

By The Fountain.

By LEE WYNDHAM.



IN ONE of the continental galleries, you could find, if you sought it, the picture of a woman, leaning from an open window, with one hand raised to shade her eyes, as she looks out on the road beyond, and seeks with her straining gaze, some object—only to be conjectured by those who stand before her pictured face. It is hardly a beautiful face. The brow is too high and the mouth too firm for that soft loveliness which we accept as the truest type of feminine beauty. But patience and strength and dignity, and self-forgetting love are in the shadowed eyes, and in the rigid mouth and chin. Roses grow round the casement frame—the dead leaves of one that has faded and fallen lie in the open palm of her hand, which rests upon the window sill, as though it had that moment ceased to wave farewell.

The legend this picture illustrates is surely no uncommon one. From the days when war began, how many women have watched, as this one watches, the gallant form of lover or husband ride away—with only prayers—not hopes—for their return. How many fruitless longings do those dead rose-leaves typify? No new story does this pictured face, with its lofty sorrow, and its yearning love, tell to us who look thereon.

But, just as though field on field of grass may lie before us, yet we shall seek in vain to find two blades alike, so, in the monotonous story of human love and sorrow, we find no two, in all their details, quite the same—and, in many points, the tale this picture tells us, is like to few others. For thus the story goes:—

PART I.

It was Easter Day in Fiesole, the sun shone, bright and warm. The streets were thronged with holiday-keepers, in gay, quaint costumes. Mass was over. The odour of the incense mingled no

longer with the perfumed breath of the lilies on the altar. The musical thunder of the organ, and the thrilling voices of the choir, were silent. The glittering vestments of the priests were laid aside. From the steps of the church the last worshipper had disappeared, save one—a youth of more than even Italian beauty, clad in a picturesque peasant garb, which revealed the limbs of an Antemous. He looked eagerly and impatiently at the perfumed dimness, half revealed by the partly open door of the church, and then turned his glance to the scene before him. From the steps of the church, which stood midway in a wide street he could see houses, vine-clad, and beautiful. At the end of the street was a fountain, whose steps served as seats for more than one laughing group—beyond that, a road, lined with olives and oleanders, led to a village, not far distant. The trees stood clear against the sky—whose radiant cloudless blue seemed to rest upon the snow-covered Apennines, far away, yet faintly visible. He turned, frowning, from all this beauty, and looked again at the church door. A muttered word of impatient anger was on his lips, when, from its shadow, a woman emerged—older than he, and far less beautiful. Yet, a disciple of Lavater would have seen in the Greek perfection of his face little that was higher than the chamois climbing the far-off mountains—and in hers, mild care-clouded though it was, the light of a soul exiled from a higher sphere. Her eyes kindled into life and beauty as she saw him, and she moved swiftly forward. "Ah, thou wert good to wait," she murmured, "But I was loth to leave the church—to shorten, by a moment, the glory of this Easter Day. Now, the rest of it is thine."

In the sunlight of her frank smile, the cloud had melted from his face, and taking her hand, he led her down the street, until they stood side by side before the now deserted fountain whose waters gleamed brightly, and fell musically. And there, with all the ardour of his Southern nature, and all the passion of undisciplined youth,