars, that evil, bearded fellow, I noticed, had drawn near and was listening with all his might. Now it was to be noticed of him that he breathed very short and fast, and that his breath struck like fire upon my skin. The interrogatory was renewed.

“Your place of immediate origin?” I was asked.

I said, “Padua.”

“Your present occupation?”

“Repentance,” I said, and spoke the truth.

“Your means of support?”

“Grace,” said I, and he stamped on the ground.

“You are trifling with me—I advise you to take care. Answer me truthfully of what you repent.”

This angered me. I told him shortly that, like everybody else in the world of my way of thinking, I repented of sin.

He turned to his amanuensis. “Write down that the young man refuses to give an account of himself,” he said harshly; and then asked me what I wanted of the hospital.

I said with heat, “My brother, I had required of it what I now see I am not to expect, charity, namely, both of judgment and act. I am afflicted, as you ought to have seen at once; I need your wisdom—but need most your sympathy—” To my amazement he cut me short, as he had done with the Jew, by the brief command, “Search him.” I recoiled as well as I could in my fainting and helpless condition.

“Do you dare insult a sick man?” I cried; and to the clerk, who was about to put me to this indignity, I said, “Touch me at your peril, sir; for though I die for it, you will pay for your temerity.”

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The Jew, who had been looking on at my examination (quite unabashed at the mortification of his own), here interposed by telling me that the thing was a common form and must be gone through with. I was about to shake him off for his impertinence when a chance phrase of his, “free lodging,” enlightened me. This, then, was not what I understood by a hospital—using the applied sense of the word—but one of those original institutions, so-called, which were, of course, guest-houses for the poor. The moment I understood that, I saw that I and Brother Hyacinth had been at cross-purposes. I pulled out my handful of money and spilled some pieces upon the floor. Instantly the great friar behind me clapped his foot upon them. The Jew hunted down the rest.

Brother Hyacinth now recoiled. “What does this mean?” he asked. “Are you a fool, or a thief, or an impudent rascal?”

“You are mistaken,” I replied, “I am none; but it is clear that I have deceived you. Had I understood the real objects of your hospital—which, I am compelled to add, you have most successfully concealed—I should not have been before you. I am ill and in great pain. I supposed that you could give me assistance. And even now, should that be possible, I would accept it, and pay for it.” Brother Hyacinth, with keen displeasure, said that mine was a case for the police, and that, while he should decline my money, he was minded to detain my person for their consideration; but the Jew thereupon broke in with more assurance than I should have thought him capable of. “Your pardon, very reverend,” he said, “but this is a case for the best physician in Rovigo, and the best bed in the best inn. This gentleman, as I knew very well from the first, is acting for a wager. Only your astuteness has prevented him from winning it. He has failed, but not by much; it is an honourable defeat. He very willingly bestows upon you two ducats for the beneficent purposes of the hospital—those very two, in fact, which the reverend frate behind him has covered with his foot. With the others he will return to his noble parents, being furnished with a certificate from your reverence to the effect that he has failed in his endeavour.”

The clerk, who had by this time extracted the two pieces from beneath the foot of the Capuchin (who loudly denied that they were there), was now whispering with Brother Hyacinth. After a short time he drew me apart and told me that but for him I should certainly be sent to prison. The brother-in-charge, he said, believed me to be a highway thief—or professed that he did—against all reason; for said the clerk, “As I told his reverence, if your honour had been a thief it is very unlikely that we should have had the pleasure of your company at the hospital. His reverence has made difficulties—it has been hard to convince him, though your honour’s generosity to the hospital has not been without effect. I flatter myself that my arguments have been useful. Any further service I can do your honour, I shall very thankfully undertake.”

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I expressed myself obliged to him, and added that though it might be very true that I deserved prison, I had other acts of penitence in view which could only be properly performed in Tuscany. I said, “You would be justified—if you knew the whole of my history—in declining what I nevertheless urge upon your benevolence—this crown-piece namely——” He assured me that no crime of mine, however unnatural, could cause him a momentary scruple, took the coin, spat upon it, pocketed it, and said that he was my servant and orator to the end of time. At this moment the great Capuchin—-he of the covering foot—took me by the arm and begged the favour of a word in my ear. He was a hideous villain, broad-shouldered, scarred, hugely bearded, and had a prominent tooth in his lower jaw, rather loose, which stuck out like a tusk. I have spoken of his breath, which was as the blast of a furnace.

“I see,” he said with an odious leer, “that you are a game-cock. I knew you by your ruffle. It was gallantly tried, and nearly successful. I like your spirit much. Come with me, and you shall not fail again. You and I will take the road together, live at our ease, and live for nothing, and brave it with the best notwithstanding. What do you say? Shall we shake hands upon it?” Monster that he was, as he hovered over me there, grinning, moving his tooth, he inspired me with loathing. I felt the blood tingle in my cheek.

“Better a Jew than a thieving renegade,” says I. “That is my answer to you. Go in peace.”

He said, “As you will,” and turned to his affairs. I left the hospital with the benevolent Jew, whose name was Issachar.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PEDLAR OF CRUCIFIXES

Issacher, as well as being a cheerful, loquacious fellow and of ready wits, was so exceedingly kind as to support my weight upon his sparer frame. My arm was heavy, I am sure, upon his neck, as his was certainly tight about my middle; but he uttered no complaints, indeed there was no room for them in the voluble series of his comments, confessions, promises and inquiries. He said, as we made our painful way down the single street of Rovigo, “My dear friend, you and I have both failed in our enterprise, and for much the same reason; but really you must be a novice at the trade if you expect to get a free lodging with a pocketful of gold about you. Confess that my invention of your wager was as happy as it was apt. Done in a flash—on the wings of the moment as they spread for a flight—but that is my way—I am like that. The lodging of my key, however, was a folly of a sort I am never likely to commit again. Another time I will swallow it. It was indolence on my part—my besetting weakness—a child of a whim! Having bestowed my goods, what but that hindered me from likewise bestowing the key? I am vexed with myself, but I expected more company. Who was to know there

would be time for so much examination? But now, sir, let me see how I can serve you. An inn? A meal? A decent bed? Medicaments? All these you can have for a turn of your pretty golden key."

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I thanked him for his services, but he would not hear a word of them. Helping me through the town, he took me to a small inn outside the gate, saw me put to bed, brought me a good broth, some wine and bread, and left me to my meditations while he went for a doctor. The thorn was extracted, poultices applied; I was given a soothing medicine, fell asleep and slept heavily.

In the morning I found him by my side. After asking how I did, and satisfying himself, by examination, that my feet were recovering, he said that he wished to serve me without being indiscreet. "What your private purposes may be," he said, "I neither know nor seek to inquire. It is plain that you are a gentleman of some simplicity, or of a subtlety far too fine for my eyes of every day. Whichever you may be, I admire. If you are candid in calling yourself a pilgrim I appreciate your candour. If you are not, I appreciate even more your discretion. But you will still let me observe that for a young gentleman of personal attractions to walk half naked through an inquisitive nation, and to give oracular replies to questions put him by officials (to say the least of it) is to excite remark. I have some recommendations to make, which I hope you'll pardon—as first, stockings; second, a pair of stout walking-shoes; third, a hat; fourthly, some apparent calling beside that of penitent. Penitence is a trade open to many objections; but for those, I am sure I should have tried it myself. Of what, for instance, do you repent? Is it murder? Is it coin-clipping? Is it—but I spare your blushes. Besides, it can always be objected that, as there is nothing to hinder your penitent fishmonger from trading in fish and being truly contrite at the same time, so also your honour has the same privilege before you. To be short, I recommend you to choose some calling more plainly commercial."

I replied that he was very right, and that I would gladly embrace any calling which would not hinder my design. To this he answered that I had not done him the honour of explaining my design, but that he conceived it to be that of walking about the country with as much discomfort as possible. To this superficial judgment I, very naturally, demurred.

"You are dry, my dear sir," I said, "nor do I wonder. Allow me to tell you my story, and I shall make you sweat with indignation." Omitting names of persons and places, I thereupon detailed the whole of my case, and concluded thus solemnly: "I hope that you now understand how I am placed. I am a gentleman who has behaved himself like a ruffian, a Christian who has stultified his religion. I love a certain lady and have insulted her; I was placed in a sacred relationship and betrayed it. Still a lover, still a postulant for service, I have three objects in life: (a) to bite and burn the vice out of myself; (b) to find my mistress; (c) to make her amends. Whatever occupation you propose for my consideration must subserve these three great ends."

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Issachar listened with attention, and remained for some time after I had finished speaking lost in thought. Then he said, “I see that yours is no common case. Honour, Religion, and Love make a strong partnership and hard taskmasters to a young journeyman. Perhaps I am too little of a casuist to maintain that the lady will not be gratified by your efforts to gain her esteem. My experiences have been few, and I am no lady’s man, but I own I should have thought that she would have preferred a more dashing return to her feet—something on horseback, say, with a hand on your thigh and a kiss of the finger-tips. Ha! you might say, ha! fair enchantress, do we meet again? A nonchalant mien! I believe few ladies can resist it. But it is not for me to say. I am, however, convinced of one thing, which is that if you stray about the country at random, proclaiming in a resolute voice that you are a criminal, in a very short time you will be taken at your word and clapped into gaol— there or in a madhouse. Either will be uncomfortable—but in neither will you meet your lady. Of that I am positive.” He grew warm, he grew declamatory. “Why, this is extraordinary!” he cried. “Why, sir, how will you get out of this State and into another without a passport? How will you live when you have spent your money? How can you approach your lady, or anybody’s lady, without a coat on your back or a quattrino in your pocket? I am ashamed to put you questions so elementary, but if you can answer one of them I shall have done with them.”

As I had no answer ready, Issachar proceeded—briskly, confidentially, and with alacrity. “It is indeed lucky for you,” he said, “that you have fallen into my hands; Fra Palamone—that old tusker with the useful foot—would have flayed you alive and sold the skin. Now, I have everything here that a man of honour can want—a neat jacket”—he produced it—“shoes, stockings, garters?”—he put them on the bed. “A hat?” He held up a broad-brimmed felt, with a draggled feather which conferred no benefit upon it. “And now,” he continued, “for your trade. Short of chivalry, which involves horse exercise and is to be condemned on the score of expense, peddling is the very thing for you. I understand your requirements perfectly: put shortly they are: (a) piety, (b) travel, (c) gallantry; beyond those you need health, reasonable protection from law or lawlessness, honest profit. Well, take peddling. It is safe, it is easy; you have company, you may make money; you see all the sights and hear all the news, and you may repent as diligently as you please through all. But my assistance will be better than you can dream of. I am myself a pedlar, with a small stock left, which (as I am going home to Venice) I shall make over to you at cost price. In addition to that, I will hand my passport over to you, just as I have given you my coat and hat. Read it, and you will see how exactly your wheels fall into my ruts.”

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He produced his passport and put it in my hands. I found myself about to be described as “Issacaro, Ebreo, vendor of pious objects,” licensed by the Sacred College and vouched for by the Grand Inquisitor. My features were said to be fleshy, my nose pendulous, my hair black and curly, my shoulders narrow, my manner assured. I objected that the description would never pass me over the frontier; but Issachar replied, “Have no concern on that score. Observe my shoulders, they are as level as your own. Can it be said of my manner that it fails of delicacy? That passport was no more mine than it is now. The fact is that a passport is needed to distinguish one man from another; and if the traveller have no particular features, these must be found for him. These crucifixes will save you.”

“That,” I said, “as a Christian, I am not allowed to deny.”

“I have a round score of them left,” says he. “Let us figure up the whole. The passport I could not let go for less than two ducats; upon my soul and honour it cost me near three. The hat, the coat, shoes and stockings—well, can we say less than a ducat and a half? Surely not. The workmanship alone is worth the money. For the crucifixes, which are very fine, and in the rococo manner now so much esteemed, I cannot say a quattrino less than four ducats, nor can a Christian, I suppose, set any bounds to the value he places upon that symbol. My price, therefore, is nominal—an act of charity on my part, which my sympathy with your sad story moves me to do. I believe you had in your breeches pocket some ten ducats and a few broad pieces. Supposing I take seven ducats and conclude the bargain—what do you say? Will you shake hands upon it?” He looked pleasantly at me, holding out his hand.

The crucifixes were large—the image of plaster, the cross of white wood. The price was exorbitant; but I felt the force of his argument, that no Christian could set bounds to the value of such a symbol. Moreover, the trade attracted me. To walk the world as a pedlar of crucifixes—could one conceive a nobler employment? I, at least, could not. The merchandise so noble that it could not be degraded by the merchant, the merchant so ignoble that he must needs be dignified by the merchandise—the cross, emblem of sacrifice, emblem of divine compassion, divine providence and humility! I must be excused if I saw here something more than happy coincidence, if I fell into a mood of dangerous exaltation. I embraced my new career with fervour, I embraced my stock-in-trade. “Oh, thou unique and venerable wood,” I cried, “often as thou hast been carried into men’s affairs, in the forefront of red battle, to preside over the consecrations of pontiffs and emperors, to abase kings, to lend criminals a final hope, never yet hast thou submitted thyself to a sinner in sorer need, but never also found sincerer champion than Francis Strelley! Under this sign did Constantius Caesar subdue Chosroes; under it shall riotous Francis tread down himself!” I bade Issachar take his purchase-money; I thanked him warmly for his friendly thoughts of me; and having put on the coat, hat, and

other garments he had sold me, set out once more, after a day's and night's repose, which were complete enough to make further inactivity impossible.

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I found my passport an easy key into the States of the Church, which all that rich alluvial country of Ferrara had now become. I sold no crucifixes, but meditated profoundly upon them as I penetrated further into the great Lombard plain, and drew nearer to the cloudy mountains which seemed to me the guardians of my Land of Promise. I hung one of them round my neck by a cord, and got much comfort and spiritual assistance from it. My faith grew livelier as my needs increased; the sacred figure received my confidences and seemed to impart ghostly counsels. I had a superstitious care to keep it always towards Tuscany, twisting the cord round so that the cross was on my back whenever I had occasion to face north instead of south. Before going to sleep I was careful to stand it up so that the image pointed its bowed head in the right direction. I felt sure that all would go well with me whilst I bore upon me this infallible mark of honest profession. I was like Dante, it seemed to me, approaching the Mount of Purgation—for which, in my own case, I put the Apennines. Like Dante, it was necessary that all my stains should be done off, and that I should be marked by the Guardian of the Gate. Well, here I bore my Sign—the only sign tolerable for a Christian—and before I had reached the last ridge of the mountains, before I could hope to look up to the shining eyes of my Beatrice, my brands of sin must one by one be wiped out. Ah, that was very true; and was proved to be so before I had done my journeyings; but I knew not then in what manner.

A misfortune for me was that, playing a character, I could not refuse to sell my wares. At Malalbergo, a small town between Ferrara and Bologna, I came into a region where famine and pestilence between them had been rife, stalking (dreadful reapers!) side by side, mowing as they went. The people stormed the churches, and hung with wild cries for mercy about the shrines on the wayside. They fell ravenously upon me—and as I could not set a price upon my crucifixes, and it was soon known that I had them to give away, it follows that within half an hour after entering Malalbergo I was able to leave it with nothing to show for my declared profession but the cross about my neck. So fearful was I of losing that one, I concealed my passport, and travelled henceforward under my own name and profession. I had very little money left—some three or four ducats, I think. I determined to be careful of these, and to endeavour after some employment in Bologna, at once congenial and lucrative, which should not, however, deflect my designs from the speedy accomplishment of my pilgrimage.

CHAPTER IX

I AM HUMILIATED, LIFTED UP, AND LEFT CURIOUS

It had been my hope to be able to buy, exercising great economy, a new store of crucifixes in Bologna, and to find a country beyond it where I might, without scruple, sell them for the means of bare subsistence—for I asked no more than that. But even that much was not to be: the city of St. Dominick's last rest would not allow long resting-place to me.

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I was delighted with the first view of it, as, following the brown street of entry, it revealed itself to me. Its towers and arcades, squares and fountains and spacious churches made a strong impression upon my excited senses. Having found a modest lodging, I wandered from shrine to shrine enraptured, and, believing myself fondly in a city of believers as ardent as myself, I took no trouble either to conceal my crucifix, a most conspicuous ornament, I must allow, or my sentiments of hopeful devotion. I suppose that by degrees I excited remark. I was a stranger in a thinly populated, very idle, curious city. I think that I meditated aloud—I may certainly have done so, since I had no desire to conceal my ambitions. If I struck my breast, the action was sincere, becoming to a contrite sinner; if I was inspired—and I was—I believe that I was about to prove a cause of inspiration in others. It is indubitable that I spoke to the crowd which gathered about me and followed me from church to church, and that, under the stimulus of their plaudits, I was moved to what may be called eloquence. I spoke of charity, I remember, upon the steps of San Petronio—charity of interpretation in matters of faith and morals and private conscience; and I ended by declaring, what was perfectly true, that Christian as I was, a Jew had put me in my present way of salvation.

At this singularly inopportune moment I was rudely interrupted. The crowd parted and fell this way and that without my perception, and a hand clapped upon my shoulder brought me to earth from those middle regions of the aether, where I had seemed to be afloat. It was as if, looking up at the stars, I had stumbled on a knotty root.

An officer of the Inquisition stood beside me, a tall, keen-eyed man, cloaked in black.

“I have been watching you, young man, for two hours,” he said. “You perform your devotions somewhat publicly, and seem to have a great deal to say about your spiritual state. The Church has appointed ways and means for the consolation of the faithful, some of which are no doubt open to you. Only scandal can ensue these kind of practices.”

I was highly indignant, as who would not have been? “Upon my word, sir,” I exclaimed, “if a sinner may not proclaim, his repentance so near the throne of pardon, nor a faithful believer record his sincerity within this shadow of the truth——”

“Such excesses as you use,” he stopped me, “savour of private conscience following its own bent. The Church is distrustful of such excursions. That crucifix which you carry, for instance——”

I clasped it with fervour. “Ah, it is my passport!”

“Sovereigns and rulers of States,” said the officer, “will require more particulars, and so, for that matter, will the police of Bologna. This is useless for any such purpose, and your pretence only adds urgency to my desire of you. I don’t wish to be severe with you. I ask you in a friendly and reasonable way to give me the crucifix.”

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“Never,” said I. “Without it I am lost to Tuscany.”

“With it,” replied the officer, “you are lost to the world for some time. This indecent profession of opinion—What! a wooden cross as big as a dagger! Give it to me at once, and follow me to the tribunal of the police.”

I confess that I grew cold before such irrational tyranny. “You are going the way to work, sir,” I said, “to make me an atheist. I shall yield only to force.”

Vain protest! “Have it as you will,” said the officer, and signed to the sbirri, who came forward at once, cleaving the crowd with their drawn swords. “This young man is illuminated,” said the officer; “take him to the tribunal, and look into his papers.” I saw that submission was my only course, and took it. The police led me away.

A much more severe scrutiny of my miserable passport than had taken place at Ferrara followed upon this. Nothing but the “assured manner” of Issachar was allowed to stand up for me. My nose was fatally straight, my hair fatally out of curl. I was asked was I a Jew? and had I dared to pretend it, I know not to what extremes they might not have proceeded. But I had never learned to lie; I admitted at once that I had bought the passport. Instant action was taken upon this. My crucifix was burnt, the passport confiscated. I was given six hours in which to leave Bologna, and did not take three. I departed in a towering rage, which perhaps did me good, and devoured the leagues between the city and the mountains at a pace which I am sure did me credit. The lengthening shadows of these engulfed and sobered me. Late at night I reached a village at the foot of the mountains, whose name I don’t know, and sought out the only inn the place boasted—if any place could have been assured enough to boast of so miserable a shelter. By this time I had walked off my fury and a great part of my piety. I shall only add of Bologna, which I have never revisited, that, if it is the duty of a city of the Church to freeze the faith out of the heart of a son of the Church, then that haughty seat may boast of having fulfilled it.

My inn was full of French and Savoyard soldiers, recruiting, it was evident, for their cause or their pockets. War was said to be threatening between the Holy See and the Grand Duchy: these were the Pope’s allies, roaring, drinking, carding, wenching, and impressing all travellers who could not pay their way out. Saturnian revels! The landlord was playing Bacchus, much against his will; the landlady and a tattered maid were Venus and Hebe by turns; for my own part, shunning to be Ganymede, I slunk into an outhouse and shared its privacy with some scared fowls and a drover of the Garfagnana, who, taking me at first for a crimp, ran at me gibbering with a knife. I pacified him, luckily, before it was too late, and crouched with him until daylight, expecting discovery at every outcry. Not until then did the house

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seem asleep. But about cockcrow there was a silence as of the dead, and that time was judged favourable by my companion-in-hiding to get clear away. Knife in mouth he crept out of cover and went tiptoe by the house. The poor fellow was crimped at the corner by some wakeful sentry and tied up to fight the Grand Duke. So I stayed with the fowls until the maid came in for a victim, which was to supply the lieutenant's breakfast.

Here was my chance. "Madam," says I, and the girl gave a little shriek. Being desperate, I put an arm round her waist and covered her mouth with my hand.

"Madam," I said courteously, "I deplore the necessity of laying violence upon you, but pray you to believe, if you can, in my sincere respect for you. I am travelling to Florence, but alone. Help me to avoid these guests of yours, and I shall be eternally grateful." When I was sure that she had understood me I released her; she sighed.

"Forgive me, sir," she said, "but I thought you were going to make love to me."

"God forbid it," said I, perhaps a little too devoutly, for she seemed to be piqued.

She said, "It's as you please, sir, of course. He never forbids what you gentlemen have a mind to."

"You are wrong, my dear," I replied. "He does forbid it—but we don't know it until too late."

"Sir," said she, "it's not too late yet." It was now for me to sigh.

"If you knew, or could read, one page of my story," I told her, "you would understand how late I am, and how pressed for time. Will you not help me? I am in your hands." She looked kindly.

"Stay here, sir," said she. "I'll do my best for you."

What means she took cannot be told; but after a short absence she returned with bread and a jug of wine under her apron, and beckoning me to follow her, took me by a back way behind the houses, up a stair cut into the rock, and so to the upper street of the little town. Towering above me then, I saw the broad green side of the mountain, whose summit was wreathed in white mist.

"You are free to go now, sir," said she. "There lies your honour's way." I thanked her warmly, offering her my hand. But she put hers behind her.

"Is that all you are going to give me?" she asked me, and made me blush for my poverty.

“I would give you something very handsome if I had it,” I said, “for you have done me a real service. It would have been impossible for me to fight the Grand Duke, feeling as I do towards one of his subjects. You have saved me from a painful dilemma and deserve more than I can offer you.” Such as they were, however, I held out to her in one hand my last gold ducat, in the other my “Aminta.” The maid looked all about her, shaking her head at the choice. Nobody was near—the narrow street was asleep. “I would much rather take a kiss from your honour,” said she. “No girl likes to be disappointed—and you have a smooth chin.”

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I could not but tell her that in accepting a salute of the kind she little knew what risk she was running; to which she at once replied that a girl in her situation, with a houseful of French soldiers, was indifferent to common dangers. I told her I was sorry to hear it, and felt obliged to add that I was peculiarly accursed.

“Why,” says she, mighty curious, “whatever have you done, a pretty gentleman like you?”

“My dear,” said I, “I have injured a spotless lady.” Her reply was to throw her arms about my neck and give me some three or four resounding kisses. “Bless your innocence,” she cried warmly, “I wish I had been your lady. Injuries indeed!”

I was moved. “You are a kind and charitable soul,” I said, “and put the religious of Bologna to shame. Except from you and a Venetian Jew I promise you that I have met with no humanity upon my travels.” At this moment she heard herself called from below, and bade me kindly adieu. “I suppose you are after your lady?” she asked as she turned to leave me. “Yes,” says I, “that is my pilgrimage—to make her amends.” “Well,” says the maid, “be bolder with her than you were with me, or you’ll never do it. Adieu, sir!” I saw her no more.

I felt myself touched in a lively part—so quickly is our nature responsive to kindness. “The embrace of that warm-hearted girl,” I thought as I went on my way, “has put heart into me. A generous forgiving soul! And, by a figure, she may stand for that compassionate Aurelia for whom I shall seek until I fall. Is there no offence which women will not forgive? Yes, there is one—the great offence of all: Pride. Ah, Beppo, Beppo!” I cried, “my venal Paduan, I was happily inspired when I left thee my purple and linen!” I laughed aloud, and footed the long hill bravely. It may seem trifling to establish one’s uplifting by the kiss of a poor wench—but who can explain the ways of the soul? The wind bloweth where it listeth! And if that of hers were the kiss of peace? At any rate, it was kindly meant, and so I kindly received it. Unknown, lowly benefactress, I salute thee again from afar, after many years.

Breasting the last green steep of the hill, picking my way amid black rocks and dripping fern, I soon came upon the high road whose entry had been barred to me by the soldiers. I ate my bread, finished my jug of wine, and pushed on so vigorously that by noon I was in the heart of the mountains. To cut the narrative short, after one cold night in the open and one more day’s march, having surmounted the watershed of Lombardy and Tuscany, I found myself within view of the frontier, saw the guard-house with the red and white posts of the Grand Duchy, and two sentries with muskets walking up and down—a sharp reminder of difficulties ahead. Beyond the frontier the road curved about a great bluff of rock and skirted the edge of an abyss. I could see dimly a far-stretching blue plain with rivers and white villages showing faintly upon it; my heart

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leaped at the thought that there below me, within a day's travel, was the land that held Aurelia and Redemption; but even in that same moment there surged up that bitter something which chilled the generous feelings and staled the fluttering hopes. Cruel and vexatious thought! There was not a rill of water on these mossy stones which did not race unimpeded, or, if impeded, gathering force and direction from the very obstacle, towards Aurelia; yet here was I, sentient, adoring, longing, who had travelled so far and endured so much, unable to move one step beyond a painted post. Such thoughts make rebels of us. Is man, then, the slave of all creation? Is his the one existence framed by the Almighty that cannot follow his nature? Better then to be a beast of chase, darting mouse or blundering mole, than a man, if the more erect posture is to be the badge of a greater degradation. If the sole merit of two legs be that they take less hobbling, better far to go upon four. Needless to say that these were the mutinous reflections of the young Francis who suffered—not of him who now writes them down, who pays taxes, wears a good coat and bows to the police with the best citizens in the country. But that Francis of nascent rebellion—miserably irresolute, truly indignant, not daring to go forward, not able to retire—asked himself such burning questions in vain as he paced the brown length of a beechen glade, within sight but out of hope of his promise.

I must have wandered further than I reckoned; for so it was that I presently became aware of a companion in my solitudes. This was a Capuchin of great girth and capacity, who sat under a chestnut tree, secluded from observation, and was at that time engaged in dyeing his beard.

CHAPTER X

I FALL IN AGAIN WITH FRA PALAMONE

The Capuchin's employment was precisely what I have stated, though all probability is against it. I was curious enough to watch him and could make no mistake. He had a copious beard descending to his stomach, the half snowy white, the half a lustrous black. Upon a depending twig he had fixed a tin-edged mirror, in his hand was a small tooth-comb. With this he raked his beard over and over again, occasionally dipping it in a tin cup at his side. He looked in the glass, picked up a strand of beard, examined it minutely underneath, dipped his comb and raked, dipped and raked again. My gradual advance, due, as I have said, to curiosity, not presumption, did not disconcert him at all; he began to speak without so much as looking at me, whereby I was able to hope that I was not recognised. On my side it had not taken long to ascertain that I knew the Capuchin very well—if not by his white half-beard, then by that jutting tusk of his—at once so loose and so menacing. It was that very same who at the hospital of Rovigo had looked at me so hard, had burnt my cheek with his hot breath and urged the value

of his friendship so clamantly against that of the Jew's; Fra Palamone, as I remembered his name. Nor could I forget why I had decided against him, nor in what terms. It had been because, when I had brought my handful of money flooding out of my pocket, two ducats had been covered by this man's foot and had been buried deep in his toes.

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“Buon di,” said he in cheerful Tuscan speech. “Are you come upon a like errand of accommodation, by chance? You are welcome to a corner of my dressing-room. We’ll strike a bargain. If you dip my beard, I’ll dip yours.”

I said that would be bad commerce on my part, since I had no beard. “You, sir,” I added, “have a remarkable one, which I confess I regret to see coloured.”

“A fig for your regrets, little man,” said the other. “Politics is the cry. If your passport described you as a middling-sized man with a black beard and a running at the nose, you’d be doing as I am. But you’ll never have such a passport as that.”

“My passport,” I told him, “is destroyed. It described me as a young Jew with an assured manner and a pendulous nose.”

This caused the Capuchin to look upon his visitor. Whether he knew me or not, then or before, he made no sign. “There’s no flattery in that,” he said, “but you could have done it. A manner’s a manner, and there’s an end; but I could swell any man’s nose for him and say thank you. And what does your present passport bear?”

I said, “I have none. The Holy Office having confiscated it, ejected me from Bologna because I wore a crucifix and prayed to the Madonna.”

“Ah,” says he, “I’ve known a man hanged in that city for less. But what you say convinces me of one thing: you will be all the better for company.”

“How so?” said I.

“Why,” says the Capuchin, “you tell me you were talking to the Madonna.”

“It is true that I was addressing her in her image.”

“Very well; that’s a proof positive to me that you had nobody else to address—a most unwholesome state of affairs. How does my beard strike you? Black as blackness, I fancy.”

He was right. I assured him that it was now as black as Erebus and pleased him extremely. I told him, however, that I thought he would have more difficulty with the rest of his description, which gave him a middle size and a cold in the head. He was, in person, gigantic, and in health appeared to be as sound as a bell.

“I shall get through,” said the friar, “on my beard, and where that goes I can follow as easily as a tomcat his head. But I have a trick of bending the knees which will serve me for some hundreds of yards—and if you suppose that I can’t snivel you are very much mistaken. Listen to this.” He hung his head, looked earnestly at the ground: then he sniffed. Sniffed, do I say? It was as if all the secret rills of the broad earth had been

summoned from their founts. No noise more miserably watery could have proceeded from a nose. He beamed upon me. “Am I a wet blanket?” he cried. “Now, friend, shall we go?” He had packed up his tools in his begging-bag and stood ready to depart. I reminded him that I had no papers.

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“That need not disturb you at all,” he said. “You pass in as my convert. All you have to do is to do nothing and keep your mouth shut. If you cannot speak you cannot answer; that is good logic, I hope. We will discuss our several affairs presently in the reasonable air of Tuscany. I stifle in the Pope’s dominions. You might say that there was not room enough for two such men.” He blew out his shining cheeks till his eyes disappeared; he looked like a swollen tree-bole with a mossy growth dependent; then he deflated them with a bang, and shouted with laughter —a single expression of delight, sharply reverberant—and suddenly stopped. “Poh! what a rattle you’ll think me,” he said. “Come—and remember that you are a deaf-mute.”

To get a thing granted it is no bad way to take it for granted. This is what the Capuchin did. I was young and he was old, I undecided and he perfectly clear in his intention. There was little more—even to my too charitable eyes—in his favour, certainly not his looks. He was a huge, straddling, positive kind of a fellow with an air of specious, bluff benevolence about him which gave way to examination. He had a very ugly mouth under his beard, cut up sideways by the pressure of his long tooth to emerge; his eyes were small, greedy and near together; they looked different ways. His nose was huge and glowing, broad-rooted as a tree and pitted with the smallpox. On his left brow he had a savage scar. His strength and determination were very extraordinary; I was to learn within a few weeks how strong he was, how ferocious and dangerous. His age might be guessed at near sixty for all his vivacity, for at close quarters I could see unmistakably the senile arc in either eye, and, as the reader knows, his hair and beard were very white. Debauchery may have left these marks upon him, but had not worn out his force. That, at any rate, was still enough to resolve the irresolute Francis, an incurable believer in the native goodness of mankind, to obey him in this instance. I am by nature pliant and easily led, and I have never been one for half measures. Therefore I received upon my staff the Capuchin’s bundle in addition to my own, and followed my leader towards the guard-house, within sight of which, crooking his knees together under his frock, drawing in his shoulders, poking his head, the sturdy rogue reduced his apparent size and expression more materially than could be believed. His calculating eyes grew weak and watery, he snivelled at the nose, drew his breath sharply as if it hurt him—almost visibly shrank into himself. I looked at him with amazement, but the officers seemed to know him very well.

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“Ho, Fra Clemente,” says one, “on the round again, it appears!” The Capuchin quavered his admission, his hand shook as he proffered his passport. Yes, yes, poor Brother Clement must live, find consolation if he could. A festival at Prato called him, a great affair; but he was getting very sadly, as his friends might see, could not keep the road much longer. The Customs officers gave him back his papers with scarcely a glance to spare for them, and had no ears for his maundering, so occupied were they with me, his companion. “Whom have we here, Fra Clemente?” said one presently, and sent my heart into my throat. But the Capuchin sniggered and touched his nose with his finger; there was an air of low cunning about him very unpleasant to observe. “This, Sor Giacomo,” says he with a cackle, “is a little surprise for the Grand Duke—a specimen, a rarity, a pretty thing. This is a Scythian youth, deaf and dumb from his birth, but very taking, as you can see. ’Tis the best thing I’ve picked up on my travels for many a year, and a fortune to me. Why, if I can present this handsome lad to his Highness, you may have me back upon you in my bishop’s coach and six! And there will still be men of my religion who will have got more for doing less, let me tell you. You’re never going to spoil an old friend’s industry for the sake of a dumb heathen!”

“Heathen!” cries the fellow. “Is he a heathen? Do you suppose you may offer the Grand Duke a heathen? You’ll have the Inquisition upon you, my man, for certain sure, and the Cardinal Archbishop for once on their side. Into the water with him before you touch Florence, or out with your knife. Make a Christian or a Jew of him.”

“Ay,” says his colleague, handling me as if I had been an Odalisque, “Ay, and the prince, between you and me, is near his time. His menagerie may go to the dogs for all he cares, Jews and infidels, blacks and whites and all. He sees little but the doctors and the priests in these days.”

“What! Has it come to that?” says the Capuchin, peering through what seemed to be rheumy eyes. “If it have indeed, then may Heaven be his friend, for he’ll need one. Tut! so I’ve spent my ducats for nothing, it seems.” He shook his pretended convoy roughly by the shoulder. “Accursed Scythian, that ever I set eyes upon thee! Forty ducats, signori, of hard money to a Venice ship’s-chandler who had him, I know, from a Tripoli merchant for half the sum. And a hardy, healthy, tall, propagating rogue he is, by the looks of him. Well, well, you may keep him for me. I am just a broken old man!” He spat upon the ground and appeared to ruminate upon his hard fortune.

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I was greatly disgusted by now at the false position in which I had been put, and should assuredly have found my tongue had I not perceived that the trick was succeeding. One of the officers said that he would go to perdition rather than have a mute heathen on his hands, the other encouraged the Capuchin to hope for the best. The Grand Duke might rally; he had the strength of a cow and the obstinacy of an old woman. In fact, I was pushed over the frontier after my supposed owner without further ceremony, and soon joined him. The old scoundrel moved painfully off, dragging one leg after the other; but no sooner had the winding of the road concealed him than, erect and replete once more, he clapped me heartily on the back and began to crow and caper his delight in the mountain airs. I watched him with mingled feelings, half gratitude, half disgust.

CHAPTER XI

I EXERCISE COMMON SENSE, IMAGINATION AND CHARITY

“Was not that fine comedy in an old grey-bearded Capuchin dog?” cried the frate, leaping about and cracking his fingers. “Could you have bettered it? Could any man living have bettered it? Confess me an old rogue-in-grain, or I break every bone in your body.”

“It is not for me to confess you one thing or another, Fra Clemente—to call you so”—I replied; “except that you have made me party to some abominable falsehoods. However, I have benefited by them, and am willing to believe that you acted for the best, which is more than I can say for your endeavours upon our last meeting at Rovigo. May I remind you of that?”

If I had hoped to startle him I was very much mistaken. The Capuchin at once sobered down, and became confidential and affectionate. He put his arm round my neck and spoke with feeling. “You have as good a memory as I have, I see,” he said, laughing pleasantly. “I had not intended to recall to your mind a time when I confess to having been the victim of prejudice. And without going so far as to say that I followed you solely to remove your suspicions—that would not be the truth—I shall own that I had you much in my thoughts, and hoped more than once that we might cross paths. My prayer is answered. I shall set to work to convince you of my good intentions towards you. Perfect confidence of man to man— shall it not be so? If I cannot help you it will be surprising: you have seen how I can help myself.”

I did not again remind him that I had seen that very clearly when, at Rovigo, his foot had been clapped upon my coins; but Fra Clemente, if that were his name, saw that it was remembered.

“Your money, let me say, would have been safer with me than with that oily thief Issachar,” he said calmly, “but let that pass. You saw fit to trust him, and now you can

judge how far I am to be trusted. I have nothing to complain of and nothing to hide. I hope you can say the same." I was silent.

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“Let me tell you,” he went on, “that my name in religion is Palamone— Fra Palamone”—here his tones became lighter, as he soared from the injured benefactor’s into a jauntier suit. “Yes, I am that Fra Palamone, known all over Tuscany for the most wheedling, good-natured, cunning, light-fingered and light-hearted old devil of a Capuchin that ever hid in St. Francis’ wound. Hey! but I’m snug in my snuff-coloured suit. My poor old father—God have him after all his pains!—put me there, to lie quiet and nurse my talent, and so I do when times are hard. But the waxing moon sees me skipping, and you will no more keep me long off the road than your cur upon it. I must be out and about—in the kitchen to tease the wenches, into the taverns for my jug of wine, off to the fairs, where the ducats blow like thistle-down; under the gallows to see my friends dance, at the gaol doors against delivery; the round of the pillories, a glance at the galleys—with a nose for every naughty savour and an ear for every salted tale. I have prospered, I was made to prosper. This good belly of mine, this broad, easy gullet, these hands, this portly beard, which may now get as white as it can, since I have done with gossip Fra Clemente—a wrist of steel, fingers as hard as whipcord, and legs like anchor-cables; all these were fostered and made able by brown St. Francis’ merry sons. Fra Palamone, dear unknown, Fra Palamone, ever your servant! And now—-“here, with another revolting change, he turned his lips back to show his tooth—“And now,” said he, “you fish-eyed, jelly-gutted, staring, misbegotten bottle of bile, who in the deuce’s name lent you the impudence to listen to my confidential histories without so much as letting me know your fool’s name—hey?”

The ferocious invective of this peroration accorded so ill with his prattling exordium that I was left with nothing but a gaze. This I gave him liberally; but he went on, lashing himself into fury, to use every vernacular oath he could lay tongue to. He swore in Venetian, in Piedmontese, in Tuscan. He swore Corsican, Ligurian, Calabrian, Spanish, Hebrew, Arabian and Portuguese. He shook his fists in my face, dangerously near my astonished eyes; he leaped at me, gnashing his teeth like a fiend; he bellowed injuries, shocking allegations impossible to be proved, horrible guesses at my ancestry, he barked like a dog, bayed at me on all fours; finally whirling his staff over his head, he rushed at me as if to dash my brains out—then, cooling as suddenly as he had boiled over, stopped short, looked quizzically at me, blew out his cheeks and let his breath escape in a volley. “Poh!” says he, “Poh! what an old Palamone we have here,” threw down his staff and came towards me all smiles, his arms extended.

“Admirable youth!” he cried heartily, “give me your hands. I love you dearly; we shall be fast friends, I can see. Kiss me, boy, kiss me.”

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I should have resented this comedy of thunderstorms more hotly than I did if I had not believed the friar to be mad. But I was very much offended by the titles of dishonour most improperly bestowed upon me, and was determined to have done with their inventor. "Sir," I said, "you have done me a service, I allow, and I am much obliged to you; but I am constrained to point out that I have carried your baggage on my shoulder for some five or six miles. You gave me your confidences unasked and undesired. It matters, no thing to me whether your name be Palamone or Graffiacane, nor how far you choose to disgrace your habit or molest the charitable. Now you have acted like a maniac, and if I did my duty I should give proper information in the proper quarter. Instead of that, I restore you your bundle, and wish you a good evening."

Fra Palamone had been watching me, studying my face intently as I spoke, his arms folded over his labouring chest. He had, before the close of a dignified, if somewhat sententious, address, recovered his breath, and completely his gravity. "My dear young gentleman," he said, "I admire your spirit as much as your person and manner. All three puzzle me, I must say. So young and so rhetorical! So simple and so polished—an egg! an egg! Are you English, Dutch, Irish? What the devil are you? You won't tell me, and I don't know. But with all you say of my whirligig self I entirely and heartily agree. That at least is to the good. I propose that we sit down here and now, and discuss your affairs—for what better can we do? A grassy bank! the scent of leaves! a fading sun—-the solemn evening air! Nature invites! Come, what do you say? We will eat and drink of the best, for I and my sack are no mean caterers. We'll make all snug for the night, and rise up betimes better friends than ever for our late little difference of opinion."

Nothing could have been less to my taste; the man inspired me with extreme disgust. "Fra Palamone," I said firmly, "our ways separate here. I go to Pistoja, you where you please; or, do you go to Pistoja, I shall take the other road. I commend you to God, I salute you, I thank you, and hope I shall never see you again."

"English!" cried Fra Palamone, slapping his forehead. "Now I know with whom I am dealing. Who else commends his enemy to God and hopes that the devil will step in?" He looked me up and down triumphantly, grating his upper lip with that fierce tusk of his. "If I were in the humour, boy," he said, "which you may thank Madonna I am not, I could have you on your back in two ticks, and your hands tied behind you. I could take every paul off you—ah, and every stitch down to your shirt. But no! you are a gentleman. I prefer to take your hand, being confident that we shall meet again in a few days' time from now. Hold your way to Pistoja, since so you will have it. I am never deceived in my man. I know you and all your concerns as well as if you were my own son—and better, a deal. You have your troubles before you, brought upon you by your own headiness— your own insufferable piety and crass conceit. And I, young sir, and I am one of them. That you will find out."

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“I bid you farewell, sir,” says I very stiff.

“But I say, To our next meeting!” he cried, and plunged down the hillside. I heard him for a long time shouting songs at the top of his voice.

Resting no more on the road, I pressed my way southward, descending through chestnut woods to the olives, the garlanded vines, the wonderful husbandry of a generous land, amazed and enchanted by the profusion I beheld. The earth seemed to well forth rich blood at the mere tread of a foot. Boys and girls, young men and women, half naked but glowing with beauty and vigour, watched their beasts on the woody slopes or drove the plough through the deep soil, following after great oxen, singing as they toiled. The ground sent up heat intoxicating to the blood of a northern wanderer. It was the Land of Promise indeed, flowing with milk and honey, a pastoral land of easy love and laughter, where man clove to woman and she yielded to him at the flutter of desire, yet all was sanctioned by the Providence which fashioned the elements and taught the very ivy how to cling. Was there not deep-seated truth, methought, in those old fables which told of the Loves of the Nymphs, the Loves of the Fauns? Was there not some vital well-spring within our natures, some conduit of the heart which throbbed yet at the call of such instincts? I was more sure of it than I had ever been before. The Loves of the Nymphs—the clinging ivy, the yielding reed! The Loves of the Fauns—buffeting wind and kissing rain! These shy brown girls who peered at me from between the trees; these musing shepherd lads calling them upon oaten pipes—“Panaque, Silvanumque senem, nymphasque sorores.” I saw them, I saw them! I walked fast! my feet raced with my thoughts. My heart was beating, my blood was hot, my inclinations were pastoral, but enthusiastic. I was disposed to admire, and prepared to prove that I admired. I could have embraced a sapling and swooned as I called upon Dryas or Syrinx. Then, by-and-by, in the fulness of the time I saw a slim solitary girl ahead of me in a glade, walking bolt upright with a huge faggot of sticks upon her head. It was growing dusk. I could see little of her save that she was tall and walked superbly well from the hips, that her skirts were thin and close about her person, that she was alone, young and over-burdened. I quickened my steps.

She stopped, she turned to face me; I saw her black hair close-curtaining her whiteness; I saw her steady eyes under dark and level brows; I saw she was very thin and as wild as a hawk. I was foolishly agitated, she not at all.

“Buona sera,” said she. She stood easily, upright, her burden on her head. Her hands were on her hips, she was perfectly simple, as simple as a nymph, and as handsome in her proud, calm, savage way.

I returned her greeting, and more for the sake of getting countenance than for the answer, asked her to direct me to some lodging not too far off. She took some time in replying, but her eyes never left mine. She gave me a steady scrutiny, in which were neither vulgar curiosity nor equally vulgar stupidity to be discerned. It seemed that she

was busy with her thoughts how she was to answer me, for when she had looked her full she shrugged and turned her head stiffly, saying, “There is none, for your excellency.”

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“God knows,” said I, “how excellent I am, and that where there is lodging for the meanest upon earth there is lodging for me.”

“What God knows,” she said, “He mostly keeps to Himself. I speak of what I see. Your excellency is on a frolic.”

“My excellency died three weeks ago,” I told her. “Oblige me by not referring to it again; and if you will not give me direction, let me carry your faggot for you.”

“Why, how will that help your excellency?” says she.

“By satisfying you that I have some title left to the name,” I replied. “Believe me, I need the good opinion of my fellow-creatures. Will you not humour me?”

“I cannot, sir,” she said. “I can cease to carry my faggot, but that won’t help you very much.”

I insisted—I don’t know why; she stared at me with raised brows, then jerked the faggot to the ground.

“Try,” she said, and folded her arms across her chest, waiting.

It is a fact that I tussled, laboured and wrought at the accursed thing, an ineffectual Hercules. Its weight was really enormous; how her slim neck could have borne it without cracking puzzles me still, though I know how like a Caryatid she was formed. She did not laugh at me, or smile, she merely watched me—and so goaded me to put out all my strength, which was considerable. Knack, of course, was a-wanting. I got it upon end, put my head against it, lifted it—and it fell behind my back. Twice I did this, and grew dank with humiliation. Then I rushed at it, lifted it bodily on high, and crammed it down on my head. Clumsy malapert that I was! It slipped to my shoulder, thence upon the girl’s bare foot. “Hey!” she cried sharply, “now I hope you are satisfied.” I saw that her cheek was bleeding as well as her foot. I would have struck off my fumbling hands at the wrists for this vexatious affair.

“Forgive me,” I said, “forgive me, pray,” and went to her. I implored her pity, execrated my clumsiness; I was born, I said, to be fatal to ladies. Hereupon she looked at me with some interest.

“You?” she said. I bore the brunt of her extraordinarily intent eyes with great modesty. “Yes,” she continued, “that may be true, for I see that you are a signore. It is the prerogative of signori to ruin ladies.”

I was stabbed more deeply than she knew, and said at once, “It is true that I was born a gentleman, it is true that I have ruined a lady, but I repudiate your conclusion with horror. I beg of you to allow me to stanch your wound.”

She smiled. “Perhaps it may not need it. Perhaps I may not desire it. But try—try.” She offered me her cheek, down which a thin stream of blood had wandered as it would. A ridiculous difficulty presented itself; I hovered, undecided. “Suck the wound, suck the wound,” said the girl, “we shall not poison each other.” I obeyed: the flow of blood ceased. I knelt down and treated her foot in the same simple fashion. When I stood up again she thanked me with what seemed shining eyes and emotion in the voice.

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“I don’t know what sort of ladies you have ruined,” said she, “but you have a pleasant manner of reparation. The scratch on my cheek smarts, but not unduly—my foot is as sound as ever it was.” She helped me perch the faggot on my head, and we walked on together. This last generosity had touched me.

Her name, she told me, was Virginia Strozzi, and her people were very poor folk of Condoglia. Condoglia was a village on a spur of the mountains, the property, with the bodies and souls of its inhabitants, of a great lord, a marchese. She was sixteen years old and had never tasted meat. Condoglia was but a mile away; it was getting dark. Would I spend the night there? “Your honour must not look for decency,” she said with a sad patience which was very touching to me; “you can judge of what you will find by what you see of me. Rags cover my leanness and wattles cover my rags. As I am, so are my father and mother, sisters and brothers—and so I suspect were theirs. You will sleep on litter, you will eat black bread, and drink foul water. It is what we do year in and year out, except that sometimes we go without the bread. What do you say?”

“I say,” I replied, “that I am thankful for your kindness to one who has used you ill. My maladroitness was horrible.”

“Your amendment was, however, handsomely done,” she said—and added fiercely, “Let me tell you that nobody has ever touched my foot with his lips before. I owe you for that.”

“You are generous indeed, Virginia,” I said; “I shall be proud to be in your debt for a lodging.” We were not long in reaching Condoglia, which, so far as I could see, was no more than a row of hovels on the summit of a crag; and then we entered the meanest dwelling I have ever seen.

It was like a gipsy’s tent, made of mud, thatched with furze, and consisted of a single room, on whose floor of beaten dung huddled a family of starving wretches—hollow-eyed, pale, gaunt, and almost naked; a round dozen of them. There were a man, bright and peaked with hunger; a poor drudge of a woman, worn to a rag before her time, with a dying child upon her empty breast; a grown son and seven children—all crouched there close together like pigs in a yard to keep life in their bodies. I saw no signs of food, and I reflected that outside this misery and want the rich Tuscan earth was a-steam with fecund heat, and bore a thousandfold for every germinating seed. To them, faint and desperate as they were, the entrance of Virginia, herself as thin as a rod, and of myself, a stranger, caused no surprise. They looked to the door as we came in, but neither stirred nor spoke; indeed, it was Virginia who did what was necessary. She brought from her bosom a loaf of rye-bread; she fetched a flask of oil; she broke up the one and soaked it in the other and distributed the victual—first to the guest, then to the children and her parents, last to herself. The bread was musty, the oil rank;

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but the children tore at it as if they had been young wolves—all but one, who was too weak to hold its own, and might have died that night had I not taken it upon my knee and put some food between its grey lips. No one spoke; it grew dark; there was no candle or other light. I sat awhile in the absolute silence, then fell fast asleep with the child on my knees, wrapped in my cloak. In the morning, when I awoke, Virginia was gone.

Deeply touched by what I had seen, and still more by the desperate patience with which afflictions so bitter were borne, before I went away I gave the husbandman all the silver money I had left, some few liras, and reserved for my future needs one single ducat, the last gold piece I had. The man thanked me exorbitantly in a voice broken with gratitude, yet almost in the same breath admitted the insufficiency of the gift.

“We shall send Virginia into Pistoja to-morrow,” he said. “It has come to this, that her brothers and sisters are dying, and she must do what she can.”

I asked, “Will you send her to beg?”

The question was evaded. “She’ll do well enough when she’s been fed and cleaned, for she’s a well-made, handsome girl. There is a great man there—we shall keep the wolf from the door by what she sends us-and maybe have something over. Misery teaches all trades to a man, you see.”

I trembled and turned pale. “I entreat you,” I said, “to do no such dreadful thing. I have serious reasons for asking—very serious. There is one thing which we cannot afford to lose, even if we lose life itself in keeping it. And it is a thing for which we pay so dear now and again that we cannot value it too highly. I mean our self-respect.”

