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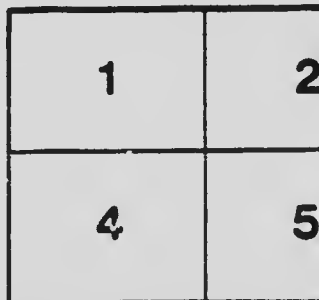
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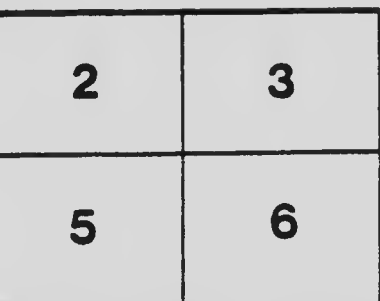
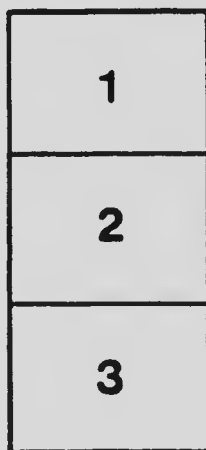
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TRANSLATED BY

MARY PRICHARD AGNETTI

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CHAPTER I

A MYSTIC PRELUDE

I.

"SIGNORINA!" called Giovanni the footman, entering the dining-room breathlessly, after looking for her in the garden, in the drawing-room, and in her own chamber. It was nine o'clock, and his master and Signorina Lelia had finished dinner before eight. The master had withdrawn to his study almost immediately; the Signorina had gone into the garden. But now she was in the dining-room again by the window.

Her eyes were fixed on the grove of chestnuts to the east, over beyond the ravine, where a brawling stream makes its way from a small lake hidden behind the green shoulders of the lofty peak of Priaforà. But she was straining her ear to catch a far-away sound that rose and fell—the rumbling of a distant train speeding towards the Val d'Astico above which the villa is situated. She turned suddenly at the servant's call, crushing a letter in her hands.

"What is the matter?"

"The master is unwell."

Lelia uttered an exclamation.

The fellow gazed stupidly at her. She started forward, then, pausing, spoke again to the slow-witted footman.

"Where is he?"

Lelia.

"In the study, I think."

Lelia ran towards the salon and met the maid Teresina coming towards her with outstretched hands.

"It is nothing—nothing," Teresina said quietly, diverting Lelia's attention to a locket that had fallen open from her belt. The girl chafed with impatience while the maid carefully closed it for her. Nevertheless, the action calmed her.

"Giovanni, go and prepare the guests' room," said Teresina, addressing the footman, who stood listening, half dazed, half curious.

Lelia trembled. "Is there something Giovanni must not know?" she asked.

"No, Signorina, no!" said Teresina, speaking with the accent of her native Trent.

But it struck Lelia that the maid was deliberately delaying her explanation.

"Why don't you speak?" she burst out.

Teresina cast a quick glance towards the study door. She was anxious to spare the Signorina, who was delicate and nervous, and so easily excited.

"If he should come out," she whispered, "and find us here talking, he might suspect something. We had better go away."

Followed by Teresina, Lelia hurried across the salon and entered the dining-room. Anxious though she was to hear the maid's story, she listened a moment to the whistle of the train, wondering whether it was signalling from San Giorgio or from the station of Seghe. Then . . .

"Tell me!" she demanded.

Well, as usual, Teresina had carried the master's letters to him in his study. From the threshold she had seen him bend his head first backwards and then towards his left shoulder, close his eyes, open them with a wild stare, and again close them, only to strain them wide once more, so that the balls showed white. She had sprinkled some water upon his face and had sent the footman in search

of the Signorina, for, to tell the truth, she had really felt somewhat startled at first. Meanwhile the master had sighed deeply and had muttered something about a sudden drowsiness. Then he had opened his letters and papers, and seeing that she was hesitating whether to leave the room or to remain, he had dismissed her. Outside she had listened, but had heard only the rustle of papers. So . . .

A bell sounded twice.

"The master!" Teresina exclaimed, and hurried away.

Lelia followed her a few steps, but stopped in the drawing-room, watching the maid's retreating figure, watching the billiard-room door, that closed softly behind her, listening, and waiting for Teresina to come back.

Meanwhile the train was whistling beneath the heights of Santa Maria, just before running into the terminus station of Arsiero. From the station it was a walk of some ten minutes to "La Montanina," the villa, so called because, with its gabled roofs and its back to the hill, among groves and fields that stretch downwards to the deep Posina, it is so like one of those peasant women who come wearily down from the steeps of Priaforà, and pause to rest awhile upon the bundle of wood they have gathered in the forests. In this villa lived Lelia and Signor Marcello Trento.

* * * * *

Teresina, as devoted to Signor Marcello as she had been for twenty years to his wife, who had now been dead two years, knocked at the study door, trembling lest her master might have been seized again with illness. Encouraged by the sound of his "Come in!" she entered, smiling, that he might not notice any signs of her recent fright.

The door opened on the left of the easy-chair in which Signor Marcello was seated at a table littered

with papers, and in the light of an antique Florentine brass lamp, which had shone upon his father's grey head, and now shed its glow upon his own, in which the grey and auburn were mingled. His hair was wild and rough and of that coarse texture perhaps characteristic of virile natures. As Teresina entered he turned towards her a face showing a moustache and tuft upon the chin that were lighter in tone than his hair, and, beneath a low and wrinkled brow, eyes that were terrible in anger but most gentle in moments of tenderness. Just now it was the face of the unrelenting inquisitor, and the woman was conscious of a blush that flamed to the roots of her hair.

"How is it," he demanded, "that I am all wet?"

"I don't know," she answered.

"You don't know, indeed? Who poured water upon my hair? Don't you understand me?"

Teresina felt that further denial would only make matters worse.

"You fell asleep," she began, "and I thought you had fainted, so I sprinkled a little water over you. I beg your pardon!"

"How stupid you are!" Signor Marcello exclaimed. "At first I could not understand, but then I guessed it must have happened in that way. But it was stupid of you."

"Yes, sir, I fear it was."

Teresina was greatly relieved. She could hardly have hoped for anything better than that her master should believe he had been asleep. She was about to withdraw when Signor Marcello stopped her with a wave of his hand.

"I want to know whether the train from Schio has arrived."

"I don't know—non so no," Teresina stammered, and then quickly begged him to excuse a phrase savouring of the dialect of Trent, which never failed to irritate Signor Marcello. She passed slowly in

front of her master and look up the snuffers, intending to mend one of the wicks of the Florentine lamp, which had begun to smoke.

"Let it alone!" he growled. "Do you suppose I cannot snuff a wick better than you can?"

Again the servant asked his pardon and left the room, walking on tiptoe lest the noise of her steps should cause him further irritation. She had hardly begun to tell Lelia about her master, when she was once more summoned by the double ring.

"What does he want now?" Teresina wondered anxiously.

She saw at once that Signor Marcello's face had changed—that it was now all gentleness.

"Forgive me," he said kindly. "Perhaps, after all, it is I who am stupid. Were my eyes open or closed when I was asleep?"

"They were closed."

"Did I not open them at all? Did you not see the white of my eyeballs?"

Teresina's blood ran cold, and she hesitated an instant before answering in the negative. Her master was scrutinising her with that inquisitorial glance that always made her shiver. She became confused, and instead of insisting in her denial, declared she really could not remember.

"And where did you get the water?" Signor Marcello asked quietly.

Teresina had filled a glass at the washstand in his bedroom beyond the study. She saw that by confessing this she would be admitting that the questionable nap had lasted a certain length of time. She failed, however, to find a fitting lie on the spur of the moment, and so answered truthfully, but with the hesitation of one who confesses reluctantly.

Signor Marcello gazed searchingly at her a little longer, and then said gently:

"You can go now, my dear. Let me know when Signor Alberti arrives."

Teresina left the room, alarmed, she knew not why, by his extreme gentleness. It was the third time in two-and-twenty years that he had addressed her as "my dear." He had pronounced the words carelessly enough the first time, when she had presented herself to him on entering his service. He had uttered them a second time, impelled by profound emotion, upon the death of his only son, Andrea, when he had thanked her for her part in the nursing which she had shared with himself, the mother being incapacitated by the disease that killed her a year and a half later. The quiet tenderness of this third *cara* was something quite new.

* * * * *

Alone once more, Signor Marcello rose slowly to his feet. His face was colourless. Turning to the broad window, he joined his hands as in prayer, gazing with reverent eyes at the dark sky above the Torraro and the army of mighty chestnuts extending from the slope of Lago di Velo to the ravine of the Posina. He was close upon his seventy-second year—his father's age on that night when a similar attack of arteriosclerosis had overcome him, and the doctor's verdict had prepared the family for the old man's death five months afterwards.

The silent flame of the lamp that had been found burning by his dead father's side seemed a living symbol of that tragedy. But to Signor Marcello the moment was not tragic; it was the solemn warning of the coming of a welcome day, the happiest that God could now grant him, of departure and eternal reunion with beloved ones. His heart was full of tenderness, and yet fear of the God of love who is also the God of justice swayed him. His soul glowed and quivered, but was speechless, like the wavering flame of the lamp.

Teresina suspected that her master had been thinking of his father's death. She said nothing

of this, however, to the Signorina, who was probably ignorant of those circumstances. She determined only to inform the doctor of what had happened and, for to-night at least, to spare Signor Marcello an interview with young Alberti, who had been his poor Andrea's dearest friend. Alberti was really coming to Velo to visit the curate of Sant' Ubaldo, but the priest, being unable to put him up, had begged the hospitality of the Montanina for his friend.

"And of course he must needs arrive on this particular evening!" grumbled Teresina.

Lelia thought she heard steps in the garden.

"It is surely he," said the maid. "The train whistled long ago."

Lelia started. "Don't call me!" she ordered, and ran out by the door to the servants' stairway, which she ascended very slowly, pausing at intervals to listen. In her own room she crossed to the window. There was no sound of steps, nor could she hear voices. Impatient with herself, she thought: "After all, what is it to me?" and turning from the window, she once more read the crumpled letter. She read it with knitted brow, from time to time raising her eyes—strange eyes of an indefinable colour—letting their stern glance follow some thought from the letter seemingly into space. Again her hand crushed the sheet, and she flung it on the floor.

At that moment the sound of distant voices floated through the open window. Lelia started and raised her head to listen. The voices came from lower down, from the foot of the garden by the entrance, close to the tiny church of Santa Maria ad Montes. Her light eyebrows contracted quickly once more, and her small, whimsical face assumed an indescribable expression of fierce pride. She rose, picked up the letter, and closed the window. What was this Alberti to her?

She was neither the daughter nor a relation of

Signor Marcello. She was a pure flower that had blossomed amidst foulness upon an evil stem. The only son of the house of Trento, poor Andrea, had loved her when she was still little more than a child, and had wished to make her his wife. When he died his parents, who had always strenuously opposed this marriage, had taken Lelia into their home, buying her, as it were, with gold, that this maiden who had been so dear to him might be preserved from the corruption of this world, and prompted also perhaps by a sense of affectionate remorse for the grief they had caused their beloved.

From her earliest girlhood Lelia had had no illusions about her parents, especially her mother, whom she judged with precocious insight that sprang from the early recognition of certain tendencies within herself, when the experiences of her own home seemed to tell her that life held no further secrets. These tendencies she despised and hated with all the strength of her proud spirit, as in her heart she despised her mother, her contempt at times breaking through her rigid self-imposed restraint. From the age of twelve to fifteen she went to the convent school of the Sacred Heart, where she was distinguished for her talents, her love of study, and her pronounced musical ability. At sixteen she became engaged to Andrea, who was then about eighteen, and was studying mathematics at Padua, her native town. Her parents, Signor Girolamo Camin and his wife Chiara, had appropriated the "da," denoting noble origin, and were known as *da Camin*. Signor Girolamo was a vulgar intriguer, who had more than once been declared incompetent, and also dabbled in politics.

Signora Chiara, who had seen much and not inglorious service in the ranks of gallantry, left her husband unceremoniously at about the time the student Andrea Trento was beginning to fall in love with her daughter. Although already middle-aged,

she settled in Milan in the company of an e'derly Austrian, who died almost immediately, and left her a comfortable fortune. She then gave herself up to a life of piety, and opened her house to priests, friars, and nuns, who were easily led to believe her a widow. Girolamo, on his part, employed a vulgar woman as his housekeeper, carefully concealing his weakness for her, but showing himself too tolerant of the airs of a mistress which the coarse creature was quick to assume.

Motives of gratitude and a girlish sense of vanity at being admired and desired, rather than love, had prompted Lelia to accept Andrea. He was too young for her, too light-hearted, too immature to understand the moral conflict that was stirring in the depths of her soul. Handsome, intelligent, and generous, Andrea Trento was humble of mind, underrating his own talents but quick to admire those of others.

Of all his friends Massimo Alberti of Milan was his favourite. The ties that bound them were rather those resulting from a long friendship between the two families than any that had sprung from their university life together. Massimo Alberti, who was several years older than Andrea, was at Padua finishing the medical course he had begun in Rome when Andrea entered the university. His friend's talents, his broad culture, and the sobriety of his mode of life filled Andrea with admiration. Lelia he also looked upon as vastly superior to himself, and often talked to her of Alberti, whom she had never seen. On one occasion he even told her, in a transport of love and humility, that Alberti was much more worthy than himself to become her husband. Lelia, who was far from meek, and whose habit it was to follow any assertion to its ultimate consequences, had reflected that such language was doubtless virtuous, but most unpleasant and inopportune. This was not her idea of love. On one

pretext and another she had always managed to avoid meeting her lover's friend.

Andrea's death grieved her so deeply that she formed an exaggerated estimate of her affection for him, confusing it with her compassion. When her father whiningly informed her that he had been asked to make a great sacrifice for her benefit, that Andrea's parents wished her to live with them as their daughter in memory of the son they had lost, and that, although his heart might bleed, he was prepared to accept a proposal so advantageous to her, she immediately guessed the nature of the bargain he was hiding from her, and flung out an indignant refusal in a transport of offended pride, vindicating, for the moment, her right to maintain the family honour, so ill defended by this despicable father of hers. But afterwards, since her rage against him was so great and her loathing of the filth he had dared to drag to the very hearthstone was so intense, she withdrew her refusal, her thoughts dwelling the while on the poor lad who was dead.

She accepted the Trentos' offer, but the act of entering their house as a thing paid for was a severe trial. She soon perceived that one of the conditions of the bargain was that her father should not enter the precincts of the Montanina, and this condition was a source of relief and yet of sorrow to her. Her attitude towards the Trentos was at first cold. She seemed to be trying to show them silently that she felt no gratitude; that she was aware they had desired her only as a sort of relic of their dead son; that, after all, they were the persons benefited, and that she had consented to become their benefactress only in memory of him, and not from motives of affection towards themselves. Under these conditions Signor Marcello's fiery temper made a rupture probable, and, after his first most affectionate welcome, many storms did indeed arise

between them. But Signora Trento's gentleness and Lelia's musical accomplishments combined to save the situation. The husband softened under the influence of his wife's gentle virtues and at sight of the suffering which soon brought her to the grave. Music did the rest. Signor Marcello, who was a fair pianist, found in music a mystic expression of his deepest grief, hope, vague memories, and regrets. He and Lelia both brought to the piano the same intense passion and the same tastes. Secret antagonism might indeed long dwell within the hearts of both, but their sympathy in music facilitated a mutual recognition—albeit measured and intermittent—of the beauty that lay in the nature of each, and a mutual tolerance, also measured and intermittent, of what in one was displeasing to the other.

Signora Trento's death brought about a crisis in their relations to each other. Little by little Lelia had allowed herself to be won over by the lady's gentle ways; and her care of the poor invalid had softened Signor Marcello's heart. His attitude towards Lelia grew day by day more tender and paternal; day by day he failed somewhat both in look and bearing and grew more indifferent to the things of this world, except music and, to a certain extent, flowers, becoming ever more absorbed in thoughts of the things of eternity; and thus at last the girl came to feel a filial reverence for him, and the feelings she had experienced on entering his house for the first time no longer ruled her. This recent loss of consciousness, which Signor Marcello had failed to realise, and Teresina's face, more than her words, stirred Lelia deeply, despite the fact that her mind was so full of the expected arrival of Massimo Alberti. Three years had passed since Andrea's death, and since his friend's funeral Alberti had not visited the Montanina; but he never allowed New Year's Day and certain other anniversaries to pass without sending some word of greeting to Signor

Marcello. The old man appreciated these attentions, and would often speak of them to Lelia, sometimes expressing regret that he had not again had the pleasure of meeting Alberti. Lelia always let the subject drop as soon as possible. Poor Andrea's unpleasant words had never faded from her memory; the tenacity of this recollection annoyed her, and she despised herself for dwelling upon it. Whenever Signor Marcello mentioned Alberti's name she invariably experienced a sense of persecution and irritation, for he rarely did so without adding some word of praise and of affection. This real sense of repulsion increased rather than diminished with time. She could not help associating it in her thoughts with a fading memory of Andrea and with other dim emotions of her soul—a nameless gloom, flashes of inexplicable gaiety, which she found it difficult to check, tears provoked by music, and a sense of brief but almost fearful intoxication imparted by the life of Nature, by flowering fields, and woods in the vigorous freshness of June. The meaning of these vague feelings did not entirely escape her. The idea that she was yearning towards love, that blind instincts inherited from her parents were dragging her towards it, was bound up with the dread that one passion might develop within her heart and take firm root there. Thus she explained to herself her aversion to Alberti's name and personality, and her clear analysis of her own mind only increased her irritation with herself. She felt that it was her duty never to love again, her duty towards Andrea's memory and towards Signor Marcello, which she had tacitly acknowledged by accepting the part of living relic of the dead; but, above all, she felt it was her duty towards herself, for she would never stoop to the life of most women, she to whom, in spite of dishonoured parents and tainted blood, destiny had offered the opportunity of a life of glorious purity. In such a state of mind the very act of considering

that lurking memory in which a germ of passion might be concealed sent the blood rushing to that particular nerve-cell, and something was indeed generated by the plastic power of the blood itself. Signor Marcello's delighted announcement that Massimo Alberti was to be a guest at the Montanina made her shudder, but a quick revulsion of feeling brought anger that was akin to remorse. Nevertheless, when she cried out, "What is this Alberti to me?" Lelia was conscious, alas! that she was insincere.

Before going to bed she kissed Andrea's likeness, which she wore in the medallion, and a little ring he had once given her as a peace-offering after a sharp quarrel. Then, having put out the light, she turned her face to the wall, drew the sheet over her head, and burst into tears.

II

As he wended his way upwards from the station of Arsiero to the Montanina, Massimo Alberti, who had arrived from Milan after a journey of nearly eight hours, amidst dust, smoke, and noise, in all the heat of burning June, thought he must be dreaming. The moonless sky was cloudy, folds of white mist lay around the brow of Priaforà and the cliffs of Summano, which point up into the sky like the teeth of a saw lying above softly wooded heights; the light mountain breeze was flinging wild odours across the uplands, and the many voices of small waters, falling into the hollows of the ravines, sounded in his ears; but nowhere was there a note of human life. The road gave out the scent of wet earth, which was pleasant after so much dust. Where it turns, entering a ravine, and revealing, higher up, a clump of chestnuts crescent-shaped below a black diadem, formed by the points of towering pines beyond, the peasant from Lago di Velo, Simone,

commonly called *Cioci*, who was going on ahead carrying Massimo's luggage, waited to inquire if the Signore were going to Velo, to Sant' Ubaldo, or to the Montanina.

"What do you mean?" Massimo exclaimed in amazement. "I am going to Don Aurelio's, at Sant' Ubaldo."

Whereupon his quick-witted guide, who at the station had contented himself with proffering Don Aurelio's excuses, saying he had remained at Velo to attend to a sick old man, now answered quietly:

"Because the priest has no room for you, you know."

Massimo was astonished. No room? Had his friend not written that there was a room ready for him? *Cioci* explained the case after his own fashion.

"It is because of *Carnesecca*, you see."

This explanation only added to Massimo's bewilderment. *Carnesecca*? What was *Carnesecca*?

"Because he has taken him into his house, you see."

Massimo gave up trying to understand. Then where was Don Aurelio sending him, as he could not have him himself? With some difficulty he drew from his guide the information that Don Aurelio had ordered him to take the stranger to the Montanina. Why, then, good heavens! had he not said so at once?

"I thought you would ask in time," said *Cioci*.

Massimo ordered him to lead on to the Montanina. He was annoyed, and he reflected that priests, even the best and dearest of them, are sometimes just a little wanting in tact. He had the greatest respect for Signor Marcello, but he was unwilling to grasp hospitality that had not been offered. He was annoyed also at the thought of meeting other guests at the Montanina, of not being able to enjoy that freedom and quiet for which he so longed, and which he had promised himself on leaving Milan. He was,

moreover, displeased at not having been informed of this change in time. He might easily have postponed his arrival. When they had gone another hundred yards honest Cioci stopped, and once more turned to address Massimo.

The priest had sent word that Signor Marcello was very grateful to him for going to his house.

At the last turn, where the road to the Montanina branches off from that leading to Velo, Cioci made a final pause and shot out a final message—the priest had said that if the gentleman had luggage in the van he was to tell the station-master, and they would send for it next morning with a cart.

Massimo could not suppress a smile. No, he had nothing in the van. This time Cioci laughed also.

"Cossa vóla, sior! What would you, sir! There were so many of them!"

To the Montanina, then. The annoyance Massimo had at first experienced gave way to other thoughts. His heart ached as he recalled his friend, who had died so young, who had been so good, so dear, so frank and full of spirits; who had told him with so much enthusiasm of Velo d'Astico and of the Montanina, of his faith in his mother's gentle kindness, which would soon lead her to consent, and would then obtain his father's consent as well, to the union for which he yearned. Andrea had also described to his friend the little apartments which would be the scene of his future bliss—three rooms and a terrace on the west side of the villa. And now, where were the joy and the sweetness of all those hopes? where was that fair head, that beautiful face sparkling with life and spirits, that warm and honest heart? Beneath the sod; while the woods, the hills, the voices of deep-flowing Posina and the murmurings of small and plaintive waters all went on as before. Here was the old chestnut-tree with its trunk split like a three-branched candelabrum; here, at the turn of the road, the strange little church loomed in dim whiteness;

and now, farther up, the villa showing palely, and the dark brow of great, pensive Priaforà.

A year before Andrea's death he and Massimo had talked together, beneath this chestnut-tree, of the Camin family, and of the necessity of keeping them all, even her father, away from Lelia after her marriage. Andrea was convinced of this necessity, and said that the girl wished it as much as he did. He had been enthusiastic in his praise of her high-mindedness and the precocious maturity of her intellect. At this point he had confessed that he had not been quite honest with his parents concerning Lelia's age. The girl was about sixteen, and he had said she was eighteen.

Instinctively Massimo paused and placed his hand upon the trunk of the chestnut, this surviving witness ; and he thought of the lad with God. It seemed to him that the tree, the modest little church, and the frowning mountain were sharing the thought with him.

"Are you tired, sir?" asked Cioci, who had also stopped. Massimo roused himself.

"No, no. Let us be getting on," said he ; and, to free himself from his sad thoughts, he began talking with Cioci of the priest. The people of Sant' Ubaldo must be well pleased with their priest.

"Ah, cossa vóla ! What would you !" Cioci exclaimed. The expression was a panegyric ; it was as if he had said : "How can I be expected to express the inexpressible?" And he added, "A great head, I tell you !"

As they were passing the little church of Santa Maria ad Montes a woman's voice called from above :

"Cioci! This way, Cioci!"

"Signora!" Cioci answered, pausing.

The Signora was Teresina, who soon appeared at the gate to the footpath beside the church. She admitted Cioci, and sent him on towards the house with his load, while she detained Alberti.

He remembered her as the maid who had bandaged a sprain he had managed to get coming down from Colletto Grande with Andrea. She was eager to tell him that her master, Signor Marcello, was delighted to be able to entertain him, but that his health was none too good, and that this meeting would surely move him deeply. She therefore took the liberty of begging Massimo to pretend he was greatly fatigued after his journey, and to withdraw early, so that the master might follow his example. This was the Signorina's wish as well.

The Signorina? Of course—Massimo had not thought of her. Signorina da Camin now lived at the Montanina. Massimo, accepting Andrea's word, as Andrea himself had accepted that of Signor Girolamo, had always called her thus instead of by her true name, Camin, and Lelia herself believed in her right to the "da." Massimo had seen her but once, and that in the street and at a distance. He had, however, seen two photographs of her, which his friend had shown him, and he distinctly recalled the two entirely different impressions they had conveyed. He remembered the dainty head of a girl of sixteen, with hair carefully dressed, somewhat irregular features, and smiling eyes that seemed to be gazing into the object-glass and inquiring, "Is that right?"

He remembered another dainty head with somewhat disordered hair, a head drooping slightly forward and looking down, so that the eyes were hidden. He had paid but little attention to the first, but the second had struck him. This face might have been that of a being conscious of deep guilt or of an unhappy fate; it might have been a face upon which love was gazing, and which was striving to conceal love; it might have been simply the face of a young girl lost in thought. Compared with the other it was the more youthful face of a deeper soul; it was the face of a child of fifteen

who, both morally and intellectually, was as mature as any woman of thirty. The very idea of having her photograph taken in that position pointed to something strange and strong in the mind of the poser. Massimo had been fascinated by the picture, but upon restoring it to his friend had refrained from confiding to him his doubt as to whether this tempting creature, with her air of a grieving and thoughtful sphinx, would fit his nature and be capable of forming his happiness. He remembered now that for many days the face of the girl-sphinx had haunted him with troubling insistence. As he followed Teresina, the image of the two small, fair heads, that were so distinct, once more flashed across his mind. In his thoughts the question which one of the two he would find was already forming itself, but he dismissed the thought as an unfitting one. Nor did Teresina succeed in distracting his thoughts by her account of how, since early morning, Signor Marcello had been eagerly looking forward to his arrival. He had invented an excuse for getting herself and the footman out of the way, yes, and the Signorina also (who, however, had seen through his stratagem), that no one might see him enter the room prepared for his guest. First he had gone into the garden and gathered some roses with his own hands. These he had taken to the room in all secrecy. Not that he expected his action would remain unobserved, for, of course, the servants would have to go into the room before the guest's arrival to put fresh water at the last moment and to see if everything was in order. It was that he did not wish to be under observation whilst going in and while he remained there, probably because he felt that he would be exposing his inmost emotions to a witness, and this was a thing he abhorred.

Before reaching the villa Teresina and Massimo met Cioci, who, freed from his burden, and desiring, for no very unperceivable reason, to pay his respects

to the stranger, had chosen this far less easy way to Lago, instead of going straight there through the upper part of the garden.

"Well, sir, good-night to you," he said, taking off his cap.

Having received what he was waiting for and having thanked the generous traveller, he told Teresina that her master was close behind him on his way down.

"There!" cried the woman, "it is just as I thought!"

They met Signor Marcello near the level space on which the villa stands. It was dark, and he was advancing with stooping shoulders and unsteady tread. Massimo hurried upwards to join him, and was immediately clasped in a close and silent embrace. He began at once to offer his excuses for thus intruding, laying the blame at Don Aurelio's door, the old man repeating the while, in a voice that betrayed his feelings:

"You do not know, you do not know what a joy it is to me to see you, to embrace you once more!" And again he strained Alberti to his breast.

They crossed the level space, and passing through the dining-room, entered the salon, Signor Marcello leaning upon Massimo's arm. He expressed the wish that his guest should be conducted to his room without delay, saying they would have a talk together afterwards. Massimo would have preferred to remain with him at present for a little time, so that Signor Marcello might soon be free to go to bed. But Signor Marcello would not hear of this, and Teresina, who knew well how many childish whims her old master's heart contained, divined how anxious and impatient he was that his guest should see how he had prepared his room. She therefore added a gentle invitation to her master's, thus conveying to Massimo that it would be wiser to yield.

As he was leaving the room Signor Marcello remarked that he would wait for him there, and that they would have coffee together.

Teresina accompanied the visitor to the very apartment in which, in his dreams of the future, poor Andrea had pictured himself with Lelia. She ushered him into the small room that opened upon the west terrace. The light revealed to her all her master's preparations, and she exclaimed softly:

"Poor, poor Signor Marcello!" Then, amidst many excuses, she advised Massimo to let his host understand that he had observed everything, without speaking openly of all the arrangements. Thereupon she withdrew.

On the marble top of the chest of drawers a beautiful white rose bent its head from a tall crystal cup, above a photograph of Andrea. Upon the bedside table rested a handsomely-bound copy of the "Imitation of Christ," and a small packet of letters tied together with a black ribbon. This packet Massimo opened, not without curiosity. They were his own letters to Andrea. He then proceeded to examine the "Imitation," expecting that this also was a souvenir, and found written within its cover the words:

"To dear Andrea, on the day of his first Communion. Rachele Alberti Vittuoni."

It was his mother's name, and she, too, had long been dead. He pressed his lips to the writing. Through the open window the deep voice of Posina and the soft murmur of the Riderella, that hurries through the garden close by the villa, alone broke the silence. Amidst the hush and the repose of Nature, in the majesty of the night, the small room with its many memories seemed a sanctuary. Still praying silently, he put out the light and left the room. Teresina was waiting for him in the corridor. The master, she said, seemed somewhat excited, and she was anxious that he should retire early. As a matter of fact he had complained of Lelia's absence,

and was upset at her having withdrawn, but this the maid refrained from mentioning.

Massimo did not find Signor Marcello in the drawing-room, but in the garden, where he was seated upon one of the benches on the west side of the villa, having preferred that their talk should take place there in the dark. Alberti would have kissed the old man's hand, but this Signor Marcello would not allow, and making Alberti sit beside him, he put his arm around his shoulder.

They sat silent for some time in the chill breath of black, overhanging Priaforà, Signor Marcello staring into the shadows with unseeing eyes, while Massimo listened to the voices of Posina and of the Riderella, which led him back to the chamber of memories, and watched almost unconsciously the lights of Arsiero, scattered like a swarm of fireflies amidst the gloom, lower down on the right, beyond the Valley of Posina, in the hollow below the heights of San Rocco and the sky-piercing peaks of Caviogio. Presently Massimo referred to the lateness of the hour, but Signor Marcello drew the young man towards him with an impetuous movement.

"No, no!" he cried, and began to question Massimo eagerly concerning himself and Don Aurelio. Massimo had to tell him, in as few words as possible, how, when a medical student in Rome, he had met the present priest of Lago; how Don Aurelio and he had had a mutual friend, a man of whom much had been said, both in praise and in condemnation—a species of lay apostle. Massimo was sure Don Aurelio must have spoken of him, and was greatly astonished to find that the name of Piero Maironi, as well as that of Benedetto, was quite unknown to Signor Marcello. Feeling that this was not the moment for enlarging upon a subject that would have led to lengthy discussion, Massimo contented himself with stating that Don Aurelio, having no fixed occupation in Rome, had, through the kind

offices of a member of the clergy, been received by the Bishop of Vicenza into his diocese and appointed to the cure of Lago di Velo. He pronounced him a godly man, devoted to his ministry, full of charity and Divine love, and averse to religious strife. Signor Marcello seconded this praise in a voice hoarse with emotion, and the deep sighs accompanying his words told clearly that it was an emotion of longing that the Church might be blessed with many such priests as Don Aurelio.

Teresina's voice reached them out of the darkness.

"Master, I am sure Signor Alberti must be tired."

"Let us alone!" said Signor Marcello, but quietly enough. "I know quite well what you want. I am not tiring myself!"

"Gésu!" sighed the poor woman anxiously under her breath, but she did not venture to insist.

Massimo had now to tell of himself, of his reluctance to practise his profession, although his studies and time of probation were over; and he talked of the things that had distracted him from it. Once more he took for granted that Don Aurelio had spoken of this, that Signor Marcello knew about his lectures, his writings of a theo-philosophical character, and the sharp opposition and disapproval from different sources that these had brought, about his weariness of soul and the longing for peace that had brought him to the mountain solitudes of Velo d'Astico.

But Signor Marcello knew nothing of all this, and showed himself deeply affected by the account of it. Once more he drew the young man's head towards his shoulder.

"Yes, yes," said he, "stay here and let philosophy alone. Those little lights shining down there amidst the gloom are like philosophy. Who goes about at night with a light no longer sees the stars. Ah, the stars, the stars!"

Massimo pointed out, with a smile, that, light

or no light, there were no stars to be seen on this particular night.

"Ah, but I see them!" his companion exclaimed fervently. "Only this very evening I saw a precious message written among them for me! I saw it there—just there!"

He pointed to the grey clouds above black Torraro. During their entire conversation this remark and the gesture that accompanied it were the only signs of a slight mental agitation which Massimo noted in the old man. But, taking them together with what the maid had said, they were sufficient to alarm him. Rising resolutely, he declared he was very tired, and asked permission to retire.

"But we have not had our coffee," said Signor Marcello.

Massimo said he was not in the habit of taking coffee in the evening. The old man begged him at least to bear him company while he took his own, and Massimo was casting about for a mode of escape, fearing to be drawn again into lengthy conversation, when Teresina, who was keeping guard in the verandah of the villa in the near vicinity of the benches, came forward, telling her master she had taken his coffee to his bedroom. Before his astonishment would allow him to protest she was on her way to the kitchen to turn her untruth into a sort of prophecy. And thus, at last, she carried her point. Massimo went up the double stairway of wood leading from the drawing-room to the floor above, while Signor Marcello retired to his bedroom on the ground floor, which adjoined the study and looked out on the near slopes of Priaforà.

III

The house had been dark for some time and most of its inmates were asleep when Signor Marcello

left his room, a tall, stooping figure, the Florentine lamp swinging from his left hand, while with the other he held a closed portfolio against his breast. He passed slowly through study and billiard-room, and entering the salon, placed the lamp above the piano that stood crosswise, almost directly beneath one branch of the stairway, the light suddenly bringing out of the shadows his deeply-lined face, now radiant with tenderness and love. Placing the portfolio on the music-rest, he opened it with great deliberation, and with trembling hands drew from it a portrait of his son and gazed long at it. His lips were trembling also, and his eyes were full of tears. The little brass lamp, so much dearer to him than those rich ones hanging from the ceiling, seemed to shed a happy light upon the lad's handsome face, mysteriously alive with new and tender meaning. The father pressed a long kiss upon the boy's forehead; then very slowly and very reverently placing it upon the rest once more, he dropped his large, thin hands upon the keyboard and began to play, with face upturned and closed eyes.

He was not an accomplished pianist, but his soul understood music. His deep religious faith, his affections, his keen sense of beauty led him naturally towards musical expression. He revered Beethoven no less than Dante and hardly less than St. John the Apostle; Haydn, Mozart, and Bach were to him no less than Giambellino and Mark, Matthew, and Luke; and, as he read the Gospels, so he daily studied some one of the four evangelists of music. Often the evening hour of memories and fancies would find him at the piano rapt in ecstasy, touching pathetic chords, absorbed in the effort to express in music his own innermost feelings, oblivious to things of the present and to the passage of time. With upturned face and closed eyes he was now touching the keyboard tentatively with those long, thin hands of his, as a blind

man feels the air. He was searching for that last song by Pergolese :

“Quando corpus morietur
Fac ut inire donetur
Paradis gloria.”

He sought it in vain, and strove eagerly for a like harmony of increasing depth and solemnity that should tell of the slow dissolution of mortality, of the end of tired day, then of uprising tones pressing close upon each other, breathless and frenzied, towards visions of delight. At this point he ceased to follow Pergolese and poured into his music a full and enraptured idea of the words “Paradisi gloria,” tears coursing down his cheeks the while. He was meeting Andrea, his dear one, in another world of infinite love, of all light, and, perhaps, all music, and his earthly music trembled with desire for its Divine ideal. Presently other memories pressed upon him—memories of his sins, of his human frailties, starting up together out of the dark places in memory, quick with fearful life, like innumerable, forgotten foes, rushing out of ambush, each shouting his evil name. The glories of Paradise and of his communion with the beloved dead, despite his strong faith in God and his firmly-rooted conviction of approaching death, were devoid of distinct form, luminous, obscured by the mists of their own brilliance. It was easy for him to speak and think of them in music. But it was not so with the biting memories of sin. His wrists bent weakly, his hands hung motionless from the keyboard, his head fell forward on his breast.

It was but for a brief instant, however. His humility, a stranger to that bitterness of pride upon a moral fall, naturally moved him to look for Divine mercy. He raised his head once more and his hands, and poured his soul into the music of a *Miserere*, passionate indeed, but full also of the sense of

generous absolution ; a prayer abounding in gratefulness and delight, almost as if the penitent rejoiced that his heavenly Father should be more loving and forgiving towards him than any human father. His hands were moving in a melody of grief and love, born from some subconscious memory of Bellini :

"Vieni, dicea, concedi
Ch'io mi ti prostri ai piedi."

Surely in all his life Marcello had never made his piano speak so wonderfully. He realised this and took momentary pleasure in it, and with his emotion there mingled a feeling of tenderness for the old, worn-out instrument itself, despised by Lelia and fast nearing its end.

He played on, with never a thought that others might be listening. Teresina, who, for that night, had wisely prepared a bed for herself in a room on the ground-floor, heard the piano, and hastening to find out what was happening, caught sight of her master. Bewildered and frightened, she hurried upstairs to tell Lelia, who occupied an east room on the first floor, and to consult her. Was the master in his right mind, or was this the beginning of some mental disorder? Would it not be wise to descend and persuade him to go to bed? And should she do this—or the Signorina? She helped Lelia to dress quickly, murmuring under her breath the while, "Gésu, Gésu!" Lelia was silent, determined first to see and hear for herself. The two women went on tiptoe into the gallery to the head of the stairway, from whence there was a view of the drawing-room, through the stair opening, and also between the short wooden columns on either side. But not even by peering between the columns could the piano be seen. Signor Marcello being slightly deaf, the two women ventured to descend the right arm of the stairway far enough to enable

them to see the musician's back, dimly lit by the lamp that stood upon the piano. Those stooping shoulders and massive head, swaying with the rhythm of the music, seemed instinct with passion.

"Gésu, Signorina!" the maid whispered, "I *must* go down."

Lelia grasped her arm and frowned. Teresina, looking at her in astonishment, saw her place her finger upon her lips. She could not know that Lelia, who was an exquisite musician, recognised in those notes the outpourings of a mind, not indeed confused by delirium, but rapt in ecstasy. She was aware only that she must not move.

A few solemn chords ended Marcello's improvisation, that mystic prelude to the future. He closed the portfolio, and, crossing his arms, pressed his forehead against it.

"Gésu, Signore!" the servant exclaimed, starting forward, but again Lelia held her back, and whispering, "I will go," descended the stairs.

She went down slowly, careless of the creaking wooden steps, her hand resting upon the banister, her eyes fixed upon Marcello. She was not troubled concerning him, seeing in his attitude merely the effect of an emotion which, but now, had vibrated in his music, and due evidently to the meeting with poor Andrea's friend. She was going down simply in order to persuade him to retire, without alarming him, as Teresina might have done. She had descended barely halfway when Marcello heard her, and raising his head, demanded sharply:

"Who is there?"

"I, Papa," said she, and hastening forward, was beside him in an instant.

"You here? Not in bed yet?"

Marcello seemed both pleased and astonished.

Lelia smiled.

"Not in bed yet, as you see!" she answered, adding with a quaint little accent she had picked

up at school from a Roman girl, and which she sometimes used: "You keep us all awake!"

Suddenly she remembered that on first coming to live with the Trentos she had one day happened to say the same words to Signor Marcello with the same accent, to express a necessity to which one must perforce submit. Signor Marcello had been amused at first, but she had thoughtlessly told him that poor Andrea had also delighted in that quaint inflection, whereupon he had become silent and depressed. And now, hardly had she uttered the words, "You keep us all awake!" before the memory of that unhappy silence overcame her, and, thinking that his face showed that he also remembered, she dropped her eyes in intense confusion. Marcello gazed tenderly upon her, raised his hands to the keyboard, his eyes still watching her, and struck the first notes of a melody by Schumann that poor Andrea had often hummed and which Lelia sometimes played to the old man in the dark, never speaking of it either beforehand or afterwards:

"O lass im Traume mich sterben,
Gewieget an seiner Brust. . . ."

Lelia trembled. It seemed to her that Signor Marcello was saying in those sweet notes: "Do not fear to speak to me of him." He turned his eyes away from her and glanced upwards as if seeking the notes in his memory, his hands following with sudden passion the melody:

"Den seligen Tod mich schlürfen
In Thränen unendlicher Lust. . . ."

She grew alarmed, and resting her hand on his shoulder, murmured very softly:

"Enough, Papa! You are exciting yourself. It is late and you had really better go to bed."

Marcello stopped playing, took the hand she was withdrawing from his shoulder, and held it affectionately between his own cold ones.

"I am all right, Leila," he said. "I am perfectly well."

During the last two months of his life, after a slight quarrel, Andrea had taken to calling her "Leila." For Marcello, who had heard of this from his wife, to address her as "Leila" was almost like saying "Andrea," almost like pronouncing that name he could not utter without suffering, that name he was always repeating in his heart, but which his lips formed only in the secrecy of his own room.

"Leila, yes, Leila!" he repeated, smiling at her bewilderment, for she was asking herself what could be taking place within that mind whose hitherto most jealously guarded depths were being revealed.

"Yes, Papa. But please do not tire yourself any more. Go to bed and rest."

She could find no fitting words with which to persuade him. She was anxious not to appear indifferent to his tenderness or startled by his unusual language; and she felt a strange desire to press close to Andrea's father in spirit for protection and refuge.

He rose from the piano, but neither took up the lamp nor prepared to withdraw. Knitting his brows, as was his wont when about to introduce some serious subject, he invited Lelia to follow him on to the small terrace beyond the drawing-room. Lelia, who had not the courage to refuse, obeyed in great agitation. Surely Signor Marcello was going to talk of poor Andrea. And Teresina was still watching up there, and might appear upon the scene at the wrong moment! Although she had little hope of its being seen, Lelia flung a rapid gesture in the maid's direction that said she should go. Then she hastened forward to join Marcello, who was leaning against the railing of the terrace.

"It is raining," she said, making a last attempt to escape.

Mist enveloped the rocky peaks of Barco and of Caviogio, and a moist breeze blew from Val di Posina, but it was not raining.

"No," said Marcello. "Come out."

As she had come to him, drawn almost providentially by his music, he felt bound to take this opportunity of speaking, but it was difficult to begin.

"If ever you should wish to do away with those artificial rocks that you dislike so much, down there by the bridge and along the banks of the Riderella," he said at last, "you need not hesitate to do so. I might have had them removed myself, but since . . . I have let everything go."

Even the little word "since," that stood for so much misfortune and so many years of bitterness, was uttered calmly.

Lelia grasped the true intent of his remark, and a shudder ran through her as she exclaimed:

"I?"

She refrained from adding anything more in order not to provoke words that she did not wish to hear. The conviction that Signor Marcello intended to make her his heir had long been fixed in her mind like a poisonous thorn. She knew that this was generally believed, as Signor Marcello was known to have no near relations, and she was looked upon as his daughter by adoption, although no legal action had taken place, nor was any such possible. But she was determined not to touch the Trento fortune, which, although not large, reached, nevertheless, a very comfortable figure. Her father had sold her indeed, but she would not sell herself. Having given herself to Andrea's parents, in memory of him, she would gladly accept gratitude from them, but no other recompense. Was it not possible that Signor Marcello did possess a distant relative? If not, he was extremely charitable, and he might leave

his money to the poor. The bare idea of being looked upon as a schemer, an adventuress, filled her with horror. But she had a second reason for dreading this heritage. What a disgusting struggle with her father would follow upon the rejection of such an inheritance! He was always pleading poverty and writing her shameless letters demanding money. She had received such a letter this very evening. She could see him already descending upon the Montanina in the event of the old man's death, fastening upon it and tainting it with his presence. She had faith in her own energy and did not fear her father, but she loathed him.

All this she was feeling and thinking as she uttered the one word "I?" Marcello took her hand and pressed it, hoping that his touch might speak for him.

"Yes, dear," he said calmly, "you."

A whisper, a scarcely perceptible breath brought the answer:

"No, Papa!"

Marcello smiled, mistaking the motive of her words.

"I am old," he said, "and not, I think, very strong. I may live many years yet, but, on the other hand, the Lord may call me very soon. Do you really think I shall be sorry to go?"

For answer Lelia stooped and kissed the hand that still held hers.

"Well, then," Marcello went on, "it is right that we should discuss certain matters. The Montanina was dear to him, and, indeed, I did much to make it so! I hope it will be dear to you also. I wanted to tell you about those rocks, and I also wanted to say that, should the occasion offer to purchase those chestnuts over beyond the road, you must be sure to do so. You will have ample means."

A passionate sound like a suppressed groan interrupted him.

"No, Papa! No, no, Papa! Do not talk of these things!"

Marcello remained in astonished silence, and she felt impelled to explain herself.

"Do not think of me as your heir. I cannot, indeed I cannot be your heir!"

He was offended, and began to be excited.

"And why not?" he asked sharply.

"No, dear Papa! I cannot, I cannot! Do not let us talk of these things! Please go to bed and rest!"

"But why not?" Marcello insisted. "Tell me."

Lelia took his arm, imploring him not to say anything more—at least, not that night.

"But you must explain!" he cried, his haggard face growing ever more angry.

At this point Teresina, who was still watching, hearing her master raise his voice, turned on the light in the gallery where she stood, and called to Lelia, saying she had sought her in vain in her own room. She wanted certain keys for to-morrow morning, to get out something for the guest's breakfast. Timidly Lelia murmured: "Papa . . . good-night . . ." as if entreating him to allow her to go. Signor Marcello did not speak, but, turning slowly indoors with bent shoulders, he took the lamp from the piano and left her without a word of good-night.

He closed the door of his room behind him, and undressed himself slowly, full of discontent, like one who, weary and already half asleep, turns towards his couch only to find it so disordered that he must spend time and strength in smoothing it. His haggard expression told of harsh and angry thoughts. He believed he knew the reason of Lelia's repulse. She did not wish to become his heir because she did not feel strong enough to keep her parents at a distance, and she realised that their presence at the Montanina would be a mortal insult to his memory. The thought of those two was sufficiently embittering.

For a moment fancy showed them to him, triumphant, playing the masters in his house. Ah, no, that should never be! If that hot-headed girl had only listened a while! He had intended to bring the conversation precisely to that point. He had racked his brain to find a means of preventing his heir's parents from setting foot in the Montanina. A clause to be inserted in his will suggested itself, but he knew Lelia would never accept a condition thus publicly imposed, and, too, one enforced by a penalty. She would simply refuse the inheritance. The only way would be to talk the matter over with her beforehand, and obtain some promise from her. It was a difficult question to handle, but precisely the one he had intended to introduce. He must resume the conversation on the morrow. It was the only way.

When he was in bed he clasped his hands behind his neck, rested his head against the head-board, and reflected. Supposing Lelia had made up her mind to marry, and was refusing on this account? It was a contingency he had foreseen, and one he and his dead wife had discussed.

His wife, who was a woman of practical views, was convinced that this attractive and clever girl would be much sought after, and that, sooner or later, she would marry. She thought that Marcello should content himself with assigning her an annuity, which she might enjoy until her marriage. Marcello, however, was not satisfied with this arrangement. The poet in him delighted in the ideal of a sacrifice which he should seem to share with his son, whose soul, freed from all earthly fetters, still loved, but with an affection that was purged of all egotism, desiring only and rejoicing in the happiness of his beloved. He wished Lelia to possess the wealth poor Andrea had offered her. It was, indeed, sweet to him to think of her as remaining faithful to Andrea, but he desired that though she might yield to a second passion, she should still have reason to bless her

Lelia.

first love. He wished for her happiness, and in appointing her his heir he did so unconditionally. Would it be best for him to speak openly to her now, and let her know how he felt?

He sighed deeply at the thought that, should he die that night, his home would fall into the hands of Girolamo Camin, or, in the event of Lelia refusing the heritage, into those of a young and distant cousin of his, who had led a gambling and a dissolute life. The thought that his wife's rooms and Andrea's might one day harbour such inmates stabbed him to the heart. As he lay thinking, this same sense of gnawing anxiety convinced him that he was more strongly attached to life and earthly things than a few hours before he would have believed possible. He reproached himself for this, and fell to thinking of the words his grandfather, who had built the Montanina, had inscribed upon the sun-dial: *Terrestres horæ, fugiens umbra*. He resolved to go to confession at Lago di Velo on the morrow, and taking up his cherished à Kempis which lay always upon his bedside table, he read the fifty-second chapter of the third book, with feelings of deep repentance. Upon raising the snuffers that hung by a small chain from one arm of the lamp, he remembered that his father had been overtaken by death before putting out the light, and without knowing why, he remained for a moment with his hand raised. Presently he smiled, put out the lamp, and by the dim light that fell through the broad window gazed for a time upon the neighbouring mountain, so sublimely untroubled and reposeful. Then he fell asleep like a little child, his arms folded upon his breast.

