VENDETTA;

—OR—

The Story of One Forgotten.

CHAPTER XII.—Continued.

He shook hands cordially,—I responded to his farewell salutations with the brief coldness which was now my habitual manner, and we parted. From the window of my saloon I could see him sauntering easily down the hotel steps and from thence along the street. How I cursed him as he stepped jauntily on,—how I hated his debonair grace and easy manner! I watched the even poise of his handsome head and shoulders, I noted the assured tread, the air of conscious vanity,—the whole demeanor of the man bespoke his perfect self satisfaction and his absolute confidence in the brightness of the future that awaited him, when the stipulated six months of pretended mourning for my untimely death should have expired. Once, as he walked on his way, he turned and paused,—looking back,—he raised his hat to enjoy the coolness of the breeze on his forehead and hair. The light of the moon fell full on his features and showed them in profile, like a finely-cut cameo against the dense dark blue background of the evening sky. I gazed at him with a sort of grim fascination—the fascination of a hunter for the stag when it stands at bay, just before he draws the knife across its throat. He was in my power,—he had deliberately thrown himself in the trap I had set for him. He lay at the mercy of one in whom there was no mercy. He had said and done nothing to deter me from my settled plans. Had he shown the least tenderness of recollection for me as Fabio Romani, his friend and benefactor,—had he hallowed my memory by one generous word,—had he expressed one regret for my loss,—I might have hesitated, I might have somewhat changed my course of action so that punishment should have fallen more lightly on him than on her. For I knew well enough that she, my wife, was the worse sinner of the two. Had *she* chosen to respect herself, not all the forbidden love in the world could have touched her honor. Therefore the least sign of compunction or affection from Ferrari for me, his supposed dead friend, would have turned the scale in his favor, and in spite of his treachery, remembering how *she* must have encouraged him, I would at least have spared him torture. But no sign had been given, no word had been spoken, there was no need for hesitation or pity, and I was glad of it! All this I thought as I watched him standing bareheaded in the moonlight, on his way to—whom? To my wife, of course. I knew that well enough. He was going to console her widow's tears—to soothe her aching heart,—a good Samaritan in very earnest! He moved, he passed very slowly out of my sight. I waited till I had seen the last glimpse of his retreating figure, and then I left the window satisfied with my day's work. Vengeance had begun.

CHAPTER XIII.

Quite early in the next day Ferrari called to see me. I was at breakfast,—he apologized for disturbing me at the meal.

"But," he frankly explained, "the Countess Romani laid such urgent commands upon me that I was compelled to obey. We men are the slaves of women!"

"Not always," I said drily, as I motioned him to take a seat—"there are exceptions,—myself for instance. Will you have some coffee?"

"Thanks, I have already breakfasted. Pray do not let me be in your way, my errand is soon done. The Countess wishes me to say"—

"You saw her last night?" I interrupted him.

He flushed slightly. "Yes—that is—for a few minutes only. I gave her your message. She thanks you, and desires me to tell you that she cannot think of receiving the jewels unless *you will first honor her by a visit. She is not* at home to ordinary callers in consequence of her recent bereavement,—but to you—so old a friend of her husband's family, a hearty welcome will be accorded."

I bowed stiffly. "I am extremely flattered!" I said in a somewhat sarcastical tone, "it is seldom I receive so tempting an invitation! I regret that I cannot accept it, at least, not at *present. Make my compliments to the lady* and tell her so in whatever sugared form of words you may think best fitted to please her ears."

He looked surprised and puzzled.

"Do you really mean," he said, with a tinge of hauteur in his accents, "that you will not visit her—that you refuse her request?"

I smiled. "I really mean, my dear Signor *Ferrari, that being always accustomed to have* my own way, I can make no exception in favour of ladies, however fascinating they may be. I have business in Naples,—it claims my first and best attention. When it is transacted I may possibly try a few frivolities for a change,—at present I am unfit for the society of the fair sex,—an old battered traveller as you see, brusque, and unaccustomed to polite lying. But I promise you I will *practice* suave manners and a court bow for the Countess when I can spare time to call upon her. In the meanwhile I trust to you to make her a suitable and graceful apology for my non appearance."

Ferrari's puzzled and vexed expression gave way to a smile,—finally he laughed aloud "Upon my word!" he exclaimed gaily, "you are really a remarkable man, Conte! You are extremely cynical! I am almost inclined to believe that you positively hate women."

"Oh, by no means! Nothing so strong as hatred," I said coolly, as I peeled and divided a fine peach as a finish to my morning's meal. "Hatred is a strong passion,—to hate well one must first have loved. No, no—I do not find women worth hating—I am simply indifferent to them. They seem to me merely one of the burdens imposed on man's existence,—graceful, neatly-packed, light burdens in appearance, but in truth, terribly heavy and soul-crushing."

"Yet many accept such burdens gladly!" interrupted Ferrari, with a smile. I glanced at him keenly.