The peasant looked round upon his hovel and sleeping brood with those famine-bright eyes of his. “Must I keep my self-respect sooner than some of them? Must I not throw one to the wolves sooner than a half-dozen?” He gave over his unhappy survey with a shrug. “It seems I have nothing to get rid of here,” he said quietly, “except that valuable thing.”

I pulled out my gold piece. “Will that keep it safe for you?” I asked. The gleam of the man’s eyes upon it was terrible to see. “Will you engage the word of a man that, in exchange for this, you will never do what you have proposed?”

“St. Mary help me, I will, sir,” he said. The coin changed hands.

“Where is Virginia?” I asked him, and he told me that she and Gino her brother had been up before the light and were spreading dung. “Now,” said I, “it is proper that I

should tell you that I am without a farthing in the world. I say that, not because I grudge you the money, but that you may see how entirely I trust you."

"You may trust me indeed, sir," said Virginia's father with tears, and I took my departure.

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The peasant escorted me some half-mile of the road to Pistoja. He explained that Condoglia and all the country for ten miles square about it belonged to the Marchese Semifonte, who had a palace in Pistoja, another in Florence, several villas upon the neighbouring heights, and a fine eye for a handsome girl. It would have been at his door first of all, as to the proper and appointed connoisseur, that the young Virginia would have knocked, with her sixteen years for sale. For, in every sense of the word, said her father, she was his property—a chattel of his. I thanked God heartily that I had found a use for my gold piece, and a salve for his conscience into the bargain. I felt, and told myself more than once, that any tragic fortune to that nymph of the wild wood, not averted by me, would bring the guilt of it to my door.

I may as well confess, too, that her haggard beautiful face and thinly gowned shape were seldom out of my thoughts upon my two days' further journeying to Pistoja. On the other hand, with curious levity of fancy, I was convinced that before I had been many hours in that my first Tuscan city, I should be bedewing the feet of Aurelia with my tears. And so the sweet rainbow vision of my adored mistress also danced before my eyes as I fared, and disputed with that queen of rustic misery for the mastery of me.

CHAPTER XII

I SEEK—AND FIND

The hopes of a young man upon his travels may be lighter than feathers whirled about by the wind, but they soar as high and are as little to be reasoned with. Going to Pistoja that fine summer's morning, my convictions of triumph were sealed to me. And why, indeed! Because I had confronted and discomfited my redoubtable adversary of the mountain, and rescued a poor family from hateful sacrifice, I was, forsooth! to find Aurelia in Pistoja, to fall with tears at her feet, to be pardoned and absolved, to rise to the life of honour and respect once more. She was to rejoin her husband, I my classes and all my former bliss: all was to be as it had been. Most unreasonable hope! Yet I declare that these were my convictions upon approaching Pistoja, and that, far from diminishing, as I drew nearer and nearer to the city, so did they increase and take root in my mind. It was therefore as a man prepared and dedicated that I entered the gates, as a man under orders that I took my way through the crowded street, as a man guided by an inner light, requiring not the functions of his senses, that I paced steadfastly forward, neither asking the way nor looking about for it, and only paused when I was before the worn portal of a great red-brick church whose facade, never finished, presented to the world the ragged ends of bricks and mortar. Here, I say, I paused, but not for uncertainty's sake, rather that I might take full breath for my high adventure: as a man may hold his energies curbed on the entry into battle, or, with his hand

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at the chamber door, upon his marriage night; or even at his last hour, when the sands are nearly run and the priest has done his best, and before him lies all that dark unexplored plain he must travel alone. I breathed no articulated prayer, all my being prayed, every pulse and current in my body, every urgency of my soul tended upwards to my advocate and guardian in heaven. I bowed my head, I made the sign of the Cross, I pushed the curtains and went in. Before me stretched a vast and empty church, desolate exceedingly, at the far end of which, in the gloomy fog, before a lamp-lit altar I saw a woman kneeling stiffly, with uplifted head, as if she watched, not prayed—watched there and waited, knowing full well the hour was come and the man.

Her head was hooded in a dark handkerchief; I could see her thin hands clasped together—on the altar-rail; even as I realised these things about her (which, besides her rigid, unprayerful pose, were all there were to see) I must admit to myself that she bore no resemblance to my lady. That one matter of devotion, and the devotional attitude were enough to condemn her. For Aurelia was no bargainer in church, but lent herself unreservedly to the holy commerce—her generous body, her ardent soul—and asked no interest for the usufruct. Have I not seen her rain kisses upon the tomb of St. Antony more passionately than I could have dared upon her hand? Had she ever risen from the outpouring of prayer without the dew of happy tears to bear witness in her eyes to her riven heart? Her piety was, indeed, her great indulgence, so eager, so luxurious, pursued with such appetite as I have never seen in England or France, nor (assuredly) in Padua, where there is no zest, but much decorum, in the practice of religion. To see her in church was, as it were, to see a child in her mother's lap—able to laugh, to play, to sulk and pout, ah, and to tell a fib, being so sure of forgiveness! No secret too childish to be kept back, no trouble too light; the mustiness of the season's oil, the shocking price of potherbs, the delinquency of the milliner's apprentice who had spoiled a breadth of silk. She could grumble at her husband, or impart and expect heaven to share her delight at some little kindness he had done her. Since I have heard her speak calmly to the Madonna about some young gentleman who had followed her three days running to Mass, I am very sure that she and Our Lady were in full agreement on my account. Thus it was that she, who had been early parted from her earthly parents, nestled into the arms of her heavenly parents. Upon what warm waves of feeling would Aurelia float into the bosom of the Mother of Sorrows! With what endearments use her, with what long kisses coax her for little mercies, with what fine confidence promise her little rewards! And to compare this passionate flooding of heart and mind, of corporeal and spiritual faculty with any incense which that rigid watcher of mysteries had to offer up, were an absurdity and a profanation impossible even to my deluded vision.

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While I watched and compared, however, I did not turn away. I cannot understand my interest or curiosity, which were very real; I knew that Aurelia was not in this church, but for all that I stood rooted by a pillar at the door and kept my gaze fixed upon the woman in the distant chapel. She may have continued kneeling there, motionless, for some quarter-hour more; in itself the act of suspense is an absorbing one. So much was I possessed by it that I forgot all beside it—that I was a lover, not of this shrouded unknown, that I was penniless and outcast, that I was hungry, ignorant, uncertain, unforgiven. I think that, in some indefinable way, the spirit of Aurelia may have been about me, pervading this cold church, linking me and that other; I think that Aurelia's soul may have whispered to mine, "Behold thy duty there." I cannot tell. But this I may say with truth, that when the thin hands at the rail unclasped and one made the cross over the form that knelt so lonely there; when the woman lifted her head, and slowly rising, turned and came up the church; when our looks met, and I found my eyes searching the grave face and sombre eyes of Virginia, that unhappy child for whom I had spent my last gold piece—I was neither startled nor disappointed, but felt rather that I had known all along that it was she.

I assume that I was in that exalted frame of mind which I have endeavoured to describe. This young girl's eyes, fixed upon me, appeared like beacons in that dark place, sullen fires lit at night to warn me that I was still upon sentry duty about her person. "Money! Can a soul be saved by money? The enemy is hungry about the wall," said the eyes of Virginia, "be steadfast, on the watch." Neither of us gave recognition of the other, neither of us spoke; but when she was level with me, I turned and walked by her side to the door. I held the curtain back for her to pass out; she bowed her head and accepted the service as seriously as a princess. Together we went down the steps, side by side we crossed the piazza, took the main street, turned to the right under an archway and went down a steep and narrow lane—all this in perfect silence. We reached a little piazza, a bay in the lane, raised upon a parapet from the road level. Here, breaking our long and nervous abstinence, Virginia stopped, saying, "I am tired; let us sit down."

CHAPTER XIII

HAVING EMPTIED MY POCKET, I OFFER MY HAND, BUT RESERVE MY HEART

We sat down upon the steps of a church—San Pietro was its name, a very old church. For a while we were silent; Virginia, it was to be seen, was now timid—timid to the verge of defiance; I was curious, and curiously excited.

Mastering myself, I asked her in as redoubtable a voice as I could summon, what she did here, in Pistoja. She then looked at me with her tragic eyes—grey eyes they were, tinged with black; and looking steadily always, without a trace of fear, she answered, "You know very well why I am here."

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“Indeed,” I exclaimed, “I know nothing of the sort. I don’t in the least understand you.” Her calmness, her unflinching regard were dreadful to me. “Do you mean me to suppose that your father—?” I could not finish with the horrid thought. She saved me that pain.

“My father has your money,” said she, “and would have kept me at home if he could. But there he reckoned without his daughter. I left home some three hours after you, and got here before you, as you see.”

I could not be indignant with her; there was that underlying her hardy speech which forbade precipitate judgment.

“My child,” I said, “what do you mean to do?”

She shrugged her thin shoulders. “It is misery at home. Here, in Pistoja, there is not apparent misery, nor need there be any. Signer Francesco,” she said, “look at me. I am sixteen years old, a marriageable girl, not ill-looking, not ill-made, starving, without a lover or the portion to buy one. What is to be done with me? What is to be the end of me? It seems that the world has to answer me that question. Am I to stop at Condoglia, and gnaw my knuckles, and work to the bone for another’s benefit, and kennel with dogs and chicken? Why, my going will benefit them. The chicken will have more to eat. Or say that I do stop there—what then? Having nothing, needing much, I marry a man of my own nation, who has even less than nothing, and needs more than I do. In fact, he needs me only that I may fend for him. And then? And then, Don Francesco? More knuckles to be gnawed, more starving mouths to gnaw them, more dogs, more chicken to jostle for the pease-straw which I and my man and the children we choose to beget shall huddle on. Life in Condoglia! Ah, thank you for nothing, Don Francesco, if this is what you have bought for me with your fine gold piece.”

I was dismayed. I was dumb at such a callous summing-up of my honest action. All I could stammer out was some feeble, trite protest against a disordered life, which sounded insincere, but certainly was not that. When I urged her in the name of religion to go home, she opened her eyes with an expression of scornful incredulity. She was fully six years younger than me, and yet strangely my senior. Without being told so, I had the intuition that to appeal to her on the part of religion was to invite failure.

“Do you ask me to agree with you?” she said slowly, “when I know what I know, and you so evidently know nothing? Who, pray, are you to judge whether it be unwholesome to the soul for the body to sleep in a good bed—you, who have rarely had a bad one? And can you tell me that it is a sin to wash the body, and feed and clothe it delicately, when all your life long you have had ministers to yours, as of right? What do you know of the inconvenience of the course I meditate when you have nothing with which to compare it? You! to whom hunger and nakedness are an adventure— yes, an adventure; undertaken for a whim or a frolic,

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I know not which. For fifteen days of your life you have gone fasting, unwashen to bed — but I for fifteen years of mine; consider me that, sir. Your experiences, again, may be ended whensoever you choose; you have but to write a letter, I suppose. But for me”—-she touched herself on the breast—“they have no end at all, save one—and I have never learned to write. My good Don Francesco,” said she lightly, “you don’t know what you are talking about.”

This gave me the courage, if not the opportunity, to assure her that I did. I entreated, reproached, exhorted her—to no purpose. Driven to it at last, I alluded again to my unlucky expenditure, when she drew herself up fiercely, and striking at me venomously, had me at her discretion.

“I am perhaps in your debt for that magnificent outlay of yours, Don Francesco,” she said. “I am willing to admit it, if only to spare you the trouble of reminding me of it any more; and if you ask me to liquidate it, I cannot refuse you. I am at your disposition as soon as you please, and in any manner that you think proper. But if you think I am to be bought of my father and put in a cupboard like so much cheese, and locked up with a golden key kept in some man’s pocket, you are very much mistaken.”

Here, the reader may think, it would have been proper for me to have told her that she was a worthless girl, who might go to the deuce for all I cared; but if such is his opinion, it is not, and was not, mine. I shall not set down all the talk between us; it was beating the air on my side, and a steady trampling of solid earth on hers. My final argument, and that only, produced a certain effect upon this remarkably clear-headed girl. I told her that part of my story which dealt with Aurelia’s perfections and my own disastrous imperfections; I made her understand that I was not the inexperienced man she had thought me; rather, I was one with two examples ever before him—one shining with the pure effulgence of Heaven, the other harsh, staring, horrible, like some baleful fire at sea. “Ah, Virginia,” I concluded, “you must not misjudge me. It is a sinner who speaks to you, not a saint removed too far to help you. A sinner indeed am I, yet not utterly lost. I have a guide, a hope, a haven; I have a light whereby I may steer my poor barque. Aurelia Lanfranchi—no! let me call her by her own name—Aurelia Gualandi will save my soul alive. Oh, let her example be yours—and her excellence your means of excellence!”

Virginia, I say, was struck by these moving words of mine. She hung her head and seemed sunk in thought.

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“I know nothing of this lady, nor of her nation,” she said, more gently than before, “but what you say of her pleases me very much. Evidently you love her, and she you. But you must allow me to tell you now, what I was timid to say before, that she showed much good sense in putting you in the cupboard, and you remarkably little in jumping out of it. Half an hour more cupboard and your learned doctor had been asleep. Next day you could have made your plans with your lady. She would have rewarded you: but so she would if, when she invited you to accompany her, you had offered her your arm and put on your hat. What possessed you, then—what inscrutable reasons had you? But there would be no end to my questions and no satisfaction in your replies. Why, Heaven! the world was before you two! You had happiness, adventure, all the rest of it. And if you must needs wander this world, need I assure you that two are better company than one?” Fra Palamone, I remembered, had been of that opinion too. “As it is,” she continued, “you may be years before you find Aurelia, and you must be prepared for any step she may have been driven to take in her extremity. I don’t wish to wound you—but there can hardly be any doubt about her plans.” She rose to her feet and looked kindly at me, saying, “I thank you for telling me your story. If I understand it, I think you are rather mad; if I don’t, then I must be. But I admire you; I think I love you. I foretell happiness for you in times to come, but not of the sort you seem to hope for at present.” She held out her hand to me. “Adieu, Don Francesco,” she said, “we will part here. Do you go to find Aurelia Gualandi, I to search for a lover like you.”

Deeply touched by this gentle conclusion of our argument, I held her hand and made her sit down again. She resisted—faintly, not seriously. I then told her that I did not intend her to leave me in this manner, or in any manner which did not assure me of her honourable wellbeing; and now it was she who pleaded feebly, now it was I who was convinced, fiery, unanswerable. I said that I was resolved to protect her honour, to work for her, to establish her firmly and comfortably in the world which had used her so ill. I told her that, being devoted entirely to the love of Aurelia, my company could do her no harm; that, on the contrary, the world, putting the worst construction upon our alliance, would actually respect her more and do her less injury than if she went into it alone. “I charge myself with your future, Virginia,” I said, “as if you were my sister. I am young and able; I shall provide for you, never fear, until you are honourably and happily married. And you shall accept this service from me—the only one I can do you—upon my own terms; and respect the bargain that you make with me more than you have your father’s.”

She would not look at me, and said nothing; but she gave me both her hands, and bending her head until she reached them, kissed mine fervently and with humble gratitude. Thus began the most extraordinary partnership between a young man and woman which the world can ever have known.

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For the plighting of it, Virginia took all the order and direction. I remember that she left me for a short time sitting there on the church steps, and returned with bread and salt, got I know not how or whence. She broke the bread, sprinkled it with the salt, and initiated me into a mystical meal of her own devising.

“This old church under which we partake our sacrament,” she told me, “is called San Pietro’s. It is here that, in times gone by, the Bishop of Pistoja went through the ceremony of a mystical marriage with the Abbess of the Benedictines, which has now been stopped by the Jesuits, because, more than once, it was not so mystical a business as it might have been. But I think the place very suitable for what you and I have to do.”

With certain rites, then, of her own contriving—certain sprinklings of salt in a ring upon the ground about us, upon our heads and knees, with certain balancing of flakes of bread, and many signs of the Cross, Virginia and I celebrated a union which, I say with my hand on my heart, was intended by both of us to be as mystical as possible, and was so until, long afterwards, it was deliberately ended. At the end of her observances she took my hands in each of hers, crosswise, and looking earnestly at me, said, “We are now indissolubly bound together—by the communion of bread and salt—my pure intention to your pure desire. Together we will live until we find Aurelia—you as master, I as servant—you vowed to preserve my soul, I to succour your body. Let nothing henceforward separate us—but one thing.”

“Amen to that, Virginia,” I said, “and that one thing shall be a prosperous marriage for you.”

So the bargain was struck; and now again I looked at the girl. The hard and bitter fires had burned themselves out of her eyes; nothing remained there but a clear radiancy. She was like a new creature, earnest, frosty cold, like a spirit set free. I have said she was handsome in a thin, fine way. She was very pale, black-browed, with firm, pure lips, a sharp chin, grey, judging eyes. She was lithe and spare like a boy, and very strong. Her hair, which was abundant and loosely coiled upon the nape of her neck, was nearly black; not of that soft, cloudy dark which made Aurelia’s so glorious, but as if burnt, with a hot, rusty tinge here and there about it. Though not now in the rags in which I saw her first, she was still poorly dressed, in the habit of the peasantry of that country, in a green petticoat and red bodice, which, like that of all unmarried girls here, was cut to display the bosom. Her feet were bare, and her arms also to the arm-pits.

Such was Virginia Strozzi, for whom I had not then any symptom of what the world calls love. I do not deny that she interested me extremely, and was of great comfort and assistance, nor that, as the reader will soon see, I gave her, and with good reason, respect, gratitude, a strong affection—as much of these as a man can give to any woman born. Of her feelings towards me at this time I shall not attempt any relation. She herself had said that she loved me. Whether she meant by that more than a

sympathetic affection, a common cause, an adventure shared, a comradeship, I know not—or at least I did not know then. All I have to add is, that she never betrayed it.

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CHAPTER XIV

MY HAPPY DAYS; THEIR UNHAPPY END

I lived in Pistoja for a month or more, very happily, without money in my pocket or a house to my name, to the benefit of my health and spirits and with no injury to my heart's treasure. I mean by that expression that I by no means, in the interests of my new surroundings, forgot Donna Aurelia; on the contrary, I assured Virginia every day that expiation was extremely necessary for me, and Aurelia's restoration to her husband a vital part of it. Virginia, without professing to understand me, fell in with my convictions; but she replied to them that my Aurelia must either have gone to Siena, or be about to go. If the latter, we should be in the way to meet her by staying in Pistoja; if she was already at home with her mother, the more time we left for the soreness to subside the better it would be for all of us. I fell in with this line of argument, which seemed to me unanswerable, because I was not then aware that the shorter way to Siena from Padua was by Arezzo.

I was now to learn that it was very possible, in a country where all classes save one were poor, to do away with the standard which obtains all over the civilised world, and to measure men, not by what they have, but by what they are. For a man to be without money where others have much is to be without foothold—the goal for any fribble's shot of contempt. It is as if he stood naked in a well-dressed assembly. But where all are naked alike, no man need to be ashamed; and where all pockets are empty, it is not singular to be without them; your wit becomes your stock in the funds, and your right hand your ready money. So, I say, I found it to be; but I believe that wit and ready hand were alike Virginia's. I may have caught at the theory—hers was the practice. Virginia's opinion was that work for hire was either done by habit or on compulsion. An ox, said she, draws the plough, because his race have always drawn it; a peasant works afield, because he is part of the soil's economy. He comes from it, he manures it, tills it, feeds off it, returns to it again. It is his cradle, his meat, his shroud, his grave. But in cities the case is altered. Here man is predatory, solitary, prowling, not gregarious. Here, for a man of wits, his fellows are the field which he tills. He is the best husbandman who can tickle the soil to his easiest profit, who can grow the finest crop at the least pains, and get for little what is worth much. What, she would say, do we need which the city will not give us for the reaching out of a hand? Shelter? A hundred houses stand empty week by week. Take any one of them; they are there to be chosen. Clothing? "Do you know, Don Francesco, how small a part of the person the laws of morality compel you to cover? There is not a dust-box in Pistoja but will give you a new suit to that measure every day." Food? "Have you ever asked yourself,"

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she would exclaim, “how many pounds of bread we throw to the dogs in the week? Enough to feed fifty packs of hounds.” Drink? “It streams at every street corner.” “Thus,” she would conclude, “are our necessities supplied. For luxuries we have the sun in sheltered cloisters, the rain to cleanse the ways in which we walk, the splendours of the church to feast our eyes, the chances and changes of the streets and taverns to keep our minds alert. No, no, Don Francis,” quoth she, “let them sweat and grow thin who must. We are free.”

I could not admit all the conclusions of this philosophy, though I was not concerned to dispute them. But Virginia’s theories of life interested me extremely and her ability to apply them was extraordinary. Perhaps I was by predestination a vagabond, and no doubt she was. All I can say is that if I myself became strong and healthy on those terms, Virginia bloomed like a wild rose and seemed to grow in grace under my eyes. She devoted herself to me and kept me in excellent order; washed my shirt and stockings at the fountain, kept my clothes neatly mended, buttons on my vest; brushed my cloak, clouted my shoes. She was not inattentive to her own person either. She put her hair up into a coil and pinned it with a silver comb, kept herself clean, and wore shoes and stockings. A pair of stays became her well, and a loose white kerchief for her bare neck. She showed to be a beautiful girl. Her eyes lost their sombre regard, her colour cleared, her cheeks took rounder curves. Where she got her clothes, where the food which made her sleek, where the happy light in her eyes, were mysteries to me. She seldom left me, she showed no signs of having been at work; so far as I knew she had no friends in Pistoja and asked no extraordinary charities. I believed that she shared in the distribution of alms at the gates of certain monasteries; I fancied once or twice that a look of recognition passed between her and various persons as they met in the streets, but as she said nothing to me on the subject I made no inquiries. There was no doubt of her devotion to myself; she never left me or met me again without kissing my hand; she always spoke of me by a title of respect— as Don Francis, or your honour, or sir—and yet was entirely unceremonious in what else she said to me, criticised my actions, and quarrelled with me hotly upon many subjects. She took a plain view of my feelings towards Aurelia, as the reader will have seen, and a very plain view of Aurelia’s towards me. But when she found that to have expressed them would really have hurt me, she withheld the expression, but did not change her view. One thing she never did: she betrayed not the slightest symptom of love for me. I might have been her sister, or she my brother, for any false shame she had—or for any sign of passion towards me. She concealed nothing, she spared nothing, but she asked nothing that I was not ready to give her—and this, as I then thought, was not because she was determined

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to fulfil her bargain towards me, but because there was nothing more that she wanted. She liked me, I suppose, very much; she respected me—perhaps she might have been a little afraid of me. She knew that I was a signore who could end my absurdities—so she freely considered my conduct—whenever I chose; she thought me a little mad. Meantime, as I was uniformly kind to her, she had never been so happy in her life. On my part, I spent my time in the writing of great quantities of poetry—which I read to Virginia in the evenings and which she thought very fine—and in teaching her to read and write. She proved an apt and willing pupil, quick to learn and with a retentive memory; but she could never spell. I think it may be said that, on the whole, I gave her as much as I got, for not only did she become happier and healthier, but I was able to soften the harsh angles of her mind, to humanise, reclaim her from savagery. I could not, however, make her religious after my own fashion. She went to Mass with me, and once, when I insisted upon it, confessed and took the communion. But she hated the priests, though she would never tell me the reason, and could hardly ever be drawn to confession again.

After trying various shelters from the weather and being driven from each by unforeseen circumstances—a cloister or two, a church (where the sacristan surprised us asleep one morning and turned us out into the rain), an old family sepulchre, an empty palace, and a baker's oven which had fallen to be let (and had been occupied by cockroaches)—we finally discovered and took possession of a ruined tower near the church of Sant' Andrea, which suited us excellently well. It had been the fortress of a great old family in the Middle Ages, that of the Vergiolesi, from whom sprang the beautiful Selvaggia, beloved by Cino of Pistoja. The lower floor being choked with rubbish and fallen masonry, the only access to our retreat was by a broken beam projecting from the original doorway. You jumped for this, caught it if you were expert enough, and must swing yourself up to straddle it. You could then gain the string-course of brick which encircled the tower, and, edging along that, reach the lower sill of a window. That window was our front door. The interior was perfectly dry, rainproof and (from all quarters but one) windproof. Enchanting occupancy to me! fit household for a poet without pence; and to Virginia, who had never known a dry lodging, a very palace. Here by the light of candle ends, got for the asking from the churches, I made her acquainted with letters; I held her fingers at the charcoal until they could move alone. I pointed my own along the page until her eye could run true. The greater part of the walls of our chamber was covered with her sprawled lettering: and, for all I know to the contrary, may reveal to this day the names of Francis Strelley, of Aurelia Gualandi and of Virginia Strozzi. It is a fine proof of her loyalty to our bargain that the first

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name which Virginia essayed to write was mine, but the second, Aurelia's. She took her own in hand last. The verb chosen for these easy essays was as usual amare: but its application to the walls was again the pupil's device. I allowed her willingly to write "Don Francesco ama Donna Aurelia," but forbade her to reverse the names. One day when I was out she put "Virginia Strozzi ama Don Francesco." I did not know it till long afterwards.

I gave her the rudiments of literature also: I grounded her in letters as well as in lettering. Amongst my few possessions were still my "Aminta" and my "Fioretti": and I knew much of Dante's comedy by heart. Virginia had a retentive memory and great aptitude for learning. Whenever she did well I called her a good child, and she was so dreadfully afraid lest I might withhold the praise that she toiled at her ciphering and pothooks long after I was asleep. There is no doubt that this was a happy time for both adventurers—full of interest for me, and of extreme comfort for the girl whom I was able to befriend.

It is not to be pretended that we kept good company. We were outcasts, and were thrown of necessity amongst those who had been cast out. But the standards of life vary with those who live, and I never could see that a man was less of a thief because he thieved from a throne, or less a profligate because he debauched a princess. I was, no doubt, in advance of my time; these are the ideas of Monsieur Voltaire. I believe that I saw a great deal of iniquity, for the taverns and gaming-dens to which I sometimes resorted for shelter or entertainment were filled with desperadoes of all sorts—deserters from the army, thieves, coin-clippers in hiding, assassins elect, women of the town, and even worse. But while I expect my reader to believe that I never sinned with them, I shall find him harder to convince that I was never invited to sin. Such, however, is the fact, and of course it is open to the retort that you do not invite a drunkard to be drunk. Be that as it may, I met these unfortunates upon the common ground of civility, conversed with them as equals, and was not only respected by them for what I was, but came myself to respect them in spite of what they were. Virginia taught me much here. With her it never was, "Such-and-such is a woman of infamous life," but rather, "Such-and-such has a fine ear for music, or can make a complicated risotto." I learned, with astonishment, that with the most deplorable degradation of life there could consist an ability to share the interests of the most refined persons. These associates of ours made no secret of their avocations (except to the police), nor were they abashed or confounded if I happened to meet them in the exercise of them; but, business done, they were to be treated like Mr. Councillor or My Lady. Nor was this an arbitrary exaction or a curious foppery on their part; not at all, but as they expected to be taken, so they behaved

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themselves. There was not, I am bound to say, one of those women who did not hear Mass three times a week, recite the daily rosary, confess herself, take the sacrament. Nor do I remember a single man of those whom I met in various houses of call or thieves-kitchens in the town who was without his mental activity of some honest kind, who had not a shrewd interest in politics, a passion for this or that science— as botany, mineralogy, or optics, or an appreciation keenly critical of the fine arts. Philosophers, too, some of them were, acute reasoners, sophists, casuists. We had no doubts, fears or suspicions of them, and they thought no evil of us. Some of them we invited to a reading in our tower; and once we enacted the "Aminta" with great applause: Beltramo, a very engaging boy (afterwards hanged for highway robbery and prison-breaking), Violante, an unfrocked priest called Il Corvo, Virginia and I took parts. Beltramo I never saw again but once, and that against my will. I saw him hanged at Genoa in 1742. A curious life indeed, which, to one so addicted to research into the ways of men as I always was, would have needed violence for its termination. Violence, indeed, did end it, and with humiliating detail.

One day I sold my cloak to buy a book. That was a vellum-bound copy of the Sonnets of Cino of Pistoja, which, with my autograph, "Fr. Strelleius—Pistoriae—IV Kal. Aug. MDCCXXII," I still possess in my present retreat at Lucca. Cino had been a famous poet in his day, the lover of the beautifully named Selvaggia Vergiolesi, who had, in fact, lived in our romantic tower. I thought that the opportunity of becoming acquainted, on the very spot, with the mind of a man who must so often have sighed and sung upon it was well worth an unnecessary garment. The volume mine, and a few pence besides, I purchased bread, wine and sausage, and made Virginia a feast. We banqueted first on sausage, next on poetry, and revelled so late in the latter that we exhausted our stock of candle, and had none left for the exigencies or possibilities of the night. Tired out and in the dark we sought our proper ends of the long room. I, who lay below the window, immediately fell into a deep sleep.

I was awakened by a dream of suffocation, imprisonment and loss, to find that of such pains I was literally a sufferer. A thick woollen was over my mouth and nose, the knees of some monstrous heavy man were on my chest, cords were being circled and knotted about my hands and arms. My feet were already bound so fast that the slightest movement of them was an agony. Dumb, blind, bound, what could I do but lie where I was? The work was done swiftly, in the pitchy dark, and in silence so profound that I could hear Virginia's even breathing, separated as she was from me by the length of a long floor. There was but one effort I could make with my tied ankles, and that was to raise both legs together and bring the heels down with a thud upon the boards. The cords cut me to the bone—the effect upon Virginia was precisely nothing.

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When I was reduced to a mere chrysalis, having cords wound all over my body which glued my arms to my flanks, I was lifted like a bundle and lowered by a rope through the window to the ground. The descent—for I spun round and round with horrible velocity—made me extremely giddy; probably I lost my senses for a time. My next discovery was of being carried swiftly over the ground by one who ran rather than walked; of my captor mounting what I supposed to be the city wall, with me on his back, dropping lightly on the other side and running again, on and on. The river was crossed, for I heard the pounding and splashing, the bank was mounted; I was now crossing furrowed ground, Heaven knew whither! I was a long time; the thief climbed a hill; I heard him labouring his breath, and felt the heat come up from his body like the sun in the dog-days from a paved courtyard. I was too uncomfortable, too perturbed, too much enraged over the fact to spend much thought on what the fact might mean. Was I taken for a soldier? Then why such a mystery about it? I had seen men crimped in the open piazza, out of wine-shops, from the steps of churches. What then was my fate? I was soon to learn.

After what I think to have been an hour and a half's journey, my captor, puffing for breath, stopped and put me down on grass.

"Porca Madonna!" cried a strident voice, "I'm not so young as I was, or you have grown fat in Pistoja. The fatter the better for me."

Then I knew that I had been kidnapped by Fra Palamone.

CHAPTER XV

I AM IN BONDAGE

The woolly gag removed, I said, in the dark, "Fra Palamone, so sure as God lives and reigns, you shall pay me for this."

He replied, "My dear lad, I am paid already, and twice paid. It is the certain conviction that I am hereafter to be much blessed in your society that has forced me to take this liberty. May I now have the pleasure of setting you free? It wounds me in my tenderest part to know how these cords must bruise you. Your aching wounds—my aching heart. Come, a fair exchange! Be free, and set me free." A great shadow of him settled down over my eyes, the impending bulk of his huge body; heat and garlic came in waves about me, his furnace breath.

"Not yet, Fra Palamone," I said firmly. "You will do well to leave me as I am until I know more of your intentions. You used the word 'freedom' just now: how am I to understand it? I warn you that, so far as I know, the first use I shall make of my freedom will be to kill you." I meant it at the time, for I was beside myself with rage.

He began to swear gently to himself, walking to and fro before my feet, coupling (as his manner was) the names of his Maker, Redeemer and Divine Advocate with those of dishonourable animals. Having thus eased himself, as a pump gets rid of foul water in the pipes before its uses can begin, he began to answer my objections. “If to have the play of young limbs, the prerogative of two-footed creation, be not liberty,” said he, “then there is no liberty in the world. And if to be loosed from sin and shame, by means however abrupt, be not liberty of the most exalted, spiritual kind, then, young man, you are a bondslave indeed, to your own ignoble desires.”

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I said, “I have told you on what terms I will take my liberty. I will die here as I am sooner than make bargains with you.”

“I am an old man,” he replied, “a-weary of my labours. I will not wrangle—I abhor disputations. I am able to offer you, Don Francis, a service which is perfect freedom. Will you take it or leave it?” I was silent, and I believe the old villain went to sleep, as certainly I did. Youth will have its rest, whether there be gall in the mouth or a teat.

When I awoke it was broad day. The sun was up and deepening the pale tints of the sky; a bird in the oak-tree overhead was singing his orison, and Fra Palamone cooking a pork chop upon a little fire of twigs. Never did I see such delicate art put into such a piece of work; he had not boasted when he said that he was a cook. Not only did he cook it to the exquisite point of perfection, but he ate it, bone and all— combining the zest of a cannibal with the epicure’s finer relish—and poured near a litre of wine down his tunnel of a throat, before he deigned to regard whether I lived or was dead. His next act was to recite the rosary aloud, on his knees, with intense fervour; and his next—-after three prostrations in honour of the Trinity—to untie the cord about his middle and add a knot or two to the multitude already there. With this formidable scourge circling about in his hand, he came to where I lay helpless.

“Ser Francesco,” he said, showing his long tooth and purring his words like a cat, “I find that bonds, imprisonment and hunger have not quickened your resolution. I admire you for it, but meantime I suffer the rage of the devil. I must assuage my pains at all costs, and regret that my balm must be your bane. But since you elect to be a prisoner it seems reasonable that you should taste prison discipline—and I, O Heaven! inflict it.” I marked his infernal purpose in his eyes—no need that he should bare his iron arm!—-and determined to endure, even unto death, sooner than give way to him. He came towards me, his arm bare to the shoulder; I clenched my teeth, shut my eyes and waited, not for long. The cords writhed about me like snakes of fire, biting so deeply that my very heart seemed torn and raw. The blood surged into my head, beat at my ears and nose, and (as it seemed) gushed out in a flood, drowning me in wet heat. So, presently, I lost my senses, neither knew nor felt any more. “Blessed art thou, Death! Aurelia hath surely sent thee!” were my last thoughts as I swooned. Waking once more, I was alone, lying bound on the edge of a little oak wood. Before me were brown fields and stretches of flickering heat, and far below, in the valley, I could see Pistoja, pale red and white in the full sun. It was near noon; the sun was directly overhead in a cloudless sky, and his rays burned me up. My head throbbed desperately, my body felt one free wound; I was sick with hunger, clogged with drouth. I made sure that I had been

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left there to die, and waited momently for the summoning angel, commending my simple soul to the advocacy of the Blessed Virgin and the merits of my patron St. Francis of Assisi. I thought, with a pang, of my mother, who might be praying for me now; beside her hallowed image even Aurelia's was dim. Then all visions faded out. Out of the midst of that glaring sky there beamed, as it appeared to me, a ray of intense light, which grew steadily to an intolerable radiancy. I believed it to be the sword of God in St. Michael Archangel's hand, held out to give me the accolade, and make me Cavalier of Paradise. "God and our Lady!" my soul's voice cried. An unearthly note of trumpet-music responded to my call, beginning very far away, and swelling in volume of sound until all the air seemed vibrant with it. Then said my soul, "In manus tuas, Domine Jesu!" and I knew nothing more.

And yet again I awoke, in the level light of early evening, unspeakably refreshed, free from bonds, and little more than stiff in the limbs. Fra Palamone was by my side, a cup of broth in his hands. "Drink this, poor suffering Francis," he said, as gently as a woman. "Henceforth all shall be harmony betwixt me and thee." He put the basin to my lips and lifted my head on his knee that I might drink more at ease. It was a strong, invigorating stuff, with a cordial in it, I know not of what kind. Had it been vitriol I had been too weak to refuse it. It brought my vigour back in a tide; I sat up. Fra Palamone began to talk, with more candour and fair reason than his late exploits warranted.

He said that a great danger, greater than my ignorance of this country would allow me to guess, had threatened me of late, had come to his knowledge in Florence, and had been forestalled by himself, under the merciful guiding of Heaven, at the last moment. The Government of Tuscany, owing to the dotage of the Grand Duke and the wicked influence of Donna Violante over her brother-in-law, the Grand Prince Gastone, was impotent; there was no police, but indeed a flagrant anarchy abroad, where private malice stalked in the cloak of justice, and the passions of evil men had scope for the utmost indulgence. Great men did as they chose—which was to do evil; the most unnatural debauchery obtained; the Grand Prince Gastone ran spoiling about the country, a satyr heading a troop of satyrs. No honest person was safe from ruin. He told me that I had been remarked in Pistoja, and my name and origin guessed at. They knew me as consorting with profligates and criminals, and accused me of having stolen a young girl from the Marchese Semifonte, upon whose estate she had been born and bred. It was said that I had brought her to dishonour; the laws were to be put in operation against me, or what masqueraded as laws; worse than death would have been my portion had he not intervened and saved me. He had been ill-advised perhaps in the manner of doing; but I was to reflect—was not secrecy essential?

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He owned that my obstinate refusal of his company had angered him, stretched as he was by anxiety, to the point of laying violent hands upon me with his girdle. “These cords,” he said, “which were meant to remind us of our humility, are too convenient ministers of our lust. But the remedy for my great offence is easy.” He again took off the girdle and put it in my hands. He took off his habit and knelt before me in a woollen shirt. “Smite, Don Francis,” said he, “and fear nothing. Smite in token of forgiveness. As you are generous, smite.”

I hope he found me generous enough, for I did smite him with all my force; whether he felt forgiven or no, this did me a power of good. I had the satisfaction of cutting his shirt to ribbons and of drawing blood from him, a satisfaction which now seems to me wholly unlike my nature, and quite unworthy of my position. He bore it with exemplary cheerfulness, singing sacred songs softly to himself, only pausing in these pious exercises to encourage me to hit him harder. “Hey, but that was a shrewd one; that went home! Nerve yourself, Don Francis, courage and resolve! A little lower, my son, nearer to the buttock. There! a proud patch there—ho ho! but you’re into it!” and so on. At the end, when I sank back exhausted, bathed in sweat, he sprang towards me, put his arms about me and kissed me. “Dear Francis, beloved friend,” he said warmly, “how can old Palamone thank you enough for your noble work? By devoted service? It is yours. By more than brotherly love? You have it. One thing at least is clear: we can never be separated after this.”

Nothing could be clearer to me than that we must be separated immediately, but I did not think it wise to dash his hopes until I found out how far he had lied. I wished to learn also what he wanted of my company. I told him, therefore, that supposing his tale about me to be true in general, in particular it was most false. So far from having injured Virginia, I said, I had saved her from destruction, and if the marchese did indeed claim her as his property, the very first thing I had to do was to defeat his purpose, since that was the root of my partnership with her. I explained my position and hers to him as well as I could, and condescended, for her sake, to bargain with the old wretch. “Since you, Palamone,” I said, “desire my company, though Heaven alone knows why you do desire it, I will agree to share my journey with you so far as Florence, whither I shall go immediately, but not on any account without Virginia. I have charged my conscience with her honour, and am inflexible on that point. If you won’t agree to this, you must follow your own devices, and may attempt whatever atrocity occurs to you. That is my firm decision which no suffering can relax.”

Fra Palamone, all smiles, made no difficulties. He would fetch Virginia that very night, and we would set off the next morning for Prato, where there was a great church ceremony which he must by all means attend. Then we would go to Florence, full of friends of his (he assured me), who would make the weeks fly for my amusement.

“Trust me, my dear brother,” he said, “you will never repent having made the acquaintance of your old Palamone.”

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I expressed with the utmost plainness my astonishment at the pains he was at to get my society. “My dear Francis,” he said, raising his eyebrows, as if in despair of making me understand his whim, “what greater proofs of my affection can I give you? I have flayed your back and allowed you to flay mine. I have filled your mouth with wool and carried you like a bale for three leagues in the middle of the night. And you ask me why? I can only say that I have a liking for you. You are spirited, pious, ingenuous, and well-read. As a man of many trades and accomplishments, I shall find you useful in a hundred ways. You will understand that before we have been in Prato half an hour. Honestly, my friend, I have twice tried to serve you in difficulties, and each time you have obstinately refused to acknowledge it. Now, for a third time, I am going to oblige you. Consider whether I am altogether undeserving; consider it when I am gone for your Virginia.”

I had nothing else half so interesting to do. I pondered his acts towards me over and over again, but could not for the life of me fit them into any reasonable relation to himself. That he meant to make profit out of me was certain; he lived for profit. But how? By selling me into slavery? Had his explanations to the Customs-house men at the frontier been pure falsehood? I knew that the Grand Duke Cosimo was surrounded by miserable young men of all colours, tongues and sizes, gathered from every quarter of the globe. That was a humour of his which all his toadies and sycophants tried to indulge. Probably his collection lacked an Englishman—but even as I hotly determined that it should for ever lack one sooner than possess me, I remembered that this mad prince lay dying. Palamone must needs know that; and then, what sort of a price did he hope for from a man with the death-rattle rising in his throat? Did the heir-apparent, the Grand Prince Gastone, intend to maintain the collection? It was possible. Of some monstrous villainy of the sort I vehemently suspected Fra Palamone, and am the more glad, therefore, to record that in this particular case I did him a wrong. He came back in good time with Virginia, who, her eyes alight, sprang towards me and snatched at my hands. I let her kiss them, and was sincerely glad to see my friend again. We devoured each other with questions. Had she been in danger of the marchese? She blushed at the supposition, and asked me what I was thinking her. Had she been alarmed on my account? No, not at first; but later she had been making inquiries. Had I been uneasy? I confessed that I had. Fra Palamone, with some magnanimity, left us alone for the best part of an hour; he sat, I remember, on the edge of the hill looking towards Pistoja, reading his breviary, well removed from earshot. This gave Virginia opportunity to exhibit her view of his behaviour. “We had better travel with him for a while,” she said. “He is known all over the country for a desperate rascal, but is

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privy to too many secrets to be apprehended. Nobody dares lay him by the heels for fear of what he will divulge; and the more you thwart him the more risk you run. He might easily kill you in a rage; he thinks no more of stabbing a man than of skewering a sausage. I grant you that your suspicions do him no wrong. He would sell you in a moment to any one who would buy you. But they are groundless; it is quite plain what he wants. He sees that you are a foreigner of good birth and position; he knows you for a truant on an escapade. Being certain that there will be hue and cry after you, a large reward offered, he means to keep you under his eye until the price is high enough to tempt him, then he will produce you and get the bounty. Call him brigand, say he holds you to ransom, you will be right. Meantime he will make you useful, as you will see when we are in Prato. Me, too, he will use; but not as you might suppose. His one passion is money, his besetting sins are gluttony and rage; he has no other appetites, I believe. For myself, I shall serve him as well as I can, and I advise you to do the same. Ways of escape will occur to us by-and-by."

I could see that she was right. Here was his plan—infinitely creditable to him compared to the other. I promised Virginia that I would humour him for the present; and just then the man himself came to us with two chickens, some cheese, a flat loaf, and a bottle of excellent red wine, grown (as he told me) upon the Grand Duke's podere at Poggio a Cajano. We had a cheerful meal, and separated for the night in high good humour.

CHAPTER XVI

VIRGINIA AND I FALL OUT, BUT ARE RECONCILED

I confess that I have never been able to feel the force of that argument which says, for example, that because a man is a sheep-stealer he must needs be a bad husband. As well might one set out to prove that a parricide must inevitably prove an indifferent cook. In the person of Fra Palamone, of whose scoundrelly proclivities I had had more than an inkling already, it is undoubtedly true that many agreeable qualities were to be found. He was, to use my illustration again, an admirable cook; he was a good talker, a companionable man, a kindly host. Having got my measure, as it were, and won of me by persuasion, what he had failed to win by force, he was sensible enough to see that, if he wished to keep me, he must curb his vile passion of rage. And so, for a while, he did.

Trudging our road to Prato early in the morning, he was very gay. Virginia stepped along by my side, a free-moving young creature who never seemed to tire; but he struck out in front of us, most of the time singing at the top of his voice very discreditable songs, or with a joke, salutation, sarcasm or criticism for everybody we passed on the

way. Wearying of this, because, as he said, it was poor work fencing with bunglers, he kept us closer company for the rest

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of the journey, and was most entertaining. He talked, he joked, he told tales, he told lies. He was shrewd, caustic, tender, witty, extravagant, uproarious, turn and turn about, but he never lost sight of his aim. Probably there never was a man of looser conversation who kept a tighter hold upon the direction of his discourse. The end of all his oratory came when he made us, his pupils as he called us, acquainted with his plans.

"This festa," he said, "whither we go, will bring all the world to Prato, if it have not done so already; and as this same world is the orange which I and you, my apprentices, propose to suck, let us lose no time in getting our teeth well into the rind. In this way, namely: there are three days' junketing before us, to which we will minister exactly what the revellers need. Tomorrow, when they translate the blessed remains of Santa Caterina de' Ricci, we shall sell objects of devotion to the faithful." As we were now sitting by the roadside for our midday meal, he produced a variety of objects from a bag at his feet.

"Observe," he continued, "these images—lilies, bambini, nourishing matrons, curly-headed deacons; these flaming hearts, these hearts stuck upon swords: a holy traffic indeed! Here, too," and he extricated a budget tied in blue tape-ribbon, "are the lives of all the frati worthy of record, and of a good few, between you and me and this damsel, not to be found recorded. Here, in this napkin, is everything requisite to make Santa Caterina de' Ricci the happiest of dead ladies—as, portraits of her mother, of her mother's sisters, of her father and all his relatives, of the young man who drowned himself at Pontassieve for her love, and of that other young man who, on the contrary, did not, but made himself a priest and became her spiritual director. Here are the palace in which she was born, the escutcheon of the De' Ricci which she despised, her governess's house, the convent where she made her vows, and the cell where, if she did not die, she might very easily have died. Here you have the great doctors and captains of the Dominican Order, here is Albert the Great, here seraphic Thomas, here murdered Peter, here Catherine, here Rose—admirable engravings, as you see, mostly after the admired John. Here then is our day's work cut out for us—a happy toil! On the next, having done our humble service to the souls of all these persons, we must be careful not to forget their bodily needs. I shall exercise my skill in dentistry for trifling rewards, and you, my young Aesculapius, will prove to others, as you have already proved to me, that the strong wrist and willing arm are not lacking among your personal endowments. I am persuaded that these duties will occupy the whole of the second day, for Prato will be full to suffocation by that time, and there will hardly be a head whose recesses we may not have to explore. By these means, having secured (as I hope) the public confidence, the time will be

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ripe for my great design. After worship, relaxation, the release from pain; after pain, pleasure comes. On that third day, my children, we will set up a faro-bank, the profits of which, if skill be employed, will more than counterbalance what we have cheerfully lost in our efforts to do good. The reward, I say, is certain, and who shall call it undeserved? Not I, for one. Now, children, to the road once more! Happy fortunes attend us! Pray for old Palamone, who loves you dearly and thinks about you night and day."

He got up as he was finishing this speech of his and took to the road before I could object—as I did object—to some of his propositions. But I told Virginia that I intended to leave him at Prato and push on to Florence, as I had no intention of helping him cheat his neighbours. "What!" I cried, "a Strelley of Upcote, a gentleman and an old Catholic, to clown it in a fair! Never in the world!"

Virginia, walking staidly beside me, considered this outburst in silence before she delivered herself. '"You speak," she then said, "as I would have you speak, but not at all as you have decided to speak. You cannot at one and the same moment be Francesco of Upcote and Francesco Ignoto; you cannot exalt yourself and degrade yourself. If you choose to be a gentleman, why did you discard your coat?"

I laughed at her. "My child," said I, "on your showing a man cannot be a gentleman in his bed—or in his bath." But she held to her opinion.

"I think you understand me very well. You choose to go a pilgrimage, to encounter dangers and humiliations, and yet the moment a fine one is proposed to you, you jump back after your gentleman's estate. You tell me that you have peddled crucifixes: what more does Palamone expect of you? Be what you choose, Don Francis; kiss me or kiss your Aurelia; go afoot or in a coach; beg or give, sink or swim. You have two hands, you will say. It is true; but you have only one person. If, with a fistful of gold in your right hand, you go about begging with your left, you will be contemptible as well as ridiculous."

"I agree with that," I said, "but—"

"Here again," said she, breaking in upon me, "you have a choice; and it is obvious. I am not able to speak for Donna Aurelia, or so you will tell me; but I will give a great golden heart to the Girdle of Prato that while she may love a ridiculous Don Francis, she will turn her back on the other."

"Love!" I said, echoing her. "Love, my good girl! Of what are you speaking? Donna Aurelia love me? You must be mad."

“It is certain that I must be,” she replied, “unless it is your honour who is mad. Pray let me understand what it is that you want of the lady when you find her.”

“Her pardon,” I said, and made her furious. She glared, bit her lip, stamped. With arms tight folded to restrain her heaving chest, she stopped short and nodded her words into me one by one, as if she were directing artillery at a siege. “Well, very well, Don Francis,” she said; “then I tell you plainly that you will find misery and her together, if you propose to pray at her feet instead of taking her in your arms—she of Siena! She of Siena, my word!—you will be miserable, and make her miserable.”

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I told her to be quiet, but she would not; she grew wild, staring about and straining out her arms. “I will be no party to this folly—I will not—I will not,” she said half to herself, but Palamone was listening with a comical, wry face, rubbing his beard.

She took no notice. “I know better than you what a girl needs, and what her rights are. One woman to humour your whims is enough, I should hope —Look at me, look at me, Don Francis!” I had never seen her in this state before—a beautiful starving creature, like some wild thing baulked of her desire. Her eyes were gaunt, she held out her hands to me; I was much concerned—it was really Palamone who got her to be quiet.

He came and touched her on the shoulder. “Have patience, my daughter,” he said, and added some quick words under his breath, whose sense was lost to me. Meantime a little company of passers-by had collected about us, and watched for the event. “We will not discuss our affairs before these citizens,” said the frate, “more especially as the lady, whose name you toss to and fro, is not here to applaud or condemn. No doubt but you will find her in Prato, if, as you say, she is of the Sienese nation. Why, to the translation of the blessed remains are to come Donna Violante, wife of the Grand Prince, and Donna Camilla Pallavicini, his mistress. Next to a saint, a Grand Duke’s mistress would draw every woman in Siena—and we are to have both. The thing is not worth discussion. She will be there. Hey, then, children, *avanti*!”

We went on without any more words; Virginia, all her spirit gone out of her, presented the most woebegone appearance. It would have been evident to me that she was deeply ashamed of herself had I not been too incensed to think anything about her. We entered the town of Prato about five o’clock in the evening, and found it crammed to the walls with sightseers and those who expected to offer them sights. The Piazza was like the camp about a fair, the inns were like anthills, the very churches were full. On the morrow was to be the great procession of religious to enact the translation of the remains. No lodgings were to be had better than a stall in the stable of the Sparrow-hawk. There it was that we established our camp; and that done, I left my companions and wandered alone about the town, hardly hoping, and not able, to find my beloved, remote and much injured Aurelia.

