

NINA SFORZA,—A TRAGEDY IN FIVE ACTS.

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Nina Sforza is the only daughter of a noble Venetian, beautiful, innocent, and happy, not knowing the world and quite unknown to it, when the tragedy opens. Raphael Doria and Ugone Spinola at that moment arrive in Venice, on a visit to her father. They are the sons of two powerful houses in Genoa, whose contest for the Captainship of the People has ended in the supremacy of Doria and the death of the elder Spinola, in an apparent reconciliation between the rival families, and in the seeming mutual attachment and friendship of the young men. Raphael Doria is heedless, wilful, and passionate; somewhat pampered and petulant withal; and for various indiscretions has been banished from Genoa by his father: Spinola follows him in his banishment, and is the means of introducing him to the house of Sforza. The relations of these associates to each other, subtly placed between friendship and dependence, confidence and scorn, are marked in the first scene of their appearance with a careless and admirable ease. Doria carries the pride of the victor faction, with its impetuous blood of careless and self-indulgence; Spinola the deference of the vanquished, with its cold and hardy temperament of self-subjection and restraint.

Doria's first adventure after his arrival in Venice is to save from drowning a young girl, whose gondola had been struck by a market-boat in the Lagoons. This is Nina Sforza, and with the passion that springs up between them the first act closes. The sudden elevation of the character of Doria by means of this passion, the sudden expansion of the mind and manners of Nina, the dreary and malignant action on the cold and resolute Spinola, are the materials of the second act of the tragedy; which closes with the recall of Doria to Genoa to assume the state of his dead father. Nina accompanies him as his bride, and Spinola as his friend.

But this marriage has consummated the secret hatred of Spinola, who had himself conceived a fondness for the young Venetian. He determines to realize at once the oath he had long sworn, to revenge, on the peace and happiness of Doria, the injuries of his race. This character is wrought with a very striking power. It is the cold and fiendish concentration of a terrible and long-enduring hatred. It has none of the common-place attributes or exaggerations of the ordinary stage villain. In all the wrong Spinola practises, in all the wretchedness he makes, he tells no formal lie. With his broken hearted victims at his feet, he might have made heaven the solemn witness of his reverent regard for the ceremonies of truth. The lie is in his heart and in his soul. Neither is he the instrument of a common self-delusion, or pretender to a purity of motive. His cold calm reason never deserts him, and his hatred, uninterrupted by remorse and shame, burns steadily to the last. In many respects, we think this character new to the stage. In the main characteristic we have noted, we think it most masterly, original, and true.

The third act expresses the happiness of Nina and Doria in their wedded life at Genoa. Spinola's efforts have been unavailing for the past, and promise little in the future. Obedient to the influence of Nina's love, all Doria's lighter and wilder passions would seem to have laid themselves finally at rest. But before the act closes, Genoa declares war against the Florentines, and Doria places himself at the head of her troops. The heart of Nina sinks with a sad foreboding, and the mounting spirits of Spinola declare his devilish hopes. Once taken from Nina's side, he knows that there is no solid or enduring constancy in the temperament or mind of Doria.

The campaign is brief, and at the opening of the fourth act Doria is halting on his homeward march in the open country between Genoa and Spezia. Ominous is that halt within the sight of home! Poor Nina, meanwhile, at the first whisper of her husband's advance, has mounted horse to meet him, and suddenly presents herself, in all the freshest fulness of her faith and love, at the tent of Doria.

Spinola. When Nina entered first into the tent
Where then was Doria?

Bizzaro. Stretch'd upon the ground;
Lounging along at Dame Laurana's feet;
Who, bending over him right pensively,
And double-arm'd with beauty and her lute,
Attack'd his soul with music and soft looks.

Spinola. And they were thus when she came in on them
Without announcement?

Bizzaro. Yes. There was a shout;
The tent-cloths parted, and with speed of light,
She darted through them at her husband's neck.

Laurana is a fair Florentine, visiting Genoa with her father under Doria's escort. No guilt has passed between them yet, but Spinola has marked them for his own.

Nina has observed a change in Doria's manner, "not much, and yet perceivable." It is the eagerness, the springing forth of love, she can no longer find in him. But not for that does jealousy, or even one suspicion, intrude into her guileless nature. Few things can be conceived more beautiful than the attitude this tender woman takes in the so sad and silent crisis of her fortune.

Spinola seeks her out on the return to Genoa. He carries with him the proof of her husband's neglect, the fatal suspicion of his infidelity, in an intercepted letter to the frail Laurana. Abhorrence of Spinola has always been with Nina a kind of irresistible instinct, but now, more than ever, she shrinks from his fiendish sympathy.