"Men seldom attain the mastery over their own passions," I replied; "they are in haste to seize every apparent pleasure that comes in their way. Led by a hot animal impulse which they call love, they snatch at a woman's beauty as a greedy school-boy snatches ripe fruit—and when possessed, what is it worth? Here is its emblem,"—and I held up the stone of the peach I had just eaten—"the fruit is devoured—what remains? A stone with a bitter kernel."

Ferrari shrugged his shoulders.

"I cannot agree with you, Count," he said, "but I will not argue with you. From your point of view you may be right—but when one is young, and life stretches before you like a fair pleasure-ground, love and the smile of woman are like sunlight falling on flowers! You too must have felt this,—in spite of what you say, there must have been a time in your life when you also loved!"

"Oh, I have had my fancies of course!" I answered with an indifferent laugh—"The woman I fancied turned out to be a saint—I was not worthy of her,—at least so I was told! At any rate I was so convinced of her virtue and my own unworthiness,—that—I left her."

He looked surprised. "An odd reason, surely, for resigning her, was it not?"

"Very odd,—very unusual—but a sufficient one for me. Pray let us talk of something more interesting,—your pictures, for instance. When may I see them?"

"When you please," he answered readily—"though I fear they are scarcely worth a visit. I have not worked much lately. I really doubt whether I have any that will merit your notice."

"You underrate your own powers, Signor," I said with formal politeness. "Allow me to call at your studio this afternoon. I have a few minutes to spare between three and four o'clock if that time will suit you."

"It will suit me admirably," he said, with a look of gratification:—"but I fear you will be disappointed. I assure you I am no artist."

I smiled. I knew that well enough. But I made no reply to his remark,—I said, "Regarding the matter of the jewels for the Countess Romani,—would you care to see them?"

"I should indeed," he answered;—"they are unique specimens, I think?"

"I believe so," I answered, and going to an escritoire in the corner of the room, I unlocked it and took out a massive carved oaken jewel-chest of square shape, which I had had made in Palermo. It contained a necklace of large rubies and diamonds, with bracelets to match, and pins for the hair,—also a sapphire ring,—a cross of fine rose-brilliants, and the pearl-pendant I had first found in the vault. All the gems, with the exception of this pendant, had been reset by a skilful jeweller in Palermo, who had acted under my superintendence, and Ferrari uttered an exclamation of astonishment and admiration, as he lifted the glittering toys out one by one, and noted the size and brilliancy of the precious stones.

"They are trifles," I said carelessly,—"but they may please a woman's taste—and they amount to a certain fixed value. You would do me a great service if you consented to take them to the Countess Romani for me,—tell her to accept them as heralds of my forthcoming visit. I am sure you will know how to persuade her to take what would unquestionably have been hers, had her husband lived. They are really her property—she must not refuse to accept what is her own."

Ferrari hesitated and looked at me earnestly.

"You will visit her—she may rely on your coming for a certainty, I hope?"

I smiled. "You seem very anxious about it. May I ask why?"

"I think," he replied at once, "that it would embarrass the Countess very much if you gave her no opportunity to thank you for so munificent and splendid a gift—and unless she knew she could do so, I am certain she would not accept it."

"Make yourself quite easy!" I answered. "She shall thank me to her heart's content. I give you my word that within a few days I will call upon the lady—in fact you said *you would introduce me—I accept your offer!*"

He seemed delighted, and seizing my hand, shook it cordially.

"Then in that case I will gladly take the jewels to her," he exclaimed. "And I may say, Count, that had you searched the whole world over, you could not have found one whose beauty was more fitted to show them off to advantage. I assure you, her loveliness is of a most exquisite *character*!"

"No doubt!" I said drily. "I take your word for it. I am no judge of a fair face or form. And now, my good friend, do not think me churlish if I request you to leave me in solitude for the present. Between three and four o'clock I shall be at your studio."

He rose at once to take his leave. I placed the oaken box of jewels in the leathern case which had been made to contain it, strapped and locked it, and handed it to him together with its key. He was profuse in his compliments and thanks—almost obsequious in truth—and I discovered another defect in his character—a defect which, as his friend in former days, I had guessed nothing of. I saw that very little encouragement would make him a toady—a fawning servitor on the wealthy—and in our old time of friendship I had believed him to be far above all such meanness, but rather of a manly, independent nature that scorned hypocrisy. Thus we are deluded even by our nearest and dearest—and is it well or ill for us, I wonder, when we are at last undeceived? Is not the destruction of illusion worse than illusion itself? I thought so, as my quondam friend clasped my hand in farewell that morning. What would I not have given to believe in him as I once did! I held open the door of my room as he passed out, carrying the box of jewels for my wife, and as I bade him a brief adieu, the well-worn story of Tristram and King Mark came to my mind. He, Guido, like Tristram, would in a short space clasp the gemmed necklace round the throat of one as fair and false as the fabled Iseulte, and I—should I figure as the wronged *king? How does the English Laureate put it* in his Idyll on the subject?

"'Mark's way,' said Mark, and clove him through the brain."