Late at night I returned and threw myself upon the straw which was to be my bed. I was tired, and fell asleep at once, but not comfortably. Restlessness possessed me, I turned and tossed about, was distressed by dreams of incredible and fruitless labours and of mental anguish, whose cause I could not define. Presently after I was awakened by a sense of something touching my feet, and lay for a time awake, wondering what it might be. Some person or another was touching me there—softly, very softly, and in kindness. I heard gentle whispering—I felt the touch as of velvet on my feet; and then a drop fell, warm and wet. I said, “Who are you who kiss my feet?” and was answered, “It is I—Virginia—my lord.”

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“What do you there, Virginia?” I asked her. “What do you need of me?”

“Your pardon,” she said; and I heard her crying softly to herself in the dark.

“My child,” I said, and held out my hand to her, “you know that I am no man to have pardons worth a woman’s accepting, but I can assure you of Aurelia’s pity and pardon for what you have said against her. Draw near and you shall have it from my hands.”

The straw rustled as she crept on hands and knees towards me. Her face encountered my hands and rested between them. It was burning hot, and so were her lips, which kissed my palms alternately and thirstily as if she were lapping water. “Forgive me, my lord, forgive me,” she urged me. “Oh, I am dreadfully ashamed! Forgive me this once, I am wretched.”

“Child,” I said, “think no more of it. I have no grudge against you—all my thoughts are kindly. Lie down, Virginia, and sleep. Our friendship is too strong for a tiff to break it.” She kissed my palms again and again and crept off the straw. I heard her shut the door of the stable after her. Where she passed the night I know not; but I remarked that in our subsequent wanderings she never let me know how or where she did sleep. She met me next morning, her usual cool, nonchalant, reasonable self.

CHAPTER XVII

ERCOLE AT THE FAIR

If needs must have it that I was to accommodate crime by falling into it myself, it would appear that I was to do it with a certain air. When I awoke I found a very decent suit of black prepared for me against the proceedings of the day: a ribbon for my hair, shoes, shoebuckles, silk stockings, ruffles, a neat cravat edged with lace. Thus attired, I was to be Fra Palamone’s secretary and lieutenant, to hold his devotional objects, pass them about for inspection, praise them discreetly, and take the money. Virginia was to play the country girl, who, by simple ardour and appropriate questioning, was to excite general interest and stimulate the sale. She, too, had a new gown and stomacher, and looked so well that, the frate said, it was quite on the cards that half his stock would be bought for her by enamoured contadini, and thus brought into circulation over and over again. It was noticeable that far less time was spent upon her instructions than upon mine. Fra Palamone was not at all sure how far I should prove amenable.

Crime, however, by which I mean an unfailing fount of ready lying, was a more difficult accomplishment than I had reckoned it. I had no notion when I began what hard work it could be. It was not for want of an exemplar, for although Fra Palamone sweated as he lied, it would be impossible to relate the quantity, the quality or quiddity of his lies. Their

variety was indeed admirable, but apart from that they shocked me not a little, for I could not but see that as ready a way as any of discrediting

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true religion is to overcredit it; and that, where people believe in a miracle, to give them a glib hundred is to tempt them to infidelity. Because it might be true, as I undoubtedly believe it to be, that St. Francis of Assisi floated between pavement and rafters, that were no reason for pronouncing that Santa Caterina de' Ricci could stroke the chimney-pots; or if one thought it possible that St. Antony of Padua preached to the fishes of the sea, I contend that one would not be supported, but rather discouraged, in the opinion by hearing that Santa Caterina de' Ricci argued with eels in the stew-pan. But the melancholy fact remains to be told that, haranguing all day long, the wilder grew the anecdotes of Palamone, the brisker was his trade. Virginia also, I freely own, acted her part superbly, with a lisp and a trick of sucking her fingers for one batch, an "O la!" for another, which brought in showers of purchasers. She presently took a fit of bargaining—by mere caprice, I believe—in which she was so keen that she beat down Fra Palamone to half his prices and set an example which made him desperately angry. As for me, I fell into entire disgrace almost at the outset, for when an old countryman asked me whether it was true that Roses of Sharon were good for the stone, unthinkingly I replied that prayer was better. "Cospetto!" cried my man, "and cheaper too! Many thanks to you for an honest young gentleman." Fra Palamone ordered me to resume my old part of deaf-mute.

The procession of the day, which, of course, put an end to all marketing for the time, began at half after ten, with High Mass set for eleven o'clock. It was a pompous business—the nuns of San Vincenzio, two and two, with lighted tapers; their friends of the world, ladies in hoops and feathers, attendant cavaliers; Donna Violante, widow of the Grand Prince Ferdinand, deceased—a stout black-eyed woman of middle age, under-dressed and over-painted. She had a court about her of half a dozen gentlemen, twice that number of ladies, and three black boys to hold her train. Donna Camilla Pallavicini may have been there, but I did not see her. The clergy followed, then the bishop with his chaplains, train-bearer and acolytes; torch-bearers next; and then the casket containing the body of the saint under a heavy crimson canopy. Friars of St. Dominic's religion closed a very fine procession.

Having myself a fair musical ear, I thought that the nuns sang badly, without harmony or spirit. They looked about them too with what I considered regretable freedom: they talked to their friends; one of them had a damerino on either side of her, and one also, I was constrained to notice, looked fixedly in my direction, with fine eyes, full of knowledge—but presently turned her head and passed on. There was nothing flagrant, nothing to be compared with what was allowed to religious in Padua and Venice; but I was a little discontented at this nun's inspection. I had observed that she was handsome and of fine person, pale, serious, and with a high-bred air.

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While all these devotees were winding their way round about the Piazza, Virginia and I had been sitting on a patch of grass by the roadway in the company of a country lad, who became extremely friendly. He was a goatherd from San Benedetto in Alpi, he told us, and had played truant for the day, walking over the stony hills for some sixteen or twenty miles and intending to return the same road at night. His name was Ercole; and that, as I told him, was as it should be. But I added, “Hercules served Eurystheus for twelve years for one clear purpose, which was that he might achieve immortality; and some of us labour for the same end, and others of us for ends which seem to us equally good. Will you tell me, Ercole, why you have undertaken these prodigious exertions of yours?”

Ercole shrugged. “There is no life upon our mountains,” he said. “Moreover, Santa Caterina was a great saint, as I have heard your master say just now. Nor can you deny it.”

I said, “I do not deny it. But the saints never fail us. Wheresoever one may dwell, there are they; and by the merits of holy baptism and the benefits of the Mass we may be in communion with them whether we live on mountain or plain.”

“That is true,” said Ercole. “Yet that was a good procession. I would not have missed it for two gold florins. I expect that in your country you have no finer processions of priests and noble ladies of religion. I am myself impassioned for religion.”

“I too,” was my answer. “But in my poor country the true faith is enmeshed in cold shrouds of unbelief. We dare not have processions, but cry unto God in secret; and no profession is more discredited with us than that of virgin.”

“That is a terrible thing you tell me there,” says he. “What else is a girl to do if she cannot marry the man of her heart?”

“We have our compensations,” I replied; “we worship in the dark, hoping to be rewarded in the full light of heaven. Persecution has braced us; the Church had grown lax. With us, for instance, you would never see religious behave as here they do. Did you observe that nun that looked me full in the face as the procession went by?”

Ercole’s eyes flashed; but he said nothing. I went on, “That would be impossible in my country, I can assure you.”

“Pardon me,” says Ercole; “you misunderstood the lady. It was not at you that she looked.”

“Certainly it was not,” said Virginia with decision.

“She looked at me,” the boy said, “and I looked at her. She knew that I should be here.”

“Ho!” said I, and Virginia said, “Gia!”

Ercole then explained. “That lady is Donna Domenica degli Onesti, who was daughter of my master, the Marchese Onesti, when I was dog-keeper to him at Bogazzano. She was always there, being in delicate health, and we loved each other from the first. There was no doubt at all about the matter.”

“How could there be any doubt?” said Virginia; but Ercole took no notice of her.

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“There was no doubt. She jumped whenever I came round the corner, and used to stand behind trees watching me. Also she used to come to see the dogs fed. Now, when I knew beyond all question the state of her feelings, I borrowed Guido’s guitar, and struck one chord upon it at night under her window, and sang but one word—Vieni! In three minutes she came on to the balcony, and we looked at each other. There was a moon, and we could see quite well. We stood looking like that for five minutes without a syllable spoken, and then I went away. I went away before she did; so the thing was clear. After that I called my Vieni every night, and every night she came. Sir, you saw how fine she was, with a face of dawn, and great eyes, and the mournful air of a saint in the sky. There never was such a good love as ours in the world, since the days of Antonio and Cleopatra of blessed memory. It lasted all one summer, but she was turned of sixteen by then, and her father, the marchese, wished her to marry. Naturally I forbade that.”

“You!” I cried, and again Virginia nodded and said, “Gia!”

“You may say so,” said Ercole. “What else could I do? And naturally also she preferred the convent. I bade her farewell in the garden. She allowed me then to touch her hand. I said, ‘Addio, Madonna,’ and she, ‘Addio, Ercole,’ and then I left her standing there. That was five years ago. Since then I have seen her once a year. This is the fifth time.”

“And when will the sixth time be?” I asked him.

“Immediately,” he said. “When the procession returns.”

“But, Ercole, is this tolerable?” I objected. “Is it humane to Donna Domenica?”

Virginia turned upon me here. “To her?” she cried fiercely. “To her?
Why, what else could she do? What else should I—should any woman do?”
Immediately she had said this, I could see that she wished she had not.
She blushed and hung her head.

“It is not too easy,” said Ercole, “but it was best under the circumstances. Imagine her in the arms of a man! It is not conceivable. On the other hand, one is not jealous of the Cross; and she knows that I should not come to see her if I had not been faithful.”

“And you have spoken—”

“For what do you take me? I have never spoken to her more than once in the garden, or at a less distance than ten braccia—except when I touched her hand. Also I used to say Vieni! and she came; but no more.”

“But when she was asked in marriage, and you forbade it?”

“Then she told me herself that she supposed I wished her to take the veil, and I nodded my head.”

I was forced to admit his strength of purpose. “You are a great lover, “I said, “that is certain. I am a lover also—but not at all in your way.”

Ercole said, “I have only done what any man would do who loved a lady.”

“Don Francis would never say Vieni!” said Virginia with a snap, looking up quickly.

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“Then the lady would never come,” said Ercole.

I was silent, condemning in my heart what my wits could not gainsay.

Ercole saw his Donna Domenica again. She passed with the returning procession, and again looked full and mournful knowledge on her lover. He neither blushed nor saluted her, but met her eyes steadily and did not follow her retreating figure in the hope that she would turn her head. Nor did she turn it. He seemed perfectly cheerful afterwards, and disposed to sleep. He said that he should take another day in Prato, so as to get a little fun of the fair. They had no fairs at San Benedetto in Alpi.

CHAPTER XVIII

FRA PALAMONE BREAKS THE LAW, AND I MY CHAIN

For his second day’s campaign, when he set up as a dentist (in spectacles and a fine black beard), Fra Palamone chose me to be arrayed in a loose punchinello suit of red cotton, covered with the signs of the zodiac in tinsel; for, said he, “Mystery is half our battle won beforehand. Hermes Trismegistus himself had not been the philosopher he was if he had been understood, and to this day Aristotle is undervalued, not for saying what he meant, but for saying it all.” He gave me a peaked felt hat for my head, and exhorted me to have no fears. “Tooth-drawing,” he said, “is as easy as kissing any day. Reflect, Francis, upon this, and let it be your comfort throughout the coming conflict, that there is no jaw-bone in the head of mortal man so strong as his wrist. With your wrist and elbow you can knock a man down; but show me the jaw that will do so much. I will say nothing of Samson, who is not in debate; moreover his weapon was borrowed and his enemies were God’s enemies. Now, here is another fact, full of encouragement for you. The stronger a man is in the jaw, the harder he will pull against your forceps. Pray, what chance has a tooth the most rooted against your pull and the patient’s? Not the faintest! Out it comes, and there is one poor sufferer the less in Prato. Courage then; pull and pull again.” I promised him that I would pull my stoutest, but curtly declined his suggestion that I should try my hand upon Virginia’s mouth, although she made no demur. Sooner should Prato swim in blood, I said, than I lay violent hands upon my friend.

And in blood swam Prato that day, and Fra Palamone bathed in it eloquently. He called himself Conqueror of Pain, and piled up his captures like the trophies of a Roman triumph. I can still hear the soul-congealing yell with which he hailed every new token of his prowess, and still see the packed Piazza surge, as it was swept by it like corn in a breeze. “Woe unto you, heathen masticator,” he would cry, holding high the forceps and its victim, “Woe unto you when you meet Palamone, Tyrant of Pain! Blessed be the pincers and the fork, which have gained the celestial paradise for Sant’ Agnese, and the terrestrial for this worthy man! I tell you,

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signori," he would say, looking round upon the gaping company, "I would rather be in this man's shoes than in the Grand Duke's, or in those of my blood-brother in God, the Patriarch of Venice. Ha! he will break up larks' bones this night! and where are the sheep's trotters to deny him entry? Where are the walnuts or the peach stones whose kernels are removed from him? Ahi, signori! do you think, if Signor Dives had had so wholesome a mouth he would have left to Lazarus the bones? Not he—but the pith of every one of them had gone to make him sleeker. Avanti, signori, avanti! Let the next in torment come up." He had abundant custom, and seemed never to tire; but my turn came at last, introduced by a string of panegyric which spoke of me as the Nerve-Acrobat, the Lodestone of Ivory, the Electrical Indian Boy, at whose touch teeth flew from their sockets and tartar dissolved in smoke. Pale, but with resolution, I grasped the weapon which he handed me.

To my consternation and half-undoing, I saw in the chair the sinewy form and honest brown face of Ercole, the heroic lover. He saluted me with a smile and wave of the hand. He was here to encourage me, he said. Every man must make a beginning, and there was nothing like a friendly face. Very much unnerved, I asked him which tooth he proposed to lose. "Whichever you prefer," he said. "I am here ready. Take this one for instance." He tapped a fine grinder in his lower jaw. I asked him did it pain him?

"Why no," he said, "it doesn't in a manner ache; but it will give you some trouble, I believe, and I'm quite ready to oblige a friend with whom I have shared confidences. Take your pleasure of my mouth by all means. I recommend this one as a twister." Displaying here two rows of pearls, he tapped the biggest of them and awaited my attack.

"I would sooner starve than touch such beauty as this," I said.

"Please yourself," he replied, "but observe, by your refusal I lose three pauls. There's a matter of a wager between me and a friend which shall let the most blood."

"Moreover, my young apprentice," said Fra Palamone with severity, "you shall understand that breaking your covenant with me involves the breaking of my stick upon your back."

"Via!" says Ercole, "where is your nerve, master? Do you think I haven't time enough at San Benedetto to grow a fresh crop!"

A terrible struggle ensued, but Ercole won his wager with ease.

Public confidence being now thoroughly established in Fra Palamone's view, he opened his faro-bank on the last day of the fair, with Virginia and me for decoys—to all

appearance a young married couple from the sea-board, who were to play and win ten florins. I was dressed, more or less, as a gentleman of the provinces—and looked, I doubt not, like a clown—in a white, flowered silk vest, white breeches and stockings, and a coat of full green velvet. I carried a sword, my hair

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in a bag, my hat under my arm. Virginia, on the other hand, looked very handsome in her high-necked damask dress; her hair done upon the top of her head, with a little powder, and a patch at the corner of her mouth. We were given a page in attendance, who was the son of an apothecary in the town, and made our ten florins with ease. That being all the bargain, we spent the rest of the day as we chose—which was not punting against Fra Palamone. He must have made sixty times that amount.

Towards evening the Piazza, grew very gay. An opera was given at the theatre, after which the ladies of the place took the air, walking up and down with their gentlemen. Drolls, marionettes, quack-doctors, a strolling company of comedians from Venice, tumblers and jugglers were holding their performances before great assemblies of the meaner sort; but the gentry kept the middle of the square, and there too Virginia and I, in our finery, braved it with the best. It was remarkable to me to see how easily and simply she carried herself in a dress and a company entirely strange to her. She had no mauvaise honte, for she made no pretence; she was not self-conscious, for she deceived nobody; she did not smirk nor make herself in any way ridiculous. She was still herself, put in a position where—as she had the wit to see—staidness was the natural thing; therefore staid she was. I would have defied any fine gentleman of London to have known her for the little half-naked peasant she had been but one day ago. Of course, in Prato the truth was to be known at a glance. There was nobody there, I suppose, who could not have picked out her village; nor did she attempt to conceal it. “You dress me like a lady for your purposes,” she would say, “you may depend upon me to do my best.”

Clear-minded, brave, honest, noble-hearted Virginia, how well I remember thee at this hour! And have I not cause? Should I not be grateful? Am I not? Ah, but God knoweth that I am!

Now, as we were promenading in that company, I chanced to see Fra Palamone talking under a lamp to a tall spare gentleman splendidly dressed in tawny velvet and gold lace. I observed in particular that he had a long, pale, harassed face, a hooked nose, and eyes so light in colour that they seemed almost white. His hands were exceedingly restless, always fidgeting with something; and he himself, for ever on the start to go, seemed not so much listening to, as enduring, the tale told him. Some person of consequence he evidently was, for two lacqueys stood near him—one holding his cloak, another his sword and gloves. Twice we had passed up and down at no great distance from him before I asked carelessly of Virginia, “Who is the frate’s noble friend?” She did not answer me at once, but pressed my arm and walked rather faster. When we were beyond the company of promenaders she said: “I have seen those two for a long time, and know that gentleman very well. It is the Marchese Semifonte, to whom my village, and my family, and I myself belong, body and soul.”

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The poor girl was trembling, though she spoke steadily enough and looked at me with unfaltering eyes. But she was grave and I horrified.

“But what,”—I began—“what do you mean, child? The marchese—your—oh, horrible thought! Is this the blackest treachery?”

“Fra Palamone finds me in his way,” said Virginia, “and wishes to have you to himself in Florence. He thinks that I know too much about him, and has told the marchese that I am here. He wishes to get rid of me by some simple means. Nor could he have hit upon a better. Well,” she said, looking gently at me, “I am in your hands. Shall I go?”

I hurried her off at once to our inn, the Sparrow-hawk, where I was lucky enough to find the padrona, Monna Bianca by name. She was a buxom woman of forty summers, good-tempered, an excellent manager of house and husband, and not unreasonably proud of her discernment. She had found me out, she had told me, in the twinkling of an eye. I was a gentleman, either English or Irish, and (as she put it) had my leg in the wrong bed. Supposing my affair to be one very common to her experience, she had begun by deploring my weakness for Virginia, whom she had called Robaccia, Cosa di Niente, and the like; but I had cut her short by telling her the whole of my own story and part of the girl’s. She had at once admitted her mistake, begged my pardon, taken a fancy to me, and now proved a good friend in this urgent need.

I told her the shameful turn of affairs, and begged her to take care of Virginia while I was employed in challenging the marchese to fight, and, if possible, in running him through the body. I said that if she had had the eyes to see my masquerade, it was not to be supposed that Semifonte would misunderstand me; but she stopped me at once. “Do no such thing, Don Francis,” said she. “You will be attacking the wrong man. The marchese is no better than he should be, but he is perfectly galant’ uomo, and would throw no sort of difficulty in your way. But you are crediting him with too much zeal. He has many irons in the fire, as we say; and, after all, Miss Virginia is not the only wench in the world.”

“Per Bacco,” said Virginia, “that’s true.”

“Your aim,” Monna Bianca continued, “should be that old sack of iniquity, Fra Palamone, the most wily, audacious rogue of a friar in all a friar-ridden land. Now, I’ll help you there—I and your Virginia together. Leave us, Don Francis, leave us alone for a while. Take the air, avoid the marchese, and by the morning you shall hear some news.”

Such indeed proved to be the case. The Grand Duke Cosimo, it seems, on the pressure of his friends the Jesuits, had published an edict, which was then in full force, that any man entering a house where a marriageable woman might be living could be arrested and imprisoned without trial. [Footnote: Mr. Strelley is perfectly right. One of the first acts of Gian Gastone, Cosimo’s successor, was

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to repeal this preposterous decree. The first and only good thing that I ever heard of him.—M. H.] By means of this Monna Bianca and Virginia laid Fra Palamone by the heels. The girl was sent to spend the night with Monna Bianca's sister-in-law, who lived with her husband (a notary public) and own sister in the suburbs of Prato, just outside the Porta Fiorentina. Thither Fra Palamone went in pursuit of his infamous plans, and there he was found by the sbirri of the Holy Office. The case was clear enough against him, for I need not say that there was no love lost between the frate and the Jesuits. Much as may be urged against that learned body of politicians, no one has ever laid a pandering to profligacy or chicane to their account. The sister of Monna Bianca's sister-in-law was a marriageable woman, Fra Palamone was in the house with her, and was there caught by the Inquisition and haled off to their house of correction. Virginia and I set out at liberty to Florence, decently clad, decently shod, with the remains of our ten florins in my breeches pocket. I remember Monna Bianca's parting advice very well. "Farewell, Don Francis," it was, "good luck to you and this honest girl. Pursue your Aurelia as ardently as you will, you are only doing after your age and degree in the world. Let me advise you to write to Padua for your portmanteau and effects. You will love your mistress none the less for a good coat to your back, nor she you, I promise you. Besides, I believe in a gentleman living as a gentleman. Marry off your Miss Virginia, who has her wits about her, to your valet, or to anybody else's valet who will take her. Your position with regard to her does you infinite credit with me; but I cannot answer for Madam Aurelia. Or rather, I can answer for her that it will do you precisely the reverse. And—I have a son of my own, remember—inform your father of your whereabouts in Florence. To meet again, Don Francis—addio!"

That was a reasonable friendly soul; but it was not to be supposed that she could understand the reverential attitude of a young man to his mistress.

CHAPTER XIX

I AM AGAIN MISCONCEIVED

The aspect of Florence, surveyed from the crags of Fiesole, or from that gentler eyrie of Bellosguardo, is one of the most enchanting visions open to the eye of man, so cunningly have art and nature joined their webbing; but that which can be harvested upon the road from Prato is not at all extraordinary. Suburb there succeeds to dirty suburb, the roads are quags or deep in dust, the company as disagreeable as it is mean. Approaching the city from that side, you neither know that within a short mile of you are the dome of Brunelleschi, the Tower of Giotto, the David of Michael Angelo—nor do you greatly care. At least I did not, being sadly out of spirits, upon that day of rain, steam and weariness, when, with the young Virginia springing by my side, I limped within the Porta al Prato and stood upon the sacred soil of the Second Athens. Quick to

feel impressions, too quick to read in them signs and portents, I felt fatality press upon my brows.

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A little way beyond that Porta al Prato, within the walls, there was, and still is, I believe, a broad neglected field—ragged grass and broken potsherds—surrounded on three sides out of four by shabby houses, taverns and garden walls. It was called the Prato, and by the shocking discrepancy between its name and appearance added to my dejection, for the one recalled and the other mocked memories of that green and sunlit plain in Padua, that dear Pra della Valle, upon whose grassy dimples looked the house of Aurelia, and to whose wandering winds I had so often sighed her name. Here, however, the Marchese Corsini had a casino and loggia, here stood in rows the country coaches from the north and west, awaiting their times of departure; here the Florentines used to hold their horse-races of St. John's day, and here, finally, you could be robbed, strangled or stabbed any night of the year. Yet it boasted at least two convents of nuns among its border of untidy buildings, and was destined, before long, to become of supreme interest to myself. Virginia the shrewd knew that, although I did not.

As we passed for the first time in our lives over the littered, disconsolate spot where, in the heavy rain, a pack of ruffians and drabs were sprawling, she took care to point out one of those two convents—a plain yellow house, closely shuttered, and by its side the red roof and rickety cross of the church appurtenant. "That," she said, "is the Convent of SS. Maria and Giuseppe sul Prato. Mark the house. You should look there for your Donna Aurelia."

My dejection held me fast; the rain, the heavy air and fog of Florence, this vile Prato and its company of tumbling, scuffling wretches loaded me with an apathy impossible to shake off. "Why there?" I asked her languidly. "Why anywhere within these fatal walls?"

"If, as you suppose and I do not suppose, she has taken shelter in a convent," Virginia replied, "it will be in that convent. That society is wholly of Siena. All the Sienese, arriving in Florence (and in need of such shelter) go thither. I am sure there is not a woman behind those walls who cannot tell you what 'l' andare a Provenzano' means—-and most of them by more than hearsay. Yes, yes. Either she is there, or she will be there before long—always supposing that she is miserable. For my part, I have never disguised from your honour my belief that she is not so miserable as you flatter yourself."

"Aurelia can have no place here," said I heavily. "This is a fatal place. I shall find her in Siena, and am minded to go there this very day."

Better for me to have done so; but "Florence lies dead in her road," Virginia persisted, "and by the time she had reached it she would be very ready for one of the two things Florence affords."

"And what are they, Virginia?" Her oracular moods always interested me, consorting so oddly with her youth.

“Pleasure or religion,” said she, and would explain herself no further.

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Pleasure or religion! It would have needed a greater than the Pythian Priestess to have given me hopes of either in Florence. And yet, as we pursued our way, by the Borg' Ognissanti towards the river, I could not but be struck by the subdued aspect of the citizens, who, far from being the lively impertinents they had been reputed, went gravely and silently about their business, cloaked in sombre black. They did not stand, as Italians love to do, grouped in the piazzas, chattering, gesticulating and acting as much for their own amusement as for their hearers'; nor did they crowd the chocolate-houses, where, as a rule, the very flies are buzzing the news. It seemed to me that church doors alone stood open.

There were few ladies abroad, and such as we saw were on the steps of the churches, going in or coming out, and hardly one of them but had a frate—sometimes two, once four—in her company. The number of religious was exorbitant, and even more remarkable was it to observe the respect in which they were held. Every woman, meeting one, dropped him a curtsey, every man saluted him. My gentleman, if you please, hardly gave himself the trouble of acknowledging the grace. I saw a couple of Theatines scolding a poor lady to tears; I saw another shake off a fine gentleman, who ran after him to kiss his hand. I saw beggars, cripples, sick men in litters, hold out their prayers in vain. I grew justly indignant. "Florence is the place for Fra Palamone," I said to Virginia with bitter foreboding, "rather than for you and me. It is horrible to think of Aurelia, with her dutiful regard for the saintly calling, bending her knees to these arrogant rascals."

> "'Bacchetoni e colli torti,
> Tutti il diavol se li porti!'"

said Virginia with scornful nostrils. "Here you see the end of a nation which shares your pietistical aptitudes. You think you have God by the foot when you have the devil by the tail."

"It is true," I agreed, sighing, "that the more I seek after God and His fairest creature, the more I am encumbered by these distorted botches of His design. This town swarms with frati."

"What will you find on a carrion but flies?" cried she. "The Grand Duke is rotting on his bed, and these are the vermin about him. Before long he will be dust, and then it will be the turn of Don Gastone, and frati will give place to cicisbei. Maybe that you won't find them any more to your liking."

"I shall leave Florence," I told her, "so soon as I am assured of Aurelia's escape from it." I heard her sniff of scorn, but did not care to reprove her.

It was not so easy to leave it as to reach it, I found out. I had not been two hours in my chosen lodging—a decent place enough—before I had a visit from the Holy Office. The

terrified landlord ushered three clerics into my room: two of them Dominicans with forms as big as flags to be filled up from my papers! The reader knows that I had no papers. The only passport I had ever had was destroyed; I had no calling but that of pilgrim, with which, as I could not but see, Virginia's presence consorted oddly; and the objects of my pilgrimage, as I had learned by painful experience, were not such as would commend themselves to the Inquisition. But while I hesitated, Virginia jumped headlong into the breach.

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A flush of seraphic mildness suffused her cheeks, her eyes sparkled like diamonds upon a Madonna's crown, she crossed her arms over her bosom and bowed her head. "Most reverend sirs," she said, "you see before you two innocents whose only faults are youth and ardent imagination. Attracted by the splendour of these shrines—pilgrims to the holy places— travellers hopeful of Heaven's gate——"

The elder of the two Dominicans, a pock-marked, long-faced, bitter man, at once said that he saw before him nothing of the kind. "We see," he continued, "a young man of foreign aspect, obviously confused, and you, my girl, who are too glib by half. If you can prove your innocence to our satisfaction we shall be agreeably surprised."

Virginia, thus rudely checked in what would no doubt have proved a generous career of falsehood, shuddered and bit her lip. Her crossed arms relaxed, but her fists clenched themselves. She frowned and looked dangerous. My temper none of the best, I took a step forward and addressed the company.

"Sirs," I said plainly, "my passport is lost, and as it was a false one it would have availed me nothing. I shall tell you the truth—that I am by birth an Englishman of your own religion, and was until lately a student of Padua. While there I had the fortunate misfortune to be subjugated by the charms of my tutor's lovely wife—fortunate in that she raised my soul to the heights, horribly unfortunate in that I (presumptuous wretch!) dared to draw her down into peril. You may spare your reproaches, for I assure you they cannot sharpen mine. She suffered undeservedly, and I am vowed to her satisfaction. I have entered your master's dominions, without objection, in pursuit of a pious intention, that, namely, of making amends to a virtuous and innocent lady. I have brought this young woman with me—a Tuscan, who needs no passport, I believe—-under the influence of another pious intention. She has been in danger of ruin, and I believe I have saved her from it. I do not disguise from you, as you see, that I have sinned very grievously; but I ask you to accept my assurance that I am on the road to repentance. If you choose to apply to the accredited Minister of my country you will no doubt receive satisfactory evidence of my standing in the world. Whatsoever I may deserve from her against whom I have trespassed, I have done no harm to you or your master. I am not accustomed to have my word doubted, and shall take no steps at all to support it from outside. I wish you very well, and beg you to excuse me. I am but newly come to Florence, and confess to fatigue."

I ended here, because I saw that further discussion would be fruitless. The officers, it is true, had listened to me gravely, without any kind of expression; their eyes had been fixed upon the floor, or the wall; they might have been statues. But at the close of my periods, one of them, a stout, breathless and foolish-looking priest, asked me, as if I had said nothing at all, "But where are your papers?"

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Virginia gave a sharp cry, and I was certainly taken aback. “Reverend sir,” I said, as calmly as I was able, “I had hoped to have explained—— "

The pock-marked Dominican took up the tale. “It is true, you have explained; but you have not produced your papers. Explanations apart from papers are of little or no value.”

“Explanations,” said I, “of the absence of papers are surely more valuable than the absence of papers and explanations alike. I repeat that my own passport is lost, and that my companion needs none.”

“I have now listened to your companion and to you,” replied the Dominican. “The reasons which, on your showing, have prompted you to visit Florence are connected with sin. These are not creditable reasons, and explain nothing. I must again ask you, where are your papers?”

Virginia, exasperated, threw up her arms and called on the Madonna. “Our papers! Just Heaven, how often is he to tell you that he has none?”

“This is idle questioning,” said I. “I cannot give you more than explanations, because I have nothing more. You will make me regret even so much complaisance.”

“But,” said the breathless priest, with a comical look awry, “But this is very serious. How are we to fill up these forms if we have no papers?”

“I cannot help you,” I said.

Here it was the turn of the third officer, and second Dominican. He was a fat-faced man with a perpetual smile. “You have done very wrongly, both of you,” he said, looking as if he loved the thought.

I said, “I have admitted it.”

“Silence,” said he. “The Holy Office cannot excuse a breach of the laws of which it is the guardian.”

“I break no laws, sir,” cried I. “At least none that are under your care.”

“Silence,” said the Dominican. “I cannot believe a word that you say. Speak you, young woman, and speak the truth. Of what nation are you?”

Virginia looked him squarely in the face. “I am a subject of the Grand Duke’s, father. I am of Siena.”

She had her reasons for the fib, but, not knowing what they were at the moment, I started violently, and the inquisitor turned upon me.

“Do you, young man, wish to make any remark?”

“I wish to say——” I began.

The Dominican turned to his colleagues. “He denies that she is of Siena; therefore, probably she has spoken the truth. We will inscribe her so. Will you now tell us,” he asked Virginia, “of what nation is this young man?”

She replied, “He also has spoken the truth. He comes from Padua.”

“From Padua!” cried the pock-marked officer; and the breathless priest tossed up his hands, echoing, “A Venetian subject!”

“You are wrong,” I said, “I am an English subject.”

“Silence,” said the stern Dominican, “you are now inscribed as a Venetian subject. A Venetian subject! From a country of profligacies and indescribable laxity of manners! A Venetian! A comedian!”

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“I am neither,” said I; “but I must observe that it is open to a Venetian (if such I were), in a time of profound peace, to enter this State.”

“A comedian!” said the smiling Dominican in a whisper. I grew red with vexation.

“Sir, sir,” I reproved him, “you are making me a comedian against my will.”

These things, however, being duly inscribed against me, the more severe officer took up his parable. “The Grand Duke,” he said, “is clement, the Holy Office very patient, but there are bounds. The laws must in all cases be observed. In this case I suspect the worst. Pray, are you two living in sin?”

Virginia cried, “Oh, father!” and the fact was immediately inscribed; but now I was furious.

“You break all bounds—you who talk of bounds. You are an abominable man.”

The priest interposed his person and held up his fat hand. “These prevarications, this violence will not help you. It is idle to deny the evidence of our eyes, ears, understanding. You—a Venetian, a comedian! I assure you that you are in a very serious position..”

The landlord raised his hands and let them down with a clatter against his thighs. I was silent, Virginia alarmed, while the officers consulted together in low murmurs, and the priest filled up the rest of his forms out of his own head. Presently the tall Dominican addressed us over his spectacles as follows: “You have shown us no reasons whatsoever for believing a word that you say. Your denial of the relationship in which you obviously stand to one another is extremely flagrant. Nothing but your youth and the comparative candour of the female stand as your advocates. Thanks to them, and to them alone, we have decided to be more patient with you than your contumacy deserves. Pending further inquiries, which, I promise you, shall be made in Venice, you, young man, will be lodged with the Jesuit Fathers; and you, girl, who report yourself as of Siena, will be placed in charge of the nuns of SS. Maria e Giuseppe sul Prato until you can be safely returned to your nation. That, let me tell you, will not be until you have shown signs of a less hardened disposition. You will accompany us at once. The seal of the Inquisition shall be placed upon your effects, which seem trifling. The landlord is warned that he stands in danger of legal process.”

Thus were my unhappy prognostications speedily fulfilled! I was helpless and knew it. For a second time those whose dignified office it was to personify the charity of our Redeemer showed themselves the least charitable of mankind. I was chewing the sour cud of these reflections when I heard Virginia thanking the officers for their paternal resolves in her regard. Strange girl! She thanked Heaven, on her knees, for their pious mission, promised them remembrance in her prayers, asked to be allowed to kiss their

hands. This being permitted, was performed to my great disgust, who saw myself disbelieved because

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I had spoken the truth, and her believed because she had lied. But when she was allowed, as a grace, to bid me goodbye, and came to me and put her arms round my neck and kissed my cheeks, crying aloud, “Farewell, thou dear companion of my shame! Do well, fulfil the pious purposes of these fathers; be sure of me, sure of thyself!” and when I was about to reprove her smartly for her hypocrisy, she quickly whispered in my ear, “Did you read my falsehood? I am to be put where Aurelia will surely come. Courage—I will find her—trust your Virginia”—and filled me with confusion. I pressed her hands—the true friend that she was; for a moment she clung to me with passion. “Forget me not, my lord—pray for me—let me see you again!” Such were her sobbed and broken prayers—cut short by her unjust judges.

CHAPTER XX

SURPRISING CHANGE IN MY FORTUNES

Father Carnesecchi, of the Society of Jesus, who had charge of the penitents in the college of his Order, and to whom I was formally handed over by my indurate captor, was a member of an old family of Fiesole long settled in Florence, a thin, threadbare, humble old man, who kept his eyes fixed to the earth—sharply piercing, intelligent eyes as they could be—and did his best to keep his lips from speaking. He had a trick of pinching the lower of them, in the hope, I suppose, that the difficulty of using the upper one alone would hold him silent. But it did not. He talked to himself continually, the habit was inveterate, and as he never let go of his lower lip it was very difficult to catch what he said. He was a tall man, but stooped at the shoulders, threw his head forward like a long-necked bird, and nodded as he walked. Beside my Dominican monolith he looked, what he was far from being, abject and poor-witted. I thought that he bent his head, as if it weighed down to the earth under the pitiless blows rained upon it by the inquisitor, as without gesture or modulation of the voice, this monstrous man unwound his tale of my iniquities, which he had taken the trouble to spin, like a cocoon, all about my poor person. If he had twisted a halter of it to hang me with, I suspect that he had done what he truly desired.

Father Carnesecchi listened to it all in the dejected, musing pose which I have described, words of pity incessantly escaping from his partly imprisoned mouth: “Dio mio!” “Dio buono!” “Che peccato!” and the like, with fine shades of difference in expression according to the dark, the denser dark, the lurid flashes of the Dominican’s chiaroscuro. This hireling shepherd piled up a hideous indictment, made up, as the reader will perceive, out of his own wicked imagination. I was a runaway from the Venetian galleys, an actor of execrable life. I had seduced a Sienese nun in Padua, and brought her with me into Tuscany to sow contempt of the sacraments, and rebellion against the reigning house. I had openly advocated the worship

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of Priapus, had spurned the marriage vow, had called one of the reigning house a tyrant, and was an apologist of the Paterini. He concluded by saying that the Holy Office was deliberating upon my case, and that he could not invite the Jesuits to hope for my conversion, since I openly boasted of being a comedian, and of my preference for that deplorable way of life. The Holy Office asked that I might be kept apart from any whom my conversation might contaminate, and that my punishment should be exemplary as well as remedial. To all of which Father Carnesecchi replied, “Altto, altro, caro fratello,” and got rid of his monitor as soon as he could. I was not conscious that he had given me a single glance of the eye, did not suppose that he knew or cared whether I stood ashamed, sullen, indifferent or indignant under my accuser’s blows. Anger possessed me altogether, and if I thought of my new gaoler at all it was to suppose him seeing in me a subject, common in his experience, whose degrading punishment of stocks, whip or pillory was to be stuccoed over with a mockery of religion. Judge, therefore, of my surprise when, having bowed the inquisitor out of the door, Father Carnesecchi returned to the room, and putting his hand upon my shoulder, said in excellent English, and the tone of a loving parent, “And now, my poor boy, let me have the truth.” The unexpected kindness, the charity, the unexpected, beloved speech unnerved me. I flushed, stammered some foolish protest, burst into tears. The good Jesuit let my emotion have its fling.

Kneeling then at his knees, with my hands folded in his, I told him the whole of my story, hiding nothing at all, not even Virginia’s ruse for obtaining sight and speech with Aurelia, supposing her to be in the Sienese convent. Having laid bare every recess of my recent life, and not spared myself either in the recital, I went on to say that whatever might come of it, I must never abandon my search for the lovely, hapless, innocent Aurelia; for, as I assured him in conclusion, and undoubtedly believed, unless I found Aurelia and received her pardon, I should die; and there was no justice under Heaven if a man, sincerely repentant, were suffered to expire unredeemed.

“My son,” said Father Carnesecchi, who had nodded his way through an harangue which I had (I can assure the reader) treated very summarily indeed, “it was in a good hour that you were led to me; for I am in a position to be of service to you. I am no stranger to your country, nor indeed to your ancient house. Many times have I said Mass in that of your mother’s family—the noble house of Arundell. I shall be able, therefore, to make a good case for you with your resident at this Court; I can recommend you to a banker, I can extenuate (so far as truth will allow) your follies to your parents, and I can give you absolution when you have done a proper penance. All these things I will do, but on conditions. My first is that you write respectfully and penitently to your father; my next that you do the same duty to the outraged Professor Lanfranchi, and my third that you leave your Donna Aurelia to me. Am I clear?”
“Father,” I said, “you are as clear as the light of Heaven. I agree to all your conditions,

but shall beg of you one thing—and that is, that you do not prevent my seeing her once more.”

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“I prevent nothing reasonable,” replied the Jesuit; “but I will ask you this question. Has it ever occurred to you that as this lady never desired your ill-considered advances in the first place, so she may prefer to be without a renewal of them? It is possible that she is not greatly obliged to you for having turned her away from house and man.”

I was surprised, I confess, at his lack of discernment. I had hoped, I said, that I had made clear the one thing, above all, which I ardently desired, namely, Aurelia’s reconciliation with the doctor.

“And do you imagine,” said he, “that your seeing her will hasten that consummation?”

I said, “I cannot suppose that it will retard it. If a gentleman has offended a lady, should he not beg her pardon?”

“You are pitching your pipe in a more reasonable key, my son,” said the Jesuit. “I am glad you have left your sophistries, for to tell you the truth I have heard them so often that I have ceased to give them all the attention which their utterers expect. The less you see of your pretty lady the better, in my opinion. Have you given any consideration to what may be Dr. Lanfranchi’s opinions? He is likely to have strong ones, from what you tell me of him.”

I said that he had been monstrous unjust, to doubt Aurelia in the face of my action.

“I think your Aurelia lost her little head,” said he, “but no worse, I hope. Now, my child, let us have no more talking of inspiration, and wings, and healing fingers of ladies, and anointings. The Church is chary of deputing these powers, which she undoubtedly possesses; and few ladies are likely to receive them. At any rate, we may leave Donna Aurelia’s claims to them to the Sacred College, and turn to what is our own immediate concern. Now, come to me and make your confiteor as you ought.”

I have always been more quickly moved to good or evil by kindness than by severity, for by nature I am diffident to excess. Father Carnesecchi had found out that trait in my character, and proved me plastic under his delicate fingers. He did not refuse me the sacrament; he absolved me and comforted me greatly. It did not become me to be obstinate to one who gave me so much.

He undertook to accord the differences between Aurelia and her husband, if I on my part would give my word that no act of mine should endanger their future happiness. If I would bind myself here, he thought, there would be no harm in my seeing her, but he insisted that this should not be done without his express sanction. He said, “You are one of those young men of your nation—one of many, I conceive—who come into this country with your minds already made up as to what you will see. Because you are romantic, you see us so; because you are mystically inclined, you believe us to be a

race of seers; because you are complex natures, you complicate ours. Because our beauty is strange to you, you think us strangely

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beautiful. Alas! my dear young friend, you have yet to learn your Italians. There is no such Italy, least of all Tuscany, as you profess to have read of in Donna Aurelia's simple soul. I don't know the young lady, but I know her kind. She is undoubtedly a good-hearted, shrewd little housewife, careful of her reputation and honestly proud of it. She will make, I expect, a first-rate, if too fond, mother. You, of course, try to make a Beatrice of her, quite regardless of the possibility that you are not a Dante, or even a Diotima (which, thank Heaven, she is not yet), not remembering how far you are from being a Socrates. My dear young man, I shall not forbid you her society— subject, of course, to her own and her husband's judgment, which, I promise you, I shall obtain beforehand. Seek it then by all means, but seek it with circumspection. Remember that she will not thrive upon the fine poetry you will make of her—nor will you, indeed; but that is your own affair. Seek her, therefore, with reasonable care for her future. In two words, write to her husband, and for once deprive yourself of your luxurious mysteries, and go to work in the light of day. As for your Virginia—you have a fondness for female society, I fancy—don't trouble your head further with that little parasite."

His injunctions were obeyed, though I could not agree with all his conclusions. I wrote respectfully to my father, candidly to Dr. Lanfranchi; I wrote on my knees to Aurelia—-though, as I now know, Padre Carnesecchi put the letter into his pocket. Expiatory rites of a religious sort, wisely recommended and cheerfully performed, I omit from this narrative. At their end I was set entirely at liberty; and there seemed no limit to the benevolence of the Society of Jesus in my regard. Money, clothes, a servant were found for me, a lodging in the Piazza Santa Maria, introductions into the fashionable world. I took my own rank once more, I had tutors, books, leisure, the respect of my equals. I went to Court, was made a visiting member of the famous Delia Cruscan Academy; I was offered a box at the opera, a villa in the hills, a mistress. I made the acquaintance of Count Giraldi, a gentleman not only in the immediate service of the sovereign but high in the confidence of the heir-apparent, a man of the world, a traveller, affable, an abundant linguist, no mean philosopher, possessor of a cabinet of antiquities, a fine library, a band of musicians second to none in Florence. If ever a young man was placed square upon his feet again after a damaging fall it was I. For this much, at least, I render a solemn act of remembrance to the Society of Jesus, who must not be held responsible for the series of events which befell me next, and by which it came to pass that the cup of my fortunes went again and again to the bitter fountain of shame.

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I passed, I suppose, some six weeks without news, but not without hope, of Donna Aurelia; and I am ashamed to add that the pleasures and interests of the world obliterated in me those obligations of gratitude and honour which I owed to the friend of my misfortunes. But so I have always found it, that the more respect a man has from the world, the less he has to give it in return. It is as if, knowing his own worth too well, he was able to put a just estimate upon his tributary. I will only say in my defence that I knew Virginia to be safe from positive danger.

CHAPTER XXI

MY DIVERSIONS: COUNT GIRALDI

My new friend, as I must call him, since so he professed himself a dozen times a week, was Count Amadeo Giraldi, one of the three members of the Secret Cabinet of the Grand Duke, and the most influential and respectable of the three. He was a gentleman of some forty years, distinguished in presence and address, of suave manners and a cynicism past praying for. This tainted philosophic habit had permeated him to the soul, so that, not only was he naturally a sceptic in matters of received opinion, but found a perverse relish in his own misfortune, until he was become, indeed, sceptical of scepticism, and found himself, at times, in real danger of proving a sincere Christian.

So strange a result of philosophy, reacting upon itself, however, did not disturb his serenity, but, on the contrary, added to his diversions; for he confessed that his highest pleasure in this life was to discover fresh follies of which he could be capable. He considered himself as an inexhaustible quarry of humours, vanities, jealousies, whims, absurd enthusiasms, absurd mortifications. He was able, as he said, to sit at his ease in the side-scene and see himself jigging on the stage in motley or the tragic sock—see himself as a lover, and cry aloud in delight at the mad persistence of the fool he appeared; see himself directing the affairs of the nation, and be ready to die of laughing at himself for pretending to be serious, and at his countrymen for thinking him so. He loved art and spent large sums upon his collection; yet, said he, “I should grudge the money for other occasions did it not furnish me with the entrancing spectacle of a middle-aged statesman panting after masterpieces, fingering this or that painted board, and staking his position in this world and the next upon the momentous question, Is this ear in the manner of Fra Angelico? or, Could Mantegna have so foreshortened a leg? I tell you, Don Francis, there is no more outrageous comedy, no more fantastic extravaganza playing in Venice at this hour than every moment of my own life can furnish me with. What! I hold in my hand the destinies of a million of souls, and the iron enters into mine—not because those others are in danger, not because those others are enslaved—no! but because at Donna Violante’s

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card-table the Marchesa Serafina disregards my call for trumps! I rise up from my escritoire, where lie papers of State—a threat from the King of Spain, declaration of war from the Emperor, a petition of right from some poor devil who has been shamefully used by one of my Ministers; I rise, I say, and leave them lying—and for what? To dangle at some faded opera, which I have heard a thousand times, behind the chair of some fine lady whose person I could possess (if I wanted it) for the writing of a billet. Is it not incredible? But there is more to come. My future master, the Grand Prince, is more of a fool than I am, because he doesn't know it. Yet I read more consequence out of some petulant freak of his than from all the despair of a nation starving to death; and I know very well which would disturb my department the more effectually— whether it would be a revolution or his being late for Mass. Is not this a humorous state of affairs? Does not this tickle your sense of the ridiculous? I assure you I have never regretted for a moment my having been involved in the business of the State. I can laugh at myself day in and day out."

The whimsicality of this kind of talk robbed it of its sting; but what is really curious about the count was that he was perfectly serious.

He gave the princes—both him who reigned and him who hoped to reign— very bad characters, but said that for purposes of government he preferred a vicious to a bigoted fool. The first, he said, will be ruled by minions, who can be paid. This makes administration a simple matter of finance. The second sort of princes are ruled by the frati, who pay themselves. The distinction is material. "The Grand Duke Cosimo," he said on another occasion, "is living of fright." "Do you not mean dying of it?" I asked him. "No," said he, "he is living of it. The frati have been at him for years; and now he is so terrified lest he may make a bad death that he has forgotten to die at all. But, of course, his fears will wear out in time, and then he will perish like any ordinary man of sense. As for my future master, Don Gastone, he will live just so long as his zest for iniquity endures. When, like some Alexander of the stews, he has no more vices to conquer, he will die of ennui. It is surprising how few are the changes you can ring upon the human appetite. Gluttony, drunkenness—"

"Spare me the catalogue, count," I begged him.

"I was enumerating for my own convenience," he said, "as I frequently do, to see if I cannot discover one new variety. Don Gastone has not yet exhausted acquisition. He has become a numismatist, and ploughed up a populous village the other day in the search for a penny of Charlemagne's, supposed to have been dropped there in passing. Then there is horticulture—which is one of my own vices; and, of course, I do not forget piety; but things are not so bad as that just yet. It is important that he should survive his father, because he is the last of the line of Medici, and I foresee troubles ahead. We shall have an Austrian prince who will make soldiers of us, or a revolution,

when our throats will be cut. An unpleasant alternative—to kill or be killed!" With these and similar reflections he now dazzled and now depressed, but always interested me.

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Count Giraldi had three palaces in or near Florence, or rather, he had four. He himself occupied the great house of his race, the Palazzo Giraldi, a magnificent pile, built by Muchelozzo, on the Lung' Arno. The Villa Felice, also, on the hillside below Fiesole was reserved for himself and his friends. His wife, a frigid, devout, elderly lady, had her own establishment, the splendid Palazzo Manfredi, in Oltr' Arno, and received him with great ceremony once a week for an hour in the afternoon. Never, so long as I had any familiarity with the count, did she set foot in either of his houses; but he always spoke of her with great respect as the only person of his acquaintance who had never provided him with matter for amusement. The fourth, of which I have spoken, was smaller than any, but the most elegant of all. That, too, was over Arno, in a retired street near the Porta San Giorgio, but within a garden of its own which withdrew it yet more from observation or annoyance. I call it his, since he assured me of it at a later day; but at this time I knew it as in the occupation of the Contessa Giulia Galluzzo, a charming lady, charming hostess, centre and inspiration of a charming circle. The count took me with him, very soon after we had become intimate, to wait upon her; she received me with all possible favour. I never failed of attending her assemblies, never found her otherwise than amiable, nor her circle than varied and entertaining. Without suspecting in the least how Count Giraldi really stood with regard to her, I could see that he was free of the house. She called him "Caro amico," and paid great deference to his opinions. He, on his side, addressed her as "Madonna," was tender without being impresse, alert without seeming to be so, and whether he intended to take her advice or not, never failed to pay her the compliment of asking it. I am thus particular in speaking of these things for reasons which will shortly appear.

