

VENDETTA;

The Story of One Forgotten.

CHAPTER XV.—Continued.

"There!" he exclaimed. "Like that she exactly resembles her father! It is positively uncanny. Fabio, all over! She only wants me to take the portrait perfect. And approaching her, he snatched one of her long curls and endeavored to twist it over her mouth in the form of a moustache. The child struggled angrily, and hid her face against my coat. The more she tried to defend herself, the greater the mischief which Ferrari committed. Her mother did not interfere; she only laughed. Her little thing closely sheltered in my embrace, and steady down the quiver of indignation in my voice, I said with quiet firmness—

"Fair play, Signor! Fair play! Strength becomes more bullying when it is employed against absolute weakness." Ferrari laughed again, but this time unreasonably, as if he were not much flattered by the compliment. Smoothing Stella's tumbled hair, I added with a sarcastic smile— "This little donetta will have her revenge when she grows up. Recollecting how one man teased her in childhood, she, in return, will consider herself justified in teasing all men. Do you not agree with me, madams?" said, turning to the ladies. "I have a sweetly coquettish look as she answered— "Well, really, Conte, I do not know! For with the remembrance of one man who teased her, must come also the thought of another who was kind to her—yourself—she will find it difficult to decide the just milieu."

A subtle compliment was meant to be conveyed in these words—I acknowledged it by a smile of admiration, which she quickly understood and accepted. Was ever a man in the position of being delicately flattered by his own wife before? I think not! Generally, married persons are like candid friends—fond of telling each other very unpleasant truths, and altogether avoiding the least soupçon of flattery. Though I was not much flattered as usual, considering the position of affairs. Just then a servant threw open the door and announced dinner. I set my child very gently down from my knee and whispering told her that I would come and see her soon again. She smiled trustfully, and then in obedience to her mother's imperative gesture, slipped quietly out of the room. As soon as she had gone, I pressed her beauty against my cheek, and kissed her lovingly. I could see my admiration of her was not very acceptable to either my wife or her lover. We all went in to dinner,—I, as guest, having the privilege of escorting my fair and spotless spouse! On our reaching the dining-room, Nina said— "You are such an old friend of the family, Conte, that perhaps you will not mind sitting at the head of the table?"

"Trop obligé, Signora!" I answered, bowing gallantly, as I at once resumed my rightful place at my own table, Ferrari placing himself on my right hand, Nina on my left. The butler, my father's servant and mine, stood as of old behind my chair, and I noticed that each time he supplied me with wine he eyed me with a certain timid curiosity. I knew I had a singular and conspicuous appearance which easily accounted for his inquisitiveness. Opposite to where I sat, hung my father's portrait—the character I personated permitted me to look at it fixedly and give full vent to the deep sigh which in very earnest broke from my heart. The eyes of the picture seemed to gaze into mine with a morbid compassion, and I fancied the firm-set lips trembled and moved to echo my sigh.

"Is that a good likeness?" Ferrari asked suddenly. "I started, and recollecting myself, answered— "Excellent! So true a resemblance that it arouses a long train of memories in my mind—memories both bitter and sweet. Ah! what a proud fellow he was!" "Fabio was also very proud," chimed in my wife's sweet voice. "Very cold and haughty." Little girl! How dared she utter this libel on my memory! Haughty, I might have been to others, but never to her—and coldness was no part of my nature. Would that it were I would that I had been a miller of lead, incapable of showing his smiling countenance, and his winning smile! Had she forgotten what a slave I was to her? what a poor, adoring, passionate fool I became under the influence of her hypocritical caresses! I thought this to myself, but I answered aloud— "Indeed! I am surprised to hear that. The Roman hauteur had ever to my mind something genial and yet most gentle to his dependants. He was always most gentle to his dependants."

The butler here coughed apologetically behind his hand—an old trick of his, and one which signified his intense desire to speak. Ferrari laughed, as he held out his glass for more wine. Here is old Giacomo," he said, nodding to him lightly. "He remembers both the Romanism—ask him his opinion of Fabio—he worshipped his master."

I turned to my servant, and with a benignant air addressed him— "Your face is not familiar to me, my friend," I said. "Perhaps you were not here when I visited the elder Count?" "No, Excellency," replied Giacomo, rubbing his withered hands nervously together, and speaking with a sort of suppressed eagerness. "I came into my lord's service only a year before the Countess died,—I mean the mother of the young Count."

"Ah! then, I missed making your acquaintance," I said kindly, pitying the poor old fellow, as I noticed how his limbs trembled, and how altogether broken he looked. "You knew the last Count from childhood, then?" "I did, Excellency!" And his bleared eyes roved over me with a sort of alarmed inquiry. "You loved him well?" I said composedly, observing his embarrassment.