IV

Upon reaching his room Massimo proceeded to unpack his portmanteaux, although, in his disappoint-

ment at not being Don Aurelio's guest, he had at first determined to take out only what was necessary for the night. He already regretted his impulse of selfish discontent, so deeply had he been moved by Signor Marcello's marked affection, present even here in this little room that had been dear to Andrea; in the pathetic souvenirs, in the white rose arranged so that its dying beauty should overhang that other blossom of bygone days, so soon cut off. Having put out the light, he went to the window, and resting his elbows upon its broad sill, gazed upon those clouds amongst which Signor Marcello had seen a message writ in stars. Beneath those clouds the delicately arched brow of Torraro divided the space that yawned between Priaforà and Caviogio, whose black and mighty outlines swept downwards majestically, like the flowing robes of giant monarchs. His thirsting soul found comfort in the brooding peace of the scene.

It was an immense relief to have escaped from Milan for a few weeks, to have left behind him the foulness and the cowardice of the free-thinking crowd who cried shame upon him for a weakling, because he professed the loyalty of a soldier to the Church, and of the Pharisaic masses who cried shame upon him for a heretic, because he thought, spoke, and wrote like a man of his times! It was an immense relief to have shaken off that idle society, ever claiming his reluctant participation in its eternal comedy; which made him feel, now by a smile, now by sarcastic praise, now by neglect, its contempt for a young man who turned his back upon those pleasures it discreetly offered him, pleasures which it cherished and shielded as its one purpose in life, a purpose indeed not always avowable. Oh to forget, if only for a few days, those weary and inglorious mental struggles, so often sustained in the tragic endeavour to hide the eclipse of hope, and also, not infrequently, of faith itself! Once more there came the strong,

persistent temptation to withdraw from the field of religious action which he had entered with that Master who had died in Rome; whereon he and others had pressed still farther than the Master, gaining nought but wounds, disappointments, and humiliations in the service of a cause possibly lost from the outset, and of a religion that was perhaps fated to perish. Might he not relinquish the struggle, and live for all the beauty there is in the world, for the subtle and harmonious delights of intellectual activity?

Such thoughts as these were rather the outpouring of pent-up bitterness than real temptation. The attitude Massimo had publicly assumed towards certain theo-philosophical questions, through essays in reviews, lectures, and controversial articles, had secured him a moral position which, while it upheld and dignified him, proved itself at certain times, nevertheless, a veritable prison-house. He realised this, and reflecting on it, was seeking interruption of his thoughts, raising himself from the window-sill, when he heard voices in the road that leads downwards following the wire fence encircling the grounds of the Montanina. He thought he distinguished Don Aurelio's voice and that of a woman speaking to a third person in the grounds. They seemed to be giving him some orders. Presently, indeed, a figure appeared upon the bridge over the Riderella, and, in the dim starlight that was beginning to pierce the clouds, Massimo thought he saw two other figures, one black, the other white, beyond the bridge. The first figure left the bridge, then stopped, seeming perplexed, gazed at the villa, walked around it, paused for an instant on the side where the kitchen is, reappeared, and finally went towards the bridge again, where Massimo heard him telling the others that the household were asleep. Thereupon the two withdrew in the direction of the gate. Presently Massimo thought he distinguished

the white figure standing with the individual who had made the tour of the villa, in the road between the group of birches beside the gate and the clump of poplars further down.

Don Aurelio, if indeed it were he, must have gone on towards Lago. The young man concluded that the woman must be a certain Signora Vayla di Brea, of whom Don Aurelio had spoken in his letters as a lady remarkable both for her talents and for her noble qualities. And then once more all was silence.

Presently from within the villa came the sound of a piano. Massimo cautiously opened the door and listened. Yes, it was a piano, and a very poor instrument too. Who could be playing? Certainly not Signor Marcello, for he had gone to bed. Then he remembered that Andrea had often spoken admiringly of Lelia's talent as a pianist. At one moment he thought he recognised the pathetic and passionate composition, but presently he lost the thread of the melody. At first it was Pergolese's "Stabat Mater," and then suddenly it turned to something else. Very softly he stepped into the corridor that he might hear better. The music came from below, from the left, surely from the drawing-room where he had noticed a piano. What strange playing, what strength of expression in the touch, what passion, and what disorder!

Doubtless the performer was improvising. What a fiery soul she must possess, this Lelia, if indeed she were the musician! Once more that small, enigmatical head, with its disordered hair and down-cast eyes, pictured itself in Massimo's mind. This music did not speak of a grief-encompassed soul, of a soul expecting more from life. It spoke of sorrow indeed, but of a thirst for love and joy as well. The music paused; there were steps and whispering near at hand, and he retreated to the door of his room. Again the music sounded. Now

it was the sweet and solemn notes of grief and supplication, and then passion once more, tender, ardent passion. Ah, "Norma"!

"Vieni, dicea, concedi
Ch'io mi ti prostri ai piedi . . ."

This music seemed a confession! What followed was no longer "Norma," but a fancy of the player's. But why had she chosen the dead of night for this musical outpouring? He recalled the lovely, sphinx-like face and the eyelids lowered like veils covering a mystery. But was Lelia really the player? On one hand it seemed too strange an action for her, on the other the quality of the music and the hour were in keeping with the strangeness of the small face. And if it were not Lelia, who could it be? Perhaps some companion of hers of whose existence Massimo was ignorant, or a fellow-guest he had not seen. Ah! but it must be she—a creature painfully eager to love and be loved, who, perhaps, loved already.

The music came to an end and he withdrew to his room, closing the door behind him and returning to the window, where he remained standing, picturing almost mechanically a love that was aflame and oblivious to the world, amidst these silent hills, whereon passions might be enthroned, confronting and challenging one another. He shook himself, sighed deeply, and closed the window, reproaching himself for all these vain fancies. For some time he studied Andrea's photograph. The poor lad's handsome face wore a bright and happy expression, like a ray of sunshine. How dearly he had loved him! Without knowing why he felt a painful longing to clasp his hands and bow his head before that placid brow. Upon going to bed he fancied that the music he had heard would prevent his sleeping, but he fell asleep almost immediately. It was Lelia who lay all night with staring eyes.

CHAPTER II

DISTAFFS AND THREADS

I

THE next morning Massimo came down to the drawing-room at half-past six, to the dismay of the footman Giovanni, who left the floor-polishing in which he had been engaged amidst great disorder of furniture, and rushed off for the coffee.

Gentle breezes blew fresh from all sides through the large, open windows, through which could be seen, on the south, the emerald of chestnut-crowned slopes, on the north, the bare and mighty crags of Barco, and on the west, the deep declivities of the garden beneath the Lago road. There could be seen, too, the tremulous glistening of the clumps of birch and poplar that border the garden fence, the Posina ravine, and beyond the little town of Arsiero, whose houses cluster amid the green at the foot of the church which seems to guard them, the gloomy depths of the sharp-cut gorge, and then mountain upon mountain rising under changing lights and shadows towards imperial Torrarò.

"Buona mattina," said the footman, returning with the coffee.

Massimo meanwhile had been paying more attention to the music that littered the piano than to the vision of hills and valleys, sunshine and verdure. A thick volume of Clementi and a thin one of Corelli bore the name "Lelia," written in a large hand.

While he was drinking his coffee he learned from the footman that Signor Marcello had gone out some time before, but whether he was in the garden or had gone to church, whether he had taken the Velo road or that to Arsiero, Giovanni could not say. Massimo went out also, intending to look up Don Aurelio. The caretaker opened the gate for him, and Massimo was questioning him as to the road to Lago, when he saw the man look beyond him and salute some one who was passing, with marked respect. He turned round. A woman stood behind him, no longer young, but tall and slim; her head was bare, and in her hand she carried a closed sunshade, although the sun was already hot upon the rocky path. To the young man's intense surprise, she stood still and smiled.

"Signor Alberti, I believe?" she said.

The soft voice struck Massimo as being the same he had heard in the night, alternating with Don Aurelio's. He bowed with some embarrassment, looking at the lady as if apologising for failing to recognise her. Before him stood a noble figure, that of a woman between fifty and fifty-five years of age, pale, with a suggestion of olive in her pallor, her face showing traces of bodily suffering, her hair quite white, her large and luminous eyes still youthful, and her manner, voice, and slow utterance conveying an expression of sweetness and of the dignity of gentle breeding.

"I am a friend of Don Aurelio's," she said, still smiling. "We passed this way last night, hoping to see you, but you were already asleep."

Massimo confessed that from his window he had seen a dark figure and a white one.

"Yes, I was wearing a white shawl," she answered. "Are you on your way to Don Aurelio's? I am going there too."

Massimo bowed, and questioned with his eyes rather than with his lips:

"Then you are Signora——?"

"Vayla di Brea," was her answer, with a pleasant smile. "Has Don Aurelio been writing to you about me? And was my name quite unfamiliar to you?"

Massimo was obliged humbly to admit that it had been.

"You see," she went on, "I have rather a grandmotherly feeling towards you! Was not your mother a Vittuoni, and was not her name Rachele? I was at Madame Bianchi Morand's school with her, in Milan. Your mother was one of the little girls when I was one of the elder ones. I was very fond of her and used to amuse myself sometimes by playing at being her mother."

They started together along the narrow road that, just beyond the gate, enters the cool shade of great chestnuts that fringe the crest of the sharp slope to the ravine, whence rises the deep, rhythmical booming of the whirlpools of Perale.

His companion spoke at once of Don Aurelio's great disappointment at being unable to receive Massimo as his guest nor even to meet him at the station. She told him that two days before the priest had taken in a sick man, a wretched pedlar of Protestant Bibles, who had fallen a victim to the people's fury at Posina, and to whom no one else would offer shelter.

"Poor creature!" the lady exclaimed. "He is an oddity, an oddity indeed!" And she gave a short laugh, which she quickly checked, however, pity overcoming her sense of the comic and her desire to indulge it.

"He is a certain Pestagran, but about here they have taken to calling him 'Carnesecca,' because in his sermons, which are always poetical, he often introduces Carnesecchi. But he gets even with them. He used to call his fellow-citizens of Lago fishes, sprats, eels, pike, and sometimes crabs. Now he calls them all sharks!"

She talked on pleasantly of the despised Carnesecca, with a gentle humour that amused Massimo, and without revealing to him that she was an attentive visitor to the sick man. Their conversation was interrupted three times; first at the end of the chestnut-grove, then in that green, flowery spot, shaded by nut and apple trees, where the women of Lago have their washhouse, amid idyllic surroundings. First a poor old woman, then a lame beggar, stopped the Signorina and poured their woes into her ears. Then she herself stopped a small, bare-footed, and dirty maiden, carrying a basket. To each she spoke gently and kindly by name, inquiring for some invalid or absent relation. For the girl she had a word of reproof—a little bird having told her certain things! When she had gently dismissed these poor people she fell once more to describing Carnesecca and his partly comic, partly heroic ways, punctuating her description with the often-repeated word "Poveretto!" as a salve to a conscience that was reproaching her for her slightly uncharitable mirth.

Passing the first cottages and low sheds of Lago, guarded by walnut-trees and grape-vines throwing their cool shade across narrow, sweet-smelling lanes, Massimo and his companion reached the small square, where a few neat houses listen respectfully to the sermon on cleanliness that the fountain preaches to them, who do not need it, while the rabble of filthy hovels keeps at a distance, as the human rabble avoids the priest's sermons. If a peasant woman who was drawing water were to be believed, Carnesecca had died in the night. A man in his shirt-sleeves, with wooden shoes, who was clattering off to his work, his scythe upon his shoulder, burst out contemptuously as he passed, without deigning to look in the woman's direction:

"What does a foresta like you know about it?"

The woman protested loudly, not because the

information of a *foresta* might, nevertheless, be correct, but because she happened to be a native of Maso, a group of houses not more than a quarter of a mile away. The sound of the man's heavy tread grew fainter, down among the dirty cottages, but his insolent voice could still be heard repeating :

"A foresta ! Foresta ! Foresta !"

Then a girl, who was watering some carnations, leaned out of the window, and greeting the Signora, told her that she had carried the milk to Don Aurelio's house an hour ago, and that Carnesecca was feeling much better. The other woman excused her mistake by stating that she had hoped the horrid creature might really be dead ! And when the Signora reproached her for her cruel thought, she turned the tables upon her, saying :

"You cannot understand, Ela ! You are a foresta ! And the priest too. . . . It seems to me that, though he is indeed a holy man——"

"He is, nevertheless, a foreigner," said the Signora, and, turning to Massimo, she added, with a smile, "He is a Samaritan."

"So he is !" said the "foreigner" from Maso sagaciously. "He comes from that very place !"

Massimo and the Signora laughed and started to climb the steep path leading to the little church of Sant' Ubaldo. The church door stood open, and hearing Don Aurelio's voice, they entered. He was saying Mass and had reached the *Pater Noster*. There were only two worshippers—a little old woman, seated on the last bench, and Signor Marcello, who was sitting in the row of benches directly in front of the altar, his shaggy head bent low, his whole being rapt in ardent prayer. The new-comers knelt down beside the little old woman.

When Signor Marcello rose, somewhat feebly, and went to kneel at the altar-rail, Donna Fedele Vayla di Braca fixed eyes brimming with grave ender-ness upon that venerable head, reverently lowering

them again when the priest advanced towards him with the consecrated host and the words of eternal life.

She had known Marcello since her early childhood, when, soon after the liberation of Venice, Colonel Vayla di Brea purchased the Villino delle Rose, near Arsiero. Marcello was then past his thirtieth year. His parents were still alive, and a warm friendship soon sprang up between the two families, who spent the summer holidays in Val d'Astico. Little Fedele showed a strong liking for Marcello, and he, touched by this childish affection, would often amuse himself by playing duets with her. When he became engaged, the girl, who was now nearly fifteen and was growing very tall, altered her manner towards him, avoiding rather than seeking his society. He alone guessed that this change concealed those ardent, immature feelings which young girls sometimes have for men older than themselves, and under these circumstances consideration for Fedele urged him for a time to break off all familiar intercourse with her. With Marcello's wife the girl became, as she grew up, on most affectionate terms. Only, being unmusical, Signora Trento could not share the love of music which still remained a bond between her husband and Fedele. Gradually these two began to seek each other's company again, and their eyes would meet more often than was necessary. One day, during an excursion, the two found themselves separated from the rest of the party, and lost in a pine forest. Perhaps, at first, passionate dreams overwhelmed the emotional girl, but as they wandered, trembling indeed and silent, neither sought the other's eyes. As they came out of the woods Marcello picked a cyclamen and offered it silently. Fedele took it and pressed it to her lips, her eyes glistening with tears.

Henceforth they played no more together, as if by an unspoken agreement ; but Fedele could not

forget. She persuaded her father to leave Arsiero, and they spent their summers at Santhià, where they had relatives. In winter they lived in Turin, where she was much courted, and where at times she seemed not indifferent to the admiration she excited. There was talk even of a real passion—of a rejected suitor, who took his life for love of her. But she never married, and at eight-and-forty she found herself alone. Her parents were dead, and, tired of city life, she remembered Arsiero, and went back to the Villino delle Rose. Poor Andrea Trento was already ill, and during the short time that elapsed between his death and that of his mother, Donna Fedele was often at the Montanina. Her former attachment to Marcello had grown into a regard that, with pity for his great misfortunes, became almost veneration.

But after Signora Trento's death and a first exchange of visits Marcello ceased to come to the Villino, and Donna Fedele no longer went to the Montanina. Lelia was the cause of this estrangement. She had, at first, been quite captivated by Donna Fedele, who, however, had unintentionally treated her with icy indifference, arising perhaps from absent-mindedness or from some passing mood. Inexplicable attacks of iciness had more than once bewildered those around her. She had smiled at the girl, had bestowed a careless greeting upon her, and throughout the rest of the visit had not once addressed a word to her. Lelia set her down as haughty, and concluded she had taken a dislike to her. Her future attitude towards Donna Fedele was the more proud and cold because her longing to be friends was so strong. On her side, Donna Fedele, who had no suspicion of the truth, was sure that Lelia disliked her; and deeply though she regretted this, her reserved nature stood in the way of her taking steps to win the young girl's heart, and, believing that her presence was unwelcome to

the person most dear and sacred to Signor Marcello, she discontinued her visits to the Montanina. She met Marcello not infrequently on the road from Velo to Arsiero, which passes below the villa. On such occasions they would walk and talk together, but they never spoke of Lelia. Marcello himself shrank from any reference to her. Knowing how peculiarly susceptible Donna Fedele was to impressions, he had concluded that Lelia was uncongenial to her, and he felt that his son's memory was thereby affronted. As through narrow mountain clefts a cold air can sometimes be detected rising, even through hot summer grass, from the heart of the mountain, so Donna Fedele felt, and endured in silence, a coolness invading Signor Marcello's friendship for her, for she understood whence it came.

She raised her eyes to the old man's face as he rose from the altar-rail and returned to his seat, while Don Aurelio turned to pronounce the *Dominus vobiscum*. Massimo looked at his friend, thinking he had noticed him, but he was mistaken. The priest's eyes were blind to the things of this world. The young man saw that he had aged and had grown thinner since their last meeting, and that his face seemed more spiritual than ever.

When Mass was over, Donna Fedele whispered to Massimo :

"Of course, you will wait for Don Aurelio. I am going to see my friend. Will you come there too, later on?"

Just for the moment Massimo did not realise that the friend to whom she referred was Carnesecca. However, he nodded assent, and sat down to wait for the priest.

He was kept waiting for some time. The lad who had served the Mass put out the candles and departed about his own business. Signor Marcello, after remaining long absorbed in prayer, rose from his seat and entered the sacristy. Massimo heard a few

whispered words, and then all was silence. The minutes passed, and neither Signor Marcello nor Don Aurelio reappeared. But Massimo was not impatient. He was enjoying the sense of peace that dwelt within these poor walls, in these poor and well-worn fittings and ornaments, that called up pictures of still poorer homes, simple beings, and of the festivals of an unsophisticated faith. Meanwhile through the open door a light breeze was wafting to him fresh scents of woods and meadows and voices from the distant fields. Once more he was rejoicing in his release from the noise and dust of scorching Milan, as he had done last night on his way up to the Montanina, along the side of the dark gorge where the water sings.

How sweet it was to be overcome by sensation alone! The music of the night sounded in his memory like a distant song. A gentle drowsiness, that was full of vague imaginings, crept gradually over him. The voices of an invisible choir filled the church with sweet sounds, while a young girl, with disordered hair and eyes downcast, came slowly towards him from the sacristy, and, stooping, touched his shoulder. His heart gave a bound; he opened his eyes and saw Don Aurelio, who had touched his shoulder and now stood smiling beside him.

* * * * *

Don Aurelio, a Roman by birth, had studied in the Propaganda College with the intention of becoming a missionary. A long illness, however, and the wishes of his superiors, who doubted his physical powers, had obliged him to relinquish this purpose. An intimate friend of the Benedictine Dom Clemente of Santa Scolastica, at Subiaco, he had met Benedetto there, had seen him again in Rome, at Dom Clemente's desire, and had become deeply attached both to him and to Massimo. During convalescence, following a relapse of his illness, mountain air had been prescribed, and a Vincentine priest,

who had been with him at the Propaganda, persuaded the Bishop of Vicenza to appoint him to the cure of Lago di Velo. Gentle Don Aurelio had gladly accepted this dispensation of Providence, rejoicing at the prospect of preaching Christ to simple souls in the poverty to which he had been born. And thus he had come to Lago, knowing nothing of it beyond the fact that it was very poor. He did not forget Massimo. He wrote to him often and watched over him, not like a father, ready to help the struggle of a fervent disciple of him who lay buried at Campo Verano, but like a mother, who trembles for the welfare of her son's soul. He knew how sorely he must be tempted to wrath and hatred by the unjust war that was being waged against him by opposite parties ; he knew that he was sometimes tempted to swerve from the doctrines of true religion, as not a few of his friends, some moved by natural pride, others by rebellious impulses, had swerved ; and, finally, he knew that worldly pleasures were also a source of temptation to him. He was aware, from what Massimo himself had told him, that women, lovely and brilliant women, had been attracted by him ; and he knew that the young man's deep and poetic feeling for woman was perhaps more dangerous to him than mere physical temptations. He felt there would be grave danger for Massimo until such a time as he should meet and love a woman worthy to be his wife, who would weave about him a net of affections and of personal interests, strong enough also to hold him back from the field of religious strife. Don Aurelio, either from the natural gentleness of his character, or from his conception of the special duties which the ecclesiastical habit imposed, was not a man of strife. In religious matters he opened his heart to God alone, praying and looking to Him only for the triumph of truth and of the Church. A lecture Massimo had recently delivered in Milan on the

Italian heretics of the sixteenth century had brought such a hailstorm of insults, both black and red,¹ had excited such a pandemonium of universal comment, that Don Aurelio had advised him to withdraw for a time from this confusion, offering him hospitality which, if devoid of comforts, was rich in peace.

When he had locked the church door, Don Aurelio put his arm affectionately through Massimo's.

"You were good to come!" he exclaimed, pressing the arm he held still closer to his side. In this pressure Massimo felt something that troubled him. His heart misgave him lest this silent demonstration of affection should mean that his friend shrank from expressing certain criticisms, or was but preparing him for them. These criticisms, he felt sure, could not fail to contain disapproval.

"You also disapprove of me," he said sadly.

"Dear friend, you may not have had my approval in everything, but at this moment I remember only that you have suffered."

"*You may not have had my approval in everything.*" These words overwhelmed Massimo with sorrow and oppression. At the moment he made no answer, but when Don Aurelio, going in front of him, led the way through the yard surrounding the priest's poor little house, and was telling him how disappointed he was at being unable to receive him there, the young man interrupted and asked, with almost painful anxiety, of what he had disapproved. At that very moment Donna Fedele came towards them, and Don Aurelio was first astonished and then pleased to see the two whom he thought strangers to one another smile at their introduction. Carnesecca was doing very well, but he was restless, and kept asking for Don Aurelio. The priest objected to his

¹ Black and red insults: black from the clericals, and red from Socialists and free-thinkers.—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE.

being called Carnesecca, but Donna Fedele, raising her eyebrows and speaking with unwonted rapidity, protested warmly that she was one of the people, and must express herself as they did.

"Would you have me give him the name by which the archpriest calls him?" she inquired. This dignitary, juggling with the stranger's name, Pestagran, had dubbed him Gran Peste. Don Aurelio's face flushed. He disliked the archpriest's nickname for the miserable but well-intentioned wanderer, but still more he disliked hearing the priest himself alluded to in sarcastic and ironical terms.

"Here I am!" he cried, as he and Massimo passed from the fresh air and coolness of the stairway into the heavy, drug-laden atmosphere of the invalid's room. A little old woman who was seated beside the bed, whence Carnesecca's yellow and wrinkled old face peered forth, like a handful of clay, from between his nightcap and the folded sheet, rose to her feet, clasping her hands and crying delightedly:

"Thank Heaven, you have come!"

The invalid raised his head and shoulders a little, propping himself upon one elbow, while he brought the other hand to his nightcap in a military salute. Then, turning to the old woman, he pronounced her name solemnly:

"Lúzia!"

He stretched out his arm, turning his wrist slowly and majestically until the palm of his hand faced the door.

"You are at liberty to devote yourself to the performance of your mysterious rites!"

The old woman hurried away, exclaiming: "I am going! I am going!" And the upraised palm fell back upon the coverlet with a dull thud.

"The good woman was troubled by my very natural impatience."

Thus saying, Signor Ismaele Pestagran blew a

noisy breath through his nostrils and screwed up his small eyes into two glittering, black points. Noticing Massimo, who had entered behind Don Aurelio, he once more brought his hand to his nightcap.

"And this gentleman? . . ."

"This gentleman's" presence did not seem entirely welcome to him. Massimo saw this and made haste to withdraw. Whereupon Carnesecca said calmly, "Your pardon." Donna Fedele, who was waiting for Massimo on the landing, asked him to go downstairs with her. Something was going on that Massimo should know of. While Don Aurelio had been saying Mass, the sacristan of Velo had arrived with a letter from the archpriest. He had left the letter with Lúzia, who had afterwards expressed herself to Ismaele as follows: "Those accursed books of yours will bring you to perdition and me to beggary!" She had refused to explain her outburst; but Ismaele was convinced that the priests of Velo intended to drive Don Aurelio away from Lago on his, Ismaele's, account. Massimo asked if there were really any danger of this. How could Donna Fedele tell? Lúzia had taken the archpriest's note to her master's study, and Don Aurelio had not been in there yet. But what was Donna Fedele's opinion? Donna Fedele was much alarmed. On account of something Don Aurelio had told her? Certainly not. He never spoke of his superiors except to sing their praises. It was her opinion that there was more to be feared from the chaplain than from the archpriest, and more to be feared from him than from the bishop. The bishop, indeed, appeared most benevolently inclined towards Don Aurelio. What sort of men were this archpriest and this chaplain? Donna Fedele would tell him nothing concerning the chaplain, and said it was a difficult matter to understand the archpriest. At times he seemed good-natured, at times harsh; he was sometimes jovial, sometimes sarcastic; liberal on some

occasions, conservative on others. As a priest he was above censure. And here Donna Fedele felt it her duty to add that, as far as morals were concerned, the chaplain was above censure also. Don Aurelio had pronounced the archpriest a good theologian and Latin scholar, and had indeed endowed him with all those merits of which she was incapable of judging. Between him and the bishop, a warm-hearted man, full of charity for friends and enemies alike, there was some friction. She was willing to wager that the archpriest had accepted Don Aurelio most unwillingly at Lago, and only because he had been obliged to do so. She believed that Don Aurelio had been under suspicion for some time on account of his sermons, which were carefully watched, and of which the chaplain was known to have hinted that they contained overmuch of purely moral teaching and mystical sentiment, and overlittle of theology and asceticism.

While Donna Fedele and Massimo were holding this conversation in the doorway, Lúzia passed on her way to the kitchen-garden to gather some peas. Donna Fedele stopped her. Well, what had the sacristan really said? He had said: "Take good care of your Gran Peste! Take good care of him! This time your priest will have to go!"

Donna Fedele's face flushed angrily, while in Massimo's breast a flame of bitterness burned hot. The grass in the field, the leaves of the mulberry-tree, quivering and glistening in the breeze, the calm hills flooded with sunshine, the clear sky, even the little garden itself, everything was brimming with kindness, was a hymn to kindness encompassing the humble home of this servant of God whose soul was full of Christ. And now everything seemed meaningless, frozen by a sudden icy breath. Neither Massimo nor Donna Fedele dared to utter their indignation here in the near neighbourhood of Don Aurelio, any more than if they had been in church. They heard

the priest's step on the stairs, and Carnesecca's voice crying, "I wish it, Signore! I wish it!" to Don Aurelio's "No, no!" And then there was silence.

"He probably wished to go away on account of the letter," Donna Fedele whispered. "But there is no danger of Don Aurelio's allowing him to leave in the state he is in."

The priest did not come to them, and Donna Fedele, leaving Massimo, went upstairs and entered Carnesecca's room without knocking. Massimo was greatly astonished to see her come down again almost immediately, laughing heartily, her face hidden in her hands. She had found Carnesecca with his bare legs out of bed, and they were such black, dry stilts of legs, and the poor man had been so dismayed, and had shouted so vigorously, "Go away! Go away!" dragging at the clothes the while, that, with her sense of humour, Donna Fedele would have had to laugh even if her father and mother had both died but that morning.

She went out to Lúzia and advised her to go and attend to her invalid. But Lúzia would not. The man was always doing that. He was always trying to get out of bed without help, and even she herself was sent out of the room on these occasions. But—what if he should become giddy? What if he should fall? What if he should break his arm—break his leg?

"Blessed Lady! What a lot of accidents!" cried Lúzia, unmoved.

"What a lot indeed!" Donna Fedele retorted, laughing. "One would be enough, I should think!"

Lúzia laughed too, and then went on gathering her peas. Massimo came up and offered to go to the invalid. Lúzia grasped at this proposal, saying, "Yes, yes; you go!" But Donna Fedele said, "H'm!" and smiled in a way that excited Massimo's curiosity. She then explained to him, with other smiles and some reticence, that he was not in

Carnesecca's good books. Carnesecca read the newspapers, and had come to the conclusion that Massimo was a Modernist, one of those people who study the Bible to discover falsehoods in it, to find errors, contradictions, and interpolations; while to him, Carnesecca, every word it contained had been written by the hand of the Almighty Himself. He rejoiced in Don Aurelio's disapproval of Bible criticism, and he had been heard to say that, on this point, he was more in sympathy with the Jews than with certain Catholics. In fact, one of his best friends was a rabbi in London. Massimo, who had never given any thought to Bible criticism, was greatly amused by the horror he had inspired and much interested concerning this friendship with the English rabbi. Donna Fedele informed him that Carnesecca had spent several years in England, where he had become a Protestant and had made the acquaintance of a rabbi, a man of science, who had taught him that there were three hundred and sixty-five bones in the human body. Allowing her own humorous imagination to colour her story somewhat, perhaps, she went on to say that, after the tortures he had endured from Catholic sticks and stones, Ismaele declared he could locate pains in no less than three hundred and fifty-nine separate bones. The two were still talking quietly among the peas when they were roused by the priest's voice. Don Aurelio was standing at his study window.

"Massimo! Will you come in now?"

Massimo hastened indoors, and Donna Fedele, who was very tired, begged Lúzia to bring her out a chair, and, settling herself comfortably, waited for news concerning the archpriest's message.

* * * * *

Don Aurelio came out to meet Massimo on the landing, and grasping his hands, held them in his own for a space, gazing smilingly into his friend's eyes.

Presently he drew him into a little study flooded with light, with a whitewashed ceiling and brick floor, and barely furnished with a bookshelf, a deal table, a few rickety, straw-bottomed chairs, a dilapidated leather easy-chair, from whose rents hung ragged ends of lining, and, hanging above the easy-chair, a wooden crucifix. The bookshelf was opposite the fireplace, and it was crowded with books, as were the table, the mantelshelf, and all the chairs save one. Yet there was no disorder or dust; the books were arranged in tidy piles, and everything was as neat as Don Aurelio's cassock and his delicate hands. Above the mantelshelf, between the two windows, hung two photographs, one of the Sacro Speco at Subiaco, the other of the Cosmati Cloister at Santa Scolastica. The books were chiefly religious works. Don Aurelio set especial store by his collection of the writings of the great mystics and of his complete sets of the works of Antonio Rosmini and of Father Gratry. These and the collection of the sacred orators of Nôtre Dame, together with many books by modern French Catholics, were the gift of Donna Fedele, and had belonged to her father. Don Aurelio showed his treasures to his friend with such untroubled satisfaction, and stood so quietly beside him at the window, pointing out the different peaks, the villages, and the more distant paths, that Massimo was forced to conclude either that nothing was wrong or that Don Aurelio did not yet know. But he was conscious, to the point of embarrassment, of his own air of distraction and of his visible lack of interest in the things of which Don Aurelio was talking.

Don Aurelio mentioned Val d'Astico, and Massimo seized the opportunity to inquire how he got on with the archpriest there.

"He is an excellent man," his friend answered; but he added, smiling, "I fear, however, he has no great liking for me."

There was no reason for that smile. Massimo saw that Don Aurelio knew.

"Why do you smile?" he asked.

The priest did not answer.

At this point they heard the voice of Lúzia, who was coming upstairs, crying:

"Smèle! Smèle!" (Ismaele! Ismaele!). "Are you there, Smèle?"

She burst into the room, glanced wildly round, and, wringing her hands as if beside herself, cried:

"Gésumarite! He is not here!"

Who was not here? Why, Sinèle, of course! And who was Smèle? Carnesecca, to be sure!

Don Aurelio realised at once what had happened. He gave a start and dashed downstairs, followed by Massimo and Lúzia. It was as she had said—the room was empty. And his clothes? They were gone too.

"Gésumarite! The poor soul!" moaned Lúzia. "And he has even left me a franc!"

A silver coin was glittering on the straw bottom of a chair, beside a ball of wool and a set of knitting-needles.

"He has forgotten his watch," she added.

"Massimo!" Don Aurelio called; "follow me!"

At the front door they met Donna Fedele; she had heard Lúzia's cries and the excited voices of the two men, and was on her way to inquire what had happened. They told her quickly. The colour left her face. It was true, then? The letter the sacristan had brought? . . . Carnesecca had gone because of that?

"It is true," said Don Aurelio quietly; "but that poor creature has nothing to do with it. And now he will make himself worse again, for this morning he was still feverish. You did not see him go out?"

Donna Fedele, who had been watching Lúzia gathering her peas, had neither seen nor heard anything. Neither had Lúzia seen nor heard him go.

Don Aurelio set about arranging a plan of pursuit. Something must be done at once. "I can't run!" observed Donna Fedele with a smile. She was so far from being able to run that, having pressed the priest's hand in silence, she dropped wearily into her chair once more. Later she had to ask the milk-girl from Lago to lend her an arm as far as the chestnut-tree, where a small hired carriage awaited her.

Don Aurelio started running towards Lago, believing that Ismaele had gone to the Montanina. Massimo went up towards Maso. The priest reached the chestnuts on the hillside, from which point one can see the white Trento villa, without having met a soul. Could Ismaele have passed already? A man of sixty, with fever upon him, and practically fasting? Impossible! Don Aurelio stopped abruptly, seized by a sudden thought. What if the tiresome fellow, believing all he did believe, had gone to confront the archpriest? The longer Don Aurelio thought about it the more he thought it probable, and, turning, he hastily retraced his steps. Instead, however, of going straight up by the short cut that leads from Lago to Sant' Ubaldo, he took the road that, a few yards from the church, joins the one descending from Velo. And here he found Massimo, who had met several people on the Maso road, but no one of them had seen Carnesecca. This convinced Don Aurelio.

"I will go to Velo," he declared, "but I must go alone. You had better go back to the Montanina, where they will be waiting for you."

Massimo asked if, in case Pestagran would not come back and his room being then unoccupied . . .

Don Aurelio interrupted him.

"No, dear friend, it is impossible. I will explain. . . ."

And reading further questions and suspicions in Massimo's expression of sorrowful indignation, he urged him away.

"Go to Signor Marcello, who is expecting you. We will talk later on. I must first find this unhappy man and prevent his committing further follies. Leave me now! Signor Marcello has asked me to luncheon, and I will come if possible."

* * * * *

The archpriest's letter had contained an enclosure from the episcopal *curia* of Vicenza that was nothing more nor less than Don Aurelio's dismissal within a fortnight from the benefice of Lago di Velo. The archpriest himself, in a few appropriate lines, expressed his regret at this unexpected communication, and begged Don Aurelio to see that all persons and furniture were removed from the house within the appointed time, as his successor would then be arriving with his mother and sister.

It was a bitter thing to be driven from that peaceful retreat, from his small, much-loved flock, not to know where to find shelter or food. *All persons and furniture to be removed.* It was impossible that he could be dismissed on Ismaele's account, but, under the circumstances, that word "persons" was not without import.

After the first moments of grief and bewilderment Don Aurelio's soul was filled with a sense of sweetest peace, as if Christ Himself had laid loving hands upon his head. His own sad plight no longer troubled him; he was thinking now of two things only—of finding the Bible-seller, and of a certain important communication, of a most delicate nature, which Signor Marcello had made to him in the sacristy after Mass.

Walking quickly, he soon reached a wayside inn. The innkeeper, a bearded Lombard, who had once been gardener at the Villino delle Rose, stood smoking in his shirt-sleeves in the doorway. As Don Aurelio came up he turned his back upon him and

entered the tavern, saying in a tone easily heard outside:

"Hogs of priests! First they kick a dying man out, and then run to see if he is dead!"

And he spat contemptuously. Don Aurelio went straight to the man, and confronted him.

"My good fellow——" he began.

The man was ashamed, and hastened to take his pipe out of his mouth.

"Will you have half a measure, Reverendo?" he stammered.

"Where is he?" Don Aurelio demanded resolutely. "Where is the dying man I kicked out?"

"Ah! I suppose you mean the Bible-seller. I'm sorry for what I said. It wasn't meant for you. For my part I prefer the priests to this Bible chap. Yes, he is here; my wife found him on the road, half dead. But he is not going to stay here, I can tell you! If that is what is worrying you, put your mind at rest. I'm going to tell him that if his own feet don't move him, mine will. Will that suit you? I spoke wrong at first; I'm speaking right enough now, ain't I? Good-morning!" He greeted a band of soldiers belonging to a regiment of mountain chasseurs, who were entering the tavern.

Meanwhile Don Aurelio went to the courtyard at the side of the house, drawn by the sound of an agitated woman's voice. Upon a broken chair planted unsteadily in the black ooze, within a yard of the manure-heap, sat the wretched Carnesecca, grudgingly held up by the innkeeper's wife, who was calling: "Checca! Checca! Quick! Quick!" with all the strength of her lungs. Don Aurelio rushed forward to support the tottering man, who was the colour of a badly-washed rag, and scolded the woman for not having taken him into the house. The woman, one moment calling "Checca" and the next making her excuses to the priest, said it had

been her man, Gésummaria l who had not been willing. And besides, Carnesecca himself—Blessed Lady!—had not wanted it. He had seemed much stronger when they brought him in from the road; not as he was now. He had even said: "Fling me on the dung-heap, for I am Jophal!" At this point Carnesecca half opened his eyes and mumbled, his chin still resting upon his breast:

"Jonah! Not Jophal!"

"Yes, yes, Jophal!" the woman comforted. "Be quiet and you shall have some coffee."

Here was Checca at last, a great, stolid-looking country girl of about sixteen, bringing the coffee—not, indeed, the coffee of the padrone and his customers, but that of the padrone's wife and her servant, a semblance of coffee on terms of intimacy with roasted wheat.

Just at this moment a hen that had been calmly disporting herself on the manure-heap, frightened by the house-dog, flapped down into the yard, and disappeared through a near hedge.

"Gèsu! Mistress! The hen!" screamed Checca, stopping short. "Catch her, catch her!" shouted her mistress, remembering a certain hole in the hedge and the ferocious threats of one of her neighbours.

Don Aurelio snatched the coffee-pot from Checca's hands, and the two women, the mistress in front, Checca close behind, were off like the wind, splashing through the black ooze. A sip of coffee revived the Bible-merchant, who fixed upon Don Aurelio a look that was half dazed, half mirthful.

"What have you done, you wretched fellow? What have you done? What has come over you?"

Carnesecca smiled, and answered in his Val d'Astico Italian:

"I got round you, you see! I told you I would. I got round you!"

Another sip of coffee.

"You think you have got round me, do you? And where do you intend to go?"

Another sip, after which Carnesecca cast a look of deep inquiry at the liquid, with a most expressive pout of his lips.

"Where do I intend to go?" he said, still gazing into the wheat coffee. "First to the High Priest of Velo!"

"I forbid your doing that!"

"I shall go to the High Priest of Velo in a spirit of respect and of meekness," said Carnesecca serenely, "and I shall say to him: 'Vent thy wrath upon me, cause me to be crucified, for this is Jerusalem, thou art Caiaphas, and I am the son of the Lamb.'"

Don Aurelio was beside himself.

"Don't talk rubbish! What you suppose is all nonsense. There is not a word of truth in it. You are coming home with me immediately!"

The "son of the Lamb" was visibly impressed by Don Aurelio's flushed countenance and angry voice, and sat gazing fixedly at him.

"Well, well, well!" said he at last, letting the words off like pistol shots. "If it is not true, I need not go. But I had sooner die on that dung-heap than go back with you. I will ask shelter of the White Lady of the Roses, who——"

"Calàpo!" shouted the innkeeper's wife, who was bringing the hen back in her arms. "Calàpo, Calàpo! What are you about?"

Calàpo, a stumpy little man, barefooted and coatless, who was dragging a cart out of the stable, shouted, in his turn, that he was going to harness the donkey to drive to Piovene.

"You will do nothing of the sort! The donkey has the colic, you fool!"

Carnesecca, interrupted in an intended panegyric upon the White Lady of the Roses, as he called Donna Fedele, made an effort to rise and go on

his way. Don Aurelio detained him. It had struck him that it would be better, for many reasons, to allow the old man to go to the Villino, but he could not let him go on foot. He begged the woman, if she would not keep him, at least to allow Calàpo to take him to the villa in the donkey-cart. But the woman refused, on the plea of the animal's indisposition. Calàpo pushed the cart back into the shed, and Carnesecca declared that he was able to walk. Don Aurelio had started to interview the innkeeper, and beg him at least to keep the "Bible-man" till the evening, when Calàpo came up and offered to drag the cart as far as the villa. Meanwhile one of the soldiers had called Checca out into the street, whither others had followed, and formed a circle around the flushed and laughing girl. The mistress shouted to her and she came in, followed by the soldiers, one of whom, hearing Calàpo renew his offer, over which Don Aurelio was hesitating, cried out:

"Do you want help? I will help you!"

Scenting fun, his companions quickly volunteered to help also, and it was arranged that together they should draw the cart as far as Velo, where a donkey free from colic might be found. Calàpo took his place between the shafts, and a couple of soldiers lifted Carnesecca and placed him in the cart. Then there was a merry proposal to put Checca in too, but the girl ran off, while Carnesecca threatened indignantly to throw himself from the cart if his dignity were thus compromised. The innkeeper's wife settled the matter.

"You want more weight, do you, boys? You shall have it," she said, and sent Calàpo to fetch two bags of corn to take to the miller.

But Carnesecca called Calàpo to his side and inquired if he really felt able to drag the cart alone as far as Velo.

"As far as Velo? As far as Piovene, if you like!" was the fellow's reply.

Thereupon Carnesecca, who shrank from the soldiers' noisy escort, turned towards them, giving them to understand that he could dispense with their services. Then he bowed his thanks to right and left, his head bobbing between upraised hands, that waved on either side like a pair of great ears. He looked like a pope imparting his blessing from the chair of state.

"Let us be off, Calàpo," said Carnesecca gently. "I give you my blessing," he said, turning to Don Aurelio, "for your hospitality." And addressing the woman, he added: "I bless you also for this cart, for the chair, and . . . yes, let us be charitable . . . for the coffee also!" At this moment the innkeeper made an appearance at the side door, and blustered: "What is all this farce about?" Carnesecca scrutinised him with the utmost composure. "I bless you also," he said, "you also, my good man—because you have a Christian wife, and a Christian wife may save a heathen husband. Let us be off, Calàpo."

The innkeeper was speechless with amazement. Calàpo, bending beneath the load, turned out at the gateway into the road, the soldiers following and jeering at him, "Gee up, Calàpo, gee up!" Don Aurelio stood for a few seconds watching this strange procession move towards Velo, and then started in the direction of Sant' Ubaldo.

II

Don Aurelio's mind was now wholly engrossed in what Signor Marcello had confided to him in the sacristy after Mass. Without explaining his reasons for thinking so, further than by alluding to his seventy-two years, Signor Marcello had spoken as one who believed he had not long to live. An unusual gentleness in his bearing confirmed the priest's suspicion that some physical warning must have come to him. The substance of his unexpected communica-

tion was as follows. Uneasy concerning the future of Lelia, whom he looked upon as his daughter, and anxious lest she should refuse the benefits his will might offer, lest she should fall once more into the hands of one or other of her parents, he had thought that if a union were possible between her and Massimo Alberti, his poor boy's friend, the second and more serious of these dangers might be averted. Probably thereby the other difficulty would be avoided as well, at least to a certain extent, for he would then comply in part with Lelia's wish, and leave her the villa only. It was to be hoped that neither she nor her husband would wish to offend his memory by refusing this legacy.

It was unreasonable to expect a girl of two-and-twenty to mourn for ever, and she must know that another future was expected and desired for her. Perhaps as long as he, Marcello, lived she would hesitate to commit what might seem an outrage against poor Andrea's memory, but if she were encouraged and persuaded that Andrea in heaven would not disapprove of this marriage, she would surely give way. Signor Marcello was convinced of this. The unknown quantity in the problem was Massimo Alberti.

Signor Marcello had heard much that was good of him from Don Aurelio, but he did not know whether he had other ties and affections, whether or no he intended to marry. This was why he had confided in Don Aurelio and asked for his advice and the help that the priest's friendship with Massimo could give him, first by information and then, if possible, by influencing the young man in the matter.

During this conversation the priest's face had flushed with trouble and embarrassment. Massimo had no ties of a shameful nature, of this he felt sure, nor, to his knowledge, was he in love. He knew him to be of a susceptible nature, and in writing to him the young man had never tried to

hide the fact. As to marriage, he was certainly not opposed to it, but he was firmly determined never to bind himself without love, or to tolerate suggestions concerning his choice. Advice of this kind had once turned him against a certain alliance which otherwise very probably would have been made. In matters like these special tact was required which Don Aurelio felt that he did not possess; he wished he did possess it, for he would have been heartily glad to urge Massimo to marry, believing him capable of realising the highest ideals of married life.

All this he told Signor Marcello, but he said nothing of what to him presented the thorniest aspect of the problem. Signorina Lelia was a riddle to him, a closed casket that might contain either rich jewels or false ones. Signor Marcello persisted, however, in his request, and showed some impatience. In the short time he had known him Don Aurelio had grown to respect this old man, with his warm heart, his honest and humble soul, with such pure faith in and love of the Divine Word. He could not refuse the favour he was now being asked, and promised to do his best.

* * * * *

He would do his best, but how was he to set to work, he wondered as he walked slowly along the parched road to Sant' Ubaldo. The first step must be to discover whether Massimo's heart was free. This was not difficult. And if it were free, by what means was he to influence his friend in the right direction without revealing his purpose? Besides, was there time enough? When he had talked with Signor Marcello he had not known he must leave in a fortnight. Would not Massimo also want to leave? And could a matter of this sort be arranged in a fortnight? He must take Donna Fedele into his confidence. She had experience of

these things, and would advise him. Although she went very rarely to the Montanina, she would surely know more about Signorina Lelia than he could possibly discover. He looked at his watch. It was half-past ten. There was time for him to go to the Villino and get back to the Montanina for luncheon. Opportunities of studying the girl and of seeing the two young people together were precious. He hurried along, taking the road that leads down to Lago without touching Sant' Ubaldo. While crossing the glade between the slope of Lago and that on which the Montanina stands he tried to recollect his few distinct impressions of Signorina Lelia. He had heard her play with great feeling. He had occasionally seen her coming down the road from Sant' Ubaldo to the Battery, carrying great bunches of wild flowers. He could not remember any but insignificant remarks of hers. Whenever he said Mass at Santa Maria ad Montes she was present, seated beside Signor Marcello. Once when he and Signor Marcello had had a discussion in her presence concerning the reading of the Gospels she had shown not the slightest interest. He recollected, indeed, that he had come away wondering whether she had ever read them. She was not unattractive-looking, but she did not seem to him beautiful enough to captivate Massimo at first sight. His impression of her face was that it revealed great intelligence and a character containing much of reserve and caprice.

Absorbed in these thoughts, he would probably have passed Donna Fedele without seeing her had she not called out, "Don Aurelio!" She and the girl from Lago were seated upon the fallen trunk of a great tree, a little above the turn that leads towards the Montanina.

"Well? Did you find him?"

Hearing that Carnesecca was on his way to Villino delle Rose, she rose to her feet, astonished, but glad

to have him, and anxious to get home. Although she was still very tired, she dismissed the girl, that she might be free to discuss Don Aurelio's dismissal from his benefice. There was little to tell, and the priest cut short her conjectures, perhaps because another matter was then uppermost in his mind, or that he feared an indignant outburst against the priests of Velo. He made haste to tell her that he wanted her advice on a very important question. "More so than this?" Donna Fedele asked. Yes. This matter was simple enough, but the other was most complex. Talking thus they had almost reached the little hired carriage that had come up as far as the entrance to the Montanina. The priest stopped, intending to explain the matter shortly.

"Don Aurelio," said his companion, "if you do not mind giving me your arm, I will stop, otherwise I must go and sit in the carriage." She was very pale, but her sweet eyes were smiling.