In the Villa San Giorgio, most of all in the society of its graceful chatelaine, I had my fill of poetry and the other ornamental arts. Wit, love, philosophy, literature, bric-a-brac, religion—each had its petit-maitre, and each its sparkling Muse. It was before the day of Arcadia and shepherdesses, those flowers of our more jaded years; women were still called divine, but it was very possible, or we used to think it so, to discuss matters which you did not understand, and express sentiments which you did not feel without the prop of a crook, or garters of blue ribbon. At my impressionable age, with my impressionable habit, I took kindly to all this; I discussed love with Donna Giulia, and puzzled her sadly; I expressed my feelings upon religion to the Abbe Loisic, the count's bookbinder, and bored him to extinction. One day I was presented to a tall cadaverous gentleman with red eyelashes and eyes so pale as to seem almost white. I had a suspicion that I had seen him in some former existence,

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and so soon as the name of the Marchese Semifonte was mentioned, remembered Prato with horror. The marchese may well have thought me reserved, for it is true that I could barely be civil to him. He argued from that, as I learned afterwards from Donna Giulia, that I was of a ducal family, and in proportion as I froze, so did he thaw. As I receded, so did he advance. He pressed invitations upon me, all of which I could not decline; it was proper that I should offer him some hospitality in return—and I did. He supped with me once or twice in my lodgings, lost money to me at cards and so had some grounds for believing himself "my friend." Presuming upon this, he was not long in discovering himself to me for the monomaniac he was, one of those miserable men devoured by a passion which may lift us to the stars or souse us in the deepest slime of the pit. He made proposals to me, tentatively at first, then with increasing fervency, at last with importunity which would have wearied me inexpressibly if it had not disgusted me beyond endurance—proposals, I mean, to share his depraved excursions. Outraged as I was, loathing the man (as I had good reason) from the bottom of my heart, I was driven to confide in Count Giraldi something of my knowledge of him. I had the good sense, it is true, to withhold the fact that Virginia, his intended victim, was in Florence; but that is the extent of my prudence. It might have served me, but for the accident which I must relate in the next chapter.

CHAPTER XXII

I WORK FOR AURELIA, AND HEAR OF HER

It was to the sympathetic ears of Donna Giulia, first of all, that I imparted the state of my feelings, my hopes, fears and prayers with regard to Aurelia. There was that about Count Giraldi, a diamantine brilliancy, a something hard and crystalline, a positiveness, an incisiveness of view and reflection, which on first acquaintance decided me not to take him into my confidence. When I came to know him better, or to think that I did, I followed my natural bent and talked to him unreservedly; but in the lady, from the beginning, I found a very interested listener. She led me on from stage to stage of my story until she had it all, and gave me the sum of her thoughts freely and with candour. "I agree with you, Don Francis," she said, "that your lady will be in Florence before long. A wounded bird makes straight for the nest, and only puts into a thicket on the way to recover itself for the longer flight. You will have to make the most of your time here, for I do not believe that even your eloquence—and you are most eloquent—will hold her from her mother's arms, as things are now. You will be sure to follow her to Siena, and can there make your arrangements at ease."

"My arrangements, dear madam, are very simple," said I. "Pardon is all I ask, and leave to serve her. She may give me these in Florence as well as in Siena."

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“Pardon you may be certain of,” said Donna Giulia.

“What has she to pardon you but the fact that you admired her, and told her so? I assure you we don’t think that an irremediable sin in Italy. Permission to serve her, in other words, permission to prove your admiration by deeds (not words), is another affair. She will certainly wish to consult her mother about that.”

“Her husband too, madam,” said I; “this is the real difficulty of the case.” She gave me a queer look.

“It is unusual to consult the husband,” she said. “It puts him in a difficult position.”

“It is my fault,” said I ruefully, “that he has been put there already.”

“Undoubtedly it is,” returned Donna Giulia. “You should have remained in the cupboard. Why, the fact that she put you there is proof of that. She has given you all possible encouragement.”

I said no more on the subject just then, but a few days afterwards, being out with the count on horseback, he himself spoke to me about my business, frankly owning that it was none of his. “Donna Giulia mentioned it to me in secrecy,” he said, “in the charitable hope that I might be of use to you. Need I say that all my abilities are at your service in an affair of the sort? I have had a good deal of experience: are you inclined to make use of me? Let me add, that if you are not, I am discretion itself. I shall understand your reticence, and even take it as a compliment; for if you think I am not the kind of man whom you would care to interest in your mistress, it will be a gratifying proof that I am younger than I venture to think myself.”

My reply to this frankly stated case was to put before him the tale of the fair Aurelia, the cupboard and the pilgrimage of penitence. Count Giraldi, greatly to his credit, listened without the alteration of a muscle, and expressed at the close of my blushing narrative his convictions that Aurelia must be a charming lady, and that I should prove an equally charming damerino when I had learned the rules of the game, “One of which,” he added with mock severity, “One of which is that while the husband must know everything, he is to be told nothing. To break that rule is to outrage society.” It may be that something of bewilderment and pain upon my face told him that he had overstepped his path. He changed the conversation rapidly, encouraged me to talk of Aurelia’s perfections and of my own shortcomings as I would, reserving, no doubt, his private view of each; and ended the conversation by promising me to put all his interest at my service. “I will do what I can, and welcome,” he said. “I will make friends with the doctor, and perhaps find a place for him under this Government; I will introduce the doctor’s wife to Donna Giulia, and listen to your reading of your poetry at least as readily as she will. More, I will make you acquainted with my personal bookbinder, the Abbe Loisic, a truly great virtuoso. If Donna Aurelia won’t

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accept your sonnets in the dress of his providing, you may give up the case as hopeless. In a word, my dear Francis," he said laughing, "there shall be only one thing wanting to complete your felicity, and even that I may be able to afford you. You will have your mistress at hand, her husband accommodated, and will only need a rival, it seems to me, to stimulate you to a pleasant exertion of your powers. There ought not to be much difficulty in finding one in Florence." He was silent awhile, then said, as if musing on the absurdity, "Semifonte, for example!" I begged him not to mention that man.

The weeks passed thus pleasantly for me, and I was wafted from winter into the fragrant chambers of spring before I was aware. On the morning of April 23, as I was sitting in my lodging, drinking my chocolate, I received a letter from Father Carnesecchi, saying that Aurelia was in Florence; and while I was still standing in ferment with his note shaking in my hand, Virginia burst into my room, fell at my feet, clasped me by the knees. "Master, news, news!" she cried, and kissed my hands with passion.

CHAPTER XXIII

AURELIA FORGIVES

The mingling of emotions, like that of two waters, may produce a volume whose direction cannot be calculated by any previous knowledge of the separate streams. In my case, just described, the reader has seen that while my heart was still palpitating at the news of the recovery of a mistress, it was to be shaken anew by the sight of a dear friend. Two sorts of joy met and blended their forces within me; their issue in one turbulent flood, which I should have thought to see heading to Aurelia at the convent, instead of that poured themselves upon the bosom of Virginia. I raised her from my knees where, upon her own, she was clinging, and clasped her in my arms. I was, indeed, happy to see her again, and so much so that I forgot entirely that I had only myself to blame for our long separation. For the first time in our lives our lips met.

But if I was moved, what is to be said of her? I can hardly express the painful scene which followed. She lost all control of her senses; she clung to me as if I had been a spar in some stormy sea wherein she drowned; she uttered incoherent cries, she gasped, sobbed, was clean distraught. When I held her, when I kissed her, she struggled like a caught bird, fought furiously, used her teeth, her nails. And yet all the time she was caressing me with every diminutive, every sweet term of love which the most passionate people in the world can find as expression of their love-thoughts. She stroked my cheeks, hair and shoulders, crooned over me like a brooding dove, held me so straitly that I was near choking; or with tragic mouth and eyes of sombre fire she

adjured me to kill her there and then, lest any subsequent moment of her life might be less full of bliss than the present.

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I know that my fancy was inflamed, and suspect that my senses—from whose occasional dominion I was no more free than most men—must have sprung into flame from this dangerous contact, had it not been that her excessive joy induced an attack of hysterics. For a time she was like a madwoman, beyond all human power; and she ended by fainting in my arms, and had to be carried by myself and Scipione, my servant, to a bed. There she lay moaning and muttering to herself for an hour or more. It may be imagined whether all this tended to calm my own agitation or to turn my thoughts towards that road whereby alone honour and salvation could be reached. I could not go out to see Aurelia; I could hardly even think of Aurelia while Virginia lay in my house with closed eyes, clenched hands and shuddering breath. I left Scipione in charge of her, and returned to my saloon, to pace the floor until he brought me word that she could be spoken with. This he did not do for some hours.

He came in at last, shaking his head. “That is a bad case, sir—porca miseria!” says he.

I hoped that she was better.

“She’s ashamed of herself, sir,” he said, “as well she may be. What a scandal, my word! But these baggages have no modesty.”

The term offended me. I told him he was talking nonsense. “She is a true friend,” I said, “whose sympathy may be excessive; but to take joy in my joy is the act of a friend.”

Scipione saluted me. “Sir, if her joy is your honour’s, I have no more to say. A gentleman is entitled to his pleasures, I hope. And she is a handsome girl, though she is thin.”

“That will do, my man,” said I. “You say that she is better.”

“She is as well, sir, as she deserves,” replied this assured fellow, “but she is mad.”

“Mad!” I cried.

“Why, yes, sir,” says he. “Judge for yourself. Here is a girl frying in love, wanting to tell your honour that another is yours for the asking.” He angered me by this freedom—-which I can assure the reader is not uncommon in this country—and I dismissed him with a few directions. I said that I must go out at once and was uncertain when I should return. Meantime Virginia was to have every care, and was to be provided with—among other things—suitable clothes for one in the position of a house-servant. Those in which she had made her sudden appearance before me were obviously peculiar to the convent in which she worked, and to her standing there. I left some money with Scipione and went out.

Perhaps it had been better to have interrogated Virginia before taking the step I now took, and so I should have done had I not been rather disturbed in my mind, first, by my own pleasure at seeing her again— which I now considered to have been disloyal to Aurelia—and next, by Scipione's account of her state of heart. Virginia in love with me! This was not the first time I had suspected it; but, reflecting upon our meeting, I was not able to deny that she

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had been very much moved. Now, should it be true, I thought to myself, what on earth was I to do? What, indeed, were the *merits* of the case? Was the fault mine—and how could I best repair it? These questions were beyond my then powers of resolution while I was uncertain of Aurelia's fate and prospects, and I deliberately put them aside. I turned all my powers of mind and heart to consider her injuries, probable sufferings and monstrous humiliations, and by the time I was near the Convent of SS. Maria e Giuseppe I was trembling in every limb, and in the state of apprehension and desire which becomes the devout lover of a lady incredibly lovely and wise.

I approached the shabby gate, and with uncovered head saluted the posts which held it up. I rang the bell, the portress appeared; I asked her for my mistress by name; she said that she would take up mine to the Lady Superior if my lordship would be pleased to wait. Then she disappeared, and my lordship stood fainting there.

Father Carnesecchi, I perceived, was with Aurelia; for the note brought back by the portress was all in his handwriting but the signature. The initials A. L. were in her own. She said, or the respectable Jesuit said for her, that she was highly sensible of my courtesy in waiting upon her, and deplored that, as she was somewhat fatigued and about to return to Padua, it was impossible for her to receive me at the moment. She hoped on a future occasion to find suitable expression of her feelings, and begged in the meantime to assure me of her entire respect.

At any other time I might have been chilled by the studious repression of this note; but at that moment I had but one aim. Begging the portress to wait, I tore a leaf from my pocket-book, wrote upon it, "Madam, forgive the wicked F. S.," and gave it over to the good nun. "I beg of you, my sister, to give this note into the hands of Donna Aurelia," I said. "It touches on a matter of the utmost consequence to me." She agreed, with an indulgent and somewhat intelligent smile, and retired once more. In half the time she came back with a little twisted note. "I hope that I can please you this time, sir," she said. "At any rate you may be sure of your correspondent, for Donna Aurelia wrote every word of it." There were but three words, "Si, si, si—Aurelia," I read, and turning my face to the Heavens, thanked God that I was absolved by the dear subject of my crimes.

Transformed, indeed, I trod upon air between the Prato and the Palazzo Giraldi. I was told that his Excellency was visiting the Contessa Galluzzo. I sailed, I soared, I flashed over Arno and into the house at the Porta San Giorgio. "Absolved! Absolved!" I cried, and kissed Donna Giulia's hand. The count pressed mine very warmly.

"Either the Church," said he, "has gained in you a remarkable champion, or the world lost a promising scoundrel. I had not suspected you of such a load of sin." I showed my precious paper and commented upon it with rapture.

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“Count,” I said in conclusion, “a truce to your sallies. Confess my Aurelia a pattern among ladies. What modesty! What clemency! What divine compassion! It is too much grace; it is dangerous; it tempts one to sin again.” At the time of utterance I undoubtedly believed what I said.

“I am of your opinion,” said the count. “I fancy that the lady is very ready to forgive you. I speak for myself when I say that I shall do everything in my power to assist her.”

“Speak also for me, caro mio,” said Donna Giulia. “I will wait upon Donna Aurelia as soon as may be. She will be better here than in the tiresome convent. I shall invite her to pay me a visit, which I hope,” she added with a smile, “will not deprive us of the society of Don Francis.” I warmly thanked my friends and took my leave.

CHAPTER XXIV

VIRGINIA VEXES

On returning to my house I ended a day of agitation by an interview with Virginia. I found her in an abject way, scarcely able to speak, and very unwilling to raise her eyes. She was dressed, and perfectly composed, and said what she had to say in a tone deliberately dry. “I ask your lordship’s pardon,” she began at once, “for the tempest I raised in your house. I ask it on my knees. I forgot myself; I lost myself. I have not seen your lordship for many months.”

I begged her to allude to it no more. I myself had been glad to see her, I said.

She looked up quickly—only for a moment—and showed a hint of her former fire. “I think that you were—I did think so,” she said; then checked herself and was silent.

“There is no doubt about it,” said I, “therefore let nothing disturb you. Take your time and tell me your news. You have seen—you have heard——”

“Yes, yes,” she said, “I have seen your Aurelia. She came to our convent a week ago in a chaise and pair.”

This startled me—a week ago!

“I should have told you before if I could,” she continued, “but they keep us close, us penitents. I have run away; I could not bear that you should remain ignorant. If they find me they will beat me to death.”

I assured her of my protection and returned to the subject of Aurelia. How, I asked, had she come? Had she been ill—in distress?

“Not at all,” said Virginia. “She was elegantly dressed. She was protected by an old woman. She wore a mask and a travelling hood, and went into the nuns’ parlour. She asked for a cup of chocolate, which was brought her. I saw her in the chapel at the office.”

How often had I seen her so—my saint on her knees!

“She was on her knees—yes,” said Virginia, “but she yawned very much. She did not rise till noon on the next morning.”

I clasped my friend’s hand. “Oh, Virginia, you have seen her!” I cried. “You help me to see her. Is she not perfection?”

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Virginia was rather cool. “Who knows?” she said, shrugging, “she is like all Sienese women. She is fatter than I am. I allow her shape. But she is not near so tall. She is a little thing. She wears her clothes well. And she is merry enough when she has her tongue.” I could afford to smile at this grudging admiration. “My dear girl,” I said, “you little know her—but how should you? Tell me more. Did you speak to her?” She nodded her head and told her story. “I waited my time. I was washing the canon’s linen in the little cloister. That was my job, week in and week out. She came through. She was scolding her old woman. I followed her round the cloister, and when the coast was clear, said, ‘Hist, Madonna.’ She turned and looked at me with her eyes wide open. They are handsome eyes for a Sienese woman. That I allow. She said, ‘Do you call me?’ Says I, ‘I do.’ She says, ‘Well?’ I reply, ‘He is well if you are.’ ’Who, then?’ says she. I say, ‘Your lover.’ This makes her jump like a flea on the bed. But she brazens it out finely, turning to her old crone with a ‘What does the girl mean?’ Bless you, *they* knew well enough. I folded my arms—so; I said, ’He has walked the stony hills barefoot to find you. He will be out of his skin, standing on his head, to know you are here.’ She stamped her foot and flew into a passion. ‘How dare you?’ she cries out. ‘Tell me of whom you are talking this rubbish.’ I nodded my head many times—so—and said, ‘You are lucky to have him so fast.’ She went away. After that she never passed me without tossing her head; and presently I ran away.” I was greatly perturbed by this tale of hers, and not unreasonably angry. I said, “Unhappy girl! you little know the harm you have done. Have I instructed you so badly in myself that you can think to serve me by your servant-girl mysteries and your nods and winks? I enjoin you to leave my affairs absolutely alone. You are to tell me no more, speak of me no more, see Donna Aurelia no more. Since you have left the convent and are in danger of punishment, you must, of course, stay here. You must be properly clothed and looked after. I will see to that. Now recover yourself, and remember what I have said.” I was almost immediately sorry for my plain speaking; she was in extreme misery, I could see. Tears streamed through her fingers, her body was convulsed with grief. More than once she seemed upon the point of lashing out at me with some furious blast of indignation; but she always checked it, as it seemed, when it was at the edge of her lips. Unthinking fool that I was! I little knew or guessed what she had endured at the convent for my sake; how, treated as a sinful woman, she had been the object of hard judgment and undeserved reproach—preached at, prayed over, lectured, scolded, made a slave of; how she had loved me and believed in me through all; and how, unable to bear her lot, coming to me at last, I had proved the most cruel of her oppressors—and

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precisely the most cruel because, from me, she deserved the least reproach. However, I must not extenuate myself, nor forestall my history. I begged her pardon for my severity and obtained her ready forgiveness. From that hour forward she kept herself apart from me as my servant, having arranged for her share of his duties with Scipione; and she never by word or look recalled the time when a much closer intimacy had existed between us.

One disturbing incident in my affairs with her must be mentioned in this place, although it did not occur until I had twice waited upon Donna Aurelia. It was indeed upon my return from the second of those visits that Scipione came into the room after me with some secret or another which he itched, evidently, to impart to me. After some hesitation, he asked leave to exhibit Virginia to me, dressed, said he, according to the best of his ability as such a fine girl should be dressed. I nodded my head—having little attention to give him just then—and he presently returned, leading Virginia by the hand.

“There, sir,” said the jaunty rogue. “Now perhaps your honour will say that she is worth looking at.” I stared at Virginia, who coloured finely, and hung her head.

I must say that, preoccupied as I was, I was astonished at what I saw. He had transformed her by some means out of a sulky and dejected penitent into a young woman of noble appearance and refined beauty. I had seen that transformation once before—at Prato; but here was a more mature and assured fine lady. She wore her hair over a cushion, a handsome dress of yellow and white brocade upon a quilted petticoat, silk stockings, and high-heeled shoes. Not only were the clothes fine of their kind and well fitted to her person, but she wore them surprisingly well; their colour set off her clear, chiselled and dark beauty; and that, as if stung by the rivalry, came fiercely out to meet them. The joy and pride of battle tingled in her cheeks and shone in her eyes. She was of that aquiline, keen type of feature which we are accustomed to call patrician. She looked at once superb and secure, at once eager to contend and sure of the prize. It may have been that, as her name of Strozzi implied, she was a scion of that noble house, sunk by no faults of her own in servitude and obscurity; suffice it to say that she was strikingly handsome and perfectly aware of it. I was too much astonished to be angry with Scipione, as I might reasonably have been. Nor could I have had the heart, I acknowledge, to have dashed her natural pleasure at her success by any abrupt expression of annoyance. I said, “Why, Virginia, you are become a fine lady!” She stepped quickly forward, knelt, and kissed my hand—an act of humility which touched me.

“Sir,” said Scipione, “I told you that she had the makings. Your honour can do as you please now, and nobody have a word to say. I can assure you that the count lost his breath and his heart at once when he saw her.”

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“The count!” I cried; and he told me that Count Giraldi had called for me that afternoon and had entertained himself greatly with Virginia.

I sent Scipione away. It was necessary to know more of this. The moment he was out of the room I asked her what had brought about this masquerade of hers. She said timidly that Scipione had a sister who was woman to a great lady. This person had several times been in to see her brother, and this dress was of her providing. She said that they had teased her about her appearance at Prato, where Scipione’s sister had seen her, it appears, and had dared to prove to them that she was indeed that handsome lady with whom I had been observed. She hoped I should not take it amiss, or be angry with “my servant,” by which she meant herself. I assured her that I was not at all angry—which was true, and then begged her to tell me what the count had wanted. She said he had called to leave me a message—an invitation to dine, I think—-and that Scipione, maliciously or ingenuously, had shown him into the room where she was queening it in her borrowed finery.

I guessed there was more. “What had his Excellency to say on your account, my child?” I asked her.

“He thought at first that I was what I seemed, and was most gallant,” she replied, to my consternation. “I told him, however, that he was very much mistaken, that I was a poor girl and your servant, playing as I should not. This tickled his Excellency—or so it appeared.”

“And he said—what, Virginia?” I was careful to hide from her my discomfort over this foolish business.

Virginia, with what I am sure was perfect innocence of any evil, said, “He was most kind. He praised my looks, and vowed that you were happily served.”

“And so I am,” I said rather ruefully. “He was right. What next?”

“Next, sir,” said this strange girl, “he praised my figure, which he thought was mightily becoming this gown.”

“Well, well, and he was right,” I admitted. “But did he say nothing more?”

Virginia would not look at me, but I caught the words, “He said that he envied you the arrangements of your household.”

“Well?” I asked her.

“And he said that he was sure I was as good as I was good-looking, and gave your honour every satisfaction. And then he gave me a gold piece and a salutation and was going away, when——”

“Well, well? Let me have the whole story.”

“I shall vex you—but not more than I was vexed, I assure you. No harm had been done—for you don’t suppose that I wanted his money, serving your honour. But just as he was going out what must that daughter of mischief—Scipione’s sister—do but blurt out that she had seen me with your honour not near so well dressed at the fair at Prato. The count started and looked very much intrigued. He asked me a score of questions—artfully, you may be sure, as if to idle away the time. But I told him nothing at all, and he presently was tired of working a dry pump. He took his leave, and that Sataness went with him. God knows what she knows! If I come within distance of her I shall drag her tongue out of her throat, I promise you.”

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I told her not to trouble herself with what could not be helped. I did not see how she could be blamed, and after all the count was my friend and a man of honour. But I relieved my feelings by bestowing upon Master Scipione one of the handsomest drubbings his oily skin had ever received. I little knew then how richly he deserved it; but I found out before long, and then if I could have killed him I am sure I would have done it.

CHAPTER XXV

I PREPARE FOR BLISS

I must return to the natural order of my history, and relate my first interview with Aurelia in order that I may prepare the reader for the last. It was brought about by Father Carnesecchi, to whom I applied for it after my visit to the convent and reception of the note of forgiveness. I had a great respect for the good man, and owed him much for his kindness to me in my hour of need, but, as I never had the knack of concealing my feelings, I could not help showing him, I suppose, that I was aware that my mistress had been a week in Florence without my suspecting it. If I had thought to confuse him by any such reproach— which I had not—I should have been quickly undeceived.

Father Carnesecchi at once admitted that he had withheld, for what seemed very proper reasons, the fact of Aurelia's arrival. "The poor little lady," he said, "when she had recovered from fatigues which (without being harsh), I must say, were not brought upon her entirely unassisted, developed a very becoming and dutiful state of the soul. I have seldom been more hopeful of a case of conscience. But it is a sensitive plant, the soul of a young and naturally amiable girl; rough blasts may bruise it; even excessive nurture may cause an exuberance of growth and weaken the roots. I do not doubt your real repentance, my Francis—Heaven forbid it me, but I confess I do gravely doubt the expediency of your assuring Donna Aurelia of it otherwise than by a letter which I shall willingly convey to her. May I ask you now—since I stand to you in loco parentis; yes, yes, in loco parentis—how it was that you became acquainted with the fact of her having been a week in the Sienese convent?"

I told him the truth; and if the father was vexed he was not surprised.

"Beware," he said, "of that little parasite. You have a dangerous liking for female society, as I have told you before. Of your two intimacies, I much prefer that of Donna Aurelia for you. There, now, is a girl naturaliter Christiana—but that is characteristic of her nation: the elect city of Mary, indeed, as the pious Gigli has observed in a large volume. Come," he said suddenly, "come, Francis, I will take you to see Donna Aurelia this moment. There shall be no drawbacks to our mutual affection. What do you say?"

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I stammered my thanks, shed tears and kissed my director's hands. The acts of the next half-hour were done to a wild and piercing music. I could scarcely breathe, let alone think or speak. I was swept along the streets, I achieved the portal, I achieved the parlour. Pictures of saints, wholly Sienese, reeled from the walls: a great white crucifix dipped and dazzled. Father Carnesecchi, after a time of shrill suspense, came in to fetch me, took me tottering up the stairs. My heart stood still; but the door was open. I blundered in, I saw her again—her lovely childish head, her innocent smile, her melting eyes, her colour of pale rose, her bounty, her fragrance, her exquisite, mysterious charm! Blushes made her divine; she curtseyed deeply to me; I fell upon my knee; and Count Giraldi rose from his seat and performed a graceful salute.

She told me that she freely forgave me an indiscretion natural to my youth and position, whose consequences, moreover, could not have been foreseen by either of us. She said that she was about to return to her husband, who would probably come to Florence to meet her—and she added that she hoped I should resume my studies at the university, and in serious preparation for the future obliterate all traces of the past. At these words, which I am inclined to fancy had been got by rote, she sighed and looked down. I promised her entire obedience in every particular, and growing bolder by her timidity, said that, with the doctor's permission, I should wait upon her at her convenience. Aurelia pressed me to come; and then told me that, thanks to the benevolence of Donna Giulia conveyed to her by the excellency of Count Giraldi, my visit might be made at the Villa San Giorgio at her ladyship's next reception. "I believe, Don Francis, that you know the way thither," she said. Very much affected, I kissed her hand again, and Father Carnesecchi, suggesting that she might be fatigued, took me away. My next visit to her was paid at the Villa San Giorgio, and on that occasion I saw her alone. Count Giraldi was, in fact, at that very hour, engaged with Virginia in my lodgings.

This time I was neither ridiculous nor thought to be so. My lady came into the saloon where I was and ran towards me, begging me not to kneel to her. She resumed for that happy moment at least her old part of guardian angel, sat on the couch by my side, and looking kindly at me from her beautiful eyes, said in the easiest way, "I see very well that you have not been cared for so well in Florence as in Padua. Now you are to be your good and obedient self again and do everything I tell you."

I murmured my long-meditated prayer for forgiveness, making a sad botch of its periods. She put her hand over my mouth.

"Not a word of that hateful affair," she said firmly. "You were absurd, of course, and I was to blame for allowing it; but I could not be angry with such a perfect little poet, and that monster should have known with whom he had to deal. He knows it now, I believe. He knows that a Gualandi of Siena is not at the beck and call of a pig of Padua. When he comes here, he will come in his right senses, you will see."

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I begged her to tell me her story; but she said there was little to tell. She had not left Padua, as I had supposed, but had stayed with friends of hers in the hope that what she called the pazzeria of the doctor would be blown away. Finding that he was obstinate, she had gone to Modena, where she lived for a while as companion to an ancient lady, who became very fond of her. It needed, indeed, a convenient bronchitis to give her her liberty again. When this occurred she found herself provided with a pretty legacy—-enough to make her independent of the doctor, but at the same time more necessary to his happiness. She had intended, she said, for Siena; but the hospitality of Donna Giulia was pressed upon her, and the good services of the count were freely hers. There was talk of a judgeship for her husband; she would see how events turned about before she made any plans. "And you, Francis," she continued, "are not to be ridiculous any more, nor wander about without shoes, nor consort with rubbish any more. You are to go back to your studies and your books, and take your degree. You are to say good-bye to Aurelia as soon as you are well enough, and forget that you ever knew her, if you can."

"If I forget you, Aurelia, I shall forget Heaven," I said.

"We will talk about Heaven another time," said Aurelia. "Who was that saucy girl I met at the convent, who seemed to know all about you?"

I told her Virginia's story exactly. She said, "The piece is madly in love with you." I assured her that she was mistaken, but she shook her head, then nodded it many times. "Certainly, certainly she is in love with you," and after a pause—"and I don't wonder. You have greatly improved, Francis."

To this I said that nothing was further from my thoughts than to do Virginia any harm. I promised to marry her to my man Scipione as soon as possible, since protection of some sort was necessary to a bondswoman who had run away from the land to which she belonged. Aurelia heard me thoughtfully, tapping her little foot on the floor in that quick, impatient way I loved so well in her. "Marry her—yes," she said, "that will be only prudent on your part. Well! it is not for me to quarrel with you—but—" she shrugged and went on quickly—"Oh, I don't deny that the wench is well enough in her broomstick way!" she cried out.

I said, No, she looked very well when she was dressed. This was an unlucky speech.

"So I have understood, sir," cried Aurelia, breathing fast. "I hear that you were seen with her at Prato; that she was dressed in silk and a hoop, and had her hair on a cushion, and I dare say a fan, of the afternoons. And you think her very well? So—so—so!" My beloved Aurelia had tears in her eyes—one dropped and lay upon her bosom. I fell on my knees before her and would have kissed her foot, but she sprang from me, and went quickly out of the room.

I was left alone in the greatest agitation. It was the recollection of this scene which troubled me when, returning to my lodging, I found Virginia again in masquerade.

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CHAPTER XXVI

I DISAPPOINT MY FRIENDS

My forebodings were more than fulfilled. The next time, which was at a week's interval, that I presented myself at the Villa San Giorgio, Donna Aurelia, in full reception, turned her back upon me and left the room in company of the Marchese Semifonte. I suffered the indignity as best I might—I did not quit the company; nobody, I flatter myself, knew what pangs of mortification I was feeling. I saw no more of Aurelia that evening, and a conversation which I had with Donna Giulia made matters no better. She spoke to me very plainly and with some warmth.

"Here you had, but a few days ago, your mistress in a most promising humour," she said, "detesting her doctor, yet resolved to have him back in order to give you a countenance. In Count Giraldi and myself you have, I take leave to say, two of the most complaisant friends in Europe; yet what are you doing? You maintain, for reasons best known to yourself, a pretty girl in your lodgings, pranked out in silks and furbelows—a runaway from a house of discipline—and (if it is all true that they tell me) one who, if she belongs to anybody, dare not belong, certainly, to you. Really, Don Francis, you are exorbitant. Pray, do you propose to us to keep Aurelia here in order that she may listen to your poetry, and then to return from your intellectual feast to the arms of your little peasant? And Aurelia is to know it and acquiesce? Good heavens! do you know that she is young, fresh, and charming, and of Siena? I ask your pardon, Don Francis—but oh, my perverse young friend, why on earth don't you take her?"

"Dearest lady!" I cried out, "what under Heaven am I to take? I adore Aurelia; I ask nothing better than leave to serve her, to kneel at her feet. If she is cruel to me, that is my pride. If she is kind, that is my humiliation. If she were to kill me, that would be my topmost reward."

"Very true indeed," she said. "And what if she were to do, as I should certainly do, ignore you altogether?"

"I should not cease to love her. I should have nothing to complain of," I said.

She tossed her hands up in despair. "If this is what conies of reading your Dante, I advise the 'Song of Solomon,'" she said. "I have never opened the 'Divine Comedy'—-still less the 'Vita Nova'; but I consider the author a donkey, and am sure that was the opinion of his Donna Beatrice."

Count Giraldi, for some reason which I could not then comprehend, did not care to talk of my affair. He said nothing of Aurelia to me—and, so far as I could see, avoided the lady herself as much as the discussion of her position. He told me that he had been able to offer a judgeship of the Court of Cassation to Dr. Lanfranchi, and that he was in

great hopes that he would take it. In that case he would, of course, reside in Florence; and “The rest,” said he, “I shall leave to you.”

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I told him that, if Donna Aurelia was reconciled to her husband through his means, I should be eternally in his debt—and not less so though I should be in Padua and with the mountains between us.

He frowned, he was puzzled. "You leave us?" he said; "you abandon Donna Aurelia?" I told him that I could never cease to love her, but that love for a lady seemed to me an extremely bad reason for bringing about her ruin. I had gone so near to that already that nothing in the world would induce me to risk it again.

He affected to misunderstand me, in his scoffing way. "Admirable! Admirable!" he cried. "I see that you have recovered your spirits."

"I hope my spirit has never failed me yet when I have had need of it," I said. "I shall thank God on my knees this night that my lady has been saved alive. No lover in the world has ever begged for his mistress's surrender so heartily as I shall pray for the return of mine to her husband's arms."

He clapped me on the back. "You are a master of paradox indeed," he said.

I assured him that I was serious. "Then," said he, "I admire while I do not follow you. I ask you once more, do you wish me to understand that you abandon Donna Aurelia? I have my reasons, mind you, and have no wish to take you unawares."

"I cannot abandon what I do not pursue," I replied. "I can only repeat that it would be a very curious proof of my love for a lady to urge her to perdition on my account."

He looked at me oddly, fixedly, for a long time. Then he said, "It is true that you are an Englishman. I had forgotten it." Suddenly he threw up his hands. "What a nation! What a lover!" His hand came down and rested upon my shoulders. "My friend," he said, "I am not so young as I was, but I do believe that I can teach you something." With that he left me.

Upon returning to my house, sadly out of countenance by the coldness of Aurelia, I was met by Virginia, who reminded me that Scipione had obtained leave of absence for the night in order to visit his wife. She seemed excited and unlike herself, very careful to lock and bolt the front door, and was continually at the window, looking over the Piazza. Occupied as I was with my own troubles, I took no notice of her, and she, with the intelligence peculiar to her, saw how the land lay. She was not accustomed to pick her words with me—no Tuscan servants are— and after a time of silence on my part and pretended business about the room on hers, she asked leave to speak to me, and without getting it, said, "Excuse me, Don Francis, for the liberty I take, but I see you very miserable, and guess the reason. You have had words with your mistress—and no wonder. Let me tell you that you have not the rudiments of love in you."

“Enough of that, Virginia,” I said; but she would not oblige me.

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“Let me tell your honour,” said she, “that your sex has had the monopoly of mine since this world was first put in order. If you want your Aurelia, as I told you before, you must take her. Your proposals towards her are very Christian, but I have noticed that it is not the Christians who have the prettiest women at their disposition, but the Turks, of whom there are more in the world than you think for. Your doctor, for example, was a Turk of the Turks; and what did your Aurelia do but grovel for his rod until you came along, and she said, ’Hey, here is one who is Turchissimo, the grandest of grand Turks, with a longer and sharper rod’? You had a great chance then, Don Francis—what under Heaven possessed you to break the rod in her presence, or rather to put it into her hands, saying, ’Behold, madam, the rod. It is yours, not mine; use it. I kneel to receive it’? Why, Lord of Mercies, is this madness? Let me remind you of what I told you at Prato not so long ago, that to pray at a lady’s feet when you ought to have her in your arms is to prepare misery for the pair of you. The whole trouble about that precious fault of yours was—not that you committed it, Dio mio, but that you did not commit it again. There, sir, that is my opinion—make what you will of it.”

I was too profoundly dejected to be angry as I ought to have been; I believe I made no reply. Emboldened, or piqued, by that, she came nearer and spoke with great passion. “I’ll tell you another thing,” she said. “I am in your way, and am quite aware of it. Donna Aurelia and all your fine friends believe that I am with you—as—as I am not. Well, now, Don Francis, you may be rid of me whenever you please. Fra Palamone is here, and the Marchese Semifonte also. I have seen them both—in this very Piazza—this afternoon. Once they were together, and once Palamone was here alone. That means something. Now, if you choose to hand me over to those two you will do a fine stroke of business. Your Count Giraldi has a fancy for Donna Aurelia, I can see that plainly. It suits him very well that I should be here. Get rid of me, and where is the count? Do you not see?”

I turned upon her then and reproved her. “You hurt yourself more than me, Virginia,” I said, “by talking in this strain. Your word ‘fancy’ is a word of the market. Grooms *fancy* a horse at the fair, housewives fancy a leg of lamb, leering ploughboys in a tavern *fancy* the wench who cleans the pots. Gentlemen do not so use to beautiful and wise ladies. You use horrible words, my poor child, but non omnia possumus omnes.”

She listened at first with lowering brows, and eyes which watched me guardedly. But as I went on, more scornfully than perhaps I thought, a change came over her. She let fall her arms, she drooped, became distressed. I saw a tear fall, but I believed that I did well to be angry.

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“Be sure of this,” I said sharply, “that I will suffer no word in disparagement of Donna Aurelia to be said in my presence. Your word ‘fancy,’ as applied to her, is horrible to me. You will take care not to repeat it. If you choose to whisper to your friends that I have a ‘fancy’ for you, or that the marchese has purchased Fra Palamone to indulge a similar ‘fancy’ on his account, I have nothing to say. No term of the sort is by this time too hard for me to bear; and the marchese, no doubt, can take care of himself. But Donna Aurelia, once and for all, is to be left out of your dictionary if you can only couple her name with a degrading qualification. Enough of that. I am about to return to Padua, and shall take you with me as far as Condoglia.” This was indeed my intention, for I was hurt more than I cared to own by Donna Aurelia’s reception of me, and yet knew all the time that I deserved nothing more.

Virginia listened with head hung down and clenched hands; when I had done she would have rushed headlong into speech—but she checked herself by biting her lip forcibly. She curtseyed to me, and went quickly out of the room. I spent a great part of the night in the destruction of papers, collection of objects which I wished to take with me, and in committing to the flame certain others which I now knew I must do without. Treasured memories of Aurelia went with them. She was still in my heart, and must ever remain there, patroness of my honest intention. Daylight was creeping over the Piazza and putting my candles to shame before I discovered how tired I was. I blew them out, opened windows and shutters, and leaned into the sweet air. St. Mary’s church stared hard, an unearthly black and white; the Piazza, perfectly empty, looked of enormous size. In it the dawn-wind blew up little spirals of dust; and it was so quiet, that when a scrap of paper was whirled into the air, I heard the littering noise it made before it started on its flight. The sky was of exquisite purity, pale as milk, with a very faint flush of rose behind the church. In a few minutes the sun would be up from behind Vallombrosa, and all the glory of the Italian day would roll over Florence in a flood. I felt mortally and suddenly tired, too languid to face the richness of life to come, poor and famished as I must now be.

As I was turning from the window I saw the figures of two men come out of the sharp angle of St. Mary’s and walk towards the town. Both were tall, both in cloaks; but one wore his hat and the other carried it. By this, as well as his drooping, deferential shoulders, I knew this latter to be the servant, the former his patron. Midway towards the Via de’ Benci they stopped, while he of the bare head explained at length, pointing this way and that with his hat, then counting on his fingers. I was now expert enough to be able to read an Italian conversation more quickly than I could gather it in talk. There was no doubt what was meant. “I shall go

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to such and such place, come back to such and such place; the carriage will stay here; in eight hours from now your lordship shall be satisfied." The man of position nodded his agreement, acknowledged with another nod a low bow from his inferior, and walked into Florence. As he entered the Via de' Benci I saw him plainly. It was the Marchese Semifonte. I saw his pale, wandering eyes, his moth-white face. So then I knew who was the other, standing out in the Piazza by himself, looking up towards my room.

CHAPTER XXVII

I SLAY A MAN

A sudden desire, whose origin I could not have defined, unless it sprang directly from alarm on her account, moved me away from the window towards the door of Virginia's room. I listened at it, but could hear nothing, so presently (fearing some wild intention of sacrifice on her part) I lifted the latch and looked in. No—she was there and asleep. I could see the dark masses of her hair, hear her quick breathing, as impatient as a child's, and as innocent. Poor, faithful, ignorant, passionate creature—had I wronged her? Did not her vehemence spring from loyalty? If she was mistaken, was it her fault? For what could she— that unkempt companion of pigs and chicken, offspring of parents little higher in degree—what could she know of exalted love? What, indeed?

I lit a candle and went to look at her. I considered her carefully, lying there prone, her face turned sideways to the pillow, one bare arm flung over her eyes. She looked beautiful asleep, for her mouth had relaxed its look of proud reserve, and all her lines were softened. She looked very tired, very pure, very young.

"God of Nature!" thought I. "Assuredly Thou didst not shape this fine, true creature for some villain's idle appetite. Assuredly also Thou didst put her in my way for her salvation—and, may be, for mine. I accept the sign. Do Thou, therefore, stand my friend." I shut the door softly and returned to my parlour. Very cautiously I drew near the window and peered out.

It was well that I took care. Fra Palamone was immediately underneath the window, grinning up, showing his long tooth, and picking at his beard. I do not think I ever saw such a glut of animal enjoyment in a man's face before. There was not the glimmer of a doubt what he intended. Semifonte had been told of his bondslave, and Palamone's hour of triumph was at hand. He would bring a warrant; no doubt he had it by him; he waited only for the police. I was laid by the heels.

A gust of anger, like a puff of hot wind, blew upon me and made my skin prick me. All that I had endured at this rascal's hands swelled within; and now I remembered also

that I, a gentleman by birth and training, had been the galled slave of a low ruffian, who now intended to sell into vice and infamy an honest girl whom I was pledged to protect. Well-being, rehabilitation, the respect of my own world had done their work. He had to do with a man now, I told myself, not with a boy. I went to my bureau, took out, primed and cocked my pistols, returned to the window and showed myself full to the frate.

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“I wish you good morning, Fra Palamone,” I said. His grinning face grinned awry, I promise you; but he recovered himself and made a brave show.

“Buon di, Ser Francesco, buon di. You are betimes, I see. Or is it that you are belated like my injured friend Semifonte? The smarting of his honour has kept him from his bed, let me tell you. But he has gone thither now, I hope, appeased.”

“You intend to appease him, I believe, in eight hours from now,” said I. “The commissary will be at his chocolate at eight o’clock, at his office by eleven. It is now three.”

“You are getting proficient in our tongue,” he said, somewhat put out by my exactitude.

“Oh, I am proficient in more ways than one,” I told him. “You taught me at Prato how to draw teeth, and I showed you, in the same town, how claws could be cut. What did you think of the carcere? Well, now I will show you another accomplishment I have. Draw teeth, cut claws! I can drill holes also, Palamone.”

“What the devil are you talking about, poet?” says he, always quick to be amused.

“Why, this,” I said. “I will come down to you in the Piazza. We have it to ourselves.” I held up my pistol by the nozzle. He saw the butt. He said, “Oho! that’s your work, is it? You are growing in grace, Don Francis; and I am not the little man to disoblige you. Many a score is on my slate to your name, and short scores make the longest friendships. Come down, my son, and play a better game than faro.”

By the time I got down he had taken off his cloak and came smiling towards me with both his hands held out. He was going to embrace me—I knew that very well. He would have kissed me on both cheeks, warmly and with sincerity; and then, before his arms were loosed from my neck, by a sudden surging of his lust, he would have throttled me. All that was as clear in his looks as are the marks on this paper; but I could read my gentleman by now and was in no mood for his freakish humours. “Take warning,” I said, “that if you move one step nearer to me I shoot you like a rabbit.” I crooked my arm and levelled at him as I spoke. I suppose he saw truth in the mouth of the barrel, for he stopped, and looked at me, breathing hard.

“I admire you, Francis,” he said. “I admire you more than ever before. If I had kissed you as I intended, you would have known it.”

“I do know it, damn you!” I replied. “But you would have strangled me afterwards.”

“Why, so I should,” he confessed, “even as surely as I mean to shoot you now. But that is neither here nor there. I’m a wild, hungry old devil of a frate, but no man denies that I love a high spirit. I should have kissed you for that, and wrung the breath out of you afterwards for a starved, misbegotten spawn of an English apothecary—as you are, my

son. Now hand me one of those pistols of yours, and say your paternoster while you are in the mind."

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I handed him the weapon, telling him that I had loaded it myself overnight, but that if he wished to satisfy himself, I had both powder and ball at his service.

He looked somewhat offended. “Do you think, my lad, that I doubt you?” he said. “I tell you that I love you. I would as soon doubt my mother, who is in Heaven, or believe my father, who is not.”

“You shall join one or the other of them,” said I, “in a few moments. Have no doubt of that, and let me alone. One condition. I will drop my arm and walk into the house, placing my back at your disposal, if you, in the article of death, as you now stand, will pledge your word to save Virginia from Semifonte. What do you say?”

He gazed at me, open-mouthed, eyes aglow, as I stood waiting. I could see that he was torn; I could see the fiend working and gouging within him, and (I believe) a good angel contending against him. Some time this lasted. Then Palamone gave a bitter laugh—-like the barking of a leopard in the night.

“Say?” he mocked me. “Why, I say that you are an exquisite, adorable fool—the very pink of fools. For two ticks I would have taken you at your word. For two ticks.”

“It was the third that prevented you,” says I. “You are not such a villain as you think yourself.”

“I believe that I am not, indeed,” he says ruefully. “I have lost a chance. Well, I am ready. But here the shadow is bad. Let us go to the obelisks and stand each back to one. There is a passable light there.”

“As you will.” I went directly out into the middle of the Piazza, and he followed—with my life between his wild hands.

I know not to this hour whether that act of mine was one of sublime courage or of the crassest folly; I remember that I strode blithely forward, and that he followed; that some chance thing or another caused me to turn my head—the sun burning in a casement, a pigeon, a cat, some speck of accident. That motion saved my life, for immediately afterwards I heard the report, and felt the ball flicker through my hair. The fiend had gouged him again, and he had tried to murder me. At that certainty, in all the fury of disgust that came with it, my stomach turned, and I was possessed by blind rage. I rounded full upon him, and he must have seen cold death in my eyes, for round went he too and ran for his life. I pelted after him.

He made for the angle of the church whence he had come. There were railings there about a loggia, much broken down, by which, I suppose, he hoped to get some sort of a screen, but I intended him to fight me in the Piazza, so increased my speed, and cut him off that retreat. He doubled, and scoured past the steps of the church, round by the

hospital, making for the Via del Fosso; I cut a segment of his circle and stopped him there. Round he span, slavering at the lips, and went dead over the Piazza, to the obelisks, I so close on his traces that I could not

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have missed him if I had chosen for murder. It was like coursing a hare, for hare-like in his pains, he began to scream—not very loudly; a wretched, wrung and wiry appeal, like some bad woman's, was all he could muster. Between the obelisks he fell on his knees, and when I reached him was praying, "Sancta Mater! Diva Mater! Ab hostium incidiis libera me!" I saw a head at a window, a head in a night-cap—a man's. Over it peeped another—a woman's. But I knew my Florence: there would be no interference in a duel. I said, "Get up, Palamone, and fight with me."

He was wild with terror—cried, "No, no, no—spare me! I give you my word, my sacred word—"

"You have none to give; you have broken it," I told him. "I will have no word in pieces. Get up, liar, and fight."

I got him to his feet, set him by his obelisk to face me. I loaded his piece for him, put it into his hands, then stepped back, facing him always, till I was fifteen yards away. "Drop your glove when you are ready," I told him, "and fire first."

He took as good aim as he could, I am sure; but I could see his shaking arm quite well. He missed me by a full yard at least. Then he waited for me, having got his courage back. I shot him in the breast, and he fell at once, and lay still. The faces at the window had disappeared; looking round the Piazza, I could see nothing but blank green shutters.

When I went up to Palamone he opened his eyes. He was not bleeding freely, and seemed more weak than in pain. "I am a dead man," he said in a whisper—I had to kneel down to hear him—"a dead man who has got his deserts. Semifonte intended to have your Virginia—but it was not Giraldi—it was not Gir—" Strength failed him; I could not catch any more than the name of Aurelia.

"Where are you hurt? Shall I fetch a surgeon?" He was hardly bleeding at all now—a bad sign. He shook his head and lay quiet. I made a pillow of my coat.

When he opened his eyes again they were very dim. "I'm off," he said, in that same dry whisper. "You have served me right—I love you for it. I have always loved you—but—-yes, always loved you. Kiss me, Francis, if you can."

I could not refuse. I did kiss him, and he me. "God receive you, Palamone, and forgive me. I shall go and fetch you a priest." My face being very near him, suddenly he lifted his head and caught my cheek in his teeth. They met there—the dying act of a savage. I wrenched myself free, and heard his head knock with a thud on the pavement. Then I

felt the blood stream down my neck. Stopping it as best I could, I went for a surgeon and a priest.

When I came back with them—I may have been half an hour finding the couple—Fra Palamone was gone, and my pistol too, which had my name on the butt. “Gentlemen,” I said, “I am very sorry, but I assure you that I left a dying man on this spot. I can only ask you to excuse me for breaking your repose.”

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The priest said, “He has been found and taken away—no doubt of it.”

“He has walked off, most like,” said the surgeon. I shook my head. I was sure I had killed him.

“If you are sure of it,” said the surgeon, “there is little I could have done for him, and as it is far more to the purpose to dress a living man than a dead one, permit me to attack that ugly flesh wound in your cheek. God of mercy!” he cried, as he looked into it, “your man must have shot you with a currycomb.”

When he had done his best for me I went to bed, and immediately fell asleep.

CHAPTER XXVIII

VIRGINIA ON HER METTLE

I slept like a log until the hour of noon—perfectly dreamless sleep. It was Virginia who awoke me then by shaking my shoulder, not (as usually) by opening the shutter. I heard the bells of the hour ringing and guessed the time; I remembered that Scipione was away; I remembered everything.

“I have your chocolate, Don Francis,” she said. “Drink it and rise as soon as possible. You must be out of this.”

I replied, “I see no reason for haste. I will write a letter—Ser Bartolo shall take it for me—the answer will be satisfactory.”

Virginia kept herself calm by main force. “The house is surrounded,” she said. “You will be taken in your bed if you don’t leave it soon.” I sat up.

“Virginia, I ask your pardon.” She shivered and turned away.

“Speak no more of that.”

“But I must. You were right, and I—” She threw up her head with a little cry, fell upon her knees. She took my hand and covered it with kisses.

“No more. I cannot bear it. Who am I? What am I? Say what you please to me, but never plead with me.” I could see her shoulders shaking.

“I must say what I have to say—” I would have continued. She gave another sharp cry—shivered again miserably. In the half light of the room I could see her lift her pale face towards the ceiling. It seemed to me that she prayed. After a while she looked down again and said quietly, “Speak now—and have done with it.”

I told her what had occurred in the small hours; I did not spare myself. When I said that I had shot Fra Palamone she shook her head.

“You might as well hope to shoot the devil. All you have done is to give yourself into the hands of them who hire him. You are to be sent to Volterra or the galleys for this. The men outside are sbirri.”

I told her that I should write to Count Giraldi. She laughed. “Your Count Giraldi will be out of Florence. Do you think him a child? His one desire is to get rid of you. No, no. You must disguise yourself. This is a trap.”

“I refused to take your word last night, my dear,” I said, “and should be sorry to do it again. If the sbirri want me they can take me on a warrant.”

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“They have no warrant. They will get that afterwards. Do you think them so stupid? While they were getting their warrant you might get clear away. Or suppose you appeared? The whole story might come out, and a number of fine people implicated. And what of your English resident? And what of your Donna Aurelia, if you are not careful of yourself? Do you wish to get her name abroad? No, no. In Tuscany we imprison a man first and get the warrant afterwards, if necessary. That is how they will work, quietly, with decency—no conversations. They have been here since eight o’clock this morning, and the Piazza is quite empty. They have seen to that, of course. If you look through the shutter you can see them. They are in no sort of hurry.”