He bluntly tells her that Doria has betrayed her, and by the ungovernable burst of rage and scorn with which she tramples down the charge, we measure the depths of her innocence, her simplicity, her gentleness and love. Spinola shows the letter, and, sinking into a sudden and scarcely conscious despair, she fearfully recoils from him. It is a master hand which plays along these trembling and terrible chords.

That night, at twelve o'clock, two muffled figures are watching in the streets of Genoa, within sight of the house where Laurana lives. They are Nina and Spinola. With a breathless interest we read what follows.

Spinola. Bear up; 'twill soon be past.
Nina. If Heav'n had ta'en but one all-precious sense,
It would have humbled, but not crush'd me thus!
Yes! Had it quench'd the quick perceiving eye,
That sees the sweets of summer when they bloom;
The stars; kind faces; all things beautiful;
At least, I should have heard him say he loved!
Or had it been the ear, that to the soul
Conveys the natural music of the grove;
And language, thought's most sure interpreter,
I could have seen him smile, and been content!
But to lose all at once, in losing that
Which was the life of all—alas! alas!
Is more than I can bear!

Spinola. Nay, then, let's home;
For now I see thy constancy is gone.
What matters it? Perhaps 'twere better so.
Let him unseen enjoy—

Nina. No, no; let's on!
Spinola. Hush! There's no need; for see, thou much-wrong'd wife,—

See where beneath yon wall thy husband comes:
Did ever felon to a pinfold creep
With such a gait and air? Is that the grace,
The easy carriage, that amazed the gay,
And fix'd the glances of the whole saloon!
Yet that is he!—Have I belied him now?

Nina [gazing intently off the scene].
Not that way, Doria; not—and yet he turns!
Oh, sinking death!—fast-coming, cold despair!—
Ungrateful! cruel!—Ah, he stops! Thank Heav'n!
Stand thus for ever fix'd, as yet unsham'd,
If thou canst not repent, be marble, love;
And I will build about thee holy walls,
And lire upon my knees before that form,
Though lost, still loved! still honor'd!—Do not stir!
My heart is in the pavement!—Do not move!
Or, if thou must, pass by that hateful door!—
Pass! Pass! Pass!—Ah!—

The fifth act of the tragedy opens in Nina's sleepless chamber, at the daybreak after that melancholy night, with a soliloquy of deepest pathos. The future in all its lengthened agony, stretches out before her.

This was the longest night I yet have pass'd;
And is the first of many such to come!

A fine scene with Spinola follows. He leaves with her a slow Venetian poison, designed for Doria as he professes, but in reality for her. As she takes the phial from him, he seems for the instant to lose something of his loathsomeness. It is her means of escape, of freedom at once gentle and sure. "So young, so full of life," she had thought, how continued and terrible would be her sorrows in a world her nature was unfitted for. She resolves to take this poison from Doria's unconscious hand; to leave by secret flight her home in Genoa; to return to Venice and enter a sanctuary there, where the slow death will still leave her time, she thinks, to pass away in gradual prayer and quiet, "unheeded and unknown." She then takes the poison and begins her flight.

There is something extremely beautiful, and worked with the utmost delicacy, in the remorse of Doria. It strikes to his heart on the first meeting with Nina after his single crime against her, and before he knows her torture. When this is added to it, he is driven into madness. In this state, while Spinola is hastily following on the path of Nina, tracked with her waiting woman to the skirts of a forest on the slope of the Apennines, Doria springs on his betrayer. Spinola with difficulty escapes a death gripe, and, in answer to Doria's agonised questions for his wife, his Nina, tells him with the cold malice of a fiend to seek her in those stately halls of Genoa which she had so graced, so elevated, so adorned. Surely, he adds, she is there.

Doria. Thou know'st she's not.
Spinola. Not there! Why seek her, then,
In that apartment, to whose quiet bliss
She still retired with such a full content,
As 'twere the only court in which she cared
To live and reign? Go, Doria, seek her there!
There! In the temple where she minister'd
To all thy social joys!

Doria. Thou mocking fiend!
Forbear! forbear!

Spinola [laughs]. Hast thou forgotten, too,
It was the place in which she tended thee
In sickness and in sorrow?

Doria. Oh no more!
Spinola. Where, in her fond devotedness, she hoped
To give thee offspring; who, in after time,
Should bear thy name in honour!

Doria. Spare me!
Spinola. No!

Not a half a word.—No! not a syllable,
To buy redemption! Hengst, adult'rous boy!
Doria. Why, then, my grief perverts my aching sense!
Thou art some hellish phantom, not, indeed,
The man I made my friend!