Too sudden and sweet a death by far for such a traitor! The Cornish king should have known how to torture his betrayer. *I* knew—and I meditated deeply on every point of my design, as I sat alone for an hour after Ferrari had left me. I had many things to do,—I had resolved on making myself apartments of importance in Naples, and I wrote several letters and sent out visiting-cards to certain well-established families of distinction as necessary preliminaries to the result I had in view. That day, too, I engaged a valet—a silent and discreet Tuscan named Vincenzo Flamma. He was an admirably trained servant—*he never asked questions,—was too* dignified to gossip, and rendered me instant and implicit obedience—in fact he was a gentlemen in his way, with far better manners than many who lay claim to that title. He entered upon his duties at once, and never did I know him to neglect the most trifling thing that could add to my satisfaction or comfort. In making arrangements with him, and in at*tending to various little matters of business, the* hours slipped rapidly away, and in the afternoon, at the time appointed, I made my way to Ferrari's studio. I knew it of old—I had no need to consult the card he had left with me on which the address was written. It was a queer, quaintly built little place, situated at the top of an ascending road—its windows commanded an extensive view of the Bay and the surrounding scenery. Many and many a happy hour had I passed there before my marriage, reading some favorite book, or watching Ferrari as he painted his crude landscapes and figures, most of which I good naturedly purchased as soon as completed. The little porch overgrown with star jessamine looked strangely and sorrowfully familiar to my eyes, and my heart experienced a sickening pang of regret for the past, as I pulled the bell and heard the little tinkling sound to which I was so well accustomed. Ferrari himself opened the door to me with eager rapidity—he looked excited and radiant.

"Come in, come in!" he cried with effusive cordiality. "You will find everything in confusion, but pray excuse it. It is some time since I had any visitors. Mind the steps, Conte!—the place is rather dark just here—every one stumbles at this particular corner."

So talking, and laughing as he talked, he escorted me up the short narrow flight of stairs to the light airy room where he usually worked. Glancing round it, I saw at once the evidences of neglect and disorder—he had certainly not been there for many days, though he had made an attempt to arrange it tastefully for my reception. On the table stood a large vase of flowers grouped with artistic elegance—I felt instinctively that my wife had put them there. I noticed that Ferrari had begun nothing new—all the finished and unfinished studies I saw, I recognized directly. I seated myself in an easy chair and looked at my betrayer with a calmly critical eye. He was what the English would call "got up for effect." Though in black, he had donned a velvet coat instead of the cloth one he had worn in the morning—he had a single white japonica in his button-hole—his face was pale and his eyes unusually brilliant. He looked his best—I admitted it, and could readily understand how an idle, pleasure seeking feminine animal might be easily attracted by the purely physical beauty of his form and features. I spoke a part of my thoughts aloud.

"You are not only an artist by profession, Signor Ferrari—you are one also in appearance."

He flushed slightly and smiled.

"You are very amiable to say so," he replied, his pleased vanity displaying itself at once in the expression of his face. "But I am well aware that you flatter me. By the way, before I forget it, I must tell you that I fulfilled your commission."

"To the Countess Romani?"

"Exactly. I cannot describe to you her astonishment and delight at the splendour and brilliancy of those jewels you sent her. It was really pretty to watch her innocent satisfaction."

I laughed.

"Marguerite and the 'jewel-song' in *Faust*, I suppose, with new scenery and effects?" I asked, with a slight sneer. He bit his lip and looked annoyed. But he answered quietly,

"I see, you must have your joke, Conte;—but remember that if you place the Countess in the position of Marguerite, you, as the giver of the jewels, naturally play the part of Mephistopheles."

"And you will be Faust of course!" I said gaily. "Why we might mount the opera with a few supernumeraries and astonish Naples by our performance! What say you? But let us come to business. I like the picture you have on the easel there—may I see it more closely?"

He drew it nearer; it was a showy landscape with the light of the sunset upon it. It was badly done, but I praised it warmly, and purchased it for five hundred francs. Four other sketches of a similar nature were then produced. I bought these also. By the time we got through these matters, Ferrari was in the best of humors. He offered me some excellent wine and partook of it himself; he talked incessantly, and diverted me extremely, though my inward amusement was not caused by the witty brilliancy of his conversation. No, I was only excited to a sense of savage humour by the novelty of the position in which we two men stood. Therefore I listened to him attentively, applauded his anecdotes—all of which I had heard before—admired his jokes, and fooled his egotistical soul till he had no shred of self-respect remaining. He laid his nature bare before me—and I knew what it was at last—a mixture of selfishness, avarice and sensuality, and heartlessness, tempered now and then by a flash of good nature and sympathetic attraction which were the mere outcomes of youth and physical health—no more. This was the man I had loved—this fellow who told coarse stories only worthy of a common pot-house, and who revelled in wit of a high and questionable flavour; this conceited, empty-headed, muscular piece of humanity was the same being for whom I had cherished so chivalrous and loyal a tenderness! Our conversation was broken in upon at last by the sound of approaching wheels. A carriage was heard ascending the road—it came nearer—it stopped at the door. I set down the glass of wine I had just raised to my lips, and looked at Ferrari steadily.