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recompense you so richly merit. "Come, let us go and drink coffee with the fair one." And arm-in-arm we wandered out to the verandah in a most friendly way possible. Ferrari was a most lovely restored to good humor, and Nina, I thought, was rather relieved to see it. She was evidently afraid of Ferrari—a good point for me to remember. She smiled a welcome to us as we approached, and began to pour out the fragrant coffee. It was a glorious evening; the moon was already high in the heavens, and the nightingales' voices came softly from the distant woods. As I schooled myself in a low chair that was placed invitingly near that of my hostess, my ears were startled by a long melancholy howl, which changed every now and then to an impatient whine.

"What is that?" I asked, though the question was needless, for I knew the sound. "Oh, it is that tiresome dog Wyvis," answered Nina in a vexed tone. "He belonged to Fabio. He makes the evening quite miserable with his moaning."

"Where is he?" "Well, after my husband's death he became so troublesome, roaming all over the house, and then he would insist on sleeping in Stella's room close to her bedside. He really worried me both day and night, so I was compelled to chase him up."

"Poor Wyvis! He was sorely punished for his fidelity." "I am very fond of dogs," I said slowly, "and they generally take to me with extraordinary devotion. May I see to one of you?" "Oh, certainly! Guido, will you go and unfasten him?"

"Go did not move; he leaned easily back in his chair sipping his coffee." "Many thanks," he answered, with a half laugh; perhaps you forget that last time I did so he nearly tore me to pieces. If you do not object, I would rather Giacomo undertook the task."

"After such an account of the animal's conduct, perhaps the Conte will not turn to see him. It is true enough," turning to me as she spoke, "Wyvis has taken a great dislike to Signor Ferrari—and yet he is a good-natured dog, and plays with my little girl all day if she goes to him. Do you feel inclined still to see him? Yes?"

"I will leave you two gentlemen to finish your wine together," she said. "Afterwards, will you join me in the verandah? You will find coffee ready."

"I had to open the door for her as she passed out smiling; then, returning to the table, I poured out more wine for myself and Ferrari, who sat gloomily eyeing his own reflection in the broad polished rim of a silver tureen that stood near him. Giacomo the butler had long ago left the room; we were entirely alone. I thought of my father, and how interesting as a problem in chess. With the deliberation of a prudent player I made my next move.

"A lovely woman!" I murmured meditatively, sipping my wine, "and intelligent also. I admire your taste, Signor."

little like—like Fabio? Is there not a something in his manner that seems familiar?" "I confess I have fancied so once or twice," he returned musingly; "there is rather a disagreeable resemblance. But what of that? Many men are almost counterparts of each other. But I tell you what I think. I am almost positive he is some long lost relation of the family—look me up for the moment, who does not wish to deal in his actual relationship. He is a good old fellow enough, I believe, and is certainly rich as Croesus; he will be a valuable friend to us both. Come, *spostina mia*, it is time to go to rest."

And they disappeared within the house, and shut the windows after them. I immediately left my sitting place, and resumed my way to the verandah. I was satisfied they had no suspicion of the truth. After all, it was absurd of me to fancy they might have, for people in general do not imagine it possible for a buried man to come back to life again. The game was in my own hands, and I now resolved to play it out with as little delay as possible.

CHAPTER XVI. Time flew swiftly on,—a month, six weeks, passed, and during that short space I had established myself in Naples as a great personage—great, because of my wealth and the ways in which I lived. I was the center of all the numerous families of distinction that especially sought my acquaintance cared whether I had intellect or intrinsic personal worth; it sufficed to them that I kept a carriage and pair, an elegant and costly equipage, softly lined with satin and drawn by two Arabian mares as black as polished ebony. The value of my equipage was measured by the luxuriance of my horse and the opulence of my liveries, and a swift trim vessel furnished with every luxury, and having on board a band of stringed instruments which discoursed sweet music when the moon emptied her horn of silver radiance on the rippling water. In a little while I knew everybody who was worth knowing in Naples; everywhere my name was talked of, my doings were chronicled in the fashionable newspapers; stories of my lavish generosity were repeated from mouth to mouth, and the most highly-colored reports of my immense revenues were whispered with a kind of breathless awe at every *café* and street-corner. Tradesmen awaited my reluctant valet, Vincenzo, and gave him double the price for the goods he bought for them—"tips" which he pocketed in his usual reserved and discreet manner, but which he was always honest enough to tell me of afterwards. He would most faithfully give me the name and address of this or that particular tempter of his fidelity, always adding— "As to whether the rascal tells good things or bad, I cannot say; but I have seen him give me thirty francs to secure my excellency's goodwill. Though for all that I would not recommend him if your excellency knows of an honest man!"