Spinola. Thy friend!—Oh, fool!

Thy father stabb'd my father in the night,
And, with his damn'd destroying myrmidons,
Burn'd to the level of the common earth
A monument of time, which he, nor his,
Hack'd with the wealth of all the living world,
Could e'er rebuild or buy!

This is truly terrible, and, in a like awful spirit the scene is sustained to its close. Spinola will not fight with him; still stretches him on the rack of unutterable mental torture; parries the fierce and sudden thrust he makes at last; flings him back upon the ground; and, in answer to a prayer for death, lowers and removes the point of his sword.

I kill thee? No, not I!
I would not kill thee: I would have thee live,
To bear about with thee, for many years,
The dead heart in thy breast.

He has yet to tell him that Nina is poisoned, and by whose hand.

Spinola. Its nature and its pow'r I know;
I mix'd—
Doria [rising on his knees]. And gave it?
Spinola. No! not I!—'twas thou!
Doria. Accursed liar!
Spinola. Nay, but hear me yet.
The cup which thou this morn, at her desire—
Doria. Ah!

Spinola. What! What, see'st already? Art so apt?
Thy worthless love to her was as a soul
By which she lived, and when that life was lost,
The other was mere carrion for the grave!
Death was her refuge; from the hand she loved
She took it with a smile, and deem'd it bliss!

[DORIA FALLS INSENSIBLE.]

What! on the ground, thou lord of Genoa!
On the damp ground, midst draugh and rotting weeds,
Where crawl the earthworm and the slimy newt!
Fit lying for a prince!—How can he look!
Despair hath lain its finger on his cheek.
I shall not look upon that face again,
Except in thought, and in the dreamy night,
Where I shall see it still!

This is the consummation of Spinola's revenge. He carries off the sword of Doria, just on his return of sense it might be made the instrument of suicide. With this he is passing through the forest to bid a long farewell to Genoa, when, being met by Doria's friends and retainers, he is slain on the supposition of having murdered him.

Meanwhile, still deeper in the forest, Nina lies on the ground near death, supported by her single attendant. It is not so much the poison, as a broken heart. Its strongest cord had snapped when she bade farewell to her husband's home, and her comfort in this earlier death is that " 'tis nearer Genoa." The shriek of Doria is heard without. Nina utters a faint cry, starts up, and makes toward the sound. Recollecting herself, she turns and tries to fly; but, after a step or two, falls senseless. She wakes at the old first meeting with Doria, when he snatched her from the lagoons of Venice. Inexpressibly touching is all that follows.

Nina. I thank you, signor;
But for your prompt and gallant courtesy,
The waters would have bubbled over us.
It is a mournful fancy so to think,
But I do think it had been better so.

Doria. These are not words she speaks, but arrows barb'd!
They deal out vengeance deep!

Gioconda. Her sweet, sweet mind!

Nina. 'Tis growing dusk, my love; thou dost forget,
We give to-night a joyous festival;
It is our wedding day.—Why gaze ye both
So earnestly upon me? Do ye weep?

Doria. I cannot bear it! This will drive me wild!

Gioconda. See, she recovers.

Doria [kneeling beside her]. Speak! oh, speak to me!

Nina. That voice!—Thou here! Ah, wherefore can'st thou here?

Doria. This must not be!—I—oh, my lord!
Did I deserve this?

Her death is very quiet and calm. Doria has asked why she sighs and turns aside her head, when he finds that life is gone. His friends have entered meanwhile, and the tragedy closes thus. Doria holds still in his arms the dead body of Nina.

I am calm
As I were dead already! Ah! that was
The first cold kiss I ever had of thee!—
Pale wife, I'll wed thee with a second rite
That cannot be disdain'd—no, not by me!
No means!—What, none? Not e'en a tag that's sharp
About us both—Why then—Come hither, friends—
I cannot bear a voice! Speak not, I pray—
Take you this lovely module from my breast;
Lay her, with reverence, in our monument—
And see you leave a space—Why shift you thus
Your looks from one to the other, as you fear'd
I had some purpose to absent myself
From this sad funeral? Pve! You do me wrong
To doubt. I shall be there.

[They take the body.]

For thee, D'Estala,
(Most dear, true friend, well loved, but ill requited),
I have a charge. Come close, for not a breath
Must stray from out the keeping of thine ear.
This dear request, which I would make, is one
So near, so absolute, that on it rest
My peace, my life—D'Estala, it is—this—

[Snatches D'ESTALA'S dagger, stabs himself, and falls.]

It seems a churlish thing to turn to the less grateful consideration of a fault; but to this we are only prompted by our sincere and cordial admiration of a writer who has thus shown, as we think, the