I did look, and saw that she was right. There were no people in the Piazza—at midday—but four men, who stood at intervals in attitudes of detachment and irresponsibility far too pronounced to be real. The church was closed, most of the houses were shuttered; all this was too remarkable not to have been arranged. Virginia and I looked at one another; but she watched me like a cat, keeping guard over every movement of mine. One hand pressed her bosom, the other was stretched downwards—a straight, tense line from shoulder to finger-tips.

“Virginia, listen to me,” I began; a heedless invocation. Every fibre of her listened and watched. “If this is a trap, as I agree it is, then you are the mouse. Nobody in Florence would care whether I have shot Fra Palamone, or he me. The count—taking him as you take him—knows that I have no intentions but honest ones towards Donna Aurelia; taking him as I take him he will defend me. No, my child, this is the marchese’s affair. I can see that he has been after you from the time he saw you playing the handsome lady at Prato. He thinks he has you, but I will show him that he is wrong. Let me once get you away, be assured of your safety, and I shall open the door to the pleasure of these gentlemen. Father Carnesecchi—the count—oh, I have no fear of Palamone’s posthumous acts, I can assure you.”

I spoke cheerfully, confidently, but Virginia was put into great agitation. She began to flit about the room like a moth, wringing her hands and whimpering to herself.

“O Dio!” she fretted, “O Dio caro! What shall I do? Madonna, Madonna, Madonna, what will become of me?” She was quite inarticulate, could only repeat her names, and wail, and beat herself into a fever. I went to comfort her, and then, as if some tie were cut by the act, she turned upon me in a white tempest of fury, no longer a girl but a devil. “Do you dare?” she raved, “Do you dare? Oh, but I could kill you now with my hands!” She took me by the shoulders and stared into my face, panting her fierce breath upon me—blasts of breath as hot as fire. “Look at me, Francis, look at me, I say. You see the one person in the world who loves you. You fool, you fool, with your Giraldis and Aurelias

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and Jesuit dogs—with your head in the air, and your heart in your hand—to be thrown like soldi to these routing swine! Misery, ah, misery!" She flung her head sideways that she should not look at me, and with her hands gripped my shoulders till I winced. She tossed her hair from her face and leapt into the battle again, scolding, rating, praying like a mad thing. Her words came so fast that I cannot attempt their semblance here, and her voice rose and fell in a kind of querulous chant to which sometimes she nodded her head, as if she was beating the time. "Yes, I know, yes, I know—I will tell you the truth for once, and you shall kill Virginia with your own hands, and lay her on your bed and go away and be a fool. Your Jesuit wants your money, and your count your mistress, and Palamone will take you stripped of all and sell you to the Grand Duke. So you will kill your Virginia because she loves you, and love your Aurelia because she does not, and all those others will trick you, and play with you, and suck you dry, and throw you away like the rind of an orange. Ah, now you have the truth, and now you will kill me. Kill, kill, Francis!"

She had a fit of shivering which made her teeth chatter together and her breath draw in with a moaning most piteous to hear. She showed the whites of her eyes, swayed about, was on the point of falling, when all of a sudden she came to herself again, caught me in her arms, pressed her bosom against me, kissed me on the lips—kissed until I felt her teeth—then sprang from me, and before I could stop her was out of the room, and half way downstairs. Half divining her purpose, I flew to get her back, but was too late. I heard the street door open and shut. She was in the Piazza.

My landlord—he was a notary by trade, and by name Ser Torpe—was dismayed to see me in bedgown and slippers. "Never go as you are, sir!" he cried. "Go like an eccellenza, bid them fetch a chair. Light of Light, what a costume for Volterra!" I ran upstairs past him, took down my birding-piece, primed it and went to the window. Virginia was talking to two of the sbrri, putting up her hair as she did so, with complete unconcern of what she displayed. She was in her usual negligent undress— all her class are the same in the mornings—of a loose shift and stuff petticoat. Her bosom was bare, her bare feet were in slippers; for her hair she had but a single pin. It was to be seen that the men viewed her with admiration, as some wanton newly from her bed. They used an easy familiarity not at all pleasant; one of them, who could not take his eyes off her, said nothing, the other put his hand on her waist. I was angry with her, I confess without reason. She disengaged herself. I heard her impatient "No, no! ma senta—"; she continued in rapid undertones.

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One of the men looked up at my window, and saw me, gun in hand. He shifted his glance a little higher and affected to be searching the roof of the house. A third man joined his companions; there was much laughing and jesting—no doubt some rough compliments passed. Virginia, however, steered her way to her main purpose through the tangle of confessions, excuses and refusals which they forced upon her; but I suppose she had to give some ground, for presently two of their heads came very close to hers. I saw their eager faces and Virginia's considering look. It was a courtship. She was playing her part, and they believed her to be what she appeared. That applied only to two of the three; the third, he who watched her so closely and said nothing, held apart. He had an ugly look. The others, absorbed in the pursuit, took no notice of him; but I kept my eyes upon him, and was not at all surprised at what followed.

Virginia, after long debate, pretended to yield. Something was proposed to her; she considered it. It was pressed upon her by two ardent voices; she looked awry and laughed. The chase quickened—one of the men took her hand, the other brought a coin from his pocket, spat on it, and pressed it on her. As she hesitated with the money on her palm, the silent watcher of all this whipped out a long knife and drove it into his comrade's back between the shoulders. He groaned deeply, flung his arms out and fell. The fourth man came running over the Piazza from his point, Virginia shrieked and ran back to the house. I saw—as if invisible barriers had been removed—men, women and boys come running in from all side streets. It was like a performance in a theatre.

Virginia, white and shaking, stood in my presence. "It is you they want, Francis, I have heard all. You must go at once—at once."

"What were you doing with the sbirri?" I asked her.

"They made love to me, all three of them; but that dark man meant it, and the others not. It is very fortunate—it will give us time, which we need. Your Count Giraldi is in the country, as I told you he would be. There is no warrant. Come, we will be off. It will be perfectly safe while this confusion lasts. Dress yourself, put on your cloak, take your sword and pistol and come."

"You, too, must be dressed, child."

"I?" said she. "No, I am better as I am. I can be of more use." But she had a wiser thought, it appears; for by the time I was ready, she looked modestly enough.

The plot, if plot it had been, had failed. I got out of the house unnoticed and unfollowed, Virginia with me in a hood. There were soldiers now in the Piazza, keeping back the crowd. The dead man lay there still, and his assailant wore shackles. Boys were racing in and out among the people singing the news which everybody knew. "Martirio d'un pio frate! Assassino per amore! Ohe! Ohe!"

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We went down the Via Belle Donne and crossed a small Piazza, taking our way, said Virginia, to the Ghetto, where she thought we might be perfectly safe for the rest of the day. There were so many hunted men there, said she, that in the confusion some must needs get away. The curtains were drawn over the barbers' shops, all doors were shut—it was the hour of repose. A few beggars sat in converse on the steps of San Michele, many were asleep in the shade, there were no passengers, no sbirri to be seen until we reached the Via Campidoglio. Here Virginia drew me back into the shadow of a great house. "That way is stopped. They are watching the market. Come, we will try something else." I admired her resourceful audacity, and followed whither she chose to lead.

We ran up the Via Vecchietta without disturbance or alarm, and reached the church of San Lorenzo. We entered the cloister, which breathed the full summer, late as it was in the year. Bees hummed about the tree; the glossy leaves of the great magnolia seemed to radiate heat and glitter; above us the sky was of almost midsummer whiteness, and I could see the heat-waves flicker above the dome. "You shall hide in the Sagrestia to-night, if you will be ruled by me," Virginia said. "To-morrow morning before first Mass we will gain the Ghetto. I know a woman there who will keep us. My word, Don Francis, you little guess how near the Bargello you have been!"

I think she was eager for my praises, poor soul, by the shy light in her eyes—a kind of preparation for the blushes with which she always met any warmth in my tone. If I gave her none it was because she had displeased me by cheapening herself to the sbirri. But I was soon ashamed of myself.

I asked her, "When did you find out that the sbirri were waiting for me?"

"The second hour of the day, it was," she replied, "when I went out to buy milk for your chocolate. There were but two of them then. They asked me if you were in the house. I said no. They said that you had killed a frate, and I, that I was sure he had deserved it. One of them laughed and said that had nothing to do with it; he had been sent there to be killed. The other one, that black-browed fellow who stabbed his comrade, said nothing at all, but just looked at me hard. He never took his eyes away once, so I guessed how his barque was steering, and you saw what wind I blew."

"I saw it, Virginia."

"And disapproved! Per esempio, you disapproved!" Tears filled her eyes. She shrugged her shoulders, pitying herself. "Povera Virginia!" she said.

This made me ashamed enough to say, "Dear Virginia, I know that you acted for my safety."

“Yes, I did! Yes, I did! But I would do worse. Ah, you little know how bad I would make myself. And you reproach me—” She was on the edge of a frenzy, but checked herself. “What does it matter now that you are safe? We will stop in the Sagrestia all night. They will never look for you there.”

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“But, my dear,” said I, “we have three hours to wait before the Sagrestia is opened. Do you ask me to stay here, in this cloister, for that time?”

She looked embarrassed, for the truth is that she would have asked me if I had not spoken of it. She had forgotten that I was not of her nation. “No, no,” she said hastily, “that is ridiculous. How could I ask you to do such a thing as that? The question!”

“I am glad of it,” I returned, “because there I can’t oblige you. I must break my fast, so must you. By the time we have done, the Sagrestia may be ready for us. Observe also that in spending the night in that place I am obliging you, for I don’t at all see why we should do it.”

She searched my face with those grey eyes of hers, hunting my raillery out. The thing above all which she dreaded was to be laughed at. She never laughed herself, except bitterly, in anger, and hated the indulgence. Suspecting still what she failed to find, she fell in with my desire to eat, though she must have thought it preposterous, and me a madman to have it. She could never understand my attachment to custom, and never think of more than one thing at a time. Just now she was engaged in hiding me from justice—to succeed in which task she would have sat still for an eternity and gone without a thousand meals. What an outcry she must have had ready for me—and how she must have loved her hard taskmaster! She did violence to all her feelings, fell in with my desire at once.

“Naturally, Don Francis, you must eat. Naturally, I must eat. Naturally, by the time we have finished, the Sagrestia will be open. Very good, Don Francis. But as to spending the night in the Sagrestia, shall I be impertinent if I tell you that by this time there is not a locanda in Florence that has not got a full and exact description of you and me, and not a landlord among them that would not hand you over for two baiocchi?”

“How do you know that, my dear?” I asked.

She stretched out her arms. “How do I know? Hear him! How do I know that my mother is a woman and my father a man? Dio buono! Have I lived in my sty with my eyes shut? And herded with thieves, and taken them for marchesi? But you shall be fed, Don Francis. Leave that to me. Do you stay here quietly, I will get you some food.”

I said that I must come with her, whereupon she began to cry bitterly, to call me heartless and cruel, to pity herself in the most deplorable terms. She nursed and fondled herself by name. “Povera Virginia! Poor little Virginia, that works so hard for her tyrant and gives herself no rest. But he is cruel—more cruel than if he beat her—-stabs her heart with cold words, rends it with sharp fingers. Poor little Virginia, poor little outcast from the Madonna!”

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I have not a heart of stone: I confess that her distress made me dreadfully ashamed. This good soul, whose only happiness lay in mine, who had trusted her all in all to me without flinching, whose life was now at my disposal as her honour had been for so long. Unworthy of the name of man had I been if I could wound her so lightly. I put my arm round her waist and drew her towards me with tenderness. I took her hands from her face and implored her forgiveness. I promised to offend her no more, to stay in the cloister until she came, to sleep in the Sagrestia, to do all her behests. In answer, the sun came out in her face. She listened to me with soft rapture, beautiful to see, and before I had done, the dear, generous creature snatched at my hand, and, kneeling, kissed it with a frenzy of devotion which brought the tears to my eyes. Immediately afterwards she was gone on her errand of mercy, leaving me in a glow of truly honest gratitude, which was to have its speedy fruit in an act which, though it fell short of my intention, was to prove for my ultimate content.

CHAPTER XXIX

I TAKE SANCTUARY

Past fatigues and present danger did not disturb my happy meditations. I paced the cloister of San Lorenzo without regard for them, absorbed in considering my future conduct, and the relationship in which I stood to my little world of circumstance. It was necessary that I should make plans for myself and for Virginia, and I made and rejected many without modifying them one and all, as well I might have done, by allowing for the part which the gallows, the gaol or the hulks might play in them. As my habit has always been, I endeavoured to judge the case upon its merits, and to adjust myself to it, not so much according to my desires as to my duties towards it. Here—to remind the reader—are the three factors of my problem.

1. I had, of my own act, withdrawn myself from Aurelia's society, having done her all the reparation I could, and obtained her forgiveness.

2. I had constituted myself Virginia's champion against the Marchese Semifonte.

3. I had killed Fra Palamone.

Now, to take these in order, it was plainly my duty to quit the side of the fair Aurelia. Even though she were and were to remain for me the shining orb of my firmament, in whose beam I must for ever walk—I must not see her again. I had obtained from her all that I could hope for, and given her quite as much as, if not more than, she desired. To stay by her now would be to compromise her; I could not be blind to the conviction of all my acquaintance, which saw in me that horrible spectacle, the lover of a married woman, accepted as such by her lawful master. Robbery! of which I could never be capable. No more of Aurelia, then, no more. She must depart like a dream before the

stern face of the morrow—or I must depart. Happy, perhaps, for her, whatever it may have been for me, that she herself had taken the first step when she turned her back upon me in pique.

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I disregarded Palamone's bloody end. I had executed a criminal, a procurer for hire, a vile thing unworthy to live; but what was I to do with Virginia? There was a young woman of capacity, merit and beauty, whose honour I had taken in charge. So far I had maintained it, and there were two ways in which I could continue so to do. In return, she had given me devotion of the most singular kind—for it is extreme devotion that a girl should bear obloquy and humiliation for the sake of a man who has defended her. There was no doubt also but that I was master of her heart; no doubt at all but that she would give herself to me without thought if I lifted a finger. The conviction of such a truth is a dangerous possession for a man, and I don't pretend that I was insensible to it, any more than I was to her definite and personal charm. He is divine, not human, who remains cold and unbiased with the knowledge that here, at his disposal, is a lovely and ardent female, longing to be in his arms. Now, I had withdrawn her from her home, defied a claimant to her, and killed a man who sought her ruin, and what was I going to do? I saw that there were two courses open; but that unless it were possible to do as the rest of her acquaintance had tried to do, there was but one. Was I to kill Palamone in order that I might ruin her myself? Good Heavens! my name was Strelley of Upcote. There was one course, and I must take that.

I did not love Virginia; I admit it. I knew that she was beautiful, and knew that she was mine for the asking, but a truce to casuistry! In her safety was involved my own honour, to her defence must go my own life. I admired, I respected, I was grateful, I wished her well. I determined to marry her, and the sooner the better. Having come to this conclusion, I knew myself well enough to believe that no power in the world could shake me from it.

When, therefore, the good girl returned to me, white and out of breath, with sausages, bread, and a flask of wine under her apron, I welcomed her as befitted one in the position in which I now designed her to stand. I took off my hat to her and relieved her of her burden. She noticed the courtesy; the colour flew back to her cheeks, but I observed that her breath was not thereby restored.

She became very voluble—to hide her confusion; for by ordinary she was sparing of speech (or did she guess the lover in the master? Who can tell?). The wine, she told me, was easy got, and the bread. "The sausage," she went on—"ah, it would have been as easy to give you one of my legs for sausages. I went first to Il Torto's in the Borgo; it was shut for mezzodi. I begin tapping—the wife opens. 'Chi e?' says she; and I see a sbirro in the shop, eating polenta. 'Niente, niente,' I say, and run. That told me that the babbo was away, and that his wife had a lover in the constabulary. Remember it, Don Francis, we may have need of her—who knows? Shall I confess to you that I stole your sausage?"

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“Confess what you please, my dear,” said I, “I shall shrive you.” Her eyes were dewy, but she lowered them too soon.

“It was a sin,” she said, “but I do not intend to eat any sausage, so I shall be forgiven. But you see that the spies are all abroad. Now, I have just thought of something, Don Francis. We cannot remain in this cloister—at least, I cannot. If a canon awoke before his time—and it needs but a fly to settle on a nose to cause it—and if he poke his head out of his door, the first thing he will do will be to look at me—”

“Naturally, Virginia,” I said. “It is what I am doing.”

“I am well aware of it,” said Virginia, and showed that she spoke the truth; “but the second thing he will do will be to look at you. I don’t think we can afford ourselves this honour, so let us go. There is a way from here into the library, thence into the church, and from there to the Sagrestia Nuova, if we could only find it, whither nobody goes but a grand duke—and he only when he is dead. Let us go by that—will you not come? It is true that I am rather frightened by now.”

I got up at once. “Come, then, child, let us hunt out our way.” We went upstairs.

The long library was quite empty. We went to the further end on tiptoe. There were three doors at the bottom in three bays, surmounted by busts. We chose for the right hand and turned the handle. It gave into a narrow passage, lined with bookcases and dimly lighted. “I think this will be the way,” Virginia said, and took the key out of the door and locked it on the inside. We followed the passage to a flight of stone steps, descended these in their curving course round a pillar, and came upon a little arched doorway. Virginia opened it. It led directly into the church of San Lorenzo. We saw the hanging lamps before the altars, and a boy in a short surplice asleep in a confessional.

“Wait here, wait here,” says Virginia. “I will make him lead us into the Sagrestia.”

I saw her go, lightly as a hare in the grass, towards the boy, and wondered. She stooped over him where he was huddled anyhow, as children are when they are asleep, and whispered in his ear. “Carino, carino, do you sleep? I am talking to you, carino, do you hear me? Say yes.”

“Si, si,” the boy murmured, and sighed and struggled.

“I am speaking to you, carino. I am tired; I want to sleep also. Tell me how to reach the Sagrestia, where the monsters lie sleeping and waking; whisper it, whisper it, and I will kiss you for it.” I heard her soothing “Hush! Hush!” as he stirred. She went on whispering in his ear. It seemed to me that she was insinuating herself into his dreams. He stirred more than once, turned his head about; every moment I expected to see him

open his eyes; but no. As Virginia continued to whisper, he began to murmur in his sleep, she directing him. He answered, laughed softly, turned about,

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slept always. I saw Virginia kiss his forehead. Then she came winging back to me; she seemed hardly to touch the pavement. “Come, come. I know the way. The door is open.” She flitted away towards the high altar, I following. We gained the ambulatory behind. A door from this stood ajar; Virginia pushed in, I after her. We followed a flagged corridor for some distance and found ourselves in the Sagrestia Nuova with Michael Angelo’s monsters sprawling and brooding in the half light. Virginia clasped me in her arms. “Francesco mio, I have saved thee. Sanctuary with thee! Oh, love thy poor Virginia!”

She pressed closely to me, and began to touch and stroke my cheeks; she put her hand at the back of my head, as it were to force my face down to look at her. Touched, excited, amorous in my turn, I encircled her with my arms and kissed her fondly.

“Dearest, best, kindest Virginia,” I said, “you have proved my friend indeed. I have much to thank you for, much to say to you. Let us choose a place in which to eat our breakfast; I am as hungry as the devil.”

Cruel, abominable speech of mine! I wounded her dreadfully; scalding tears testified to a bruised heart; but to her relief came pride.

“Stop,” said she, “you shall not eat yet. I am hungrier than you, whom bread will satisfy. I am famished.” I would have made amends, but she drew away from me, and folded her arms. “Let me understand. You kissed me just now. Were you false to Aurelia? Did you intend to insult that girl whom you taught to fear insult?”

I said, No, that had never been my intention, but it had been quite otherwise. “Donna Aurelia,” I said, “has been restored to her proper place. She will find salvation where her happiness is, and I have been considering mine, whether I can find it in my happiness also.”

“One thing at a time,” said she, breathing very fast. “Has Donna Aurelia’s husband returned?” I told her that he had not, but that there were good hopes of him shortly.

“And you have said farewell? You are free—free as the air?”

“It is my duty,” I told her, “never to see Donna Aurelia again, and I will not if I can help it.”

She frowned, then threw up her hands. “I don’t understand anything about you! Is this love or madness? You love a lady, who loves you—you find her here—alone—you meet—you speak—you look at each other—you take her by the hand and lead her back to her husband—and tell her that she will never see you again. And she allows it!”

“Not only so,” said I, “but it was she who turned her back upon me. And she did rightly.”

“Why did she so?” she asked me. I had to tell her that it was on her account.

It made her peer with her eyes, in which, however, a keen light burned. She took a step towards me; I thought she would be in my arms; but instead she stopped short, breathing fast through her nostrils.

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'"Tell me this, tell me this," she said, "was she the fool, or were you?"

I laughed. "My girl," I told her, "if I am a fool it is not for you to say so. But I believe, for all that, that you are paying me a compliment." She did not comprehend me, so took refuge in a quip— tossing her head at me.

She said, "I wish your worship joy of my compliment."

I took her. "I intend that you shall do more than wish me joy, child. I intend that you shall give it me, and be my joy."

This altered her tune. She quickly released herself and pointed to the victuals she had risked herself to get. "Let us eat," she said, "and talk afterwards. Forgive me if I troubled you just now. I have suffered and am a little over-wrought. Forgive me."

I kissed her again, she not forbidding me; we put our cloaks below that enormous figure of the Thinker, and sat down to our breakfast; we ate our sausages and drank our wine. Colour came back into Virginia's grave face, light danced in her eyes; she became more herself, but with an excitement latent within her which betrayed itself in little hasty acts of affection, quick movements, half caressing, half petulant—as if she would soothe me, and, half way, change her mood and be minded to scratch. I became interested, I wondered how long she would leave our affairs in doubt; rather unkindly, I held my tongue, just for the pleasure of seeing her make the next advance. And then—in spite of my curiosity—fatigue began to creep over me. I had been thirty-six hours awake, had bid an everlasting farewell to a mistress, restored, or done my best to restore, a banished wife to her husband's arms, shot a man, saved a virgin's honour, made matrimonial advances, run for my life. Here was a good day and a half's work. After a profusion of yawns, which, try as I would, I could not stifle, I said, "Forgive me, my dear, if I go to sleep. I find myself mortally tired—and you must be in the same case. Let us lie down here and rest ourselves."

"Sleep, my lord, sleep," said she, with beautiful, tender seriousness, and spread my cloak on a bench for me. She took off my sword and knelt, as her custom of old had been, to kiss my hand. I felt then that I must needs love this loving child. I lifted her up, and, "Kneel no more to me, my girl," I said. "You and I are ruined together. I cannot obey my father, who will disinherit me. You are no better off. Hunted animals don't kneel to each other, but league themselves to face their persecutors. Virginia, be mine!"

She said nothing, and would not meet my eyes. I drew her to me, embraced her with my arm, kissed her cold lips.

"Do you know what I am doing, Virginia?" I said. "Do you know what I need of you, my only friend?"

“Yes, Don Francis,” she said. “You are making love to me, and it is your right. I have never refused you, and never shall. But you must not ask me to marry you.”

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If I were nettled, it was because a man, having made up his mind, is not willingly thwarted—for no other reason. But I do not know that I can accuse myself even of so much. I did not let her go, nor did I cease to kiss her. I told her, I believe, with as much calmness as is possible under the circumstances, that I was perfectly determined; I said that she need have no fear of the future, even though in taking me she would take no such fortune as I ought to offer to my wife. She flamed up at this and cried out that she wanted no fortune and had never led me to believe it. "Well and good, child," I replied, "in that case you need have no fears at all, for I, on my side, can ask you to admit that I have given you no reason to suppose me a villain. If I take you and all that you have, believe me I shall give you in return my mind and affection as well as the respect and gratitude which you have already. Believe me, Virginia—"

She moaned and rocked herself about. "Oh, I love you so! Oh, do not tempt me—oh, my lord, my lord, what shall I do? Oh, Madonna purissima, help me now!" I caught her to my heart.

"Virginia! as beautiful as you are true, you are worthy of a better love than mine," I cried. "But a more tender love you will never have. Friend, saviour, dear and faithful, beloved companion, I need you— come!"

She struggled faintly to put me away. She withheld her lips by averting her head; but I caught at her wrists and held her arms to her sides. By-and-by she let me have my will, and gave me kiss for kiss. I had won her; she was mine utterly from that hour.

"My lord and my love," she said, "you have conquered me. I will be yours in the manner you desire. You may be humbling yourself, but you are exalting me. Have no fear—I will make you happy. Ah, but how I will work for you! You have never seen me work yet! I am your servant still— your faithful servant."

"We shall serve each other, I hope, my child," I said. "There will be work for me to do also. But what is immediately before us is to escape from Florence."

Virginia got up. "Sleep you here, my soul, I will go out and see how the land lies. Before morning I will see you again." She clasped me to her bosom and kissed me fondly, then went quickly out, as swift and salient in her joy as a keen wind of spring that carries health in its forceful pride. I slept profoundly until daylight, little knowing what her immediate errand was.

CHAPTER XXX

I MARRY AND GO TO LUCCA

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Virginia was pleased to be very mysterious on the subject of our marriage, keeping me in the Sagrestia for three or four days, visiting me only to give me food and such news as she cared to impart. She told me, for instance, that Professor Lanfranchi had undoubtedly arrived in Florence, and that he was staying with Aurelia at the Villa San Giorgio. As to our own affair, she said that everything was in good train. She had found a church and a priest in the Ghetto; she would need a little money—not very much—-and promised, directly the coast was clear, to get me over to that safe quarter. To be done with this part of my history, so she did, and was made mine in the church of Sant' Andrea on October 24, 1724, three years, almost to a day, since my arrival in Padua in 1721. I took her back to a mean lodging in that meanest part of Florence, and spent three days with her there alone. I then wrote to my father, as I felt bound in duty to do—fully, unreservedly, with candour and, I hope, modesty. I wrote to Father Carnesecchi, to Professor Lanfranchi. Such money as I could consider mine by right I converted into cash; the rest, which I thought to be my father's—being that share of my monthly allowance which I had received after I had decided to disobey him—I returned by bills of exchange to his London bankers. I believe that, on the day of my departure from Florence, I stood up possessed of some fifty guineas—no great capital upon which a man and his young wife could begin the world. Nor had I any great idea how I should increase or husband my little store. But I was young, zealous, proud. I believed in myself, I loved Virginia. In a word, as always happened to me, I looked studiously forward, and was happy. As for her, she hardly touched the ground with her feet when she walked. You never saw so radiant a creature.

We left the Ghetto at a good hour of the morning, intending for Lucca; but at the gate of San Frediano a difficulty about post-horses bade fair to detain us for a day in very unfortunate publicity. The man of whom we had bespoken them met us there with despair upon his face. He was vexed, he was harrowed, his nicest feelings of honour were wounded—at least he said that they were. The horses had been fed and watered; he was about to put them to, when an order which he dared not disobey had supervened. No less was this than a precept from the Pratica Segreta that the horses were to be put at the disposition of the Cavaliere Aquamorta, of whom the State was most anxious to be rid. Had it been anything under a Government order, said he, he would have laughed in the bearer's face. Not even the Grand Duke could make an honest man break his word, &c. &c.; but I could see he was helpless. I saw nothing so clearly as that I was. I expostulated, offered more money than I could afford. Virginia stormed. All to no purpose. I was for walking, and was about to command Virginia to accompany me, when who should appear but my gentleman himself, the Cavaliere Aquamorta, inquiring the cause of the uproar. He presented a truly magnificent appearance in that squalid place.

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No sooner was he informed that he was the cause of our distress than he addressed himself to me with elaborate politeness—all the more singular as that my appearance and equipage contrasted most unfavourably with his. My clothes had not been improved by the adventures I had undergone; my linen was soiled; I had no baggage. Virginia was respectably dressed and looked beautiful, but had no pretensions to a rank which she did not possess of herself and which I did not propose to give her. For I had thought it only honourable in me, as I was dispensing with my father's injunctions, to dispense also with his money. I had renounced the world in which I had gained nothing but misery and crime. In this fine gentleman's eyes, therefore, I must have seemed a simple young artisan, and Virginia a pretty country girl. However, he begged to be of service to us. He was himself going to Lucca, he said. If he took our horses it was only fair we should take seats in his chariot. In fine, we should hurt him deeply if we did not. All this was put before me with so much frankness and good humour that I could not well refuse it. I saw, moreover, that in addition to my horses he had two of his own. I accepted his offer, therefore, with many thanks. He handed Virginia in with a bow; he begged me to precede him, which I did, but to the back seat. He took the place next my wife, and we left Florence.

"If," said this remarkable man, "I lay it down as an indispensable preliminary to our acquaintance, which I hope may be long and warm, that you accept me for a gentleman, it is because, as I do not happen to be one, I have devoted all my energies to demonstrating the exact contrary. No man can help the accident of his birth. My mother was an actress of Venice: God knows who was my father, but I tell myself that he was peculiarly mine. I was educated in the slips of the theatre of San Moise; at ten I ran away from home, and from the age of twelve made my fortune my own care. It was then that I found out the advantages of being what I was not, for I observed that while nobody scrupled to cheat a gentleman if he could safely do it, nobody (on the other hand) resented the fact that a gentleman cheated him. At the age of fifteen, when I served in Zante in the company of the noble Mocenigo, and received a decoration for gallantry and a commission of lieutenant, I killed my captain for permitting himself to doubt my gentility. I should be sorry to have to reckon how many more have gone his way, or for how many years I have been obliged to shed blood in every new State I have chosen to inhabit. Those days are past and over; my reputation is made; this order which I wear was presented to me by the Holy Father, and is at once my patent and my passport. If I need another, it is here." He pointed to his sword, which reposed upon a narrow ledge of the chariot, behind my back.

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I then told him a difficulty of my own, which was that, although I was a gentleman by birth who had waived his rank for reasons unnecessary to be named, I had no passport into the Republic of Lucca. “I think it right to inform you, cavaliere,” I added, “that I also found it necessary to shed blood in Florence, and that consequently I have left that city somewhat abruptly and without a passport. I should be sorry to put you to any inconvenience on my account, and assure you that you have only to express a doubt—-a hint will be enough—to be relieved of me and my wife at our first baiting-place.”

He clasped my hand, saying, “I like your frankness—it pleases me vastly. And I see that I can help you. I have a very commodious passport which will pass your charming lady, yourself and half a dozen children— if you had been so precocious as to have them. Let us talk of more pleasant things than my magnanimity, if you please; the subject is naturally familiar to me.”

This Cavaliere Aquamorta—he had the Order of the Golden Spur from his Holiness—-was a tall spare man of a striking, if truculent, presence, with a high forehead, prominent eyebrows, densely black, cheekbones like razors, a complexion of walnut, and burning dark eyes. He carried his head high, and punctuated his vivacious utterances with snorts and free expectoration. He was, as I had seen at once, very much overdressed; his jabot was too full, he had three watches, ring-laden fingers, not unduly clean, and no less than five snuff-boxes, which he used in turn. He had certain delicate perceptions, however, which I must do him the justice to record; for if he was overdressed, I (God knows) was not, and yet not one glance of his penetrating eyes was turned in my direction which was not of deference and amiability. He treated me in every respect as if I had been his equal in appearance, address and fortune. His gallantry to Virginia would have been, I thought, excessive if displayed to any woman in the world. Before we had gone a league he had hold of her hand, to illustrate a story he was telling us of an intrigue he had had with the Princess of Schaffhausen. “I took her Highness’ hand—thus,” says he, and took my wife’s. “‘Madame,’ I said, ’upon the honour of Aquamorta, the affair, having gone so far, must go all lengths. Logic and love alike demand it.’” The story was long; by the end of it, it was to be seen that he still held Virginia’s hand. Indeed, he held it more or less until we stopped at Empoli to dine; and when we returned to the carriage, if I may be believed, this knight of the Spur resumed possession, and (as if it had been a plaything) nursed, flourished, flirted, made raps with my wife’s hand until we were near the end of the day and within a few miles of the frontier of Lucca. Then at last he released it, kissing it first—popped his head out of the window, looked about and started, gave a prodigious Ha! cleared his throat, spat twice, and sat down again.

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He looked at me pleasantly but with penetration. “We have arrived at the dreadful field of Altopascio, where Castruccio Castracane cut up the Florentine legions,” says he, “and now, friend, your trials begin. My dear Signor Francis, believe me that I shall never forget the honour you and your charming lady have done to the equipage and solitary splendour of Aquamorta, nor the many marks of confidence and esteem you have both shown me throughout our delightful journey. Unhappily, so far as you are concerned, dear sir, it is over for a while. It will be necessary for you to leave us. My passport”—he produced it—“is made out for the Cavaliere Aquamorta, his lady, and servants. Your plan, therefore, will be to mount the box. I would take your place and give you mine, but that I am too well known to be supposed my own lacquey; nor could my sensitive honour brook it if I were. I would offer you my cloak, again, but that I fear it would betray you. It is perhaps a little out of key with the rest of your apparel. Better, after all, take one of those rascals’. For the next few hours you are Fritz, remember—Fritz from Buda Pesth; and I,” he cried with a sprightly air, “am the happy, the indulged possessor of the most lovely of women.” Again he kissed Virginia’s hand. Deeply annoyed as I was, there was nothing for it but to obey; and it was under these by no means dignified circumstances that I entered the Republic of Lucca for the first time.

Worse was to follow—much worse. The man was without conscience in exacting from me the uttermost farthing of the bargain. Arrived at the inn, where, it seemed, he had already bespoken the whole of the first floor, he led Virginia upstairs with the greatest deference, hat in hand, past the bowing landlord and all his array of scullions, maidservants, lacqueys, porters and cooks; and took no more notice of me than he had done of the horde of beggars at the door. Full of indignation, I started to follow him, but his body-servant, an assured rogue if ever there was one, stopped me with a firm grip of my elbow. “Softly, comrade, softly,” says he. “They won’t need you yet awhile. When hot metal is on the anvil my master is accustomed to strike.”

“What do you mean, you rascal?” I cried; and he, still holding my arm, “Why, my fine man,” says he, “since you won’t take a hint, I must deal plainly with you.” As we were then at the foot of the stairs, he suddenly wheeled me to the right about, and plunged me into the crowd of inn-servants. “Landlord,” cried he, “take this fellow in and give him his hire on my master’s account. ’Tis a runaway gaolbird by the look of him for whom we have no sort of use here. A few pauls will be handsome.”

He carried out his part with such bounce that he was completely successful; between him and the landlord and his crew I was hustled into the kitchens where I found the preparations for the cavaliere’s supper in full blast.

CHAPTER XXXI

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MY ADVENTURES AT THE INN

I hope I may say that, in the painful position in which I found myself, I did what was becoming to a man of honour more jealous of his wife's than of his own. I reasoned with myself that a scandal, an uproar, an exhibition of my resentment would not only be no protection to Virginia, but would be, on the other hand, the clearest evidence that I doubted her. It could only end in my being turned out of the inn and in her being held by every man and woman of the place for what she was not. I remembered here with admiration the conduct of Father Carnesecchi, who, having on one occasion conducted two ladies and their cavaliers about the church of San Giovannino, and pointed out what beauties it possessed—and many which it did not—was mistaken by them for the sacristan and offered a small gratuity at the door. He thanked them and humbly accepted it, and (as I think), did well; for, as he said afterwards, it would have hurt their esteem much more to have been refused than it could possibly hurt his to have been offered the gift. It was in the spirit of this that I acted in the present state of my affairs. Virginia was undoubtedly my wife, and therefore of my own rank. To doubt a gentleman in any situation, however delicate, were to be offensive; it could not therefore be less offensive, but must needs be more, to doubt a gentlewoman. Not only did I not doubt her in truth, but I would not let it be supposed by any one that I did. There then, in that steaming kitchen, among sweating cooks and greasy cook-aids did I stand, with what countenance I had.

They were too busy just then for any notice to be thrown my way. I sat in a corner out of sight and watched their preparations for a superb banquet. It might have seemed that the cavaliere was going to entertain all the Ancients of the Republic, to judge by the capons and turkeys, the strings of ortolans, the quails, the partridges, roasting, basting or getting trussed. There was a cygnet, I remember; there were large fish stuffed with savoury herbs, crawfish, lampreys, eels in wine; there were pastry, shapes of cream, jellies, custards: you never saw such a feast—and I am sure there were a score of persons of both sexes busy about it. The maids flew from saucepan to stewpan, the boys staggered under piles of plates; the dressers and servers were always in and out, carrying dishes to the lacqueys of the table or coming back for more. The head-cook, a mountain of brawn and lard, seemed fresh from the bath— so he dripped and shone. The hubbub, bustle, heat and worry are not to be described by me.

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When the dinner was at last completed and sent to table, the master-cook straightened himself and gave a short order, which was immediately obeyed. I saw him go into the scullery near by and souse his head and neck in a bucket of cold water. In a trice the tables of his late business were cleared, and the scullions laid out the materials for supper. These were, as may be supposed, distinguished by abundance rather than refinement: a dish of tripe, a chine of beef, spaghetti in wash-hand basins, onion salad with garlic, sausages, blood-puddings, pigs' feet in vinegar. High wicker flasks of wine stood in iron cages, to be swung down by the finger; there was one bottle of water: all was ready. But nobody sat down until the master-cook appeared. The men stood on one side of the table, the maids on the other, like soldiers on parade. He entered, the huge fellow, red from his cold douche, his hair all rumpled from the rude embraces of the jack-towel, and walked over to the men's side, wiping the wet from his ears as he went. He stood—this captain of the kitchen—in front of his company, and with a sweeping and appraising eye surveyed the ordered nymphs. He selected the partner of his choice, a modest-mannered creature who answered to the name of Gentucca; she came forward and stood by his side. With no more waiting he took his seat at the head of the board, and, plunging his fingers into a steaming bowl of spaghetti, began to gobble at it in the unedifying way which his nation have—and which, indeed, the dish demands. Gentucca sat at his right hand, but took nothing until she had helped him to drink. Meantime the others had made their arrangements— from the second in command down to the merest pot-boy selections had been made from among the maids. I heard, "Lisabetta, come here," or, "No, no, Liperata, I have chosen you"—or it was Caterina, or Giocosa, or Bettina, as the case may have been. To be brief, down sat everybody in the kitchen, Jack by his Gill, save my unhappy self.

It was the highly favoured Gentucca who pointed me out to the Grand Master of the Cooks. As I still wore the cape and long coat of Aquamorta's servant I was naturally accepted as such. The master-cook, who saw directly that I was a foreigner, courteously invited me to the right hand of Gentucca, ordering a bouncing girl of the name of Maria-Maddelena to make room for me. She very pleasantly did so; my plate was heaped, my cup was filled; all the company stood up and drank my health. Nothing could have been kinder than this humble society. My eyes clouded more than once to recognise it.

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My host exerted himself to entertain me, though he tried (and I cannot blame him) to entertain the company at the same time. Perhaps his curiosity got the better of his good nature; certainly he pumped me as dry as I could be induced to go, and it was not until he had learned everything I cared to tell him that he remembered that he could impart as well as receive. He discussed my master (as he supposed him to be), the cavaliere, and by what he told me gave me some entertainment not unmixed with anxiety. That obliging and imperturbable person was, I found out, a gentleman of fortune—a term which implies that he was not a gentleman at all and had no kind of fortune but what he could secure of his neighbours. He travelled like a prince, and spent his money freely, but all was, as my host said, a case of casting nets. "Not but what my gentleman loves his belly as much as you or I," said the master-cook; "and small blame to him if he do. A man's head has no more stout ally than his paunch, while it is well lined, and no more arrant deserter if he cut short the supplies. But if you suppose, sir, that the banquet which I have sent upstairs is all for Aquamorta and his lady to consume en tete-a-tete, you know very little about him. Why, I'll wager that demirep of a valet of his has collected half our young blades to the board. Good food, good wine, good talk there will be, never fear. And afterwards—what follows? So soon as the tables are cleared out come the cards and the fishes. His Excellency, to oblige the company, will make a faro-bank; the company—well fed and well drunken—to oblige his Excellency, will punt. The signora will do the same for the ladies, the ladies for the signora. Now do you see the drift of his net? Should any little dispute arise—as will be on occasion—the cavaliere's sword is at the disposition of the gentleman offended. He is something of a marksman, too, as you cannot fail to have heard if you are a traveller. He has killed a man and undone a couple of ladies in every Court of Europe. He has been under the leads at Venice, and out again, deuce knows how. He has been expelled from half the cities of Italy, and has turned the story into capital in the other half. A most exorbitant, irresistible droll of a master you have there, sir; but who his decoy-duck of the moment may be, I dare say you can tell better than I. A fine young woman, and a cool hand, I could see for myself. I thought she looked waspish and gave herself more graces than were hers by nature. He has a taste for a bitter with his food, it appears; something tart and sharp to give an edge to his palate, perhaps. Do you happen to know her name?"

I said she was known to me as Donna Virginia, whereat he laughed gaily, and taking Gentucca round the waist, kissed her heartily, saying that she was the virgin for him.

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Shortly after this, with a few words of polite excuse, he broke up the table and retired with his partner. The rest of the company gave itself up to pleasures which were as zestful as they were free. It may be imagined that I had little taste for such simple sports as these worthy persons could devise. I sat, an unhappy spectator of their gambols—but a diversion of a vigorous kind was at hand. In the midst of the scuffling and babel of voices in the kitchen I heard the strident tones of the cavaliere, evidently in a great rage.

“Where is that dastardly dog? Where is that villain of a cook?” I heard him roar on the stairs. “Bring me that scoundrel that I may slit his ears!” At this moment he burst through the doors, a terrific spectacle of fury, his eyes burning like fires, his face inflamed, his drawn sword in his hand. The company scattered to the walls or dived beneath the tables, chairs were overturned, the maids began to scream.

He glared about him at the desert he had made. “Produce me the cook, you knaves,” cried he, “or I mow you down like thistles.” The master-cook’s face peeped through the gently opened door, and the cavaliere, across the room in two strides, seized his victim by the ear and pulled him headlong into the kitchen. “Hound!” he roared, “and son of a hound! Take the punishment you have earned.”

“Sir, sir!” says the unhappy cook, “what have I done?”

“Done!” cries the cavaliere, screwing him unmercifully by the ear, “you have compassed my death by your infernal arts. I am poisoned—a dying man, but my last ounce of strength shall be enough to avenge me.” So said, he began to belabour the wretch with the flat of his sword, and at each stroke the cook gave a howl of terror. His poor little mistress ran out of her concealment and clung to his helpless person, seeking to receive upon hers the blows as they fell. It was then that I interposed.

“Cavaliere,” I said, “you are acting, with I know not what justice, against a man who has just proved more hospitable to me than yourself has thought fit to do. I must now tell you that any further indignity offered to him must be considered as done to me.”

He paused in his furious attack, and “Ha!” says he, “here’s the husband.” He began to laugh; he laughed with such gusto and abandoned himself to such uproarious mirth that very soon all the company except myself was laughing with him. All of a sudden he stopped, with a mighty serious face. “Harkee, my friend,” says he to me, “upon reflection I do believe that I have been hasty. The spasm passes. It may well be that it was the excellence of this honest man’s catering which betrayed me, and not any infernal design. A passing cholic, after all!” He smiled benevolently upon his recent prisoner. “Rise, my worthy friend,” said he, “and receive a pardon from the right hand of fellowship, sugared, as I hope, to your liking.” His hand was full of gold pieces. “Nobody shall say,” he added proudly, “that Aquamorta cannot requite good service,

because he knows so well how to reprimand bad service." The cook humbly thanking his Excellency, the storm was over.

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But I had another brewing, or thought that I should have. As the cavaliere was about to retire, I stopped him and said that I wished to accompany him. He scratched his head.

“Why, my dear sir,” says he, “that will be plaguily inconvenient at this moment. My rooms are full of guests, d’ye see? Your charming lady is entertaining all the Senators’ mistresses, and I am in the midst of a carouse with their Serenities. I am not one for hard-and-fast categories, as you know. Your dirty shirt and ragged elbows are nothing to me—but zounds! I can’t answer for the most Serene Ancients.”

I said then that I would retire to my room and wait for my wife—but to that he objected that, in strict truth, and to keep up the fiction upon which my safety depended, I had no room, at all. My wife was considered to be his wife, while I was supposed to be what I had professed myself, his servant. Would I, he asked me, for the sake of a night’s gratification, imperil the many happy years which, he hoped and would take care, should be in store for me?

I was somewhat slow in meeting this preposterous question as it deserved, and when I opened my lips to speak he stopped me with, “Say no more. I don’t ask your thanks. Your safety is as dear to me as my own.” He beckoned to one of the scullions, and “Hi, you,” says he, “show this fellow of mine where he can sleep, and see to it that his company be honest.” With that he ruffled upstairs with the airs of a grand duke, and left me once more stranded with the cooks. To come to an end of this humiliating page, rejecting all offers of company, I was accommodated with a wretched cupboard below the stairs, which smelt vilely of sour wine and mildewed cheese, and ruefully prepared to spend what sort of night I could, with my thoughts for bedfellows.

I know not what hour of the night it was when I was roused out of a dream-tortured sleep by the creaking of my cupboard door. Looking up, the light of a candle which she held showed me Virginia.

“Behold Virginia,” she said. “Did you doubt whether I should come?”

“I never doubted but you would come if you could,” I replied, “but I did not see how it was possible.” She blew out the candle and crept to my side. “The cavaliere, by diverting his friends with your plight,” she said, “revealed to me where he had left you. I excused myself to the company and retired. I think he will be disagreeably surprised before morning.”

I was much touched by her devotion and wifely duty, and assured her of it by every means in my power.

CHAPTER XXXII

WE LIVE HAPPILY IN LUCCA

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Whatever trick Virginia may have designed for the humiliation of the cavaliere—and I never inquired of her what it was—it failed of any apparent effect. He presented himself before us in the morning with undisturbed serenity, and the same elaborate professions of good-will. He was going, he said, to spend the day in my rehabilitation. “Be of good cheer, my dear Don Francis,” were his comfortable words, “for I never yet failed a friend. It would, indeed—to put it at its lowest—be a deplorable want of policy on my part, for since I wish to be thought a gentleman, every act of my life must be more gentlemanlike than that of the greatest gentleman in Europe. As you have found me hitherto, so you shall find me now. Make me your banker at the tailor’s, the perruquier’s, the barber’s, the shirtmaker’s, the hosier’s, and the hatter’s. Add the shoemaker to your list, to oblige me. I go out to beat at every influential door in Lucca in your favour. Before nightfall, you shall have papers of identity and safe-conduct which will take you all over our peninsula.”

I thanked him, but declined any assistance whatsoever. I had money enough for my needs; my wife was prepared to share the fortunes of her husband. I said that I intended to take a small lodging, to settle myself there, and by honest industry to make my way in the world. Both of us could work; we had no desire for fine society; and as for credentials, the excellency of our handiwork and our obedience to the laws would be the best in the world.

He was vexed, and showed that he was. “As for your handiwork, my dear sir,” says he, “all that I have seen of it is that it has left you with scarce a shirt to your back. Your respect for the law has induced you to shoot a Capuchin in broad daylight, and forced you to leave Florence disguised as a manservant. However, these things are no concern of mine. Go your own way, young gentleman, consider me your friend, and permit me to kiss your lady’s hand, vowing myself her grateful and obliged servant for more favours than perhaps you would care to hear recounted.”

Scorning such insinuations as they deserved, Virginia held him out her hand, which he kissed as if he would have bitten it. I ought to have been warned by the glitter in his hard black eyes, but being conscious of my moral altitude above the base wretch, I took no further notice of him.

I had still in my possession my fifty guineas, with which, judiciously laid out, I had no doubt but that we could make our way good in Lucca. Full of hope, and fortified by all the privileges which the Church can bestow upon a Christian, or a complaisant wife upon her husband, I set about my business, which was to secure honourable employment for both of us. After much discussion with Virginia and the exhibition of reasons on my part with which I shall be less particular to trouble the reader, since I have dwelt upon them more than once already, I decided to begin in one

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of the humblest positions a man can take up. I would do journeyman's work of any sort or kind until I had won what in the finer walks of life we call the spurs. Not to be behind me in effort, Virginia would work also. I hesitated for some time between the carpenter's and the gardener's profession, for both of which I had always had an aptitude; but the former had my choice. Virginia ultimately chose for laundry-work, because that took her more into the open air, which she dearly loved.

I remember that we came to these decisions, after a day or two of talk about them, upon the grassy ramparts which overlooked the beautiful city on one side and the green meads of the Serchio, with their background of purple hills, on the other. It was there that Virginia, holding my hand in hers, spoke in this manner. "Francis," said she, "my lord and master, I have never yet asked you why you paid me the extreme honour of making me your wife, when, as you know very well, I was yours to dispose of in any other way you pleased; and I shall never ask you. It is enough for me that you have raised a poor girl out of the mire and made her a proud woman. But proud as I am—or because I am proud—I shall not forget to be humble. Don't suppose that I think myself raised to your degree because you have taken me in your arms; no, indeed, I am a little peasant and shall always be a little peasant. If I was found good in your eyes—as I am bound to believe I was—it was for that reason. Such as I am, for such as you have taken me, I shall never fail you. I will work the flesh off my bones for you, I will lie, cheat, steal, commit any sin under the sky if you bid me. I am utterly yours to take or put away, to live or die, for Heaven or Hell—you have only to require of me. It is in my power to sink for your pleasure, for we can always go lower than our best; but I cannot rise without you. If you ask me to set up for a lady, I tell you plainly I cannot. Have patience with me, Francis; do not condemn me to fail you. If I cannot rise, you must stoop. If I cannot be a fine lady, you must be content to do without your gentlehood. If I am a peasant, you must be a peasant. As such I shall please you—I am certain of it. In any other way you will stab me at every turn of your head. I shall break my back for you—and do well in my own way; but in yours I shall break my heart—and not advantage you one inch. Remember this too, that you may abandon me whenever you please, and get no reproaches from me."

She spoke modestly, courageously, and well. I kissed her, saying, "You are a good wife to me, Virginia. I agree with everything you say. Come, my dear, kiss me. I think we shall be happy."

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She dashed her hand across her eyes as if to fend off a sudden storm of tears; then threw her arms round my neck and pressed me close to her bosom. She kissed me a thousand times, eagerly and warmly. “I love you, my lord, I love you, my saviour and king. If you are kind to me, I shall die. Beat me, misuse me, neglect me, be unfaithful —it is your right— and I shall serve you the better for it. But if you love me I cannot bear it. I shall suffocate with joy—my heart will crack. O Francis, Francis, wilt thou never understand thy poor girl?” All this time she was straining me to her with frenzy, kissing me, almost blind with tears. She was frantic, panting and struggling for breath. I had seen her before in possession of this dangerous ecstasy of love, and though I could not but love her for it in my turn, it was not the kind of happiness I wished her to enjoy. Her scene ended in a very passion of weeping, distressing to witness, but no doubt soothing; after which, moaning like one sore beaten, she lay lax and languid in my arms. Deeply touched, I laid her down upon the grass and watched her fade off into a quieter sleep. In this state she lay for an hour of more, and awoke refreshed, her usual shrewd and reticent self.

