

so quiet; so like the curé of a convent. Who would believe that you had sold the lives of thirty men for a few hundred roubles?

'And who,' interrupted the courier, would believe that you, bluff, honest Conrad Ferrati, had run away with all the money those thirty men had collected during ten years of labour, for ransoming their country from the Russian?'

'That was good, Alexis, was it not? I never was so rich in my life as then; I loved—I drank—I drank—on the patriots' money.'

'For how long? Three years?'

'More—and now have none left. Ah!—Times change, Alexis; behold me.' And the guard touched his buttons and belt, the badges of his office. 'Never mind—here's my good friend the bottle—let us embrace—the only friend that is always true—if he does not gladden, he makes us to forget.'

'Tell me, my good Alexis, whom do you rob now? Who pays for the best, and gets the second best? Whose money do you invest, eh? my little fox? Why are you here? Come, tell me while I drink to your success.'

'I have the honour to serve His Excellency the Count Spezzato.'

'Ten thousand devils! My arsenal cousin' broke in the guard.

'He who has robbed me from his birth; whose birth itself was a vile robbery of me—of me, his cousin, child of his father's brother. May he be accursed for ever!'

I took most particular pains to appear only amused at this genuine outburst of passion, for I saw the watchful eye of the courier was on me all the time they were talking.

The guard drank off a tumbler of brandy.

'That master of yours is the man of whom I spoke to you years ago, as the one who had ruined me; and 'oh serve him! May he be strangled on his wedding night, at dawn of day for ever!'

'Be calm, my dearest Conrad, calm yourself; that beast of an Englishman will think you are drunk, like one of his own swinish people, if you talk so loud as this.'

'How can I help it! I must talk. What he is, that I ought to be; I was brought up to it till I was eighteen; was the heir to all his vast estate; there was but one life between me and poverty—my uncle's—and he, at fifty, married a girl, and had the son, "his son of perdition, my cousin. And after that, I who had been the pride of my family, became of no account; it was "Julian," "sweet Julian!'

'I heard,' said the courier, 'that some one attempted to strangle the sweet child, that was—'

'Me—you fox—me. I wish I had done it; but for that wretched dog that worried me, I should have been Count Spezzato now. I killed that dog, killed him, not suddenly; may his master die like him!'

'And you left after that little affair?'

'Oh yes! I left and became what you know me.'

'A clever man, my dear Conrad. I know no man who is more clever with the ace than yourself, and, as to bullying to recover a mistake, you are an emperor at that. Is it not so, Conrad? Come, drink good health to my master, your cousin.'

'You miserable rascal, I'll crush you if you ask me to do that again. I'll drink—Here, give me the glass—'

'Here's to Count Spezzato! May he die like a dog! May his carcase bring the birds and the wolves together! May his name be cursed and hated while the sun lasts! And may purgatory keep him till I pray for his release!'

The man's passion was something frightful to see, and I was more than half inclined to leave the place; but something, perhaps a distant murmur of the rising tide, compelled me to stay. I pretended sleep, allowing my head to sink down upon the table.

He sat still for a few moments and then commenced walking about the room, and abruptly asked:

'What brought you here, Alexis?'

'My master's horse, Signor Conrad.'

'Good, my little fox; but why did you come on, your master's horse?'

'Because my master wishes to reach Leghorn to-night, to meet his bride, Conrad.'

'Then his is the special train ordered at nine, that I am to go with?'

'I explained the guard eagerly.

'That is so, gentle Conrad; and now having told you all, let me pay our hostess and go.'

'Pay! No one pays for me, little fox; no, no, go; I will pay.'

The courier took his departure and the guard kept walking up and down the room, muttering to himself:

'To-night, it might be to-night. If he goes to Leghorn, he meets his future wife; another life, and perhaps a dozen. No, it must be to-night or never. Does his mother go? Fool that I am not to ask! Yes; it shall be to-night; and he left the room.'

What should be 'to-night? Some foul play of which the Count would be the victim, no doubt. But how? and when? That must be solved. To follow him, or to wait—which? To wait. It is always best to wait; I had learned this lesson already.

I waited. It was now rather more than half-past eight, and I had risen to go to the door when I saw the guard returning to the wine-shop with a man whose dress indicated the stoker.

'Come in, Guido; come in,' said the guard, and drink with me.'

The man came in, and I was again absorbed in my book.

They seated themselves at the same table as before, and drank silently for a while; presently the guard began a conversation in some patois I could not understand; but I could see the stoker grow more and more interested as the name of *Beatrice* occurred more frequently.

As the talk went on, the stoker seemed pressing the guard on some part of the story with a most vindictive eagerness, repeatedly asking, 'His name? The accused! His name?'

At last the guard answered, 'The Count Spezzato.'

'The Count Spezzato?' said the stoker now leaving the table, and speaking in Italian.

'Yes, good Guido; the man who will travel in the train we take to-night to Leghorn.'

'H shall die! The accused! He shall die to-night!' said the stoker. If I lose my life the betrayer of my sister shall die!'