"You expect other visitors?" I inquired.

He seemed embarrassed, smiled and hesitated.

"Well—I am not sure—but" The bell rang. With a word of apology Ferrari hurried away to answer it. I sprang from my chair . . . . I knew—I felt *who* was coming. I steadied my nerves by a strong effort. . . . I controlled the rapid beating of my heart; and fixing my dark glasses more closely over my eyes, I drew myself up erect and waited calmly. I heard Ferrari ascending the stairs . . a light step accompanied his heavier foot fall . . he spoke to his companion in whispers. Another instant . . . and he flung the door of the studio wide open with the haste and reverence due for the entrance of a queen. There was a soft rustle of silk—a delicate breath of perfume on the air—and then, I stood face to face with *my wife*!

CHAPTER XIV.

How dazzlingly lovely she was! I gazed at her with the same bewildered fascination that had stupefied my reason and judgment when I beheld her for the first time. The black robes she wore, the long crape veil thrown back from her clustering hair and *mignonne* face, all the sombre shadows of her mourning garb only served to heighten and display her beauty to greater advantage. A fair widow truly! I, her lately deceased husband, freely admitted the magnetic power of her charms! She paused for an instant on the threshold, a winning smile on her lips; she looked at me, hesitated, and finally spoke in courteous accents—

"I think I cannot be mistaken! Do I address the noble Conte Cesare Oliva?"

I tried to speak, but could not. My mouth was dry and parched with excitement, my throat swelled with the pent-up wrath and despair of my emotions. I answered her question silently by a formal bow. She at once advanced, extending both her hands with the coaxing grace of manner I had so often admired.

"I am the Countess Romani," she said, still smiling. "I heard from Signor Ferrari that you proposed visiting his studio this afternoon, and I could not resist the temptation of coming to express my personal acknowledgments for the almost regal gift you sent me. The jewels are really magnificent. Permit me to offer you my sincere thanks."

I caught her outstretched hands and wrung them hard,—so hard that the rings she wore must have dug into her flesh and hurt her, though she was too well bred to utter any exclamation. I had fully recovered myself, and was prepared to act my part.

"On the contrary, Madame," I said in a strong harsh voice, "the thanks must come entirely from me, for the honor you have conferred upon me by accepting trifles so insignificant—especially at a time when the cold brilliancy of mere diamonds must jar upon the sensitive feelings of your recent widowhood. Believe me, I sympathise deeply with your bereavement. Had your husband lived, the jewels would have been his gift to you, and how much more acceptable they would then have appeared in your eyes! I am proud to think you have condescended so far as to receive them from so unworthy a hand as mine."

As I spoke her face paled,—she seemed startled, and regarded me earnestly. Sheltered behind my smoked spectacles, I met the gaze of her large dark eyes without embarrassment. Slowly she withdrew her slight fingers from my clasp. I placed an easy chair for her; she sank softly into it with her old air of indolent ease, the ease of a spoilt empress or sultan's favorite, while she still continued to look up at me thoughtfully. Ferrari, meanwhile, busied himself in bringing out more wine; he also produced a dish of fruit and some sweet cakes, and while occupied in these duties as our host he began to laugh.

"Ha, ha! you are caught!" he exclaimed to me gaily. "You must know we planned this together, Madama and I, just to take you by surprise. There was no knowing when you would visit the Contessa, and she could not rest until she had thanked you, so we arranged this meeting. Could anything be better? Come, Conte, confess that you are charmed!"

"Of course I am!" I answered with a slight touch of satire in my tone. "Who would not be charmed in the presence of such youth and beauty! And I am also flattered—for I know what exceptional favor the Contessa Romani extends towards me, in allowing me to make her acquaintance at a time which must naturally be for her a secluded season of sorrow."

At these words my wife's face suddenly assumed an expression of wistful sadness and appealing gentleness.

"Ah, poor unfortunate Fabio," she sighed. "How terrible it seems that he is not here to greet you! How gladly he would have welcomed any friend of his father's—he adored his father, poor fellow! I cannot realize that he is dead. It was too sudden, too dreadful! I do not think I shall ever recover the shock of his loss!"

And her eyes actually filled with tears;—though the fact did not surprise me in the least, for many women can weep at will. Very little practice is necessary—and we men are such fools, we never know how it is done; we take all the pretty feigned piteousness for real grief, and torture ourselves to find methods of consolation for the feminine sorrows which have no root save in vanity and selfishness. I glanced quickly from my wife to Ferrari; he coughed, and appeared embarrassed—he was not so good an actor as she was an actress. Studying them both, I know not which feeling gained the mastery in my mind—contempt or disgust.

"Console yourself, Madame," I said coldly. "Time should be quick to heal the wounds of one so young and beautiful as you are! Personally speaking, I much regret your husband's death, but I would entreat *you* not to give way to grief, which, however sincere, must unhappily be useless. Your life lies before you—and may happy days and as fair a future await you as you deserve!"