Among other distinctions which my wealth forced upon me, were the lavish attentions of match-making mothers. The black spectacles which I always wore, were not repulsive to these diplomatic dams,—on the contrary some of them assumed me to be a great man, so anxious were they to secure me as a son-in-law. Fair girls in their teens, blushing and ingenuous, were artfully introduced to me—*oh, should say, thrust forward like slaves in a market* by my inspection—though, to do them justice, they were remarkably shrewd and sharp witted for their tender years. Young as they were, they were keenly alive to the importance of making a good match,—and no doubt the pretty innocents laid many dainty schemes in their own minds for liberty and enjoyment when one of the other of them should become the Countess Oliva, and foil the old black spectacled husband to her heart's content. Needless to say their plans were not destined to be fulfilled, though I would have been glad to have obtained any one of these fair creatures, raising their youthful brains for new methods to entrap the old millionaire, as they thought me, into the matrimonial net. I used to see their eyes, sparkling with light in the sunshine, grow liquid and dreamy in the mellow radiance of the October moon, and turn upon me with a vague wishfulness most lovely to behold, and most irresistible to resist. I could not say I had a bare round white arm and not be repulsed,—I could hold little clinging fingers in my own as long as I liked without giving offence,—such are some of the privileges of wealth!

In all the parties of pleasure I formed, and these were many, my wife and Ferrari were included as a matter of course. As first Nina departed, with some plaintive excuse concerning her recent terrible sea-sickness, but I easily persuaded her out of this.

I even told some ladies I knew to visit her and add their entreaties to mine, as I said, my wife was in a very delicate condition, and it was not good for one so young to waste her time and injure her health by needless grieving. She saw the force of this, I must admit, with admirable readiness, and speedily yielded to the united invitations she received, though always with a well-acted reluctance, and saying that she did so merely because the Countess Oliva was so kind as to bid her family and know me poor dear husband as a child."

On Ferrari I heaped all manner of benefits. Certain debts of his contracted at play I paid privately to surprise him,—his gratitude was extreme. I honored him in many of his small extravagances,—I played with his follies as an angler plays the fish at the end of his line, and I succeeded in winning his confidence. Not that I ever could surprise him into a confession of his guilty amour, but he kept me well informed as to his pleasures, and was pleased to call "progress of his attachment," and supplied me with details which, while they fired my blood and brain to wrath, steadied me more surely in my plan of vengeance. Little did he dream in whom he was trusting!—little did he know into whose hands he was playing! Sometimes a kind of awful astonishment would come over me as I thought of the trivial talk, and heard him make plans for a future that was never to be. He seemed so certain of his happiness,—so absolutely sure that nothing could or would interfere to mar it. Traitor as he was, he was unable to foresee punishment,—materialist to the heart's core, he had no knowledge of the dangerous pulse he stirred me,—a desire to say to my point blank.

"You are a condemned criminal—a doomed man to the brink of the grave. Leave this light converse and frivolous jesting—and, while there is time, prepare for death!" But I bit my lips and kept stern silence. Often, too, I felt disposed to seize him by the throat, and, declaring my identity, accuse him of his treachery to his face, but I always remembered and controlled myself. One point in his character I knew well,—had known it of old,—his was his excessive love for good wine, and whenever he visited me I took care that he should have his choice of the finest vintages. Often after a convivial evening spent in my apartments with a few other young men of his class and culture, he reeled out of my presence, his deep-lying face and thick voice bearing plain testimony as to his condition. On these occasions he used to come with a flushed face, and a heavy head, and would revive him,—for though he saw no offence in the one kind of vice he practised, he had a particular horror of vulgarity in any form, and drunkenness was one of those low-lying sins he especially abhorred.