The guard, returning to the unknown tongue, seemed to be endeavoring to calm him; and I could only catch a repetition of the word 'Empoli' at intervals. Presently the stoker took from the seat beside him two tin bottles, such as you may see in hanks of mechanics who dine out; and I could see that one of them had rudely scratched on it the name of 'William Atkinson.' I fancied the guard produced from his pocket a phial, and poured the contents into that bottle; but the action was so rapid, and the corner so dark, that I could not be positive; then rising, they stopped at the counter, had both bottles filled with brandy, and went out.

It was now time to get to the station; and, having paid my modest score, I went out.

A little in front of me, by the light from a small window, I saw these two cross themselves, grip each other's hands across right to right, left to left, and part.

The stoker had set down the bottles, and now taking them up followed the guard at a slower pace.

Arrived at the station, I found the Count, his mother, a female servant, and the courier.

The Count came up to me, and said, in broken English, 'You are the English to go to Leghorn with me? Very well, there is room. I like the English. You shall pay nothing, because I do not sell tickets; you shall go free. Is that so?'

I thanked him in the best Italian I could muster.

'Do not speak your Italian to me; I speak the English as a native; I can know all you shall say to me in your own tongue. See, here is the train special, as you call it. Enter, as it shall please you.'

The man drove up to the platform; and I saw that the stoker was at his post, and that the engine-driver was an Englishman.

I endeavoured in vain to draw his attention to warn him, and was compelled to take my seat, which I did in the compartment next the guards' break—the train consisting of only that carriage and another, in which were the Count, his mother, and the servant.

The guard passed along the train, locked the doors, and entered his box.

'The Florence goods is behind you, and Siena goods is due at Empoli Junction four minutes before you; mind you don't run into it,' said the station-master with a laugh.

'No fear; we shall not run into it,' said the guard with a marked emphasis on the 'we' and 'it' that I recalled afterwards.

The whistle sounded, and we were off. It was a drizzling dark night, and I lay down full length on the seat to sleep.

As I lay down a gleam of light shot across the carriage from a small chink in the wood-work of the partition between the compartment I was in and the guard's box.

I was terribly anxious from the manner of the guard; and this seemed to me a means of hearing something more. I lay down and listened attentively.

'How much will you give for your life, my little fox?' said the guard.

'To-day, very little; when I am sixty, all I have, Conrad.'

'But you might give something for it, to-night, sweet Alexis, if you knew it was in danger?'

'I have no fear; Conrad Ferrati has too often conducted a train for me to fear to-night.'

'True, my good Alexis; but this is the last train he will ride in as guard, for to-morrow he will be the Count Spezzato.'

'How? To-morrow? You joke, Conrad. The brandy was strong; but you who have drunk so much could hardly feel that.'

'I neither joke, nor am I drunk; yet I shall be Count Spezzato to-morrow, good Alexis. Look you, my gentle fox, my sweet fox; if you do not buy your life of me you shall die to-night. That is simple, sweet fox.'

'Ay; but Conrad, I am not in danger.'

'Nay, Alexis; see, here is the door.' (I heard him turn the handle.)

'If you lean against the door, you will fall out and be killed. Is it not simple?'

'But, good Conrad, I shall not lean against the door.'

'Oh, my sweet fox, my cunning fox, my timid fox, but not my strong fox; you will lean against the door. I know you will, unless I prevent you; and I will not prevent you, unless you give me all you have in that bag.'

The mocking tone of the guard seemed well understood, for I heard the click of gold.

'Good, my Alexis; it is good; but it is very little for a life. Come, what is your life worth, that you buy it with only your master's money? It has cost you nothing. I see you will lean against that door, which is so foolish.'

'What in the name of all the devils in hell will you have?' said the trembling voice of the courier.

'Only a little more; just that belt that is under your shirt, under everything, next to your skin, and closer to you; only a little soft leather belt with pouches in. Is not life worth a leather belt?'

'Wretch! All the earnings of my life are in that belt, and you know it.'

'Is it possible, sweet fox, that I have found your nest? I shall give Marie a necklace of diamonds, then. Why do you wait? Why should you fall from a train, and make a piece of news for the papers? Why?'

'Take it; and be accursed in your life and death!' and I heard the belt once flung on the floor of the carriage.

'Now, good Alexis, I am in funds; there are three pieces of gold for you; you will need them at Leghorn. Will you drink? No! Then I will tell you why, without drink. Do you know where we are?'

'Yes; between St. Dominico and Signa.'

'And do you know where we are going?'

'Yes; to Leghorn.'

'No, sweet Alexis, we are not; we are going to Empoli; the train will go no farther. Look you, little fox; we shall arrive at the junction one minute before the Siena goods train, and there the engine will break down just where the rails cross; for two blows of a hammer will convert an engine into a log; I shall get out to examine it; that will take a little time; I shall explain to the Count the nature of the injury; that will take a little time; and then the goods train will have arrived; and as it does not stop there, this train will go no farther than Empoli,