As it was not yet eleven, Donna Fedele decided that there was time for Don Aurelio to accompany her home and then be driven back to the Montanina by twelve o'clock, and although the driver's presence would prevent their talking on the way, they would, nevertheless, have a quiet quarter of an hour at the Villino.

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At five minutes to twelve Don Aurelio pushed open the covered gate that leads into the Montanina grounds, beside Santa Maria ad Montes, feeling much lighter-hearted than he had felt earlier in the day. Donna Fedele had promised her aid with such enthusiastic goodwill that he, ignorant as he was of the depths of her good nature, was touched and filled with gratitude, as if that goodwill had been all on his behalf.

III

Massimo came down from Sant' Ubaldo with his heart full of bitterness, believing firmly, with Carnesecca, that Don Aurelio's dismissal had been brought about by his championship of the Lutheran missionary. He wondered anxiously what would happen to his poor friend. Even if the unfortunate priest should wander far in search of another diocese, would not these calumnies follow him? Would he not be met on all sides with reluctance, diffidence, and timidity?

Hardly had his hand touched the Montanina gate than another anxiety beset him, overruling the first. He thought of his approaching meeting with the Signorina, which he desired and yet at the same time dreaded. The green, flowery loveliness of the villa's setting seemed to him to distil a subtle sense of awe-inspiring mystery. Instead of going straight to the house he turned to the left, past the clump of poplars and the bridge, overgrown with roses, and walked along the bank of the Riderella to where a tiny waterfall sings, almost in the shade of the walnut-trees. Presently he asked himself impatiently what was the meaning of this agitation on account of one whom he had never seen. For answer the two photographs rose to his mind, and he shrank from the thought of being confronted by that pale face and the downcast eyes. He started towards the villa, trying to steel himself into indifference. In the distance, by the stables, he saw Teresina talking to a gentleman, whom he learned from her later was the village doctor, who had not deemed it prudent to intrude upon Signor Marcello without a plausible excuse. Massimo went up to his room and stood gazing for some time at Andrea's picture. Then he carefully and almost reverently changed the water in the glass that held the rose, the rose

that had drooped a little lower and become more languid, its outside petals already touched by the first pallor of death. Again he re-read his letters to his lost friend, letters whose pages were still more faded than the rose. He was standing at the window in passive enjoyment of this feast of sunshine, wind, and living things that exhorted to life, when he heard a heavy step in the corridor, and, turning, saw the door slowly pushed open. It was Signor Marcello, who, on perceiving him, uttered an exclamation of apology.

"I did not know you had returned," said he.

In his hand he carried a fresh rose, a magnificent white one, like the other. They stood gazing at each other for a while in silent sympathy; then Massimo, deeply moved, took the rose, and Signor Marcello withdrew.

Towards half-past eleven, while Massimo was writing letters, Giovanni brought a message from his master, asking the young man to come down.

"He is in the drawing-room with the Signorina."

"Which shall I see?" was the thought that sprang to Massimo's mind as he went down the wooden staircase.

Lelia was seated with her back to the stairs at the writing-table placed crosswise between the spacious window and the fireplace. She was annoyed with herself because her heart was beating so violently; she would not admit, even to herself, her burning curiosity to see this man who was descending the stairs; she would not have turned her head to look at him, either then or later, if she could have avoided doing so without being set down as hopelessly discourteous.

"Lelia!" said Signor Marcello gently.

She laid down her pen, opened the drawer to place something in it, seemed to be searching in it for an instant, and finally rose and faced about.

Signor Marcello introduced her: "My daughter."

She barely inclined her head. Massimo bowed low, murmuring something incoherent of which the only word distinguishable was "pleasure."

Yes, pleasure! Here was neither the one face nor the other. Here was the serious face of a girl who receives for the first time a friend of her dead lover. It was the face of one who had once given everything to love, and had now consecrated her life to the memory of that love. Massimo might have been more critical of the irregularities of this face had its expression been different. But the irregularities seemed to him too insignificant to dwell upon, and he thought her almost beautiful. He could not but admire her figure, which, though not tall, was perfect in all its lines, revealed by her simple grey gown, trimmed with black, and cut slightly low at the neck. He noticed the splendid, fair hair that crowned her small head, and the grace of her neck, which was the colour of old ivory. His bearing immediately became less constrained.

But Lelia became even more rigid. Signor Marcello saw, by a slight movement on her part, that she was about to flee, like a child whose feet fidget to be off. He tried to detain her by making her the subject of conversation.

"She has sacrificed herself for my poor wife and myself," he began, but obtained the opposite result to that at which he aimed. Lelia cried reproachfully, "Papa!" and darted off. Signor Marcello was hurt, and called after her:

"Lelia!"

She paused on the threshold of the dining-room, turned towards them, and stood resting her hands against the door-jambs. Massimo shuddered. It was the face he had dreaded—the marble sphinx, with downcast eyes. The vision lasted but an instant. Then Lelia looked up with a forced smile.

"I must go, Papa," she said—"that is, if you want any luncheon!"

"Oh, very well . . ." sighed Signor Marcello, more displeased than submissive.

Hardly had she left the room than he began to sing her praises. She was kind, intelligent, a musician, a skilful housewife. Massimo listened in silence. As soon as possible he brought the conversation round to Don Aurelio's dismissal, of which, of course, Signor Marcello had not yet heard. Massimo was as yet unacquainted with the particulars, but the fact itself was certain.

Signor Marcello was more disappointed and grieved than indignant. Four-and-twenty hours before he would have felt differently. Of Carnesecca, Massimo only knew that he had fled, and he greatly doubted whether Don Aurelio would be able to keep his engagement to luncheon. He also spoke of Donna Fedele, although he was unaware on what terms she stood at the Montanina. Signor Marcello expressed his pleasure at discovering that there was a link between them, repeating several times how glad he was, without giving any reason why, and without any special praise for any of the persons concerned, and going on to tell how the Vayla di Breas had come to settle in Arsiero. At this point Don Aurelio arrived.

He came in with a bright manner, and answered Signor Marcello's and Massimo's questions briefly. Yes, it was quite true that he must leave his benefice within a fortnight. But it was no one's fault. Ismaele was only a poor visionary. The rough time he had had at Posina had made him fancy there was persecution everywhere. A priest, with his mother and sister, were coming to Lago. Probably it was to assist them, poor things—while he, without any such claims upon him— And he shrugged his shoulders, as if it would be the easiest thing in the world for him to earn a livelihood. Changing the subject, he became eloquent in his account of Carnesecca's wanderings, saying that, at

the present moment, he was in bed in a comfortable little room at the Villino, in a state of beatitude. Well, perhaps not precisely of beatitude, because the three hundred and fifty-nine bones had begun to ache again, but, nevertheless—! The footman here announced that luncheon was served. Lelia was waiting in the dining-room.

* * * * *

The four seated themselves at the square table, one on each side. Lelia sat facing the glass door opening into the garden and commanding a view of the crags of Barco; Massimo was on her left. On her right sat Don Aurelio, who began talking to her at once, telling her he had often seen her coming down the road from the Battery, carrying wild flowers. He referred to the rhododendrons that grew luxuriantly where landslides have torn the slopes of Priaforà. She knew these well, and admitted that those wild spots were favourites of hers. Her voice was deeper and not so sweet as Donna Fedele's, but rich, sympathetic, and soft, nevertheless, suggesting as far as a woman's voice can the notes of a violoncello, and rich with personal feeling. Her answer to Don Aurelio's question, whether she was fond of solitudes, came hesitatingly and in the affirmative, but she added quickly, fearing she had not understood aright:

"Solitude, you say?"

"I really said 'solitudes.'"

Without looking at Massimo she felt he was about to speak, and hastened to renew the conversation with Don Aurelio, asking him if he had seen the rhododendrons of Priaforà in blossom. Alas! no, that was impossible! The Signorina forgot that he had only come to Sant' Ubaldo in October.

"You will see them in July," she said.

Don Aurelio smiled

"I am sorry to say that Don Aurelio is leaving us," Signor Marcello announced sadly.

"As a matter of fact it is not he who——" Massimo began.

"He is leaving us?" Lelia broke in, more astonished than grieved.

"They are driving him away," said Massimo, with some irritation, and determined to conquer the girl's assumption of indifference towards himself. She flung him a glance that seemed to say, "What have you to do with it?" and once more repeated, "He is giving us up?"

But when Alberti was determined, it was no easy matter to silence him.

"Yes, indeed, they are driving him away," he reiterated, speaking rather to Don Aurelio himself than to Lelia. "The archpriest has dismissed him. He is sending him away because he has housed a Protestant! Or it may be perhaps because he believes him to be a Modernist."

To Massimo, Don Aurelio's humble meekness towards his enemies seemed excessive, and sometimes irritated him, as it had a moment since when he had alluded to his needy successor. He was burning to tell him so openly, to make him see the truth clearly. During his outburst Don Aurelio could only protest in monosyllables, but when his friend had finished he expressed the pain such violent language and these unproved accusations caused him.

"He is capable of it," murmured Signor Marcello with bowed head, alluding to the archpriest. "Quite capable of it—quite!"

"The archpriest knows perfectly well I am not a Modernist," Don Aurelio went on with a last protesting gesture. His superior had, indeed, assured him of his most complete satisfaction on that point.

"Nonsense!" said Signor Marcello. "You a Modernist indeed!"

"He certainly is not," Massimo interposed. "At

the most he may be a Modernist only in the way Antonio Rosmini was. They say I am one also," he added candidly.

Don Aurelio laughed heartily.

"You . . . you . . . I" he cried, with a blankness that was eloquent.

Massimo understood, and looking round, met a glance from Lelia's eyes that pierced him like a shaft of fire. For an instant he felt blinded, and it was only by an effort that he brought himself to answer Don Aurelio.

"Yes," he said, "I may be more of a Modernist than you are, but I am not one, after all."

What a significant glance from the marble sphinx that had been!

Signor Marcello stretched out his hand, and laid it upon Massimo's, that rested on the table.

"My dear young friend," said he, "remember an old man's words: 'There is but one true form of Modernism, and that is the Modernism of Dante! Therein is the whole Catholic creed to the last iota, inspired by ardent faith, bringing the Gospel in simple language to all men, regardless of the shades of their opinions. Dante, dear friend, Dante! And now talk about the rhododendrons again.'"

But instead Massimo spoke of the room Carne-secca had left unoccupied at Sant' Ubaldo, saying there was no longer any excuse for his intruding upon Signor Marcello. The old man, astonished and somewhat hurt by this display of formality, protested that he could not hear of Massimo's leaving. His friend's speech seemed to upset Don Aurelio also, who generally found it easier to express his feelings by certain restless physical movements than by words. But Massimo persisted. Like Don Aurelio, he also accompanied broken sentences with various gestures, that were the visible signs of unspoken arguments.

"I assure you," cried his friend, half in jest,

half in earnest, "by your presence in my house you would injure me more than poor Carnesecca did, and I can't have you! You will have to listen to Signor Marcello."

A conviction that he was being encompassed by some irresistible influence suddenly overwhelmed Massimo. His brain struggled feebly to send forth the words "Then I will return to Milan," but they remained unsaid, and he kept silence.

Lelia had not spoken since meeting the glance which had said, "Are you interested in me?" She could not forgive herself her own glance. She perfectly understood Signor Marcello's displeasure, but she could not see why Don Aurelio did not wish to have his friend at Sant' Ubaldo. She encouraged her forced contempt for Massimo by telling herself he did not really wish to leave, that if he had wished it, instead of bringing the matter up at the luncheon-table, he would have come down later with his luggage ready strapped, and said to Signor Marcello: "There is no longer any excuse for my remaining here, and I am going." But, of course, Signor Alberti preferred a comfortable room, a nice house, and a good table to the priest's poor home and meagre fare.

* * * * *

So he was a Modernist as well! Of Modernism Lelia knew less than nothing. She disliked the name, and she disliked her own ignorant interpretation of it. She had never thought about her own attitude towards religious observance. A creature of instinct and of passions rather than of reason, the vagaries of her fancy and ideas were in no wise checked by the regular, if mechanical, performance of religious duties. She looked upon Modernism, not as an effort to adapt traditional Catholicism to modern conditions, but rather as a doctrine that sought to substitute for the ancient religious obligations of Catholic tradi-

tion new obligations that were more extensive, less clearly defined, and heavier.

At times she prayed devoutly, but always with the traditional forms and never spontaneously. Her prayers were for definite and immediate objects, and not for Divine love and for spiritual blessing. Her impulse, nevertheless, was sincere, and she found a help in prayer of this kind.

She imagined, and the thought was odious to her, that Modernism was incompatible with traditional prayer. The only aspect of Modernism that could appeal to her was its element of rebellion, but she judged it an abortive, half-hearted rebellion at best. And so Signor Alberti was a Modernist! This helped her in her determination to despise him.

The fruit had been placed on the table and Lelia rose.

* * * * *

Her obstinate silence after that fiery glance, from which Massimo still smarted, was, to his mind, the necessary complement of that glance, and was characteristic of his conception of her as a marble sphinx. In rising with the others when Lelia rose, the young man recalled certain teasing words a friend had once spoken, the recollection of which often galled him: "You have not yet experienced it, but when you do fall in love, it will be sudden and overwhelming." As he passed into the drawing-room behind Lelia he noticed certain tiny red spots upon her white neck. He was glad to see these, for they seemed to diminish somewhat the power of physical attraction which this strange creature possessed. Taking Don Aurelio's arm, he scolded him gently for not wishing to have him at Sant' Ubaldo. But Don Aurelio had found a useful excuse. "You would compromise me!" said he, laughing his hearty laugh that shook his whole frame. "Is it not true, Signorina?"

"It seems to me," she said, without looking at either of them, "that compromise cannot matter now." And she busied herself in pouring out the coffee.

Don Aurelio, always slow to recognise a thrust, failed absolutely to recognise this one, which wounded Massimo more deeply than himself. He murmured humbly: "I am only in jest, only in jest, you know!" and added, in his simplicity and inexperience of *double entente*:

"Poor Massimo cannot compromise any one."

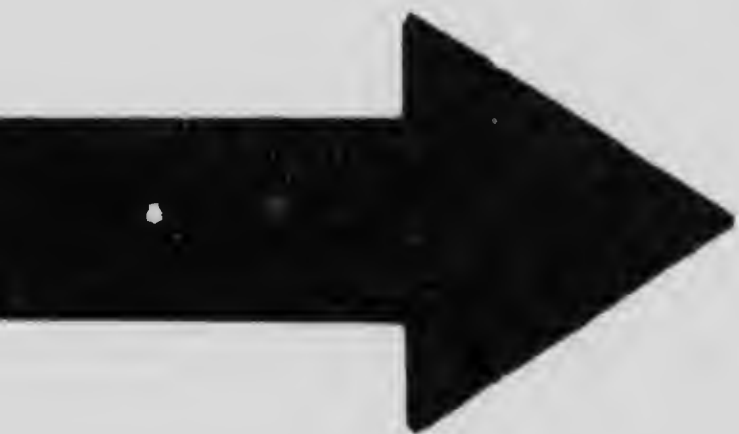
Massimo was somewhat embarrassed, but said nothing. Lelia, however, smiled slightly, thus making Don Aurelio aware of his blunder.

"Ah, well . . . yes . . . of course . . . what nonsense!" he stammered, answering her with a laugh almost of regret for unspoken words. "I speak simply, and must be taken simply."

Signor Marcello called them out to the terrace to see a fine effect of gathering storm-clouds. On the north the sun was beating upon the heights of Rotzo in Val d'Astico, that stood out, brightly gilded, against the clear blue, while the brow of the same uplands was lit up towards the east by continuous summer lightning, flashing out of a sky of turquoise. Lelia hastened to obey the summons, pretending to have forgotten that she had not given Signor Alberti his coffee. When, a moment later, he appeared on the terrace with Don Aurelio, she withdrew, and slipping into the dining-room, crossed to the threshold of the garden door. A thunderstorm always made her nerves tingle with a mad delight, and she liked to enjoy it alone, drawn to it like a small cloud saturated with electricity. If there had been wind, she would have rushed out as she did sometimes at night, letting her hair blow wild. But as no leaf stirred, and as she heard Signor Marcello's voice asking for her, she returned to the terrace.

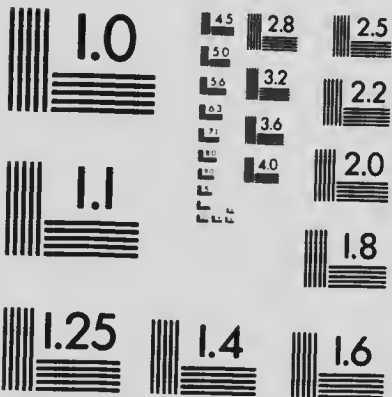
"The coffee, dear," said the old man. "Neither Alberti nor I have had ours."





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She murmured some excuse. In helping Massimo in that manner was not precisely rude, but there was something ungracious both in her face and bearing. Don Aurelio, who noted everything, with meekness indeed, but with keenness as well, reflected in his artless optimism that the memory of her lover could no longer be very vivid in her heart, if she could treat his dearest friend thus coldly.

"Where was it," said Signor Marcello suddenly to Massimo, "that you met that Benedetto from Subiaco?"

"At Jenne."

"And what was he like?"

"Well, I will not say that I adored him, for I object to the word, but I loved him better than I have ever loved any one in this world, except my mother."

Massimo had no idea the sphinx would speak.

"Was he indeed a saint, then?" said she.

"I beg your pardon, Signorina," he retorted, "but I have never felt the necessity for saintliness in those I love."

"But is it true he performed miracles?"

"No, he performed no miracles."

"Did he really die in a woman's arms?"

Don Aurelio, amazed that a young girl should ask such a question, could not suppress an exclamation of protest.

"Lelia!" Signor Marcello ejaculated severely.

With flaming face Massimo exclaimed:

"It is a vile calumny! I never heard it before!"

"I read it somewhere," said Lelia calmly.

Don Aurelio intervened.

"I would have you know, Signorina, that the man of whom you speak may have erred in matters of doctrine; on that point I can express no opinion. But, had the Church pointed out his errors to him, he would have been the first to recognise them. As to his private life, after his conversion it was

one of perfect purity. I can answer for that, at least."

Signor Marcello, who was following the discussion with a nervous twitching of every line of his expressive face, now cut it short in a voice of authority. Saying that he wanted to speak privately with Don Aurelio, he proposed that Lelia should take Alberti for a walk in the garden. Lelia cast him a half-dazed glance, and then looked towards Massimo as if beseeching his support.

"It is too hot," she objected.

The young man protested that he was quite ready to go alone, but Signor Marcello would listen to no excuses. A heavy bank of clouds was rapidly darkening the villa's green surroundings, and the rain was more to be feared than the heat.

* * * * *

"You know the Montanina well?" said Lelia, as she passed out by the south door that opens upon the green slope, studded with pines and mountain-oaks, and crowned, far above, with chestnuts. "You have seen the sundial, and Blessed Alberto Magno, and the goat's head, through whose mouth flow the waters of the Riderella?" All this she delivered like a tiresome and oft-repeated lesson, and, walking in front of him, did not appear to notice that he made no answer. She took the path leading upwards, on one side of the villa. "Do you know the Fontana Modesta also?" she inquired, as they passed near the small cave, filled with the spring's soft murmuring. On she went, pointing out this feature and that, regardless of Alberti's silence, and with all the perfunctoriness of a professional guide.

While she was speaking the words "the source of the Riderella" he interrupted her. He had been waiting to speak only until they should have reached a sufficient distance from the house.

"Signorina," said he, "I did not insist with Signor Marcello because I saw that I should cause him pain, but I wish you to understand that you need not put yourself out for me. If you will allow me, I will finish the walk alone."

Lelia answered coldly: "As you like."

The path being narrow, she stepped aside to let him pass, standing with downcast eyes, like a statue of marble.

"Thank you," said the young man, quivering with indignation, and he passed her without a look. Why had this girl taken it into her head to treat him thus? Did she think he was going to make love to her? He could not fancy any other reason. And those foolish questions concerning Benedetto had simply been a piece of pointed impudence. Make love to her indeed!

But that fiery glance! In thinking of it Massimo recalled the music he had heard in the night. What lay concealed in the soul of this mysterious creature? Her stiffness and indifference, her silent discourtesy, and her insolent words were not only intentional but incomprehensible as well. What reason had she to suppose he intended making love to her? What sign had he given? A suspicion flashed upon him. Don Aurelio had taken it into his head that his friend should marry young. Was it possible he had chosen this girl for him, that some inkling of his plan had reached her? No, it was impossible, and that for a hundred reasons, and if on account of nothing else, at least for the friendship between Don Aurelio and Signor Marcello. The conclusion, then? The conclusion was that one thing only was clear—the girl's pointed hostility. This he might have regarded as armour against budding affection had affection had time to bud. But as it was . . . ?

He sat down to rest upon a rustic bench beneath the chestnut-tree. The great clouds were veiling Torrarò, the shadows of the trees swayed in the wind

on the flower-strewn banks, the white villa was smiling brightly down below in the sunshine, and the dull roar of the torrent and of the whirlpools of Perale rose through the silence of chestnut-groves. But Massimo could enjoy neither the shade nor the fresh breeze, nor the grand and gentle beauty of all things. He felt that beauty was a stranger to the bitterness of his heart, felt himself a stranger to beauty. He wondered what course he should pursue. He would not go back to the Montanina, and he must either persuade Don Aurelio to take him in or he must return to Milan. He took pleasure in recalling all the bitterness of his heart, mingling that which lay at the bottom, almost outside the bounds of memory, with the bitterness of the present hour. He tried to concentrate his thoughts on Don Aurelio's sad plight, for Signorina Lelia's discourtesy was really not worth worrying about. But Don Aurelio! The old temptation rose up again, grim and violent. Would it not be better to break away at once and for all from the people who persecute such men as Don Aurelio, the very salt of the earth? But immediately he felt the grave eyes of Don Aurelio himself fixed upon him, the eyes of the victim who was all meekness towards his persecutors and the impulse of rebellion was defeated. But to cease fighting the enemies of the Church for the Church's own sake, to stand by and watch the struggle—this was no temptation, but a wise counsel. But what should he do in the world, then? Ignore the world, obtain an appointment as parish doctor—why not? In some village, among the hills, would it not be happiness to taste something of the joys of love? Presently he saw Don Aurelio come out of the villa, look upwards, and start in his direction, and he went down to meet him. Don Aurelio appeared astonished to see him alone.

“And the Signorina?”

Massimo said he had begged her not to put her-

Lelia.

self out for him, and hastened to add that, being alone, he had had time to think of his own plans. He was resolved to leave the Montanina that very evening, and still hoped to occupy Carnesecca's room. Don Aurelio answered firmly, and at the same time regretfully, that he had just now promised Signor Marcello that Massimo would stay at least a fortnight at the Montanina, if not all the time he had arranged to spend at Lago di Velo. Massimo repeated that this was out of the question. If Don Aurelio would not have him as his guest during the few days that remained of his ministry, he would go back to Milan. Don Aurelio seized this favourable opportunity.

"Is it an interest in any special person that calls you back to Milan?" he asked.

Massimo answered promptly in the negative and smiled.

"Really, no? You can assure me of that?"

"Really, no! My hand upon it!" cried the young man, extending his hand, which Don Aurelio pressed.

"In that case," he said, "you must not disappoint this old man so cruelly."

But Massimo was so determined that the priest was forced to conclude something unpleasant had happened. He asked if the Signorina's questions about Benedetto had offended him. No, she had spoken in ignorance, repeating newspaper gossip. Perhaps there had been further discussion in the garden? No, there had not. But Don Aurelio pressed him so hard that at last Massimo confessed the real reason. The girl could not bear him, and had let him see it. This Don Aurelio refused to believe, and made him describe all Lelia's hostile actions, which appeared insignificant enough in the telling; but the priest admitted that certain things that might almost pass unobserved may be keenly felt. It was only with difficulty that he extracted

a promise from Massimo to postpone his departure until the morrow. He should be free to leave the next night if his impressions were confirmed. He advised him, at all events, to pay a farewell visit to the Villino delle Rose immediately, and pointed out the little house, showing like a red berry on the edge of the plain of Arsiero, that looks towards Seghe. Don Aurelio urged his friend to start at once, that he might be sure of finding Donna Fedele at home.

When Massimo had gone the priest returned to Signor Marcello, with whom he had a long talk. Then he left him to go back to Sant' Ubaldo. Signor Marcello sent for Lelia. He told her how dear Alberti was to him, and said she must surely understand why. He wished him to remain some time at the Montanina, and he therefore begged her to be gracious to him. The old man spoke in low tones and with great gentleness, as one who wishes his manner to convey the seriousness of unspoken words. Lelia, who had stood listening, pale and motionless, murmured that she had not been conscious of ungraciousness towards Signor Alberti. Signor Marcello looked at her, but did not answer. Presently he said, with the same gentleness as before :

"I ask it as a favour."

Hardly above a whisper she answered, "Yes, Papa."

Then going to her room, she locked the door and burst into a violent fit of weeping.

IV

Massimo returned from the Villino delle Rose shortly before the dinner-hour. Signor Marcello came out to meet him, and drawing his arm through his own, repeated lovingly to him how delighted he was to have him at the Montanina. He meant to show

him many treasured old letters, wherein he, Massimo, was mentioned. A few days ago he would not have believed himself able to do this, but now, largely owing to Massimo's presence at the Montanina, he felt quite strong. The young man, who was both touched and troubled, was at a loss how to introduce the painful but necessary question of his departure. He was still casting about in his mind for a suggestion when the bell rang for dinner. Then it was too late to speak, and he postponed the difficult announcement until later.

Lelia was late for dinner. She was dressed in black and wore a bunch of pansies in her belt. She was very pale, and ate scarcely anything. With a visible effort she forced herself to put some questions to Massimo as to how he had spent the afternoon, paying but slight attention to his answers. Signor Marcello glanced frequently at the black gown and at the flowers she wore, with a look half tender, half regretful. He talked a great deal and with affectionate admiration of Donna Fedele, speaking of her former beauty, the youth that still shone in her brown eyes, and sweet voice. Looking at Lelia, he said how sorry he was that the lady no longer came to the Montanina as before.

"To tell the truth," said Lelia, "it is for us to go to see her."

Signor Marcello's face beamed with satisfaction and gratitude, and taking the hand that she allowed to rest limply in his, he pressed it tenderly.

Then the conversation turned upon Don Aurelio's dismissal. "Who is this archpriest?" Massimo inquired.

"Gésummaria!" cried Signor Marcello, covering his eyes with his big, thin hands, a gesture that spoke volumes. And "Gésummaria!" was all he would say, nor did Massimo press him. Lelia's eyes were downcast, but her face was not sphinxlike; it wore rather the expression of one who disapproves and

is grieved. This expression of hers goaded Massimo into saying that Don Aurelio was a priest whom the most uncompromising conservatives, even the *intransigenti*, had no excuse for persecuting. He was a follower of Rosmini, and had never been suspected of Modernism even in Rome, when he was living there. A few questions from Signor Marcello easily led the young man to speak of his own life in Rome, of Subiaco, and of Jenne; how he had come to know Don Aurelio, Dom Clemente, and Benedetto, and the adventures of his dead friend from the time he disappeared from his house at Oria, in Valsolda, in order that he might dedicate himself to God, to his death in Rome, in the gardener's cottage at Villa Mayda. He told the story of his last hours, and placed in its true light the part Jeanne Dessalle had played. It was almost dark when he finished his story. Coffee and lights had been forgotten, and Signor Marcello and Lelia remained silent. Presently Giovanni entered, and asked if he should light the lamps.

"No," said Lelia promptly, in a hushed voice. Then she asked Massimo if he had known Jeanne Dessalle. He replied that he had seen her that night at Villa Mayda.

Was she beautiful? He really could not say. She had simply passed him in one of the ante-rooms. It was not yet dark, but, as it was raining hard, there was little light in the room. Her figure had struck him as graceful. Lelia then inquired what had become of her. No one knew. And where was Benedetto buried? Massimo hesitated an instant.

"At Campo Verano . . . for the time being," he said.

"For the time being?"

The same astonished question fell from the lips of both his listeners. Massimo did not answer.

"And what will Don Aurelio do?" Lelia asked. "Where will he go?"

"I do not know."

The room was full of shadows, and the three rose from the table in silence.

* * * * *

Giovanni having been ordered to light the drawing-room, had lighted a large lamp near the fireplace. Signor Marcello begged Lelia to play for their guest, and at the same time he rang the bell, intending to have the lamp by the piano lighted. Lelia hastened to prevent this.

"No, Papa, please not!"

She preferred this dim light, and Signor Marcello did not insist, but went out to the terrace, with stooping shoulders, to watch the darkness over in the west that was dotted with the lights of Arsiero.

"What sort of music would you like?" said Lelia. "Serious or light?"

"Signorina," Massimo said, "you must not put yourself out for me."

Remembering their conversation in the garden, Lelia said to herself: "He evidently has no other expression."

"Perhaps you are not fond of music?" she said.

"Perhaps not."

He smiled slightly as he spoke, and his smile hurt her like a blow upon the cheek. Without a word, she opened the piano and began playing something from Schumann's "Carnival" from memory.

She played it too nervously and without sweetness. When she had finished Massimo thanked her dryly. That would have been the moment to go to Signor Marcello and press the question of departure, but he hesitated. The girl's conduct was beginning to strike him in a new light. The black dress and the pansies had jarred upon him as a sort of unnecessary hint to himself, but her questions during dinner, the interest she had shown in his story, and now her way of answering his "perhaps not," show-

ing that she had understood his feelings and his irony, her choice of the author and of the passionate music, the very nervousness of the execution, and the immobility that followed it, gave him the impression of a state of mind that was neither hostile nor indifferent. He could not help thinking it a little strange of Signor Marcello to leave them together as he had done. For a minute or so Lelia let the fingers of her right hand run softly along the high notes, and then she inquired carelessly if he wished to hear something else.

He remembered that melody by Bellini he had heard in the night.

"Will you play 'Sola, furtiva al tempio'?"

"'Norma'?"

She sought the beginning, but after the first notes struck a wrong one, tried others at random, and murmuring, "I don't know it," took her hands from the keyboard. Massimo was tempted to say, "You knew it well enough in the night!" But meanwhile the girl had tried again in an absent-minded way, and again had failed. Then, almost in a whisper, and studying the palm of her hand, she said:

"Was not your Benedetto a heretic?"

"No!" cried Massimo. "His teaching may sometimes have erred, but he lived in obedience to the Church, and preached that obedience always."

"Then would you mind explaining to me why they persecuted him as a heretic?"

The tone of the question was hostile, but Massimo answered, nevertheless.

"Willingly. Now, if you please."

"No, no! To-morrow or the day after. Now I am going to play for Papa."

With a scale of chords Lelia put an end to the dialogue that had been carried on so softly and rapidly. Then she began an *Étude* by Chopin, and Massimo concluded that the Signorina did not really wish

to hear his explanations, but, at any rate, it would be impossible to interrupt her now, and tell her the day after to-morrow would be too late.

"This is for Papa, you know," she said, still playing. "I don't care for it."

Massimo listened for some time, and then rose to go to Signor Marcello. He paused before the fireplace, where the light fell full upon the frieze of marguerites interwoven with the motto, *Forse che si, forse che no* ("Perhaps yes, perhaps no").¹ The motto was so entirely in harmony with his own uncertainty that he looked curiously to see how it ended. He said to himself: "If it is cut short at *yes*, I will go. If it is not cut short, and ends in *no*, I will remain." He was conscious of reflecting that, according to all probability, it would end in *no*. The motto finished with *perhaps!*

Massimo stood gazing upon it, somewhat baffled, but presently he saw that there was another test he could apply. The marguerites in the frieze were all losing their leaves, but the one where the motto ended still retained a few. He might pluck these in imagination, and see if the answer were *yes* or *no*.

A soft voice whispered close behind him:

"Are you consulting the oracle?"

The young man turned quickly. Donna Fedele stood smiling at him, her finger at her lips, for Heller's *Étude* was not yet finished. She had arrived while Lelia was playing Schumann, and had been chatting with Signor Marcello until, seeing Massimo contemplating the frieze, she had come behind him.

"I am really here on your account," she said, still smiling. The music ceased, and she turned from the fireplace towards Lelia, who had risen.

¹ This strange motto, which Gabriele d'Annunzio has chosen for the title of his latest novel, may be found running through the rich decorations of the wooden ceiling of a room near Isabella d'Este's boudoir in the ducal palace at Mantua.—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE.

She kissed her affectionately, as if no shadow had ever touched her friendship for the girl. Congratulating her on her playing, she took her arm and returned with her to the fireside. Signor Marcello stood looking into the drawing-room.

"Did you know," Donna Fedele began, addressing Lelia, "that Signor Alberti's mother and I were friends? He is going to dine with me to-morrow, for we must have a long talk about his mother. She was such a dear, poor thing!"

Massimo, who was both troubled and surprised, could only murmur:

"Thank you, but——"

"Just fancy," she went on, as if she had not heard his *but*, "Signor Alberti was kind enough to come and see me to-day, and I, who ever since last night have been meaning to invite him, entirely forgot to do so. I am so absent-minded! I came myself this evening instead of writing, because I had to go to Arsiero any way, and so had the carriage. But now it is late, and I must be off."

She kissed Lelia again, pressed Signor Marcello's hand, and holding out her own to Massimo, said, with her charming smile, and a slight dropping of her chin towards her breast:

"At seven, then."

"We will let him go for once," said Signor Marcello, in a tone of satisfaction.

Donna Fedele went out with Lelia, who walked with her as far as the carriage, that she had left at the main entrance.

* * * * *

Massimo resigned himself to postponing his departure, at least for a day, and persuaded himself that he was glad to do so only because it would please Don Aurelio. Signor Marcello made him sit with him on the terrace, and put his hand on the young man's shoulder.

"Dear Alberti," he said with a sigh. Massimo took his other hand in both of his and answered :

"I do not forget, sir."

The old hand pressed the young one convulsively, and a long silence followed. They could hear no steps on the gravel. Signor Marcello glanced into the drawing-room, but there was no one there.

"Did he ever speak to you of Lelia's family?" he said in an undertone.

At first Massimo did not understand the allusion. Then, suddenly enlightened, he exclaimed :

"Yes, yes—several times !"

"How much did he tell you?"

"He said it was just on account of the family that you opposed his wishes, but that he was sure of the girl, and would find a means of keeping her parents at a distance after his marriage."

"Did he really know her parents well? I ask because, in talking with me, he did not appear to."

"Yes, yes ; he knew them perfectly well. He told me the father, who carefully hid his evildoings, was quite as corrupt as the mother, whose evil reputation is a matter of public knowledge."

Signor Marcello listened again, and then began talking of Lelia, who, he said, was a living confutation of the theories of heredity. He praised her virtue, which was as adamant, her warm heart, which often led her to commit acts of charitable folly, and made her the idol of all the servants, in spite of certain sudden outbursts of temper. He told of a little child whose mother was dead, and whom Lelia had one day brought home with her to save it from a drunken father's brutality, and whom she proposed taking care of herself, although, poor girl ! she had not the slightest idea how to set to work. He admitted certain peculiarities in her character that, he said, were more apparent than real, and pleaded her early and sad experience of life in her child-

hood as an excuse for language that was at times more bold, perhaps, than was seemly in a young girl.

And now, in thinking of the future and of those parents, the idea of leaving Lelia unprotected caused him the greatest anxiety. His only hope was in God, and the only blessing for which he now asked was a worthy protector for her who was dearer to him than a daughter.

"You will live a long time yet," said Massimo.

"Dear Alberti, do you think it is kind to wish that for me? And, besides . . ."

The old man paused.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Massimo. "Besides what?"

"And, besides, my dear young friend, I am aware of something I do not speak of."

There were steps upon the gravel, coming from the Riderella bridge. The bell above a door announced Lelia, who was entering the drawing-room from the open verandah. She came out to the terrace, kissed Signor Marcello good-night, saluted Massimo graciously enough, and withdrew.

* * * * *

It was after ten o'clock, and Giovanni brought Signor Marcello his coffee and the brass lamp. After the billiard-room door had closed upon him, Massimo still lingered on the terrace, contemplating the huge shadows of the mountains, breathing in the cool night air, and thinking how strangely confidential Signor Marcello's communications had been. He had doubtless failed to reflect that they might convey precisely that meaning which was most repugnant to his fatherly heart. At the same time Massimo confessed to himself that something had indeed stirred within him at the sound of Lelia's step upon the gravel, and that her friendly good-night had caused him at once displeasure and delight. He had better not dwell

upon all this, he thought, as he passed into the drawing-room on his way to bed.

On reaching the fireplace he raised his eyes almost mechanically to the frieze of marguerites and the mysterious *perhaps*. There was no longer any need to question the marguerites concerning his departure. He was tempted to consult them on another subject now, but he refrained. He stepped back from the fireplace and turned unconsciously to the piano. Awakening to a sense of his movement, he asked himself wonderingly what had prompted it, and stooped to examine the volume of Heller on the music-rack as if he had come there for that especial purpose. But he was possessed by the sense of Lelia's presence and personality that breathed from objects, like a perfume perceptible only to the spirit. Upon the chair he saw a pansy that must have fallen from her belt, and he stooped to pick it up, but drew back his hand, and, turning, started upstairs, resisting a strong temptation to go down again. Hearing steps in the drawing-room, Giovanni appeared on the threshold, inquiring if he might put out the lights, and, having received permission, proceeded to do so. At the moment Massimo was glad of this interruption. When he reached his room he told himself that, had he picked up the pansy, he would have placed it beside his dead friend's picture, and he regretted that he had not done so.

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Regardless of Teresina's protests, Lelia had filled her room for the night with roses, honeysuckle, and acacia. It was a weakness of hers. She had as many flowers as possible brought to her room unknown to Signor Marcello, and she delighted in the strongest scents. That night she had a sea of flowers. She stuck several bunches of acacia between the bed-head and the wall, and a bunch of roses between the wall and a holy picture. She loved to lie in bed and

feel the petals falling upon her face. Teresina begged her to leave all three windows open, and to this she agreed. As soon as Teresina had left the room she put out the light, turned upon her side, indulging her consciousness of fragrance as if she were listening to some caressing language, and gazing through the window at the black, crescent-shaped crown of woods, at the sharp dolomitic peaks against the dark sky, and neither thinking nor wishing to think.

CHAPTER III

THE WOOF

I

DON TITA FANTUZZO, archpriest of Velo d'Astico, said Mass as usual at half-past seven; and, after some lengthy prayers in the sacristy, proceeded down the stairs leading from the church to the parsonage, where he met his sister-in-law, Signora Bettina Pagan, *veuve* Fantuzzo, and the chaplain, Don Emanuele Costi de Villata. The e two were going down together, or, rather, not together, for the chaplain was a few steps ahead; but his progress was impeded by the sense of the presence behind him, while Signora Bettina was hindered by a feeling of obsequiousness towards the presence before, and also somewhat by the mere knowledge of her position as rear-guard.

"What are you marching in single file for, like a pair of cart-horses?" inquired the jovial archpriest, pausing close behind his sister-in-law. "'Se casco mi, Caschemo tuti tri!' ('Tumble me, Tumble all three!'). Lines by the poet Zanella," he quoted merrily.

Behind her black veil Signora Bettina's vermilion nose took on a deeper hue, while a fleeting smile lit up Don Emanuele's watery eyes, a sign rather

of deference for a superior's wit than of any appreciation of it.

"Cape!" muttered Signora Bettina. This invocation in dialect of a favourite crustacean inhabitant of the sea was an ejaculation that was often upon her lips, and, in the present case, expressed a gentle self-justification and the fitting reverence that had forbidden her advancing at the chaplain's side. On reaching the parsonage door the latter stepped aside to the right and Signora Bettina to the left, while the archpriest, hastening his steps and murmuring, "Here I am! Here I am!" passed in in triumph, with a great flapping of priestly robes.

They assembled in the little dining-room of the parsonage, where coffee stood ready for the archpriest and for Signora Bettina, who was in the habit of going to Communion every day. Don Emanuele had said his Mass at five, and now sought permission to withdraw under pretext of studying. The archpriest detained him.

"Don't study so much. You will only muddle your brain," said he.

The other, who was clever at feigning, appeared to yield simply from a sense of deference, whereas, in reality, this little formality had been privately arranged with his superior, and he began talking of a certain sick person he had visited that morning. The archpriest, meanwhile, was taking his coffee and milk in an old chipped basin, and dipping into it some broken bits of yesterday's bread. Signora Bettina was having her coffee in a similar basin, but with some of those Pandoli for which the town of Schio is famous.

"I am ashamed to be eating these biscuits, Don Tita," said she, raising one to her mouth.

"Be ashamed, then, to your heart's content," replied the excellent Don Tita, laughing. "Shame is a virtuous sentiment." And as she still hesitated,

in red-faced silence, to bite off the top of the biscuit, he added, laughing still: "Go ahead! Go ahead! Aren't you a native of Dolo, and is that not Dolo bread?"

"Poor Dolo!" cried Signora Bettina, turning with a smile to Don Emanuele, and speaking in Italian now. "What ever am I to do? The archpriest cannot forgive me for having been born there."

"Just as he cannot forgive me for having been born at Udine," the chaplain replied, smiling also.

"I should think not!" Don Tita exclaimed. "Udine indeed! Fountains without water and an aristocracy without manners!"

Now, Don Emanuele was not only a native of Udine but came of a noble family as well; but Don Tita, of course, was only jesting. His face, his person, his bearing, and his language, all pointed to the young chaplain's gentle birth and education. In appearance he was in all things the reverse of Don Tita. Don Tita, short and rubicund, with a merry face, as heavy as his own witticisms, and eyes that twinkled, despite his honest piety, inspired rather by worldly shrewdness than by celestial yearnings, was most careless in his dress, anything but scrupulous as regards cleanliness, and familiar and simple in manner, sometimes even to the point of rudeness.

In Don Emanuele, tall and slender, one saw the future prelate. He had the face of an ascetic—a lofty brow beneath a delicate and perfect arch of light hair, thin cheeks, deep-sunk eyes under bushy brows; the eyes themselves of a pale blue, with mysterious pupils and irises moist, as it were, with meekness, and, like windows of painted glass, open to light but closed upon the soul. In his bearing and gestures there was a precocious dignity and sense of just measure. His language also was studied and cautious. He spoke softly, in a cold, slightly nasal voice and with aristocratic enunciation. It was

said that in his early youth he had wished to join a religious Order, but that his bishop, for some reason unknown, had dissuaded him. It was also said that his family had strongly desired him to seek an appointment in connection with the *curia* in Rome, but that it had been his own ardent wish to devote himself, for a time at least, to the cure of souls, at a distance from his family and in a different diocese.

Inwardly, also, Don Tita and Don Emanuele were dissimilar, but less so than outwardly. Don Tita was more complex. Don Tita's spirit might be compared to his face, whose fundamental hardness was concealed by flexible muscles and soft flesh; or, less gruesomely, to a green, flowery field, where the rock is not a hand's breadth below the surface; or to certain small, soft mountain peaches, in which the teeth are quickly brought into contact with the uncompromising stone. On the surface he was all good nature, verbal acquiescence, and willingness to accommodate: but his heart was hard and cold with a religious conscience that was stereotyped by antiquated doctrines and dominated by tradition, the letter of the law, and the authority of the hierarchy. It was a conscience full of conviction, and a slave to the desire to perform his religious duty everywhere, at all times, and at whatever cost. But to Don Tita charity towards his neighbour was merely a duty imposed by a stern external law. Obedient to the gospel, he was generous in bestowing alms, but he neither loved nor esteemed the poor. The most grievous sins of his flock, above all, any public exhibition of disrespect for the sacerdotal office, irritated rather than grieved him, and made his hands itch—his heavy hands, that were not unskilled in a certain form of oratory. As to his morals, they were of a scrupulous, almost mistrustful purity. A man of many prayers, he despised mysticism, which he looked upon as sentimentality, except when met

with in the saints or in their writings; for to him the saints were especial beings, men born with the nimbus decreed to them by canonisation after death.

He had a fair knowledge of theology, and was not entirely destitute of literary culture; he had been Professor of Classics in the seminary, although, indeed, he knew no Greek. His reading consisted exclusively of newspapers, magazines, and Catholic books. Only Italian printed matter came to the parsonage for him, but for Don Emanuele there came the *Stimmen aus Maria Laach*, and other foreign publications, principally German. This strong food was not for the excellent Don Tita, but nevertheless filled him with admiration for Don Emanuele's powers of mastication. Admiration, not envy, for Don Tita was not ambitious, and was satisfied with his lot, his only desire being, perhaps, promotion to a parish in the city, that he might escape from the mountains that oppressed him, and where he might enjoy the society of old friends and colleagues. This was the height of his ambition. But as to Don Emanuele, nephew of a cardinal, son of a privy-chamberlain to his Holiness, and brother of one of the noble-guardsmen, Don Tita believed him destined to great things. If the humble chaplain of Riese had become Sovereign Pontiff, why should not a chaplain, favoured by fortune as was Don Emanuele, achieve the same greatness? The archpriest's bearing towards the younger man was difficult to define. He really stood somewhat in awe of him, but he sought to hide this sentiment beneath a display of jocose familiarity. He felt Don Emanuele's superiority, and was never entirely at his ease with him. He believed him to be a tower of knowledge because he spoke German, nevertheless he was convinced that, as a preacher, he, Don Tita, surpassed him. His vanity was flattered by the fact that he had such a chaplain, but there were times when he could not help thinking that the

parsonage would be a pleasanter place without Don Emanuele.

Don Tita would perhaps have been happier without his chaplain, because Don Emanuele did not speak the dialect, because his manners were refined, and because he was the living negation of all that is jovial. But in the main both were hewn from the same stone. In Don Tita, however, there was need of much scraping before the natural rock was reached, whereas Don Emanuele was a smooth and highly-polished monolith. Notwithstanding his knowledge of the diabolical German language, he was far less clever than the archpriest. The son of an Austrian woman of rank, he had learnt French and English from his sisters' *bonnes* and governesses. It was said that his progress in theology was slow, notwithstanding his persistent application. But many visits to Rome, where he had been the guest of his uncle the Cardinal—a man of genius, extremely sociable, and surrounded by friends—had done for him what long immersion in good Bordeaux may do for certain insipid biscuits. This great personage, the family divinity, had been a sun to his asteroid of a nephew, and, all unconsciously and unintentionally, had attracted him to his own orbit from the time that the asteroid was still studying grammar. It is true the lad already displayed, both in face and character, a singular predisposition for high ecclesiastical office. At ten he was a little man fully equipped with all the manners and graces of the best society, a stranger to all games and boyish friendships, orderly, respectful, quaintly discreet in his infrequent discourses, measured in his expressions of affection towards his relatives, regulating such expressions according to their different degrees of relationship, devout, and self-contained. His mother, the Cardinal's sister, and a very pious woman, was at once proud of this son and disappointed in him. It was a joy to her to know that he was sincerely religious, and

an anxiety to know nothing further concerning him. The Cardinal had never been like this—his was an open nature. When little Emanuele was between six and eight, to all who asked him what he was going to be when he grew up he would answer promptly, "A bishop"; between eight and twelve the answer was, "A priest," but between twelve and fourteen he would only repeat obstinately, "I don't know, I don't know!" The honest answer at that time would have been, "A cardinal." Still, he was no hypocrite nor was he consciously ambitious. He honestly felt himself called to enter the Church, and he persuaded himself that his birth and connections providentially predisposed him to rise to dignity and power in her service, and that this lofty sentiment sanctified certain ambitious longings whose voices he had heard within him in early days, not without certain pricks of conscience. By degrees these longings had become so enveloped in the mantle of pious yearnings as to be completely hidden from his conscience. The mantle was both wide and heavy. Don Emanuele's religious zeal was not inferior to that of Don Aurelio, his religious convictions were no less deep, his life and thoughts no less pure, no less free from any stain of concession to lustful tendencies. But his conception of God, and, above all, his conception of the Church was different. Divine paternity was to him rather a formula in which he believed than a truth which he felt and which was precious to him. With his lips he called Him Father, while in his heart he felt Him to be a monarch. Don Emanuele's grandfather had been the imperious and formidable tyrant of his noble family, upon which he had forced his own austere asceticism, and a fear of God that in his children and grandchildren was irrevocably confused with a fear of himself. In Don Emanuele's mind the idea of God had shaped itself in accordance with his grandfather's imperiousness and piety. His

God was a species of infinite grandfather, holy and terrible. For him the Church was the only hierarchy, and was, in a way, his grandfather's house, where there was perpetual entertainment of priests and friars, as celestial beings superior to poor humanity.