Therefore, loving, and being passionately loved in return, working diligently at a clean trade, living in the sweat of my brow, owing no man anything, the next few months of my life—few as they were, not more than six all told—were some of the happiest I have ever spent. They recalled those weeks at Pistoja, but only to excel them; for then I was idle and Virginia not satisfied. Then I had none of the sweet uses of domestic life—the hearth in common, and the heart too; the nuptial sacraments of kiss and embrace, the united outlook, the rational hope of increase. We forgot the world, which had forgotten us; our appetites were simple and easily satisfied; we fed each other and knew deep content. Happy, happy days at Lucca, too soon ended! We shared the uses of a single room with a couple as young and newly wedded as ourselves, rose at five in the morning, and worked at our employment until late in the evening. We ate frugally, drank a little wine and water, loved temperately, and slept profoundly. On Sundays and festivals we went to Mass together, and spent our leisure in excursions in the fields and pleasant groves with which Lucca is engirdled. We never ventured outside the territory of the Republic, but felt secure within it, trusting to our honest intentions, our simplicity and complete insignificance. Ah, blessed content! Blessed, thrice blessed obscurity! Would to God that you had been assured to us for ever! On rare occasions one or other of us had sight of the Cavaliere Aquamorta, who maintained the same magnificence at the Albergo del Sole, and was reputed to be making large sums with his faro-bank. A new scheme of his for a State lottery upon a scale never before conceived by this thrifty little State was said to be under

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the consideration of the Senators. Working in my master's yard, I used to see him now and again being carried in his chair to this great house or that, half a dozen link-boys before him, and his valet behind carrying his sword and gloves. Virginia often met him in the course of her errands, but, as she said, was never recognised by him. We nattered ourselves that he had forgotten our co-existence with him upon this planet. Hope never stooped to falser cozenage; we were to be rudely undeceived.

CHAPTER XXXIII

TREACHERY WORKS AGAINST US

One evening—I believe, as I said, that it was after nearly six months' calm and temperate life that our troubles began—upon returning from my day's work, I found Virginia in a pensive mood. She accepted, but hardly returned, my salute, was very silent throughout the preparation and eating of our supper; now and then, glancing at her, I caught her gaze fixed upon me, and fancied that there was a hard light in her eyes. Our companions, Gioiachino and his wife Teresa, rallied us on what they thought to be one of those domestic differences common to the most affectionate couples. "A tiff, a tiff!" said they, nudging each other. "Virginia has caught him with the gardener's wife. We shall get no sleep to-night." This gardener's wife was an obese and asthmatic matron of some two-score years; who occupied a room in our little house, and was kinder to me than I cared for. It was not until Gioiachino and his Teresa were asleep that I could hope to discover what had affected Virginia. She then told me that, as she had been at work that afternoon, kneeling on the boards by the river with the other women, the Cavaliere Aquamorta with a party of gentlemen had come by the meadows and stopped to jest and bandy familiarities with the laundresses. Although he had pretended not to recognise her, Virginia was not deceived. Finding his opportunity, he drew near to her side, and whispered in her ear, "Can I believe my senses? You, my charming consort of a few weeks ago, in such a plight, in such a company!" Virginia had replied that the company had been of her own choosing up to this hour, and that what he complained of now could be remedied very easily, and by himself only. He said, "No, my honour will not allow it. I must needs remember what I might have made you, and what you have become. Count upon Aquamorta, who has never yet failed his friends. Count upon his memory and passionate aspirations."

"I told him," said Virginia, "that I should do nothing of the kind. I said that I was wife to a gentleman born, who also happened to be an honest man. 'If,' I said finally, 'you wish to do Virginia a real service, you will be pleased to forget that you ever saw her.' He laughed, and said that that was impossible to a man of his tumultuous passions, and went away with a profound salutation. This," said my poor Virginia, "has troubled me

more than I care to own. I think we should be wise to leave Lucca until—evil wind that he is—he blows over."

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Though I comforted her pretty well and bade her think no more about the man, I very soon had reason to be of her opinion. Two or three days later, as I was sawing planks in the yard, to make a trellis, that saturnine person came in, resplendently dressed, and filled the wholesome place with the reek of his essences. He saluted me with extravagant politeness, telling me that he had words for my private ear which he was sure would interest me. When I took little or no notice of him he came to closer quarters. "Hearken, Signor Manifold," says he, "my news concerns Donna Aurelia."

How he knew that sacred name I cannot conceive. It had never passed from my lips into his wicked ears. But I was unprepared for it, and started violently the moment I heard it. "Ha!" cried he, "now I have passed your guard, Don Francis, have I? Now perhaps you will do me the honour of conversing?" I blush to record that I led him within the workshop and begged him to be quick with his news.

There is no need for any reader of mine to tell me my duty. I ought not to have allowed her name to rest upon his mouth; I ought not to have allowed it to touch mine. I ought not to have remembered Aurelia, I ought not to have adored her. Was I not wedded? Was I not beloved? O God of Heaven and earth, if regrets did not avail me then, how can they avail me now? But I will no more look back than I will anticipate in this narrative. I will repeat with what face I can that I led this hardy ruffian into the workshop, cleared a bench for him to sit upon, and bade him tell his story.

Then said he, "My news would at any other time than this give you great pain, Don Francis, for it is not altogether to the credit of one to whom you have paid the most tender of your vows. But seeking, as I have always done, your honour and advantage, I feel that I shall really increase both of them by what I have to say. For if I remind you that you are a fortunate husband, it ought to enhance your consciousness of that fact when I go on to tell you that Donna Aurelia was unworthy of your attentions, since she took no pains to deserve them."

I said here that I knew beforehand his malice and the reasons for it. I said, "You have proved yourself already so unworthy of belief that I tell you now I shall not credit one word you say. How dare you speak of the unworthiness of any lady, being yourself the most worthless of men?"

He smiled, and continued, "What will you do, but thank God, my dear Don Francis, when I tell you that it was she herself who put Fra Palamone in your way? What will you say when you know that you were not intended to kill the Capuchin so that you might be chased out of Florence, as you have supposed, but instead, it was hoped that he would carry off Miss Virginia to her marchese? What will you now say to Donna Aurelia's share in that plot, when I tell you that she——"

He paused here, grinning his triumph.

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“I will tell you what I have to say,” I answered him, standing up with folded arms. “I say that you lie. You have never done anything but lie and cheat since the moment I saw you. You live by cheating, and will die lying. That is what I have to say. I salute you and beg you to be gone.”

“The fair and cruel-kind Aurelia——” he began unconcernedly, but I struck the bench on which he sat.

“Cavaliere,” I said, “if you speak one word more of that lady I shall kill you here in this place.”

I had an adze in my hand, and I suppose he believed me, for he shrugged his shoulders, got up and walked out of the carpenter’s shop. He had accomplished one part of his infamous design, at least. With every symptom of the most exquisite torture of mind I recalled throughout that day and night the lovely, fleeting, unattainable image of Aurelia Gualandi. She was fatally present, every bend and turn of her head, every motion of her bosom, the weaving of her hands, every flutter of her breath, every sigh, every flash of her eyes danced before me, mocking, deluding, beckoning, beguiling, enchanting me. My poor Virginia had reason to complain of my dejection, coldness, inattention, God knows! But He knows too, and will reward her for it, that the brave girl never once did complain. My torment endured atrociously all night, and all the next day; then subsided somewhat, and by the Sunday following was almost gone. On the Monday, moreover, I had something else to think of: this, namely——

On Monday evening, just as I was about to leave the yard, Virginia, with a hood over her head, came into it. This was extraordinary, and so did she appear—vividly coloured, with the eyes of one in a fever, but not alarmed; elated rather, and full of strong resolve. Before I could speak she put her finger to her lip, and said, “Hush! Come with me to the ramparts instead of going home. I have something to tell you.” I followed her at once. The ramparts were very empty, as it was nearly dark. She took my arm and began to walk slowly under the trees, speaking calmly, mastering the excitement which she evidently suffered.

She said, “At noon to-day, after the dinner-hour, the padrona gave me three baskets of linen, and told me to carry them to their owners, with the bills which were pinned upon them. I put all three on my head and went away. The first errand was to the apartment of that old colonel of artillery, where I have often been before. I delivered the basket, unpacked it in his presence, received the money and my buona mano, and departed. The second took me to Don Filiberto, the parroco of Santa Lucia. As usual, he inquired after you, asked me that certain question which you know, gave me two whites, patted my cheek, and hoped for better news next week. When I came to look at my third basket, judge my dismay to find that it was addressed to the Cavaliere Aquamorta, at the Albergo del Sole. It was the largest by far—and that was why I had put it at the bottom—and had a substantial bill upon it, including the arrears of three weeks. I

suppose he had planned it with the padrona, for I had never been to him before, and did not even know that we washed for him. However, there was no help for it. I must go.

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“He received me with a grin, expressing surprise, which I knew he had not, and pleasure, which I fear he had. I was as unconcerned as I knew how to be, and began unpacking the linen; but he came behind me at once, and, kneeling beside me on one knee, began to be unpleasantly attentive, praising my beauty extravagantly, talking, joking, whispering—and worse—doing all he could, in fact, to make me as bad as he was. He owned that he had laid this ‘little stratagem of love,’ as he called it, and that the bill, far from being in arrear, had been paid, and twice paid. There, then, was the price of my betrayal. Then he spoke of you, Francis, asking whether I had discovered the cause of your recent distemperature. ‘I have given him some news of his Aurelia of late,’ he said, ’which may have inclined him to neglect a far more charming nymph.’ I replied to that, that if he had put himself to the trouble of telling you lies of Donna Aurelia, there was no wonder that you were unhappy; for, says I, ’To have her name, which you held sacred, tripped off lips which you knew to be profane was a horrible thing.’ He laughed at me, and called me his incorrigible charmer, his dearest tease, delight and provocation. He grew very attentive, and would have embraced me; whereupon, biding my time, I gave him such a slap in the left eye as he won’t soon recover from. Then, while he was cursing me and calling for his servant, I made my escape.”

I praised her warmly, as she deserved. She had done what became her with the only weapon she possessed. “The rest,” I said, “is mine. I shall know how to maintain your honour and my own. This very night I shall send a friend to the cavaliere, and leave him the choice of weapons.”

She stopped our walk, and faced me with agitation. “Dio mio, my lord, what are you saying?” I repeated my words, and she became dry, as she always did when she disapproved.

“Good, my lord,” she said; “and may your handmaid know the name of the friend whom you propose to send with your cartel to the Cavaliere Aquamorta?”

I said that I should ask Gioiachino, our fellow-lodger, to oblige me.

“Excellent,” said Virginia with irony, “excellent indeed! Gioiachino, a cat’s-meat man, waits upon the Cavaliere Aquamorta on behalf of his friend Francesco, a journeyman carpenter!”

This made me more angry than I had any business to be, for she was perfectly right from the cavaliere’s view of the thing. I said, “Virginia, my condition in this world has never been hidden from you. Apart from my birthright, which is an advantage not of my own making, I hope I have never been to you other than an honourable man. Gioiachino, who has been a good friend to you and me, certainly deserves no less credit. If a gentleman, as I claim to be, is condescending enough to send a person perfectly honest to a vulgar, libidinous, lying bully and cheat, who happens to have

robbed to better purpose than I have worked— then, I say, you should agree with me that I am paying more honour to a thief than he can hope to deserve. I am sorry to have to speak so plainly to you, but it is not for you, any more than for me, to reproach Gioiachino with being an honest man."

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She was silent for a few minutes, then knelt down and kissed my hand. When I raised her up and embraced her, I found tears on her cheeks. We walked home in the dark without another word said, and I prevailed upon Gioiachino to convey my challenge, though he did what he could to dissuade me. “This,” he said, “is madness. Do you not know that the less your man is assured of his gentility the more exacting he will be in the profession of it? Do you know what will occur? He will call for some lacquey or another to kick me downstairs.”

My answer to that was that such conduct to the bearer of a gentleman’s cartel was unheard of. I added that if the cavaliere prided himself, against all evidence, upon being a gentleman, he was not at all likely to convict himself of being a ruffian. Very ruefully, in the end, the good-natured Gioiachino went out to oblige me.

It happens that I was right, or had good grounds for thinking so. The cavaliere received the poor fellow with perfect affability, and after a short colloquy with some of his companions, introduced a certain Prince Gandolfo Dolfini, with whom Gioiachino was to arrange a meeting in the fields for seven o’clock on the Wednesday morning. The cavaliere having the choice of weapons, his friend the prince decided for *whips*.

If this was to make me feel ridiculous it failed. I was much too angry. “Whips he shall have,” said I, and went to bed.

On the morning appointed I rose at my usual hour and went to the workshop, intending to go on with my duties until the time appointed. I left Virginia in tears, and Teresa, no less wretched, clinging to her in her bed. At a quarter before seven, Gioiachino with me, armed with a stout cart-whip, I left the Porta del Vescovo and walked briskly over one or two water-meadows towards a retired grove of trees not far from the Pisa road. I flattered myself that we were first in the field; but there I was mistaken. I found a numerous company assembled—tall persons in cocked hats, coats and badges, a posse of police, and the villainous cavaliere smirking in the midst. So soon as we entered the grove he pointed to me with his cane and said in a loud voice: “There, Signor Sindaco, there is the fugitive assassin, the betrayer of an innocent girl. Speed him back to Tuscany with the added wages he has richly earned in Lucca.” The police advanced, seized me, bound my wrists. An old gentleman without teeth read a long legal instrument without stops, at the end of which I was stripped to the shirt, horsed upon Gioiachino’s back and vigorously whipped. I was then haled by my harsh executioners some league or more over the marshes to the confines of the Republic of Lucca and told to take myself out of sight unless I wished for more taste of the whip. Without prayers, without words, without a coat, without money, rich in nothing but innocence and despair, I reached the hillside and flung myself face downwards upon the sward. There I lay far into the night.

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CHAPTER XXXIV

I FALL IN WITH THE PLAYERS

My present situation was of that shocking description which defies thought and paralyses the will. I was utterly alone, deprived of the means of joining the only person in Italy who loved me, utterly destitute of means, placed in a country from which I had been banished as a criminal. I shall be understood, then, when I say that for a week or more I wandered over the face of the land, not regarding whither I went (so only that I avoided my kind), nor what became of me. How I subsisted I am at a loss to tell; I have no clear recollections—nothing but a confused sense of abiding despair, hunger, haste and desolation. I know not through what regions I passed, the names of what villages I avoided, the names of what farm-houses I pillaged of eggs and milk in order that I might keep a soul in my body. It is true that I became a common thief; it is very true that during this most dreadful period I spoke not to one living person—for whenever I saw man, woman or child I crouched in whatsoever shelter I could find, and lay there trembling like a beast of chase until the enemy (as I deemed him) had passed and I could venture out again to seek for food. Providentially for me, my banishment from Lucca had taken place in the summer; I suffered nothing from exposure, and had no real lack of sustenance. I used to rummage the streets of villages at night to get broken meat; as I have said, I did not scruple to rob henroosts, or to suck the teats of cows and goats in the byres. During this time I neither prayed to God nor thought of Virginia in her horrid peril. All my efforts of mind and sense were directed to hiding and finding food. I was very near losing my wits.

Gradually, however, I recovered my self-possession, and with that, one by one, my proper faculties returned. I was surprised at myself when one day, seeing a man hoeing in a field, I felt the desire to speak to him and ask my whereabouts. I was in a dreadful fright when it came to the point that I had gone too far towards him to recede; but I mastered myself by an effort and brought myself to accost him. Without any surprise at my appearance, which was, indeed, no worse than his own, he told me that I was in the Vale of Chianti, between Certaldo and Poggibonsi, and that if I persevered upon the road I saw before me I should reach the latter place by nightfall. “But, brother,” said he, “you look to have seen better days, and I advise you to push on to Siena. May be you’ll find employment there—for that is a rich city. Here I tell you there is nothing. It is little use my offering you a crust, for I have not got one.” I thanked him, and having broken cover, stoutly took the road and limped along as best I could.

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Perhaps I had gone a league and a half when I came to a village full of people. Half a dozen miserable houses placed streetwise, one of them a disreputable inn, formed a background to a motley assembly of tattered vagrants, of which peasants of the countryside of both sexes, children, pigs and turkeys formed a small part. The others were men and women of the most extravagant attire and behaviour it is possible to imagine. I saw a punchinello on stilts wading among the rest; there were women flaunting feathers on their tousled heads, and moustachioed bullies who might have come from the ruck of some army on the march; pages, minions, magicians, astrologers, women's ruffians, castrati—it was as if one of the wildest hours of the Piazzetta of Venice had been transported by witchcraft to this quiet place. As I approached, wondering at what I saw, a creature, I knew not then whether man or woman, came and stood in my path, and with a great gesture of the arm greeted me in this remarkable apostrophe: "Hail, all hail, Bombaces, King of the Halicarnassians!" He, or she, repeated this shrilly three or four times, but nobody took any notice.

This hermaphrodite had a face of the most vivid and regular beauty I ever saw—a face of perfect oval, freshly and rarely coloured, a pair of dark and lustrous eyes, a straight, fine nose and a mouth exquisitely shaped, provokingly red. Its hair, which was dark brown, fell in a tide of wealth far over its shoulders. It wore a woman's bodice cut square in the neck, after the fashion of unmarried women in Venice, and short in the sleeves; but at the waist that sex stopped and the male began, for it had on a pair of man's breeches, worsted stockings and Venice slippers, and its shape as revealed by these garments was not that of a woman. The creature, as a fact, declared itself to be a male; and when he began to declaim against me again, I addressed him for what he was. "My good young man," I said, "I am too weary, too desperate and too hungry to be entertained by your antics, and too poor to reward you for them—being, as you see me, an exile and a stranger. If you can find me something to eat, I shall be grateful; if you cannot, go in peace, and leave me to do the same."

The droll beauty changed his tone in an instant. "Follow me, sir," said he, "and you shall have everything you want. I entreat your pardon for inflicting my impertinences upon you at such an ill-judged moment." He took me by the hand and addressed himself to the crowd about the inn doors; by pushing, punching, jostling, cursing, praying and coaxing in turns, he made a way into the house. But that was full to suffocation of the actors and their belongings, and of the peasantry who had come to gape at them. Everybody was engaged in getting drunk who was not drunk already. Some were fighting, some lovemaking, some filching. I saw a curious sight. A man dressed like a harlequin was picking a countryman's pocket, and having

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his own picked, while he was in the act, by some sharp-featured imp of a castrato. In fine, the whole house from floor to rafters was full; the bedchambers, to call them so which had no beds in them, were worse than the kitchen. I could not see that I had gained anything by following my questionable guide; but he, who had more resources than I knew of, having snatched a half-loaf and bottle of wine from the lower quarters, trampled and fought his way upstairs with them, showed me a ladder which gave on to the roof, and went up it like a bird, without using his hands. I followed him, and saw a proud light in his eyes as he invited me to survey my private room. We were in the valley formed by the two pitches of the roof, nothing between our heads and the evening sky. The revellings and blasphemies of the house were not to be heard; pigeons clustered on the chimney-pots or strutted the ridges of the house; a cat, huddled up, watched them from a corner. Stars showed faintly here and there; we were sheltered from the wind; I heard far off the angelus bell ringing.

“Here, at any rate, you won’t be disturbed,” said my protector. “Eat, sir, drink, and repose yourself. When you feel inclined you shall tell me how I can serve you further.”

The evening bell, and this kindness of the lad’s, had reminded me of what I was. I said, “My friend, I shall first thank God for having made your nation the boldest, the most ingenious, the gentlest, the most modest, most open-hearted in the world. You see before you a man of all men most unfortunate; but yet I say to you in the presence of God and of his household, whose lights are kindling even now, that, but for the like of you, many and many a time I should have died unannealed.”

He was confused and, boylike, tried to laugh off my praises. “You give me too high a character, sir,” said he. “I am a graceless devil of the Veneto, without prospect or retrospect to be proud of, a poor creature who has to go to market with what wares he has. If I can look forward it is because I dare not look back. What I am doing for you now, for which you are so kind as to praise me, is not virtue. I wish to Heaven virtue were so easy got. Eat, however, drink and rest. If I am no better than I should be, I suppose I am not worse than I could be. And I cannot allow you to praise me for that.”

“You are of the race of the Samaritans,” said I, “whether you hail from Venice or Tuscany. I am an Englishman, my name is Francis. How are you called?”

He said, “I believe my name is Daniele; but they call me here, in the company, Belviso.”

“And they do well,” I returned, “for that you certainly are, and, as far as I am concerned, you prove as good as you are good-looking.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “No one is better than he can help, I fancy, sir,” he said. “There is every inducement to be wicked in this world. But I will say this of myself—and

I dare say everybody else can say the same—that when I am good I am as good as gold, for I realise perfectly well my unusual estate and become a very usurer of virtue. But this is of rare occurrence, seeing that I am an actor. By ordinary, for the fifteen years that I have been in the world, I am remarkably vicious."

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“I cannot hear you say that, Belviso,” I told him, “without giving you warning that, so long as I am in your company, and to the utmost of my powers, I shall restrain you from being anything of the sort.”

He started, looked at me for a moment, then kissed my hand. “I believe our Saviour sent you here to be his vicar in my regard,” he said. “I don’t know how long you may be in my company, for it depends mostly upon yourself. But I promise you in my turn that I shall never take ill whatsoever your honour may please to say to me; and I say that if I have the misfortune to lose sight of you this very night, I shall be the better for having known you, and shall go to sleep with more prospect of a decent to-morrow than I have ever done in the whole of my life.”

I judged that the best thing for this youth was to think more about my misfortunes than his own. I therefore told him how it was that I came before him in this plight, barefoot, bareheaded, bleeding and in rags. I told him of my concern for Virginia, of the deadly perils that beset her, and concluded by assuring him that the one service of any moment which he could do me was to devise me some means of communicating with Gioiachino, the vendor of cat’s-meat in Lucca. Belviso had put his head between his knees, and so remained for some time after I had done speaking, in earnest meditation.

After a while he lifted up his face, and said, “I shall go to Lucca for you, Don Francis. It is certain that you must not cross the frontier, and equally certain that there is no other person here who could strive more heartily to help you. But I dare not myself go alone. I shall get Il Nanno to go with me—a very good old fellow and as shrewd as a winter wind. We shall disguise ourselves, of course, and be off before dawn to-morrow. He shall go as my wife.”

“Your wife, my dear!” I exclaimed. “I should like to know what old fellow could play the woman beside you.” “Seeing that I get my living by so doing, I don’t mind owning that there is no one,” he agreed. “The trouble is that I should do it too well. When you see Il Nanno you will admit that my proposals are as prudent as they seem the reverse. I’ll go and fetch him, and you shall judge. Remember always that his name is Aristarcho; it would be a mortal affront to use that nickname of ours, for he is sensitive to a degree, like all these hunchbacks, and as fierce as a wild cat. Stay here—I will bring him up to you.” He disappeared into the house, and presently returned, followed by his proposed wife.

Signor Aristarcho was a dwarf of the most repulsive and uncompromising type. He cannot have been much more than four feet in height; he had a head nearly as large as his body, the strong-jawed, big-nosed, slit-mouthed head of some Condottiere of old, some Fortebraccio or Colleone of history and equestrian statuary. His eyes were small, staring, but extremely intelligent, his flesh spare and strained under the

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skin; he was beardless and as warty as a toad's back; he never smiled, spoke little and seemed to be afraid lest the air should get within him and never get out again, for he only opened the corner of his mouth to emit a word or two, and screwed it down immediately he had done. His poor deformed body was like that of Punchinello, a part for which he was famous in the theatres—protuberant before, hunched up between his shoulders behind, and set upon little writhen fleshless legs like wooden spigots. In manner he was excessively punctilious, grave, collected, oracularly sententious. I know that he was exquisitely sensitive to ridicule and remorseless in punishing it. It was not hard to understand— the moment I set eyes upon this poor monster—that, with the young and beautiful Belviso masquerading as a woman by his side, trouble must succeed trouble without end. On the other hand, I could not for the life of me see how the parts were to be reversed with any reasonable assurance. But the good youth himself had no misgivings.

After an exchange of careful courtesies I addressed myself to the dwarf. "Signor Aristarcho," I said, "this charitable young man has assured me of your active sympathy with my anxieties. You see before you a victim of fortune's extremest spite, who can sue for your favours with nothing but his tears——"

"Don't shed them," says he at the side of his mouth, "they are precious."

"—and offer you nothing in return but his thanks. But I am speaking to a gentleman ——"

"You are not," he said gruffly. "You are speaking to a man."

"—of honour," I pursued, "and sensibility. In a word, I am speaking to a Christian. If then you, a Christian, can save the soul of my young and newly wedded wife—ah, Jesu! my darling from the lions——"

He put up his hand. "No more," he said; "I will do what I can."

I said, "Sir, my boundless gratitude——"

"No more," he stayed me; "I am paid already."

"Alas, sir——" I felt that I must go on; but he would not have it.

"You have called me a Christian," he said. "No one has ever called me that before. I thank you. I would die for you."

"Live for me!" I cried. "Sir, sir, sir, I do find that the lower my bodily fortunes descend, the nearer I get to the kingdom of Heaven."

Aristarcho bowed gravely and said, “I thank you. Count upon me.”

He bowed again profoundly, and I returned the salute. When he had retired I told Belviso that I saw nothing in his state to deserve our pity, but that, on the contrary, I envied him the possession of a constant and discerning mind.

My friend replied, “Yes, yes, he is a good fellow and will serve you well. You have earned his gratitude; but let me warn you again never to hurt his feelings. You will be sorry for it for many a day.”

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When we went down, long after dark, to the inn kitchen, I found the actors seated at supper and was kindly received. Belviso presented me to the principals—to a pleasant, plump old gentleman, who looked like the canon of a cathedral foundation, and was, in fact, the famous Arlecchino 'Gritti; to the prima donna, a black-browed lady, who, because she came from Sicily, was called La Panormita, her own name being Brigida, and her husband's Minghelli; to the cheerfulest drunkard I ever met, who played the lovers' parts, and was that same Minghelli; to the sustainers of Pantaleone, Scaramuccia, Matamorte, Don Basilio, Brighella and the rest of them—a crew all told of some twenty hands, all males with the exception of La Panormita. The reason of that was that the company was very poor, and that fine women did not get sufficiently lucrative side-issues, as I may term them, to be tempted to join it. And again there were several restrictions placed by some States—such as those of the Church—upon female performers, only to be overcome by heavy fees to the officials. If it was inconvenient to them to drop Signora Minghelli in one place and pick her up at another, to have had more women in the same case might well have ruined them. They therefore had with them half a dozen boys and lads, of whom Belviso was by far their best—Pamfilo, Narcisso, Adone, Deifobo and the like, wicked, graceless little wretches as they were. Belviso took the leading woman's part in La Panormita's absence, and when she was present he came second. Notably he was Columbine in the comedy, and, as they said, one of the most excellent. I found all these people, as I have never failed to find Italians of their sort, simple, good-hearted and careless, sometimes happy, sometimes acutely miserable; but always patient and reasonable, and always expressing themselves unaffectedly, in very strong language. Of their kindness I cannot say too much; of their moral behaviour I must not. Their profession, no doubt, which forced them to exhibit themselves in indelicate or monstrous situations for the pleasure of people who were mainly both, had made them callous to much which is offensive to a man of breeding. Il Nanno was a great exception to their rule. I never knew him, but once, behave otherwise than as a gentleman. I never heard him hold unseemly conversation. Belviso, too, was, as far as I was concerned, honest, decent and self-respecting. I am inclined to hope, and have some grounds for believing, that he had given himself a worse character than he deserved. All I shall say about him here is that, had he been my son, I could not have been troubled by anything which he said or did so long as I was in his company.

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Sufficient of my story had been made common property by Il Nanno to save me the trouble of trying to enlist their sympathies. They were mine from the moment of my appearance in their midst. They were entirely willing to let my two champions go to Lucca on my account, and I was glad to hear that the company would not stand to lose much by so generous an act. They were on their way to Siena, and except for an open-air performance or two in mean villages would not need either Belviso or the dwarf until they reached that city, where the pair would rejoin them. They offered me their protection and hospitality in the frankest manner— in such terms, indeed, that I could not but have accepted them had my necessities been lighter than they were. I took them thankfully, and asked leave further to propose that, as I had a good memory and a person not otherwise unsuitable, I might place myself and my abilities at their whole disposal. "Use me, gentlemen," said I, "if I suit you; make me of service elsewhere than on your scene if I do not. By so doing you will lighten my load of debt, and make me feel less of a stranger and a burden. I have won two friends already by the recital of my sorrows"— here I placed a hand on Belviso's shoulder and gave the other to Il Nanno —"let me hope that I can gain yet more by some exhibition of my talents."

This was loudly applauded. "Stand up, Don Francis," said Belviso to me, "and spout us out whatever bombast you can remember."

I gave them, first, the opening speech of the Orfeo of Politian, where the sad shepherd accounts his plight, his pursuit of the nymph Euridice, her abhorrence of him, and the like. All eyes were fixed upon me; I saw those of La Panormita glisten. The smooth-flowing verses moved her. They were silent when I had done, which a little disconcerted me; but presently the dwarf snapped out, "More." Emboldened, I began upon the Aminta of Tasso, reciting the opening speech of Daphne in the fourth act. To my delight the part of Silvia, which Virginia in our old days at Pistoja had been wont to take, was caught up and continued by Belviso. We fired each other, capped each other, and ended the great scene. The last six lines of it, to be spoken by the Choragus, were croaked by Il Nanno in his bull-frog's voice. We stopped amid a storm of bravas, and La Panormita, with a great gesture, crowned us with flowers. I was made free of the company by acclamation.

Belviso set off early in the morning with his monstrous old wife of the occasion. He embraced me warmly before he left me. "Keep a good heart, Don Francis," he said, "and trust in your friends. All that is possible shall be done, you may be sure. I shan't dare to look you in the face if I come back without your Virginia."

CHAPTER XXXV

TEMPTED IN SIENA, BELVISO SAVES ME

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The company, of which I was now enrolled a member, moved on towards Siena, that city for which—as Aurelia's cradle—I had a feeling of profound reverence; towards which now, in spite of all that had occurred, I could not approach without a quickening of the pulse, an aching heart, and a longing mind. We travelled with a large caravan of donkeys and mules to carry the baggage and women—La Panormita, her gross old mother, and two hags, who called themselves the mothers, and were really the owners, of the boys. The rest of us, the men and the boys themselves, trudged afoot. We begged, jigged, or bullied for food as we went, having scarcely any money among us; for just now, after a disastrous week in Florence, the company was by way of starving until it could earn some pence-halfpence in Siena. The first night we slept in a rick-yard—a bitter wet night it was; the next, we reached Certaldo, and cajoled the landlord of the Ghirlanda out of house-room. This he only consented to upon the condition of our giving free entertainment then and there to his customers. We had been all day on the road; but what choice is open to the needy traveller? Footsore, muddy to the eyes, hungry, thirsty as we were—our clothes of the stage sodden with rain, our finery like wet weeds, our face-powder like mud and our paints like soup—we must perforce open our packs, don our chill motley, daub our weary faces, and caper through some piece of tomfoolery which, if it had not been so insipid, would have been grotesquely indecent. All I remember about it now is that it was called La Nuova Lucrezia ossia La Gatteria del Spropositi, a monstrous travesty of the story of Lucrece. One of the castrati—Pamfilo by name—played the part of Lisetta, "una putta di undici anni," and exhibited the most remarkable turn of satirical observation and humour I have ever seen before or since. Horrible in a manner as it was, it would have redeemed any performance. This demon of ingenuity and wit was little more than fourteen years old, and sang like an angel of Paradise. Another of them was the Lucrezia, the Roman matron—put into the short skirts, spangles, and mischievous peering glances of Colombina. Belviso would have sustained it had he been present. Adone, his understudy, took his place. My own share in the mummery was humble and confusing. In toga and cothurnus I had to read a pompous prologue, and did it amid shouts of "Basta! basta!" from the audience. I don't believe that I was more thankful than they were when I had done. The less I say about the rest of the evening and night the better. The people of Certaldo more than maintain the popular reputation of their great townsman, Boccaccio. They are as light-hearted, as impertinent, as amorous as he; and they diverted themselves with our company in a manner which did credit to his example. Such things, I hope I may say, were very little to my taste; but it was necessary for me not to seem singular, and I fancy that I did not.

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After a similar night's entertainment at Poggibonsi we set out, intending to be at Siena that same night. I need hardly say that the so near prospect filled me with various and contending emotions. I might hope, in the first place, to find Belviso there, returned with Virginia, my faithful and tender wife. To know her safe, to have her by my side, to be conscious, as I could not fail to be, of her deep and ardent love for me testified in every glance of her eyes—such could not fail to be a satisfaction to any honest, any sensible man. Such, too, I hope they were. But I must needs confess that not this confident expectation (for confident I was of Belviso's success) alone moved me and elated me at the moment. No, it is the truth that, the nearer I came to Siena, the more I realised the abiding influence of Aurelia upon my heart and conscience. I could not but tremble at the thought that in so few hours I should be treading the actual earth which her feet had lightly pressed during the years when she must have been at her happiest, and if not also at her loveliest—since when was she not at that?—assuredly at her purest and most radiant hour; before she had been sullied by the doctor's possessory rights, before she had been hurt by my dastardly advances. This, then, this it was which really affected me, to feel like some pilgrim of old, to Loreto, may be, or Compostella, to Walsingham, to Rome—nay, to the very bourne and goal of every Christian's desire, Jerusalem, the Holy City, itself—to feel, I say, singularly uplifted, singularly set apart and dedicated to the privilege which was now at last to be mine. From the moment of departure from Poggibonsi to that moment when I saw, upon a background of pure green sky, the spear-like shafts, the rose-coloured walls and churches of Siena, I kept my eyes steadily towards my Mecca, speaking very little, taking no heed of the manner of our progress. I had other sights than those to occupy me. I saw hedge-flowers which Aurelia might have plucked, shade where she might have rested, orchards where she might have tasted fruit, wells which might have cooled her feet. Some miles before I was in actual sight of my desired haven I was in a thrill and tension of expectancy, wrought upon me by these hopeful auguries, which I cannot describe. I was in a perpetual tremble, my lips were dry. We passed Castiglioncello; we rested for noonday at Monteriggione; at Castello del Diavolo, in full sight of all men, I kissed the stony road. In my own country, I know very well, I should have been hooted as a madman, but here, where a man does what nature, or something higher, prompts him without shame or circumspection, I was never molested. My companions were undoubtedly curious. Pamfilo said that I was going to meet my amica at Siena; La Panormita supposed that I regretted some bouncing girl of Certaldo. But I was soaring now to such a height that I cared nothing. We entered the Porta Camollia at half-past five o'clock in the evening,

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and trailed up the steep Via di Citta, between houses like solemn cliffs, and in the midst of a throng which, in the dusk of that narrow pass, seemed like dense clouds, lit up by innumerable moons, to our lodging at an inn called Le Tre Donzelle. These moons I found out were the wide straw hats of the lovely daughters of Siena, sisters of Aurelia, companions of her maiden hours! It made my heart jump into my throat to see in the doorway of the inn a girl of her own tender and buoyant shape, to hear her very tones, with that caressing fall which never failed to move me, and to see the quick turn of a crowned head exactly in her own manner. Before many hours were over I found myself stabbed more or less vividly by every young woman I met. There was no escaping from Aurelia in Aurelia's own city.

Indifferent alike to the orgies of my companions or to their reproaches of me for not sharing them, I spent a solitary, wakeful night in great exaltation of mind; with the first ray of dawn I was out and about, gaining in entire loneliness my first view of the sacred city. I stood, awestruck and breathless, under the star-strewn roof of the great church; I knelt where Aurelia's knees must have kissed the storied pavement. I walked in the vast Campo, which has been called, and justly called, the finest piazza in Europe; wondered over the towered palace of the ancient Commune; prayed at the altar of St. Catherine. Prepared then by prayer and meditation, I made solemn and punctilious visits to what I must call the holy places of Aurelia's nation: the Madonna del Bordone, the Madonna delle Grazie, and the Madonna called of Provenzano. Before each of these ladies—mournful, helpful, heaven-conversing deities—I prayed devoutly, on my knees. I anointed the feet of each with my tears, I offered up to each the incense of a sigh from my overcharged heart. From the last and most gracious of the three ladies I received what seems to have been a remarkable counsel.

I fell into conversation with the sacristan of her church—Santa Maria di Provenzano is its name—who told me the tale of this wonder-working image, a mutilated bust of the Holy Virgin, veiled and crowned. He said that his Madonna was kind to all the unfortunate world, and famous all over it, but that to the most unfortunate of all she was mother and friend. "And whom do you call the most unfortunate of all?" I asked him.

He looked at me as he uttered these curious words. "The most unfortunate of all, sir," he said, "are they that have to pretend to love when they do not feel it. And theirs is the class of which our Madonna is the patroness."

Padrona degli Sventurati, Helper and Friend of those who must serve Love without loving! What a Goddess was this! I drew apart from my informant and communed alone with the mysterious Emblem. "O most tender Advocate of them that need Thee," said I, "O loving Mother of Sinners! Clean Champion of the unclean, Stem, Leaf, Blossom and Fruit of the abounding promise of Heaven that a seed of hope may fructify

in our ineffable corruption! cast down Thy compassionate eyes upon me too, that in their light I may strive again."

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This was my prayer, a general one for grace rather than a particular for some specific grace. Now for what I consider to have been a direct answer to it. On the steps of the church, on going out, I saw Belviso waiting for me. I saw that he was alone—and that at once brought before my mind the picture of Virginia, the brave and passionate dark-browed girl, my stormy lover and my wife; whom I, alas, was hired by gratitude and the sacrament to love, though love her as I ought I did not. I stood speechless and thunderstruck. Here now, sinner, is the answer to thy prayer! Art not thou, poor Francis, one of Love's hirelings? Dost not thou need the Padrona degli Sventurati? I asked myself these questions; Belviso would answer them for me.

He told me how he had sped. He had been to Lucca and seen Teresa, Gioiachino's wife. Gioiachino, poor fellow, was in prison, but not for long, it was thought. Virginia was gone, but Aquamorta remained in the city. My poor girl had left a note for me with Teresa, which Teresa handed on to Belviso and he to me—to this effect. I read it with tears:

"*Master*, *lord*, *and excellent husband*," it began—("Padrone, Signor, ed egregio marito mio")—"Thy child is unhappy, but having learned from thee how necessary it is to regard her own honour, is resolved to fly danger rather than brave it. I have gone to Arezzo with all thy money safe in my bosom, to put the breadth of Tuscany between me and my persecutor. Make thy affairs as thou wilt, thou art free of Virginia, who will never blame thee. If thou need her or what she hath of thine, thou wilt find her at Arezzo, an honest woman,

"Who kisses thy hands,

"*Virginia*."

Without a word of explanation I returned to the church and held up my letter before the veiled image of the Madonna of Provenzano. "Here, lady, is my duty," I said, "here is my hire. The lowliest of thy clients, I will never shirk the yoke put upon me. Yet do Thou, Patroness, make it sweet!" I kissed the letter and put it in my bosom; then I went back to Belviso, embraced him, thanked him for his extraordinary pains on my behalf, and said that as soon as possible after the forthcoming performances of the company I should go to Arezzo. He sighed and looked unhappy. "I knew that you would leave us," he said; "it was only to be expected."

"Yes, yes, Belviso," said I, "I must indeed rejoin Virginia. I see very well that she is my only means of redemption."

"And what is to become of me, Don Francis?" says he suddenly, catching hold of my hand and staying me in the street. "What is to become of me without you, who are in turn *my* only means of redemption?"

I said, “My poor youth, you are putting upon me more than I can bear—or rather you are putting a fresh weight upon Virginia. If by her I can be redeemed, and by me only you can be redeemed, then that untried girl is charged with the redemption of both of us—a singular tax for one whose redemption was originally my own care.”

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He agreed with me that the position was unusual, but affirmed with energy that he had truly stated it so far as he was concerned. “I owe you, sir,” he said, “the dearest thing a lad can possess, which is his self-respect restored, his courage reborn. In the light of your approbation I can face even my miserable trade and hope to grow up as I should. If you cast me off I am undone——“after which, as I made no immediate reply, with a pretty gesture, as of a girl wheedling for a favour, he touched my cheek with his hand and begged me to take him with me to Arezzo. I told him I would consider of it; but made no promise.

CHAPTER XXXVI

MY UNREHEARSED EFFECT AND ITS MIDNIGHT SEQUEL

I do not know whether any other man in the world has been so unfortunate as I in making resolutions and finding opportunities to break them, but I am persuaded none can have made more abundant use of his occasions. My only consolation is that my performances have been exemplary, since punishment has ever followed hot-foot upon the offence.

Let it be observed that on the eve of my public appearance upon the scene in Siena with the rest of the company, I was resolved, and had fortified myself with a solemn vow to the Madonna of Provenzano, to return to Virginia’s side and act, if I did not feel, the part of her faithful and assiduous husband. Never mind whether I believed this to be due to Aurelia, and that it was the strongest testimony I could give her of my love—this did not, in my opinion, make me disloyal to my wife, because the very act of pleasing her involved the putting out of mind that dear mistress of my heart. My resolution was indeed my final offering at the shrine of mystical love; it was to be an act comparable with Dante’s—who, loving Beatrice, married Germma Donati, and proved the reality of his tie by making her the mother of many children. It will readily be believed, I suppose, that so fine a proposition made me enthusiastic, that I was impatient for the moment when I could put it into practice, recover Virginia, press her to my bosom and cherish her as so beautiful and loving a girl deserved to be cherished; but it must be almost incredible to every reader of my book that in one moment I could not only quench my own fire, but make it impossible to light it again. This, however, is the plain state of the case.

In honour of the Grand Duke’s birthday a great many festivities were preparing in Siena. The city was full of visitors, for a Palio was to be run in the Campo, the Cardinal Archbishop of Florence was to celebrate pontifically in the cathedral, and our company of actors—not because it was the best, but as being the only one available—was commanded to perform in the theatre before the Podesta, the Gonfalonier and Senate, and all the representatives of Government, of the university, and of the garrison. The whole of the boxes was bespoken, and our manager was given to understand that his

expenses for this night were guaranteed. As we had so far had very indifferent houses, it may be gathered that he looked upon this as the occasion of his lifetime. We were put into vigorous rehearsal, and worked most of the day, besides playing at night. We were to give the Artaserse, a tragedy of extreme length and magniloquence, and conclude with the Donne Furlane.

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The night arrived; the theatre was full from parterre to gallery; the boxes presented a truly brilliant spectacle. The curtain went up, and the play began.

I shall only say of Artaserse that La Panormita was the Aspasia of the piece, and Belviso the Berenice, her foster-sister and companion. My role was that of the Messenger, and only gave me one long speech, recounting the miraculous preservation of Artaspe and Spiridate, sons of King Artaserse and lovers of the two ladies; the treachery, discovery, and violent end of Dario—in fact, the untying of the knot firmly twisted in the third act. The audience paid visits, talked, laughed, played faro, so far as I could learn, throughout the play. Nor do I wonder at it, for not the finest acting in the world could have galvanised into life any one link of its dreary chain. When the curtain was raised; however, upon the second piece, there was a perceptible settling down to listen, behold, and be amused. Tragedy was the fashion, and must be endured, but all the Italians loved the masks.

The Donne Furlane was the piece, a comedy of art as they call it here— or, as we say, a comedy of masks—wherein the stock characters of Harlequin, Columbine, Brighella and Pantalone are given a rag of a plot, and are expected to embroider that with follies, drolleries and obscenities according as their humour of the moment may dictate. The persons who give the title to this particular farce—the Donne Furlane— are the lowest class of Venetian women, and their ceremonious name implies what we in England imply when we speak of the nymphs of Drury Lane or the sirens of Radcliffe Highway, calling them, in fact, exactly what they are not. According to the plot of the play, Pantalone is an old merchant of Rimini who arrives in Venice with his family. Colombina is his daughter, and was played, of course, by Belviso; Arlecchino and Brighella are his simpleton sons—they were the manager and myself. Il Nanno was Punchinello, his Neapolitan servant, Il Dottore his travelling physician. They come ashore in the quarter of the Furlani, and all the zest of the play lies in the equivoque which contrasts the knavery of the inhabitants with the naivete of the visitors. Pantalone's family is fair game. A bully called Truffaldino poses as a marchese and wins the affections of Colombina; Brighella is entrapped by a Donna Furlana into a promise of marriage; the Dottore finds himself engaged to cure half a dozen of the same sort of ladies of the maladies incident to their career; finally, Pantalone is claimed as their long-lost uncle, who was supposed to have abandoned them in their days of infant orphanage. Such promise of diversion as this imbroglio had, it was rendered still more to the taste of the audience by the license which the actors allowed themselves. Belviso was perfection as the simple country girl; one could hardly credit a lad of his age with such niceness of observation, such humorous yet whimsical

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representation of an honest, foolish young woman flattered by the attention of a villain. His “La la,” his “Sissioria,” and “’Lustrissimo, si!” which marked so well the growth of self-esteem; his finger in the mouth, his twisting apron-corner, which betrayed embarrassment when the siege was too vigorous; his “Io non so gniente,” when sheepishness was the only defence—here was the highest art of the stage. I, as Brighella his brother, aped him as well as I could. I was a clown, tickled by, yet pondering, the hardy advances of a baggage, who, in the expert person of Pamfilo, was only too well performed. If it was my business to look a fool, God knows I played better than any. The audience stormed us with delight, and I do believe I was having my share of the triumph, and might have been emboldened by success to have deserved it, had not all my sham tremors been shent—in one moment—by a shaft most real and memorable, whose fatal delivery I must now relate.

We had reached a point in our absurdity where, by the direction of Il Nanno, who had a sure dramatic sense, a little touch of tragic meaning was to be brought into the action. The play was suddenly to deepen into seriousness; the masqueraders were to be discovered—momentarily—for men and women, with hearts to be broke and souls to be tortured. I believe it was I who gave him the hint; for he had said to me one day at rehearsal, “Don Francis, you have tragedy in your face, a mouth of pure sorrow. That is a valuable asset for our business.” May be that he had thought to use me at my best when he suffered this little shiver of serious surmise to be blown across the painted scene. The worthy little monster was pardonably proud of his conception, and explained it to me point by point. Touchy as his infirmities had left him, his vanity of author made him as tender as a green wound. He set all his hopes upon his invention; rightly rendered, he said, the whole theatre would be moved by it. It should be received with a moment of absolute silence, a sixty-seconds’ silence; then, with one consent, the audience would rise en masse and cheer the actor—myself—and the poet—himself. Admiring the thought, feeling the force of it, I promised him that he might depend upon me.

His point was this. At a certain stage in the play, Brighella, the country clown, observes his pretended inamorata, the sham contessa, in the embrace of the pretended marchese, Truffaldino, who by his lies and flatteries has ensnared the heart of Colombina. Now Colombina is the beloved sister of Brighella; and the doubt is to dawn upon him that possibly his wonderful contessa and his sister’s imposing marchese are no better than they should be. Why is she in the arms of the marchese? Are these perhaps the customs of the world of fashion? Punchinello, the family servant, suggests that the marchese and contessa may be brother and sister. “O Dio, no!” cries poor Brighella. “I know what brothers and sisters do. I love Colombina

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and she me, but we don't kiss and hug in a corner. That is what the contessa taught me to do—I thought it very beautiful. It was our secret, do you see? But she seems to have taught the marchese—and it is a secret no more, and not beautiful at all." He begins to wonder to himself, and grows suddenly homesick under disenchantment. He has many artless, touching things to say concerning his happiness with his sister in his own country, there far away on the lonely Adriatic shore.

I was doing my best with the part; Il Nanno, as Punchinello, was at my side watching and moving every turn of the dialogue; in the back of the scene were Truffaldino and the Furlana at their kissing. The audience, quick to feel the pathos, was very quiet, and gave me courage.

"Go to your mistress, Brighella," says Punchinello; "reproach her, pull her away."

"No, no," say I, "that would not be honourable. That would show that I doubted her. That would be an insult to her ladyship, and no comfort to me."

There was a murmur of applause, low but audible, and that stir which I know is more enheartening to the player than all the bravas in the world; but just then, as if directed by some inward motion, my eyes wandered about the auditorium, and (as happens but rarely), I saw faces there. In a box on the grand tier I saw Aurelia herself in a yellow silk gown and a hood of the same, half fallen from her dark hair. There she sat, as if absorbing the light—Aurelia, and no other, in a gallant company. She was smiling, interested, eager. Her lips were parted; I saw her little teeth; I saw the rise and fall of her white breast. Starting violently, a sharp intense pain pierced my heart. I shut my eyes and tried to recall myself, while the theatre was hushed, like death. I felt myself swaying about, and to save myself from falling, stretched out my hand for some support. Unfortunately I found it; for I caught and held the bony ridge of the nose of Il Nanno, which was just on the level of my elbow, and drove my fingers into it until he yelled with pain. Risu solvuntur! The audience rose at us in wild delight—but I, in my horror and concern, knew nothing but that here was I, a poor fool in motley, and there, at some few paces from me, radiant as a star in the firmament, was the adorable being under whose maddening rays I had fallen, as struck by the sun. I gave one short cry, and fell on my knees. "Pardon, pardon, queen of my soul!" I began, when Il Nanno, beside himself with mortification, sprang at me like a wild beast and gripped my throat. Had not the contessa and Truffaldino pulled him off me, I should have been strangled. The audience hushed, the curtain fell. I knew no more until I found myself lying on my strand paillasse at the inn and saw Belviso, yet in his skirt and spangles, leaning over me with vinegar in a sponge.

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Refusing me leave to talk, he told me that he had done his best to pacify the dwarf, and hoped he had succeeded. The audience had been entirely misled. They had believed this ending to have been devised for their entertainment, and had completely approved of it. Our manager had been sent for by the Syndic, congratulated and rewarded by a handsome present. The piece was to be repeated next evening, and, for the sake of that, it was even promised that the public would sit through the Artaserse again. Higher testimony, said Belviso, could not have been given to Aristarcho as author, or to me as his exponent. Far from being in disgrace, I was the hero of Siena. The Piazza, the cafes were alive with my performance, my stage name of Francesco de' Pazzi was in everybody's mouth. I murmured the name of Aurelia, but Belviso had no notion of that part of my story, and begged me to sleep. So, after a time, I think I did—and he also.

At some later hour of the night, which must have been near the edge of dawn, Belviso woke me by springing off his bed and going to the door. Presently I heard voices downstairs, stern, short, official voices, and the hasty whispers of two or three answering at once. What was this? Steps resounded on the stair, a chink in the door revealed a light growing in brightness. We were broken in upon where we crouched in alarm; and I saw a Corporal of the Guard, two or three troopers, the scared faces of some of our companions.

The corporal held up his candle to look at me. Our colloquy was very brief.

"You are Francis Strelley, an Englishman?"

"I am."

"You killed a Capuchin in Florence and fled to Lucca?"

"I did."

"You were chastised, and expelled the Republic?"

"I was."

"You are my prisoner, in the Grand Duke's name. Get up, dress yourself and follow me."

