

THE SACRIFICE;

OR
FOR HER FAMILY'S SAKE.

CHAPTER XXVI.

On Monte Pericoli—and the sun setting over Rome. A sunset in this city is different from any other in the world. Nowhere else does he find it so hard to leave the earth, and nowhere else does he leave behind him such a mellow, golden light. Even the atmosphere seems filled with millions of particles of gold dust, and behind St. Peter's immense dome flames up a crown of rays, brilliant, majestic, indescribably magnificent—enveloping the city below with a halo of glory. The notes of a hundred bells quiver in the air; a soft wind is blowing from the distant mountains and playing about the luxuriant foliage, and these evergreen walks are filled with thousands of visitors, walking up and down. The crowd sways and surges; here are shining eyes in proud Roman faces; there, the brilliant blonde faces of lovely English women, and the rosy complexions of the Germans. Bright, gleaming dresses, elegant equipages; among others, the scarlet liveries of the queen. There, long trains of young priests in their green, blue, and red robes.

Now the music begins, and mingles with the sound of the bells and the plashing of the silver waterfalls, with the chatter and laughter of the throng, who are talking in all the languages of the civilized world; and opposite, rising sharply against the yellow evening sky, the solemn pine woods of the Villa Borghese.

In one of the lonely middle paths, an old gentleman in a light spring suit, with a black band on his arm, was walking; by his side a slender, youthful figure in a simple walking costume, but in deep mourning. The delicate tint of health rested on her cheek, and though the manner in which she was gazing at the magnificence of the spring sunset was not exactly gay, there was in the glance of the liquid eyes a quiet, intense joy in the beauty around her.

"Uncle, how true it will be to go away," she was just saying.

"Yes, Lorchen, that may well be; but we shall come again."

She laughed out gayly. "Oh, uncle, if you have always called me poor little!"

"H'm! Lora, shall I try to get something for you out of that *ci-devant* husband of yours?"

She looked at him with a smile. "Yes, you are just the sort of man to get it out of him, and I am the sort of person to take it."

"You are right, Lorchen."

"As always, uncle," she said gayly; "and now, please don't say any more about it. Only look, how wonderful I assure you, uncle, it is good for the health to look at such a sight every day." And she pointed to the picture spread out before them—Rome in the golden light of the sunset.

She took his arm and they walked on in silence. Now and then he cast a proud glance at her, when admiring eyes rested on his beautiful companion.

They sauntered comfortably along, past the French academy, down to the Piazza del Popolo, and along the Corso. Lora was in a waking dream, in which her good old uncle gave place in her thoughts to another, who was dearer to her than any one in the world.

That would be happiness indeed, to float through this charmed atmosphere with him, to let herself be taught by him, to admire and enjoy everything done with him in this wonderful land, where not a soul knew them.

She started violently when the general said, "I wonder if we shall find any letters?"

As he spoke he pinched the ear of a saucy little, dark-eyed creature, who had been following them offering violets to sell, and at last had put a bunch into his coat-pocket, and was now clamorously demanding payment for it.

"Heathenish set," he scolded, as he put two soldi into the child's basket, and offered the violets to Lora.

"I wonder whether there will be any letters?" he repeated.

"I hope so, uncle; I am sure I hope so. I have not heard from mamma for a week, and I am always anxious lest she should be ill."

"It wouldn't be strange if she were. But you must not fret about it, child. Besides, that monkey, Katie, has got to pass her examination at this time, if she gets through all right, I will give her something. Would you like to strive home, Lora. It is a good way home yet, and I am sure your little feet are as tired as my big ones."

He beckoned to a fiacre, and they drove home through the crowded street.

In the little sitting-room, proudly called a *salotto*, Gemma, the dark-eyed, but by no means beautiful daughter of the house, had lighted a fire, to keep off the evening chill. On the covered table a lamp was burning, and the flame was lighted under the tea-kettle. Lora took off her hat and jacket, and the general took the paper he had bought on the way home out of his

pocket, and seating himself comfortably on the sofa, he said:

"Do you know, Lora, that I never will go travelling again without you. By Jove, this is cosy. A German table in the heart of Rome."