The archpriest alone in all the countryside knew exactly under what circumstances Don Emanuele had come from Udine to be chaplain of Val d'Astico. It had been the will of the Cardinal that his nephew should devote himself, not to the career of the prelacy, but to the cure of souls, at a distance from his family and his aristocratic connections, in a diocese where his name was completely unknown. The archpriest had heard this from the Bishop of Vicenza. Don Emanuele himself had never mentioned it to him; indeed, he never spoke of himself, his family, or his future plans. He even seemed unwilling to speak of the Cardinal. By dint of much effort, the archpriest had succeeded in eliciting from him some information concerning the Cardinal, and had concluded that the nephew had more reverence than affection for his uncle. He therefore refrained from mentioning the Most Eminent, save at Christmas, New Year, Easter, and on the eve of the festival of St. John, the Eminence's patron saint. On these occasions he would say: "By the way, Don Emanuele . . . when you write to Rome, if you think best . . . understand . . . my most humble. . . ." Sometimes his words would be only: "By the way, when you write . . ." And he would complete the phrase with a respectful bending of head and body, and an obsequious spreading of hands.

II

"Madre Santa! How he talks!" cried Signora Bettina, turning a very red face to the chaplain, upon the archpriest's outburst concerning the aristocracy of Udine. The unruly member of Don Tita's flock had made a mistake when he fastened upon Signora Bettina the title of the "female Holy Ghost." She had not the slightest ambition to inspire either her brother-in-law or Don Emanuele, and was intent only upon her own sanctification. At the age of fifty-two she had become the widow of Dr. Fantuzzo, and being childless and well provided for, had arranged to occupy an apartment in the spacious parsonage at Velo d'Astico from the end of April to the beginning of November of each year, for which apartment she paid a tit to the archpriest. She had her own kitchen, and took only her morning coffee with Don Tita. She was of a good family of Dolo, and had remained faithful to certain habits of life differing somewhat from those of the archpriest, and notwithstanding her profound respect for the clergy, she was jealous of her liberty. That she might be preserved from her neighbour was, indeed, one of the fundamental characteristics of her extremely fervent piety. Signora Bettina desired and prayed that, for the greater glory of God, her good neighbour might be encouraged in the path of righteousness, and that her bad neighbour might be converted, but she would have neither of them hanging about the house—she would have no "bother"! She would look after her own soul, let others look after theirs. When her right hand succoured the poor her left hand remained in ignorance of the fact, but so also did her heart. Her heart was eager only to acquire mortgages on celestial estates, and on these terms, and through the agency of her brother-in-law, she was more willing to allow her loans to the Almighty to

take the form of surplices, copes, altar-clothes, sacred vessels, Masses, and Requiems than that of deeds of charity. But her heart had not always been thus. In her early youth it had been a heart full of secret and dangerous vagaries. The late Dr. Fantuzzo, however—a good-natured creature enough, but coarse and pleasantish and an inveterate drinker—had disillusioned her. Sprung from a deeply religious family, she had one day been terrified by being brought face to face with a temptation such as she had never dreamed of. She took refuge in fervent asceticism, and in all such external practices as were best adapted to surround her with an invulnerable reputation. Aided by an uncompromising theologian, who was mistrustful of all mysticism, her wavering earthly flames were gradually transformed into one great blaze, nominally the love of God, but really the desire for her own salvation. The world, always severe in its judgment of pious persons, might easily have set her down as a born egotist. But is the world capable of judging? Different social surroundings and a simpler spiritual training might not have smothered those harmless affections that had gladdened childhood and youth. In this imperviousness to friendship she resembled the chaplain rather than Don Tita. The merry Don Tita was quick to make friends, and found it easy to adapt himself to every one. Don Emanuele had never had a friend; in the midst of a merry crowd he seemed like a crow, dazed by the noise of a flock of cocks and hens. But Don Emanuele had not yet found his peace, and Signora Fantuzzo had. She had no other temptations save of eating three biscuits with her morning coffee, instead of two. of telling the archpriest to stop wiping his pen or his hair, now that it was white, and of praying that the Lord might see fit to destroy the cobbler's scandalous cat. She was more like Don Emanuele than Don Tita, and in fact, without drawing any

comparisons, which she would have scrupled to do, she felt for Don Emanuele a respect and admiration she would have shrunk from uttering, and cherished a secret reverence for him, whereas her open demonstrations of reverence were directed mainly towards the archpriest. In speaking of the latter, Signora Bettina might sometimes smile; in speaking of Don Emanuele, never.

* * * * *

When she had finished her coffee Signora Fantuzzo reached for her black veil which lay on the table.

"Well," said she, "Don Tita——"

This was her usual formula of departure. Don Tita stretched out his hand, with fingers wide-spread.

But the archpriest had no intention of letting her go, and burst into a long string of "No, no, no," and "Sit down, sit down!"

The servant entering at that moment to remove the tray, Don Tita ordered her to be gone, and as a greater precaution against interruption, he withdrew to the study beyond, followed by the chaplain and Signora Bettina, who was in great trepidation in case she were about to be involved in some "bother."

The archpriest's joke led her to suppose that it was simply a matter of advice, but even this would be a "bother." In fact, not even to herself did she confess her horror of "bother," believing that this horror was only for such doubts as her conscience might inspire, and, after all, every "bother," be it in advice or deed, must bring with it some scruple of conscience. In the past one of her spiritual directors had recommended a certain book, well calculated to further the progress in her soul of an incipient paralysis of all scruple.

"The fact of the matter is, my dear Bettina,"

the archpriest began, "that, were it not for the glory of God and the good of our neighbour, we would not trouble you. Is not that so, Don Emanuele?"

Don Emanuele, who had kept his eyes fixed upon the archpriest as if to control and direct his language, into which there frequently crept expressions that were ill-advised and good-naturedly imprudent, showed both in his glance and bearing so evident a desire to help, that the archpriest immediately took advantage of it.

"Do you wish to explain?" he asked. "Then do."

Promptly withdrawing once more into his cold shell of prelatical composure, Don Emanuele spoke, confident of not spoiling, as the archpriest might have done, a certain piece of delicate machinery which had been set in motion, perhaps not over much for their neighbour's good, but certainly, from the chaplain's point of view at least, very much for the glory of God. He believed himself more clever than the archpriest, because he had studied the grammar of subtleties, but he was mistaken. The archpriest was clever by nature, unconsciously clever, and his purposes were served by the very imprudence and carelessness of his language. It made him appear a simple creature to such as had but slight knowledge of him, and there was perhaps no one in all the countryside who really knew him well, save Signor Marcello and Donna Fedele, who had the power of reading character in a very short space of time.

"Well," said Don Emanuele, "it is a question of saving a poor girl."

"Ah! yes, I can fancy what it is then," said Signora Bettina, her face lighting up with satisfaction beneath a veneer of compunction. "I can fancy."

The subject, indeed, was a thorny one and painful

to handle, but the "bother" would be but slight. Her servant's younger sister was undergoing siege by a private of the Royal Foot Artillery.

"Ah, I know!" she went on with a sigh. "I am sorry to say I know. I heard only yesterday, and had, indeed, intended to speak to the archpriest about it."

"You are on the wrong scent—the wrong scent, my girl!" muttered Don Tita, his deep and serious tones saying plainly, "This is quite another matter."

"Perhaps she does know. She may perhaps know," observed Don Emanuele sweetly, addressing the archpriest. "The matter has to do with the young person—the young lady who lives with Signor Trento, and who was to have married his son."

The archpriest had his eyes fixed upon his sister-in-law to see what her expression would be. It was not promising.

"Good gracious! I don't know her!" said she.

If she supposed she had found a safe refuge through her declaration of ignorance, her illusion was short-lived.

"Nonsense!" said the archpriest.

"It would be easier if you were acquainted with her," Don Emanuele observed thoughtfully. "Do you not know her at all? Not even slightly?"

"By sight. Oh yes, by sight!" Signora Fantuzzo replied with flushed cheeks. But Don Emanuele, who was well informed, held his peace, as one who deems it better policy to insist by silence.

"I may have spoken to her once," Signora Bettina conceded, her face aflame.

"That is good," said the archpriest.

"But I shall not speak to her again—not again—certainly not again!"

Poor Bettina appeared terrified, and kept repeating. "Ah, no, no, no!" until the archpriest demanded

impatently: "Why not? What has she done to you?" She replied that the person in question made her feel timid, terribly timid. But this was far from being the true reason. Lelia had found herself seated beside her one day in church, when poor Bettina was sporting a headgear of such an outlandish description as to excite the mirth of a group of summer visitors, consisting of eight or ten young girls, each one more flighty than the other. Seeing this, Lelia immediately took poor Signora Fantuzzo under her protection. She offered her own seat, recaptured a whole flight of saints that had escaped from the Signora's prayer-book, left the church when she did, and found an opportunity of saying a few pleasant words concerning the archpriest's sermon. For some unknown reason the young girl's courtesy completely upset poor Bettina. It was as if, together with a wave of strong attraction, there flowed over her one more those vague emotions of her youth that had once filled her with terror. To become the Signorina's friend, to come in contact with a youthful spirit, a spirit well versed in love and the ways of the world, to taste of both once more, even though it be through another—such was the temptation that had spoken faintly within Signora Bettina's bosom. But it had been sufficiently strong to send her hastening into the parsonage crying, "Enough, enough, enough!" her throat a cavern overflowing with ejaculations expressive of her firm determination never again to approach that most dangerous person.

"It would of course be better if she could speak to her," said Don Emanuele, looking at the archpriest, "but it does not seem to me to be essential."

"No so pol—I don't know!" The three truly masterly monosyllables seemed to signify that he saw no way of reaching the desired goal if his sister-in-law persisted in refusing to approach the Signorina. As a matter of fact neither the archpriest

nor the chaplain really intended to bring about an interview. Their tactics were to lead up skilfully to a proposal that should appear and be agreed to as a compromise. But Don Emanuele had gone too fast, and the archpriest's *No so po* had been a delicate and artistic turn of the brake. Don Emanuele saw this and retreated with a *Perhaps*, that was charged with doubt and with regret as well as with suggestions of yielding and exhortation.

As both lapsed into silence after this, Signora Bettina, hoping that the hour of her release had now come, straightened her shoulders as if about to rise, and uttered another:

"Well."

"Wait, my girl," said the archpriest, stopping her by a gesture, and turning to Don Emanuele, he added:

"We may as well tell her everything. Then she can make up her mind what to do. Do you agree?"

Don Emanuele, remembering the lesson he had just received from one he looked upon as having more to learn than to teach, raised his two hands that rested on his knees, spreading them like a pair of fans, and murmured in his turn:

"I don't know."

Don Tita's tone now became decided.

"Yes, yes! Tell her," he said. "Tell her."

Then Don Emanuele drew his tunic about his legs with an almost feminine gesture, and began:

"It is a very simple matter."

But it was evidently a very complex matter, and he did not know where to begin.

"The Signorina's parents are still living," said he. "Her father, you know—"

And the chaplain drew a long and soft breath in a manner as if to signify that of the father there was good to be said and evil as well, and that, having added the two together, the sum total was that—it would be best to say nothing.

"The mother, on the other hand——" he went on.

"Ah! the mother," Don Tita put in in a deep bass voice laden with satisfaction, and wagging his head as if silently denying that anything evil could be said of her.

"Mercy on us, Don Tita!" Signora Bettina gasped in utter amazement, fixing her eyes on her brother-in-law, for in the past she had heard accounts of a very different nature.

The chaplain hastened to pacify her.

"No," he began. "In times past, indeed, there may have been room for comment. Yes, indeed, there were certain indiscretions. . . . Now she is a woman who is making amends, a woman whose one thought is for pious works and deeds of charity, who lives in Milan, leading a most edifying life, and who is well known to many excellent men among the clergy. It is true she is separated from her husband, but there may be some good reason for that, or perhaps some misunderstanding. After God and the Church her one thought is for her daughter. She can have no direct communication with her because Signor Trento, a hard-hearted man who may or may not be truly religious, will not allow it. At this moment she is trembling for her daughter. I heard of this in a letter I received the other day from a priest, a most worthy priest, who comes in contact with her."

"Have you the letter about you?" the archpriest broke in. "You had better read it."

Don Emanuele glanced apologetically at his superior.

"To tell the truth," said he, "it is a letter of a very private——"

"Well, well!" cried Don Tita. "Never mind, then, never mind."

The chaplain continued:

"This priest writes that Signora da Camin has

discovered that a young man from Milan, who is well known there, and who bears a notorious reputation, has been staying at Signor Trento's for some days and is still there."

"An unhappy creature!" murmured Don Tita. "A most unenviable individual!"

He said this in the tone of one who registers an irreparable and unhappy fact.

Signora Bettina struck in timidly to say she thought she had seen the young man in church on the preceding Sunday. Don Emanuele sighed, but did not speak.

"Yes, yes," said the archpriest, "very likely you did see him. He goes to church, but he is worse than those who do not. Headstrong, my girl, and a friend of that other headstrong fellow the priest of Lago. He is one of those who want to change everything in our religion."

Signor Bettina emitted a whistling sound, sucking the air in sharply as if she had burnt her tongue. Once more Don Emanuele sighed.

"Alas! yes," said he. "And this mother is living in agony lest her child should become interested in the young man, and lest the young man—the girl being good-looking and possessed of great expectations——"

"The Lord save us!" Don Tita exclaimed. "If he should worm himself in here——"

Signora Bettina repeated her whistling noise.

"Now," Don Emanuele went on, "the priest who writes to me has been able to discover, through what seems to me a special dispensation of Divine providence, that——"

There was a pause.

"Out with it, out with it!" cried Don Tita. "Courage! Very well, then, I will go on. It seems there is some sort of a mess between this fellow and a woman in Milan—a married woman, mind you."

Signora Bettina here indulged in repeated whistlings.

"The other night Don Emanuele and I were talking this over," Don Tita continued, "and wondering how we could get this piece of information to the girl. We thought and thought, but could find no way. But yesterday we came to the conclusion that the only way would be through you."

"Good Lord, Don Tita!"

The accent with which she pronounced this ejaculation was heartrending.

There was silence.

"We will say no more about it," the archpriest declared. "The girl will be ruined, but it will be through no fault of mine."

Signora Fantuzzo, who was seated beside the archpriest's writing-table, reached out for a book that lay upon it, and drawing it towards her, pretended to study it. She was the colour of a lobster.

"I really believe," Don Tita exclaimed, "that this sly puss knows more than she will tell!"

Signora Fantuzzo protested that she knew nothing at all, but the archpriest had little trouble in eliciting from her the information that the Trentos' cook, who was a friend of her servant's, had talked of the goings on at home since the arrival of the young man from Milan. She had spoken of the master's apparent uneasiness, of Teresina, the maid's, ill-humour, and of fits of weeping on the part of the Signorina. One morning the maid had rushed into the kitchen calling for very strong coffee, her eyes standing out of her head with fright, because the young lady had been foolish enough to shut the windows, with all the flowers she kept in her room at night, and was almost dead with the headache. The cook had said at the time:

"The girl wants to kill herself!" and the maid had answered, her eyes full of tears, "Who can say!"

"I believe," added the excellent Bettina, "that all this is because the young man was such a friend of her lover's, and reminds her of him."

"My good creature," said Don Tita, "you are a simpleton."

Meanwhile Don Emanuele was reflecting with a grateful heart how visibly favourable Providence was to his aims and to those of the archpriest. To tell the truth, neither the one nor the other had proposed making Signora Bettina the only and direct instrument of Providence in this matter. In their satisfaction at possessing a weapon against Don Aurelio's friend, the famous Alberti, they had planned that Signora Bettina should confide the story of Alberti's intrigue with the woman in Milan to her servant, who, as they well knew, was a friend of the Trentos' cook, and the cook, they hoped, would pass the scandal on to the maid. And here were their hopes being realised; here was the machinery already acting in the service of similar confidential reports.

"Then I understand," the future prelate began, with a guileless air, "that between your servant and the Trentos' cook——"

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in!" cried good-natured Don Tita.

The chaplain relapsed into silence, dropping his watery eyes, but otherwise giving no sign of his dissatisfaction at the interruption sanctioned by his superior. It was Signora Fantuzzo's servant, who had come to look for her mistress. Don Tita, his mind flooded with the light of a sudden inspiration, begged her to wait outside. "One moment, one moment only!" he cried. He himself rose and closed the door with a bang that—left it open! Then he began declaiming, confronted by the bewildered faces of the chaplain and Signora Bettina.

"Listen, sister-in-law, and you also, chaplain. You must not mention it, but I will tell you something. That young fellow from Milan who is at

the Montanina and who is so intimate with the priest of Lago—do you know what a precious pearl he is? He is entangled with a woman in Milan, I tell you, and I know—a woman with a husband, children—”

“Goodness!” Bettina ejaculated. “Children also?”

“Well?” Don Tita retorted in a low tone. “She is married, isn’t she?” And he resumed in a loud voice: “Let us hope the rascal has no designs upon that young girl who lives with old Trento! Supposing her mother should hear of this, poor woman!”

Hereupon Don Tita rose, and added softly, “That’s done!” Casting at Don Emanuele the glance of a colleague in art who has proved himself a master, he crept to the door on tiptoe and flung it suddenly open, shouting, “Where is she . . . ah! excuse me.” For there the woman stood before him, half stunned by the sudden opening of the door. Signora Bettina rose, thankful to be free at last. The chaplain, not entirely convinced of the success of this brilliant strategy, was still pondering the matter, when the archpriest’s servant rushed in, in a state of great excitement.

“The Fedele woman is here!”

Signora Vayla’s Christian name was often mistaken among the peasants for her surname.

“What Fedele woman?” the dazed archpriest demanded.

“Don’t you know? The one from Arsiero—the one with white hair.”

Signora Bettina scurried away, the archpriest closed his eyes and puffed, as if he had been offered a glass of castor-oil, the chaplain murmured, “Archpriest!” and stood before his superior with clasped hands and eyes raised heavenward, which attitude signified an exhortation to the man to stand firm, and a prayer to the Lord to keep the man standing firm. Then, with bowed head, he also hastened

away. The archpriest requested that Donna Fedele should be ushered in. He was convinced she had come to talk to him about Don Aurelio and of the people of Lago's determination to appeal, if need be, to his Holiness himself against the priest's dismissal.

III

Donna Fedele had driven over from the Villino delle Rose in the usual little hired carriage. Near the Posina Bridge she had met Massimo, and had said to him, laughing, "I am going to see the archpriest about the 'den.'" By a similar channel of communication to that which lay between the parsonage and the Montanina, certain interesting bits of news had reached her, and also, amongst others, the fact that at the parsonage her house had been labelled a "den" on account of Carnesecca's presence. She had answered Massimo's exhortation to "give him a piece of her mind" with a smile, a smile as sweet as her voice. But when the little carriage had turned to the left on the steep rise, the noble lines of her face assumed an expression of melancholy, which the meeting with Massimo had not a little to do with. She was worried as to the position of affairs at the Montanina. She saw, indeed, that Massimo was daily becoming more strongly attached, but she recognised too that Signor Marcello was anxious and Lelia startlingly enigmatical. Lelia impressed the older woman as a creature at war with herself, and withal so proud that nothing good could come from any attempt to influence her. Donna Fedele had won Teresina's confidence, and had heard from her about the flowers and the closed windows, which incident she felt

should neither be made too much of nor entirely ignored. Teresina's idea was that the girl was in love, and was ashamed of her state of mind, feeling bound in honour to the memory of poor Signor Andrea and by Signor Marcello's trust in her. It was at present impossible to see clearly in the matter, and Donna Fedele could not rid herself of innumerable doubts, anxieties, and presentiments.

* * * * *

Waiting in the little salon of the parsonage, Signora Bettina and Don Emanuele strongly reminded the visitor of two frightened chickens, as they scurried past, hugging the wall, and she recalled so vividly a certain red wart above the archpriest's left eye, that always became inflamed when he was worried, that a laugh clutched her throat, and she had barely time to straighten her face before entering the study.

The wart was scarlet indeed, but her welcome was of the warmest. Worthy Don Tita appeared incapable of suppressing within himself—and he was, in truth, no weak vessel—a certain effervescent mixture of surprise, pleasure, and obsequiousness. But at this moment Don Tita was no hypocrite. Rising, he approached his visitor, crying eagerly, "Well, well, well! Who do I see, who do I see? Your servant, your very humble servant!" And this cordiality was not the result of any calculation. There was an unconquerable officiousness in his blood that instantly rendered him cordial and ceremonious in the presence of any person worthy of consideration. On such occasions he felt any differences of opinion that might separate him from such a person shrivel within him, as by a miracle, and in spite of himself he was bound to convey to that person, by means of words, gestures, and play of feature, that he was really much more of his or her opinion than that person might be inclined to

think. Secretly, Donna Fedele was highly amused by the reception she had of course expected, especially when she reflected how different would be the scene that must follow. She also took a mischievous delight in accepting the archpriest's big chair, and in imagining herself a bishop in her violet skirt, and she longed to reach out her hand to the snuffbox that lay open on the table before her.

"I have come," she began, in that gentle, indolent manner of hers, "to show you that I try to be a Christian, if not a good Christian, at least a passable one."

The archpriest gave a loud laugh.

"That is good! That is good! But who doubts it, Signora? Tut, tut, tut! Who doubts it?"

Donna Fedele smiled, but while her lips were smiling her eyes widened and flashed with a vivid light.

"Ah! that is the question," said she, and there was a flash in her voice also.

Don Tita pretended not to understand, to have forgotten a certain occasion when Donna Fedele lent her grounds for a peasants' merry-making that had ended in some rather wild dancing, to have forgotten, too, a certain unwise sermon of his of which the lady had unnecessarily reminded him.

"Tut, tut, tut!" he repeated.

The sweet voice went on:

"You yourself have not always considered me such, and you do not at present, now that I have taken Pestagran into my house."

Don Tita became the colour of a raspberry.

"I?" he cried. "Quite the contrary! It is pure charity, Signora! Charity, charity! A priest's house was one thing, you see, but the house of a layman is another."

"It is a lay 'den,' then," Donna Fedele murmured under her breath.

The archpriest did not hear, and she went on to

say, still blandly, that she had not known the clergy were less bound to perform deeds of charity than the laity. Don Tita's protests she met with a fixed stare and in silence.

Poor Don Tita, remembering that he had said that this lean lady was more of a *Carnesecca* (a piece of dry flesh) than Gran Peste himself, and who was far from realising that had she known this Donna Fedele's amusement would have tempered her severity towards himself, was as one seated upon hot coals.

"But I am not here," she continued, "to discuss Pestagran, or anything connected with Pestagran."

"*Ben*, Signora! Good, good!"

The archpriest said "*Ben!*" relieving his feelings by a lapse into dialect, but in his heart he thought, "*Male*, Signora! Bad, very bad!" for although that first pill was swallowed, who could say what Madame Carnesecca might have in reserve?

"As you and I are both interested in the same person, I have come to ask you for some information that might perhaps, under certain circumstances, affect that person indirectly."

This time Donna Fedele spoke in a clear and rather loud voice, articulating her words carefully and looking resolutely at Don Tita. His face was filled with bewilderment. Who could this person be? Bettina? No, no—nor the chaplain either. Could it be Don Aurelio, after all?"

"It is true, is it not," Donna Fedele went on, "that you are much interested in the young girl who lives with Signor Trento?"

Don Tita, greatly relieved that Don Aurelio had not been sprung upon him, rubbed his hands together softly.

"I, Signora . . . I interested . . . ? No, no, Signora. Not at all, not at all."

"What do you mean by 'not at all,' when you are anxious to have her warned against a certain

Alberti because he is carrying on an intrigue with a married woman?"

The archpriest made up his mind that Donna Fedele was indeed an incarnation of the evil one. He muttered, "What, what, what!" and, gathering his scattered wits together, whispered to himself, "The monster!" these words referring to his own servant, who alone could have listened, have heard, and have gossiped. But meanwhile he found no answer. Donna Fedele waited for a time, and then asked, with her gentle but pitilessly apathetic air, if he were going to admit or deny the accusation.

"I deny it," said Don Tita, recovering from the blow. "I can safely deny it, Signora. I deny having had any hand in the matter. I was already acquainted with the fact, Signora, but the secret was not my own."

Donna Fedele inwardly regretted having omitted to count the archpriest's "Signoras." Once before she had counted, or said she had counted, one hundred and one in half an hour. Presently she went on with her cold-blooded torture.

"You see, archpriest," she said, "as so much is known here concerning what is said and done in my house, it is only fair that I should know something of what is said and done here."

Donna Fedele was convinced that the archpriest's servant had orders to worm out of her gardener's wife all she could about her mistress, Don Aurelio, Carnesecca, and Massimo Alberti. The servant, on the other hand, had parted with some parsonage gossip in exchange. Then the gardener's wife told the story to the housemaid, and although Donna Fedele invariably scolded her maids for listening to gossip, she had not been able to stop her own ears, and, as a matter of fact, had opened them rather wide this time.

The colour of the wart spread over the whole surface of Don Tita's face.

"Ah! you must really excuse me, Signora," said he in an injured tone, "but as to that—that—oh! oh!—"

And he wagged his head as if it had been on a pivot, and knit his brows.

A timid "Con permesso" was heard, the door opened slowly, and there stood the culprit herself with coffee and biscuits for Donna Fedele. She was a little, fat old woman, with the voice of a goat and a cunning expression. She placed the tray upon the writing-table and glanced at her master, expecting him to rise, as usual, brandish the spoon, and vociferate, "How many lumps, Signora? How many lumps?" Her master did rise, but slowly and not at once, and he gave her a glance that made her tremble lest she had done wrong to bring the coffee. "Cape!" muttered the poor woman, who, like Signora Fantuzzo, was in the habit of appealing to that distant and invisible crustacean. The sight of this bewildered woman, ignorant of her position of *lupus in fabula*, and of Don Tita's face at being obliged to administer coffee and biscuits to an odious creature who had dared to be insolent to him, the thought of the scene that was bound to take place between master and servant as soon as she should have left—all this put the little demon of comedy that had his home in Donna Fedele's brain into such extreme good-humour, that instead of refusing the coffee, or at least the biscuits as her first impulse had prompted her to do, she partook of both, that she might better enjoy her laugh at Don Tita's sad plight and smile at her own part of it.

After the coffee and biscuits, however, she ceased tormenting the poor man. Donna Fedele, who was capable of fierce dislikes, felt only indifference for the archpriest. She believed him to be rather weak than deceitful, rather spoiled by an insufficient and unwholesome education than base by nature, possessing cunning indeed, but cunning of a coarse sort, that

it was easy to fathom ; and she recognised his good qualities, his disinterestedness, his sincere desire to serve God. When the servant had left the room she told him, very calmly, that she had serious reasons for wishing to know the truth concerning the accusations against young Alberti. Don Tita, who was quickly appeased, at first barricaded himself behind the assurance that the secret was another's ; but he soon yielded to the temptation to gratify his interlocutress, and admitted that it was the chaplain's secret, and it would be terrible should the chaplain suspect that his secret was not well guarded. "He is my master, you see ! A future cardinal ! One centime's worth of cardinal already !" The archpriest often alluded to Don Emanuele in this way, when he believed he was addressing one not friendly disposed towards the chaplain. And this time, indeed, he was not mistaken, for there was no one in the world more uncongenial to Donna Fedele than the chaplain of Velo d'Astico. She asked at once to speak with him, and Don Tita hastened away to fetch him. Donna Fedele felt quite sure he would not be forthcoming, and, in fact, Don Tita returned, after a long enough absence, with a hang-dog expression, stammering that the chaplain was out.

"He will come back," said Donna Fedele, rising. Yes, Don Emanuele would certainly come back, but hardly before noon. It was then half-past nine. Donna Fedele could not wait two hours and a half, and so, without explaining what she intended to do, she left the parsonage. She made inquiries of a peasant woman seated in the door of a cottage close by if she had seen Don Emanuele. "He has just gone past, Signora," the woman answered. "He went into the church."

Donna Fedele turned quickly, and was sure she saw the archpriest's tunic whisk into the parsonage, he very probably having been watching her movements

from the doorway. Mounting the steps, she entered the church and saw the chaplain kneeling in the first row of benches, in front of the high altar, and praying fervently. Instinctively she raised her hand to the holy-water font, but before her fingers had touched the water she repented of her action and withdrew her hand, for her feelings at that moment were all too unchristian. That man, kneeling there with his face buried in his hands, filled her with wrath. For him to play the saint, he, the hard-hearted, malevolent creature! He was the secret enemy and denouncer of Don Aurelio, of that she had no doubt, now that she had discovered him plotting maliciously against Alberti, because he suspected him of heresy! Donna Fedele was ready to swear to this also, although she really knew nothing about it, and had come for the express purpose of discovering whether there was any solid foundation for the accusations against Alberti. She sat down on a bench in the shadow near the side door, and after a moment's hesitation, sank upon her knees. The ancient traditions of her house had made her an earnest believer. Her faith was simple; she did not trouble herself with religious contentions and often declared, like her father before her, she preferred the famous *foi de charbonnier*. But she detested everything that seemed to her deceit, hypocrisy, or perfidy, and at this moment a capricious impulse suggested to her to pray against the prayers of the priest bending low before the high altar. Kneeling down, she prayed, "O Lord! Listen to me, and not to him"; but hardly had she placed her arms upon the bench before her than she thought, "Perhaps he is not praying at all." He seemed to her a Pharisee, and she did not realise that she was putting herself in the position of the Pharisee of the parable and that, like him, she deserved condemnation. Her suspicion, moreover, was unjust. Don Emanuele was praying with all the strength of

his soul, according to his nature and education, in the only way possible to him. In his own home no one had ever dared to ask the terrible grandfather for anything in the usual, direct way. A priest, or a favourite steward, or an old nurse had been made the go-between. Thus Don Emanuele prayed rather to His servants than to the Infinite Grandfather Himself. At the present moment he was praying to St. Louis Gonzaga as to a deified prince, who, standing upon the throne in all the pomp of state, surrounded by flowers and winged cherubims, should graciously bend his head in the suppliant's direction and command the demon to depart. Thus prayed poor Don Emanuele as best he might, horrified at the fierceness of unexpected temptation. And it may be that the Almighty, to whom all causes and all origins are known, judged him far less severely than did Donna Fedele, who would have brought about a rare muddle had her prayers for the confusion of the chaplain been answered. Soon afterwards, hearing some one enter the church, Don Emanuele, feigning to look around to see if his chair was empty, and having thereby caught sight of Donna Fedele, sat down and began to read his breviary. In his own way he heartily reciprocated Donna Fedele's dislike. The outspoken frankness, which her soft voice only rendered more irritating, offended him. Besides, he knew her to be the friend of Don Aurelio and of young Alberti, two persons whom he fervently abhorred, convinced, however, that it was their opinions and not themselves that he detested. Conscious of an ill-defined but profound antagonism between himself and Don Aurelio, and instinctively averse to him, he was naturally and conscientiously inclined to attribute to him ideas and opinions unworthy of any Catholic, to say nothing of a priest. The irreprehensibility both of his words and actions was another source of irritation, for he believed Don Aurelio to be a hypocrite. As

to Alberti, what he had read in the newspapers, together with what had been communicated to him from Milan, filled him with a sort of loathing for the man. Donna Fedele, the friend of both, could not differ from them to any great extent.

Upon hearing her announced by the archpriest's servant the chaplain had concluded that she had come to plead Don Aurelio's cause. Now, however, he was aware that she had come about Alberti, that the archpriest's servant had been eavesdropping and gossiping, and that that wretched man had been true to himself and compromised him, the chaplain, instead. As soon as he caught sight of Donna Fedele he guessed her intentions, and as he read his breviary he was enveloping himself in an imaginary armour, plated with steel and bristling with points.

But as the placid lady showed no intention of raising the siege, he knelt down once more, buried his face in his hands, and having pictured to himself the moment of the attack, and decided upon his line of defence, he withdrew to the sacristy. Immediately, and as he had foreseen, Donna Fedele rose and followed him. Being unable to avoid the interview, the chaplain preferred that it should take place in the sacristy rather than at the parsonage or in the street.

Donna Fedele inquired icily if she might speak with him, her eyes veiled with haughty indifference. His equally cold answer was a silent bow of assent.

"I should prefer some other place," said she. He hesitated for an instant, and then proposed that she should wait for him in the church. They would go out together. He remained in the sacristy at least ten minutes longer, and then made a genuflection before the high altar that lasted two minutes more.

"I wish you to give me a piece of reliable in-

formation," said Donna Fedele, coming out of the church with him, and trembling with impatience.

"If I can," Don Emanuele answered gently but firmly—"if I can."

The Signora found it difficult to check an angry outburst.

"If you can, of course. But I know you can, and, being able to, you must."

"If I can," the chaplain repeated, still more gently and firmly—"if I can. What is it?"

Very red in the face, Donna Fedele observed that it was a delicate matter, and one not fit to be handled in the public square. Hereupon the priest pulled out his watch.

"I have to go to Mea," said he, with that air of gravity, impenetrability, and of compunction, and that *Dominus vobiscum* tone which were unbearable to Donna Fedele. Once more she fumed.

"Very well. I will take you there. I have a carriage."

"I am sorry, Signora. I must go on foot."

It seemed to Donna Fedele that his short words, his knitted brow, and downcast eyes spoke of a shrinking, prompted by modesty, of a fear of giving scandal. She was on the point of calling him a fool to his face, but checked herself.

"I will walk also," said she. "The carriage can follow us."

Don Emanuele continued to wriggle for a while, but said no more. Two minutes ago Donna Fedele would not have believed herself capable of walking half a kilometre, but now her nerves were braced with sufficient energy to carry her all the way to Vicenza. At the Albergo del Sole she picked up her driver, who, immediately upon his arrival at Velo, had tied his horse to an iron railing, that he might be free to begin an imprudent struggle with a wine that was stronger than himself. As soon as they had crossed the square, the carriage following slowly

at a short distance, the conversation began. The priest walked as if the soil burnt his feet, as if he were striving to tire out this woman who was persecuting him.

She told him openly and simply that, for particular reasons, she was very fond of young Alberti. She knew that he was said to hold unorthodox religious views. She hoped that this was not so, but, after all, his religious opinions were not a matter that concerned her. But now they were accusing him of immorality. This was a question upon which she could give an opinion, and, before judging, she wished and was determined to know the truth. The archpriest had told her that the chaplain was the one who knew. At this point the chaplain made a movement of acquiescence.

"Then you do know?" Donna Fedele exclaimed, stopping short. Don Emanuele stopped also. He hoped that, having had her answer, this terrible woman would turn back.

"I am sorry to say I do know," said he. "It is very serious. Immoral dealings with a person who is not free. Unfortunately, this is true, only too true!"

"But what authority have you for saying this?"

"Oh, my source of information is—is—is—"

He appeared unable to find an epithet sufficiently superlative to qualify the excellence of this source.

"Well? And the source—the source—!" Donna Fedele exclaimed impatiently.

"The thing is a fact," the chaplain retorted gravely and positively. "The thing is a fact, but I am not at liberty to reveal the source of my knowledge."

"At least tell me the name of this married woman."

"I cannot."

This, indeed, he was not able to do, and his words naturally were more full of conviction than ever. But Donna Fedele's patience was at an end.

"Do you know what I think?" said she. "That there is no source at all, and that this is a pure invention!"

"Think what you will," said the chaplain, who had grown very pale; and, touching his hat in sign of salutation, he started off rapidly along the road to Mea.

"Don Emanuele!" called the Signora. The driver, who was half tipsy, and who was standing near, his hand upon his horse's bridle, dropped the bridle and flew past Donna Fedele, shouting as he ran:

"Shall I catch him for you?"

"Stop!" cried Donna Fedele, but the drunken man already had the chaplain by the arm.

"Stop, my lad!" he commanded.

"No! Shame upon you!" cried Donna Fedele, coming up with the pair and ordering the driver back to his horse in a tone so peremptory that he obeyed at once.

"Now go!" said she, turning to the bewildered chaplain with such a disdainful air, with so much energy and such fire in her bearing that she seemed almost to have recovered the brilliancy of her youth. "Go on serving God by slandering your neighbour! Treat Alberti as you have treated the priest of Lago! Triumph! I am going back to my house, which you have called a 'den,' and I am better satisfied with myself and my 'den' than you will ever be with yourself and your palace when you are a cardinal." And she turned her back upon him.

"Siora!" (Signora) the driver declared tragically, placing his left hand on his breast, and waving his right, in which he clasped the whip. "If you say the word, priest or no priest, Gésummaria! I will twist his neck!"

Where can Donna Fedele's little demon have been dozing? She did not even smile, but ordered the carriage to turn round, and got in, heedless

of the driver's condition. She could not possibly have walked another step. All her strength was deserting her in a tremor that shook her from head to foot. The gentle wind of Val d'Astico, so pure and fresh, that made the trees sway and the shadows wave upon the white road, revived her somewhat. Having had a chance to relieve her feelings, she now felt a sort of pity for the chaplain. But presently she banished him from her mind, and fixed her thoughts on the Montanina, on her old friend's last, melancholy desire of a union between Lelia and Alberti, of the inscrutability of these two young people, and of what the future might have in store.

CHAPTER IV

SHEARS

I

AT Lago di Velo the news of the priest's impending departure had greatly distressed the inhabitants. Many, indeed, had been displeased that he had taken Carnesecca into his house, but after he had explained his action from the altar, condemning the pedlar's doctrines, and yet reminding them of the teachings of the gospel, no one had dared raise his voice in censure. The news that Carnesecca was gone and that the curate must leave spread simultaneously.

The "Chief" of the countryside, as he to whom his fellow-peasants freely entrust the handling of all matters of common interest is here called, summoned a meeting of the heads of families, and spoke sensibly and in a religious spirit. There was to be no rioting, no disorder, no inciting of the priest to resist. A priest is a priest, and must obey his superiors. It is to these superiors petition should be made. But these were not the views of all. The women were already declaring that the priest should not leave; that an appeal must be made, if necessary, to the Pope. The Chief persuaded them to be calm, and await the result of the first protests. He himself headed a deputation to the archpriest. But the archpriest repulsed them, giving these honest souls to understand that they were but fools, ignorant countrymen, and bullics. They went home cowed, and the general dissatisfaction grew rapidly.

Don Aurelio, after having in vain endeavoured privately to dissuade his flock from any attempt to retain him, repeated his exhortations from the altar in language that was both affectionate and firm. Several of the summer visitors, people of position, also went to the archpriest in the name of the inhabitants of Lago, begging him to intercede with the *Curia*. For these the excellent Don Tita had pleasant words, saying that he had had nothing to do with the much-to-be-regretted measure, praising Don Aurelio, and promising to act, to speak, and to write. His flock listened respectfully to Don Aurelio, without the slightest intention of obeying him, and they listened to the report of the second deputation without the slightest faith in the archpriest's promises. The Chief called another meeting, and it was decided that all those present should go in a body to the bishop and seek to obtain at least a postponement. On hearing this Don Aurelio begged them first to listen to something he had to tell them. This was on Friday, and there were five days more before the date upon which he must resign his benefice. The peasants intended going in to Vicenza to the bishop on Sunday morning. But they promised to come to Don Aurelio the next day, Saturday, at noon. On Friday evening Don Aurelio went down to the Villino delle Rose, stopping at the Montanina on the way back. It was nearly eight o'clock, and Giovanni having informed him that the family were still at dinner, he would not allow them to be disturbed, and waited in the drawing-room, examining a small collection of books near the fireplace. They were all works on botany and gardening and belonged to Signor Marcello. Don Aurelio knew little concerning Lelia's taste in literature, and would gladly have known more. To a direct question he had asked some days before, the girl had said that her favourite reading was the works of foreign poets. Don Aurelio, who knew little of foreign poets, had not

ventured to press her with questions, but later Donna Fedele had confided to him that the two foreign poets preferred by Lelia were Shelley and Heine. He knew nothing of the first, but the name of the second conveyed a suggestion of fatal scepticism. The suspicion that Lelia's soul contained some bitter dregs of scepticism had been forced upon him by several remarks of hers which Donna Fedele had repeated, wherein she had maintained that the acts of men, even those apparently of a most generous nature, were prompted only by a spirit of egotism, and her words had seemed to point indirectly to Signor Marcello's action, in taking into his house a living memory of his dead son.

Don Aurelio had been greatly incensed, and his more indulgent friend had found it difficult to pacify him by placing before him the surroundings amongst which Lelia had dwelt and the painful origin of her scepticism. Donna Fedele was less uneasy than he concerning Massimo's future should this marriage take place. The girl's eccentricities did not impress her so painfully as they did Don Aurelio. She remembered that her own girlhood had been fanciful and passionate also, and understood so much that to Don Aurelio was incomprehensible.

Having examined all the books, Don Aurelio caught sight of the maid Teresina at a door at the further end of the room. She came silently towards him, advancing on tiptoe, and he went forward to meet her. Teresina had a secret message for Donna Fedele, who, having been less well than usual after her raid upon the parsonage, had not appeared for two days, whereas usually a day rarely passed now without a visit from her.

"If you see her," the woman whispered, "tell her things are worsel"

Don Aurelio failing to understand, Teresina explained. After the affair of the closed bedroom windows she had promised to tell Donna Fedele

everything that she considered important concerning Lelia.

"And now," said she, "she has got hold of the key of the Velo Park, and, for the last two nights, after dark, she has been there all alone, spending hours there. What she does in the Park I cannot say. She makes me tell lies to the master, and say she is in bed with a headache when he asks for her. Of course he always asks. Then I must go and wait for her at the park gate, at eleven, and, to tell the truth, I am rather afraid. But she won't listen to anything. Last night she was not in until midnight. Please ask Donna Fedele what I am to do. What would you yourself advise, Don Aurelio?"

"First of all I must inform you that I shall not be able to tell Donna Fedele anything," said the priest.

Teresina was astonished and asked the reason of his refusal.

"Never mind the reason," Don Aurelio answered, and added: "You have done very wrong not to speak. You must do so, and at once."

At that moment the dining-room door was thrown open and Signor Marcello himself appeared, protesting against so much ceremony on the part of his friend, who had refused to have his presence announced. Taking him by the arm, he led him into the dining-room.

Lelia's greeting was so slight that Signor Marcello spoke to her.

"You absent-minded puss!" said he. "Here is Don Aurelio."

For some days past the priest had thought that her usual coldness towards him had grown. Now he was sure of it. Massimo also seemed to be in a gloomy mood. Don Aurelio told of his call at the Villino and of Donna Fedele's condition, which was far from satisfactory, judging from her look and some vague hints that had escaped her. Lelia, who had

been won over by Signora Vayla's charm and affection, listened attentively.

"She is a woman who will break down entirely if she does not have something done for her health, and that at once. You are her friends, and it is your duty to make her take care of herself."

Signor Marcello, more impressed by the tone in which the words were spoken than by the words themselves, asked what they could do, and what the nature of Signora Vayla's disease really was. Don Aurelio replied that he did not know, but that a suspicion had been aroused in his mind by the very unwillingness of the sufferer to call in a consulting physician, and he believed a consultation to be absolutely necessary.

A painful silence ensued, and then Don Aurelio rose to go. Massimo rose with the intention of accompanying him as far as Sant' Ubaldo. The curate turned to Lelia and said impressively:

"Signorina, Donna Fedele is very fond of you. I recommend her particularly to your care. Hers is a life that is useful to many."

Signor Marcello had risen also.

"And so, Don Aurelio," he began, "you are going to have this meeting to-morrow. Will you be able to bring us some good news afterwards?"

"I cannot say, my friend," Don Aurelio replied in his fine Roman accent and rich voice. "I cannot say whether it would be well to remain. But the Lord tells me that obedience is good."

There ensued a short struggle between them, for Signor Marcello would have kissed the hand the priest sought to withdraw in dismay. Then they embraced, and Don Aurelio felt tears upon the old man's face, and went out murmuring "Poor fellow! Poor fellow!"

* * * * *

As they left, Don Aurelio told Massimo that had

he not offered to accompany him to Sant' Ubaldo, he himself would have asked him to do so. The young man did not answer, and Don Aurelio, glancing at him, saw that he appeared not to have heard. It was growing dark, and there was no other sound in the air but the gentle voice of Riderella and the deep one of Posina. All Nature seemed filled with a sense of the mystery of that shining city whose myriad portals opened tremblingly, one by one, in the splendid space above. Beyond the gate Don Aurelio paused, and silently put his hand upon his friend's shoulder. In his eyes there shone a new expression which Massimo failed to see, for he was insensible to everything save his own feelings. Perhaps the poetry of the evening increased his fever, but he felt the fever only, not the poetry. Every pulse in him responded to a burning passion that had grown during these last ten days, and had discovered itself in divine moments of contact by a glance or other fleeting, involuntary revelations in spite of the coldness and gloom with which he had to contend. Things that Donna Fedele and Signor Marcello himself had said seemed to breathe a vague encouragement of his hopes, and he could not rid himself of the apparently inexplicable idea that he moved among accomplices. He was bewildered by doubts, and his love for Lelia alone radiated the darkness wherein she, too, stood, a dark and half incomprehensible figure. When Don Aurelio placed his hand upon his shoulder the fact that during dinner Lelia had neither looked at him nor addressed him was weighing upon his heart. He took his friend's gesture as a warning.

"You have seen?" said he. "Do I give myself away so quickly?"

Don Aurelio's astonished silence revealed to him that it had been only, at that moment that he had given himself away.

"Then why," he exclaimed excitedly—"why did you put your hand on my shoulder?"

"Poor Massimo!" Don Aurelio answered smiling, and perceiving that now he did really understand his friend. "And so this time it is serious?"

"Dio! and you can laugh!" cried Alberti.

"Why, yes, yes! Come, we will talk it over!"

So this man, who was being unjustly driven from his humble pastorate, and who saw the moment rapidly approaching when he would not know where to lay his head, set himself to the task of comforting his friend, whom the egotism of love had made oblivious to the other's sorrows.

"You see, this is something that pleases me and will please others as well," he said, as they passed into the deep shadow of the great chestnuts. Massimo stopped short.

"Signor Marcello also? Will it really please him? Really?"

The shadows were so dark that Don Aurelio did not venture to answer, for on the road itself, or within the Montanina grounds, some one might easily overhear them without being seen. It was not until they had reached the point where the road, issuing from the grove and turning to the left, winds along the open hillside of the hollow of Lago, that Don Aurelio revealed Signor Marcello's secret to his trembling friend.

Massimo embraced him impetuously.

"What is all this? What is all this?" the priest exclaimed, freeing himself with difficulty.

"But Signorina Lelia?" Massimo panted.

"What are Signorina Lelia's feelings?"

"Ah! that I really cannot say!" Don Aurelio replied. "I really don't know. I don't understand such matters, but it seems to me that you yourself ought to know."

"But you can see for yourself I don't know. I am completely in the dark."

Don Aurelio was at a loss to know what to say. He told Massimo that he believed he was justified

in hoping, for this was also Donna Fedele's opinion. Massimo's joy flamed forth once more, and without pausing to ask how and why Donna Fedele and Don Aurelio had come to discuss this, he inquired what reasons, what signs had led Donna Fedele to form this opinion. But as to that she alone could enlighten him.

"I am going to her now!" the young man cried. But Don Aurelio would not allow it.

"No, my dear fellow, I want you with me now."

Massimo demanded why, but the priest replied that he would tell him when they reached home. A few steps farther on the young man again stopped, begging and praying to be allowed to go on to Villino delle Rose at once. It was then that Don Aurelio asked him sadly if there was really no one else in all the world for him but Lelia. His sorrow-laden accents were as a fiery touch to Massimo. With both hands he seized his friend's arm, and would not be appeased until Don Aurelio had embraced him as a sign of pardon. They walked through Lago without speaking, but beyond the village, on the road that winds upwards round the steep, grassy hill on which stands the church of Sant' Ubaldo, Massimo opened his heart to his friend. He told him of the impression he had received from Lelia's photograph while poor Andrea was still alive; he spoke of his impression of her on the occasion of their first meeting, of the strange and alluring changes in her mood, of the fascination of the depths which he believed existed in her soul, of the dawn of passion in himself, of his remorse, of Signor Marcello's inexplicable attitude, of the growth of his own infatuation, of the one dream of his days and nights—to turn his back upon the world and forget it, spending his days with her in some mountain solitude, fulfilling the duties of his profession, serving man, and practising religion with that quiet freedom of soul which no despotism may overcome.