She smiled, her tear-drops vanished like morning dew disappearing in the sun's heat.

"I thank you for your good wishes, Conte,' she said; "but it rests with you to commence my happy days by honoring me with a visit. You will come, will you not? My house and all that it contains are at your service!"

I hesitated. Ferrari looked amused.

"Madame is not aware of your dislike to the society of ladies, Conte," he said, and there was a touch of mockery in his tone. I glanced at him coldly, and addressed my answer to my wife. "Signor Ferrari is perfectly right" I said, bending over her, and speaking in a low tone; "I am often ungallant enough to avoid the society of mere women, but, alas! I have no armour of defence against the smiles of an angel."

And I bowed with a deep and courtly reverence. Her face brightened—she adored her own loveliness, and the desire of conquest awoke in her immediately. She took a glass of wine from my hand with a languid grace, and fixed her glorious eyes full on me with a smile.

"That is a very pretty speech," she said sweetly, "and it means, of course, that you will come to-morrow. Ange's exact obedience! Gui——, I mean Signor Ferrari, you will accompany the Conte and show him the way to the Villa!"

Ferrari bent his head with some stiffness. He looked slightly sullen.

"I am glad to see," he observed with some petulance, "that your persuasions have carried more conviction to the Conte Oliva than mine. To me he was apparently inflexible."

She laughed gaily. "Of course! It is only a woman who can always win her own way—am I not right, Conte?" And she glanced up at me with an arch expression of mingled mirth and malice. What a love of mischief she had! She saw that Guido was piqued, and she took intense delight in teasing him still further.

"I cannot tell, Madame," I answered her. "I know so little of your charming sex that I need to be instructed. But I instinctively feel that you must be right whatever you say. Your eyes would convert an infidel!"

Again she looked at me with one of those wonderfully brilliant, seductive, arrowy glances,—then she rose to take her leave

"An angel's visit truly," I said lightly, "sweet, but brief."

"We shall meet to-morrow," she replied, smiling. "I consider I have your promise; you must not fail me! Come as early as you like in the afternoon, then you will see my little girl Stella. She is very like poor Fabio. Till to-morrow, adieu!"

She extended her hand. I raised it to my lip. She smiled as she withdrew it, and looking at me, or rather at the glasses I wore, she inquired—

"You suffer with your eyes?"

"Ah, madame, a terrible infirmity! I cannot endure the light. But I should not complain—it is a weakness common to age."

"You do not seem to be old," she said thoughtfully. With a woman's quick eye she had noted, I suppose, the unwrinkled smoothness of my skin, which no disguise could alter. But I exclaimed with affected surprise—

"Not old! With these white hairs!"

"Many young men have them," she said. "At any rate they often accompany middle age, or what is called the prime of life . . . really, in your case, they are very becoming!"

And with a courteous gesture of farewell she moved to leave the room. Both Ferrari and myself hastened to escort her down stairs to her carriage, which stood in waiting at the door—the very carriage and pair of chestnut ponies which I myself had given her as a birthday present. Ferrari offered to assist her in mounting the step of the vehicle; she put his arm aside with a light jesting word and accepted mine instead. I helped her in, and arranged her embroidered wraps about her feet, and she nodded gaily to us both as we stood bareheaded in the afternoon sunlight watching her departure. The horses started at a brisk canter, and in a couple of minutes the dainty equipage was out of sight. When nothing more of it could be seen than the cloud of dust stirred up by its rolling wheels, I turned to look at my companion. His face was stern, and his brows were drawn together in a frown. Stung already! I thought. Already the little asp of jealousy commenced its bitter work! The trifling favor *his* light-o'-love and *my* wife had extended to me in choosing *my* arm instead of *his* as a momentary support had evidently been sufficient to pique his pride. God! what blind bats men are! With all their high capabilities and immortal destinies, with all the world before them to conquer, they can sink unnerved and beaten down to impotent weakness before the slighting word or insolent gesture of a frivolous feminine creature, whose best devotions are paid to the mirror that reflects her in the most becoming light! How easy would be my vengeance, I mused, as I watched Ferrari. I touched him on the shoulder; he started from his uncomfortable reverie and forced a smile. I held out a cigar-case.

"What are you *dreaming of?*" I asked him laughingly—"Hebe as she waited on the gods, or Venus as she rose in her bare beauty from the waves? Either, neither, or both? I assure you a comfortable smoke is as pleasant in its way as the smile of a woman."

He took a cigar and lit it, but made no answer.

"You are dull, my friend," I continued gaily, hooking my arm through his and pacing him up and down on the turf in front of his studio. "Wit, they say, should be sharpened by the glance of a bright eye; how comes it that the edge of your converse seems blunted? Perhaps your feelings are too deep for words? If so, I do not wonder at it, for the lady is extremely lovely."

He glanced quickly at me.

"Did I not say so?" he exclaimed. "*Of all* creatures under heaven she is surely the most perfect! Even you, Conte, with your cynical ideas about women, even you were quite subdued and influenced by her; I could see it!"