She looked pleasantly at him, and taking a delicious salad, replied gayly:

"If you like it, I am quite ready."

"Yes, you would soon be doing with thanks," he laughed. "No, no promises, Lora, or you would be breaking your word."

The smile lingered on her face. She felt so free to-day, as light as a feather, escaped from its cage; like a flower which feels the first sunshine, after a long period of rain; as only a young heart can feel when flattered by delicate hope, after a time of heavy sorrow.

When the general had gone to his room, after tea, she stepped out upon the tiny balcony, which hung, like a swallow's nest, over the little courtyard. And involuntarily the sweet dream came back, as she listened to the plashing of the fountain below. Far, far away from Rome, in her distant home, her thoughts were busy; she could see it so plainly, the house with the elegant window. And he would pardon her, he would be sure to, when she told him what had separated them before. She was certain of it, perfectly certain. He could not forget her a more than she could forget him, their love was too true, too real, too happy future, what will you bring?

Gemma's soft voice called her back to the present. She was excusing herself she had quite forgotten, she said, that a letter had come for the signora; he it was, and she also wished to know if the signora would wish to go to the theatre at once. She, Gemma, wished to know for she wanted to go to the theatre she had had a ticket given her by Signor Inglese on the first floor—

"If the signora does not wish for anything more this evening—"

"Oh, to be sure; you can go," replied Lora pleasantly, going toward the lamp with the letter.

The girl quickly cleared the table, giving stolen glances at the lovely face of the fair woman who held the letter thoughtfully in her hand, and though it must be from the distant spouse, was a pity that they were going away so soon, the old *eccellenza*, they were such quiet lodgers, giving so little trouble—not half so troublesome as the last, downstairs. She left the room with a pleasant *felice-note*.

Lora shut the door behind her, then came back to the table, nestled down in the sofa, and opened her letter.

All at once she turned deathly pale and sat bolt upright. She sat motionless for awhile, her eyes fixed on the cancy, her hands pressed tightly together on her lap.

The letter lay on the table; it contained only a few hurried lines.

Lora's face twitched convulsively; a smile still lingered about her mouth, but in terrible contrast were the lips, and the eyes, which seemed absolutely sunken for the moment. She got up at length, slowly and heavily like an old woman, crept to her room and shut the door behind her. The lamp in the deserted room flickered—in a cool night wind, which streamed from the balcony, it blew off the table, and swept down the letter, which had brought the news of Katie's engagement. It fluttered across to the door, behind which Lora had disappeared, as if it would penetrate even here with its message.

It was still as death; only once then sounded something like a cry of pain from the next room.

"Good heavens, child, how you look!" cried the general the next day, as he entered the *salotto*, at the usual hour.

She looked beyond him as she gave him her hand, and asked how he had slept.

"That would—if you should get the fever! For Heaven's sake—Gemma shall go for the doctor—"

"Thank you, uncle, but I am quite well."

"Nay, nay," muttered the old gentleman suspiciously; "don't try to make yourself out stronger than you are, and, I beg of you, don't go home sick."

"Before that I shall be quite well, uncle."

"Yes, my dear; but we can go very soon, now." The old general smiled slyly, and took a letter out of his pocket. "Look! That I found, last night, on the table by my bed. It is the act of divorce. You are free, Lorchen."

She nodded slightly.

"I am glad, uncle," she said warmly. "I thank you very much; you have taken so much trouble for me."

"What should she do with her freedom?"

The general turned red. He was vexed at this indifference. Yesterday she could hardly wait for the document to come which should release her from the bonds of her hated marriage.

"Then we will go away at once," he grumbled. "I have stayed here longer than I intended. We will go Saturday."

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