Don Aurelio listened in silence. When they reached the church he opened the side door and went in to pray. Massimo followed him, but did not pray — he thought of Lelia instead. That same morning, after having treated him with almost contemptuous indifference, she had suddenly sat down at the piano and played Schumann's "Aveu." He had followed the music with keen delight, gazing upwards through the opening in the gallery at a slender, dolomitic peak, swathed in the blue mists like the tremulous outline of a dream. And now, within the little church, he was trying to recall that indescribable moment, that sweet music, and the mountain peak, cleaving the blue ether like a shaft of passion shot skyward.

Lúzia, hearing her master coming, had placed a light in the little room on the ground floor. Don Aurelio took the lamp, and climbed the wooden stairs, followed by Massimo.

"First, we will talk of your affairs," said he, when he had placed the lamp on the writing-table in the study. He motioned Massimo to a chair opposite his own with a certain air of solemnity that startled the young man.

"You must answer a question I am going to ask you. And think well before you answer."

He looked steadily and in silence at his friend's astonished eyes, and saw that they were questioning him.

"It is this," said he. "Do you know whether there was ever any gossip in Milan about yourself and a married woman? Think well."

Massimo's brow cleared, and he smiled at the saintly simplicity of this man, who had lived so far away from the world.

"Certainly there may have been," he answered, "and not with one alone, but with two or perhaps even three. You don't know what Milan is. But did you believe the gossip? Did you doubt me?"

Don Aurelio hastened to declare that he had not doubted, but nevertheless he seemed perplexed. Then Massimo guessed there was something serious, and cried anxiously:

"Ah! now I understand! Signorina Lelia believes in it."

No, Don Aurelio did not think that the subject had been mentioned at the Montanina. It had been discussed at the Villino, and though Donna Fedele did not doubt him, Massimo himself must reassure her. Massimo thought it would be better for Don Aurelio to undertake to do this.

"H my dear boy?"

Don Aurelio thought for a moment, and then added in a low tone:

"I am leaving to-night."

Massimo started from his chair.

"What! you are leaving? What do you mean?"

His first thought was, "He is forsaking me at this time!" His second was, "Why does he leave when there is still hope that he may be allowed to remain? And why to-night? Where will he go?" And he burst into a string of questions.

Don Aurelio checked him at once, and placed his finger upon his lips. Lúzia might hear! No one knew, and no one must know. There was no hope that his superiors would allow him to remain at Lago, and there was danger that the inhabitants might resort to violent measures to prevent his departure. His duty, his positive and absolute duty, was to leave at once, and secretly. He would start on foot during the night, and take the train at Schio at five in the morning for Vicenza. Once there he would go to the Bishop, acquit himself of the accusations he believed had been lodged against him, and then . . . place himself in the hands of Divine Providence. He was sure the Bishop would help him to find a living in some other diocese, where he could be

even more out of the world than he had been at Sant' Ubaldo.

"Whatever happens," he said, "the Lord will not forsake me." And when Massimo gave vent to his indignation against his supposed persecutors, he checked him. "They think they are doing right. Can you look into their hearts? Can you see into their consciences? We must pray for them. Promise to do so."

So saying, he held out his hand, which the young man seized with both his own, and pressed to his lips.

"And now you must help me," said Don Aurelio, rising.

Together they sorted the books, dividing the ones to be returned to Donna Fedele and to Signor Marcello from those that belonged to Don Aurelio, which Massimo undertook to send wheresoever destiny might determine. The priest could take with him only his breviary, a small pocket Bible, and the "Imitation of Christ." As he handled and laid aside the precious volumes, his hands trembled, but not a single word of complaint escaped him. Only once, on handing a fine edition of the "Confessions of St. Augustine" to Massimo, a book that reminded him of many hours of reading and religious meditation in the shady solitudes of the Velo Park, near the gentle murmur of running water, did he lack strength to say, "This is for Signor Marcello." Massimo, catching a glimpse of his face, guessed the truth, and instead of taking the book, seized his hand, pressing it in sympathy. "For Signor Marcello!" Don Aurelio quickly exclaimed, but he did so with an effort, as if his wandering thoughts alone and not emotion had prevented his speaking before. Not another moment of weakness did he have, and even had a reproof ready for Massimo, who, towards the end, found the strain too severe, and tried to make one last effort to shake his friend's decision. They

had scarcely finished when Lúzia appeared, on the pretext of seeing that the shutters were closed. Don Aurelio bade her go to bed.

"Thank you, sir," said the woman gratefully, and withdrew.

Don Aurelio thought for a moment. He must remunerate Lúzia in some way beyond her monthly salary, which he had already put aside for her. Donna Fedele had once given him an alarm-clock that was much too fine for him.

"It is handsome, is it not?" he said to Massimo. "Please sell it for me and give the money to Lúzia."

Ah! Massimo had not considered that the poor priest had perhaps not enough in his pocket to support him for two days away from home. He offered him fifty lire which he had by him. Don Aurelio himself had three lire, and it was with a simplicity truly Franciscan that he accepted twelve more for the journey to Vicenza, and, if necessary, from Vicenza to Milan, where, if the worst came to the worst, he could seek the hospitality which a brother priest had frequently offered to him. Massimo could not make him accept more.

"I should have asked you for those twelve lire any way," he said. Then, with burning cheeks he showed Massimo the drawer in which he kept his linen, a silent witness to his saintly poverty. He would write from Vicenza saying where his few belongings were to be sent. As to the books, the best plan would be to pack them in a case, and get Donna Fedele to keep them for him. His few bits of furniture must also be packed up. Then it came into his mind that Lúzia once said, "If you go away, Don Aurelio, you will leave me the bed, will you not?" After all, it would be better to leave her the bed and not sell the clock. Poor Lúzia! She had never lost an opportunity of saying that her own bed was a wretched, shaky thing, only fit to be burnt.

"But, my dear friend!" Massimo cried, as if

suddenly realising the fact, "how can I remain if you go? Ah! why did I not think of this before? I will go with you!"

Don Aurelio embraced him tenderly.

"Can you forgive me," the young man cried, "for not having thought of this at once?"

But Don Aurelio only pressed him closer without speaking. Presently he thrust him gently from him, and kissed him on the brow.

"I do not want you."

"You do not want me? Why not? Well, I shall come even if I am not wanted."

The small petroleum lamp was threatening to go out. Don Aurelio extinguished it.

"We shall need it later," he said, "and I don't know whether there is any more oil in the house. At any rate, I should not be able to find it. Let us sit down."

Dark masses of cloud in a moonless sky loomed dimly through one of the windows. Don Aurelio, whom the darkness hid from Massimo, began talking in a low voice and with the earnestness of a father.

"It is I, dear lad, who will be with you. I have never told you, but I have prayed so hard that God might give you what He is now giving you, a strong and mighty love, rich and holy. You are not made for celibacy, you are made for a union ideally human, ideally Christian, ideally beautiful. You are made to raise up a strong and pure progeny. The tradition of great families, heroically devoted to kings, is at an end. We must found families that shall be heroically devoted to God, in which devotion to God shall be handed down as a title of nobility, as the just and traditional sentiment of nobility. You must found such a family. It is my dream for you. It was the dream of—"

Don Aurelio's voice whispered a name and then was silent.

"Was that indeed so?" Massimo cried.

"Yes, it was poor Benedetto's dream for you."

The vision of a dear, suffering face, with great speaking eyes, flashed across Massimo's brain amidst the darkness of the room. Benedetto had dreamed of happiness in love for him! Once more he saw, for an instant, the face upon the pillow, lifeless and waxen. Tears welled up in his heart, but he forced them back.

"You cannot go away," Don Aurelio went on. "You must see Donna Fedele early to-morrow morning, and reassure her on the point we have discussed. She does not doubt you, but as she is charged with a mission, she wishes to receive this assurance from you. Then she will speak to Signorina Lelia at once, to-morrow; she will question her in Signor Marcello's name, for, through me, he has requested her to do so. To-morrow night you will know. Donna Fedele is sure of a favourable answer. Then you yourself can speak."

The table upon which Massimo was leaning, his hands pressed to his temples, shook like a living thing.

"If all goes well," Don Aurelio went on, "send me a telegram to Vicenza, to be called for at the office. . . . Are you afraid?" he added, for the table still vibrated. "Donna Fedele says the girl's is a self-contained nature difficult to penetrate, but she does not believe her to be bound to a memory; she thinks that she feels the need of love, and of a future. She believes her also to be a very storehouse of moral energies, a little embittered perhaps by her sad experience of life; this Donna Fedele has to admit. But she is sure that certain peculiarities will disappear when these energies are properly ordered and guided by one in whom she has confidence."

Massimo was silent. He, too, looked upon her as a closed paradise, darkened by the shadow of

a tree of knowledge of good and evil, which was all too wide-spreading. When Don Aurelio asked him if he had really been unable to discover any clear sign as to her feelings towards himself, he answered, with a sigh:

"I am inclined to think that something in me attracts her, while something else repels her."

"What is it that repels her?"

"Benedetto."

Don Aurelio was amazed. What did this girl know of Benedetto? Massimo hastened to explain. Surely Don Aurelio remembered the conversation at the dinner-table on that first day, and Signorina Lelia's words concerning Benedetto, that had offended him? Soon afterwards she had brought up the subject again, speaking in the same hostile tone. She believed him to have been a heretic. She had seemed disposed at the time to listen to Massimo's defence of him, but later she had always openly avoided the subject.

"Well, well!" said Don Aurelio. "But if that is all——"

He could not bring himself to believe that this girl could be so influenced by religious questions as to be willing to sacrifice her future for them. He realised at once that this scepticism, apparently tinged with but slight esteem, had hurt Massimo. He felt for his friend's hands amidst the darkness, and did not mention Lelia again.

"It is of Benedetto that I want to speak to you," he said. "I had a letter from Elia Viterbo to-day. He would have written to you, but no one in Rome knows where you are. They take for granted, however, that I know. It was even rumoured in Rome that you had taken refuge at Praglia. Fancy that!"

Don Aurelio could not restrain a short laugh of comment.

"A nice sort of Praglia indeed! He wishes me to tell you that your friends have decided to accept

your proposal concerning Benedetto's poor remains, and they beg you to communicate with them. It seems that as you live in the neighbourhood of Oria, they rely on you to help to carry out their intentions."

A few of Benedetto's disciples had proposed some months before to erect a simple monument to his memory in Campo Verano, and had opened a subscription for this purpose. Others among his followers had disapproved of this proposal, both because they foresaw that the sum subscribed would be but small, and because the proposal itself was not in harmony with the Master's spirit. Much dissatisfaction had resulted, and Massimo, who was opposed to the proposal, had sought a peaceful way out of the difficulty, suggested by certain words of Benedetto's on the occasion of a visit they had once paid together to Campo Verano. Benedetto had said: "I shall surely end here, but I should like to rest in the cemetery at Oria. However, that is a vain hope." Massimo had proposed that the idea of a monument should be given up, and that instead this touching desire should be carried out. A small piece of ground, far removed from worldly strife, in the cemetery where Piero Maironi's parents lay sleeping, and where his wife had wished to rest—that would be the most fitting monument. And now it was decided and Benedetto's wish was about to be fulfilled.

"Will you come to Oria on that day?" Massimo asked.

Don Aurelio could not promise this. He did not know whence or how far he might be obliged to travel to reach Oria. But he would come only if the ceremony were free from all unseemly religious manifestations. Then he rose and relighted the lamp.

"It is late," said he, "and you must return to the Montanina." He opened a drawer of the writing-table and drew from it two letters, which he asked Massimo to forward on the following day, after

having read them himself. One was for the arch-priest, the other for the village Chief. The dying lamp flickered and went out.

"Oh!" Don Aurelio exclaimed. "And I wanted to write a few lines more!"

Massimo struck a match.

"You can do so," said he.

Don Aurelio took a sheet of paper and wrote a few words, while Massimo struck match after match. Presently the priest handed him the paper. "That is for Signorina Lelia when she has said 'yes.'"

Massimo read the words, quivering with emotion.

"Allow a poor priest to bless your love in the name of that Infinite Love, from whence may it derive eternal life.

"DON AURELIO."

At that moment they heard a knocking at the street door. Don Aurelio released himself from Massimo, who had flung his arms about him, and hurried to the window. It was Giovanni from the Montanina. Signor Marcello had sent him to see if anything had happened to Signor Alberti.

"No, no, he will come directly!" Don Aurelio replied. He turned from the window and felt Massimo's arms clasping his knees. The young man was kneeling at his feet.

"Go, go!" he whispered, "and may God bless you!" Their parting was perforce a sharp one. Massimo started to his feet, flung himself out of the door and down the stairs, and soon disappeared into the night. Don Aurelio withdrew to his bedroom, and, kneeling before the crucifix, prayed with a keen sense of oppression, and almost as if struggling to overcome an inward enemy, for the two priests of Velo and for all his superiors, who wished to see him shamed, a wanderer, and hungry. "Father, Father, they believe they are serving Thee. They

believe they are serving Thee ! Forgive them
forgive them ! ”

Signor Marcello, who was really anxious, imagined all sorts of reasons for Massimo's absence, for at ten o'clock he had not returned, although he could not but be aware that this was the curfew hour at the Montanina. The old man even grew rather annoyed with Lelia, because she would not admit that anything had happened.

“ He is always in the clouds,” said she. “ He may have gone to the Villino delle Rose under the impression that he was walking here.”

It seemed almost as if Massimo's liking for Donna Fedele were distasteful to the girl. Signor Marcello noticed this, and the allusion to the Villino displeased him. He asked her if she blamed Massimo for liking to go there. She protested hotly. On the contrary ! She said no more, but in her heart she was blaming Donna Fedele for her partiality towards Massimo, although she would have been unable to explain the reason why. She dreaded further questions, and so withdrew.

She went to her room determined not to give up her evening walk in the park, and although it was already late, she meant to await the rising of the moon there. The moon would rise at midnight that evening. Signor Marcello would go to bed immediately on Alberti's return, and then she could go downstairs. She did not light the lamp, but flung herself into an easy-chair opposite the wide casement window that looked out upon the upper slopes of the dark forest below the jagged crags of S. Romano. Once more she turned over in her mind Signor Marcello's words. Did she blame him ? And so it would displease Signor Marcello should she even so much as touch his Alberti with the slightest censure. It was not the first time since his reproof to her on a certain day that Signor Marcello had taken up the cudgels for Alberti and

against her on matters of trivial importance. And he was so determined to keep him at the Montanina! Was it possible that the poor old man thought him so devoted to the memory of his son that he might not even be tempted to be disloyal to him?

At this point there suddenly flashed across her mind the idea that she was the centre of a comedy. What if all had been pre-arranged, the invitation to Alberti sent through Don Aurelio, and his reception at the Montanina? What if Donna Fedele's sudden change of attitude and her daily visits were all directed towards the same secret end? What if Signor Marcello had been talked over by the priest of Sant' Ubaldo and the mistress of the Villino, and what if they had succeeded in persuading him to accept their plan, who knew by means of what arguments? In a flash all seemed clear to her. Signor Alberti, invited by people who had themselves arranged the part she, Lelia, was to play, had come to make the acquaintance of and captivate Signor Trento's heir. In her wrath she grasped the arms of her chair firmly and bit her lip that she might not cry. And she did not cry, but the flood of tears she held in check made her bosom heave and heave again. How maddening it would be if the tears should fall! Contempt, contempt, only contempt!

She lighted the lamp and rang the bell for Teresina, telling her to let her know when Massimo returned. He was not back yet, the woman said. It was with horror that she learned that the Signorina was determined to go down to the park again that night. She begged and implored her not to do so, and even threatened to speak, but a sharp scolding was the only result, and she ended by consoling herself with the hope that this would be the last time. The following morning she was to go to Schio. From the drawer of her writing-desk Lelia took a sealed letter that lay there beside

the one she had crushed in her hand on the evening of Massimo's arrival.

"The usual thing," she said, handing it to the maid. It contained money that Lelia was sending to her father. She was in the habit of sending it through Teresina and from Schio, fearing that some indiscretion on the part of the postal officials of Velo d'Astico might reveal her secret to Signor Marcello. Teresina delighted in this mark of confidence which enabled her to rise somewhat from devotion towards friendship. To-night's act of confidence helped her to start by slow degrees a small rivulet of talk that, like the little rivulets in nature, bend and twist amidst obstacles, and always find a way to the great stream for which they are bound. She began cautiously by alluding to the Signorina's very scanty wardrobe, and by saying she spent too little on her clothes. Even the master had noticed this and reproached her, Teresina, for it. But what could she do? She could only mention it to the Signorina, and so now she had done so. Not extravagance, certainly not. Too much dress would be out of place at the Montanina; but she might dress more elegantly. The master thought she had better get Donna Fedele to help her to choose a good dressmaker. It was true Donna Fedele got her clothes in Turin, but Teresina was quite sure she went only to some fourth-rate house. Lelia, who got her clothes in Vicenza, inquired whether Teresina could recommend a good dressmaker in Schio, whereupon the maid protested. Was there not Milan? And which one of Milan's great houses would the all-wise Teresina recommend? At this point the rivulet could find no outlet, and formed a little pool. The pool filled rapidly, and the rivulet presently began to trickle out on one side.

"No, Signorina—I don't know anything about them," the woman at last made answer. "But there are plenty of people who do."

"Now, who would be likely to know?"

This time the rivulet was forced to overflow.

"I suppose Signor Alberti must have some ladies in his family."

This speech formed a very waterfall!

"Let Signor Alberti alone!" exclaimed Lelia.

It had been through no confidence on Donna Fedele's part, but rather through a vague undercurrent in her remarks concerning the Signorina, and through a new manner in Signor Marcello's speech and gesture that the clever maid had recognised an unspoken support of the sentiments she had early read in Massimo's expression. She did not know what to make of the Signorina. At one moment she thought one thing, at the next another, and now that she had thrown out the sounding-line, having struck against something unresponsive, she tried again.

"I, Signorina!" said she. "I let him alone? I can see well enough the master is wrapped up in that young man. It is a beautiful sight, I tell you!"

Lelia cut her short, and sent her to see if Massimo had returned. She assured herself it was plain that Teresina would not have spoken as she had done without having been prompted. Evidently she was in the conspiracy also. "Ah, no, my friends! No, master fortune-hunter, no, no, no!" She seized an old photograph of Signor Marcello that stood upon the table and tore it across. Here was another bargainer like Alberti, disloyal to a whole religion of memories in order that his Montanina might not fall into the hands of her parents, or into other similar hands. "No, Signor Marcello! Ah, no, all of you!" But where was Teresina? Was it possible that Alberti had already returned, and that the treacherous creature would not come to tell her in order to prevent her going to the park? She stepped into the corridor in a state of great irritation. It

was nearly half-past eleven ! She listened and heard Teresina's step in the corridor below.

"Well?" She flung the question at her from above.

"Now, Signorina," the other answered softly. "This very minute."

* * * * *

A quarter of an hour later, feeling sure that Signor Marcello and Alberti had gone to their rooms, Lelia left the villa and the garden and started towards the wooden gate that opens into the park from the high-road just below the little church of Santa Maria ad Montes. With fierce contempt in her heart for this man, who had come from Milan with a fine plan for a rich marriage ready in his pocket, she said to herself that, had her father and mother been upright people, she would have taken refuge with one or other of them at this time. But she could not live in the same house with her father's mistress, nor could she allow her mother to support her on the old Austrian's money. A thought came to her that had first attracted her when she was but fourteen, and that had persistently haunted her ever since except during the time of Andrea's courtship—the thought of escaping from the world. Yet this morbid idea had never assumed the intensity of a purpose. Even on the evening when she had closed the windows of her room, which was full of lilies and tuberoses, she had not meant to do more than indulge her delight in recklessly facing danger and risk. As a matter of fact, on waking the next morning, with her limbs like lead, her brow tightly clasped as by a band of iron, her nostrils, her mouth, and her throat saturated with the acrid perfume, her first impulse had been to open the window. Neither was she moved by any tragic purpose in visiting the park to-night, although there was a pond in it that in some places was more than two metres deep.

She was satisfied with the knowledge that there was a place of refuge for her should she wish to seek it. Nevertheless, her hand trembled a little as she pushed open the small gate and closed it behind her again. She advanced across the open space to where giant trees guard the entrance to the kingdom of Silence. She had trembled lest her step, light as it was, should be heard as she came over the gravel of the garden paths and across the road. Now that she was moving silently and like a spirit across the grass all sense of fear left her, and that all-silent darkness seemed to offer her protection. She listened to the murmur of streams in secret dells, or in the mountains' open ravines; her foot sank often into soft, marshy ground. There was a cool, still air, smelling of dampness, in the shady hollows, but warm upon the sloping banks, and all alive with a wild fragrance. She flung herself upon her back on one of these slopes, as if overcome by all this warm sweetness. Night was indeed a tender mother to all things, and their appealing influence filled Lelia with a sense of sweet fellowship with Nature. She lay without thinking, revelling in vague yearnings, as at times in her own bed, when the petals of flowers rained upon her hair and pillow. The voluptuous spirit of the warm, fragrant earth took possession of her, and softened the pride that held her back from love. She tore up a handful of grass and bit it.

Presently she rose, though loth to leave the fragrant spot, and wandered towards the long, dark avenue of horn-beams, whose entrance glimmered faintly on her right. On her left the shadows were unbroken, and rang with the noise of falling water. She turned this way, knowing of a path that led from the avenue to some acacia-trees by the rivulet, the same rivulet that splashes and sings farther on. She found the path and paused among the acacias on the bank of the stream, which she could hear but

not see. Instinctively she began to undress herself, at the invitation of that soft voice, then, awaking to a sense of her actions, she dipped her hand in the water. It was cold. All the better; it would do her the more good. And she went on undressing, never heeding where she flung her garments, removing them all except the last. She put her foot into the running water and shivered. She tested the bottom—pebbles, beneath a couple of feet of water. She put her other foot in and, her heart gripped by the chill, let herself sink slowly into the water with closed eyes and parted lips, uttering little sighs the while. The water covered her with icy caresses and rippled gently about her neck and heaving bosom. Other sweet voices sounded in the air. Lelia opened her eyes and raised herself in amazement. She seemed clothed in light, which shone upon the trembling waters and wrapped the banks and her clothes lying beneath the swaying, whispering trees in a silver radiance. It was the rising of the moon, a mysterious awakening of all things in the dead of night. Flowers were raining from the acacias upon the stream and its banks. The girl pressed her folded arms against her breast, and, under the gathering moonlight, amidst the odours of the woods and the rain of flowers, some indefinable emotion filled her heart with welling tears, which fell hot and silent into the quivering water.

Presently she climbed the bank, dressed herself as best she could, and then, with throbbing heart, with never a glance at the moon shining amongst billowing clouds upon the brow of Monte Paù, fled back along the same path and passed out at the wooden gate, feeling like a castaway who suddenly finds himself safe. Teresina, who was waiting for her beneath the little porch sheltering the entrance to the garden, and who had been trembling with a thousand fears, received her with the same sense of relief.

"Even you, Signorina, were frightened this time!" she said, seeing Lelia shudder, and being unaware of the dripping under-garment she wore.

"No, no!" said Lelia; "but I shall not go there again."

II

At half-past seven the next morning Massimo was already at the Villino delle Rose. He knew that Donna Fedele always rose at six, but this morning she was still in bed, and the maid confided to him that her mistress must be feeling very unwell indeed thus to break away from her habit of early rising. Donna Fedele could bear much physical pain, and hardly ever mentioned her sufferings, which were such as to alarm any one who looked upon death less fearlessly than she did. But there were times when she was unable to lead her usual life, which was one of wonderful activity, taken up with the care of her house and her roses, visits to the sick and the poor, correspondence, reading, and a few lessons that she gave. She was training the gate-keeper's little girl in composition and arithmetic, and teaching French to the Arsiero doctor's daughter; for, notwithstanding her ill-health, she never refused her aid to those who sought it.

She heard Massimo talking with the maid in the garden, and ringing her bell, sent him word to wait a quarter of an hour for her, if his patience would allow. Massimo understood the meaning she had intended to convey by this phrase, "if his patience would allow," and she entered the drawing-room presently with a smile that bore out the playful allusion. She was pale, and there were black circles under her big eyes, but she was in good spirits, and nothing about her suggested suffering. Massimo began by excusing himself for having come at that

hour, but she checked him at once, saying, "Never mind that; never mind!" Then the smile faded from her lips.

"And so he is gone?" she added.

Massimo replied that he believed so.

"Ah! then you were not with him when he started?"

"It was not possible for me to be."

Donna Fedele said nothing, but her silence and her face seemed to say, "It ought to have been possible."

"I wished to go away with him," said he, "but he would not hear of it. I am here this morning at his wish."

"I can quite understand that," Donna Fedele replied, somewhat coldly. She would have liked Massimo to have stayed with Don Aurelio at any cost up to the last. But, not knowing the circumstances, she refrained from passing judgment on his action. She questioned him as to what the fugitive had said and done during those last hours, and while Massimo was talking kept repeating, "Poor Don Aurelio! Poor Don Aurelio!" Massimo told her all he could.

"Now I hope they are satisfied," she said bitterly, rising from her seat. She looked to see that the drawing-room doors were all closed, and then returned to Massimo, saying: "I trust no one. We are living in the realm of spies, to the greater honour and glory of honesty and Christian charity!"

Then she immediately broached the delicate subject, excusing herself for so doing. More tactful than Don Aurelio, she began by asking the young man if she were mistaken in supposing that he was strongly attracted by Signorina Lelia, and upon his answer, she told him that for the sake of the friendship between his mother and herself, and also for his own sake after what Don Aurelio had told her about him, she would gladly help him.

"As far as Signor Marcello is concerned, I hardly think you will need my help," she said. "He sees that it would not be fair to the girl that she should sacrifice her whole life, and besides, he is very attached to you. But how about Lelia herself? I believe she cares for you, but she is struggling with herself, partly, perhaps, because she wishes to remain true to a memory, partly, perhaps, not to offend Signor Marcello—"

Here Donna Fedele dropped her voice and continued, smiling:

"Perhaps because of some fancy, for you must see that your Lelia is just a little strange."

Massimo smiled also.

"Do you think so?" said he.

"Oh, yes, indeed!" Donna Fedele exclaimed, laughing outright. "And it is partly for that reason you have fallen in love with her! I have done the same, you see. She attracts me, being made much in the same mould as myself—at least, according to what many people say of me, the Velo priests among others, and the goldsmith at Arsiero, to whom my gatekeeper took a gold coin last night, believing it to be false because it did not ring true. What do you think the goldsmith said to him? 'It is just like your mistress—it is good, but slightly cracked!' They think my head is wrong, mainly because I am always going about without a hat, but also because I keep a pluviometer and leave my windows open at night. Even Carnesecca, who has left the 'den' at last, told me that if the world called me mad, I might comfort myself with the thought that it called him mad too! And now will you yourself set me down as mad if I ask you a very bold question, my dear Alberti?"

"I shall only laugh," the young man replied, "and my worldly friends in Milan would laugh even more heartily."

Donna Fedele sat looking at him affectionately for a time, speaking to him with her eyes.

"In that case," said she at last, "I will see Lelia this very day, and try to find out how matters stand. Will that suit you?"

Massimo was profuse in his thanks, but his restless manner showed her that he hoped she would start for the Montanina at once.

"I have ordered the carriage at half-past nine," she said, smiling. "Is that early enough? And see what faith I am placing in the answer you gave me a moment since, or rather, what faith I have in you yourself."

Massimo took her hand and raised it to his lips. She accepted his homage laughingly, and then rose. She was expecting a pupil. Massimo might come back for news about two o'clock. That was too late? Then he might come to luncheon. She would tell them at the Montanina that she had invited him. Meanwhile he could stay or go, as he pleased. If he wished to read, the Villino had a small library. If he did not wish to remain, he had four hours before him for a walk.

"Take a good long walk, one of those walks that refresh the soul."

Having given this piece of advice with her air of gentle raillery, she held out her hand to her young friend. He begged her to have patience with him a moment longer. Did she think the rumour of his supposed intrigue in Milan had reached the Signorina's ears? Donna Fedele had no reason to believe she had heard it. But who had spread this story? Donna Fedele, by a virtuous effort, remained silent concerning the Velo priests, and simply alluded to Lelia's mother, without further explanation, nor did Massimo venture to press her with questions. Before leaving her, however, he wished her to know of Lelia's antipathy towards his Master—Benedetto. But she cut his explanation short, demanding how that could

affect matters. Ignorant alike of Modernism and of Anti-modernism, content to believe and to live according to the traditions of her family, Donna Fedele, knowing that both Lelia and Massimo were not irreligious, could not conceive of any religious dissension between them. Yet certain words Lelia had uttered had given her the impression that the girl's faith sprang from habit rather than from real conviction. It was just for this reason that she would be glad to see her married to one who, like Alberti, was strong in religious belief.

"How can that matter?" she said. "Love will change all that easily enough. Besides, I do not suppose that you expect me also, simply because I am very fond of you, to become an enthusiastic follower of your Master. It seems to me that we need no other Master than the One who has guided us now for some nineteen hundred years."

Massimo would have liked to rep'y to this, but Donna Fedele dismissed him, saying: "Go now, go!" with her usual sweet smile, wherein there was just a suspicion of irony.

Massimo took the road to the upper Val d'Astico, that led farthest away from the Montanina. Passing the village of Barcarola, he left the Pedescala bridge on his right, and went down through the fields to the banks of the Astico, where for some time he watched the green water flowing rapidly by, listening to its even murmur and to the beating of his own heart. The sky was veiled with grey; the mountains that guard the stream on either side, enveloped in heavy mists, looked like silent cloaked mourners.

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Shortly after nine o'clock Donna Fedele's unpretentious carriage was slowly toiling upwards towards the Montanina. To her great surprise, on turning in the direction of the candelabrum chestnut, she heard the querulous tinkling of the bell of Santa Maria ad

Montes. It was always Don Aurelio who said Mass there, from time to time, on certain festivals. Was it possible he had not started? Leaving her carriage at the chestnut-tree, she went up to the little church on foot, and entered. It was empty, but some one was moving in the sacristy. On going to see who it was, she found herself face to face with Don Emanuele. She could not check an exclamation of surprise, and turned quickly away, while the chaplain sank on his knees upon the prayer-stool, to prepare himself for the Mass. Presently the little altar-boy told her that the Mass would be for the repose of the soul of Signora Trento, this being the anniversary of her death. The priest's preparation lasted a long time, and twice again the querulous little bell tinkled. Donna Fedele, seated near the small stone holy-water font with its frieze of "alpine-stars," reflected, not without some pity, how difficult it would be for the poor chaplain to recover from his unpleasant surprise. When she thought how furious he had made her, she experienced a sense of remorse and humility. Amongst the leaves of the mystic vine adorning the choir, she noticed the words of Christ: "*Ego sum vitis, vos palmites.*" The little demon of sarcasm that dwelt in her brain took his revenge by suggesting to her that perhaps Don Emanuele was an unfruitful tendril, but she despised herself for such thoughts as these, coming to her in church, even while contemplating the Lord's vine. "At least," she told herself, "the chaplain would be a green tendril, while I am but a withered one." Signor Marcello came in, and not having expected her to be there, thanked her by a glance, believing she had come for the anniversary. Lelia came in behind him. Don Emanuele said Mass with all the gravity of an ascetic and a prelate. Of the three participants Signor Marcello showed the most devotion, and having put on his eye-glasses, stood reading the "Imitation of Christ" from the beginning

of Mass to the end, without once sitting down. Lelia was not praying, and her glance often wandered through the little side-door to the green landscape of the Velo Park and the bright strip of field between the chestnuts, that she had crossed in the night. Donna Fedele glanced often and sadly at Signor Marcello, who seemed to her to have grown even thinner, while his face was worse than pale, it was yellow. She also studied Lelia, who looked dissatisfied and sullen. She could not help thinking of her coming interview with this girl, and although she reproached herself for her distraction, of poor Alberti's grief should Lelia's answer be a refusal, and of the mixed feelings of regret and satisfaction that such an answer would bring to Signor Marcello. For Don Aurelio had told her that Signor Marcello would certainly rejoice in her loyalty should she refuse, but in the event of her consenting he would feel that in Massimo Alberti he was regaining some part of his son, and that the danger of Lelia's falling again into her parents' power, or forming some unfortunate union later on, would be definitely removed. The soft, persistent murmur of the little fountain in the small vestibule behind her soothed her melancholy; all this uncertainty would soon come to an end, the interview would be a thing of the past, and its consequences, whatever they might be, would pass away also; perhaps she herself would soon be no more. She gave no further thought to anything but the eternal words the priest was uttering. The quarter of an hour's drive had sufficed to increase her suffering. During the Communion she was obliged to sit down, and she felt that she looked like a dead woman. The lad who was serving the Mass stared at her as he stood waiting with the two flasks for the priest to present the chalice, and she smiled inwardly on perceiving his look of amazement. When Mass was over, her indomitable will helped her to rise and pass out by the side-door,

followed by Lelia, while Signor Marcello remained behind a moment longer. His profuse thanks embarrassed Donna Fedele, who, however, concluded it would be wiser to accept them in silence.

"I came partly because I wanted a walk with Lelia," said she. "And, as I am here, I should also like to ask you for some advice."

He seemed somewhat surprised.

"Certainly," he answered, "any advice I can give."

Whenever these two talked together there was a tone of respectful affection in their voices; her voice was almost timidly affectionate. While they were on the way up to the Villa, the little altar-boy came to say that Don Emanuele could not come to take coffee, as he had an engagement.

"I am the obstacle," thought Donna Fedele.

"And what do you think of the new about Don Aurelio?" said she.

Signor Marcello's frame was shaken by silent indignation, the lines on his brow deepened, and his clear eyes flashed angrily.

Donna Fedele thought he must have heard the news from Massimo. No, Alberti had not told him on his return from Lago, and he had gone out very early that morning. Don Emanuele had brought the news. And how had he brought it! He had simply come without sending any word, and Signor Marcello to his intense astonishment had found the chaplain in the sacristy, where he had expected to find Don Aurelio. Don Emanuele had then said that the archpriest had ordered him to come as a substitute for Don Aurelio. It had almost required a corkscrew to drag from him the information that Don Aurelio had requested the archpriest to take his place, that Don Aurelio was not ill, and that he had gone away, leaving a letter in which he said that he recognised that it was his duty to go. Donna Fedele's fine brow became overcast also, and a flash of scorn

lit up her great dark eyes. Lelia knew, too, of what had happened, for Signor Marcello had returned to the villa to tell her. She now observed coldly that Don Aurelio had done quite right, and said no more. A fleeting cloud passed over Donna Fedele's pale face. She controlled herself, however, and taking the girl's arm, told her that after a short talk with Signor Marcello, she was going to ask her to show her that special corner of the Velo Park which she, Lelia, had often spoken of as being so beautiful. Lelia consented coldly.

Signor Marcello asked whether Donna Fedele would prefer his study or a garden-seat. She chose the study, and smiled, as if to tell him that the advice she was seeking was of a delicate and personal nature. Once there her face assumed a sweet seriousness which ennobled it with the dignified beauty which is nearer to immortality than to youth, and is the inheritance of years spent in doing good and guided by a pure conscience.

"My dear friend," said she, addressing him thus for the first time in her life, "if one to whom you were bound by ties of respect and affection should charge you with a mission through a third person, instructing you also through this person not to speak to him directly concerning it, and you, having performed the mission, should find it no longer possible to communicate with your friend through the intermediary, would you appeal to him in spite of his first injunction, or what would you do?"

While she was speaking very slowly and deliberately, Signor Marcello's eyes brightened with a sad smile, for he recognised the instructions he had given Don Aurelio.

"I was in the wrong," said he. "I suppose this walk——"

She nodded assent, and he went on:

"We must talk the matter over together. Forgive me!"

Donna Fedele protested warmly. His desire for secrecy was quite natural. But Signor Marcello still persisted.

"No, no! Forgive me!"

There were no tears in her eyes, only her lids trembled slightly. It was the first return, after long years, to an intimacy which, though it had never overstepped the bounds of duty, was conscious, nevertheless, of the sweet secret that each cherished. With the passing of time the sweet secret had faded. Only its faint perfume remained, hardly perceptible in his soul, but stronger in hers. But now, slowly but irresistibly, the wave of memory was rolling backwards, bringing great sweetness to Donna Fedele's heart and great sadness to Signor Marcello, upon whose mind it was being borne that his was the fault that her youth had faded without marriage, without maternity, and for one long moment neither of them spoke.

Donna Fedele was the first to break the silence.

"I so thoroughly understand your feeling in this matter," said she.

Signor Marcello took her hand and pressed it, and she added softly:

"My poor friend!"

Still he was silent, and still he pressed her hand. But presently he spoke with a fair amount of composure. He told her how the thought of this marriage had first come to him. He had made Lelia his heir, and on the very night of Alberti's arrival, in the course of conversation, he had sought to give her an inkling of this by speaking of the Montanina, letting her see that the idea that this Montanina his dear ones had so loved should pass into the hands of strangers would be most painful to him. She had thwarted him. Knowing her character, he could only suppose that pride had prompted this resistance to what might seem a reward for the loyalty of her affection. Or perhaps she had acted thus because

she wished to be free to dispose of herself one day. All this had deeply grieved him, and in recalling talks he had had in days gone by with his poor wife, he had assured himself that the girl, who was passionate by nature, would certainly end by marrying, and that it would be wise for him to hasten this event that he might influence her choice. The accident that had brought his son's dearest friend to the Montanina had seemed to him truly providential, and immediately, indeed the very next morning, he had taken Don Aurelio into his confidence.

"My first plan was," he concluded, "that you should ascertain Lelia's feelings. But now, I do not know why, I have grown very impatient. And so please tell her straight out that should she consent to marry Alberti, I should die happy."

"Do not speak of dying, dear friend!"

"We will not discuss that," replied the old man shortly.

She had wanted to question him about his health, but she no longer dared to do so. She did venture, however, to point out to him that, should Lelia refuse to accept his legacy, the Montanina must go into other hands, notwithstanding the marriage. He replied that as soon as Lelia and Alberti became engaged he would alter his will and leave the villa to Alberti.

"Let us hope that all may end well," said Donna Fedele, rising and smiling her own smile again. "Shall I find you here after my talk with Lelia?"

"Yes, you will find me here. I would wager now you are thinking, 'How that old man clings to his home! How can he expect to hold it, in a way, even after—'"

Donna Fedele checked him. "Don't, don't! Be quiet! Be quiet!"

She left the room. Signor Marcello took a Bible which always lay on his table, and read the eighteenth chapter of the First Book of Kings, the chapter of

the "knitting together" of the souls of Jonathan and David. As a child he had wept over the fate of the noble prince Jonathan, who had been his favourite hero. Once more he read that vivid, dramatic story, and reflected that Jonathan, falling in Mount Gilboa, must have rejoiced in the thought that henceforth his friend would sit upon the throne to which he himself had been born.

* * * * *

In the drawing-room Donna Fedele found Lelia waiting, reclining in an easy-chair, her parasol in her hand.

"Are we really going?" said she.

Donna Fedele seemed to hear in that question all the sarcasm of one who has discovered what others are seeking to hide, and would fain publish the discovery. Lelia's voice and her eyes both said: "This walk is a pretext. You are here to talk to me. You have just consulted Papa on this same subject, and perhaps now the talk with me is no longer necessary."

"Of course. Why do you ask?"

"Because," said Lelia, rising from her chair, but lingering near it, "it seems to me you cannot really want a walk. If you could only see how pale you are! Look in the glass. If you have something to tell me, you can say it here."

Her tone, not her language, was rude.

"Yes, dear," Donna Fedele answered with a note of icy command, "I have something to tell you, but not here."

Lelia started without a word.

"On the present occasion I have Signor Marcello's authority to speak to you," Donna Fedele added very gently, tempering the pressure of her command. Lelia now had no further doubt concerning the existence of a plot in which her friend had a part. Massimo's absence, Donna Fedele's determination to

she speak to her in a secluded spot, confirmed her suspicion that Donna Fedele was charged with a mission from Massimo, and was acting with Signor Marcello's consent, a consent which she had perhaps wrested from him but a moment since. She resented all this ardour for the sake of Massimo, and the moral force that she imagined to have been used against Signor Marcello. Frowning and in silence she went down the garden path in front of her companion, who could not keep up with her, and was obliged to ask her to go more slowly. Lelia pointed to a garden-seat beneath the walnuts, near the Riderella. Would not that do? To her blunt question Donna Fedele replied with equal bluntness:

"No, dear."

Lelia said no more. The two women entered the park by the wooden gate.

"How beautiful!" said Donna Fedele.

Lelia pouted contemptuously. How could she say "How beautiful!" when they had only just passed the gate? The view was just the same from the high-road. After all, Donna Fedele might be very clever, but she had little feeling for Nature.

Lelia walked on, and following a rough grass track, turned to the right between the chestnuts and a small stream that flowed through the narrow valley. A little farther on the track lost itself in a flowery meadow-land between high, shady banks. Donna Fedele sat down here in the shade of the walnuts and rested a little, gazing thoughtfully into the dark waters. Presently she turned to Lelia, who was still standing, and tracing figures in the grass with the point of her parasol, saying gently:

"Do you know what Signor Marcello spoke to me about?"

"Perhaps I do," said Lelia, still tracing.

"That is good. What was it?"

"I shall not say."

"I can quite understand your not wishing to."

said Donna Fedele indulgently. "It is a very delicate and personal question. All the same, it is much better to discuss it. In any case, you have expressed your wishes and no one can coerce you."

"My wishes?" Lelia cried with a start. "My wishes?"

"Well, did you not tell Signor Marcello you would never consent to be his heir?"

Lelia's hostile and unwilling manner suddenly changed, and she stopped tracing with the point of her parasol.

"We discussed that and other matters as well. I want to talk to you about that now. Sit down, and don't make me twist my neck."

"It will be of no use," the girl said impatiently.

"Perhaps not, but nevertheless you must listen to me. Why are you determined to make this poor old man so unhappy?"

"Because I am willing to sacrifice everything to him except my self-respect."

Donna Fedele raised her voice somewhat and smiled, to show that she did not take this rude remark seriously.

"Do you think I would advise anything that could wound your self-respect?"

Lelia answered sharply, and with downcast eyes:

"You see things in one light, and I in another."

Then she cast a glance at Donna Fedele, as if to say, "It is your turn now. What answer have you to that?"

Donna Fedele made no answer at all. She waited a moment and then played her second card.

"And when Signor Marcello is gone, what will become of his son's affianced bride?"

"Perhaps she herself may be gone too," the girl retorted promptly.

Donna Fedele was unmoved. "Perhaps," said she. "But if she should still be here?"

Lelia played among the grasses with her parasol for an instant, and then said:

"It will be soon enough to think of that then."

"Child, child!"

"No, woman!" cried Lelia. "And I thought you would understand me better!"

As she spoke her eyes filled with tears, and Donna Fedele longed to tell her that she did indeed understand her only too well, but checked herself in order not to spoil her plan of action.

"Think of your future, dear," she said gently.

"I cannot decide my future," Lelia answered calmly.

Then Donna Fedele took the third step.

"Don't you see that all this is a source of anxiety to Signor Marcello?"

Silence.

"It is such a great anxiety to him," Donna Fedele went on, "that if he could only see you settled, and that at once, he would be quite happy."

The word "settled" was a mistake. Lelia felt hot with resentment and cold at the same moment.

"Ah!" she cried. "And so he wishes to see me settled. That is just what I thought. And the means by which I am to be settled, by a strange coincidence, happens to be ready to hand!"

The point of the sunshade jabbed the grass fiercely.

Donna Fedele felt very angry. She raised her eyebrows and gazed severely and narrowly at her companion, who was still stabbing the ground restlessly.

"What do you mean by that?"

Lelia in her turn, threw her a nervous glance, and then brought her attention back again to the parasol.

"Oh, you know well enough!" said she. "A strange coincidence has provided the means of settling me. By a strange coincidence also, some

one who should have gone to Lago came to the Montanina. By another strange coincidence this some one is a young man, unmarried, and seeking to get settled too. He is fairly clever at speculating, and knows how to play his cards. A series of strange coincidences—nothing more!"

Donna Fedele's eyebrows went up higher than ever, and her voice, which had been trembling, now sounded icy.

"Do you know that you are also insulting me?"

The point of the parasol stopped tracing.

"No, I am not insulting you. I am only insulting him—that man who came so accidentally. You, perhaps, really believe he came by chance."

"Poor Lelia!" sighed Donna Fedele, without anger and with deep pity.

"Oh, no, no!" said Lelia softly. "It is not 'poor Lelia!' at all."

After this both remained silent for a time, and sat gazing into the water that was flowing onwards with a mournful lament. At last Donna Fedele repeated:

"Yes. Poor Lelia! And you do not know why I say so. It is because I can read your heart."

"You cannot read my heart."

Donna Fedele felt that this denial was an admission. She waited a moment longer, and then, with an air of determination, asked the girl if she had heard any slander concerning Alberti.

"What do you think I could have heard?" she answered scornfully. "And in any case do you suppose I should care?"

This time Donna Fedele could not contain herself.

"Oh, but you do care! How can you deny it in the face of your anger which has been aroused simply because you believe the stupid calumny that he is on the look-out for a fortune?" And the poor invalid rose, not without difficulty.

"That concerns me!" Lelia exclaimed, forgetting

for an instant to help her friend. She quickly begged her pardon, however, and offered to fetch the little carriage that had gone up to the Montanina stables. Donna Fedele made an effort to do without it, but when she had taken a few steps she was obliged to admit, with her brave smile, that she could not manage to walk. She must see Signor Marcello, and so Lelia went on to send her carriage for her.

* * * * *

Signor Marcello came anxiously to the door of his study to meet Donna Fedele. She entered the room quietly, saying the conversation had not been satisfactory, but she believed that, by careful management, they might still succeed. Signor Marcello immediately inquired, with a gentle and pathetic expectancy, if Lelia's old love still burned too warmly in her heart. Donna Fedele held out her hand to him, but did not answer. He held it without pressing it, for he feared a disappointing answer. Silence alone spoke between them.

"Then, if that is so——" said he at last.

Donna Fedele told him that Lelia's attitude in the drawing-room had indicated that she was not only antagonistic, but also overwhelmed with suspicion, how she herself had then changed her plan in order not to risk definite failure, how she had spoken of Alberti and found the girl fierce against him, so fierce that her violence could only be explained by conflicting sentiments. Lelia was convinced that he had come to Velo for the express purpose of arranging a rich marriage for himself. If they could persuade her that this was untrue, they might still carry the day. But of course great prudence was necessary. Signor Marcello begged her to advise him. The only advice she could offer, however, was that he should no longer detain Alberti at the Montanina, nor even seek to persuade him to remain, for she had no doubt he would wish to

leave at once. At this point she deemed it prudent to tell Signor Marcello of the interview she had had with the young man, who was now awaiting her return. Then, almost timidly, and with her sweetest smile, she proffered her help in the delicate and difficult task that lay before them.

"It is only natural that I should wish to help. Don't you see that, dear friend?" she said, realising his gratitude. They parted without more words, but with a long handclasp.

* * * * *

On reaching the Villino, Donna Fedele found that Massimo had not yet returned, nor did he appear until nearly noon. At the gate he met the maid, who informed him that her mistress had returned at half-past eleven, but had forgotten to leave word at the Montanina that he would not be there to lunch, and had therefore despatched her with a message. While walking up the short drive Massimo reflected, with alternate waves of despair and of hope, first, that the news must be unfavourable, because if all had gone well Donna Fedele, instead of sending a message, would surely have sent him off to the Montanina instead; then, that the news must be favourable, because if all had not gone well, she would probably not have forgotten to mention his absence. The maid had smiled at him; this was a good sign, but Donna Fedele did not come out to meet him, and that was a bad sign.

As a matter of fact she did come to meet him, but only as far as the verandah that ran in front of the villa. She had seen him at the gate and now met him here, neither in the house nor really out of doors, neither smiling nor downcast. He read his fate upon her face, and murmured quickly:

"I knew!"

She did not at once speak the words of comfort of which her heart was full, but simply held out her

hands to him, and although he tried to appear composed, she saw him turn so pale that she felt she must give him some encouragement.

"I cannot deny that things do not look very bright," she said, "but perhaps they may not be so bad, after all. I will tell you all about it. Come with me." And her familiar smile once more illumined her face. When they were seated in the little study on the ground-floor, she related all the particulars of her interview with Lelia, omitting nothing and hiding nothing. Her words were like so many lashes to him, but he listened without flinching.

"Very well," said he, when his friend ceased speaking. "After all, the girl is only very silly!" As he spoke his face flushed hotly with all the anger he had held in check.

"She is not silly," Donna Fedele retorted. "But I am afraid she was insincere with me. I really fear some one has been talking to her about that intrigue you were supposed to have had in Milan. But I have another idea also."

