

himself up into a fever. His face was white. Drops of sweat stood on his forehead.

He had set out to be deceptive—what he would have called *un poco birbante*, and he had even deceived himself. He knew that it would be dangerous for his Padrona to live again near Marechiaro. Any day a chance scrap of gossip might reach her ears. In time she would be certain almost to hear something of the dead Padrone's close acquaintance with the dwellers in the Casa delle Sirene. She would question him, perhaps. She would suspect something. She would inquire. She would search. She would find out the hideous truth. It was this fear which made him argue on the same side as Artois. But in doing so he caught another fear from his own words. He became really natural, really truthful in his fear. And—she scarcely knew why—Hermione was even more governed by him than by Artois. He had lived with them in the Casa del Prete, been an intimate part of their life there. And he was Sicilian of the soil. The boy had a real power to move, to dominate her, which he did not then suspect.

Again and again he repeated those words, "*La povera bambina —la povera piccola bambina.*" And at last Hermione was overcome.

"I won't go to Sicily," she said to Artois. "For if I went there I could only go to Monte Amato. I won't go until Vere is old enough to wish to go, to wish to see the house where her father and I were happy."

And she had never gone back. For Artois had not been satisfied with this early victory.

In returning from a tour in North Africa the following spring, when Vere was nearly two years old, he had paid a visit to Marechiaro, and, while there, had seen the contadino from whom Hermione had rented, and still rented, the house of the priest. The man was middle-aged, ignorant but shrewd, and very greedy. Artois made friends with him, and casually, over a glass of *moscato*, talked about his affairs and the land question in Sicily. The peasant became communicative and, of course, loud in his complaining. His land yielded nothing. The price of almonds had gone down. The lemon crop had been ruined by the storms. As to the vines—they were all devoured by the phylloxera, and he had no money to buy and plant vines from America. Artois hinted that he received a good rent from the English lady for the cottage on Monte Amato. The contadino acknowledged that he received a fair price for the cottage and the land about it: but the house, he declared, would go to rack and ruin with no one ever in it, and the land was lying idle, for the English lady would have everything left exactly as it had been when she lived there