I puffed slowly at my cigar and pretended to meditate.

"Was I?" I said at last, with an air of well-acted surprise. "Really subdued and influenced? *I do not think so. But I admit I have* never seen a woman so entirely beautiful."

He stopped in his walk, loosened his arm from mine, and regarded me fixedly.

"I told you so," he said deliberately. "You must remember that I told you so. And now, perhaps, I ought to warn you."

"Warn me!" I exclaimed in feigned alarm. "Of what?—against whom? Surely not the Contessa Romani, *to whom you were so anxious* to introduce me? She has no illness, no infectious disorder? She is not dangerous to life or limb?"

Ferrari laughed at the anxiety I displayed for my own bodily safety—an anxiety which I managed to render almost comic—but he looked somewhat relieved too.

"Oh no," he said, "I meant nothing of that kind. I only think it fair to tell you that she has very seductive manners, and she may pay you little attentions which would flatter any man who was not aware that they are only a part of her child-like, pretty ways; in short, they might lead him erroneously to suppose himself the object of her particular preference, and——"

I broke into a violent fit of laughter, and clapped him roughly on the shoulder.

"Your warning is quite unnecessary, my good young friend," I said. "Come now, do I look a likely man to attract the attention of an adored and capricious beauty? Besides at my age the idea is monstrous! I could figure as her father, or yours, if you like, but in the capacity of a lover—impossible!"

He eyed me attentively.

"She said you did not seem *old*," he murmured, half to himself and half to me.

"Oh! I grant you she made me that little compliment, certainly," I answered, amused at the suspicions that evidently tortured his mind; "and I accepted it as it was meant—in kindness. I am well aware what a battered and unsightly wreck of a man I must appear in her eyes when contrasted with you, Sir Antinous!"

He flushed warmly, Then, with a half apologetic air, he said—

"Well, you must forgive me if I have seemed over scrupulous. The Contessa is like—a sister, to me; in fact, my late friend Fabio encouraged a fraternal affection between us, and now he is gone I feel it more than ever my duty to protect her, as it were, from herself. She is so young and light-hearted and thoughtless that—but you understand me, do you not?"

I bowed. I understood him perfectly. He wanted no more poachers on the land he himself had pilfered. Quite right, from his point of view! But I was the rightful owner of the land after all, and I naturally had a different opinion of the matter. However, I made no remark, and feigned to be rather bored by the turn the conversation was taking. Seeing this, Ferrari exerted himself to be agreeable; he became a gay and entertaining companion once more, and after he had fixed the hour for our visit to the Villa Romani the next afternoon, our talk turned upon various matters connected with Naples and its inhabitants and their mode of life. I hazarded a few remarks on the general immorality and loose principles that prevailed among the people, just to draw my companion out and sound his character more thoroughly,—though I thought I knew his opinions well.

"Pooh, my dear Conte," he exclaimed with a light laugh, as he threw away the end of his cigar, and watched it as it burned dully like a little red lamp among the green grass where it had fallen, "what *is* immorality after all? Merely a matter of opinion. Take the hackneyed virtue of conjugal fidelity. When followed out to the bitter end what is the good of it—where does it lead? Why should a man be tied to one woman when he has love enough for twenty? The pretty slender girl whom he chose as a partner in his impulsive youth may become a fat, coarse, red-faced female horror by the time he has attained to the full vigor of manhood; and yet, as long as she lives, the law insists that the full tide of his passion shall flow always in one direction—always to the same dull, level, unprofitable shore! The law is absurd, but it exists; and the natural consequence is that we break it. Society pretends to be horrified when we do—yes, I know; but it is all pretence. And the thing is no worse in Naples than it is in London, the capital of the moral British race, only here we are perfectly frank, and make no effort to hide our little sins, while there they cover them up carefully and make believe to be virtuous. It is the veriest humbug—the parable of Pharisee and Publican over again.

"*Not quite*," I observed; for the Publican was penitent and Naples is not."

"Why should she be?" demanded Ferrari, gaily; "what in the name of heaven, is the good of being penitent about anything? Creation is a mere caprice of the natural elements. The best thing we can do is to enjoy ourselves while we live; we have a very short time of it, and when we die there is an end of all things so far as we are concerned."

"That is your creed?" I asked.

"That is my creed, certainly. It was Solomon's in his heart of hearts. 'Eat, drink and be merry, for to-morrow we die. It is the creed of Naples, and of nearly all Italy. Of course the vulgar still cling to exploded theories of superstitious belief, but the educated classes are far beyond the old women's notions."

"I believe you," I answered composedly. I had no wish to argue with him; I only sought to read his shallow soul through and through that I might be convinced of his utter worthlessness. "According to modern civilization there is really no special need to be virtuous unless it suits us. The only thing necessary for pleasant living is to avoid public scandal."