Massimo did not ask her what it was. At that moment he felt he was no longer in love. His one desire was to get away, and never to return. He regretted having thought, even for a day, of abandoning the field of strife for Truth and Righteousness, and of yielding to a great love. He said to himself that he was grateful to this girl's petty, foolish pride, which was setting him free again. He rose to his feet, and to Donna Fedele he seemed to have grown taller by several inches.

"You don't ask what my idea is," said she.

"I was to have telegraphed to Don Aurelio," Massimo replied. "But I will go to him instead."

"You don't ask what I think," his friend repeated, raising her voice and emphasising her words. "Well, what is this idea?" he demanded, more to satisfy her than from any curiosity he felt. Thereupon, with some hesitation, she gave him her impres-

sion of Lelia's feelings. Massimo showed himself bitterly incredulous. During luncheon he hardly spoke, nor did he eat. His friend having mentioned Don Aurelio, he remarked that he should see him that very evening. They took their coffee in the verandah.

"I think you are wise to leave at once, at all events," Donna Fedele whispered when the maid had withdrawn. "But you must not judge Lelia so hastily. Let me get to the bottom of things first. I will keep you posted."

Massimo replied that he was sorry he had called the Signorina "silly," but that it was no use thinking any more about her. So slight a thing as the affected mispronunciation of a word had once sufficed to cure him of his attachment to another girl, and between Signorina Lelia and himself there was a lack of sympathy in outlook that was far more serious than any lack of sympathy in culture.

"Could I not leave at once?" he demanded suddenly, looking at his watch. There was a train at two thirty-seven. Might he not send Signor Marcello a line, saying he had been unexpectedly summoned to Milan, and to beg him to forward his luggage?

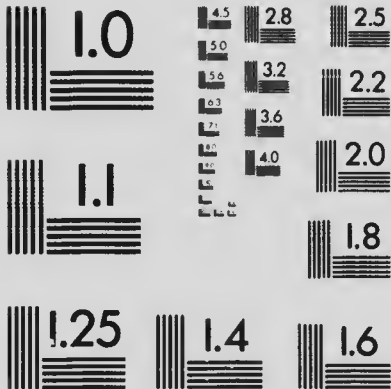
Donna Fedele protested. On the contrary, he must go to the Montanina immediately, and say that when Don Aurelio had confided to him his intention of going away, his first impulse had been not to allow him to go alone, but that his friend had requested him to remain and do several things for him after his departure. At this point Massimo broke in. Certainly! And this was no pretext, but the truth. And to think he had forgotten! He must go to Sant' Ubaldo at all costs. He could not possibly leave before six o'clock.

"Go up to Sant' Ubaldo and talk to Lúzia," said Donna Fedele. "As to the books, I will arrange to have them brought here, and the furniture also.



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You will see—sooner or later you will return to these parts, and then certain proprieties will make it impossible for you to stay at the Montanina, and you will put up at the Villino delle Rose ! ”

She smiled as she spoke, and the young man saw she was alluding to a local custom that forbade a betrothed couple to dwell under the same roof. “ No, no ! ” said he. The lady laughed outright.

“ How is that? Don't you wish to come to me? Are you afraid of compromising me? ”

“ You know what I mean ! ” the young man said. “ You know what I mean ! ” And he took a hasty leave, even forgetting his hat, which the maid brought after him to the garden, while Donna Fedele's silvery laugh echoed behind her.

* * * * *

After the unpleasant interview Lelia took refuge in the gallery at the head of the stairs leading from the drawing-room, and remained there, watching to see when Donna Fedele would leave Signor Marcello's study. Sooner than she had expected she heard Donna Fedele open the door between the billiard-room and the salon, and saw her enter and glance about her as if looking for some one. Lelia drew back to avoid being seen, dreading to be summoned, and remained quiet until the tinkling of the bell above the door told that Donna Fedele had gone away without asking for her. And so it was all over. They would not worry her any more. But still she was not satisfied. A sense of weariness and discomfort in all that she tried to do had taken the place of her previous irritation. Until an hour ago she had delighted in contemplating herself in the attitude of repelling love by pride, as by pride she had repelled riches. And now a cruel doubt was torturing her. What if, after all, there had been no plot, and Alberti had really come to the Montanina by chance? But in any case she was bound

to despise him for not having spoken openly to her, and in thinking of him as a fool she thought she had struck a fatal blow at the passion of which she was ashamed. She determined to go to Lago to distract her thoughts, and hear what they were saying there about Don Aurelio's flight. Thinking she might meet Alberti if she went by the usual road, she took the path under the chestnuts, and sank upon the first seat she came to, trying to quiet her restlessness by listening to the murmur of the wind, and by watching the breeze swaying the long meadow grass. And at last dreams conquered. *He* came upon her unawares in the Velo Park at night, amidst the whispering of the wind, in the wavering moonlight, beneath the fragrant rain of blossoms from the acacias. He flung his arm about her, drew her towards him, and pressed his lips to hers, and then the vision suddenly faded.

The luncheon-bell roused her to a sense of painful reality. At the entrance to the villa she met the maid who had come with Donna Fedele's message. At this moment of reaction against the mockery of her dream the message was a welcome one. She found Signor Marcello already at the table, and wearing an expression that promised nothing pleasant. His greeting was of the slightest, and his manner made her blood boil, for she attributed it to her persistent refusal to become his heir rather than to the other and true reason. Why should he try to force upon her what he might think a great favour, but for which she had no desire? She was obstinately silent. Signor Marcello was the first to relent, although the thought of the girl's having told Donna Fedele that her self-respect forbade her acceptance of his fortune still rankled. Such a remark betokened much pride and little affection, the old man had reflected. He observed presently, however, in a fairly mild tone, that she had eaten nothing. Lelia could hardly bear this display of tenderness,

which always followed any outburst of displeasure on his part. As soon as she had had her coffee she withdrew, that she might hide the tears which were ready to fall, though she could not have explained exactly what prompted them.

A moment later Signor Marcello rose and went into the drawing-room, where he hoped to find Lelia. He stood still for a moment, listening for a voice or a step, but he heard no sound. Then he sat down sadly at the piano and began to play. Lelia, who was standing in the upper gallery, gazing fixedly upon the steep, green slope, crowned with chestnut-trees, recognised the air by Pergolese on which he had engrafted his own fancies during the night that had followed his fit of unconsciousness. And once again those sensitive fingers were touching the keys in an inimitable fashion, pouring into them all the bitterness of a lonely old man, who had lost everything on earth, and who now felt the icy breath of opposition. She forgave him his black looks at luncheon, and came down slowly and noiselessly to the drawing-room, and sat down near the piano, where Signor Marcello would be sure to see her. He did so immediately and at once stopped playing. She wanted to say, "Go on," but pride held back the words. He stretched out his hand to a music-stand, drew forth a piece at random, placed it open upon the rest, and then sat gazing silently at it, instinctively waiting for a word from her. This time Lelia could not avoid murmuring, "What is it?" and so reconciliation began. Signor Marcello turned to replace the piece of music, which was a manuscript copy of an air from that old comic opera called "Le Prigioni di Edimburgo," in the stand, but Lelia insisted upon his playing it, believing her request would please him. He began to play, in a happier frame of mind, while Lelia sat listening to the music, to which both were utterly indifferent. But soon he flung the manuscript aside, and placing a large volume of Clementi

upon the rest, turned to a page that was thickly strewn with pencil-marks. Lelia knew the volume, but not this particular page. Signor Marcello leaned forward, his large hands, their fingers crooked like the talons of a hawk, resting upon the keys, his eyes fixed upon the music, and his whole face wrinkled and quivering with the effort of reading and interpretation. He surpassed himself. When he had finished Lelia expressed her preference for Clementi, and took the volume into her hands.

"Poor Clementi!" said Signor Marcello. "Who knows where he will end!"

She did not understand at once.

"Where do you suppose he will end?" she questioned.

"Oh, probably in some old book-shop."

She had not the courage to say that even if she could not accept his wealth she would gladly take the book.

"Ah, dear Lord!" sighed the disheartened old man, straightening his shoulders and pressing his face into his hands. Lelia, overcome with pity for him, tried to find something to say that should soften the bitterness of her refusal. Each would have gladly welcomed a word of affection from the other, and yet both were silent—she standing, examining the volume of Clementi, he sitting, with his eyes fixed on the empty music-rest and his hands lying motionless upon his knees. Finally, Signor Marcello rose, saying, in a tone of tender melancholy, "Good-bye, dear," and moved on his way to his study. Lelia, who was absorbed in the confusion and turmoil of her own feelings, did not at once respond to this exceptionally tender greeting. She roused herself, however, with a start, and softly followed the old man to the door, whispering, "Papa!" And when he turned round in astonishment, she raised her face to his for a kiss.

He kissed her brow gently, his face lighting with

satisfaction, and took her hand, saying, "Come with me, dear." She saw that her action had been interpreted as a first sign of yielding to his wishes and hesitated, but presently followed him with beating heart.

They passed into the billiard-room. He closed the door behind her, and then, returning to where she stood, placed both hands upon her head and said, smiling, while his eyes were wet with tears:

"Were you thinking of Andrea?"

At the moment she did not realise the true meaning of this question, and answered, without thinking:

"Yes, Papa."

Then she trembled lest she had brought about a misunderstanding, and also with the emotion of hearing him speak of Andrea.

"God bless you!" said the old man.

She shuddered. Why did he bless her? She longed for him to explain his words, but it was impossible to say anything. The old man had not been moved to bless her through any misunderstanding, but only by her gentle and affectionate action, which always sufficed to make him forget any displeasure. At the bottom of his heart, indeed, the hope was growing that the prayers of one who was no more might persuade Lelia to desist from her refusal.

"Goodbye," he repeated. Then, seeing her indecision whether to go or to stay, whether to speak or remain silent, he yielded to an impulse and took her hands again, saying, with a smile: "I saw Signora Vayla after you had a talk together. I want you to know that it was I who thought of a certain plan when a certain person came here, and it was only because I did not want to sacrifice you to my own selfishness. I believed that Andrea himself would approve. But if it be indeed no sacrifice for

you to remain as you are, I can but rejoice in the thought."

Lelia did not answer, and appeared unwilling to understand. Her silence made Signor Marcello regret he had spoken with such openness. But now he could not unsay his words.

"Go out and get some air," said he. "You should go up to Lago and see what is going on there, now that Don Aurelio has gone."

* * * * *

She had no desire to go out. She would have preferred to shut herself up in her own room and think over Signor Marcello's words, but she dared not give way to the idea. It would be better to walk to Lago. Through the open verandah she passed into the garden, trying to fix her mind upon Don Aurelio's flight, and what the people of Lago were saying. But the very trees she passed seemed to be reminding her of those thoughts from which she shrank. She began walking faster to escape their silent scrutiny, but on the up-hill road, where she was obliged to go more slowly, the great, spreading chestnut-trees renewed the tyranny and hung over her in compassionate lament.

Defiant, she hurried on; yet a sob quivered in her throat, and she shook with a strange impulse on passing the footpath leading to the small lake whose waters lay quiet and clear in the shadows of a group of hornbeams.

No one was to be seen among the huts of Lago, but an old woman was drawing water at the fountain in the square. Lelia questioned her. Was it really true that Don Aurelio had fled? *Gésu!* of course it was true! And what did they say about it up here? "I tell you, Siora, they are all up at Sant' Ubaldo, making a great to-do. They say they are going to do for the archpriest. You go up, Siora, you go up, toc! That young gentleman who is staying

with you has been talking to them. You go up and talk to them also. You had better go !”

Lelia, very pale, stared vacantly at the old woman, wondering whether she should not turn back again.

“Go up ! Go up, too !” the other repeated. And Lelia felt ashamed at having shown any hesitation. She fancied that she must have given herself away.

“Yes, yes !” she exclaimed. “Of course I am going.”

She took the Sant' Ubaldo path, and at a short distance from the carriage-road that leads down to Velo she met two women and a man, who were talking quietly as they walked. “They are all in the wrong,” the man was saying—“the priest who ran away like a thief, the archpriest who was bound to get rid of him because he was a good Christian, and the women who will not go to church nor receive the sacraments because the young priest is no longer there.”

“That is so,” said one of the women approvingly. Then she greeted Lelia respectfully.

Lelia stopped them. What had happened? The Lago priest had run away, and the women of the village were furious with the archpriest and the bishop also ; they had assembled and, together with a few men, had sworn that they would not enter the church again, neither on Sundays nor at Easter, neither for baptism nor for marriage, until their priest's return. A gentleman, a fine, handsome young gentleman, had addressed them wisely and like a good Christian, but had not succeeded in convincing them. The women had also written some words on the doors of the church. And what were they about now? Now they had all dispersed, having arranged to reassemble in the evening. And the young gentleman? He was gone also. “Your servant, your servant, your servant !” and the trio started onward again, leaving Lelia to proceed alone. There was no one near the church. She stopped to

read what was written on the low side door :
"Closed until Don *Urelío* returns."

She heard steps behind her, and looked round to see Alberti and Lúzia bringing a basin of water and a sponge.

Before Lelia caught sight of Massimo he had had time to adopt a manner of calm, courteous indifference. He had done all he could to pacify the turbulent people of Lago. He had sought to exculpate the archpriest and the bishop by declaring that they had evidently been misled by slanderous stories. He had tried in every way to make the people see that by refusing to go to church they would not only be grieving Don Aurelio most deeply, but injuring him with his superiors, for the latter would not fail to say, "What sort of religion has this priest been teaching?" Then he had spoken of the Blessed Sacrament, to which more worship and respect was due than to any priest. He had not succeeded in convincing them, but his conscience was at rest, for he had risen above rancour and resentment, as Don Aurelio himself would have done. And this conquest over self filled him with a great calm that did not desert him even in Lelia's presence. He felt himself out of the reach of her unjust prejudices, more firm in his new resolve to look upon the time when love had overcome him as a time of weakness, more determined to stifle a passion that clashed with his self-respect, to keep himself for some other woman who should be more in sympathy with him.

"Good afternoon, Signorina," he said, smiling. "I failed to achieve my purpose in words, and now I am going to see if a sponge will serve me better."

He fell to rubbing the writing vigorously. Lelia, who was very pale, asked who had written the words, as if she knew nothing of what had taken place. Massimo flung the sponge into the basin and related everything with the utmost composure. Lelia thought

at first that Donna Fedele could not have told him of their interview, but it presently struck her that his easy manner was too unlike his usual bearing and was not natural. Meanwhile, a peasant who had come from Masa, catching sight of the basin and sponge, and of the use to which they had been put, paused, and, smiling derisively, advised Massimo to desist, else he might find that trouble was in store for him.

"From what quarter? From you?" Massimo demanded resolutely. The man was somewhat taken aback, and mumbling, "Ah, no, Signore!" walked off, still muttering under his breath.

"Signorina," said Massimo, in the same indifferent tone as that in which he had first addressed her, "are you going on or returning home?"

Lelia looked at him in astonishment.

"I must stay here a little longer," he said, reading in her face that she dreaded he might offer to accompany her. A clap of thunder burst from the heavy clouds hanging over Priaforà. There was no immediate fear of rain, for the countryside beyond the foot of the mountain lay in sunshine, and the points of Summano, flushed with a golden glory, stood out against a clear sky. But the clap of thunder helped Lelia out of her dilemma.

"I shall go home," she said.

"In that case," Massimo replied, "may I ask you to tell Signor Marcello that I must start for Vicenza, on my way, possibly, to Milan, by the six o'clock train. I have one or two things to do here for Don Aurelio; then I shall come down and say good-bye."

He raised his hat.

"I will not offer you my hand," he added. "It is unfit."

Lelia started violently.

"I mean that my hand is too dirty!"

The young man smiled, and exhibited the hand

that had held the sponge. Lelia responded only by the slightest of bows, and took the short cut that leads straight downwards from the church. She could have cried with mortification, for she was sure he had meant to be sarcastic, and she was, moreover, furious with herself for having so readily shown her susceptibility to the sarcasm. At Lago she met Teresina, who had been sent by the master to meet Lelia and bring her the key to the Velo Park, in case she might like to come back that way and gather some flowers for the dinner-table. But Lelia preferred to go straight home. She did not allude to Alberti's departure, which he had requested her to announce; but the maid did so, however, in a very guarded manner, giving it as her opinion that, in consequence of Don Aurelio's absence, Signor Massimo would cut short his visit at the Montanina. Upon learning that he was to leave that same evening, she gave an exclamation of relief, and, making an excuse that she really must know about his departure, because of some clothes the young man had sent to the wash, she inquired whether Signor Marcello would not try to induce him to stay longer. "Oh, no, no!" Lelia exclaimed, with so much assurance that the maid was emboldened to speak out.

"Well, I am glad of that!" she said. Lelia remained silent, but the woman's ejaculation struck her as very strange, for heretofore Teresina had been in the habit of speaking of Alberti in a tone of poetic admiration. Teresina, indeed, was only waiting for a word of astonishment or a question, but as Lelia showed no intention of breaking the silence, she decided to proceed with her explanation. She remarked with a smile that she had that morning heard fine things concerning Signor Alberti. She had gone down to the station with the cook, who was on her way to the market at Arsiero, and the cook had repeated to her what the servant of Signora Bettina Pagan, the archpriest's sister-in-law, had told

her. They knew all about this Signor Alberti up at the onage of Velo. They knew that, although he went to church, he was really much worse than Carnesecca as regards religion. And, moreover, he led an evil life with a married woman in Milan. "Indeed!" said Lelia, with perfect indifference; and not another word did she utter. The maid, somewhat dismayed by this silence, hastened to proffer her excuses for having spoken of what did not concern her. A shrug of the shoulders was Lelia's only answer. At that moment they turned in at the Montanina gate. The maid said no more, and went about her business. Lelia stopped, and, leaning against the handrail of the Riderella bridge, gazed into the water, her heart torn between bitter pain and satisfaction. "He is unworthy, then! He is unworthy!" she repeated monotonously to herself, standing there like one turned to stone, while on either side the long, straggling branches of the rose-bushes pressed clusters of red roses against her, and the breeze, laden with the scent of new-mown hay, touched her softly, urging her to listen to the seductive voices of the flowers. "There is still love," they were saying. "There is still life!" But she neither saw nor heard them. For her the future held no love, no life.

* * * * *

Signor Marcello received the news of Massimo's proposed departure with apparent satisfaction. Lelia reflected that he would be still better pleased did he but know what the Velo priests had learned. It seemed to her that by telling it she would more thoroughly confirm her own belief in it, but when the moment came to speak a forbidding voice vibrated deep within her. She spoke notwithstanding, her face aflame, but felt as she did so that she was doing wrong, very wrong. Signor Marcello listened with a frown, and when she had finished he observed that

the priests of Velo would have done better to keep such things to themselves, and that he did not believe a word of the story. What could those men know about it? But, he added, things being as they were, it was useless to discuss the matter. On leaving the study, Lelia crossed the drawing-room, and glancing at the easy-chair in which she had sat waiting, parasol in hand, but a few hours since, she thought of Donna Fedele, and then suddenly remembered a phrase of hers she had forgotten: "They have been telling you something evil. . . ." And the voice deep within her said, "Donna Fedele knows of this story, and does not believe it."

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Alberti returned to the Montanina towards four o'clock, and found a telegram from Don Aurelio awaiting him, which said that the priest was starting for Milan. There was also a letter from a Milanese friend, which he saw was too long and not sufficiently important to demand immediate attention, as he was pressed for time. He packed his portmanteaux and then went down to the drawing-room. There was no one there. He glanced at the piano and thought of the pansy that had fallen from Lelia's belt and of the music of the "Aveu." Then, suddenly, he imagined himself holding in his arms the woman concerning whom he had been so deceived; but quickly and by a strong effort of his will he recalled his angry contempt for her.

"And so you are really going?" the old man said, with an embarrassment the meaning of which Massimo could not wholly grasp.

"I am really going," he replied. He showed Don Aurelio's telegram, and said that, although the priest had a friend in Milan, he himself wished to be there, at least during these first days, to give him all the help he could. When he came to the conventional expression of thanks, he declared that his gratitude

to Signor Marcello was very great, and not for his hospitality alone. Here he paused, his emotion getting the better of him.

Signor Marcello, himself deeply moved, would have been willing to swear, at this moment, that the Velo priests were either mistaken or had lied. He longed to say, "Come back soon!" but restrained himself, and begged the young man to write and give him frequent news of himself and of Don Aurelio. When Massimo looked at his watch and rose to go, Signor Marcello rose also and followed him into the hall, arranging for his luggage to be carried to the station. Then he kissed him twice. "Once for *him*," he said, "and once for myself!"

"I hope you believe I am not unworthy of this," the young man whispered.

The answer came with a ring of conviction that startled him, so charged was it with hidden meaning.

"I believe you."

Massimo had already placed his hand upon the handle of the door above which hung the bell, but he hesitated before opening it.

"Do you wish to say goodbye to Lelia?" Signor Marcello asked.

"If I might," Massimo answered, bowing slightly.

Lelia was sent for, but she had gone out, taking the key of the little church with her.

"Then you will see her in passing," said Signor Marcello, and silently gave up the idea of walking with Massimo as far as the church. The young man went down alone, asking himself whether to enter the chapel or to pass on, as it was plain the Signorina wished to avoid seeing him. On reaching the porch he paused, still hesitating.

Lelia recognised his step, and on hearing him pause guessed his indecision. Rising from her knees, she also stood hesitating whether to remain where she was or to go out and meet him. She hoped he

would pass on, but presently both arrived at the same conclusion, that it would be best to act with complete indifference. And so it came about that she started to leave the church and he to enter it. They met upon the threshold.

"You are going?" she said, without offering him her hand. "I wish you a pleasant journey and *au revoir!*"

"We shall hardly meet again," Massimo suggested, smiling. "But I shall never forget the days I have spent under your roof."

"My roof! Oh, no!" Lelia broke in.

"And I wish you all possible happiness for long years to come," he went on, disregarding her interruption. "I do so from my heart, Signorina."

"Thank you," said Lelia.

Massimo bowed, and walked quickly away, glad to have shown himself less embarrassed and more haughty than the girl herself, to have spoken as if he should never see her again, and as if this thought did not affect him at all.

III

Lelia had gone to the church in order to avoid, if possible, taking leave of Alberti. Their short interview left her dissatisfied with herself, as usual, and she chafed at the tone of almost contemptuous indifference he had so successfully assumed. She twisted her own meaning into it. It was the tone of one, she thought, who had witnessed the defeat of his plan rather than of one who had been disappointed in love. Instead of returning to the house she followed the path along the Riderella and presently sank upon a rustic seat under the walnut-trees. She was mortally weary, and sat listening half unconsciously and with an aching heart to the small, soft voice of the little waterfall close by.

Teresina had brought her a letter from her father, whose habit it was to address his letters to the maid, "Teresina Scotz, Post-office, Schio." She had already read the letter, and had put it in her belt, intending to throw it into the Riderella, but she had forgotten its contents, and so proceeded to read it over again. It contained but a few lines. Her father inquired if the preceding letter had gone astray, and asked for an answer, the very answer Teresina had that day carried to Schio. Lelia tore the sheet into small pieces and threw them into the stream.

She was accustomed to send her father the greater part of the allowance Signor Marcello made her for her personal expenses, accompanying the enclosures with a few short sentences. She despised her father, and knew that she was justified in her contempt of him. She sent him the money as a contemptible thing flung to a contemptible person. She knew he was deeply in debt, but nevertheless she had no belief in the poverty he was always pleading. Her life at home had convinced her that he was an adept in the art of cheating his creditors, and that, while he made a display of poverty, he carefully concealed his money. But what was this to her? Had her mother asked her for money, she would have sent it to her also. But her mother, who wrote to her from time to time, asked for her affection only, in terms of religious unction. Lelia never answered her letters, and had, on one occasion, quickly returned her mother's pious gift of a rosary, that had been blessed by the Holy Father. "The Trento fortune would be put to fine purposes should it come into my hands!" she reflected. Once more a doubt assailed her concerning the mistaken conclusion at which Signor Marcello might have arrived after that kiss of hers. How should she rectify this? She dismissed the thought, wearily, and sat motionless, her eyes fixed upon the tiny waterfall. Amongst other pictures that floated into her tired

mind, there came a vision of the dark lake, encircled by the bending, peering hornbeam-trees.

* * * * *

It was a great trial to Lelia, two hours later, to come down from her room to dinner. She felt she could not eat, and she dreaded Signor Marcello's questions that were always more searching when he was in an affectionate mood. She knew if she did not go down he would come up and worry her to death with endless questions. And so she went down, and invented a headache as an excuse for her want of appetite, and, as she had foreseen, Signor Marcello's innumerable questions forced her to tell a string of untruths. Partly from shame at her own deceit and partly from impatience, she was once on the point of declaring angrily that there was nothing at all the matter with her. But she restrained herself, and presently Signor Marcello lapsed into grieved silence, even more inclined to conclude that Donna Fedele was right, and that the girl was indeed suffering on account of Massimo's departure. He remained silent until the dinner was over. As soon as Giovanni had withdrawn, and before Lelia had finished her coffee, he inquired if she had seen Alberti, who had wished to say goodbye to her. She answered in the affirmative, half indifferently, half in annoyance, finished her coffee, and, rising, asked permission to retire.

"Go, if you like, dear," Signor Marcello replied, but he called her back again before she had reached the door.

"Listen, my child," he said. "I give you my blessing now, whether you may decide to marry at some future time or continue to live alone. But if you choose to live alone, I hope you will not accuse me of selfishness because I had hoped——"

And he smiled his pathetic smile, so full of sadness and tenderness.

"Thank you, Papa," Lelia murmured. And she could not refrain from adding, as she thought of the misapprehension under which he was probably labouring: "I am not sure I deserve your blessing."

The coldness of her words wounded the poor old man. Lelia felt she had hurt him, and was sorry but she could not regret words which were intended to free him from harmful illusions. She slipped silently from the room, closing the door softly behind her.

Signor Marcello did not move. Not for a long time had the house seemed so sad and empty. He drew towards him one of the two glass bowls that ornamented the table, and contained two cyclamen plants that had not yet blossomed. This style of table decoration was one of Lelia's fancies, and Signor Marcello disapproved of it. He gazed with affectionate compassion upon the little plant, with its dark leaves, streaked with pale green, that had been torn from its nest of moss at the foot of some chestnut-tree and placed in these unnatural surroundings. He had always greatly loved flowers and carefully cultivated them, feeling that they returned a kind of real affection for any care that he bestowed upon them. This little tortured plant that sought to please him with its rich greenness seemed to him to show more affection for him than Lelia. He would have liked to press his lips to this small, living thing, had he not been ashamed of what might appear foolish sentimentality.

A long, dull peal of thunder from Priaforà, which all day long had worn a threatening aspect, interrupted his fancyings. He remembered that the large window in the drawing-room was open, and, in order not to disturb Giovanni, who was having his dinner, went to shut it himself. He then made the tour of the ground-floor, closing all the windows, faithful to his habit of sparing the servants as much as possible. Presently he returned to the drawing-

room. It was rapidly growing dark, although it was an hour before sunset. There was a flash of lightning, and more thunder. Giovanni came in to attend to the windows, and catching sight of his master as a flash illumined the room, asked if he would have a light. Signor Marcello did not wish for a light. He sent the man to close the upstairs windows, and then stood gazing out into the shadows, cloven repeatedly by the lightning that flashed out of Val d'Astico. The usual noisy precautions against thunderstorms sounded above his head—excited voices, hurried footsteps, and the banging of shutters. The great, tragic cliffs of Barco gleamed white for an instant and then were lost again in the darkness. The poplars along the Riderella, standing transfixed in the motionless air, like the outposts of a reserve force, waited in rigid silence for the approach of the battle that was raging along their line. Suddenly the rain came pouring down, the flashes ceased, and all was darkness. Signor Marcello stood gazing into the sounding shadows until he heard Giovanni come in again to light the lamps. As usual when there were no guests, and the Signorina did not spend the evening in the drawing-room, he ordered him not to light up. His own brass lamp would be enough. When the man had brought it Signor Marcello put on his glasses and began to read the newspaper. Contrary to his habit, he soon wearied of it. But it was only half-past nine, and he was not sleepy, and as he had been suffering recently from insomnia, he did not wish to go to bed at this early hour. He felt no desire to play, for his heart was cold and heavy. He felt physically well, and no further symptoms had followed his fit of unconsciousness. Had he perhaps been mistaken about it? Must he look forward to long years of such a life as this? At least, if he must live, he would fain do so to some useful purpose. Some years ago a friend's advice had made him think of starting

an agricultural school. Why not take up that plan again? He might at least write to his friend and ask his opinion again. And he reflected how to word his letter. But the idea began to fade from his mind almost as soon as he had formed it. By an effort of his will he rose to his feet, determined to prevent its complete escape by writing immediately; but still he hesitated, and stood lost in thought, his lamp in his hand. The sound of the rain had sunk to an even and melancholy whisper. The old man set down the lamp and went into the open verandah to look upon the night.

There was no wind, but the rain was coming down persistently, as it does in the autumn, and it hid the mountains and the lights of Arsiero. This was the spot where Don Aurelio and he had their coffee on those occasions when the priest said Mass at Santa Maria ad Montes. And he was gone also, dear Don Aurelio! He was gone for ever. He would never see him again.

The old man returned to the drawing-room with a heavy heart. Bitter words against the priests of Velo rose to his lips, and agitated his face as he took up his lamp again, meaning to go to bed, for he had now lost all desire to write. At sight of the Bible and of the "Imitation of Christ," on his bedside table, he was immediately filled with remorse for having yielded to impulse, and for having harboured uncharitable thoughts. He confessed his shortcomings in prayer, then, as a castaway clings to a rope, he clasped the little Bible in both hands until peace once more encompassed his spirit. As he laid the Bible down again he determined to go to confession on the morrow to the archpriest himself. Quieted by this determination, he proceeded to enter the day's expenditures in his account-book, as was his habit. As it was the last day of the month, and he had forgotten to pay the servants' wages, he counted the amounts out carefully, placing

them in separate piles on his writing-table. He also set aside his monthly dole to the poor. The melancholy patter of the rain reminded him of the plants of cyclamen in the dining-room. He hunted in a cupboard until he had found the two pots from which they had been removed—cruelly, as he thought—to be placed in the glass bowls. Then he restored them to the pots, delighting in the kindly action, and carried them out lovingly, regardless of the rain, and set them side by side, behind the villa, on the edge of a grassy slope. As he stood upright again his head swam, but this did not trouble him. Even in his youth he had often been seized with giddiness on resuming an upright posture after bending over some plant. He waited until the giddiness passed away, and then returned to his room, said his evening prayers upon his knees, undressed himself, and got into bed. At that moment the dizziness returned with renewed violence. He rested his head against the head-board. A thunderbolt seemed to tear through him from his neck downwards. He thought he cried out, but in reality he made no sound. He felt his arms becoming as blocks of ice, and he recognised that this was death. He tried in vain to move his lips and pronounce the words, *In manus tuas, Domine*. Then all was over, and the only life the room contained was in the heedless flame of the little lamp that illumined the quiet face of yellow marble resting against the head-board, and the only heart that throbbed was the small and heedless one of the watch upon the bedside table.

CHAPTER V

THE SHADOW OF SIGNOR DA CAMIN

I

DONNA FEDELE arrived in her carriage at ten o'clock. A despairing note from Lelia had brought her the news at nine. She got out at the entrance to the open verandah in order not to pass the chamber of death, and Lelia came on to the verandah to meet her. They kissed in silence. Lelia's eyes were full of tears, and Donna Fedele looked ghastly, but she had no tears. They entered the drawing-room, and Teresina, who happened to be coming in from the dining-room at the same moment, began sobbing at sight of Donna Fedele, and covered her face with her handkerchief. When she had succeeded in controlling her feelings she handed Lelia a telegram. While the girl was opening it and reading it Donna Fedele softly questioned the maid. Had they noticed anything wrong during the day, or, perhaps, during the evening.

Nothing, nothing. He had not been in good spirits, that she must admit, but, of course, they all knew that Don Aurelio's flight and Signor Alberti's departure had upset him. Teresina, whose tongue was now loosed, evidently had something more to say, but she checked herself, and fell to sobbing again.

And how had they made the discovery?

It was Lelia who answered. Giovanni had gone in with his coffee at seven and had found him dead.

He was sitting up in bed, his shoulders outside the covers, and his head resting upon the head-board. The doctor had assured them that death had been instantaneous, for the body was composed, the face calm, and there had evidently been no attempt to rise or ring the bell. Death had probably taken place as soon as he got into bed, and before he had arranged himself for sleep. The lamp was still burning when Giovanni went in. Teresina now gave further particulars. Giovanni, who slept on the ground floor, had heard his master pass his door twice before he, Giovanni, had gone to bed. He had heard him open the door of the villa on the side towards the mountain, and early that morning, while putting the dining-room to rights, he had missed certain plants which the Signorina had placed in two glass bowls. They had been found later, in ordinary pots, out of doors. No one in the house knew anything about this change, and it must have been the master who set them out, that they might enjoy the rain. At this point the tears welled up in Donna Fedele's eyes, which seemed at the same time to be smiling with tender emotion.

"You will need help," she said to Lelia, controlling her feelings after a moment's struggle. The girl handed her the telegram that had just arrived. It was from Signor Marcello's agent, announcing his speedy arrival from Vicenza with a lawyer.

Donna Fedele inquired if there were any relatives who ought to be written to. Teresina knew that there were some distant cousins, but the master had more than once said to her, evidently with a motive, that in case of his death they were not to be troubled.

Giovanni appeared and summoned the maid, who presently returned to say that the archpriest and his chaplain wished to know if the Signorina would receive them. Lelia, much annoyed by this intrusion, consulted Donna Fedele, who advised her to see them.

"Meanwhile," said she, "if I may——"

Lelia understood at once, and murmured, "Of course, of course!" Donna Fedele crossed the billiard-room and study to the chamber of death. On reaching the study her remarkable fortitude almost forsook her. Only a few hours ago she had sat here with him. She could see his wrinkled face—his speaking countenance that was still youthful, his eyes that so quickly revealed the impulses of his warm heart—and his frank voice seemed to be still speaking to her. She felt as if he had only just left the room. The arm-chair behind the writing-table was pushed aside, upon the table lay an open account-book, and the bedroom door stood ajar. Donna Fedele pushed it open very slowly and very reverently. Upon the bed, between two lighted candles, lay her old friend, dressed in black, and clasping a crucifix in his ivory hands. The gate-keeper's wife, who was seated opposite the bed, near the window, rose as Donna Fedele entered. The latter proposed that she should go out for half an hour. When the woman had left the room Donna Fedele approached the bed and stood gazing tenderly upon the waxen face of the one man whom in her youth she had really loved. The sad evening of his long day had drawn to a close, and at last he was with his loved ones. Had fate decreed differently for him and for her, had she become his wife, this parting would have been more terrible. She sighed, almost as if regretting what might have been. Closing her eyes, she saw him again as he had been in his youth, and let her mind dwell upon the secret love of long ago, which had been so sweet even in its bitter and restless anxieties. Both had been led astray at that time; they had been over-heedless of a great danger. She more than he, indeed, for had he but spoken, had he but wished it, she would joyously have sacrificed everything to him. Her father had been alive then. Good God! if this had really hap-

pened, how horrible it would have been! She stooped to kiss the ivory hands, and then, sinking upon her knees, prayed fervently, promising her dead friend that she would be as a mother to the woman his son had loved, and would seek to bring about the union he had desired. She rose, consoled. She could hear distinctly the ticking of his watch on the bedside table. It was as if some part of him still lived and understood. Many flowers had been strewn upon the bed. She reflected that another woman in her place would surely take one to cherish, but she could not bring herself to do so, nor could she tell what prevented her. Once more she kissed the ivory hands and then the crucifix, thus setting a seal upon her promise.

II

On leaving the chamber of death she was greatly astonished to find Lucia in the study. The girl was quivering with indignation against the archpriest and the chaplain, especially against the chaplain. She was so upset, indeed, that she would not tell her story here, so close to the peaceful dead. Donna Fedele and she withdrew to the billiard-room. It appeared that both the archpriest and the chaplain had greatly deplored Signor Marcello's sudden death, for reasons of a religious nature, and on her reminding them of the purity of his life, of his charities, his great piety, and of the fact that he had received the Sacraments but a few days since, the archpriest had answered coldly, "We can only hope for the best!" and the chaplain had not opened his lips.

Then the archpriest had taken the liberty of alluding to the needs of his church, believing he was addressing an heiress, and at last the chaplain had asked her, with a great show of humility, if "that young man" were still at the Montanina. "I said

'Yes,' Lelia went on, "simply because I was so indignant, and they are nothing but busy-bodies! I am sure they know Alberti is no longer here, for the archpriest turned red and the chaplain yellow." Had Donna Fedele been aware that Lelia knew of the rumour that had started from the parsonage concerning Alberti's supposed intrigues in Milan, she would have been better able to understand her extraordinary indignation, one element of which escaped the girl's own consciousness. She expressed regret that she had not done at once what she was now determined to do—to shut herself up in Signor Marcello's room and not to leave it again until she was ready to leave the villa. After all, she was no one in this house. Her duty was to remain with Signor Marcello until the end, but once Signor Marcello was gone there was no room for her at the Montagna. Donna Fedele sought to bring Lelia to look upon matters in a different light, but seeing that she was becoming exasperated, she deemed it wiser not to insist, and so took her leave, saying she would return in the evening. Lelia expressed no pleasure at this promise, but kissed her in silence, and then withdrew to the death-chamber. Donna Fedele did not want to leave until she had seen Teresina, but she was not feeling strong enough to go in search of her. She therefore rested in a low chair in the drawing-room and waited. At last she heard Giovanni and the cook talking in the dining-room, and the prudent footman came to the door to see if they were safe from listeners. So Donna Fedele was able to send for Teresina and tell her of Lelia, who had insisted upon shutting herself up, and talked of leaving as soon as the funeral was over.

"I hope she will come to my house," she said, "at least for a time. But I really don't know what she has taken into her head—whether she proposes going to her father, or what."

Teresina was unmoved. Go away! Nonsense!

She was the heiress. Her poor master had given Teresina to understand this most clearly. Donna Fedele expressed a doubt. What if the girl should refuse the inheritance? Teresina was startled now. How could she possibly refuse? If for no other reason she would accept in order to be able to help her father. And she proceeded to tell of the money she was in the habit of sending off for the Signorina. Besides, how would the girl herself get along? "My good woman," said Donna Fedele, "when it is a question of pride . . ." But the maid could not understand such pride, and the Signora did not attempt to explain it to her. She requested Teresina instead to let her driver know that she was ready to go home. The servant begged her to remain until the arrival of the agent and the lawyer, when they would learn something positive concerning the will. But she could not persuade her. Donna Fedele replied that she did not wish to intrude, and that she would not return unless she were sent for.

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She was not sent for, but towards evening she received the following letter from her dead friend's agent:

"MADAM,—The maid Teresina Scotz begs me to inform you that this morning the notary, Signor Dr. Camilli, and I went to the office of the Royal Prefect of Schio, in whose presence my poor master's holograph will was opened, it having been in accordance with regulations deposited by him with the above-named notary. I also take pleasure in informing you that Signorina Lelia Camin is therein appointed sole legatee, and that the maid, Teresina Scotz, is to be the recipient of a legacy amounting to five francs per day, exempt from taxation. Signora Scotz begs me to inform you, further, that a telegram has reached me from Padua, signed Girolamo

da Camin, which contains, besides expressions of condolence, the declaration that he is Signorina Lelia's father, that she is a minor, and also the announcement of his intended arrival some time to-day. He will probably come by the last train this evening. The heiress admits that she is the above-named gentleman's daughter, and that her twentieth birthday fell only a few months since, whereas I am aware that my lamented master believed her to be older.

"I am, Madam,

"Your very humble servant,

"MATTEO CAROZZI, *Agent*.

"Val d'Astico (Vicenza), ' *July . . .*"

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CHAPTER VI

IN THE TOWER OF PRIDE

I

THE engineer Luigi Alberti, Massimo's uncle, descended from a family of solid and respectable Milanese burghers, had a small apartment on the third floor of a house in Via San Spirito. The apartment was simple, furnished in an old-fashioned style, with old furniture, pictures, some of which were really good, and books, but devoid of modern conveniences, and a faithful reflection of its master's character. Luigi Alberti often used to say, in his Milanese dialect: "Sont un andeghee" ("I am an antique—a man of the past!"), and this with the air of one who has voluntarily withdrawn from the world, and lives in a solitary and cherished corner of his own. His humble spirit, his disregard for this world's goods, the purity of his life, his unostentatious generosity, marked him as a Christian of apostolic days. Parsimonious with himself, he was free-handed with his nephew Massimo, an orphan of insufficient means, of whom he was fond from a sense of duty rather than from any promptings of affection. His heart was engrossed in a sacred cult, the memory of his poor wife, who had died some years before, leaving him childless. She had been a woman of exemplary Christian virtues, with a keen intellect and gentle manners, and she had loved her husband devotedly,

despite his few physical attractions, his ineptitude for social life, certain strange little ways, and his aversion to a rational modern spirit, to which she would gladly have opened their doors and adapted their mode of life. He would not take his nephew into his home, that he might not be obliged to change his own old-fashioned habits and those of his old servants, a man cook and a maid, who were devoted to him. Instead he set apart for Massimo three rooms on the second floor of his house, where the cook's wife waited upon him. In his intercourse with his nephew the engineer was always somewhat ill at ease, and kind rather than cordial. Massimo's father and mother had squandered their fortune by living beyond their means, and Massimo's refined ways appeared to fill his uncle with awe. In offering him, as his nearest relative, his generous assistance, a comfortable lodging, an allowance, and the hospitality of his board whenever he felt inclined to accept it, he had done so almost apologetically, and as if his offering had been unworthy of Massimo's position. Massimo himself was painfully conscious of the distance between his uncle and himself, not only in externals but in ideas. The engineer was intolerant in his political opinions to the verge of madness, and though not a "Clerical," being always guided in political matters by the *Perseveranza*, and voting even when this was forbidden by the ecclesiastical authorities, he had the fierce Clerical hatred of Modernism and religious reform. He disapproved of priests taking part in public life, and of their associating themselves with the political press. But in church and sacristy he respected their authority unquestioningly. So when he heard Massimo spoken of as a disciple of Benedetto, and Benedetto branded as a heretic and rebel, he was greatly distressed. He questioned several priests who he believed could inform him accurately, for he lacked the courage to speak openly to his nephew. He found some who

told him that it was unfortunately true, that his nephew was identifying himself with those who refused to admit the fundamental doctrines of Catholicism, the Sacraments, and the authority of the Pope. Others assured him that this was not so. He continued to avoid mentioning the matter to Massimo, fearing to be dragged into a discussion, and his simple faith would not admit of discussion. Only once, in a letter, had he alluded to these fears of his. The young man's plain and entirely orthodox answer had reassured him, but only for a time. It was also a matter of regret to him that Massimo had not tried to put his medical studies to some use. He heard much talk of other studies of a theological and literary nature, of lectures on Science and Faith, and on Christian Socialism. "Bellissim rob!" ("Fine nonsense!") he had said to one who praised Massimo's activity. "Fine unprofitable nonsense!" But not even on this point would he express himself to Massimo. He felt it would be useless, and that he must be resigned to being unable to understand this specimen of the rising generation, and to being misunderstood by him. Reason decreed that Massimo should be his heir, and he fully intended to dispose of his belongings according to the dictates of reason, but his mental refrain was ever, "He will find only what he will find!"

Since his wife's death the engineer had kept no account of his expenditure. A very small portion of his not inconsiderable income sufficed for his own personal needs, the rest being divided between Massimo—to whom he made a fixed allowance—such needy persons as appealed to him, subscriptions to charitable institutions, and gifts to the small country town where he and his wife had spent many summers.

A month before his journey to Val d'Astico, Massimo had delivered two lectures at the Università Popolare, on "The Italian Reformers of the Sixteenth Century," wherein he had put forward the

argument that had these men, many of whom were distinguished both for genius and virtue, not rebelled against the authority of the Church, their views would have been more widely accepted, and that the Church would have gained thereby. The engineer was scandalised by these lectures, as were the majority of Milanese Conservatives, who joined hands with Radicals and Socialists in crying anathema upon the lecturer. To the Conservatives he was a canting heretic, to the Radicals and Socialists a weakling, almost a coward, and to all a dreamer. The engineer expressed his opinion freely to several persons, and, among others, to a priest, Don Santino Ceresola by name, a warm-hearted creature, zealous in promoting good works, who at that very time was cherishing a plan for the founding of a most admirable institution, quite, however, beyond his means. He had often obtained large sums from the engineer for other purposes, and now he could not help reflecting that, should a rupture occur between uncle and nephew, his much dreamed of Home for Grammar School Students might gain by it. When his mind was taken up with a project such as this, the good man lost all sense of proportion, especially of the proportion of their means that his friends might be expected to subscribe, and his persistent harping on the one subject exasperated most people and rendered himself and his special charity alike odious. But he went on his way, rejoicing in this easy form of martyrdom, his bearing fully justifying the nickname of "Beata Ciapasü" ("Blessed Take-what-you-give-her!"), which he owed to his face, like that of an aged nun, his squeaking voice, and the beatitude with which he accepted money and insult alike. He had several times mentioned the Home to the engineer, who, having a level head, had always sought to convince him that he would not succeed in raising money enough even to buy the land. One day, after Massimo's departure for Velo d'Astico, the

priest appeared in Via San Spirito in great delight, and with the news that an old lady had presented him with two thousand square metres of land at Porta Vittoria. He inwardly echoed the engineer's amazed "Is it possible?" and promptly determined to renew his siege upon the fund that had so often assisted him before. He began by begging the engineer to draw him a plan, just a little plan, just a sketch to begin with, with a rough estimate, just a few short lines. The engineer saw quite clearly what he was aiming at with all his diminutives and at first refused; but at last, yielding to the other's insistence, he exclaimed: "Well, listen, then! I will do my best with the plan, but as to money . . . !" And his laugh was full of meaning. The blessed one protested, "The idea!" He had never thought of asking him for money. Nevertheless the wedge had entered, and Don Santino's visits became frequent. The engineer was induced to go to Porta Vittoria with him on several occasions. Once the priest failed to find him at home, and so waited for him, talking the while with the maid, Bigin, whose confessor he was, and who was as simple at sixty as she had been at twelve. Don Santino told her his plans, first swearing her to secrecy, and then instructed her what to do to further them, almost going the length of promising her Paradise if she should manage to get his Home mentioned in her master's will. He inquired casually concerning the relations between uncle and nephew, and learned that on one occasion the uncle had spoken of his nephew's life as being wasted. Bigin could not promise much, because: "The Lord preserve me from speaking to him of his belongings! He will never stand any meddling on that subject!" However, should the occasion present itself. . . . But the occasion failed to present itself, mainly because it would have taken the good creature a century to grasp the true purpose of this *Pensionato*, this Home, which at first

she took to be some superannuated and poverty-stricken clerk or employée whom her master was to be asked to support. "No, no; that is not it at all!" cried Don Santino gravely. "That is not it?" she queried. But after this she contented herself with committing to memory the five words, "*Il Pensionato*—Don Santino's Home," and with repeating to her master, in season and out, that if she were rich she would give Don Santino her shirt, a thing she did not do, but which, after all, she might have done easily enough, despite her lack of riches.

II

Having left Arsiero at six in the evening, Massimo reached Milan shortly after six the next morning. They were not expecting him at San Spirito. The engineer, who had been not very well for a couple of days, was still in bed, but the cook and his wife gave the young master an exceptionally warm welcome, the reason for which it would have been difficult to perceive. The pair had soon guessed the motive of Don Santino's frequent visits . . . it was evidently some plan to get a lot of money out of their master. "You will see," Peppina had said to her husband, Togn. "That priest will keep at it until he has got everything away from him." It was easy to arrive at the conclusion that the master would die impoverished, and there would be no comfortable little pensions to the servants. Togn and Peppina united in blaming the stupidity of Bigin, who could not be made to see that, in speaking on behalf of her confessor, she was working for her own beggary. The good creature would retort, in horrified accents: "Aren't you ashamed to think of such things? Aren't you ashamed?"

The two, therefore, gave Massimo an unusually

warm welcome, because they looked upon him as being equally involved in the threatened danger, and their only hope lay in his intervention. They decided to warn him at once, but this, they saw, must not be done too abruptly, nor before they had studied the best means of introducing the subject. Peppina, who was more grasping, more hot-headed and impatient, than her husband, would have liked to speak that very morning; but while they were still arguing, Massimo left the house on his way to Porta Magenta, where Don Aurelio's friend dwelt, not a stone's-throw from the Monastero Maggiore.