"Go to your lady-love, *mon beau Silenus*!" I would think, as I watched him leaving my apartments, and he would be gone, singing and laughing loudly as he went, or singing the last questionable street song of the Neapolitan *bas-pèpè*. "You are in a world-beautiful and savage mood—her finer animal instincts will revolve from you, as a little gazelle would fly from the hideous gambols of a rhinoceros. She is already afraid of you,—in a little while she will look upon you with loathing and

ingust—tant pis pour vous, tant mieux pour moi." I had of course attained the position of *ami intime* at the Villa Romani. I was welcome there at any hour,—I could examine and browse my own books in the library; at leisure I could stroll through the beautiful gardens accompanied by Wyvis, who attended me as a matter of course; in short, the house was almost at my disposal, though I never passed a night under its roof. I carefully kept up my character as a prematurely elderly man, slightly invalided by a long and arduous career, in far off foreign lands, and was particularly prudent in never idly permit the least word or action on my part that could arouse his jealousy or suspicion. I treated her with a sort of parental kindness and reserve, but she, trust a woman for intrigue!—she was quick to perceive my reasons for so doing. Directly Ferrari's back was turned, she would look at me with a glance of coquettish intelligence, and smile—a little mocking, half pouting smile;—or she would utter some disparaging remark about him, combining with it a covert compliment to me. It was not for me to betray her secrets,—I saw no occasion to tell Ferrari that nearly every morning she sent her maid to my hotel with fruit and flowers and incense after my health,—nor was my valet Vincenzo the same to say that he carried gifts and similar messages from me to her. But at the commencement of November things were so far advanced that I was in the unusual position of being secretly courted by my own wife!—I reciprocating her attentions with equal secrecy! The fact of my being often in the company of other ladies, picked her rapidly—she knew that I was considered a desirable party, and she resolved to win me. In this case I also resolved—to be won! A grim courtship truly—between a dead man and his own widow! Ferrari never suspected what was going on; he had never spoken of me as *"that poor fool Fabio, he was too easily duped,"* yet never was there one more easily duped than himself, and he was being duped by his own wife, and she was being duped by me. I saw before me a sure-foolure of his own good fortune. I wished to excite his distrust and enmity sometimes, but this I found I could not do. He trusted me—yes! as much as in the old days I had trusted him. Therefore the catastrophe for him must be sudden as well as fatal—perhaps, after all, it was better so. I was thinking my first visits to the Villa I saw much of my child Stella. She became passionately attached to me—poor little thing!—her love was a mere natural instinct, had she but known it. Often, too, her nurse, Assunta, would bring her to my hotel to pass an hour or so with me. This was a great treat to her, and her delight reached me when she came to look at me. I was glad to see that she had a fair idea of my nature, and that she was a good little girl whose papa suddenly went away, and how the little girl grieved for him till at last some kind fairies helped her to find him again. I was at first somewhat afraid of old Assunta,—she had been my nurse,—was it possible that she would not recognize me? The first time I met her in my new quarters, I felt she held me for a sort of suspense,—and I think she could scarce make out my lineaments. She was of an entirely different nature to Giacomo the butler,—she thoroughly believed her master to be dead, as indeed she had every reason to do, but strange to say, Giacomo did not. The old man had a fantastical notion that his "young lord" could not have died so suddenly, and he grew so obstinate on the point that my wife declared he must be going crazy. Assunta, on the other hand, would talk volubly of my death and tell me with assured earnestness—

"It was to be expected, Eccellenza—he was too good for us, and the Saints took him up to our Lord, and wanted his soul to pick out the best among us. The poor Giacomo did not listen to me, he grows weak and childish, and he loved the master too well—better, and here her voice would deepen into reproachful solemnity, "yes, better actually than St. Joseph himself! And of course one is punished for such a thing. I always knew my master would die young, he was too good for us, and too kind-hearted as he was to stay here long."

And she would shake her grey head and look for the beads of her rosary, and mutter many an Ave for the repose of my soul. Much as I wished it, I could never get her to talk about her mistress—it was the one subject on which she was invariably silent. On one occasion when I spoke with apparent business to the Countess, she glanced at me with sudden and earnest scrutiny—sighed—*but said nothing*. I was glad to see how thoroughly devoted she was to Stella, and the child returned her affection with interest,—though as the November days came on apace, my little one looked far from strong. She pined and grew thin, her eyes looked pale and sunken, and she was very very early weaned. I called Assunta's attention to these signs of ill health; she replied that she had spoken to the Countess, but that "Madama" had taken no notice of the child's weakly condition. Afterwards I mentioned the matter myself to Nina, who merely smiled gratefully up in my face and answered— "Really, my dear Conte, you are too good! There is nothing the matter with Stella, her health is excellent; she eats too many bonbons, perhaps, and is growing too fast, that is all. How kind you are to think of her! But, I assure you, she is quite well."

I did not feel so sure of this,—yet I was obliged to conceal my anxiety, and over-much concern about the child would have been in keeping with my assumed character.

It was a little past the middle of November, when a circumstance occurred that gave impetus to my plans, and hurried them to full fruition. The days were growing chilly and sad even in Naples,—yachting excursions were over, and I was beginning to organize a few dinners and balls for the approaching winter season, when one afternoon Ferrari entered my room unannounced, and threw himself on the nearest chair with an impatient exclamation, and a vexed expression of countenance.

