

cause, without possessing their pedigrees, he was more popular: wealth will always exercise more sway with the foolish than rank, ay, or with the wise, for the most part either. The rich envied him, because he equalled them in their expenditure and magnificence, but with this essential difference, that, while they injured their estates to tope with him, a few hours in his *atelier* would serve to reimburse him for weeks of dissipation. The poor envied him, because the poor always did, and always will, envy the wealthy: the poor ever imagine that happiness mainly consists in possessing wealth, the rich *know* to the contrary: neither will ever convince the other; so, thus thinking, will both, high and low, jog on to eternity.

In spite of all this envy, Ernest commanded admiration—his talents from the few, his profusion from the many, his generosity from all. Count Aldini had the most luxurious palazzo in sunny Florence! Count Aldini was an especial favourite with the Grand Duke; Count Aldini was smiled upon by every lady in Florence, and his acquaintance sought by every gentleman distinguished by rank, by fame, or by talents, from the common herd."

Every one wondered much and often why Count Aldini wore a shade upon his brow, and why he never seemed to partake with the elasticity or buoyancy of youth in the varied pleasures which danced around him. Could they have penetrated his heart, and seen what feelings lurked within it, few would have envied him his good fortune, still fewer been found willing to exchange their griefs and their joys for his.

It was precisely a year and a day after he had first possessed the strange charm which produced these changes, that, one hour before midnight, Ernest left the polished circle, of which he was regarded as the very life, hurried home to his spacious palazzo, sought his studio, and, having closed the door, paced dejectedly up and down the apartment.

"What a strange existence is mine!" he muttered, "thus suddenly lifted to the enjoyment of all that this world affords of luxury, by means of a supernatural gift—from whom? Alas, from one whose slave I fear I must become. Wretch that I am!" and he paused before the easel, and gazed upon the painting that it supported. "The dread of what is to follow destroys every present enjoyment, and fills my soul with horror and despair." The painting represented with fearful accuracy the terrors and sufferings of a place of torment in another world, and, guided by the feelings which so strongly actuated him, the painter had bestowed his own likeness upon one of the principal figures, which appeared surrounded by the ministers of vengeance in the foreground of the design. "Yes," the artist mournfully continued, "such, such will be my doom; and what have I received in exchange? A gift," and he drew forth the pencil, "the possession of which renders me wretched, and yet with which I cannot—dare not—part."

"The distant clock tolled forth twelve; the artist paused to count the dull heavy sounds as they fell upon the silent ear of night. The moon became suddenly shrouded in gloomy clouds, the lamps burned but dimly, the door opened, and the old gentleman entered.

A withering sensation of fear thrilled the bosom of Ernest: the old gentleman bent profoundly, and then unbidden seated himself on a splendid ottoman.

"Permit me," he said, calmly, "permit me, sir count, to congratulate you on your well deserved good fortune: talents"—and he smiled sarcastically—"talents like your's deserve suitable encouragement. But you look pale," soothingly; "are you unhappy, or is it merely the weariness which results from past enjoyment that oppresses you?"

"I—I am wretched!" burst from the lips of Ernest.

"Indeed? Can I remedy your causes of grief? Surely your pencil fails not of its wonted effect?"

"No—no—it is not that. I scarcely can tell you, scarcely describe even to myself what it is that oppresses me. I seem to bear a charmed life; content flies my bosom; strange fears haunt me; and I dread—I know not what."

The old gentleman smiled.

"Then, when I enter a cathedral, and would pray, my thoughts become confused, and, feeling like a wretch guilty of heinous sins, I rush from the sacred pile in wild despair."

The old gentleman took a pinch of snuff from an ebony snuff-box, then handed the latter to Ernest: it contained black rappee, mixed with scented Scotch. Ernest declined the offered courtesy.

"Is this all that oppresses you? Is this all that paints your cheek with pearl powder, and your brow with Indian ink?"

"All? Yes; is it not enough?"

"No," said the old gentleman, composedly taking another pinch; "they are nothings, unworthy the notice of a man of sense. You must, however, permit me to contradict your last assertion; these things are *not* the sole sources of your grief."

Ernest blushed deep crimson. The old gentleman looked not at him—gentlemen don't like to be looked at when they blush, and his elderly friend was aware of it.

The fact was, that Count Aldini was not the painter Ernest who had entered Florence a year and a week before. There are few who can bear great and sudden prosperity with an even mind: one it will sway into the paths of vice; another it will drive to madness; a third will become absurdly proud; a fourth it will utterly destroy; a fifth it may render grateful and virtuous. N. B., the last is a rare phenomenon. It is some praise to Ernest that his prosperity had not betrayed him into any great crime; but, although his conscience was not burdened very heavily, his moral character had undergone a change. He was haughty and proud, too, of his imaginary talents; (how many there are in this world proud of that for which they ought most to blush!) he had likewise become reckless in his disposition, and, regarding himself, already as a victim to supernatural agency, scarcely hesitated to look on crimes of a heinous character without distaste.