Il Nanno had betrayed me, or some other more inveterate enemy. I rose, put on my shoes and a cloak, and told the officer I was ready. As I was tying my shoe, Belviso whispered in my ear, "Courage, I follow." He bade me a mock farewell, with tears and embraces, and I went out a prisoner.

I understood that I was to be taken at once to the Fortress of Volterra. Now, indeed, this famous, infamous prison was to have me and bury me alive.

CHAPTER XXXVII

I COMMIT A DOUBLE MURDER

Francis Antony Strelley, Tennis-ball of Fate, should be inscribed upon my tomb, unless like the wandering Jew I were not destined to have any other than that restless globe upon whose shelving surfaces I was for ever to slip and slide. Here was I once more buffeted on to the road; and yet I could not fairly pretend that there was no fault of mine concerned in the stroke. O, fatal dower of beauty that was thine, Aurelia! Could I say that, had I maintained my firm resolve of a few days' date, and fixed my heart and

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inclination where they were due— towards the loving bosom and welcoming arms of my Virginia—this new shame had come upon me? Alas, what malign influence drew thee, lady, to Siena, to rekindle my flame, to melt my conjugal desires, to betray me into the old passion, to draw me into the old despair? Thus I bitterly questioned myself as, guarded on either hand by mounted men, I descended the silent street on the way to what I must needs consider perpetual imprisonment.

Going out of the Porta Romana, where we were obliged to wait in the cold drizzle of a cheerless dawn for the porter to open the gate, a deeply veiled, respectably dressed young woman asked the favour of our escort from the corporal, and received it, probably on account of her good looks, which should be extraordinary. She was going, she said, to join her husband at Volterra, and feared the brigands who were notoriously rife in that country. The corporal offered to take her pillion behind him. "Willingly, sir," she said, and was lifted up by the troopers. As we went out of the gate she raised her veil to use her handkerchief and to look at me. In a moment I saw that it was my brave and affectionate Belviso, and was no little comforted by the thought that here, at any rate, was one heart in Siena generously inclined to mine.

We baited at Colle, and rested there two or three hours; from thence we mounted a very steep hill and reached a country of abounding desolation and misery, where bare grey hills alternated with dense thickets, and were told that there was not a human habitation for the rest of the journey to Volterra. Our guards saw to the priming of their muskets before they started from Colle, and kept a sharp lookout on all sides of the way. We met nothing, however, threatening or otherwise, for nearly half our journey, but somewhere about four o'clock of the afternoon, when we were traversing a barren moor, the corporal gave a sharp cry and reined up his horse. Before I knew what he was about a pistol had been placed in my hands, and he said, "Every man for himself now. You are free, sir."

"How—free?" I asked him.

His reply was to point ahead of us. "Brigands," he said, "and the Kingdom of Heaven in view."

The troopers got off their horses, lashed them by the bridles, head to head, and stood behind them with their muskets pointed the way the enemy was coming. They were upon us almost before I had seen anything but a cloud of whirling dust. They came on at a furious pace, yelling and discharging their arms, and made short work of our defenses. The three soldiers were killed and rifled. I and Belviso had our hands tied, were strapped on to horses, put in the midst of the band, who were all masked, and carried off at a terrible rate across the open country. We went down a mountain side,

crossed a torrent and crashed into a thick belt of woodland which lay beyond it. In the midst of this a ruined chapel or hermitage

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seemed to serve our captors for a camp; for here they drew rein and disposed of us, their booty. My feet were bound, as my hands already had been, and I was thrown thus helpless on my face on one side; the miserable Belviso, whose disguise and beauty made him appear what he had so unhappily pretended to be, had his hands tied behind him, but his ankles left free. Him they placed on the other side of the ruin at some distance from me. They had made no effort to search me, my wretched rags of a clown of the theatre being my protection, and by that means only I was able to keep the pistol given me by the corporal. Mercifully I had not used it yet, for when the attack was made I saw that I had better make no defence if I wished to save my life; and I could not see that I had any good reason for risking it on behalf of the soldiers. I suppose it must have been evident that I was a prisoner, and that it would be better worth their while to keep and sell me as a slave than to blow my brains out. It was only too clear what they intended to do with my poor friend.

The brigands, so soon as they were rid of us, set to work preparing a meal for themselves. They lit a fire in the chapel, filled a cauldron, fed and watered their horses. Very soon they were all about the pot, eating and drinking like wild beasts; and when the meat was done they went on with the wine and brandy which they had in abundance, played cards and dice, quarrelled or caroused far into the night. It was densely dark, save for the chance flames of the fire, when I heard them all wrangling together and had some hopes of a fight which might turn to our advantage. But whatever was the subject of their disputations, their fury died down into grumbling. They had decided on drawing lots for possession of us, as I now understand—but some were too drunk to take a part, and some too indifferent. It came down to three who went on with the contest, while three fell asleep and snored through all the noise.

I saw the whole affair: how three billets were put into an empty crock and one was drawn out. The man who drew it had won me, I could tell, because when he had shown his paper to the others, he came over to where I was and touched me with his foot to learn whether I was safe. I shammed sleep, and never moved; so presently he lay down by the side of me and himself slept. Meantime another, of the remaining two, had drawn Belviso and had gone towards his victim. I saw the loser creep after him, and lost sight of both in the dark; but then, after a horrible pause, I heard my wretched friend begin to cry for mercy, to confess the truth, to pray to God, to shriek in a way I shuddered to hear. The ruffian at my side, like his companions by the fire, slept through all, and this dared me to what sounds like an act of madness. With a temerity born of my anguish on Belviso's account, I rolled over and over until I was close to the fire. There, I thrust my ankles into the flames, regardless

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of the excruciating pain, and burnt away the cord that tied me. I served my hands in the same way, and springing up, crept swiftly to where I heard the crying lad and the scuffling. By what light the fire afforded I saw that the two men were fighting for possession. One was full length on the ground, the other crouched over him and upon him with a knife in his teeth, but so intent upon his murderous design that he had no eyes for me. I came quite close, made a sudden snap at the knife, and plunged it with all my force into the neck of the topmost. It drove right through him and pierced his victim; I think they must have died at once, for except for one horrible gasping snort I heard nothing. At the moment I felt myself caught by the ankle and heard, “Francis, Francis, it is I.” I pulled Belviso to his feet, cut the cord at the wrist and plunged forward into the black of the wood, running downhill, as near as I could judge, towards where I knew the brook was. We were pursued, but in a darkness so impenetrable the chances were in our favour, and we were never within a quarter-mile of being caught. We gained the river side. “Jump!” I cried, and dragged Belviso in after me. We could just bottom it. There we stayed, under a shelving bank, up to our necks in cold water until the day began to break—not daring to move lest we should happen upon our enemies, our teeth chattering together, in a state of semi-death. How we endured it I don’t know; but life is sweet to young men.

Looking about with great caution, I could see nothing nor hear anything of the brigands. We crossed the river and ran as fast as we could— Belviso in dripping weeds and myself in my wet rags of the comedy. By very good luck he had had some four lire in the pocket of his gown.

When we had recovered something of blood and heart by our running, I told Belviso to keep himself snug in some bushes while I went marketing with his four lire. I had seen some herdboys on the hill and was determined to supply him with clothes proper to his sex. I went up to the boys and offered a lire for a pair of breeches. Half a dozen pairs were off and under my nose before I had done speaking. I chose two pair, begged a hunch of bread into the bargain, and made them happy as kings with three lire. I asked them my whereabouts and learned that I was four leagues from Volterra and seven from Pomarance. I was south of Volterra, south-west of Siena, but Pomarance was on my road to Arezzo. To Pomarance, therefore, so soon as we were clothed in the one indispensable garment of manhood, we determined to go.

To reach our haven it was necessary to cross one of the main lines of communication with Siena, that from Florence, namely, by the Val d’Elsa, or that from Rome by San Quirico and the Val d’Orcia. We agreed that the latter was the safer for us as being further from the seat of Government, though much the more difficult. The country was mountainous and thinly populated. If we ran in no danger of

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robbery—as how should we, who had nothing but rags and empty stomachs about us?—we might easily starve, or keep the beasts from starvation. There were wolves in these hills, and dogs, turned rogue, which were as bad or worse. All this, however, we were ready to face so soon as we had eaten bread, washed ourselves at a well by the roadside, and commended ourselves to God. “Come, brother,” I said, “our fortunes must needs mend since they can never be more broken. In this world there is no stay, but a thing gets better or worse. I believe we may be happy yet.”

“Brother,” replied Belviso, “I am sure of it, and I promise you I have never looked forward to happiness before. This well in which I have washed myself is lustral water. I have fouled it with the vile thing I was once. In return it has made a new creature of me, thanks to God and you.”

“Bravo,” said I, “and now, Avanti!”

“Pronti,” says Belviso, and we struck east along a fine grassy valley where the trees were in the full glory of early summer. I was full of hope, which I could neither explain nor justify, and though I did not know it then I had some grounds to be so. I shall not inflict upon the reader the vicissitudes of our wearisome journey of three weeks over the sharp-ridged valleys of lower Tuscany. We sometimes begged, sometimes worked for the bread we ate and the sheds in which we slept. We were tanned to the colour of walnuts, healthy as young cattle, merry as larks in the sky. We gave each other our full confidence, or so I believed. At any rate I kept nothing from my friend. He was more reticent. “The past is past,” he used to say. “My safety is only in the future; let me talk to you of that.” And so he did. A friendship was sealed between us which no difference of race, degree or age could ever break in upon; we loved each other tenderly, we were as brothers. Belviso was at one and the same time the most affectionate, the shrewdest, and the most candid boy that ever was conceived in sin and nurtured in vice. No shameful dealing had left a mark upon him, he was fine gold throughout. But so I have found it always in this dear country of my adoption, that it takes prosperity, never misery, to corrupt its native simplicity. The lower you descend in the scale of human attainment the greater the hopes you may conceive of what humanity may be permitted to attain. The poor drab, the world’s hire for the price of a rush-light, the lurking thief, the beggar at the church door, the naked urchin of the gutter—these, though they live with swine and are of them, have the souls of children new and clean from God. Neither malice nor forethought of evil, nor craft, nor hatred, nor clamour, nor the great and crowning sin is in their hearts. A kind word, a touch, a kiss redeems them. Thus they, whom the tyrants of Italy have enslaved, are in truth the very marrow of Italy, without whom she would never have done anything in this world. And the sorrowful verity is that slaves they must remain if Italy is to live on. For prosperity, which fattens their bodies, chokes and poisons their souls.

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CHAPTER XXXVIII

AN UNEXPECTED MESSENGER LIFTS ME UP

Destitute as we were of anything but the sinews of our backs and arms, we were forced, if we would live, to work our way to Arezzo; and it often fell out that the piece-work we engaged to do kept us long in one place. Near Sinalunga, in particular, in a green pastoral country, we hired ourselves out to a peasant to hoe his vines, and were busy there for nearly three weeks. I cannot say that I was discontented; indeed, I have always found that the harder my labour is and the straiter my lot, the less room I have for discontent. With this peasant, his family, his pigs, hens and goats, Belviso and I lived, in a hovel which, had it not been roofed over, might have been a cote or a pigsty. The man's name was Masuccio, his wife's Gioconda; between them they had a brood of nine children—a grown daughter of fourteen, three stout lads, four brats, and a child not breeched; and in addition to all these, and to Belviso and myself, to a sow in farrow, four goats, and hens innumerable, the good man's father was posed as veritable master of the whole—an old man afflicted with palsy, who did nothing but shake and suck at his pipe, but who, nevertheless, had, by virtue of his years and situation, the only semblance of a bed, the first of everything, and the best and the most of that. The rest of us, higgledy-piggledy, lay by night on the mud-floor, with a little pease-straw for litter, and scrambled all together for the remnants of the old tyrant's food. Yet nobody questioned his absolute right, and nobody seemed unhappy, nor looked out at any prospect but unremitting, barely remunerative labour from year's end to year's end. This is, I am now convinced, the true philosophy of life—that labour is a man's only riches, and food, shelter, rest, and the satisfaction of appetite his means whereby to grow rich. In other walks of life the practice is reversed, and labour is looked upon as the means, appetite and comfort as the end. Inconceivable folly! since labour alone brings health, and health content. But I must relate how I was cozened out of my own healthy contentment.

One day, when I was afield in the vines not far from the high road which ran from Sinalunga to still distant Arezzo, as I was resting on my hoe in the furrow, I saw a man come by walking a pretty good horse. He was an elderly, bearded man, very portly, and wore the brown garb of the Capuchins, which I certainly had no reason to love. His bald head, gleaming in the sun, was of the steep and flat-topped shape of our English quartern-loaves; and it came upon me with a shock that here was that Fra Palamone, whom I had last seen extended, shot by my hand, in the Piazza Santa Maria at Florence. This alarming discovery was verified by his nearer approach. I recognised his twinkling, tireless eyes, his one long tooth, like a tusk, and even the scar on his right brow. It was Fra Palamone in the flesh—and in great and prosperous flesh.

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Although this apparition made me vaguely uneasy, I was relieved to find that I had not his death upon my conscience. On the other hand, I felt no yearning of the bowels towards him, and did not propose to go one inch over the newly turned clods to bid him good-day. Supported by my hoe, chin on hands, I watched him, tolerably sure that he would never mark me down. I was as brown as the earth in which I delved, scarce distinguishable from it. I had on my head an old felt hat of no shape at all; I had a cotton shirt open to the navel, and a pair of blue cotton drawers which failed me at the knees. I was bleached and tanned again, stained and polished by the constant rub of weather and hard work—a perfect contrast to my last appearance before him. Then it had been my heart that was rent, not my garments; then my spirit was fretted and seamed, not my skin. Then I had had a fine cloth coat and lace ruffles; but my soul was soiled and my honour in tatters. The hand which shot him down had been covered in a scented glove; but pride had flaunted it upon me, naked and unashamed. The contrast assured me, while it gave me confidence enough to watch my wily enemy.

He saw me, however—he saw me and reined up his horse. He beckoned me towards him in the way of free command which a mounted man assumes with peasants. As it would have been more singular to stand than to obey, I went slowly over the furrows and saluted him, responding to his bluff "Buon di" with a "Servo suo." The shadow of my hat was now my only hope; but I felt his sharp eyes burn their way through that, and now I am sure that he recognised me at the first moment. He pretended, however, that he had not, saving up, as I suppose, his acclamations to be the climax of the little drama he had schemed. Addressing me as his "honest lad," he asked his way to Fojano, with particulars of fords, bridle-tracks and such like. This was a game of which I, at least, was soon weary; I never could play pretences. I said, "I have told you what you want to know, Fra Palamone. It is three good leagues to Fojano. I hope you are sufficiently recovered of your wound to attempt it." At the same time I pushed up the brim of my hat, and looked him in the face.

He maintained his silly comedy for a little while longer, the old knave, staring at me as if I had been a ghost, muttering names, as if to recall mine. Then with a glad shout of, "It is, it is my Francis of old!" he threw up his arms to Heaven and broke into doggerel—

"'Si, benedetta tu,
O Maria, Madre di Gesu,
Regina Coeli intemerata,
Atque hominum Advocata!

"O what perils by land and sea," he continued, "what racking of entrails! What contumely, what anguish of hunger and thirst, have I not undergone for this—for this—-for this! Now I can say, Domine, nunc dimittis, with a full heart. Now, indeed, is the crown of lilies set upon the life-work of wayworn, sad-browed Palamone!"

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Sad-browed Palamone! He threw a leg over his horse's ears, and slid to the ground with a thud which made earth shake. He stretched out his arms to beckon me home; and when I would not budge, he scrambled through the briery hedge and took me, whether I would or no, into his strenuous embrace. He wept over me as a long-lost child of his, slobbered me, patted my head, back, breast. He held me at arm's-length to look at me better, hugged me again as if at last he was sure. "This is verily and indeed," he cried, "my friend and companion for many years, ardently loved, ardently served, lost for a season, searched for with blood-shedding, and found with tears of thankfulness. O dearest brother, let us kneel down and thank the Giver of all good, the only True Fount, for this last and most signal instance of His provident bounty!" He did kneel, and had the hardihood to drag me with him; I believe he would have prayed over me like a bishop at a confirmation—but this blasphemous farce was too much for me. I jumped up and away in a rage.

"Fra Palamone," I said, "I don't know whither this pretence of yours is designed to lead you, but I know well whither it will lead myself— namely, with this hoe of mine, to complete the work which I bungled in Florence. And to the achievement of that I shall instantly proceed, unless you get up from your polluted knees and tell me your real and present business with me here."

He got up at once—one of those lightning alterations of his from the discursive to the precise.

"Va bene," says he, "you shall be satisfied in a moment." He fumbled for his pocket-book, and from that selected three papers, which he handed to me in silence and in due order. They were:

1. A power of attorney to Fra Palamone by name from Sir John Macartney, his Britannic Majesty's representative at the Grand Ducal Court, authorising him to use all diligence and spare no expense in finding Francis-Antony Strelley of Upcote Esquire, wherever he might be in Italy; and with further authority to secure honour for his drafts upon the banking-house of Peruzzi in Florence to the extent of five hundred pounds sterling.

2. A letter to the said Sir John Macartney from Mr. Simcoe of Gray's Inn Square, announcing the death of my father, Antony Strelley Esquire.

3. A letter addressed to me by my honoured, dear and now widowed mother.

Over these documents—especially the last two of them—and my mournful reflections upon them, I draw that veil, which no one who has been a bad but repentant son to a saintly parent, will ever ask me to lift up.

My first desire was to be rid of Palamone, my next to think. I turned shortly on the frate.

“I am obliged to you for your diligence in my affairs,” I said to him, “though I don’t understand how you procured the means of using it. However, as you seem willing to serve me, you will have the goodness to ride on to Sinalunga and buy me three horses, two suits of clothes, with riding-boots and cloaks for each; body linen sufficient for two persons, valises and whatever else may be necessary—all being duplicates, remember. The whole of these necessaries you will bring back to that house which you see in the valley, together with a proper supply of ready money, within three hours of this. Now be off.”

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It was his turn to salute me now, and for him to say, “Servo suo.”

I found Belviso helping Filippa, the daughter of the house, to milk the goats, and when he had done, drew him apart and told him my news. He received it gravely, without surprise. “Don Francis,” he said, “what do you expect of me, except ‘Of course!’ It did not need much penetration on my part to see that you were a signorino. The whole of our company knew it. As far as I am concerned, it only makes your goodness to me the more inexplicable, while it perfectly explains my willingness to serve you; and since you have added condescension to charity I am the more sincerely grateful. As you will now wish to be rid of me, I can assure you that I am strong enough to stand alone. I believe that I shall make my way in the world by honest courses in the future; but I shall never cease to bless your name.”

“Belviso,” I said, “as to leaving me, that is your affair, for I tell you that the separation will never spring from me. We have been brothers in misery, and may be no less so in good fortune. At any rate, I shall not leave you to this life of a beast. Come with me to Arezzo, and after that to Florence. Then we will talk of all our businesses, and hear what Virginia has to say.”

He looked serious. “Ah,” he said, “I know beforehand what your Virginia will say. She will say as I do. I will follow you to the gates of Heaven or Hell, Don Francis, but only in one capacity!”

I said, “There is only one possible capacity.”

“I know that very well,” replied the boy. “We agree to that point, but differ beyond it.”

“What do you mean?” I asked him, puzzled.

He was very serious, and said, “Don Francis, if I go with you from this place, I go as your servant, and in no other fashion.” To that I said, “Never,” and invoked the aid of Heaven. Shrugging, he turned away, saying, “As you will. Then it is farewell, padrone.”

“You will make me angry,” I said; and he answered, “It is your right.”

“My right, is it?” said I. “If so, then, I command you.”

“What!” he exclaimed. “You command me to be your brother? Dear sir!”

At this I became angry in good earnest, and showed it very plainly. He was extremely patient under it, but equally firm. He said, “Don Francis, your generosity has gone near to be your ruin, because, though it would be good logic in Heaven, we are not there yet. You say that you and I are equal. I say that we are nothing of the sort; and the proof would be that if we started level from this door, and as we stand, in six months’ time you would remain a gentleman, and I the son of a shoemaker of Cadorre. A gentleman you

are, because you were born so. If you took me up to your right hand, whether in this hovel or in the palace which is yours by reason, still you would be the gentleman and I the cobbler's son. And though I might prosper in business and become rich, and finding you in want,

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might take you up to my right hand, call you my brother, make you my heir—still you would be the gentleman condescending, and I the cobbler's son making myself ridiculous. Your misfortunes—every one of them—have arisen from the fact that you persist in treating your inferiors as your equals. I should be sorry to tell you—it would be a great impertinence—how far back into your career in Italy I can trace this foible of yours."

He was no doubt in the right. A little more generosity on my part would have told him so. I said that I could not convince him, and that I should leave Virginia to do that.

"Oh, sir, it is she that has convinced me already," says he.

The return of Fra Palamone with the gear put an end to our talk. I said, "Come with me, Belviso, as you will—but come"; and his reply was, "Servo suo."

I left the honest family at Sinalunga calling blessings on my name, and rode forward on a good horse to Arezzo. By my orders Fra Palamone kept behind me. By his own determination, Belviso held him company, and led the sumpter-horse.

CHAPTER XXXIX

VIRGINIA DECLINES THE HEIGHTS

I took up my lodgings at the Bear, in Arezzo, and made all such preparations to receive my wife as were becoming. I engaged a woman to wait upon her, had a withdrawing-room—as the French say, a boudoir— fitted up, and caused her bedchamber to be hung with the best curtain and wall furniture the place could afford, I then proceeded to dine, but told the landlord that he must be prepared at any moment to place a fresh cover on the table, with a bottle of his most excellent wine. To Belviso, who persisted in playing valet, and who told me that he had been in Arezzo before more than once, I entrusted the privilege—though I grudged it him—of seeking far and wide through the town for Virginia's lodging. I said, "Brother, you failed me once, in spite of yourself, when you tried so bravely to find my wife. Don't fail me this time, I beseech you."

He looked troubled; he fingered the tablecloth before he spoke. I encouraged him to open me his mind. "Well, Don Francis," said he, most uncomfortably, "the task you put upon me then was very easy but for the one little circumstance that Virginia was not there. But this present is of enormous difficulty."

"Why so, my dear?" I asked him.

"For the one little circumstance that Virginia *is* here," said he; and then, seeing my bewilderment, he added, "You don't know the Tuscans of her class as well as I do, that's certain. You know them as children, as warm-hearted, passionate simpletons; but you have yet to learn how tender they are of their reputation, and how quick to feel a touch. I have never seen your Virginia, but I'll warrant her as proud as fire. I believe that she would rather die than occupy that damask-hung bed, even with your honour for mate. And supposing she consented to that, do you not guess what would be the first thing she would do? It would be to scratch the eyes out of that Donna di Camera you have given her. And she would do that, mind you, in self-defence, for the Donna di Camera (who is probably a little above her in degree) would certainly do the same for Virginia."

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I own to having been somewhat put about. “My dear Belviso,” I said, “Virginia is liable to impulse, it may be admitted; but she is never likely to forget what wifely duty involves. I was not a cruel husband to her, and left her through no fault of my own. I will answer for her that she will be a good wife.”

“A good wife—for Francesco the carpenter,” said Belviso. “Yes, it may be so, though I own that her marriage puzzles me. But wife to Don Francesco—nobile Inglese—never in the world!”

I said, “Belviso, I never asked you to be my servant, as you very well know. The proposal came from you against my will. But if my servant you are, I will make free to remind you that I have given you an order, and shall be obliged if you will set about performing it.” The good lad dropped on one knee, took my hand and kissed it, and turned to obey me without a word. Ashamed of myself, I patted him on the shoulder in token of forgiveness, and saw the tears spring into his eyes. Before he could reach the door, Fra Palamone had filled up the entry, panting, holding out a note.

“For the Excellency of Don Francesco,” says he, “just delivered at the door by a young female.” I took it from him; it was in the hand of Virginia, the hand I myself had guided, the good and docile hand which had formed itself on mine.

I read—O Heaven, can I say so? The words, like knives at work, cut themselves deep into the fibres of my heart.

Virginia wrote:

“*Most excellent don Francis*,—

“That cavalcade of his lordship’s, of four horses and two servants, entering this city of Arezzo at three o’clock in the afternoon of to-day, was witnessed by a concourse of people, always eager to see a great gentleman, and to secure some part of his bounty. Had his lordship lifted his eyes to the windows of the shops and houses of the poor as he passed by, he would have seen Virginia Strozzi at her needlework—that poor creature whose virtue his lordship was so benevolent as to protect; for which truly gracious act his same poor Virginia must always be grateful. It would have been a great kindness in his lordship to have allowed one, who ever tried to be faithful and obedient, to kiss his noble hand; and his Virginia cannot doubt but that she might have done so. His lordship’s nobility of mind and generosity of heart are so well known, that for the very reason of them she has not dared to present herself. I know what my duty is; I cannot come to you. I beg him not to seek me; I am going away so soon as I have delivered this letter. Do not ask me to come, Francis, I cannot, I cannot, I cannot.

“Your *Virginia*, who tries to be good.”

This letter stunned me. I sank under it, as under a violent blow. With me also fell, dashed to the ground, all my honourable resolutions, all my hopes of gaining self-respect. I will not deny also that I was savagely stung by mortification; for a man is so made that he does not relish a refusal any the more for being aware that he has not too anxiously sought acceptance; but, on the contrary, his self-reproach for that tardiness of his is made more bitter by the rebuff. He feels that he has deserved it, and is the more deeply wounded.

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And had I not deserved it? Why had I not crept back into Lucca—in any disguise, by any subterfuge—when I was driven out? Why had I not braved a second disgrace—-nay, imprisonment, stripes, even death, on Virginia's account? Alas, it was because Virginia's account was not heavy enough in my books. Pass that, and have at me again. Why, when I knew her whereabouts, did I not strike off across the hills to find her? Was it that she would not have welcomed me naked, have cherished me dying, have died herself to save me? Alas, no! It was because I had been drawn on to Siena by that lovely, haunting, beckoning, beguiling vision of Aurelia, my torture and stem of shame. Why, finally, were my eyes not lifted up to her wistful eyes, as she sat—poor sempstress—in that upper room? It was because of my accursed prosperity. It was because my eyes were cased and swollen in pride; because my fine horse held them; because I thought I had but to nod and be obeyed by—my wife! Thy wife, sayest thou, Francis? Nay, wretched fool, but thy *slave*! Out upon thee—out!

White and suffering, not knowing what to do, I sat by my untasted board and gave the letter into Belviso's hand to read. He read it carefully, and Fra Palamone peeped over his shoulder. He was the first to speak.

He clacked his tongue to his palate—that gross and forcible rogue; he looked all about him with his arms spread abroad, as if he were scouring the air to find Virginia. "She's off," he said, "she's off, that's plain. Bolted like a coney to the hills. Now, who's our man?"

I struck my breast. "It is I, Fra Palamone. I am her man."

He inspected me for half a moment, as if to judge of the possibility; but took no further notice of me. He walked to the window and looked out—up and down the street. "Clean heels," says he, "and she was within reach of my hand."

"What!" I cried. "It was she who——" I did not finish but rushed at the door. Belviso, divining my insane purpose, caught me by the coat.

"Stay, Don Francis—let any one go but you." Seeing that I paused irresolute, he went on to urge me by all that I held dear to do nothing so foolish. "Do you suppose," he said, "that *you* will find her—knowing nothing of Arezzo—and she knowing all? Do you think her so light, that, having borne the first sight of you already without faltering, she will fall to you at the second? You have taught me wiselier about her out of your own mouth. Let us question the friar." He turned to Palamone, who had his mouth open and was scratching in his beard.

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The frate said that Virginia herself had delivered the letter into his hands as he stood taking the air at the inn door. He scoffed at the notion that he could be mistaken; had he not nearly lost his life for her already? He described her in terms too luscious to be palatable—a fine and full wench, he called her, bare-headed, bare-necked, with the breasts of Hebe. "And," says he, "Don Francis, you may call her your wife or by what other pleasant phrase you please, but though I'd allow you, to do you pleasure, that that were what she ought to be—wife, at least, to somebody—saving your respect, she's no wife at all. There's not a wedded woman in all Italy would go abroad with a bare bosom—you may take the word of an expert for that. She's tricked you, sir,—or you have tricked her. She has had what she has had without responsibility— and now she's away; and if I may be allowed the remark, I should say you were well rid of her. An excellent dinner awaits you here—more than enough for one, a bare pittance for two; a courteous banker awaits you in Florence. Old Palamone will scratch his eyes out to save you. After dinner, sir, half of Arezzo—"

I said, "Palamone, I lay this command upon you, since you profess yourself my friend. Find me Virginia, wheresoever she may be. I will give you a thousand guineas. Without her you have not one farthing of mine."

He seized my hands. "A thousand devils would not send me faster— consider her in your arms." He went gaily out of my presence with a song on his lips. I heard him singing it lustily down the street of the town, and saw no more of him for some days.

Belviso was of great comfort to me during my time of anxiety; without the faithful creature I should have run my feet off my legs and my wit out of my head in futile search. He was much too tactful to remind me of his warnings, but did not cease to show me all sorts of reasonable grounds for Virginia's conduct, which had the effect of keeping his first prognostication always before me. "The girl," he said—I repeat the sum of his many discourses—"is evidently a good girl, and of strong character. She is perfectly reasonable. She married you—I take that for granted—when you were broken, beyond all prospect of repair. She now finds you restored to your proper station in the world, and will be no party to pulling you off your throne. She sees very well how that must end—unhappily. How can she hope to be a companion of your companions, a friend of your friends, a sharer in your amusements? Mistress she might be, your toy; wife she can never be. That parade of her neck and bosom— a desperate measure I assure you—shows to my mind that you will never possess her again, but as you would not care to do. You assure me that you married her, you name the church, describe the rites. All seems to be in order; but the more I understand your Virginia in these late proceedings, the less I understand that wedding in the Ghetto. Everything I learn of her from her own acts convinces me of her good sense; but of her acts as reported by you, Don Francis, I reserve my judgment."

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My heart and whole mind being now set upon finding her, my chagrin may be imagined when Fra Palamone returned without her. He demanded money to prosecute his researches beyond the confines of Arezzo. “She’s a deep one,” he said, “she’s as deep as the sea. Who can tell where she is by now? May be in Venice, may be in Rome, may be in the attics of this inn.” I gave him twenty guineas, and he disappeared again for ten days. At the end of that time he returned once more, horribly dishevelled, dirty and extended. He looked to be just out and about again after a ruinous debauch. He talked in hollow whispers, he trembled in the limbs, he started and turned pale at a shadow, or the sound of a mouse in the wainscot. He said he had been to Ancona, Gubbio, Rimini, Ravenna, Chioggia, Venice, Udine, Trieste. He demanded money—fifty guineas; but this time I gave him nothing. I was preparing to go to Florence, and had other agents than him in view. I dismissed him from my service, and told him to go to the devil. He left me for the moment, vowing as he did it that he should never, never quit my service, and I found that it was no easier to get rid of him now than it had ever been. I saw him on the morrow; I saw him every day. The more I saw of him the more I abhorred him; and the more I made this plain the more devoted he professed himself. Wherever I went he shadowed me. He lurked in the dark corners of churches where I made my devotions, or studied the monuments until I rose from my knees. If I rode in the country I knew that he was not far away, if I frequented public assemblies I saw his keen eyes upon me, and his wide mouth fixed at a patient grin. He was oppressively, sickeningly affectionate, his role being that of the old friend of my family, who had rocked my cradle and held me by my leading-strings. At meals he came skipping about me with little offerings: “A rose-bud for my bosom’s king!” he would say; “Fresh-pulled radishes for my heart’s blood!”; and once, while I was at dinner, he danced up to the table with a large and bleeding rabbit, saying, “A coney for my dear, of old Palamone’s wiring!” This was too much for my patience; I swung the beast about his ears, drove him from the room and flung his catch after him. He brought me no more presents, but did not cease to be my shadow.

CHAPTER XL

I GET RID OF MY ENEMY AND PART FROM MY FRIEND

When the day drew near upon which I had appointed to depart from Florence, I saw that I must come to terms with the fellow. I sent Belviso out to look for him—and to find him at no greater distance than the other side of the door, with his eye at the keyhole. He came in, blinking like an owl, still weak with his recent excesses, and very nervous. I felt my gorge rise at the sight of him, but did my best to be cool.

“Palamone,” I began, “it appears that you have recently done me a service——”

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He leered at me. “My Francis! When—and at what hour of day or night have I not been ready to serve you?”

“Why, that’s as may be,” said I. “I think I could remind you of a night attack at Pistoja ——”

“Oh, cruel,” he said, “oh, cruel!”

“Of a ravishment—of the strappado applied to a man bound hand and foot—”

He pretended to weep. “Cruel, cruel Francis!”

“Of detestable treachery in Florence when you set to work to entrap a good girl who had done you no harm in the world—and, Fra Palamone, I think I may remind you of the payment of those services of yours *in kind*, in the Piazza of Santa Maria.”

With clasped hands, streaming eyes, he beamed upon me. “Generous hand! Oh, healing, life-giving blood!”

“I am glad,” I said, “that you consider yourself healed by bleeding. But now, it appears, you have appointed yourself messenger from my friends, and have succeeded in benefiting me without extraordinary robbery. I cannot suppose that you did this for love.”

“Believe it,” says he, “believe it, Francis.”

“You must forgive me if I cannot,” said I. “On the contrary, I believe that you have acted for what profit you can make out of it. I never asked you to interfere in my affairs, and owe you less than nothing, but to make an end of you, since you do, perhaps, believe that you have served me with this late news of what you, no doubt, would call my ’good fortune,’ I will give you more than you deserve.” I counted out ten guineas, or their equivalent, and held them out to him.

His eyes gleamed, as if a fire had suddenly been kindled in them by the sight of money. He pounced at my hand and emptied it, as a dog scrapes in the ground. Holding his coins close to his breast, he snarled at me of his astuteness, and took obscene pride in his guile. “Is Palamone an old fool then? Eh, mercy and truth, was there ever such a wise old fox born into this world? Did I not, when I saw you at Rovigo, lay this finger to this nose, and say, ’La, la, Palamone, fratello, here is a pigeon for your plucking hand’? Did I not know you for an Englishman, for a nobleman born? For what do you take me? I knew that you had run away out of a scrape, I knew that the money-bags would be emptied to find you. Wise old Palamone! Deep-browed old night-bird! Darkly thinking, quickly acting old Fox-Palamone! And now, take heed to this, I have never lost you, but have been hard on your heels though Jesuits and Ministers and woman after woman have beset you on all sides. And what have I gained by all this? A wound in the

breast, my conscience! A slug through the lung, on the word of a Christian—and my Francis, the child of my sorrow, fed upon my tears, talks to me of profit—O Dio! O Dio!" He wrung his hands and howled; then, grinning like a wolf, he came creeping to me, his fingers gripping the air like claws. "Give me more money, Francis, you who have so much—give me the guineas of England, fifty, a hundred, a thousand—what are they to you? To me they are meat and drink, Paradise and the Mercy Seat." He was now hovering close to me, terribly possessed by greed. "If you do not give me money, Francis, I shall kill you with these hands." So he threatened me, raving.

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My anger got the better of my judgment. “You black-souled thief,” I said, “you shall have just what you deserve.”

He still grinned and glared. I think he still hoped for more money. I had my malacca cane in my hand, caught him with the other by the neck-gear and beat him till the stick was in splinters. It was like thrashing a sack of flour, for he lay like that under his punishment, and the dust that flew out of him filled the room. When I had done I threw him from me, went to the door and opened it. Belviso was outside, pale and trembling. I sent him for a corporal’s guard, at the sound of which order, before the lad could obey it, the frate rose, howling like a lost dog, ran swiftly to the window and leapt out into the street. He was not hurt, apparently, for I heard his howls far down the Via di Citta; and he must have run like the wind, for when they searched the country half an hour later there was no sign of him to be seen.

Belviso, who had witnessed this startling end, came trembling out of the corner of the room with his hands stretched out. He knelt down before me, his face hidden between his arms.

“Terrible man!” he said, shuddering; “but oh, signore, he has awoken the God in you. Have no fear, he will trouble you no more.”

“I believe not,” said I. “On the other hand, he will not find me Virginia. Get up, Belviso, let us take counsel together. What is your opinion?”

Belviso, thus adjured, rose to his feet and stood humbly before me. He was agitated—if by fear, then curiously; but it did not seem to be fear which put the slurred accents into his voice.

“Senta, Don Francesco,” he began, “what Virginia has done was all for love. She has acted according to her nature—as many would act—as all would act towards you, who knew your worth. O Dio!” cried the lad suddenly, gripping his chest with both hands, “O Dio! I would prove my love in the same sort if I were—if I were not—if you were—if you were not——” He began to weep piteously.

I stared. “What is the matter with you, Belviso?” I asked him. “What would you do if you were, or were not, something which you are, or are not? Riddles, riddles, my dear.” I was sorry he had seen me in such a rage, and laid a kindly arm upon his drooped shoulders. But Belviso sprang away.

“Don’t touch me—do not touch me,” he said, panting. “You little know— you cannot guess—and you never shall! What! shall I prove such an ingrate? You have befriended me, lifted me out of the mud. I have a soul now, it is worth saving. Virginia, that savage, fine girl, is not the only servant in the world. No, Mother Diana, we have hearts too in the Veneto——” He swept the storm from his eyes and calmed himself by the

gesture. “Don Francis,” he said, “let me leave you at this moment. I will find your Virginia—that fine girl. Trust me, leave all to me. I know Tuscany and the Tuscans. I will give her to you, never fear. In six weeks from now I will have her snug in Lucca. There you shall find her if you still want her, and if you do not——”

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“If I do not,” I said, “you may blot the name of Francis Strelley from the Book of Life and Judgment. God bless you, Belviso, dear friend. Your words convince me. Go in peace. Take money, take what you choose—my love, my gratitude——”

“I choose nothing but your confidence, and a kiss of your noble hand,” said Belviso.

“You shall grasp, not kiss, my hand,” I told him. “You are a man, or will be one, as I am. Let us love, trust, meet, part, as men.”

I held out my hand, he took it, pressed it, seemed unable to let it go. Suddenly he dropped down and kissed my knee—but with ardour, with reverence, indescribable devotion; then sprang to his feet, and was gone.

I made all preparations for my journey to Florence.

CHAPTER XLI

I RETURN TO FLORENCE AND THE WORLD OF FASHION

Upon my arrival in the capital, my first care, after securing a lodging on the Lung’ Arno, was to pay a visit to the Ghetto, where I had spent those happy three days with my newly wedded wife—if wife indeed she had been. I found the church, but not the priest; I found the old Jewess, Miriam, in whose house we had lodged. She made short work of my doubts. “You are no more married to your Virginia than you are to me,” she curtly said. “You are as little married as any young man of my acquaintance. Married, indeed! Why, that church hadn’t had a Mass said in it to my knowledge for fifty years, except a black one now and again to oblige the jaded vicious; and as for your priest, ’tis true he was a priest once, but he had been degraded for a bad affair of robbery with violence and inhibited from his business—and, now I come to think on it, he was hanged outside the Bargello no earlier than last week.”

I was aghast at this news, which, as it was delivered, I could hardly doubt. Virginia then had deceived me. I had trusted her in all things and she had played me false. Designing to do her honour, I had done her the greatest dishonour—but through her means. Blind fool that I was! Playing the husband, complacently accepting her play of the wife as serious. O Heaven, and she had let me ruin her, and now was gone! I own that I was angry at being made the victim of a trick, indignant at having been forced into a thing which I should never have dreamed of doing. But when I turned severely to Miriam and accused her of being a party to the fraud, she laughed in my face, and put the case before me in a way which made me sing a tune in the minor. “Fiddledededee!” she retorted, her arms stuck out akimbo, “what in the world had I to do with your fooleries? ’Twas the girl arranged it all—and for reasons which do her more credit than *you* seem able to do her. I think she’s a very good girl—a thousand times too good for

you. If you find her again I shall be sorry for her—and I'll tell you this much, that I shan't help you."

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She had me pleading after this; but it took two or three visits and very liberal treatment before she would condescend to tell me anything. Finally, however, she gave it as her opinion that Fra Palamone, whom I had been so short-sighted as to dismiss, was more likely to know of her whereabouts than any one; and that I had better beware of the Marchese Semifonte, a man well known to her. She plainly told me that she thought next to nothing of my chances, and that the best thing I could do was to go back to England. "You don't understand our women, nor will you ever— you and the likes of you," she said. "They have more sound sense in their little fingers than your nation in its collected Parliament. Do you imagine a girl like Virginia wants to be your lady? What on earth should she do in such a place? Lie on a couch and order menservants about? Oh, preposterous! What pleasures does Virginia know but those of bed and board and hoard? She'll be merry in the first, and hearty at the second, and passionate for filling the crock with gold pieces. But your manners would freeze the heart out of her; and if you have more guineas than you can spend, where's the joy of sweating to get 'em, or of hiding 'em under the flag-stones against a lean year? No, no, she knew better than you, and did better. A gentleman may play the beggar for a while, but sooner or later his own will have him—and what's Virginia to do then? Do you dare," she said sternly, "do you dare to blame her for what she has done? She has done incredibly well; and if you in all the rest of your life can prove a tithe of her nobility, you will be a greater man than I have reason to believe you."

"I cannot blame her, Miriam," I said, "I love her too much. I shall never rest until I find her." The tears stood in my eyes—I was indeed humiliated; but my shame, though bitter, was not without fruit.

Shortly afterwards, in order to clear up the affairs of my inheritance, I presented myself before Sir John Macartney, the English Minister, at his weekly levee in the Palazzo C ——. A bluff, soldierly man, of Irish birth and English opinions, he received me with particular civility, in which curiosity may perhaps have played its part. He deplored my loss of an excellent father, rejoiced in my gain of an excellent estate, hoped I should return to England, cry for King George, hunt the country, and keep a good head of game. He alluded, as delicately as he could, to religious differences. "I know very well that you're no turncoat, Mr. Strelley," he said; "no, dammy, your house is inveterate for the Pope. But your father was never a Stuart's man, and I hope you'll follow him there. You'll stand apart—'tis only natural—but, curse me, let us have no Jesuit rogues in our women's quarters—hey? No, no—you must uphold the Protestant succession, Mr. Strelley, like your father before you."

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My reply, I fancy, somewhat sobered the heart of Sir John. I said that I preferred the Republican form of government as I had seen it in Venice and Lucca, and that I should certainly have nothing to question in the authority of King George, seeing that that authority had been conferred upon him by Parliament. I added that my plans were very uncertain, and did not at present include hunting the county of Oxford. "I have done much hunting since I have been in Italy," I said ruefully, "I have been as often quarry as huntsman. At present I am hunting for my——." But there I stopped. Wife I could not say—mistress I would not.

Sir John saved me the trouble. He was a man of the world.

"Young blood!" he cried. "I envy you that. At your age, my dear sir, that too was my game." He took snuff, then said in an undertone, "I am not too old but I can feel for you, and not so young neither that I shall pretend more ignorance of your troubles than you could believe me to have. For reasons of your own, you chose not to seek my good offices when you were last in Florence, and it was not for me to thrust myself upon you. There was a lady, I believe—pooh, man, never blush for that; there is always a lady at your happy age. Well, I can give you news. That lady is still here in Florence—a charming creature, Mr. Strelley! Upon my soul, if I were younger by a decade—tut, tut! what am I saying?"

What was he saying, indeed! He was reminding me of one I desired extremely to forget; he was diverting my mind from another whom I must by all means remember. Honestly, I did not wish to see Donna Aurelia— but Sir John must have out his news.

He told me that Donna Aurelia and her husband were established in Florence. Count Giraldi, said Sir John, had used his great authority with the Sovereign to obtain a fine position for the professor. Dr. Lanfranchi had been made a Judge of the Court of Cassation, and had been in residence some six months or more. Fine as this position was, however, it was nothing, said Sir John, to the position of the judge's lady. "She's a leader of the mode, I can assure you," said he, "and any little difficulty you may have had in that quarter, you may be sure, will be none now. Count Giraldi will, no doubt, be enchanted to present you there. I recommend you to keep in with the count."

I felt that I could not love Count Giraldi any more. I told Sir John that my duties towards Donna Aurelia and her husband were of a peculiar kind, not to be assisted or made more difficult by Count Giraldi. "There was a moment," I added, "when his Excellency could have served me—when, having played the part of an honest man, I called for the help of one who had pretended himself my friend. He failed me then, I know not why; and he might fail me now. If you will pardon me for saying so, what I now have to do in the case of this lady—if there is anything for me to do—is by no means the business of his Excellency."

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“I hope not, I hope not,” said Sir John. “Go your own way—and count upon me, at least, in the pinch—if pinch there is to be. But remember this. Count Giraldi is the Chief Minister of this Government, and this Government is your host. Count Giraldi is therefore major-domo. Keep in with him, my dear sir, by all means, unless you desire (a) your conge, or (b) an extortionate bill for breakages and arrears. I need only mention the name of the Marchese Semifonte—no more on that head.”

“No more indeed,” says I, very short. “But as to Count Giraldi, I can assure you that I have no quarrel with his Excellency, who (idle rumours apart) has never, to my knowledge, impugned my honour.”

“Why no,” said Sir John, with a queer frown, “nor need he ever—so long as you clearly perceive wherein your honour lies.”

“I do perceive it most clearly,” I replied, “and believe that I have always perceived it since that fatal night when I forgot that I had any. I am so sure of it now that I shall not hesitate for a moment. With your permission, sir, I shall set about it this very hour.”

“What the devil are you going to do, my dear sir?” cried the Minister.

“I am going to leave Florence,” I said, “so soon as ever I have done my present business.”

Sir John puffed out his cheeks and let his relief escape in a volley. “Poh! How you put me about,” said he. “I thought you were for the count’s throat. I thought—body of me, I know not what I thought. As for the doctor, you’ll find him easy handling. The good man knows where his comforts are, and whence they come. Why, supposing that you had never gone into his wife’s cupboard and stalked out of it again, would he at this day have been snug upon the bench, with house-room at the Villa San Giorgio?” Here was something strange.

“At the Villa San Giorgio?” I echoed with astonishment. “Is Donna Giulia then——?”

Sir John looked sly. “Donna Giulia,” he said, “was a sensible woman. She knew very well the length of her shoe. Donna Giulia has joined her husband at Naples—a Court appointment and a good house. Dr. Lanfranchi occupies the Villa San Giorgio. Now do you see how the land lies?” I frowned and squared my chin. I think that I was disturbed because I did not then see how the land lay. I suspected, however, that Sir John knew more than he chose to tell me. I rose to take leave of him. There was something about me which he noticed.

“You are going to the doctor?” he said. “You will find him in court.”

“I am going,” I said, “to the Villa San Giorgio.”

He showed his alarm by saying, “You may regret it; you may regret it all your life long.”

“I shall regret that I ever lived if I do not go,” said I. As I went out Sir John threw up his hands.

CHAPTER XLII

I STAND AT A CROSS-ROAD

I did not go immediately to the Villa San Giorgio; it was necessary that I should be clear why I was to go there at all. How did I stand with regard to Donna Aurelia—did I love her still, or was I cured of my wound? If I loved her, to go to her now were to play the criminal; if I did not, it might be to play the fool.

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Because—if I did not love her, why was I going? That is easily answered. I was going because I suspected that all was not well with her. Why was Donna Giulia in retirement? Why was the villa at the disposition of the learned judge? Why was Sir John Macartney so guarded in his admissions, and why so desirous that I should not see Count Giraldi? Apart from my private grievance against that person, which, after all, was only based on surmise and the convictions of Virginia, I could see no possible reason why I should not meet him, but one. That was, that he was fallen a victim to Aurelia's charms. And to a certain extent I felt that I should be responsible for that misfortune, for if I had never loved her she had never been in Florence; and if she had never been in Florence, she had never seen this accomplished, scoffing, cynical Tuscan.

I was not ashamed to confess that I still thought Aurelia the most beautiful woman in the world, the most heavenly in conversation as in person the most superb. All the old glamour was upon me still. I knew that I should be a child at her knees the moment I set eyes upon her again; I knew that I should be imparadised, longing after impossible goodness, filled with impossible joys. But I knew also that I did not desire her. She was sacred, she was so little of the earth that as well might one hope to wed a seraph, all compact of fire, as she. I set by her, in my mind's eye, that passionate Virginia—that faithful, clinging, serving mate of what I knew were my happiest days. Ah, my sweet, lovely, loving wife! Virginia's long kisses, Virginia's close arms, her beating bosom, her fury of love, the meekness, obedience, steadfastness into which it could all be changed at a mere lift of my brows—ah, nuptial love, wedded bliss, the joys of home and the hearth, English joys! Virginia meant all this and more to me. I swore to myself that without her I could not live, that to deserve her I would renounce the world, my patrimony, my country, and that not even a changed Aurelia—changed from Seraph to calling Siren—could keep me from her side.

But Aurelia—Aurelia Gualandi, that delicate flower of Siena, that youngest of the angels, that fount of poesy—what of her? What had she to say to such a certainty as this of mine? In my mind's eye I saw them stand together, she and Virginia, those two beautiful girls, Virginia a head the taller, proudly erect, with arms folded over her chest, and her dark brows forming a bar across her forehead. I saw her in white bodice and green petticoat, her arms and neck bare, her feet in old slippers, her black hair loosely coiled and stuck with a silver pin. I saw her hold herself aloof and dubious, proud and coldly chaste. "Call me and I come," she seemed to say to me between her shut lips, "Call me and I follow you over the world like a dog at your heels. Send me into infamy and I go; expect me to woo you there and I will die sooner. Yours, if you will have me; nobody's, anybody's, if you will not!" In my fancy I could hear her very words, see her steady eyes, her pure and moving lips.

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And Aurelia—how did she stand there? I saw her too in my mind's eye; dazzlingly, provokingly, like a creature of pure light, with thrown-back head and parted lips, with jewels about her neck, as I had seen her in the theatre at Siena; and jewels also in her hair. Like a queen of beauty at a love-court, conscious of her power, loving it, proving it; she smiled, she shook her cloudy tresses, she demanded my worship as of right. "If I choose I shall call thee," she seemed to say, "and thee— and thee—and thee again, to stand behind my chair, to kneel at my feet, to be my slave. And wilt thou deny me, Francis—or thou—or thou?"

Her soft eyes, how they peered and sparkled! Her soft lips, how they faltered between laugh and pout! "If I need him I can have him here," I heard her say. "I have but to thrill his name—to call Checho—Checho— and he comes. Is it not so, Checho? Is it not so?"

Call you me, Virginia; call you me in turn, my girl! What said she now but, "Povera Virginia, che fara? Don Francesco non ti ama piu. Ebbene— pazienza!" Virginia shrugged her proud shoulders and turned her grey eyes away. Virginia refused to plead, and was too proud to command.