"What is the matter?" I asked carelessly, as I caught a furtive glance of his eyes. "Anything financial? Play draw upon me! I will be a most accommodating banker!" He smiled unreasonably though gratefully.

"Thanks, Conte—but it is nothing of that sort,—it is—*gran Dio!* what an unlucky wreck I am!" and here I put on an expression of the deepest anxiety. "I hope the pretty Countess has not played you false? she has refused to marry you?" He laughed with a disdainful triumph in his laughter.

"Oh, as far as that goes there is no danger! She does not play me. It is rather a strong expression, my friend!" And I stroked my beard and looked at him steadily. He himself seemed to think he had spoken too openly and hastily, for he reddened as he said with a little embarrassment— "Well, I did not mean that exactly—of course she is perfectly free to do as she likes,—but she cannot, I think, refuse me after showing me so much encouragement."

I waved my hand with airy gesture of amicable agreement. "Certainly not," I said, "unless she be an arrant coquette and therefore a worthless woman; and you, who know so well her intrinsic goodness and purity, have no reason to fear. But, if not love or money, what is it that troubles you? It must be serious, to judge from your face."

and I am bound for the sake of decency to attend his last moments. Rather protracted moments they threaten to be, too, but the few years I had better be present, as the old man may take it into his head to disinherit me. I will draw up a will, I suppose I shall not be alone long—a fortnight at most—and in the meanwhile—

Here he hesitated and looked at me anxiously. "Continue, *oro mio* continue!" I said with some impatience. "If I can do anything in your absence, you have only to command me."

"He rose from his chair, and approaching the window where I sat in a half reclining position, he drew a small chair opposite mine, and sitting down, laid one hand confidently on my wrist.

"You can do much!" he replied earnestly. "And I feel that I can thoroughly depend upon you. Watch over her! She will have another protector, and she is so beautiful and careless! You can guard her—your age, your rank and position, the fact of your being an old friend of the family—all these things warrant your censorship and vigilance over her, and you can prevent any other man from intruding himself upon her notice."

"If he does," I exclaimed, starting up from my seat with a mock tragic air, "I will not rest till his body serves my sword as a sheath!" And I laughed loudly, clapping him on the shoulder as he drew a long breath. He had witnessed his interview with my wife in the evening. He seemed to find something familiar in the phrase, for he looked confused and puzzled. Seeing this, I hastened to turn the current of his reflections. Stopping abruptly in my midst I assumed a serious gravity of demeanor, and said— "Nay, nay! I see the subject is too sacred to be jested with—pardon my levity! I assure you, my good Ferrari, I will watch over the lady with the jealous scrutiny of a brother-elderly brother too, and therefore one more likely to be a model of propriety. Though frankly admit it is a task I am not specially fitted for, and one that is rather distasteful to me, still, I would do much to please you, and enable you to leave Naples with an easy mind. I promise you—here I took his hand, and I warmly—"that I will be worthy of your trust and true to it, with exactly the same fidelity and fidelity you yourself so nobly showed to your dead friend Fabio! History cannot furnish me with a better example!"

"I am glad to hear that," he said, and a drop of blood receded from his face, leaving almost livid. He turned his eyes in a wondering doubt upon me, but I counterfeited an air of such good faith and frankness, that he checked some hasty utterance that rose to his lips and mastering himself by a strong effort said briefly— "Thank you! I know I can rely upon your honor."

"You can!" I answered decisively—"positively as you rely upon your own." Again he winced, as though whipped smartly by an invisible lash. Releasing his hand, I asked a tone of affected regret. "And when must you leave us, *carissimo*?" "Most unappreciated, as once," he answered. "I start by the early train to-morrow morning."

"Well, I am glad I knew of this in time," said, glancing at my writing table, which was strewn with unseemly invitation cards, and estimates from decorators and bill-furnishers. "I shall not think of starting any more gaudy 'till you return.'"

"I looked at him fully at me. "Really! It is very kind of you, but I should be sorry to interfere with any of your plans."

CHAPTER XVII. Next morning I kept my appointment with Ferrari at the railway station. He looked pale and haggard, though he brightened a little on seeing me. He was curiously irritable and fussy with the porters concerning his luggage, and argued with them about some petty trifles as obstinately and pertinaciously as a deaf woman. His nerves were evidently jarred, and it was a relief when he got into his carriage. He carried the yellow covered trunks in his hand. I asked him what he contained any amusing reading. "I really do not know," he answered indifferently. "I have only just bought it. It is Victor Hugo."