"Just so!" agreed Ferrari; "and that can always be easily managed. Take a woman's reputation—nothing is so easily lost, we all know before she is actually married; but marry her well, and she is free. She can have a dozen lovers if she likes, and if she is a good manager her husband need never be the wiser. He has *his* amours of course—why should she not have hers also? Only some women are clumsy, they are oversensitive and betray themselves too easily; then the injured husband (carefully concealing his own little peccadilloes) finds everything out and there is a devil of a row—a moral row, which is the worst kind of a row. But a really clever woman can always steer clear of slander if she likes."

Contemptible ruffian! I thought, glancing at his handsome face and figure with scarcely veiled contempt. With all his advantages of education and his well-bred air he was yet ruffian to the core,—as low in nature, if not lower, than the half-savage tramp for whom no social law has ever existed or ever will exist. But I merely observed,

"It is easy to see that you have a thorough knowledge of the world and its ways. I admire your perception! From your remarks I judge that you have no sympathy with marital wrongs"

"Not the least," he replied drily; "they are too common and too ludicrous. The 'wronged husband,' as he considers himself in such cases, always cuts such an absurd figure."

"Always?" I inquired, with apparent curiosity.

"Well generally speaking, he does. How can he remedy the matter? He can only challenge his wife's lover. A duel is fought, in which neither of the opponents are killed; they wound each other slightly, embrace, weep, have coffee together, and for the future consent to share the lady's affections amicably."

"*Veramente!*" I exclaimed with a forced laugh, inwardly cursing his detestable flippancy; "that is the fashionable mode of taking vengeance?"

"Absolutely the one respectable way of doing it," he replied; "it is only the *canaille* who draw heart's blood in earnest."

Only the *canaille!* I looked at him fixedly. His smiling eyes met mine with a frank and fearless candor. Evidently he was not ashamed of his opinions, he rather gloried in them. As he stood there with the warm sunlight playing upon his features, he seemed the very type of youthful and splendid manhood; an Apollo in exterior—in mind a Silenus. My soul sickened at the sight of him. I felt that the sooner this strong, treacherous life was crushed *the better; there would be one traiter less in* the world, at any rate. The thought of my dread but just purpose passed over me like the breath of a bitter wind,—a tremor shook my nerves. My face must have betrayed some sign of my inward emotion, for Ferrari exclaimed—

"You are fatigued, Conte? You are ill? Pray take my arm!"

He extended it as he spoke. I put it gently but firmly aside.

"It is nothing," I said coldly; "a mere faintness which often overcomes me, the remains of a recent illness." Here I glanced at my watch; the afternoon was waning rapidly.

"If you will excuse me," I continued, "I will now take leave of you. Regarding the pictures you have permitted me to select, my servant shall call for them this evening to save you the trouble of sending them."

"It is no trouble——" began Ferrari.

"Pardon me," I interrupted him; "you must allow me to arrange the matter in my own way. I am somewhat self-willed, as you know."

He bowed and smiled—the smile of a courtier and sycophant—a smile I hated. He eagerly proposed to accompany me back to my hotel, but I declined this offer somewhat peremptorily, though at the same time thanking him for his courtesy. The truth was I had had almost too much of his society; the strain on my nerves began to tell. I craved to be alone. I felt that if I were much longer with him I should be tempted to spring at him and throttle the life out of him. As it was, I bade him adieu with friendly though constrained politeness; he was profuse in his acknowledgments of the favor I had done him by purchasing his pictures. I waived all thanks aside, assuring him that my satisfaction in the matter far exceeded his, and that I was proud to be the possessor of such valuable proofs of his genius. He swallowed my flattery as eagerly as a fish swallows bait; and we parted on excellent terms. He watched me from his door as I walked down the hilly road with the slow and careful step of an elderly man, once out of his sight, however, I quickened my pace, for the tempest of conflicting sensations within me made it difficult for me to maintain even the appearance of composure. On entering my apartment at the hotel the first thing that met my eyes was a large gilt osier basket, filled with fine fruit and flowers, placed conspicuously on the centre table.

I summoned my valet "Who sent this?" I demanded.

"Madame the Contessa Romani," replied Vincenzo with discreet gravity. "There is a card attached, *it* the Eccellenza will be pleased to look."

I did look. It was my wife's visiting-card, and on it was written in her own delicate penmanship—

"To remind the Conte of his promised visit to-morrow."

"A sudden anger possessed me. I crumpled up the dainty glossy bit of pasteboard and flung it aside. *The mingled odors* of the fruit and flowers offended my senses.

"I care nothing for these trifles," I said, addressing Vincenzo almost impatiently. "Take them to the little daughter of the hotel-keeper; she is a child, she will appreciate them. Take them away at once."