He walked slowly, thinking of Velo, of the silence of the chestnut-groves, of the deep voice of Posina; thinking also, against his will, of Lelia. The vulgar façades of the houses on either side oppressed him, and he shrank from the noise and bustle of the city. He longed to see Don Aurelio again. It would be like another glimpse of Lago. The stones of Milan seemed to breathe a spirit of antagonism, the very spirit of the long letter he had received just before leaving the Montanina, and which he had read over and over again on the journey, enjoying the bitter satisfaction of realising its painfulness to the utmost. It had been written by a friend whom Massimo suspected of none too much loyalty either to himself or to the opinions he professed, and was a minute recital of hostile acts and words that had been directed against Massimo from the camps of the most unyielding Clericals and of the Modernists and from sceptical Milanese society. The society of St. Vincent de Paule had decreed the expulsion of this member who had virtually constituted himself the apologist for the Italian heretics of the sixteenth century. The sale of his lectures had been prohibited, and there had been allusion in the Clerical press and in the pulpits to their insidious nature. In one Clerical house it had been reported that Massimo had gone to Velo d'Astico to seek Don Aurelio's assistance in

preparing for the publication of a Modernist periodical. Moreover, most unedifying reports had been circulated concerning Massimo's relations with a certain married woman. This was the only part of the letter that amused Massimo, for the woman referred to was a most estimable person, and the reverse of all that is beautiful, graceful, and fascinating. In the Modernist camp they despised Massimo for a poor, priest-ridden, lukewarm, timid creature, who was incapable of freeing himself from the fetters of tradition and of rebelling against the Church's tyranny over the conscience. They looked upon him as an old young man, twenty years behind his times, not quite a Clerical, but differing only slightly from one, and they laughed at him.

In society the women, with but few exceptions, were more strongly opposed to him than the men. The latter set him down as a creature of indecision, a mediocrity given to half-measures. The women, even many who went to church regularly, accused him of pharisaism and of cowardice. His friend wrote that one evening he alone had defended him against the goddess major and the goddess minor of a certain aristocratic house, a mother and a daughter who were among his most bitter enemies, but the act was set forth more in the light of a virtue than as if the writer had really been convinced of the justice of his arguments.

None of these details were new to Massimo, who had left Milan in the midst of the storm; but as he had the feeling of having been absent a hundred years, he had been unprepared to find it still raging so severely on his return. Don Aurelio, in his place, would have prayed meekly for the malicious offenders, and would have consoled himself with the words of the "imitation of Christ": "*Quid sunt verba nisi verba?*" But Massimo merely felt a supreme contempt for all this uproar; and if, during the past weeks, he had ever doubted his own faith,

and had ever been tempted to withdraw from all religious controversy, now, confronted as he was by this host of hostile, mocking, or compassionate faces, he burned to show them how unyieldingly he stood his ground.

Don Aurelio and his friend had both gone out. The servant believed they had gone to see the Archbishop, but they might return at any moment, and Massimo met them on the stairs as he was going away. At first Don Aurelio hardly recognised him. In Milan? How was this? On catching sight of Massimo the other priest's face darkened. He was a most excellent man, unbending as regards doctrine, but just and charitable, incapable of playing the spy and of hypocrisy. He defended Don Aurelio because his Rosminian views were known to him, as were his exemplary life and great piety. But he had disapproved of Massimo's lectures, and knowing the young man but slightly, believed a certain amount of the scandal that had been circulated concerning him.

Massimo understood, and instead of detaining Don Aurelio, asked him to come and see him towards noon. Then, notwithstanding the early hour—it was barely ten o'clock—he decided to call upon the very lady whose name had been so maliciously coupled with his. She had sent him a note to San Spirito on the previous day, begging him to come and see her at any hour, as soon as he reached Milan. Massimo now went out of courtesy, but not willingly, despite the affinity in political and religious views that had once drawn them together in a common effort at propaganda. The good lady, possessed not only of a husband to whom his wife's visionary schemes were a constant trial, but of four big sons as well, each more badly brought up and ill-mannered than the others, received Massimo with an embarrassing outburst of affectionate anxiety. At last! At last! But, dear Alberti! . . . What had he been doing?

Why had he run away? Why had he stayed away so long? What had he taken into his head? Did he not know that things had been getting worse and worse here? Did he not know they were all against him? Had he been here he might have defended himself, might have convinced them—but instead he had disappeared, and no one had known anything about him. There had even been a rumour that he had entered a convent, like that master of his—some said at Subiaco, some at Praglia. And did he know this and had he heard that? Hereupon the lady who, in theory, professed a lofty contempt for the world and its doings, but in practice revelled in every bit of slightly improper gossip that was brought to her, related to Massimo more or less the same things that his friend's letter had contained. On reaching the most delicate point, she covered her far from youthful face with both hands and exclaimed, between groans and laughter: "Dio! Dio! Alberti! Don't you know you should not be here? that perhaps I am doing wrong to receive you? Have you heard what they have dared to say?"

Now, the lady had a very good-looking parlourmaid, and Massimo, who was irritated beyond measure by the torrent of gossip that had spread in so many directions, and who was also keenly alive to the ridiculous side of the situation, could not resist saying:

"What have they said? That I come here to make love to your parlourmaid?"

For a moment his hostess was perplexed, but she was too simple and good-natured to take offence, and was even relieved by his mistake, for she believed Alberti to be incapable of deceit. Not until after his departure, when she paused to examine the nature of his mistake, did she ask herself how he had happened to notice the girl's youth and grace, and in her simple heart she exclaimed, "Just think of that, now!" But at the time she promptly

changed the subject, with a hasty, "Enough, enough! We had better not discuss it!" And she brought forward a plan about which she was enthusiastic—a plan for a third lecture. He really must deliver a third lecture to explain the first and the second, and correct certain impressions, especially that of subservient submission to authority.

She had consulted several of her women friends, and was in a position to suggest a subject that was at once most interesting and most appropriate—"From Döllinger to Loisy." "My dear friend," said Massimo, "if I take up the pen again, which I doubt, it will be to use it as a lash."

On reaching home towards noon he found a telegram from Donna Fedele announcing Signor Marcello's death. The news filled him with astonishment, and grieved him most deeply. He had not realised how fond he was of the old man. He went in to greet his uncle with the telegram in his hand, his face wearing an expression of sorrow. Usually their meetings were painfully silent, both uncle and nephew—the younger man especially—racking their brains to find topics of conversation that would not lead to an unpleasant clashing of views. On this occasion the sad news relieved them of the difficulty. The telegram contained the information that another would follow, stating the day and hour of the funeral.

"Shall you go?" the engineer inquired. Massimo hesitated slightly. A "yes" rose to his lips, but he answered "No" resolutely, in order to bind himself and to avert all danger of yielding to a possible weakness. The engineer made no comment, but his expression said plainly that the "no" struck him as strange. "You will want to send a telegram," said he, and offered to send the cook out with it after luncheon. But Massimo declared this would be unnecessary. He would send it himself. He lunched with his uncle and then withdrew

to his own apartment, his heart full of visions of Lelia alone and in tears in the villa over which hung the shadow of death. He took up his pen to write the telegram. Once more the desire assailed him to go—to see her again. He flung down his pen, crying aloud in an angry voice :

“ Good God ! How weak I am ! ”

He glanced anxiously about him, fearful lest some one might have heard. Once more he seized his pen and reflected. He sought for unusual words, words that should adequately express his sentiments towards the dead man and towards the living woman. But they would not come. Then he decided that a telegram, couched in conventional terms, would be more fitting. And what if, instead of a telegram, he should send a letter? He decided at last to telegraph to Donna Fedele and to write to the Signorina, and rapidly wrote as follows :

“ SIGNORINA,—I feel sure that you are mourning for one who has been a father to you. I myself mourn for him even more deeply perhaps, grateful above everything for his affection and esteem. I bless his memory as I do that of his son.

“ MASSIMO ALBERTI.”

Peppina announced Don Aurelio. The sad news that Massimo had to tell him filled him with sorrow, but did not surprise him. He had foreseen this, but had not expected it to happen so soon. Poor Signor Marcello ! After his last confession he had spoken of Signorina Lelia, expressing grief that he must leave her, soon probably, alone and unprotected, exposed to the danger of falling into her father's hands again, and to a destiny no one could foresee. Here Don Aurelio paused and looked inquiringly at Massimo. Massimo replied without waiting for further questions.

“ You see, I am here.” Don Aurelio gave silent

sympathy. Presently he asked softly if his friend were going to the funeral. "No," said the young man; "I shall write. Or rather, I have already written. Read this." And he handed him the letter. Don Aurelio studied it for a while.

"That is good," he said at last. "I can see why you have used the word 'affection,' but I cannot say why you say 'esteem' as well."

"Believe me," said Massimo, "it is the right word."

Don Aurelio returned the letter with a sigh, and without demanding further explanations, which he felt would be distressing. Then he told of his visit to the Archbishop, to whom he had presented a letter from the Bishop of Vicenza. His Eminence had received him most kindly, and promised to take him into his diocese. Naturally, it might be some time before the right place was found for him, and meanwhile, in order that he might earn something, they would get him some pupils. The autumn was approaching, there were the October examinations in view, and it was a favourable time. Finally, assuming a fatherly air, the Archbishop had advised him to keep much to himself, and then, with a smile, that was also fatherly, he had alluded to the priests of Velo d'Astico. "I can fancy what they are like," he had said. "Good men, but the sort that see heretics everywhere. I know a priest who came to me to denounce a colleague of his as a heretic because he so disliked wine that he made his salad with lemon instead of vinegar!" In a word, Don Aurelio was more than satisfied with his visit. And how about his books? What would become of them? Massimo reassured him. Donna Fedele would attend to everything. He was curious to know what Don Aurelio's friend had said of him, after their meeting on the stairs.

"I noticed the face he pulled," said Massimo. Don Aurelio smiled.

“He told me several unpleasant things about you, but all in perfect good faith, poor man, for he was only repeating what he had heard! He informed me that you were a Theosophist, that you did not believe in the divinity of Christ, in the Resurrection, in the Real Presence, and so forth and so on. To tell the truth, I had all I could do to convince him that he was mistaken. Once convinced, however, he was greatly relieved. Nevertheless, he advised me not to see too much of you.”

“We will write to each other,” said Massimo. “Besides, I do not intend to stay long in Milan.”

He proceeded to enlighten his friend concerning the troubles and vexations that made life in Milan a burden to him, and then he opened his heart to him about certain other anxieties that would prevent his going away again immediately. In his own right he possessed only forty thousand lire, which sum was invested in a mortgage that would shortly be paid off. His uncle, besides the hospitality that was always open to him, made him an allowance of two hundred lire a month. The sixteen hundred lire that his own capital produced represented the small foundation of his independence. Notwithstanding his affection and respect for his uncle, Massimo could not help fearing that the deep-rooted, though unacknowledged, disparity in their views would one day bring about a crisis which would make it impossible for him to continue to accept his uncle's generosity. Therefore, as he was disinclined to practise medicine, and his favourite occupations not being of a money-producing nature, he must find some profitable investment for his small fortune. He told Don Aurelio these things with a melancholy smile for having to consider such matters which harass even the most fervent idealist. The conditions made it imperative for him to look out for some one who wished to borrow capital, to go through formalities with a solicitor, and draw up contracts, or he might be

obliged to make inquiries into the stability of bank shares, of shares in industrial enterprises, or to consider other similar undertakings. He could not think of Government bonds, for at the rate of interest they were then producing his income would have been diminished by two hundred lire. "And two hundred lire," he said, "represents a sum which may mean much to me."

The friends went out together, Don Aurelio to pay a call which he hoped would result in two lessons a week, and Massimo to post his letter and telegraph to Donna Fedele.

III

The next morning Peppina informed Massimo that her husband begged for an audience. The man came in, and Peppina also put in an appearance again, but remained standing near the door, a few steps behind her husband, and in an attitude of reinforcement. Hardly had Togn uttered his introductory, "Well, you see . . ." than he began to flounder in an ocean of excuses for what he was going to say. "Begging your pardon, sir. . . . It may not be my place. . . . It is not fitting. . . . I know that. . . . But, after all. . . . Well, there! . . . Certain goings on. . . . It is entirely on your account. . . . One can't always hold one's tongue. . . . Certain goings on. . . . Ain't that so, wife? . . ." Peppina, thus appealed to, murmured, "Exactly!" and with a final, "Well, there!" Togn brought his preamble to a close.

He began the second part of his oration in much the same manner, however: "Well, you see. . . ." And, looking over his shoulder from time to time to solicit confirmation from his wife with an "Ain't that so, Peppina?" he proceeded to relate the manœuvres of Blessed

Take-what-you-give-her! He briefly sketched the priest's career, dwelling especially upon this last episode, the institution to be erected at Porta Vittoria, the gift of land, and the frequent, almost daily visits to the engineer. Thus he prepared a final effect in which his language became somewhat stronger, and was coloured by that special form of cant, the prophecy of evil: "Well, I can solemnly assure you that this Ciapasü will be the ruin of this house! I warn you because it is my duty to do so—which is the wife's opinion also—ain't it, Peppina? And you can trust us. Now I had better tell you exactly how matters stand."

But Massimo did not hear the prophetic recital of the machinations that threatened the engineer's "pile," because he promptly interrupted the orator as soon as he had grasped the true meaning of the discourse. How was this? Was the engineer not master of his own money? What right had they to complain if he spent it in one way rather than another? Seeing the evil turn matters had taken, the couple protested that they had dared this step solely in Massimo's interest, whereupon the young man became so furious that the unfortunate pair made a hasty exit, leaving behind them a string of frightened excuses.

Later in the day Massimo went to see his notary. On his way home he met the friend who had written him the famous letter, and who had been to San Spirito in search of him, wishing to carry him off to lunch at the house of a certain lady with whom both were acquainted. Massimo declined the invitation, but his friend insisted. He had received a note from the lady, couched in terms of Napoleonic firmness. "I know that Alberti is in Milan. Bring him to lunch to-morrow, dead or alive." Massimo's friend himself had had his invitation three days before, and believed it was going to be a large gather-

ing. This hostess, who was clever, selfish, sentimental, and cultured, sometimes indulged in the amusement of inviting a lot of people of the most opposite tendencies, demanding only, if they were stupid, that they be either rich or titled; if intellectual, that they have a clean shirt, but even accepting certain celebrities with a dirty one. Some few objected to these gatherings, and never went a second time, but most of her guests were glad to come again, some because of her chef's skill, or the quality of her wines, some because of their hostess's clever conversation and the splendour of her house, so that they might boast of their invitation and either praise or abuse everything. Massimo was convinced that the lady wished to have him simply in order to play him off against his enemies. He could already imagine her self-justification: "I asked you out of pure friendship, in order that you might have an opportunity of explaining your position." Whereas, in reality, her sole motive would have been that she might enjoy the spectacle of a struggle between clever adversaries. She might accuse him of cowardice, but what was that to him? Under no conditions and from no one would he accept an invitation to lunch while poor Signor Marcello still lay upon his deathbed. His friend declared that this was going too far, but failed to move Massimo by his arguments.

The young man lunched with his uncle, whom he found quite restored to his usual health, and in conversation with Don Santino. On catching sight of Massimo the priest hurried away almost in a state of panic. His uncle did not mention this visit until after coffee was served, and Bigin, who had waited upon them, had gone to have her own lunch. Then he spoke softly, in a tone that was exaggeratedly confidential, and as if by the simple words, "You saw that priest?" he had been divulging a secret concerning the safety of his money. His confidential communications rambled on, always in an undertone,

always good-natured, unusually affectionate in tone, but somewhat confused in substance, owing to his pre-occupation with the thought of a fixed goal, and his anxiety lest he should be checked by some one or something before reaching it. The engineer's face wore a pleased expression, and, in the beginning, his chuckles almost outnumbered his words. The chuckles were evoked by thoughts of the cook and his wife, who could not endure the sight of the priest. Their master had noticed this, had guessed their secret fears and laughed at them, for his great kindness to his domestics did not prevent his valuing them at their real worth, and, perhaps, at a little less. And so he had guessed that they hated the sight of the priest because they feared he might "reduce them to their shirts." The cook had once said to him, "That priest knows what he is about when he comes here!" The parlourmaid was different. She was all devotion to Don Santino. The engineer had one day told Bigin that he was prepared to give this holy man everything he possessed, for he was sure she would repeat this to the cook. He had said more or less the same thing to Peppina also. "On purpose, you know!" said he in a soft falsetto, and chuckling with satisfaction at his own cunning. Then he began talking seriously of the priest's plans and his own intentions. He had made up his mind to give his assistance as architect, plus a sum of five thousand lire. The priest was hoping to get much more out of him, but as to that . . . and the excellent man concluded, "He has got his head turned!" He added that he knew his own duty, and not only his duty towards his servants. Massimo reflected that his uncle must have heard of his interview with Togn. and that by this discourse of his he was simply seeking to reassure him. This greatly annoyed the young man. He protested that his uncle had no obligations save those towards his domestics. While

he was speaking the engineer kept mumbling, "Well, well, well!" his eyes fixed upon the tablecloth, his hands moving as if to ward off his nephew's words. When he could, he ejaculated, "Just listen to me now!" and then proceeded to make a sort of testamentary declaration of principles, in that tone of gentle firmness he sometimes assumed. He was entirely free to do what he pleased with the income derived from his profession, but what he had inherited from his parents must go to relatives. Hereupon Massimo protested even more warmly. The engineer frowned, appearing to wish to convey to him that this was a matter of duty rather than of affection, and finally exclaiming excitedly, "Well, we will drop the subject—we will drop it—for now I must take my 'constitutional' for the sake of my digestion!" he rose from the table and so dismissed his nephew. When he was taking his constitutional, by walking fifty times backwards and forwards through a suite of four small rooms, he always preferred to be alone. Massimo went out, fully determined to leave Milan, to provide for himself, to do all that lay in his power in order that his uncle might have no reason to look upon him as a burden and a check upon his works of charity.

IV

Before dinner the same friend came to look up Massimo again. The hostess, disappointed at not having him to lunch, hoped to see him in the evening. It was not a reception night, and Alberti would meet only a few friends.

He went there towards half-past nine, and found his hostess alone with her unmarried daughter, a girl of about five-and-twenty. The Signora had not expected him so early, and seemed almost disappointed, for she was secretly alarmed lest he had

come early in order to leave early, which intention would have upset her plans. She was most gracious, and at once referred to his sorrow, inquiring about the dead man, the villa, and the country. But she had soon buried poor Signor Marcello and forgotten him, and passing easily from the tone of condolence to that of jest, she inquired with a smile, but without offering any explanation for her question, if Praglia was far from Velo d'Astico. Massimo's face flushed hotly, and he was on the point of retorting that it was as far from it as all the Milanese tongues—save her own—were from telling the truth, when fortunately two men and two women were announced. These new-comers received a cordial welcome from the unmarried daughter, who had been hardly civil to Massimo, and had sat reading a newspaper while he was telling of the Montanina and of Signor Marcello. The two women were foreigners. One, who was young and very handsome, was a Russian. The other, old and ugly, was a Swiss. The elder of the two men was a professor at Pavia, a big, stout man, clumsily built and noisy, and very gallant. The other, who was young and slim, was a politician, who took a lively interest in intellectual matters, and who also was a ladies' man, but possessed of far greater refinement than the professor. Massimo was more or less well acquainted with all four. The name of the handsome Russian, a mystic Theosophist, had even been coupled with his by the Milanese world. She had, indeed, displayed a liking for him, and Massimo could forgive her her theosophic mythology in consideration of her beauty, her cleverness, and also of her mysticism. The elderly Swiss, who was a frigid Positivist, always spoke of Massimo as bigoted and retrograde. The politician was strongly inclined to esteem this young man, who was so full of idealism, and whom so many were attacking. But not having much moral courage, he would not have dared to take up the cudgels in his defence.

As soon as the four appeared Massimo realised that his hostess proposed to start a discussion. He was glad of the presence of the professor and the elderly Swiss woman, who stimulated the spirit of strife within him. None of the new arrivals took much notice of him at first, and the professor and the Swiss immediately began to quarrel. Their opinions were really identical on all points, but when, in a discussion, his elderly friend found herself confronted by another woman, both young and attractive, the professor would at once join forces with the latter. Hereupon the Swiss would show her irritation so plainly, and say so many sharp things to the professor, that his delight knew no bounds, and when occasion presented he never failed to introduce a discussion with this end in view. The kindling which he most frequently used to set the fire ablaze was some outrageous proposition concerning love. But this would no longer serve, for the old lady had become over familiar with the trick. This time the professor chose a fresh opening. Russia, he said, should declare war against Switzerland on account of the Nihilist refugees. The Swiss dame immediately attacked him, with coarse personal allusions.

Every one laughed, the Russian girl and the professor most heartily of all, while the elderly woman continued her tirade in French, declaiming against "*cet homme insupportable*." The politician, to whom the subject of Russia appealed, offered to negotiate peace at St. Petersburg. Hereupon the old woman turned upon him and was backed by the professor, until at last the hostess succeeded in making her voice heard—a small, husky voice, like the high notes of a diminutive piano, enclosed in a packing-case and played upon by spirits. "Enough, enough! I myself shall dictate the terms of peace! And what do you say, Alberti? Say something!"

The name of Alberti rather than her imperious

"Enough!" had the effect of oil upon the waters, and the sudden silence seemed to say, "What has he to do with it? What can he say?" As a matter of fact Alberti answered that he had nothing to say—really nothing, but as there was strife going on, he should take refuge in armed neutrality. "Then you will have us all against you!" said the Swiss. The Russian woman, who had, as yet, hardly opened her lips, here murmured, "Yes, indeed!" and the hostess's unmarried daughter smiled meaningly. The professor was taking careful note of all these bad symptoms. Things were looking black for this Alberti. "But Alberti is armed," said the politician pleasantly. The hostess, greatly pleased at the turn the conversation was taking, gave it a final push.

"You were wise to arm yourself, Alberti," said she, laughing, "for Signorina Grüssli has warlike intentions."

"Yes, indeed!" cried the sexagenarian Grüssli. "And I am glad to be able to tell Signor Alberti so, because we have talked a great deal together in the past, and although our views differed, I have never been so displeased with him as I am now. Oh, no!"

"But why, why?" demanded the hostess, anxious to fan the flame.

"It is needless to say. All present know, and Signor Alberti best of all."

"I assure you I do not," said Alberti with a cold smile. "But in any case——"

"You mean you don't care a rap for me? But there are others I fancy for whom you will care. If you don't know I am going to tell you. I attended your lectures on the heretics of the sixteenth century, my dear sir, and I and many others with me did not approve of your saying they should have held their tongues and obeyed! Ask these ladies and gentlemen here!"

The professor protested, declaring himself to be too much of a Positivist, too far removed from Alberti's ideas and from any religious sentiment to care whether heretics be spoken of in one way rather than another. To him there was no difference between heretics of whatever shade and Catholics of whatever school. He might, perhaps, admit that unyielding Catholics, being the most logical, were therefore the least uncongenial to him. The Swiss dame caught him up sharply. She admitted there was little to choose between heretics, Modernists, and Papists, but there was the moral question, the question of self-respect, of honesty. "I should think so!" said the daughter of the house. But it was the handsome Lalina, the Russian, who added fuel to the fire.

"I am not a Positivist," she began, speaking in French, "but my disappointment was far greater than Signorina Grüssli's, and I am glad to be able to tell Signor Alberti so. I hold Anne Besant's views, but I might perhaps have become a Catholic had the ideas contained in Signor Alberti's articles been recognised by his Church. I was enthusiastic about those articles. I thought their author would prove an apostle full of faith and ready to accept martyrdom. But his lectures showed me plainly enough that he is no such apostle, that he would not even seek a stone-cold pile."

Here the daughter of the house laughed, putting as much impertinence as possible into her laugh; and her mother sought to ease matters by saying, not without a flash of mirth in her eye:

"Oh, poor Alberti! How they are abusing him!"

"As to the pile," said the politician, "it seems to me Alberti went out of his way to find it, and that he is standing upon it at the present moment. It may not be a pile of the Holy Inquisition, and it is probably of '*bois de sandale*,' but nevertheless I can smell the odour of burning. But as far as

that goes, Signorina Grüssli, I also burn without any pile at all."

"That may be," cried the Swiss woman, "but there is no odour of burning about *you*—only of cooking!"

Meanwhile Alberti was thinking: "Shall I refrain from telling these foolish creatures the truth, just because they are women? If they keep it up I certainly shall speak out!" His hostess claimed his attention.

"Why don't you speak, Alberti? Why don't you defend yourself?"

"He has been burnt at the stake," the professor cried gaily. "Let us at least respect his ashes!"

"No," said Massimo, delighted to have hit upon a harsh answer. "I will not defend myself. I should be in danger of convincing many. I have isolated myself, and you cannot think how delightful it is to be alone. I do not feel the slightest desire to defend myself. Allow me to remain silent. Should I speak, I might utter words of too defiant, too violent a nature."

"But we don't ask you for humility and gentleness. We ask you for reasons," the hostess retorted.

"No, no, dear lady, I have not heard any one ask for reasons!"

"But I do—I ask for them," she pressed.

"Ah, you only!" said Massimo. He was silent for a moment and then went on, smiling: "I have something to ask for also. I would not accept Signorina Lalina's 'stone-cold pile' because it would not even serve to make a cup of tea. I should like to know if this other terrible pile upon which they tell me I am standing will heat a cup for me?"

"Don't get furious, Alberti!" his hostess warned, while her daughter murmured:

¹ To be cooked, in colloquial Italian, means to be over head and ears in love.—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE.

"He will bite us presently!"

"Oh, no, Signorina!" said Massimo, laughing. "You may beware of me in the future, but at present I am muzzled."

Tea was served in another room. His hostess took Massimo aside.

"Why did you refuse to defend yourself?" said she. "It was a mistake. The professor raised a great to-do against you, even at the University."

"What is that to me?" said Massimo, and he entered into conversation with the two foreigners, showing himself in a more amiable mood. He made no effort, however, to be amiable to the daughter of the house. Signorina Grüssli and the Russian might not be very level-headed, and they were not deliberative nor sufficient, intellectually, for the part they wished to play, but they were at least honest, and enthusiastic in support of their own views. The hostility displayed by the daughter of the house was based upon conceit and ignorance.

* * * * *

On leaving, the politician offered to accompany Massimo. "Well, well, my dear Alberti," he began, taking the young man's arm as they reached the street. "You did quite right not to get into a discussion. Those are people who reason little and poorly. The professor is about as clever as a rhinoceros, and as to the women—they do what they can, poor things! Even the Russian! She is awfully pretty, but there are other topics besides religion I should like to discuss with her. She certainly is awfully pretty. But never mind that. I wish you would kindly enlighten me a little, for I am really very much in the dark. Answer me seriously, exactly as you honestly feel, and I promise not to betray you. Do you really believe that this old bark of St. Peter's will not end at last in some shed connected with the Navy Department? Or, at least,

do you really believe it can go on being propelled by oars or by wind, and that St. Peter himself will not sooner or later be forced to get a motor? You are not to answer me as you would do in public. I know well enough how you would answer there. Of course you call yourself a Catholic. One might as well put such a question to the Cardinal of Milan. I am asking you for your private opinion—here—between ourselves. Will you give it to me?"

"Why not?" said Massimo. "I will answer you as Pius IX. answered those cardinals who were saying how safe was the bark amidst the tempest. The bark will neither sink, nor run aground, nor end in a shed. But as to the crew—that is quite another matter."

"Words, words!" said his disappointed interlocutor. "This is a jest. I did not ask you for a jest."

"I beg your pardon, but the matter of the shed, the oars, and the motor was a jest also. But if you really wish it I will answer you seriously. If I believed that the Church to which I belong could fall, I would not wait for an earthquake, but leave it at once. But I assure you that not even an earthquake could drive me out of it, such is my faith in its foundations."

"Happy man!" cried the honourable deputy, stopping, and dropping Massimo's arm. "But look here—besides the visible Church you Catholics have an invisible one, have you not? Well, then, in your place, I should feel a great deal safer in the invisible Church in case of an earthquake."

They were standing in front of Café Cova, where a group of friends were awaiting the politician. "Listen to me," said he. "You are young and I am almost old. I have a great liking for you, and I am going to take the liberty of giving you a piece of advice. Don't think so much about religion. Be satisfied with your own beliefs and practices, but

don't meddle with religious questions for the general public. Our public gets out of patience when too much religion is forced upon it. It cannot understand that a young man like you should be so deeply interested in matters that concern another world than this. Do you see?" The political personage pronounced that smiling and familiar "Do you see?" with all the warmth of his liking for the young man, and also with somewhat of gentle authority, the authority of that world that did not understand Massimo, of a great and powerful world composed of men who have reached comfortable places, and are persuaded that the great essential is to get as much enjoyment as possible out of life—and of other men who have not yet "arrived," who are engrossed in politics, and who, not in words but in their secret souls, set slight value upon everything that is devoid of political importance, and is outside the field of the struggle for political power.

"No, I don't see!" Massimo replied, laughing. "I must tell you that I delight in vexing the public."

"A strange taste, my boy!" said the elder man, and entered the café.

Finding himself alone, Massimo started homewards. He was pleased with himself—bitterly, fiercely pleased. His tower of pride was a comfortable place, whence he could look out upon Lelia, his uncle, the hostile world, the scoffing world, the indifferent world. In his thoughts he raised it as high as the clouds, covered it with gold and steel, and joyed in dwelling alone in his impregnable stronghold. In his preoccupation, instead of turning out of Via Manzoni into Via Monte Napoleone, he kept straight on as far as the arches of Porta Nuova. Now it was a question of choosing a place somewhere outside of Milan, whither he might transport his tower. Thinking and searching, he passed the arches. The idea of applying for a post as parish

doctor somewhere in the mountains, which had flashed across his mind at the Montanina, again took possession of him. Meanwhile, he wandered onward as far as the railway bridge, where he was once more aroused by the sense of topographical reality.

On reaching home he sat down to write to Donna Fedcle to excuse his absence from the funeral. But while writing, it occurred to him that he might pay a visit to the Velo cemetery instead in the course of a few days. He could easily go there from the Seghe station, between two trains. He tore up his note and wrote another, announcing that on the 4th of July, at one o'clock, he would leave the train at Seghe for this visit, and expressing the hope that his friend would bear him company.

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CHAPTER VII

FROM THE HEIGHTS TO THE DEPTHS

I

ON the 4th of July at a quarter to one, Donna Fedele reached the Seghe station in her usual small carriage, drawn by the usual small horse. On hearing the whistle of the train on its way from San Giorgio, she left the waiting-room where she had been amusing herself by talking with a dirty old herdsman, and went out into the broiling sun without opening her parasol. Before the train had come to a standstill she had caught sight of Massimo at one of the windows of the last carriage, and was hastening towards him, smiling joyously. Massimo's expression showed how pale and ill he thought her looking, and at first both shrank from referring to their recent loss. As they left the station she inquired when he intended to leave. By the next train, he told her, and he was going back again to Milan. They would have two hours together, and the carriage would take them to the San Giorgio cemetery in a very few minutes. They drove along the banks of the Astico, which was swollen and noisy after the heavy rain of the night before; and she talked of Signor Marcello's death, referring to the premonitory symptoms, the particulars of that last day, and of the thunder-storm, and telling of the plants he had carried outdoors, the money he had laid ready on the writing-table, the lamp that had been found burning,

and the aspect of the body. She spoke very quietly about it all, not mentioning Lelia on account of the driver. At San Giorgio the custodian of the cemetery pointed out a dark mound of freshly upturned earth, and then left them. Donna Fedele had brought two roses with her, one of which she now gave to Massimo. They knelt down and placed the roses upon the upturned earth, and prayed silently, while the custodian struggled with a group of inquisitive urchins who had slipped in at the open gate. Their voices seemed disturbing to the peace of him who slept there. Donna Fedele rose, ordered the children to kneel down and be silent, and her quiet power compelled their obedience. Then she returned to Massimo, remaining there beside him for a few minutes longer. He felt that she was moved by an emotion far deeper than his, but he knew nothing of the past, and this feeling drew his thoughts away from his dead friend to her.

Before getting into the carriage again, she said that she wished to speak to him on a critical matter. She could not do so in the carriage or in the waiting-room at Seghe, and she therefore suggested that they should cross the small wooden bridge that connects Seghe with the group of houses known as *Schiri*, and follow the shady path along the left bank of the Astico.

"I must talk to you about Lelia," she said, when they had left the carriage near the Seghe post-office, and were walking along a narrow street between two rows of grimy cottages. "I must"? thought Massimo. Why *must* she? Had she been charged to do so? He remained silent, and put himself on the defensive.

"I must ask your advice, not so much for Lelia as for myself in dealing with her."

Their conversation was interrupted by a meeting with some friends of Donna Fedele, who were coming from the bridge. Presently, when they had passed

the cottages, they came in sight of the broad and angry river, threading the wide, green plain to the stretch of open sky between the two wings of the valley beyond.

"Poor Signor Marcello always loved this spot!" said she.

"You wish advice for yourself?" Massimo asked.

"Yes, yes! For myself!" Donna Fedele answered. "Do you know that Lelia is staying with me now?"

Massimo stopped short, and Donna Fedele looked at her watch.

"We have an hour and a quarter longer," said she. "Let us go and sit down."

They crossed the bridge, and sat down on a low wall in the broken shadows of the hornbeam-trees whose branches hung over the sunlit stream. Donna Fedele began by speaking of the will, and of Signor Marcello's mistake as to Lelia's age. Andrea had said she was nearly eighteen, when she could not have been more than sixteen. He himself might not have known.

"Lelia's father," Donna Fedele went on, "who heard the news immediately, no one knows how, telegraphed that, as his daughter was a minor, he was coming at once to assert his rights as her guardian. Lelia had a terrible attack of nerves, and refused to see her father. So he sent to beg me to fetch her, and I took her home with me. Then the funeral took place, but she did not go. She was in no condition to do so, indeed, for she spent the whole day in bed with a raging headache. I went, and, of course, her father was there."

"What sort of a man is he?" Massimo asked, interrupting her.

"Ah! Disgusting to look at! Imagine one of those wax heads out of a barber's window, grown old, with badly dyed hair and a dirty skin! He talks idiotically, and with great stiffness. You would say

he was starched with self-consciousness. In my presence, at least, he showed extreme embarrassment. If I did not know him to be a sly fox I should set him down as an imbecile. After the funeral he came to pay me a visit, 'to perform his duty,' he said, in his affected way. He asked to see Lelia as her steward might have done, but not her father. She would not hear of this, and after a few muttered expressions of pity for her he took himself off, perfectly satisfied. He is unique in his way. This morning he sent me a note, saying he was going away for a few days with the agent, and that on his return he hoped to find Lelia at the Montanina. But Lelia"

Donna Fedele pronounced these two last words very softly and then lapsed into silence, slowly drawing mystic signs in the grass with the point of her parasol. She was waiting for a question that did not come.

"Lelia is a great anxiety to me," said she, "and I do wish Don Aurelio were here to advise me."

Massimo immediately began talking of Don Aurelio, of his present condition, and of his hopes for the future. At any other time Donna Fedele would have listened eagerly, and have put a thousand questions. But now she was impatient, feeling that Massimo was only trying to avoid talking of Lelia.

"Perhaps you could ask his advice for me?" said she at last.

Massimo answered coldly that he would do so if she wished it.

"But you yourself ought to see Lelia."

The young man started. How could that be possible? The train would be starting in half an hour now.

"You might stay here," Donna Fedele murmured. Stay here? Certainly not! The harsh answer was

delivered with emphasis and decision, and seemed like a protest—almost a reproach.

"It would really please her."

In spite of his emphatic refusal, Donna Fedele made this remark very calmly. Massimo, however, was as clever as she was at not hearing what he did not wish to hear and not understanding what he did not wish to understand.

"But you wrote to her," she went on. "I know you did, because they brought the letter to her at the Viliino while she was ill, and I myself received it. What did you say?"

It was Massimo's turn now to be deaf.

"I should not like to lose my train," he remarked.

"I have only about twenty minutes left."

"Lose it!" Donna Fedele was getting excited. "You would certainly do so if you had heard Lelia's confession to me this morning," she added.

"What confession?"

"Stay here, if you want to know!"

Massimo rose. The colour had fled from his face

"I must not," he said. "And you—forgive me for saying so—should not ask me to. It would be too humiliating after her treatment of me. But now I shall really lose my train if I do not start. Good-bye."

"Go, then," said Donna Fedele, without rising.

"But you are only a great, foolish boy!"

"A boy?"

"Yes, a boy! You do not know what love is yet. You do not know that when one really loves, one loves! There can be no question, then, of humiliation. When one really loves, one loves!"

They heard the whistle of the train at the Arsiero station. Massimo said goodbye and hurried off, but Donna Fedele knew that the train a'ways whistled some time before it actually started. She rose, too, but very slowly, and stood thinking over her own words: "When one really loves, one loves!"

She was back again, young and passionate, with Marcello in the forests of Lavarone, and living again in that sweet moment when, had he asked it, she would have given herself blindly to him, forgetful of all else. Then suddenly the noisy, plaintive waters awoke her to realities again.

She rejoined Massimo at the station just as the train was coming in, and had time to whisper to him: "Stay! She loves you—she has almost admitted it!"

"She loves you!" The words pierced him like an arrow, pinioning him. He could neither move nor speak. Donna Fedele began to hope that, after all, he would stay. But he suddenly started from her side and jumped into the train, almost without knowing what he was doing. The engine had been uncoupled and sent to fetch some freight-cars, and Donna Fedele was able to speak to him again through the open window of the first-class compartment, in which there were other travellers besides Massimo. As she might want to write to him, she inquired if he intended to be in Milan during July. He told her that a letter from Rome had lain a very dear and solemn charge upon him, which would oblige his leaving Milan almost immediately and going to the Lake of Lugano. For the future he had other plans. Donna Fedele brought her face as near as the open window as possible and whispered a farewell:

"She loves you!"

The train started. Massimo's head swam, and he closed his eyes, partly so that he might escape recognising a fellow-traveller whom he knew. He pretended to be asleep, and saw Lelia coming towards him. He opened his eyes quickly, that he might no longer see her, and his gaze rested upon the flying greenness of this happy valley. Then he closed them, that he might see her once again, and he had a vision of her fair head, drooping upon her breast as if to hide her face. Presently he saw two little

white hands being raised very slowly, and felt them resting at last upon his shoulders. With a shudder he opened his eyes. He no longer saw the glittering landscape, but always that fair head. The train thundered into the Mea tunnel. Then he felt her arms about his neck, her face against his, and kisses and tears, and heard the oft-repeated words, "I love you, I love you!" His breath was coming in gasps, and he suddenly thought, "What a weak fool I am! What has become of my tower of pride?" He put his head out of the window and watched the passing trees and fields, repeating to himself, "Fool! Fool!" Besides, Donna Fedele had said "almost." It was she, she alone, who was trying to put things straight. But if it really were so! He drew back from the window, searched his pockets for a newspaper he could not find, bowed to his fellow-passenger, apologising for not having recognised him sooner, and began discussing the railway that would one day connect Rocchetta with Asiago.

He had two hours to wait at Vicenza. He knew no one there, and so walked slowly up and down the broad avenues of plane-trees leading to the station. It was five o'clock and very hot, and only a few idle people like himself were pacing silently in the sultry shade. He thought for a moment of coming to live in this peaceful, unknown little town. But no, Velo was too near. As he entered the station once more he heard the cry, "Thiene—Schio!" By taking that train he could be back at Villino delle Rose before dark! Farewell, farewell, green valley, dear streams, roses blowing in the mountain breeze! He went to the café and read the *Corriere della Sera* through from beginning to end. He even dipped into the advertisements, and found the following notice:

"The post of parish-physician to the united communes of Valsolda will remain open until the end

of August. Salary 3,500 lire. Applications to be addressed to the Mayor of Drano (Como)."

Half an hour later he heard the cry, "Verona—Brescia—Milan!"

Massimo rose, still lost in thought, and still clutching the *Corriere della Sera*.

II

Before she returned to the Villino, Donna Fedele went to Seghe to see a poor young fellow who was dying of consumption, and who worshipped her as an angel from heaven. He had known her when working as painter's apprentice at the Villino. A wild life had brought disease upon him, and, remembering Donna Fedele's gentle admonitions, he had begged her to visit him. She went often to read to him or to show him illustrated books and photographs. To-day she found him unhappy and restless. The chaplain of Velo had been with him, and having noticed a copy of the Gospels, published by the Society of St. Jerome, which the Signora had given him, he had advised him not to read it, saying he would not be able to understand. Donna Fedele hid her indignation as well as she could, and promising the poor boy that she herself would read and explain the holy book to him, she went away, leaving him comforted, but carrying with her much sadness and another weight upon her soul. Lelia had not told her in so many words that she loved Massimo. She had simply offered to leave the house, in case, she said, Signor Alberti were so indignant with her that her presence there would make it too embarrassing for him to stay there. That was all she had said, but her tone, her manner, and her face had spoken eloquently. If Massimo had yielded to her entreaty and had stayed, perhaps . . .

But he had gone, and in Donna Fedele's heart hope was giving way to disappointment, and with Lelia in her present state of mind, she foresaw the danger of a catastrophe. The girl had not said anything to her to arouse suspicion, but in the past she had more than once told Teresina that, should she again be forced to live with her father, she would certainly kill herself. Poor, frightened Teresina had thought her mad, but Donna Fedele did not think this. She admitted that she was strange, but she thought her largely the victim of a false conception of religion, the result of a naturally eccentric temperament, ignorant upbringing, and evil example. She hoped that Lelia's speeches to the maid had not been serious, but her present gloomy silence was not an encouraging sign. She did not wish Lelia to go out alone; therefore, when, on reaching the house, she learned that the girl had done so she trembled with fear, though she tried to reassure herself that Lelia had gone out to avoid a possible meeting with Massimo. The servants knew nothing of her whereabouts; they had only seen her leave the grounds by the great gate. Donna Fedele went down to question the gatekeeper, but the man, who worked at the Perale paper-mill, was away. His wife told her that the Signorina had left a message that she was going to the Montanina to fetch something, and that she would not be home before six o'clock. Evidently Lelia had thought that, if Alberti came to the Villino, he would be leaving by the six o'clock train, and this only meant that she did not wish to be in the way. To make sure, however, Donna Fedele dispatched her maid to the Montanina, with the excuse that Lelia might need her help.

At six o'clock they both returned from the Villino with Teresina, who had begged to be allowed to go back with them and to visit the house, which she had never been inside. Lelia greeted Donna Fedele affectionately, without inquiring for Alberti or about

the visit to the cemetery, and then withdrew to her own room. Donna Fedele answered Teresina's request to see over the house with a sweet smile, but hardly had Lelia left the room than the woman's face assumed an expression of anxiety and embarrassment that showed the Signora something had happened, and that the maid's desire to see the Villino was merely an excuse.

"I will show you my study first," said Donna Fedele.

The study was in one corner of the house, looking south and west, and it was the room in which they were least likely to be disturbed. As soon as Donna Fedele had closed the door she inquired in a low tone if anything unpleasant had happened. By way of answer Teresina buried her face in her hands and began to sob. Donna Fedele urged her gently to explain herself, and the maid began by protesting in a voice which shook with emotion that it was not her fault, that she had thought she was doing right, and that, after all, she had only told the truth. Donna Fedele could make nothing of all this. What had she done? What had she said? Little by little the woman became more calm, and told her story.

"I was not expecting to see the Signorina," said she. "I was in the scullery when I heard steps in the passage outside the kitchen. I looked to see who was there. It was the Signorina, and she greeted me affectionately. She seemed perfectly calm, and told me she had come for the photographs of poor Signor Andrea from the master's room, and for the one the master had placed in Signor Alberti's room.

"'You have come for them?' said I. 'Are you really not coming back again to the Montanina?' She answered angrily, 'No, no!' and I understood what she meant, for you know what she has often told me about her father, about living with him, when she wished me to help her send him money.

I understood perfectly, but did not dare say anything. 'Shall I come too?' I inquired. 'No, no,' said she, 'stay here and go on with your work. I will go in alone. Is there any one in the house?' I told her there was no one, for Signor da Camin went away this morning with the agent, and the footman was having his afternoon out. Even the cook had gone out. Then she left me, and I felt rather anxious in case she might want help. As she did not return, I made up my mind to go after her. I waited a little while outside the master's door, thinking she was in his room, but suddenly I heard steps on the floor above, near the guests' room. I went into the salon. She was on her way down the wooden stairway, and on catching sight of me she turned very red and made a gesture of impatience. I begged her pardon, and asked if I could not get her a cup of coffee or anything else. She did not even answer me.

" 'Are you going away at once?' I asked. 'Yes,' said she, 'almost immediately.' Then she went into the poor master's room, where I believed she had already been, but she was there only a few seconds, and came out with the photographs. On reaching the drawing-room she flung herself into an easy-chair without speaking. I was at a loss whether to go or to remain, but concluded at last I had better go. When I reached the doorway, however, she called me back. 'Do you know,' said she, 'whether Signor Alberti had permission to take that photograph away with him?' I was astonished at this question. 'No,' said I. She frowned. 'How shameful!' she exclaimed. 'Excuse me, Signorina,' I answered, 'but the photograph is still there. I myself placed it in one of the drawers of the table. I forgot to tell you so just now.' I found the picture and gave it to her. And then—having known so much about all this, somehow I began to talk, and took the liberty of

putting in a good word for Signor Alberti. She grew very angry. 'What is this you are saying?' she demanded. 'Don't you remember what you yourself told me about him?'

Here Teresina paused, begged Donna Fedele to excuse her for what she was about to say, and then went on:

"Donna Fedele has probably been talking to you!' Signorina Lelia cried. 'No!' said I, 'I have never seen her since the funeral. It is true I told you some evil tales about Signor Alberti, but I found out later they were only gossip.'"

Teresina, feeling very ashamed and penitent, now had to relate what she had told Lelia concerning Massimo's Milanese entanglement, and she also confessed her later discoveries. On the day of the funeral the archpriest's sister-in-law, talking to the seamstress, Angela, about Alberti, had said that the young man was a most improper person, and a deadly enemy of all priests. Her brother-in-law, she said, had been instrumental in bringing about his departure; the chaplain had received a letter from a Milanese priest who knew a lady who was deeply attached to Signorina Lelia, and who was in the greatest anxiety concerning the presence here of this disreputable young man, whom all Milan knew to be mixed up with a married woman. Her brother-in-law had found a means of informing the people at the Montanina about this, and thereupon the young man, who had come especially to arrange a rich marriage for himself, finding himself unmasked and his plan discovered, had taken the next train home. Signora Bettina had said that the archpriest had his eye on a certain count from Vicenza, who, he thought, was made for the Signorina. But this, of course, was a secret. Angela had at once decided that it was her duty to hand on this information to her friend Teresina.

"I told the Signorina all this with the very best

intentions," the woman went on, "because I saw there had been a conspiracy against poor Signor Alberti, and I felt I had somehow been in it also, and I was dreadfully upset."

"Well, and what happened?" Donna Fedele inquired anxiously

"I am going to tell you," sighed Teresina. "First of all she looked angry—Dio, how angry she looked! But she never uttered a word. Then presently she began to question me, and made me repeat over and over again what Angela had said. At last she rose and ran quickly upstairs to her own room. I waited a bit and then I followed very softly along the corridor and called, 'Signorina, do you want anything?' I heard her turn the key sharply in the lock, and that was all. I stood waiting for some time, and then, fearing she would be still more angry should she come out and find me there, I started to go away. I had not gone ten steps, however, when I heard a cry, followed by a kind of gasp—that I have heard her give before, once when she had received an unpleasant letter from her father. It is a sound . . . ah, ah! . . . as if her breath were failing her. But she was soon quiet again, and I made up my mind it would be wiser to go down to the drawing-room and wait for her there. She came down in a few minutes as pale as death, but quite calm. It was then I asked her to let me go with her to see the Villino. At first she hesitated, but just at that moment your maid arrived, and we started off together. Before reaching the bridge over the Posina who should we meet but the archpriest! When he came up to us he smiled, and made one of his sweeping bows. Gésummaria! you should have seen the Signorina! She drew herself up as stiff as a soldier, and gave the priest a stare with eyes that were as cold as ice, and passed on. I said nothing, and she never opened her lips until we got there."