So stood I, In my fancy, irresolute between these two, their battleground, the prize, it would seem, of one who now refused to fight for it, and of one already sure of victory. But this was very odd about the affair, that the stiffer Virginia grew, as I saw her there, the more indurate, the more ruggedly of the soil, declining battle, the more Aurelia shrank in my eyes, the less confident her call to me, the more frail her hold of my heart. Virginia stood apart like a rock and turned away her eyes from me. "Thou shalt seek me out of thine own will, Francis, for I will never come to thee again of mine!" But Aurelia's halo had slipped; her wings drooped lifeless, her glitter was dimmed. Her appeal was now urgent; her arms called me as well as her voice; but I seemed to shrink from them, as if there were danger in her.

This very singular hallucination of mine decided me to go, for now I was curious. The strife, in which I had had so little to do, had been most vivid, the parties to it so real, that there were moments when I caught myself speaking aloud to one of my phantoms. That one was always Virginia; therefore I dared to go, knowing full well that she would now go with me.

And it was so. At six o'clock of an evening I went out of doors and turned my face towards the east. It was a mild evening as that on which I had seen Virginia for the first time in the wood, her faggot on her head. I seemed to see her now going bravely before me. So clearly did she show, I quickened my steps to overtake her; and again my heart beat, and again I thought of the nymphs and all the soft riot of the woodland scents and sounds. Strange! how the slim figure of the peasant-girl possessed me. I thought of her as I entered the grove of cypresses which led to the villa, and if my heart

was in high trouble as I asked for Donna Aurelia, it was the surmise that I should again see Virginia fluttering among the trees that set my blood a-tingling.

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But she left me there, as I waited in the saloon open to the shadowed garden; and I knew not whether I felt her the more certainly for her absence than for her former persistent company.

CHAPTER XLIII

AGITATIONS AT THE VILLA SAN GIORGIO

The servant, an old one of Donna Giulia's, who knew me well by sight, had grimaced pleasantly as he saluted. "Buon di, signoria," he had said, and "Servitore del 'lustrissimo." The padrona, he felt sure, was in the house, and the Excellency of the count was paying a visit. Let the 'lustrissimo accommodate himself, take repose, walk in the garden, do his perfect pleasure. In two little moments the padrona should be informed. With that he had gone away, leaving a volley of nods, winks and exclamations behind him. The windows stood open, the hour, the season invited. I saw the long, velvety vista of the cypress avenue, the slender feathers of trees in young leaf, the pleasantness of the grass, heard the invitation of a calling thrush, thought poignantly of Virginia, and went out, hoping to see her spirit there.

I paced the well-remembered long avenue to where it opened into a circle to meet two others. A sun-dial stood here in the midst and marked a point from which you could look three ways—behind you to the house, to the right and to the left. I chose for the right, and sauntered slowly towards the statue of the Dancing Faun, which closed that particular alley.

Strange, indeed, it was to be within the personal circle of Donna Aurelia, and undisturbed! But I did not realise then how near her I was.

The sound of voices in debate broke in upon my meditations—a woman's clear "No, no. At this hour, no!" and a man's, which urged, "Signora, if my devotion—" I knew both voices—the woman's was not to be mistaken. Aurelia was there—the divine Aurelia—-close at hand. Without thinking what I did, I took a strong breath and stepped forward to my task. I reached the statue of the faun, which leered and writhed its leathery tongue at me; and in the bay which opened out beyond it I found Aurelia and the count together.

The fair Aurelia was flushed and disarrayed. Her hair was half uncoiled, her bodice undone. She lay, or rather reclined, upon a garden seat; one hand was clapped to her side, one hand guarded her bosom. The count, who had his back to me, was upon one knee before her. He was, or had been, eloquent. At the moment of my appearance he had finished his period, and still trembled with the passion of it. For the cynic philosopher he professed to be, he was, at the moment, singularly without relish of the humours of his position.

Coming upon all this, I stopped suddenly short. Aurelia saw me, and uttered a cry. At the same instant her hands were busy with her dress. The count, on his feet in a moment, turned his head, started violently, then controlled himself, and advanced to meet me, whom he had once called his friend.

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“My dear Don Francis,” he said briskly, “let me be one of the first to welcome you. I had heard of your arrival only to-day—indeed, I came here to prepare Donna Aurelia for a pleasant surprise. I believe I was being eloquent on your account at this moment. You may have overheard me—if I was too partial, blame my esteem.”

I scarcely heard him, and was perhaps barely civil. I went past him, hat in hand, towards the lady. I saluted her profoundly.

“Madam,” I said, “my intrusion is pure accident. I was told that your ladyship was in the house. Ten thousand pardons that I come unannounced before you—unwelcome I must needs be, unworthy of your clemency—since we parted unhappily. Forgive me, I beseech you.” I then offered the count my hand.

“Oh, Signor Francesco,” says Aurelia in a twitter, “I am glad to see you again.” She was tremulous, beautiful; she had her old wayward, ardent ways, her childish bloom and roundness had not left her, nor her sumptuousness, nor her allure—and yet I could look calmly into her face and know that she had no charm left for me.

“Madam,” I said, “since you showed me so plainly that my company was not to your taste, I have no right to be here. My fault—my old fault—is so clearly before me that I should not have dared commit another. If I may once more ask your pardon——”

“Oh, my pardon!” cried she, faltering. “Why, what harm have you done me now, pray?”

“Madam,” says the count, “my young friend’s fault is a very natural one. If he is a sinner, what must your ladyship be? For if it is sinful to love, is it not worse to inspire it?” The lady made no reply at this gallant diversion.

The position was very awkward. I could not speak as I felt, or as I ought to feel; the count would not, and Donna Aurelia was on the verge of tears. Obviously I must retire.

“Madam,” I said, “I intruded upon you by misfortune, and may not trespass. I beg my service to the learned judge, my profoundest respect to your ladyship. The young man who once showed himself unworthy to be at your feet may now stand upon his own. Don Francis has offended Donna Aurelia——”

“Oh, no, no, no!” said Aurelia in distress. “Oh, Checho, don’t leave me.”

I came off my stilts, for I saw that she was unhappy.

“Can I serve you?” I asked her. “Can I be so honoured?”

“Yes, yes,” she said brokenly, “stay with me. I need you—stay.” Count Giraldi took a step forward.

“Madam,” he said, “I salute your ladyship’s hand, and shall do myself the honour to wait upon you upon a less urgent occasion. Don Francis, your humble servant—to meet again, no doubt.”

He bowed himself away, and left me alone with Aurelia.

For some time neither of us spoke. She sat pensive, with signs of distress—storm signals—still displayed; she was very nervous, looking at her fingers at play in her lap. I stood up beside her, not knowing, in truth, what in the world she wanted with me. The silence, as it became oppressive, made Aurelia angry. She bit her lip.

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“Well,” she said at last. “Well! have you nothing to say to me, now that you have found me?”

“Madam,” said I, “my fault——”

“Oh,” cried she in a rage. “Your fault! Do you not see how hateful your ‘fault’ makes me appear? Do you think the best way of amending this wonderful fault of yours is to be for ever bewailing it? Has a gentleman never loved a lady before, or am I a lady whom no man should love? Do you suppose I am flattered to learn that you have hunted me all over Italy only for the pleasure of telling me that you are ashamed of ever having loved me?”

I said, “I loved you unworthily—I played a knave’s part. I distorted your lovely image, I presumed upon your gracious kindness. I was accursed—accursed. I did sacrilege—I profaned the temple.” I strode about before her declaiming against myself, not looking at her.

She laughed her vexation away. “My poor Checho,” she said, “if you knew, if you could understand! Those days and nights of ours were very sweet. Come, let us walk a little. It is chilly here. Come, we will go into the house and you shall tell me of your travels.” She took my arm; I led her back to the house.

I sat by her side in the little saloon which had been Donna Giulia’s boudoir, and served Aurelia now for the same purpose; and judging honesty the kindest, and only, course, I told her everything of my defence of Virginia, hinting at the same time at my suspicions of Count Giraldi. I said that the poor child had certainly been betrayed to the marchese, that the count and Father Carnesecchi alone had known her story, that I could not suspect the Jesuit, and therefore——At this point Aurelia stopped me, not by any words, but by her appearance of being upon the point of words. She was very much excited, but she controlled her speech; and I went on to tell her that, in consequence of that betrayal, I had felt bound to make Virginia my wife. At this I thought that she was ill. She stared at me as if I had suddenly stabbed her; she went perfectly white. “Your wife!” she whispered—“you have—— "

“Madam,” I said, “that is the truth. I have never shrunk from my duty, I believe, and never saw duty plainlier than then. I married Virginia, or thought that I did; but it now appears that my marriage was none at all— not by my fault, but by that noble girl’s mistaken generosity. And now that I have lost her I must by all means find her. She must be mine for ever.”

Aurelia had recovered her colour and self-possession. She was now also very angry, tapping her foot and breathing fast. She looked disdainfully at me, and reproachfully. “But,” she said, with scorn, “But what I am to think of you, Don Francis? Do you purpose to spend your life seeking ladies whom you have compromised? No sooner

have you lost me than you look for another! And when you find your wife—as you choose to call her—if you are so fortunate, shall you treat her as you have treated me?”

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“I hope so,” said I. “My first duty will be to ask her forgiveness; my second to convince her of my repentance; my third——”

“Oh, spare me your *thirdly*,” said Aurelia drily. “I have no doubt what your third duty will be, and I am sure you will perform it admirably.” She grew red, tears gathered in her eyes—she stamped her foot. “Vexatious boy!” she cried out, “I wish to Heaven I had never seen you! You loved me once—but I was not ready. Now that I am—what I am—you are not ready.” “I did you a wrong—I was a villain.” A great terror struck me. “God have mercy upon me,” I cried. “Aurelia! is it possible— is it possible—that you——?”

She came very near me—so near that her quick breath fanned my face—so near that I could distinguish her heart-beats. She took my hands, tried to draw me to her.

“Yes, yes—it is possible—it is possible—it is certain—it is true! I love you—I need you—I will follow you across the world. Do you think me bold? Judge then of my need. Do you suppose such a confession easy to a woman—or lightly made——? Do you think me a bad woman? I shall not deny it—but I shall add to your judgment that I am a loving one. Ah, there was a time,” she said bitterly—for she saw my dismay—“there was a time when you prayed me to love you, and I refused. If then I had agreed, would you have gone white and red by turns—would you have averted your eyes—would you have looked on the ground?” She took me in her eager arms, she clung to me, she strove, panted for a kiss. “To me, to me, Francis—you loved me first—you taught me—I am yours by right of conquest. Here I am—on your breast, the forgiving, the longing Aurelia!”

I cannot express what I felt during this scene. Painful as it was to me to know myself unaffected by it, it was exquisite grief to me to have her unqueen herself before my eyes. O Aurelia, to stoop from thy celestial commerce to barter for a kiss! I know not what I said, nor can remember exactly what it was that I did. I was, I trust, gentle with her. I disengaged myself without abruptness and led her to a seat. I said nothing—but when she was more at ease within herself, I knelt before her, kissed her hand respectfully, and left her. It was, I am sure, a case where fewest words were best. I believe that she was weeping; I know that I was.

Going out of the villa gates into the street, I was aware of a cloaked figure standing at the first corner towards Florence, evidently upon the watch for me. The moment I was clear of the gate he came to meet me, and I saw that he was followed by another muffled man, and that both carried swords. I kept my course, however, as if they were no concern of mine, and made room for them to pass me on the side of the wall. But the first of them stopped in front of me.

“A fine night, Don Francis,” he said. It was Count Giraldi.

CHAPTER XLIV

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I CONFRONT MY ENEMIES

I could not see his face, for besides that it was now very dark, he kept his cloak up, and had pulled his hat downwards over his brow; but his voice was perfectly familiar. His companion was similarly muffled; I did not then recognise him.

I saluted the count and admitted the fineness of the night. It seemed to me that he had more to say—and he had.

“I have wished a little conversation with you, Don Francis,” he said. “Shall we walk together? You are returning to your lodging—after an interview which, to judge from its duration, must have been pleasant.”

“My dear count,” said I, “Donna Aurelia, as you know, is an old friend of mine. We had much to say. I will walk with you by all means. But your friend here——”

He laughed. “My friend will not disturb us. Let me make two gentlemen acquainted, who should know each other, at least, by name. Marchese, let me present you to my friend Mr. Francis Strelley. Don Francis, be pleased to salute the illustrious Marchese Semifonte.”

I began to smell mischief—indeed I had smelt it already. I knew that the count was no longer my friend; and as for Semifonte, no doubt he would murder me if he durst. Here, then, were these two worthies in league, and waiting for me in a lonely place. Lucky that I had my sword.

In the meantime Semifonte raised his hat and bowed; I returned the salutation and said that I had had the advantage of meeting his lordship already. To that he made no reply. We then walked on together—I on the inside, next to me the count, the marchese on the outside.

The count began by congratulating me upon my escape from Florence, and from what might have been a most awkward affair. “Luckily for me,” he added, “I was out of the city at the time, or, between my duty and my inclination, I should have found myself in a dilemma.”

To that I replied that it was sufficient for me to be sure that he had been absent. “If I had known that Donna Aurelia was still in the Villa San Giorgio,” I went on, “at the time when I was hiding from your excellency’s servants, I believe I should have pushed my importunities so far as her door.”

“You would have asked Donna Aurelia to interest herself in the cause of your charming—your too charming——” I could not see his face, but could have sworn that he was showing his teeth.

“Not at all, count,” I said, “not at all. But I should have asked the Grand Duke’s principal Minister to remember that he had betrayed an innocent girl’s whereabouts to those who sought her ruin, and to give fair play to him who had risked his life to protect her.”

“You wrong me, sir,” he said warmly; “you accuse me of treachery. Of that I am incapable. As for my distinguished friend here——”

“Let your distinguished friend deny that he purchased Virginia Strozzi from her parents,” I retorted; “that he has sought her ever since—that he sent Palamone to murder me—-that he still intends some mischief. Let him deny these things, and I speak no more of them.”

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The marchese said not a word. The count took up the tale.

“Let me, in my turn, trouble you with a few denials. I do not deny that Donna Aurelia was in Florence earlier than you supposed, nor that I kept you in ignorance of it. It was judged better on all accounts. Father Carnesecchi was of that opinion. I believe that the lady had no desire to see you. Perhaps you will pardon my franchise when I say that it would have been singular if she had. She desired to be accommodated with her husband—and that was done. My part in that affair, which I am very ready to defend, need not concern you, though (if I remember rightly) you professed yourself anxious on that account. Now for my denials. I deny flatly that I did any service to my distinguished friend at your expense. I deny it point-blank. And I deny that, when—not for the first time—you took the law into your own hands, I purposely removed myself from the city. That suspicion of yours is not worth so many words. What should my purpose be? What object could I have? Why should I become your enemy?”

“That, sir,” I said, “is what I intend to find out. Be so good as to add these to your denials if you can. Will you deny that you witnessed the performance of the Donne Furlane in Siena on the occasion of the Grand Duke’s birthday last year?”

He said, “I remember it, and a remarkable performance it was.”

“And did you see it in company of Donna Aurelia?”

“I did.”

“And did you give yourself the pain to send officers to arrest an actor called De’ Pazzi?”

He was silent. I said then:

“And did you not know that I was that actor? Now, Count Giraldi, since you cannot deny these facts, I will ask you why you are my enemy? For you are not a man who acts without reason.”

We were upon the river bank a little short of the Rubiconte Bridge. The water rippled languidly over the muddy reaches, but the rush of the weir was audible. Not another sound was to be heard, not a soul was in sight. We three stopped—I was facing the two men, my back to the low river wall. I heard Giraldi’s breath come short and whistling through his fine nose; I heard Semifonte breathing through his mouth—shorter breaths—he was panting.

Count Giraldi spoke, using great command of himself, measuring his words.

“I think I will tell you the facts,” he said, “I think that will be best. You can then judge my actions, and, as a reasonable man, govern your own by them.

“Man of the world as I am,” he continued, “I must confess that you surprised me upon our first acquaintance. I could not tell whether I was consorting with a very refined profligate or (forgive me) a very singular fool. You came into the city in search (as you told me) of a lady with whom you had had an abortive affair—but you came in company with an attractive person, in a relationship with her which could only bear one interpretation—No,

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no, you must hear me out, if you please," he said peremptorily, stopping my protest before it could be framed in words. "Upon your representations I interested myself in Donna Aurelia. I judged her attractive by your report; I found that your discernment was even better than I had expected. She came to the convent in some distress, I saw her, she was charming, she charmed me. She was in a chastened mood, subdued, softly melancholy. I believe—indeed, I know— that she had a tenderness for you. Well, I was prepared to be loyal, no one is to say in my presence that I am a false friend. I *was* loyal until—Pest!" cried he, "what did I find? I found that, while you professed the most extravagant regard for the lady, you asked nothing better for yourself than that she should return to the arms of her horrible old spouse! I found also that you had recovered possession of your straight young Contadina by means which were more ingenious than lawful—that she was in your lodgings—your friend—your——"

Semifonte here gave a harsh guttural cry. Giraldi spoke to him in an undertone, then resumed:

"You may remember my interest in that young woman's appearance and manner, when I chanced to find her in your lodgings in the dress of a fine lady. You remember that you then told me her history? Believe me when I say that I did not tell my illustrious friend here of the adventure. He was told, it is true, but not by me. If it will satisfy you, I will take my oath to that. I had no intention of depriving you of your mistress; far from it, that would have destroyed my particular object, which, I will now confess, was to take your place in Donna Aurelia's regard, for which you would not ask. I own also that I did not care to have you in her neighbourhood, and that I very much desired to get rid of you. Why? Because I could see that Donna Aurelia was in love with you."

He paused while I admired his affectation of candour. Presently he went on: "When my friend here proposed to secure your mistress by means of the Capuchin I gave him a free hand; that is to say, I gave you no warning, I admit that. Why again? Because I knew you, Don Francis, and was certain that you would never allow a hand to be laid upon her. I was right, you did not. You did precisely what I desired. You as good as killed the Capuchin and you went into hiding. I wished to keep you there, and so I did. If I had not sent Carabineers into the Piazza—if I had been accessible to your messengers—you would have been fatally in my way. You were never in danger of arrest or imprisonment—but you believed that you were, and that served my purpose.

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“You left our State. All was well until you entered it again. I admit that when I saw you in Siena I was in Donna Aurelia’s company, and feared the effect of your apparition upon her. She did not recognise you, but I did. I confess that I had you arrested, and assure you that you would never have gone to Volterra, but to Leghorn. You would have been placed upon an English ship and sent to your own country, where your peculiar qualities would have had freer play. Lastly, I admit that I was vexed at your reappearance here in circumstances of prosperity which forbade my touching you. I admit that I have resented this late visit of yours to Donna Aurelia and am still smarting at the length of it. Ridiculous, but so it is! I know that she has a feeling for you—I am not secure—I wish you to go. You are really unconscionable, you must let me say. You have deprived the marchese of a possible mistress, and now you seem inclined to deprive me of an actual mistress. You are exorbitant, my young sir——”

“Stop there, Count Giraldi,” I said in a voice which I myself hardly knew for my own. “Stop there. Repeat your last words. You say that I am for robbing you—of what?”

“Donna Aurelia,” said he deliberately, “has done me great honour. I am her accepted cavalier. She has accorded me the highest favour. She occupies my villa—the doctor is my humble servant. You will not wish me to enlarge upon this?”

“You are a liar,” I said, “you are a liar,” and struck him full in the face with my open hand. His white face was nearly all I could see of him.

He recoiled—he had not expected it, I am sure. At that moment, before he could recover his self-possession, Semifonte gave another hoarse cry and leapt at me with a dagger. I caught him under the arm-pit, closed with him and threw him easily. His back gave at the first jerk—there was no strength in him—and when he was on the ground I disarmed him with ease and bade him lie still. I put my foot upon his neck, and drew my sword. “If you stir, assassin, I shall run you through,” I said. “Now, Count Giraldi, I am at your service.”

“You are bolder than I thought, and readier,” the count said; “but you have gone too far, and I shall meet you as soon as you please. I don’t know whether you believe that this has been part of my plan, or whether you care to hear me deny it. If you believe me a liar, you can easily believe me assassin also. I will bid you good-night, Don Francis. We know where to find each other.”

I told him that my friend, Mr. Robert Malcolm, of the English Legation, would receive any friend of his, at any hour—the sooner the better. He went away.

I removed my foot from the marchese’s neck and told him to get up.

“You see, my lord, what your friend thinks of you by the way he has disavowed your performance and left you in the mud,” I said. “Give yourself the trouble to go to your

own house." I gave him the road and waited while he walked swiftly away. I incline to believe that he was mad, this miserable man. He said nothing—not one word—but did exactly as he was told. I could barely make out the outline of him in the darkness, and could not see his eyes. I know that they were white and scared.

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CHAPTER XLV

THE MEETING

Bob Malcolm came to see me early in the morning with news that the count's cartel had been delivered in form. He told me that I might as well fight the Grand Duke—"For if you kill, Frank, if you kill," says he, "you'll be in a fortress for life; and if you don't kill, why, then you're a dead man. Body of a dog, as they say here, you're a dead man either way." Good Bob was much put about.

I did my best to hearten him. I said that I would take the risk of Volterra, as I had taken it before, and should do my best to kill the count. He was, I said, a lying blasphemer whose death would be an act of justice. Malcolm whistled.

"This is a devilish sharp-set affair," says he; "for that is just how the marchese put his man's frame of mind. He stipulates, it seems, that you fight to the death. Look out for him too, Frank," he added. "He is dangerous. I never liked him; and to-day he looked like a sick wolf."

"Who is your marchese?" I asked without interest.

"Semifonte," says Bob, "and as mad as a March hare." I got up at once. I said, "I shall kill Count Giraldi."

We met in the Cascine at six o'clock of a foggy morning; the light bad, the ground heavy from a night's rain. The marchese wore black, I remember, and looked horrible; a wan, doomed face, a mouth drawn down at one corner, a slavered, untidy red beard; and those wide fish-eyes of his which seemed to see nothing. Count Giraldi bore himself gallantly, as he always did. I was extremely cool.

We stripped and faced each other, the swords were produced and measured; we saluted, and the count at once began a furious attack. I think that on any ordinary occasion he would have proved the better man; he was fully as strong as myself, and as good in the wind—for he lived temperately; and he had had more experience. But to-day, as I soon discovered, he was flurried and made mistakes; twice in the first five minutes I could have disarmed him, and once I very nearly had his life. He was foolhardy to an extraordinary degree; his eyes were unsteady; it seemed to me that he was thinking of something else; and before we had been long engaged I discovered that he was thinking of two things, the first, his own certain death, the second, the state of mind of the Marchese Semifonte. My finding out of the second of these made me resolute to bring about the first of them; otherwise, so wildly was he at work I don't believe I could have brought myself to kill such a tyro as he was proving.

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The fact which determined me to kill him was this. I had pushed him vigorously, after parrying with ease half a dozen of his frenzied attacks—I had pushed him, and he had given ground as usual; but, although I did not perceive it at the time, in giving way he had worked back towards his second, who had not budged; so that, as I advanced, I got to be actually within wounding distance of the marchese. Bob Malcolm ought to have knocked our swords up, no doubt; but he did not. In the full tide of my attack, then, when I had my man almost at my mercy, I felt a sudden and sharp pain in the side, and at the same moment heard Malcolm's cry, "Ah, bloody villain, none of that!" Almost immediately I heard the clash of swords, and turning my head for a moment, saw our seconds engaged. In that same instant of forgetfulness Giraldi was upon me, lunged furiously and ran his blade through my sword arm. There was an assassination, planned and nearly achieved!

Red rage now possessed me; I do not believe an angelic messenger could have stopped me now. Changing my sword hand, I attacked my man, who ran lightly back to avoid me. I pursued him, I closed with him, we had a desperate rally for perhaps a minute and a half. I know that I pinked him twice, for I saw the blood on his shirt; in another few seconds I had his sword flying out of his hand and himself his full length on the sward.

There then lay this shameful enemy, traducer of ladies, treacherous friend, hirer of murderers—why should I spare him? I did not intend it. I went up to him fully prepared to deal death upon him, fallen though he were. At that moment I thought that no power of earth or Heaven could have saved his life. And yet there was one power which could and did: the power of Aurelia's name.

His pocket-handkerchief was stuck in his waistband; and as I stood above him full of meditated and most reasonable murder, I happened to see upon it, in red letters, his cipher; a coronet, and under that the initials of his name, Amadeo Giraldi. They struck me like the writing on the wall, as if they had been letters of fire. A. G., I read there—the letters of Aurelia's virgin name! A. G.—Aurelia Gualandi, untried maiden of Siena once, innocent of all the evil that men could devise against her, unsullied rose dropped from the lap of Mary the mother of us all! Could I dare—could I indeed dare to slay one who bore, though shamefully, those letters of hers whose perfection I was here to maintain? I knew that I could not; I lowered my sword.

I looked at him where he lay, perfectly still, calm now, with his black eyes fixed upon mine. I said, "I hope that you are prepared for justice, Count Giraldi, at my hands."

He replied with a smile, "I am prepared for anything, my dear sir. Least of all, perhaps, for justice at this moment."

"It is what you least deserve," I said, "since it is what you practise least; but there are circumstances at work in your favour. You must, however, confess yourself a liar. That

is indispensable. Come now, what do you say?" At this moment Malcolm came back with a red sword.

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“I have paid him in his own coin,” he said, “but I think we had best be off.”

“Go, my dear Malcolm,” I told him. “Do not delay a moment. I shall not leave Florence in any case.”

“Are you mad, my dear?” he cried. I said that I had no notion whether I was mad or not; but that I had work to do in Florence, and intended to finish it. I persuaded him at last to get away to Lucca at once, where I hoped to join him. The doctor came up to report Semifonte quite dead.

I returned to the count, who said to me, “Every man over forty is, and must be, a liar, since, in a sense, his very existence is a lie. If it will satisfy you, I will assure you that I am over forty.”

I accepted that periphrasis. “And now,” I said, “I will tell you to whom you owe your life. It is to that lady whom you have dared to traduce—to her and no other. I gather that you will not repeat your slander.”

“I promise you that, sir,” said he. “But I am curious to learn how Donna Aurelia can have interceded.”

“Her name in maidenhood,” I said, “was Aurelia Gualandi. There upon your handkerchief I read her initials, ‘A. G.’”

“The handkerchief is my own, I swear it!” he cried with passion. “Will you make the merest coincidence accuse her again? Shame upon you, sir.”

“Never in the world,” said I. “I never doubted but it was your own. The cipher saved you, not the handkerchief.”

I suppose that he was too faint by now to understand me, for he only put his hand up and shook it to and fro. “Exquisite fool!” I heard him say, and then with a groan, “Gesu, I die!” he fainted in earnest. I helped the surgeon carry him to his coach, then walked to my lodging, leaving the marchese astare at the trees.

CHAPTER XLVI

THE DISCOVERY

I was to dine that night with the Prior of Saint Mark’s, a former acquaintance of mine, and I kept my engagement, though I left the party early. My wound, which was painful but not dangerous, was not the cause of that. The fact is that I was arrested while we were sitting over our fruit and wine, at a moment when I was enunciating a favourite theory of mine that this world is a garden for every man alive of us who happens to be a

gardener, and for no other; and that he only is a gardener who lives for the joy of his labour and not for the material profit he can make out of his toil. The Grand Inquisitor—that pock-marked Dominican who had treated me with uncharitable harshness upon my first visit to Florence—was present at table, and was upon the point of denouncing my argument as perverse, unchristian and I know not what else; he had said, “It is my deliberate opinion that detestable beliefs as are Atheism, Calvinism, Mahometanism and the tenets of the Quietists, it were better for a man to embrace all of them in one vast, comprehensive blasphemy, than depend for their refutation

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upon any argument which Mr. Strelley can advance——" when a friar opened the door and ushered in a lieutenant of police and his guard. The officer saluted the company in general and myself in particular. "Sir," he said politely to me, "I have the honour to arrest you, in the Grand Duke's name, for the barbarous murder of the most illustrious Marchese Deifobo Semifonte, for the attempted murder of his Excellency Count Amadeo Giraldi, and for contravention of the law of duelling. By express command of the Syndic I am to put your honour in irons. Corporal, do your duty."

I said nothing in reply, but took leave of my host with all the proper form of society, assuring him that I should take with me whithersover I went a grateful memory of his beautiful and peaceful retirement; I bowed to my fellow-guest, and then suffered the corporal to chain my hands behind me. A coach was awaiting me at the gate; I entered it with the lieutenant and was driven to the Bargello.

I was not ill-treated by any means. I had a small but decent chamber assigned to me, and I was alone. When I demanded that my accusation should be read over, in order that I might engage a lawyer for my defence, I was assured that this would not be at all necessary, as there would be no trial. In that case, I begged them to leave me to repose and meditation, which they were so good as to do. I had an excellent night's rest, and was very ready for my chocolate at eight o'clock in the morning.

Whilst I was sipping this, expecting every moment the arrival of my servant with my clothes, clean linen, letters, and a barber, I heard the key turn in the lock, and made sure that it was Federigo. But the warder introduced a muffled figure of a woman, who, when he had retired, came quickly towards me, as if she was about to stab me. "Miserable young man!" she said fiercely. It was Aurelia!

I sprang up, took, saluted her hand, "Madam," I said, "this is a condescension which I am far from deserving. I have done nothing but my duty."

Her eyes were very bright, and she was distressed for breath; but there was an intensity in her manner—a fire, a flame—which made her vehement.

"Your duty, indeed!" she cried. "When may I expect you to find your duty elsewhere than in my affairs? Am I never to have paid off my original debt to your lordship? It is not enough, it appears, that you make love to me—but you must tell my husband all about it! It is not enough that he drives me out of doors and that you refuse to come with me—no, but you must wander about by yourself, telling all the world what you have done. It is not enough that you make me love you, but you must needs intrigue with a low-born girl, a thing of naught! And now, finally, you come galloping into Florence again, and you—you——Oh, Heavens, I have no patience left to speak of such things! How did you dare"—she stamped her foot furiously, her cheeks were flame-red—"How

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did you dare do such deeds? You have killed the marchese—dead; you have given Count Amadeo three dangerous wounds and a fever; you are in every mouth, and not you only, you wicked boy, but myself and my husband—and—and——" She wrung her hands, she shook with anger, but at last she was silent. I ventured to say that she did me wrong, though any wrong she did me would be benevolence compared to my trespasses against her. I said that I had not killed the marchese, who, on the contrary, had done his best to murder me twice; and that as for the count, who had slandered her vilely and deserved a felon's death, I had spared his life upon his retractation of his calumny. "I hope," I said in conclusion, "that he told you to whom he actually owed his life."

"He did, sir," said she haughtily; "he told me that you had been very absurd, and had made him feel a fool—which he did not at all relish. Oh, oh, oh!" she broke out with a little burst of laughter, "how could you be so mad as to spare him for his pocket-handkerchief!"

"For a reason, madam," I said, "which does not amuse me at all."

"Nor should it," she agreed. "That was a serious thing that you did, Checho. It was more serious than you seem to suppose. The wounds in his person are nothing compared to what you did beside. He is a proud man, and you have wounded his vanity. I doubt if he will ever be healed of that stroke. Do you know what he said to me just now?"

She was perfectly friendly now, by my side, almost touching me with her quick beautiful hands. With what seemed to me a levity no longer becoming the woman she was grown to be, she talked of serious things with sparkling eyes, and would give me confidences which she had received from an impudent liar. In reply to her question I shook my head. I could not speak to her just then, nor could I look at her.

She told me her story. "Count Amadeo said to me this morning, 'My friend, the fact that I owe you this preposterous debt of initials makes it more than doubtful whether I can ever endure to pay it off. I could have had no objection to stand indebted to Don Francis for my life, but I am a man of honour, with a name which I have some reason to value, and I assure you that it is not tolerable to me that I should owe its continuance in my person to the fact that my mistress's maiden name began with the same letters.' He said also——"

But I had caught her by the arm. "No more," I cried, "No more, O God!"

She was alarmed. "You are ill, you are ill, Checho?"

I said, “I stand at a death-bed. Love lies dying down there. Hush. We should be on our knees.”

She was now weeping bitterly. “O lasso! O lasso! What have I done to you?”

“I fought in your honour, madam,” I said, commanding myself, “I dared a murder in your defence. I would have stormed Hell’s ramparts and put the baleful city to the sword in the same cause. From that accursed day on which I first saw you until now I have held you high before my face as the glory of womanhood. And now you repeat the slander for which that monster lay at my mercy. You repeat it—you allowed him to say it in your ear!”

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She was pale, her eyes were wide; but she did not retreat. “But,” she said, “but it is true, Checho. It is true. What he said to you was true— and now—” she frowned as she pondered out what was to come; clouds gathered over her beautiful, soulless face; she folded her arms, clenched her teeth and stormed at me.

“You fool, you fool, you fool!” she said fiercely, panting for breath with which to end me. “Oh, you dream-child, you moonraker, what are you doing in a world where men work for their pleasures and women have to cringe for the scraps? What was I to do when Porfirio shut me out of doors, and you—you, who had caused it, refused to come with me? Was I to spread my wings and fly straight into the lap of the Madonna? You would say so, I suppose! Your flights were very fine, but one cannot live on the wind. Any man but a poet would have picked me up at the door and taken care of me with a ‘Come, my beloved, we will fly together.’ But no! You were making eyes at the stars, and protesting that two of them were my eyes, and the moon my forehead. And then—-O Dio! and then, when you found me again in Florence, what did you do? I was at my wit’s ends, and you kissed my hands! There! That was all—all—all—on the word of a Christian! Did I not try to get more from you? Any one but a poet would know that I did. I heard your long poems, I touched you, I ran to meet you, I was kind, I was cross, I called you to me and then turned my back upon you. And then I found out, sir, what your baciar-di-mani, and bowings and reverences were worth. They were worth—-myself. You had your Virginia snug at home, in a brocaded gown, and a fan, my word! Do you think I could not guess the truth of your story about her? Her honour indeed! What have such rubbish to do with honour? A Virginia, a baggage for your arms—and I, to have my hand kissed, and to yawn over dreary verses! By the Madonna, but I did my best to stop that play. Let me tell you, Don Francis, that it was I—I—I”—she struck her bosom with each naming of herself—“who told Semifonte where he could lay hands upon his chattel. You believed it was the count—it was I!” Quivering, breathing fire and anger, beautiful as a goddess and wicked as a fiend—what was I to say to this terrible witness? She had stayed for lack of breath, panting, tapping her foot, her bosom heaving like the sea under her close arms—and I was face to face with her, alone, with ruin between us. So with a stamp of her little foot, so with a flick of the fingers, it seems, she had broken her own image and killed love outright. There and then love died, and his funeral knell was the horrid barking laughter with which I greeted this end of her story.

“Madam,” I said, when I had laughed hatefully and long, “I have robbed you of a lover, and you, in return, have robbed me of my love. You ought to be as much obliged to me as I am to you.”

She scowled at me darkly. I think she would have stabbed me gladly, but just then the warder entered with my servant, and an official from the palace. This latter, with a profound salutation, handed me a letter from the count. Asking leave, I opened it and read as follows:

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My dear don Francis,—I have just learned, with concern, that you are in prison upon two charges—one false, and another which is trumpery. I hasten to assure you that orders have been given which will satisfy your sense of justice, and, I hope, improve your opinion of myself. I believe that by this time you will have been assured that it was not I who betrayed your confidences to Semifonte—who, between you and me, has got his deserts, or (according to the orthodox) must now be getting them. As for my more recent offence—the real ground of our little encounter—I can assure you of this, that if I ever make any such assertion again, and you again call me a liar, I shall not resent it; for a liar I shall be. I kiss your hands and am, with the most perfect esteem,

"My dear Don Francis,

"Your most obedient, faithful, humble servant,

"*Count Amadeo Giraldi*.

"P. S.—It may be discreet in you to repair to Lucca for the summer heats. Pray command me in any occasion you may have."

My doors were set open. The first use I made of my freedom was to escort Donna Aurelia to her chair. Without a word spoken between us, I handed her in and shut to the door. The chairman asked me for a direction.

"To the house of Dr. Lanfranchi the learned judge," I said.

CHAPTER XLVII

THE FINAL PROOF

Free in every sense of the term—free, of prison, free of debt (for if Aurelia had paid me, I had now paid her husband), free of every obligation but guilt, I was all on fire for Lucca and that service which is perfect freedom, voluntary bondage to Virginia, whom I could now love whole-heartedly as she deserved. Artemis! Artemis! Chaster than a fire—what wonder is it that she had prevailed in that dream-strife which I had witnessed in the villa garden, what wonder when she had to contend with the soiled wife of a vile man—-with Aurelia, the lovely, caressing, silken woman, bought by a place, bought by a house, who, possessed by two men, sought yet another. Ah, thou glowing, honey-tongued, unhappy one, in what a horrible web of affairs was I enmeshed along with thee! What a world was that into which I went ruffling with my money, and rank and fine prospects! Never more, never more would I enter that world of bargain and sale.

So I swore, and so purposed; but in pursuance of a plan which I had formed in my most private mind, I travelled to Lucca in a coach and four horses, with postillions before and my body-servant behind. On this occasion I was furnished with a passport and

abundance of money. All my property in Florence, all my household gear had been transferred to the city of my choice. I left behind me in Florence not one vestige of myself, and (so far as I know) not one true friend. I intended to be two days upon the road, and lay the night at Empoli; early on the following morning, a fine day in early autumn, I departed from the inn for my final stage, and fared without incident as far as Ponte a Cappiano.

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Before the hill of Altopascio is reached, the traveller must accomplish a lonely stretch of road, which runs for some three miles through a ragged wood. This place bears a bad name; it is debatable land, as we say, between the Republic of Lucca and the Grand Duchy, and a well-known haunt for footpads, highwaymen, outlaws, and other kinds of cut-throat. So, at least, my servant said when, stopping the carriage, I got out and proposed to walk through the wood by a direct path and meet my conveyance at the top of the pass. He begged me very earnestly to do nothing of the kind. "The road is the only tolerable way for your lordship," he assured me; and then, with a start, he added, "Hark, sir, hark! As I live by bread, we are pursued even now." I listened, and could hear a long way off the regular pounding of a horse.

However, I paid no more attention to that than to see to the priming of my pistols. I had been near death too often of late to stand on any ceremony with it; and there are times in life when one can see beyond it. I had a certainty that I should not die until I had found Virginia. Therefore I dismissed the carriage and walked on. Now and again, as I entered more deeply into the thicket, I caught the sound of hoofs; but I soon grew to disregard them and presently forgot their menace altogether.

This wood, of holm-oak, holly and beech for the most part, rises and dips twice before it climbs the final ascent to the crown above Altopascio. A cart-track runs through it, deeply rutted and always miry, on either hand of which glades are revealed of great beauty. Here, if the trees are remote, the grass grows lush and green. Hereabouts are the flowers, tall and plenty—foxgloves and mullein, such as we have at home, and loosestrife (lysimachia), both the yellow and the purple. The sun shone brilliantly between the leaves, the air was sweetly tempered, the wood was empty. I felt exalted, as I always do when I am alone. I was hopeful; I was still young. God, methought, was about to bless me abundantly, after making stern trial of me. My secret thought ran rhythmically in my head. I walked briskly up the first slope, surmounted it, and stood looking down upon a scene more charming than that which I was about to leave—a deeper, greener glade, with a clearing in the midst, and a rude gipsy tent and a little fire, and two persons beside it. As I stood looking I heard the crackling of the brushwood and dead twigs behind me. The horseman, whoever he was, had entered the wood and was following the track.

But the encampment below me engrossed all my eyes. In that windless hollow a thin spire of smoke rose blue towards the blue. An iron pot was suspended on three poles; the smoke hugged it closely, united above it, and rose in a column. The couple, a young man and woman, sat still, watching it. Their meal was ended, I judged, and they were summoning resolution for the road. The woman, with a pretty,

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weary gesture, put her head upon the man's shoulder. He embraced her with his arm, bent his head and kissed her. Stooping yet lower, he kissed her lap. I saw that she had a child asleep there. Just then both of them heard, as I did, the horse's hoof strike on a stone. They both started, and looked up towards me. My heart stood still, my tongue clove to the roof of my mouth. Those two were Belviso and Virginia—and the child! the child! In a flash of instantaneous reflection I remembered that a year ago Belviso had gone to Lucca to find Virginia, had reported her to me as not there, and at Arezzo had asked leave to seek her again.

Oh, monstrous thought! Oh, monstrous thinker, Francis! But I was incapable of justice or reason. I thought here to see the mockery of God; and I, who imagined so wickedly, went on to deal wickedness.

I strode down the hill upon them without a word, my eyes blazing like coals. Both recognised me at the same moment. Virginia stood up, holding her child close to her, but never budged; Belviso cried, "Master!" and started towards me. When he saw with what countenance I was coming, he faltered and stood ill at ease. In my blind fury I put this down to his guilt; good God, what more did I meditate? Oh, horrible! I stopped and cocked my pistol.

"Ah, false wife once," I said terribly, "and now false mistress! Traitress, with this traitor whom I believed my friend——"

Belviso here gave a cry and held up his hand. He was looking, not at me, but behind me to the slope down which I had come. "Master, beware, beware," he called out in his ringing young voice. "Palamone is behind you. Treachery indeed!"

I turned, and saw that he spoke the truth. Fra Palamone, booted and spurred, with a huge black cloak flagging about him, was close upon me, walking his horse tenderly down the hill. His face was distorted with a grin, there was a light, scared look in one of his eyes, whose brow was lifted more than the other. If ever appearance foretold mischief, that did his.

He saw that I was armed, no doubt, for he reined up out of shooting distance, bowed to me, and spoke my name. I asked him what he wanted.

"A little talk, if you please, Don Francis," he said in his blandest tone, "a little friendly talk."

"You rascal," said I, "a cudgelling was the upshot of your last. Do you want another? Have you earned it yet?"

“God do so unto me if I meditate any harm to your Excellency,” said the old villain. “Upon Christ’s life and death I can do you a service at last, and so I will. Know first of all that the most charitable deed you ever did in your life was to break your cane over my wicked body. Yes, yes, I tell you truly, you saved a soul that day, and I care not who knows it. Sir, sir!” said he earnestly, “I am here not only to thank you for having restored me my soul, but to give you a letter which will restore you your wife, and tell you the whole truth about her into the bargain.”

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“Who wrote your letter?” I asked him, and he told me, “One who knows. Miriam the Jewess.”

I am to confess that he deceived me again. I was fool enough to believe that he could explain to me the guilty history of these two persons behind me—these two and their child. We believe what we desire to believe, whether it be of good or evil report. I bade him give me his letter; he dismounted and came towards me, fumbling in his cloak. “’Tis here,” he was muttering to himself. “No, no, that is my pardon from his Holiness. Ah, what have we here? Nay, ’tis my certificate of communion. How, how? Have I lost it?” Grumbling and mumbling, grating his loose tooth, he was close upon me, his hand deep in his cloak. “Ha, ha!” he suddenly cried, “now I have it!” and whipped out his hand. Belviso shrieked my name aloud, “Francis, my lord and king!” and flung himself upon my breast. There was a shocking report of a pistol, discharged close at hand. Belviso shuddered and fell limp—a dead weight. I raised my arm, levelled, and shot Palamone through the head.

We picked up the lifeless form of that lad whom I had once loved for his love of me and laid him by the fire. Virginia knelt beside him, pale and tearless; pale, stern and tearless also I stood above him, my weapon still reeking in my hand. “Woman,” said I hoarsely, “would that I had fired that shot. Do you dare to say that he has not got his deserts?”

She did not answer me; she was busy with the dead. She opened his jacket and vest and put her hand below his shirt to feel if his heart yet fluttered. Then she lifted to me a stern pure face. “His deserts, my lord, say you? Come, kneel you by me, and see whether he have them or no.”

Some impulse, I know not what, made me obey. I kneeled down by Virginia. She opened reverently the clothing of Belviso, laid back the vest, laid back the cotton shirt. Wonder, terror, a flood of shame came scalding into my eyes. I had looked upon, but now could not see, the young breasts of a girl. My proof had turned to my reproof. I was humbled to the dust. “Poor child,” said Virginia very softly, “poor sinner, who died to save him that had once saved thee, I pray to God that thou knowest now how innocently he did thee this wrong.” She stooped and kissed the cold lips, but I fell upon the cold bosom and wept bitterly.

She let me sob my full. Not until I was calmer did the noble girl touch me upon the shoulder and call me by my name. “Francis,” she said, “do not reproach yourself any more. This poor soul has done what she must in any case have done. Her heart was yours, and yours, she knew, could never have been given her. She was loyal to you through all and deceived you through loyalty. She is repaid in the only coin she could have asked. God have her soul.” [Footnote: Belviso’s tragic masquerade was not at all uncommon in Italy at the time of which I write. If a girl were desirous of becoming a comedian she must, unless

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her talents were extraordinary, appear to be a male. The salaries of women, to begin with, were high and out of the reach of poor companies of players; and secondly, as I have said in the text, some States, such as the Roman, forbade the appearance of women upon the scene. Women's parts, therefore, would be taken by castrati, or boys, whose sex it was necessary for a woman to assume. There was another reason which, I fondly believe, induced Belviso to adopt that name and appearance. A woman appearing as such must be morally ruined. I never heard of an exception to the rule. Belviso's real name was Geronima Sastre, and she was a native of the Trentino.—F. A. S.] I looked up at my beloved—now at last my entirely beloved—wife. Bare as she was, her neck bare of covering, her finger of the ring, she was my wife before God and the angels. I rose and faced her, she met my looks without flinching, in her eyes was no shame. The child lay sleeping in her shawl.

My heart beat high. I lifted up my face to the sky and laughed aloud. "O God, O God, Thou hast redeemed me!" I cried. Then to Virginia I said, "This child of thine——"

"It is thine," said Virginia.

My arms embraced both mother and babe, but with a hand I took her by the chin. She turned her face to me, and with her clear eyes searched my face. "It is ours," she said, and blushed.

"And I am yours, my Virginia," I said, and stooped to her. Our lips met and stayed together. We kissed long, drinking the joy of one another. The Fool would err no more.

CHAPTER XLVIII

THE LAST

Here
Belviso
lies
who died to save his friend

Under this superscription we consigned to the dust the dust of our dear benefactor; and that reverently done, we settled ourselves in Lucca, where we have remained ever since, where I have written these pages, where I intend to live and die. Of my true marriage with my beloved, expect no raptures in this place, seek no further, ask no more. This is holy ground. In all these years wherein she has been spared to be my well of bliss, my fountain of nourishment, my stem of solace, I declare with my hand on my heart, never for one moment did she cease to be my loving, willing, chaste and

discerning wife. We have been poor, for I renounced my inheritance in favour of my next brother, retaining nothing of it, and began the world again where I left it when I was driven from Lucca by misfortunes; and by industry and thrift we have risen to a competence enough to educate our children according to the degree marked out by their birth. I did this deliberately, having found out by hard experience that money was the bondslave of lust, and rank the breastplate of inanity. Had I taken my wife to England I must have retained my wretched panoply; but England also I renounced, and that also deliberately. I shall take leave to close my relation with a few words upon my choice of life.

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It has been said, with truth and reason, that our vices are but the excrescences of our virtuous essence. If I am justly to be called a Fool then, and my folly a vice, it is because it has ever been a ruling need of my nature to be naked, and to desire to deal nakedly with my neighbours, who, to serve my ends, must themselves be unclad. Let the light scoffer understand me. I speak of the soul, and of spiritual and moral matters. All my good fortune, and I have had much, was due to my ability to indulge that spiritual urgency of mine, and to my having been dealt with as I desired to deal; all my troubles, and they were not few, were bruises inflicted upon my simple soul by others, who opposed their mail-clad might to my tenderness. Not once, but many times, in the course of this narration, I have had occasion to show how the poor, the outcast, the forsaken and the very young entreated me, as one must suppose the Saviour of us all, His Divine Mother, and the guardian angels would entreat each other or us. The proud, the greatly circumstanced, the rich, the enclosed, the sitters in chief seats, wounded me, shocked, rebuffed, cast me down. But in this land the Genius of the place delights only to dwell in the hearts of the poor. They are the true Tuscan nations, and in spite of governments they remain the salt of the earth and the heirs of all that is good in it. In England it is not so. There the poor are serfs; there feudalism forbids intercourse; there the weak suspect (and rightly) the benevolence of the strong; and the strong can only be benevolent in proportion as they are weak. Consider for a moment what flows from these axiomata; it will result, I think, that Honour, Religion, and Love, the three fortresses of the human soul, will be found deeply involved with them.

Honour, as I understand it, consists in the nice adjustment of what is due to me from my neighbours, and to them from me. Here, among the poor, where a native reserve has not grown, as a fungus upon it, a native cant, where there is no desire to seem better than one is, and no belief that one is so by seeming—here, I say, among the Tuscan poor, there is never any difficulty, for here there is no excrescence to the substantial quality of the soul, but precisely to the contrary, there is, if anything, a denudation. The fault of the Tuscans is, perhaps, a carelessness of opinion, and an ignorance of it, and, springing from that, a lack of reserve which occasionally approaches the shocking. Be this as it may, here it is possible for man to envisage man, each as he really is and can be discerned to be.

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In England it is not so. Honour is an artificial, manufactured thing, depending upon accepted, volunteered relationships. What is due from me to my lord differs from that which his lordship owes to me: so in any traffic between me and my valet, or my valet and the kitchen-boy. So also it is with Religion. The Englishman dare not even strip before his God, but will bear his garter or his worsted-braid, his cocked or cockaded hat, his sword or his dung-fork up to the very sanctuary rails— lest, forsooth, by leaving them at home he should either seem so poor as to be without them, or so rich as to be able to discard them. But here, what a difference! Not only is man naked before God, but God stands naked before man. The church is their common ground; the church is their inn, and the blessed table their market ordinary. At this board, God and man, man and the saints, meet as friends. The sweetest intercourse possible on earth is not denied them. They may be gossips, God and man; they may be lovers, bosom friends. Is this not a hopeful estate for the tried and erring, naturally affectionate soul? I trow that it is.

And as with Honour, as with Religion, so with that child of the pair, so with Love. Boy and maid, man and woman, in this country stand as children hand in hand before their parent, who is God. Hand in hand, in seemly innocence, naked, without shame, or underthought or afterthought, they stray about the flowery meads. Their hearts are by chance enkindled, each burns, fire seeks the embrace of fire; they touch, they mingle, they soar together. Wedded love, which neither soars nor leaps like a furnace, but glows steadily with equable and radiant heat—wedded love ensues this passionate commingling. But the pair remain what they were at first, simple, naked, unashamed, unshameful, with all things displayed, even to the very aspirations of the secret soul, in blessed sympathy, in union blessed and to be blessed.

Such, I say, may be, and indeed is, the case with many honoured, wedded pairs observed by me. Such, I thank God, has been my own lot, since that day when, after long tribulation, I took Virginia into my arms and held her to my breast. But of that, and of her, I dare write no more. Judge me favourably, reader, for her sake; and so farewell.

Lucca, October 20, 1741.

[Mr. Strelley lived, I believe, until the spring of 1759, and was buried behind the altar of San Romano. His house, now a hospital, is still intact, and may be visited by the curious, as it was by me.—M. H.]