"The real case is this," resumed the old gentleman, after a brief pause; "you have fallen in love with the beautiful daughter of the Marchese di Santo Giuliano, and know not how to inspire her fair bosom with a corresponding passion." Ernest blushed again. "It is this which gives you more pain than all the rest of your troubles," with a slight sneer.

The old gentleman was perfectly right in supposing that the circumstance which he specified was the cause of many uneasy sensations in the breast of Ernest, but the latter portion of his speech was not equally correct. Ernest had passed the earlier part of his life in too religious a manner not to feel many severe qualms of conscience at so complete a change in his circumstances. There was a slight pause.

"The pencil will assist you," said the old gentleman.

"The pencil?"

"Ay, where is it?"

Ernest handed it to him. The old gentleman unscrewed it about the centre, although Ernest had never previously observed the slightest appearance of a crack, and drew from the hollow within it a small phial containing liquid of a dark red colour.

"Of course you are aware," said the old gentleman coolly, as he drew the cork from the phial, and applied it to his nose, apparently to ascertain whether the contents were in right order, "of course, with your keen perception, you must be aware that the Signora Aloysia loves another?"

"I have imagined," said Ernest—while a dark shade gathered on his brow—"that she loved her father's protégé, the young Antonio; but to her union with him the Marchese would never consent."

"I am not so certain of that," rejoined the gentleman with the white hair; "indeed I know that he has some doubts at this moment upon his mind as to whether he shall not at once consent to their marriage."

"Ha!"

"Even so; and, were it otherwise, we must commence

our operations with Antonio; he is a formidable barrier in our progress to the heart of the beautiful Aloysia."

But then her father," said Ernest despondingly, "would never consent to her weding an artist, however wealthy or deserving."

The old gentleman smiled.

"The Marchese, with all his pomp and pride, is poor—very poor—pride, pomp, and poverty! what a funny combination!" and the old gentleman chuckled inwardly and heartily, although Ernest could not see much in the joke; but, presently subduing his merriment, he proceeded, "The Marchese is very poor, and yet loves gaming as well as you do his daughter."

"Well," said Ernest.

"Well," said the old gentleman, and then he took another pinch of snuff, "the pencil will assist you."

He had unscrewed this mystic gift into two parts—from the one he had taken the phial, from the other he now shook forth a pair of dice.

"Go to-morrow evening to his palazzo; you will find him alone: ply him with wine, and then propose play; substitute these dice for those which he will produce; you must win, ay, and largely; and, belike, he cannot pay you. You must take his daughter in lieu of the gold you do not want, and as for Antonio—when next you meet him, infuse the contents of this phial into his wine, and my life on't Aloysia is your's before the month is gone."

"Murder," muttered Ernest.

"Nonsense," said the old gentleman, "do as I bid you, and fear not for the result; only beware ye part not with the pencil." He screwed together the parts of the pencil, returned it to Ernest, and then rose from his seat.

"Is there no other way?" said Ernest.

"None," said the old gentleman. "Come, you are a lover; wish you not to know how your idol is employed? Stretch forth the canvass and exercise your pencil."

Mechanically, Ernest did as he was bidden. A wide-spreading, luxuriant, garden appeared to flow from the teeming brush; the gentle moonlight glowed on every tree through every bush; and in an alcove sat the fair Aloysia, whilst, by her side, the young Antonio, with rapture in his eyes, appeared to tell his love in impassioned melody.

"Confusion!"

"Such joys," said the old gentleman, "should be thine."

"And shall!" cried Ernest.

The old gentleman smiled.

"Farewell," said the latter; "follow my advice, and when next we meet, I shall hail the lovely Signora Aloysia as the happy bride of the painter, Ernest. Adieu;" and so saying, he glanced with evident delight upon the representation of Pandemonium which had arisen from the painter's morbid imagination, bowed very politely, and forthwith departed.

Ernest stood as though transfixed, with the pencil in his hand, and his eyes riveted on the eloquent painting before him. Suddenly his hesitation seemed to vanish.

"It shall be done!" He looked at the phial and then at the dice, carefully examined them, and then safely lodged them in a secret cabinet. Ernest pressed his hand against his burning forehead, and, in an almost utter exhaustion of mind, threw himself upon a couch—but not to sleep. Slumber flew far from his resting-place, or if, for a few moments, his wearied eyelids closed, dreams of so fearful a nature presented themselves, that it was a relief to wake again. He fancied that every face he beheld resembled that of the old gentleman, that every figure displayed thin and emaciated yet nervous frame. Now he would grin on the uneasy sleeper with wild delight, then reproach him with anxiety, anon with dismay, and lastly with fiendish rage and hate.

Morning at length dawned. Morning! bright Morning! the blessings of millions hail thee—songs of gay and happy warblers welcome thee—all nature greets thee with strong and fervent joy! The lark rises to meet thee and pour forth his hymn of praise—for thee is the dewy bud of the night-closed flower unrobed—and to thee man owes his release from midnight terrors and midnight gloom. Blessings on thee, bright and beautiful as thou art!