

CHAPTER V

THREE days after Artois' conversation with Hermione in the Grotto of Virgil the Marchesino Isidoro Panacci came smiling into his friend's apartments in the Hôtel Royal des Étrangers. He was smartly dressed in the palest possible shade of grey, with a bright pink tie, pink socks, brown shoes of the rather boat-like shape affected by many young Neapolitans, and a round straw hat, with a small brim, that was set slightly on the side of his curly head. In his mouth was a cigarette, and in his buttonhole a pink carnation. He took Artois' hand with his left hand, squeezed it affectionately, murmured "Caro Emilio," and sat down in an easy attitude on the sofa, putting his hat and stick on a table near by.

It was quite evident that he had come for no special reason. He had just dropped in, as he did whenever he felt inclined, to gossip with "Caro Emilio," and it never occurred to him that possibly he might be interrupting an important piece of work. The Marchesino could not realise work. He knew his friend published books. He even saw him sometimes actually engaged in writing them, pen in hand. But he was sure anybody would far rather sit and chatter with him, or hear him play a valse on the piano, or a bit of the "Bohème," than bend over a table all by himself. And Artois always welcomed him. He liked him. But it was not only that which made him complaisant. Doro was a type, and a singularly perfect one.

Now Artois laid down his pen, and pulled forward an arm-chair opposite to the sofa.

"Mon Dieu, Doro! How fresh you look, like a fish just pulled out of the sea!"

The Marchesino showed his teeth in a smile which also shone in his round and boyish eyes.

"I have just come out of the sea. Papa and I have been bathing at the Eldorado. We swam round the Castello until we were opposite your windows, and sang 'Funiculi, funiculà!' in the water, to serenade you. Why didn't you hear us? Papa has a splendid voice, almost like Tamagno's in the gramophone, when he sings the 'Addio' from *Otello*. Of course we kept a little out at sea. Papa is so easily recognised by his red moustaches. But still you might have heard us."

"I did."

"Then why didn't you come on to the balcony, amico mio?"

"Because I thought you were street singers."

"Davvero? Papa would be gry. And he is in a bad temper to-day anyhow."