Obediently, Vincenzo lifted the basket and bore it out of the room. I was relieved when its fragrance and color had vanished. I, to receive as a gift, the product of my own garden! Half vexed, half sore at heart, I threw myself into an easy chair;—anon I laughed aloud! So! Madame commences the game early, I thought. Already paying these marked attentions to a man she knows nothing of beyond that he is reported to be fabulously wealthy. Gold, gold for ever. What will it not do. It will bring the proud to their knees, it will force the obstinate to servile compliance, it will conquer aversion and prejudice. The world is a slave to its yellow glitter, and the love of woman, that perishable article of commerce, is ever at its command. Would you obtain a kiss from a pair of ripe red lips that seem the very abode of honeyed sweetness? Pay for it then with a lustrous diamond; the larger the gem the longer the kiss! The more diamonds you give, the more caresses you will get. The *jeunesse dorée* who ruin themselves and their ancestral homes for the sake of the newest and prettiest female puppet on the stage know this well enough. I smiled bitterly as I thought of the languid witching look my wife had given me when she said, "You do not seem to be old!" I knew the meaning of her eyes; I had not studied their *liquid lights* and shadows so long for nothing. My road to revenge was a straight and perfectly smooth line—almost too smooth I could have wished for some difficulty, some obstruction; but there was none—absolutely none. The traitors walked deliberately into the trap set for them. Over and over again I asked myself quietly and in cold blood—was there any reason why I should have pity on them? Had they shown one redeeming point in their characters? Was there any nobleness, any honesty, any real sterling good quality in either of them to justify my consideration? And always the answer came, *No!* Hollow to the heart's core, hypocrites both, liars both,—even the guilty passion they cherished for one another had no real earnestness in it save the pursuit of present pleasure; for *she*, Nina, in that fatal interview in the avenue where I had been a tortured listener, had hinted at the possibility of tiring of her lover, and *he* had frankly declared to me that very day that it was absurd to suppose a man could be true to one woman all his life. In brief, they deserved their approaching fate. Such men as Guido and such women as my wife are, I know, common enough in all classes of society, but they are not the less pernicious animals, meriting extermination as much, if not more, than the less harmful beasts of prey. The poor beasts at any rate tell no lies, and after death their skins are of some value; but who shall measure the mischief done by a false tongue,—and of what use is the corpse of a liar save to infect the air with pestilence? I used to wonder at the superiority of men over the rest of the animal creation, but I see now that it is chiefly gained by excess of selfish cunning. The bulky, good-natured, ignorant hon who has only one honest way of defending himself, namely with tooth and claw, is no match for the jumping two-legged little rascal who hides himself behind a bush and fires a gun aimed direct at the bigger brute's heart. Yet the lion's mode of battle is the braver of the two, and the cannons, torpedoes, and other implements of modern warfare are proofs of man's cowardice and cruelty as much as they are of his diabolical ingenuity. Calmly comparing the ordinary lives of men and beasts,—judging them by their abstract virtues merely,—I am inclined to think the beasts the more respectable of the two!

CHAPTER XV.

"Welcome to Villa Romani!"

The words fell strangely on my ears. Was I dreaming, or was I actually standing on the smooth green lawn of my own garden, mechanically saluting my own wife, who, smiling sweetly, uttered this cordial greeting? For a moment or two my brain became confused; the familiar verandah with its clustering roses and jessamine swayed unsteadily before my eyes; the stately house, the home of my childhood, the scene of my past happiness, rocked in the air as though it was about to fall. A choking sensation affected my throat. Even the sternest men shed tears sometimes. Such tears too! wrung like drops of blood from the heart And I—I could have wept thus. Oh, the dear old home! how fair and yet how sad it seemed to my anguished gaze! It should have been in ruins surely—broken and cast down in the dust like its master's peace and honor. Its master, did I say? Who was its master? Involuntarily I glanced at Ferrari, who stood beside me.

Not he—not he; by heaven he should never be master! But where was *my* authority? I came to the place as a stranger and an alien. The starving beggar who knows not where to lay his head has no emptier or more desolate heart than I had as I looked wistfully on the home which was mine before I died! I noticed some slight change here and there; for instance, my deep easy chair that had always occupied one particular corner of the verandah was gone; a little tame bird that I had loved, whose cage used to hang up among the white roses on the wall, was also gone. My old butler, the servant who admitted Ferrari and myself within the gates, had an expression of weariness and injury on his aged features which he had not worn in my time, and which I was sorry to see. And my dog, the noble black Scotch collie, what had become of him, I wondered? He had been presented to me by a young Highlander who had passed one winter with me in Rome, and who, on returning to his native mountains, had sent me the dog, a perfect specimen of its kind, as a souvenir of my friendly intercourse. Poor Wyvis! I thought. Had they made away with him? Formerly he had always been visible about the house or garden; his favorite place was on the sweet verandah step, where he loved to bask in the heat of the sun. And now he was nowhere visible. I was mutely indignant at his disappearance, but I kept strict watch over my feelings, and remembered in time the part I had to play.

"to Villa Romani!" so said my wife. Then, remarking my silence as I looked about me, she added with a pretty coaxing air,

"I am afraid after all you are sorry you have come to see me!"

I smiled. It served my purpose now to be as gallant and agreeable as I could; therefore I answered,

"Sorry, Madame! If I were, then should I be the most ungrateful of all men! Was Dante sorry, think you, when he was permitted to behold Paradise?"

She blushed, her eyes drooped softly under their long curling lashes.