Donna Fedele smiled. "Poor Teresina!" said she, as if in pity for an unnecessary anxiety. Then she proposed that they should go over the rest of the house, and in such a careless manner that Teresina felt rebuffed. "I beg you to pardon me if I have gone too far . . ." she said.

Donna Fedele understood, and throwing aside her apparent apathy, which was nothing more than absent-mindedness, she overflowed with kind words, making no comment, however, upon Teresina's story. Presently she inquired about Lelia's father. Hardly had his name been pronounced when Teresina cried, "Goodness! I had almost forgotten!" That horrid man! Before going away with the agent he had asked her, with a laugh, half cunning, half stupid, about her poor mistress' jewels. She had answered that she knew nothing about them. Just fancy their falling into such hands! She knew well enough that the poor mistress had had a lot of rings and bracelets, a string of pearls and sapphires, and a diamond ornament. The master had no safe, but kept them in a secret drawer of the writing-table in his own room.

"Do you know why he asked?" said Teresina. "I am willing to swear it was because he had taken them already. For one whole day he did nothing but look over papers in the study. He is sure to have found some note or memorandum of them. Besides, last night I heard him go into the poor master's room, and he was in there a long time. I will take my oath my dear mistress' jewels are travelling at this very moment. And to think of his asking me! You can fancy how I feel, knowing that he is quite capable of accusing me of theft."

Donna Fedele sought to reassure her, and having at last got rid of her, went to lie down, for she felt completely worn out. Still, the physical relief only increased her mental unrest. That hot-headed Alberti! Why was he not here now? Love was

waiting for him, and he must needs play the haughty prince ! And yet perhaps, should he yield, the girl might take it into her head to play the haughty princess too.

From her window looking east Donna Fedele could see the great arch of sky between the two ranges of hills stretching across the plain. Her eyes fell upon the cemetery of San Giorgio. How bitter to think of the Montanina in the hands of that man, plundering and laying irreverent hands on everything belonging to her poor old friend ! She summoned all her faith to convince herself that Marcello was at peace and satisfied that good must come from all these ills, but it was not easy. Then she turned over an idea that had come to her in the night, to ask Camin's permission to take Lelia away with her into Piedmont, so that she might be spared, for a time at least, from the misery of living with him. The girl would have time to recover, and so many things might happen in that time ! Having decided to do this, Donna Fedele made an effort to free her mind from all thought, hoping that sleep might come.

III

She had indeed fallen asleep when, half an hour later, the maid came to announce dinner. The Signorina was already downstairs. Donna Fedele was tempted to stay where she was, for she was still weary and disinclined to eat. But she forced herself to get up and go down. The table was set in the verandah in the front of the house. Lelia appeared so calm that Donna Fedele was encouraged to tell her of Massimo's visit, and of the news he had brought of Don Aurelio. In speaking of the priest, she said how deeply she felt the loss of his wise and spiritual counsel.

"For I am a wicked woman," said she. "I lack

gentleness and charity, especially towards certain other priests who are unlike him."

Levia let the matter drop, and began to talk of the little cemetery where she had never been. She had planned to go there on the following morning, and hoped her friend would be able to accompany her. They would take some roses—plenty of roses. She would have liked to take white roses, but just now there were only a few red ones in the Villino garden. The talk went on to roses. Donna Fedele was dissatisfied with hers. It seemed to her that at that moment the place would have been more appropriately named after the thorns. She must really plant a great many more trees. The Villino should look as if it were resting upon a basket, full of roses, and be muffled in them up to the very eaves.

"We will take a little trip to Milan," said she, "and go about among the horticulturists, choosing what is best. Would you like that?"

Levia seemed pleased, and said she believed her father would allow her to go. Donna Fedele was amazed at her submissiveness.

"I ought to go into Piedmont on business also," she added. "Would you like me to ask your father to let you come with me for three or four weeks?"

Levia assented, waited in silence until the maid had withdrawn after serving the coffee, and then said, with a ghastly smile, playing nervously with her spoon the while:

"Now that everything is over, may I know if a certain person came to the Montanina in accordance with a preconcerted arrangement?"

Donna Fedele gave a start, and raised her eyebrows, offended by this reflection upon her own honesty.

"Now that everything is over," she retorted severely, "I can assure you that I never lie, and that there was no preconcerted arrangement. When

Alberti came he had as little thought of marrying you as I have of marrying Carnesecca !”

Lelia gave a harsh, forced laugh.

“What makes you think of Carnesecca?” she asked.

“Because I see him,” was Donna Fedele’s reply.

“There he is, coming through the small gate, which the keeper has forgotten to close, as usual.”

Lelia glanced over her shoulder. There, indeed, was friend Carnesecca, coming slowly towards the verandah, hat in hand. On reaching the steps he paused, regardless of Donna Fedele’s smile of encouragement.

“Come in, Carnesecca !” she cried, and then hastened to correct herself. “I beg your pardon—I mean Ismaele !”

“Why should you beg my pardon, White Lady of the Roses?” said the pedlar of Bibles. “Why, and for what? They have put a scornful name upon me because I preach Jesus and the most righteous servants of the Lord, and thus they have insured me a humble seat among the blessed. *Beati estis cum dixerint omne malum.* I glory in my title !”

Donna Fedele, protesting that she had no intention of mocking him, invited him to come up the steps and sit down, and ordered coffee for him. Then she inquired what had brought him back to these parts where he had been so roughly handled. He said he was on his way to Laghi, and that he was ready to undergo there the same martyrdom he had suffered at Posina.

“At this time of the year,” said Donna Fedele gravely, “it will probably take the form of potatoes.”

“I wish it might !” the old man replied. “But if the Caiaphas of Laghi resembles him of Velo, it will probably be stones.”

“Look here, my conscience tells me that I myself should be pelting you with a few pebbles at least !”

At this half-laughing, half-serious declaration of

Donna Fedele's, Carnesecca flung his arms heavenwards, innumerable rents in his coat revealing an extremely dingy shirt.

"No, White Lady of the Roses. You are not called upon to cast even the smallest pebble against me. I have never offered you a Bible, because I am quite sure you have one already. I do not seek to convert you to Protestantism, for you are a Christian already. I come to-night to thank you once more for your kindness in receiving me beneath your roof."

Donna Fedele inquired if he intended to push on to Laghi that same evening. No; he was tired. He had come all the way from Vicenza, and had been walking seven hours. Donna Fedele expressed pity for him, but hastened to destroy an illusion he had evidently cherished. She had entertained him once when his bones were broken, but she had no intention of doing so again, now that he was on his way to get them broken once more. He spoke of a vague hope that the Montanina hayloft might afford him shelter for the night. He had not heard of Signor Marcello's death, nor was he acquainted with Lelia. The young girl sat silent and unmoved while her friend imparted to him the mournful intelligence, falteringly and in a low voice. Carnesecca was greatly shocked, and, having said good-night, went his way, without stating whether or no he had altered his plans for the night.

The friends went out to a corner of the garden where some chairs had been placed.

"'White Lady of the Roses,'" said Lelia. "A pretty name!"

"Too pretty for me," Donna Fedele replied. "But Carnesecca would certainly do better to confine himself to inventing names, instead of preaching Luther and Calvin, and I don't know whom besides."

Lelia inquired carelessly who this man really was, and how he had become a Protestant. Donna Fedele told her his story. She went into much detail, and

for some time failed to notice that Lelia was not listening. The girl's eyes were fixed upon an empty chair. Donna Fedele lapsed into silence, but still Lelia sat gazing at the chair. Although it was nearly nine o'clock, and the sky was overcast, it was still light in this part of the high, open garden, with its light gravel paths. Presently Lelia became conscious that Donna Fedele was looking at her. She left off looking at the chair, but did not break the silence. A few drops of rain began to fall, and Donna Fedele suggested that they should go in. Seeing the maid busy clearing the dinner-table, she asked her to send the keeper to close the small gate through which Carnesecca had come and gone. Lelia hastened to say she would like a little exercise, and would take the message herself.

The keeper was just going to bed when she entered the cottage beside the main gate. His wife received her, and Lelia asked to see a sick child of theirs, inquiring after it with so much affectionate solicitude that the mother was greatly touched. Lelia remained some ten minutes at the lodge, and then returned to the Villino without having mentioned the open gate. Entering the drawing-room in the dark, she heard Donna Fedele's voice: "Did you send?" And unhesitatingly she answered:

"Yes."

Donna Fedele begged her to play something. In the dark? Yes, in the dark. The old piano had been silent for many months, for its mistress, who had been a fairly good musician in her youth, now only played occasionally for the amusement of some childish visitor. Lelia played a composition of Signor Marcello's—his only composition, a Barcarola he had written some thirty years before. When it was finished she paused, waiting for a word from her friend, a request for more music. But the elder woman did not speak. The only sounds that broke

the silence were the quick ticking of an alarm-clock and the gentle patter of the rain upon the gravel.

"You know that, do you not?" said Lelia at last. Out of the shadow the sweet voice answered softly:

"Oh, yes!"

That sweet and soft "Oh, yes!" told Lelia things which she had already vaguely guessed. She rose from the piano and went towards the corner of the drawing-room whence the voice had come. Bending over Donna Fedele, she sought her hands and silently kissed first one and then the other. Donna Fedele gladly yielded to the kisses that seemed to say, "I also am a woman, and I understand." They held a second meaning as well, but one that was still hidden.

"Are you not going to play any more?" Donna Fedele whispered quickly. She was grateful for the kisses, but words would have grated upon her. Lelia did not answer, but still stood holding her hands and pressing them.

"Shall we go to bed, then?" Donna Fedele went on. Lelia dropped her hands. "You must go," said she; "but if I may, I should like to stay and play a little longer." She turned on the light. Donna Fedele rose from her chair with a smile. "That is right, dear," said she. She embraced Lelia, rang for her maid, and then withdrew.

Lelia remained standing motionless until the house was quite still. Then she sat down at the piano again and went on playing at random until the maid returned and began closing the heavy double doors opening upon the verandah. Lelia begged her to leave them open. She would close them herself. Perhaps she might go out again to get a breath of air.

"It is raining, Signorina," said the maid; "and now the wind is rising." But Lelia had begun to play again and made no answer, and, after a moment's hesitation, the woman decided she had

better go and leave the doors open. Lelia paused to listen, heard her mounting the stairs, and then heard her footsteps on the floor above. She rose and went to assure herself that the door had really been left open, peering for an instant out into the night. There was little wind, but it was raining steadily, and the shadows were black. She went back to the piano, and hid her face in her hands as if searching in her memory for music. Presently she let her hands drop upon a chord, while her head fell forward and her eyes stared unseeingly. Once more she raised her head, and once more went to peer into the whispering shadows. Then she closed the doors, shot the bolts noisily, and opened them again quietly. Then she put out the light and went up to her room, whose single window looked south across the plain of Arsiero, upon Priaforà and the Montanina. It stood open. Over yonder, between the plain of Arsiero and Priaforà, flowed the invisible Posina. Lelia held her breath to listen, but she could not hear the river. In her mind's eye she saw the bridge that spans it, the water flowing noisily far below over its bed of grey gravel, the canal that runs along beside it, higher up, and then turns southwards, shaded by birch-trees, flowing silently and rapidly. A gust of wind blew the rain into her face. She closed the window hastily, and then smiled at herself for shrinking from a splash of rain. She looked at her watch—it was half-past ten. There were still two hours before the moment she had fixed upon, when she would throw herself from the bridge into the swift and silent canal below.

She sat down at her table beneath the lamp, feeling it her duty to leave a few written words. She wrote as follows :

“DEAR FRIEND,—I am going to my death. I do not know why I should die, but still less do I know why I should go on living.”

And beyond that? Should she ask pardon? But for what? And if not to ask pardon, why should she write at all? To bid farewell? Donna Fedele would remember those two last kisses. She could not even find words to write with. There was nothing within her save icy purpose, held stiff by action. She tore the note in pieces, rose from the table, and changed her dress. The gown of deep mourning she had on was one Donna Fedele had lent her. She changed it for the grey dress she had worn on the day she came to the Villino. Then she took up a silver chain-bag that had been a gift from poor Andrea, and in which she kept certain other souvenirs of him. A little plaque, upon which was engraved the word "Leila," was incrustated upon the chainwork. Her eyes fell upon the plaque and the name that reminded her of a quarrel. Several times she put the bag down only to take it up again, uncertain whether to carry it with her or leave it behind. An inner impulse moved her to leave it behind, and at that moment the frost that bound her heart melted into a very tempest of desire. Once more she opened the window, and, yielding to the passionate impulse, flung her soul towards him, wherever he might be. "I love you! I love you! I give myself to you! Take me, take all of me before I die! Kiss me, kiss me! Hurt me with your kisses!" She spread her arms wide, writhing as if in a spasm of pain. She raised one arm, pressed it against her mouth, gasped, and closed her teeth upon it, holding them there until the violent throbbing of her heart was quieted somewhat. The clock at Arsiero struck eleven. From the silver bag she drew a photograph of poor Andrea, and wrote beneath it:

"July fourth—I am coming!"

Then she placed the picture on the table near the inkstand, where it would be seen at once, and she

Finally decided to take the bag with her. She glanced about her to see that everything was in order. She took the "Journal d'Eugénie de Guérin" from the bedside table and placed it upon the chest of drawers. Donna Fedele had given it to her to read, but she felt she had nothing in common with Eugénie de Guérin, who would have been horrified with her at that moment, and that it would be an act of hypocrisy to leave the book where it was. She looked at her watch. It was only a quarter-past eleven. There was no danger of meeting any one on such a dark and rainy night, and she decided to wait no longer. She cut a piece of cord from one of the curtains with which to tie her skirts before the leap, that they might not float over her head, and put on her rubber goloshes that her footsteps might not be heard on the stairs. Then she put out the light, and went down very softly and cautiously.

Suddenly she remembered that she had forgotten to destroy the pieces of the note she had written. Should she go back and get them? She gave a shrug of indifference and then crossed the drawing-room, listening to the quick ticking of the clock, and judging from that in which direction the verandah door lay. Very cautiously she parted the wings she herself had only pushed together, and passed quickly out. She had only gone a step or two, however, when she gave a sudden spring to the left, upsetting several chairs, for a form had started up in front of her. She did not cry out, but making for the verandah steps, disappeared into the garden. But Donna Fedele had heard the crash of the overturned chairs, and she cried out: "Who is there?" Carnesecca's voice answered, "A woman! A woman has left the house!" "What woman? Where is she now?" Donna Fedele cried again from the window in great alarm. "I don't know. She has gone away! She has disappeared!"

"Follow her!" came the order. "She is a sleep-walker!"

Carnesecca tore away into the darkness towards the small gate. A silence followed which was soon broken. Donna Fedele, going down the verandah steps, wrapped in a dressing-gown, heard Carnesecca saying in a soft and soothing voice, "Wake up, Signora! Wake up!" Ah, then she was safe! Donna Fedele's strength failed her, and she sank upon the lowest step, regardless of the pouring rain. Lelia, who had been overtaken on the grassy slope below the gate, had screamed on feeling herself grasped, and had then fallen in a dead faint.

* * * * *

"What a piece of good fortune," said Carnesecca, bringing the insensible girl into the house with the help of the cook and the housemaid—"what a piece of good fortune that I could find no shelter anywhere, and so determined to take the liberty of spending the night on your verandah! Otherwise this child of God might have come to serious hurt with her sleep-walking!"

"Yes, yes! Good fortune indeed!" said Donna Fedele, who was still trembling, while the maid and the cook could only mutter:

"Gésummaria Signore! Blessed Lady! Dear Lord preserve us!"

CHAPTER VIII

HOLY ALLIANCES

I

THREE days later, on the Friday, Girolamo Camin, Auditor, Francesco Molesin, Doctor-at-Law, and Carolina Gorlago, Camin's housekeeper, reached Arsiero together by the first train, and packed themselves, with all their bags and umbrellas, into one of the small carriages that abound at that station for driving travellers to Tonezza and Lavarone. Dr. Molesin hesitated somewhat when about to get in, on account of Carolina, but, encouraged by his friend Momi,¹ friend Checco² finally took the second inside seat. Carolina, a vulgar-looking woman about five-and-thirty, climbed up beside the driver, making no effort to hide her vexation. Then the driver whipped up his horse, and they started off in the direction of the Montanina.

Auditor Camin, whose claim to kinship with the ancient and honourable family of da Camin was purely fictitious, was ugly with an ugliness not so much the fault of his features as the bloated unhealthiness of his complexion and red eyes, a dyed, particoloured beard adding little to his beauty. He wore a straw hat, a long olive-green overcoat that had seen better days, and a red and yellow

¹ Momi : diminutive of Girolamo.

² Checco : diminutive of Francesco.

muffler as a protection against any bleak winds that might blow from the mountains of Val d'Astico. For the same reason Molesin had also enveloped himself in a long brown coat, and had wound a heavy black and white shawl around his neck. There was not much resemblance between the two friends. Sior Momi's small and bleary eyes were always fixed in an expressionless stare. Sior Checco's, on the other hand, which were larger and darker, looked out from beneath his respectable felt hat with a grave melancholy, even when he smiled. Molesin wore a moustache only, a fair moustache, which was growing grey, and though he was older than Camin he looked healthier. The woman loomed large beside the small driver, whose extreme youth seemed to cause the two inside passengers considerable anxiety. Molesin, who was especially nervous, did not dare to lean back, and kept hurling instructions at the boy in a manner that was not in keeping with his usual grave demeanour. "Be careful, I tell you! Go slow, I say!" Nor was Camin what might be called a fearless traveller, but the idea of being upset was not his greatest anxiety at that moment. He had noted Carolina's vexation, and was now intent on stroking her broad back affectionately at frequent intervals. "Are you quite comfortable? Hold tight! Hold tight, I say!" he kept on saying. Carolina gripped the iron encircling the box-seat, and deigned no reply. When they had crossed the Posina bridge, a proceeding which made Molesin shudder, the horse subsided into a walking pace.

"Thank the Lord!" Sior Checco murmured, and upon learning that the Montanina was near at hand, he once more resumed the business talk that had been interrupted by leaving the train. The driver, who had as much curiosity as any newspaper reporter,

¹ Sior : dialect for Signor.

finding that they were discussing things he was unable to understand, turned his attention to his neighbour. Who was the gentleman behind him? The woman answered dryly:

"I don't know."

"Are you a relative of that other gentleman who is sitting behind you?"

"I don't know."

"You don't belong to these parts, do you?"

"I belong to much better parts!" she retorted. and the boy was afraid to ask any more questions.

She was really a native of Cantù. A master-mason from Como, who had known her as an inn-servant, had married her and taken her with him to Padua. Having separated from her husband, she took service with Sior Momi, first as cook and then as house-keeper, and now she both served and ruled, besides holding a position in his household which constituted something of a stumbling-block to Camin's ambitions of ingratiating himself with the Clerical party.

"Is this the famous Montanina?" asked Molesin, raising his eyes to the green hillside along which the carriage was driving. And being impressed by the villa's high and pointed roof, and the lower ones of the outbuildings and the church, of the so-called *casoni* of the plains, certain large cabins with straw-thatched roofs, he gave vent to the following memorable criticism:

"Un cason che gà famegia—a big house with a family of children."

Sior Momi laughed his own peculiar laugh—"Ahol ahol"—his mouth opening wide.

"Good, good! Very good!" said he. "A big house with . . . aho, ahol!"

It was his habit to re-echo other people's clever sayings as a delicate form of flattery.

Teresina and Giovanni received the party at the south entrance. Giovanni could hardly keep a straight face at the sight of the bundle of overcoats

and many-coloured scarves, but Teresina's expression was funereal. She accompanied the new master's housekeeper to a room on the second floor which she had chosen for her, and on the way Carolina informed her that she was aware she was the "girl's" maid—Süra¹ Lella's maid. It was perhaps because *el Lella* is a popular personage in Lombardy that Carolina could never get Lella's name straight.

"You and I are sure to get on together," said she, in her broad Lombard dashed with Paduan. Then she proceeded to sing the praises of her master, whom she pronounced a good-hearted creature enough.

"However," she added with a smile worthy of her public-house education, "you had better be careful of him, for he has a weakness for fine women."

"Tut, tut!" said Teresina, with flaming cheeks, "this is no talk for me to listen to!" And in her heart she added, "Gésu! What company for me!"

Carolina Gorlago was not satisfied with the room, which, although spacious and lofty, had only a roof-window, and in a most deliberate fashion she proceeded to take possession of another room in the front of the house, above the salon. This apartment was known as the "swallow-room" in allusion to its decorations, and many years before, when his son was still a boy, poor Signor Marcello had told Teresina that it would one day be the nursery for Andrea's children. Teresina had never forgotten this, and now, at sight of this Carolina boldly establishing herself here as mistress, the tears came to her eyes, and she hurried to her own room to relieve her feelings. But Giovanni soon came in search of her. The master wanted her. "Master, indeed! The Signorina is our mistress!" she cried angrily. "I don't believe

¹ Süra : dialect for Signorina.

we shall get our wages from the Signorina," said Giovanni. "He will pay us, and so I am bound to call him master."

Sior Momi had chosen for himself the corner room on the first floor looking towards the kitchen. Little did he care for a fine view; this room was admirably situated for watching the servants, for spying, and for eavesdropping. He inquired if coffee had been prepared for his housekeeper also, and which room she would occupy. Upon hearing that she had not been satisfied with the one prepared for her, his heavy face betrayed no surprise. "Bad, bad, bad!" came mechanically from his lips, prompted by his habit of seeking to please, at least in the beginning, whoever might be speaking to him. At last he inquired for Lelia. Teresina had a letter for him from Donna Fedele. She gave it to him and then withdrew, saying she would take the coffee to the dining-room. But she had hardly closed the door when she opened it again hesitatingly. Would the housekeeper come to the dining-room for her coffee also? This time the mask-like face and the bleary eyes smiled slightly.

"No, no! She will have her meals with you, with you!"

The man impressed Teresina as a perfect fool. Had she not been aware of the affair of the jewels, she would have found it hard to believe he was the cunning rascal whose very name had been so hateful to Signor Marcello.

Molesin took an especial interest in friend Momi's affairs, and Momi was full of attentions for friend Checco. Sior Momi had extorted money from many people by means of numberless tricks, but, at the same time, he had got into debt. One fine day he had declared his inability to pay, and had made his creditors an offer of twenty per cent. The creditors having called a meeting and consulted together, had entrusted the defence of their interests to Molesin.

Many of the unhappy victims who had been duped by Momi were priests, and in the ecclesiastical world the forensic and financial abilities of Dr. Molesin were very highly esteemed. This man, who, having devoted two years to the study of law, and spent much time hanging about the courts, now gave himself out as a Doctor-at-Law, accepted the defence on the understanding that he was to have thirty per cent. of whatever sum he might be able to squeeze out of Momi over and above his offer. Upon being invited to consult with him, Momi, who was in ignorance of this arrangement, fancied he would be able to get round his friend by the offer of a handsome present. Molesin feigned intense scrupulosity, for he believed Momi to be possessed of hidden means, and he had also great hopes that Lelia, now an heiress, would be induced to save the honour of her name.

Upon hearing that Lelia, who was still a minor, had come into her fortune, Molesin hugged himself.

Now was the time to watch Momi, for that sly rogue would certainly try to get all he could, and give out as little as possible. Now was the time to watch the daughter also. He had already interested himself from a distance in her affairs. Having been a fellow-student of the archpriest of Velo d'Astico, he kept up a fairly active correspondence with him, his declared purpose being to obtain news of Signorina da Camin for his friend Momi, who was cut off from communication with the Montanina. The archpriest honestly credited this explanation of his old friend's curiosity, and promptly answered his letters. And in this way Checco had learned of the arrival at the Montanina of the famous young Modernist. He became alarmed, fearing, not his Modernism, but his youth. Should Lelia marry, his fondest hopes would be frustrated, and it was he who found means of conveying the news to Signor Camin. On the very night of Signor Marcello's death the archpriest had

written to Molesin that Alberti had fled, and that damaging information concerning him which had been received from Milan had probably led to this happy solution. Then, with but slight ceremony, the cunning doctor had proceeded to drag an invitation to the Montanina from the heiress's father.

The short journey, to take place on the following morning, had then and there been planned at Camin's house and in Carolina's presence. That night the honest doctor slept but little. He knew that he was about to begin a game of cunning with the "sly rogue," whom he knew to be a sharp-witted adversary, despite a weakness for women that Checco, minus this defect, regarded as a lamentable flaw in an otherwise peerless composition.

* * * * *

Molesin was somewhat worried by the fact that, as yet, he had failed to catch a glimpse of Lelia, and that her father had not mentioned her. He questioned Giovanni, who was taking him to the room that had been prepared for him, "Where is the Signorina?" Giovanni told him she was out, and Molesin naturally concluded she had gone for a walk. On his way down to coffee he met Teresina on the stairs, and put the same question to her, "Where is the Signorina?"

"She is not here."

"Not here? What do you mean by that?"

Teresina stared at him, somewhat nettled by his tone.

"She is with Signora Vayla, sir."

"Strange that Momi should not have said so," Molesin reflected, going towards the dining-room. As he entered by one door Carolina disappeared through another, her face wearing an angry scowl, and Sior Momi was still muttering impatiently:

"You have your orders! Be a good creature and

obey!" He had been ordering her to vacate the "swallow-room," and take the one Teresina had prepared for her.

Molesin had no idea who this Signora Vayla might be nor where she lived, but his keen insight put him on the scent of some trouble existing between father and daughter. As he sat silently sipping his coffee it was borne in upon him that probably the girl had refused to come in contact with Carolina. He longed to know the truth—it was important that he should know it. If father and daughter were going to lead a cat-and-dog life, Sior Momi would undoubtedly wish to make the most of these few months before the girl became mistress of her own fortune, and grab as much as possible—money, bonds, jewels, everything in fact that could not easily be traced, and then . . . why, he, Molesin, would find himself in no better position than before.

"Tell me, my good Momi," said he, between calm sips of coffee, "when shall we have the pleasure of seeing your daughter?"

Momi replied that she was indisposed.

"Oh, poor girl! Poor girl!" Molesin became tenderly solicitous. "I do hope we have not upset her!"

Momi reassured him. Lelia was not in the house. She was staying with a friend at Arsiero—an old friend of Signor Marcello's. She had insisted upon going to this lady's house immediately after the sad event. He went on to declare that this friendship between his daughter and Signora Vayla was a thorn in his flesh. The obstinate and eccentric girl had always been prejudiced against her father, first by her own mother and then by the Trentos, and he had no doubt that her Arsiero friend had now undertaken to encourage this prejudice. In fact, a letter he had just received from the lady as good as proved the truth of this suspicion. Sior Momi

herewith drew a letter from his pocket and handed it to Molesin with a great show of candour. The man of law reflected that the very act of showing it to him proved this to be a first move on his adversary's part. He read as follows :

" Villino delle Rose, July sixth.

" DEAR SIR,—I regret to be obliged to inform you that during the night of July fourth your daughter had a violent attack of fever. The doctor declared it to be of a rheumatic nature. At present her temperature is almost normal, but she is very weak. The doctor wishes her to be spared all excitement, and for this reason I feel that a visit from you at the present moment would be inopportune.

"I take the liberty of adding that the mental shocks Lelia has so recently received have certainly affected her general health, and the doctor shares my opinion that a change to other surroundings, for a time at least, would greatly benefit her. Your own affairs, I expect, will keep you here for the present, but as I am going to Turin on business, I should be delighted if you would allow me to take Lelia with me. Her company would be a great pleasure to me. Trusting you may see your way to consent to this proposal, I am,

"Yours very truly,

"FEDELE VAYLA DI BREA."

"But I'll go and see her, all the same . . . eh? . . . I had better go, don't you think so? . . . I am her father. . . . It is my right! . . . The rights of paternal authority. . . . Don't you think so? . . . Eh? . . . Hadn't I better go, all the same?"

Momi appeared now to be stating a proposition, now to be asking for advice, and the change of

tone, the words, and the smile were but so many blandishments lavished upon the watchful cat, who, having laid aside the letter, sat for some time watching his rat in silence. At last, with a slight shrug, Molesin replied :

" Benon ! All right ! "

Sior Momi thought he noted a tone of disapproval.

" Why not, then ? "

" I said, ' All right, ' " his friend repeated, this time in a more encouraging tone. " Meanwhile, " he added, rising, " let us go over the house. "

Camin rose also, but his eyes were blinking nervously, this being the only external sign of internal discomfort to which he was subject. He persisted in seeking his friend's advice.

" No, no ! Come now ! Tell me—had I better go or not ? "

" Have I not just said ' All right ' ? " Molesin reiterated. " Go or stay away—it is all the same to me. " And he added that, should Sior Momi decide to pay his visit, he himself would go and call upon the archpriest.

This time it was Momi who said " All right ! " but, as a matter of fact, he did so coldly enough. He was conscious of the suspicions the letter and his comments upon it had aroused in his formidable guest, and he was wondering what machinery he could set in motion through the archpriest to help in carrying out his own plan, which was, to allow it to appear that the relations between his daughter and himself were strained, while, secretly, he would be winning her over to his side. He blinked nervously two or three times before he could control himself, and then he and his guest started on their round of inspection, Momi never failing to emphasise Molesin's comments with his sycophantic laugh. Carolina's bag was still in the " swallow-room. " Molesin noticed this, and Sior Momi saw that he had done so. The woman was on a round of inspec-

tion on her own account, and the couple met her on the stairs as they were coming down.

"I say!" cried Momi, in harsh and commanding tones, "put that bag where it belongs, will you?"

Carolina looked at him furiously and passed on. Molesin followed her with his eyes as far as the upper landing.

"My dear Momi," said he, placing his hand on his friend's shoulder and emphasising his words, "I am afraid your daughter's personality and this lady's—their personalities, you understand—will be likely to clash!"

"Aho! aho! What is the matter now?"

"Oh, nothing!"

"Aho, aho! You son of a dog . . . !" laughed Sior Momi, expressing by his epithet his admiration for his companion's sharp-sightedness.

II

Towards eleven o'clock the worthy Camin, having held a brief consultation with Teresina in the study, informed his friend that he was ready to start for the Villino delle Rose, and invited him to go part of the way, if he still meant to call upon the archpriest. At the point where three roads meet and the path from the Montanina joins the main road, Momi pointed out the campanile of Velo, glittering in the sunshine, and then betook himself to his own road. Molesin went slowly forward for a few yards, then, looking behind him to make sure that Momi was no longer in sight, he turned and retraced his steps. Had Momi seen this manœuvre he would most certainly have repeated his last epithet with real feeling this time, and would, moreover, have congratulated himself that he had anticipated that while he was out of the way Molesin would try to cross-

examine Teresina, and that he had had the forethought to instruct her accordingly.

Molesin returned to the Montanina to fetch his scarf, which he had purposely left in the vestibule. Then he went in search of Teresina, and having found her, he carefully explained the reason for his unexpected return, and then asked her to show him the little church, which he had not yet visited. While they walked through the garden he inquired, with great affability, what she thought of her new master. Teresina avoided the question, and Molesin went on to assure her that he was a "most excellent man—the best of men! But unfortunate, very unfortunate! Unfortunate in his wife and in business. And how about this daughter of his?" he rambled on. "How about the daughter? Is she glad to have her father to live with her again? She must be delighted. I can imagine how glad she is—is she not?"

Dr. Molesin's honeyed tones failed to have any effect upon Teresina, not because she felt bound by any loyalty towards Sior Momi, who had, however, exerted himself to the utmost to win her confidence, but because Molesin's face, voice, and blandishments were odious to her. She answered shortly enough that she knew nothing about it, and could give him no information. Molesin entered the church, and having dipped his fingers in the holy water, made the sign of the cross devoutly, and knelt down for a moment before starting out to make a minute examination of all that the church contained. He accepted all the doctrines of the Church blindly, and conformed to all its practices, but as he did not take people's money directly from their pockets and strong-boxes, it never occurred to him that there was the least discrepancy between his religious practices and his worldly dealings. On the contrary, success in his worldly dealings only made him more zealous in religious ones. When he had swindled and despoiled his neighbour, he

would seek to swindle the Almighty as well, by means of various *paters, aves, and glorias*, or by a few extra Masses. He was quite unconscious, however, of being a hypocrite, and looked forward quite confidently to occupying a small corner in Paradise. He belonged to the Clerical party, but his dubious reputation caused many of his fellow-members to look upon him askance, though he always pretended to be unaware of this. He relied greatly on the friendship of a few priests, who were unacquainted with his true character, and these friendships he was continually bringing forward in terms of boastful exaggeration. One of these was with the archpriest of Velo, Molesin's contemporary and school companion.

"And the young man?" said he as they were leaving the church—"the young man from Milan who was staying here? A fine fellow, eh? A very fine fellow! I should have thought he might have suited the Signorina. A splendid fellow, I tell you! And so they could not arrange it? What a pity! Do you mean to say it could really not be arranged?"

"I wonder what he knows about the young man from Milan," thought Teresina. This time she answered impatiently. How did he expect her to know about things that were no business of hers?

Molesin started forward once more along the Velo road, his head bowed, meditating upon his next move in the game. He was annoyed at having to carry the shawl. His journey back to fetch it had been to no purpose, and it weighed upon his arm and looked out of place at eleven in the morning and beneath the blazing sun.

"Damn the woman and the shawl too!" he muttered.

The archpriest was not at home; he was in church. Molesin inquired for the sister-in-law. She was in church. And the chaplain? In church also.

"Your name, if you please," said the servant, seeing he was annoyed. Upon hearing that revered name—Dr. Molesin—her face brightened. She knew he was a great friend of the archpriest's, and she had posted many letters to him from her master. She detained him, saying she would call the archpriest, and then, assuming an air of mystery, and in strictest confidence, he being a friend of her master's, she confided to him the fact that the chaplain had just received a letter from his uncle the Cardinal, announcing that the archpriest was about to be made a Bishop. The master had been deeply moved, mainly on account of the prospective bishopric, but also somewhat because he feared he might be sent to some place in the neighbourhood of Naples, and he had long entertained a violent dislike of those parts. On receipt of the news, the master, Signora Bettina, and the chaplain had immediately gone to the church, and were there still.

"Then, in a way, you will be a sort of female bishop," said the merry doctor. And he asked himself: "Does she know anything that can interest me, and will she be as secretive as the other?" He begged her not to announce his arrival, not to disturb any one. He was quite willing to wait, he said, and went on to praise the virtues of Don Tita, who was deserving, most deserving. The servant showed him into the reception-room, and there, seated on the sofa, he amused her with anecdotes of the days when he and the archpriest had been at school together. "It is a wise choice!" he cried at last, "a very wise choice! Do you know, I believe I will go and join them in the church. But first I wish you would satisfy my curiosity on one point."

He proceeded to ask her if she knew Signorina Camin, who had lived with old Signor Trento? The woman's face became stern. Of course the gentleman knew what had happened? No, he had not

heard! Blessed Mother! Why, she had tried to run away!

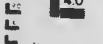
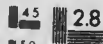
"To run away?" Molesin cried in amazement. But the servant had heard voices outside, and with a hurried, "Here they are!" she was off. The archpriest and his two companions had returned from church. They held a short confabulation with the servant outside the door, and presently the archpriest came in alone.

He saw the astonishment depicted on Molesin's face, and concluded without hesitation that "that chatterbox has been blabbing!" He was conscious also that his own expression was rather a tell-tale one, and that there was no need for him to confirm the woman's news in so many words. His only greeting was, "My dear friend!" and it was with tears in his eyes that he embraced the man who he had always refused to believe was either a hypocrite or a knave. His were honest tears, arising from various emotions. There was first the comforting sense of his promotion, by the will of God and of the Vicar of Christ, to a dignity whose religious importance really appealed to him more than the external and worldly glory connected with it, and the warm appreciation of the mark of confidence from his superiors. The tears sprang, too, from a revival of his religious fervour, a yearning determination to lead a simple, austere pious and exemplary life, the life befitting a shepherd of shepherds, and there came, also, the sad feeling of breaking with old habits and saying farewell to familiar places. Dr. Molesin, despite his amazement at the servant's information, saw the mistake under which the archpriest was labouring, and took advantage of the embrace, which he protracted as long as possible, that he might have time to settle his line of action, and, like the archpriest himself, he produced a yard of coarse, blue handkerchief, with which he wiped his eyes vigorously.



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"A fine choice!" he exclaimed, folding his handkerchief again. "A very fine choice!" Meanwhile the archpriest had also regained his composure. He begged Molesin not to divulge his secret, and when the good doctor inquired the name of the diocese over which his friend was to preside, declared that he had no idea, not the slightest idea which it would be. Thereupon he thought it advisable to change the subject by a decisive "Well, then?" to which the doctor responded.

"Well," said Molesin, speaking in Italian, to add weight to his remarks, "the famous Modernist has had to take himself off, and his friend the priest has gone too, they tell me."

The archpriest laughed.

"Ancient history!" said he. "Ancient history, my dear friend. Let us come down to modern times."

Molesin asked for nothing better than to come down to the present, but what could he say of the present that the archpriest did not know already? There was old Signor Trento's death, his will, Momi Camin's presence at the Montanina—

"Until the grand sweep-out comes!"

The archpriest had no idea how unbearable Molesin was finding his priestly reserve, but the worthy doctor bore it without flinching. He said that Momi had invited him to come and see the villa, and that he had accepted mainly that he might have the pleasure of seeing the archpriest again; but, of course, he had been glad to please Momi also. At this point he thought fit to speak in high praise of Momi, who had been so unfortunate both in his family and in business, who had perhaps gone slightly astray in politics, but who was a good creature at bottom, and a good Christian—oh, an exemplary Christian—one of the old sort.

"Hold on there!" cried Don Tita. "I have been told that at his home in Padua there are pretty goings-on."

Molesin frowned, pursed his lips, and uttered a long, low groan, interrupted at intervals by outbursts of denial—no, no, no! "I really cannot believe it! It is only what people say!" Then he went on to extol the excellence of his friend's principles and practices. He was sure he would prove a good parishioner, a most generous parishioner towards the church and the poor, whereas, should the Montanina, sooner or later, fall into the hands of a certain other person, of that Signor Alberti—

"Alas, my friend!" moaned Don Tita, "it has fallen into those hands already!"

"You don't say so!"

For a moment Molesin lost command of himself.

"It has fallen into them already," Don Tita repeated. And he went on to tell of Lelia's attempted flight.

"It was all arranged, you see," he declared. "Everything was arranged."

It was his belief, he said, that the girl had absolutely refused to live with her father. Donna Fedele had taken her part, but she would not be able to keep her with her should her father insist upon having her. In a few months Lelia would come of age, and be her own mistress. What mattered to her abettors was only to get through these few months, and they had fixed upon a clever plan. The girl was to have run away—she was a daring creature, one might even say she was shamelessly bold—and to have hidden herself in Piedmont, where Donna Fedele had hosts of friends with whom she could have stayed until her minority was over. Meanwhile her accomplice would have laboured on behalf of Signor Alberti, who was another of her favourites. She had even had him back at Seghe since his flight. They had been seen plotting together in a deserted spot on the banks of the Astico. But Providence was on the watch. Providence had made use of a rascally heretic to upset their cunning

plans. One night this heretic had been led to take refuge from the storm in a place where the girl had certainly not expected to find him, and this accident had brought about the scheme's complete failure.

Don Tita described the nature of the failure, and then proceeded to point the moral. The trick would most certainly be tried again, and Signor Camin or *da* Camin must find a means of preventing its accomplishment if he also wished to prevent the "grand sweep-out."

This cleverly-constructed story was not the fruit of Don Tita's genius, but of Don Emanuele's, and Don Emanuele had even withheld some of the facts. The chaplain had told only what he deemed it good for Don Tita to know, and what might be freely repeated without undesirable results. As a matter of fact, Don Emanuele knew quite well that the servants at the Villino had been led to suspect an attempt at suicide by certain remains of a letter they had found in the Signorina's room. But it gave the chaplain a pleasant sense of superiority to retain this information, besides placing him in a position to direct matters. Don Tita was not deceived, though he appeared to be so. He saw through Don Emanuele's little game, but he realised that the tale he had just told Molesin would do as well as any other to sow discord between the new master of the Montanina and Signora Vayla, and to promote an alliance with the former that might prove advantageous to the church, which was sadly in need of funds. Molesin followed the story with great attention. If matters really stood thus, and should Momi consent to his daughter's going away with Donna Fedele, they might prepare for the worst. That woman would help Lelia to escape, and there would be no finding her again. And the "grand sweep-out" would take place in a few months now. The girl would assign a pension to her father—she would probably refuse to do more—and that would not amount to anything. She must

be induced to return to the Montanina, and Momi must be persuaded to make every effort to regain her confidence. This would be the most difficult point!

"Poor Momi!" he sighed gloomily, and without mentioning Donna Fedele's letter, passed on to another subject. He inquired if Momi had had the funeral service read on the seventh day after Signor Marcello's death. No, nothing had been said about it. Under ordinary circumstances the archpriest would have consulted the family, but in this case, Signor Camin having left without making any arrangements, and his daughter being away, he himself had taken no steps. The chaplain perhaps knew something about it, but he was doubtful as to this.

"We shall see," he said, and ringing the bell, sent to summon the chaplain.

Molesin had met Don Emanuele once before in Padua, and had then fancied that the priest's bearing was hostile. He had felt ill at ease under the gaze of that cold and watery eye. His suspicions were correct, for Don Emanuele knew him well, and had purposely kept him at a distance. Molesin would gladly have avoided meeting him again, but when the chaplain entered the salon and greeted the visitor, Checco was secretly pleased to perceive that the watery eye was less cold than on the previous occasion. The fact was that Don Emanuele now saw in Molesin only the person who had warned that pious lady Signora Camin of Massimo's dangerous presence at the Montanina, and, through her, certain ecclesiastics who were friends and advisers of his own. As he bowed to Molesin, the priest's face wore a slight smile, which seemed to say, "Ah, so it is you, is it!" Having ascertained that Don Emanuele had not spoken to any one concerning the funeral service, and that, moreover, in consequence of a previous arrangement of services which the archpriest had forgotten, it would not be possible to

celebrate it on the seventh day, Molesin declared that he would assume the responsibility of ordering it in his friend's name, and that they could fix the day later on. In his friend's name also he begged them to help him to find a priest who would celebrate Mass on Sunday at the church connected with the Montanina. The archpriest would have answered cordially had he not been checked by a shadowy hint upon his chaplain's face. He therefore answered vaguely that he would see about it. Then Molesin, who had not been blind to Don Emanuele's expression, proceeded to give them a further glimpse, by means of certain vague allusions, of the fine things Momi Camin might be capable of doing should he meet with encouragement and find peace in his own family. He did not venture, however, to specify the nature of these same fine things, and the archpriest, who, indeed, was glad he had not done so—had not put forward any kind of contract—punctuated his confused and involved discourse with certain ejaculations of approval that were as balm to the spirit of the speaker.

But Don Emanuele, evidently uneasy lest his own secret plans should be frustrated and his superior should be compromised by incautious language, here reminded Don Tita of certain pressing business they must attend to together, and thus Molesin found him obliged to take his departure. The archpriest asked him if he were leaving that same day. He answered that such had, indeed, been his intention on leaving home, but that the place was so charming, and his friend Momi so determined to keep him, that he had decided to remain. Thereupon he said goodbye, and trotted off towards the Montanina, now meditating upon the archpriest's story and the mysterious shadow that had darkened Don Emanuele's face, now wondering what sort of an interview Momi had had with that Signora Baila, or Balia, or whatever her name was. On reaching

the Montanina he found that Sior Momi had not yet returned, but he came in presently, and Molesin, who was in the kitchen inquiring about lunch, heard him calling down the corridors, "Doctor! Sior Checco!" Having criticised the cook's method of cooking a salt-cod she was preparing, and instructed her according to his own taste, Molesin went into the house again, shouting in his turn, "Momi, Momi! Here I am!" They met in the vestibule.

"Bad—bad—very bad!" grumbled Momi, blinking rapidly.

The girl would not see him, and the Signora had given him to understand that, if he attempted to make use of his legal right to have his daughter with him, he might be prepared for the worst. Signor Camin had been obliged to consent to the journey. "We must wait and hope for the best," he repeated in a nasal voice, his stupid, masklike face looking at his friend. "Wait and hope!"

On learning that Momi had consented to the journey with Signora Vayla, Molesin's first impulse was to exclaim, "You stupid fool!" But on second thoughts he changed his mind and said, "Yes, yes! Quite right!" as if it were not worth while to get excited over such a trifling matter. "Such a dish of codfish as we are going to have!" he added. "And you will have me to thank for it!"

CHAPTER IX

THE VILLINO OF THORNS

I

DONNA FEDELE had Lelia carried, still unconscious, to a large, double-bedded room, and saw that she was undressed and put to bed. Presently the young girl came to herself, cast an astonished glance about her, pushed away with a moan the hands of the maid who was arranging the bedclothes, and raised herself on her elbow. Donna Fedele ordered the two women to withdraw, and motioned to them to wait in the dressing-room. She closed the door and, coming back to the bed, caressed Lelia tenderly. "You have been walking in your sleep, dear," she said. "But now, please, keep quite still, for I am myself feeling so ill that I really must rest." Gently she laid her back upon the pillows, then put out the light, and lay down quietly upon the other bed. She had been suffering greatly of late, so much so that she had at last almost made up her mind to see a doctor, not that she was nervous about herself, but she thought it would be advisable. But at the present moment her greatest anxiety was for the humiliation Lelia must be experiencing over the failure of her attempt. She was determined to deceive the girl, to make her think that no one even suspected the truth.

As yet not a single word had passed Lelia's lips, but about a quarter of an hour afterwards Donna

Fedele thought she heard her move. She called softly to her :

“ Lelia ! ”

There was no answer. “ Lelia ! ” she called again in a louder tone, but still no answer came. She did not dare persist, but she raised her head slightly from the pillow, in an effort to catch a glimpse of the girl. Lelia appeared to be lying motionless upon her back, but Donna Fedele could not tell whether her eyes were open or closed. She continued to listen carefully for any sound, but she heard only the wind whistling round the house. Softly creeping out of bed, she went to dismiss the servants, and by the light that slanted through the door and across the room she saw Lelia turn over quickly upon her side, with her face to the wall. When she was back in bed once more, Donna Fedele inquired, in her usual voice, if Lelia had been in the habit of walking in her sleep as a child. But there was again no answer. “ You certainly must have done so in your childhood,” Donna Fedele added. During the rest of the night all was silent, save for Lelia’s restless movements and the roaring and howling of the wind. It was a mortally long and weary night. Towards dawn Lelia fell asleep, and her breathing became laboured. Donna Fedele rose, and placed her hand upon her brow. It was burning hot. The sleeping girl shuddered at her touch, started up in bed, and moaned, “ This is not my room ! This is not my room ! ” Donna Fedele told her that she had left the house in her sleep, and had had a fall. A fall? What did she mean by that? She had not fallen. In her feverish mind the word “ fall ” could only refer to the terrible fall she had premeditated. She fancied she must have somehow carried out her purpose. Donna Fedele held her in her arms, and felt her embrace returned, felt the girl’s kisses and tears, and her burning fever. She found it difficult to release her-

self from this embrace, and to get Lelia to lie quiet again. At last she rang for the maid and ordered her to send the gatekeeper for the doctor.

Donna Fedele dressed painfully, and when the doctor arrived she left the maid with Lelia, and went to tell him only so much as it was absolutely necessary for him to know. Signorina Lelia had gone out in the night, in a moment of great mental agitation, which had been brought about by recent domestic events. She had fallen just beyond the gate, and lost consciousness. In order to spare her feelings they had led her to believe that they attributed her having left the house to an attack of somnambulism, and Donna Fedele begged the doctor to keep this in mind in speaking with his patient.

Lelia refused to take either food or medicine of any description. She was greatly excited by the fever, and kept up an incessant flow of talk concerning somnambulism and sleep-walkers, but never once betrayed herself. She seemed morbidly intent upon confirming Donna Fedele's conclusions. Only once did she vary her topic. Then she mentioned poor Signor Marcello, and burst out crying. Towards night the fever diminished, and she became gloomy and silent. Late in the evening the doctor came again, and finding her temperature almost normal, tried to cheer her up; but the resentment that quickly overspread the beautiful pale face made him give up the attempt. Donna Fedele herself was flushed and burning with fever. The true cause of her sufferings was unknown to the doctor as to everybody else, and he put her present condition down to fatigue, and advised her to sleep alone that night and keep as quiet as possible. She smiled, but said nothing. Peace for her was not to be gained so easily. That could only come in devoting herself entirely to the young girl, not so much for the latter's own sake as for the sake of Marcello and for the sake of the love he had borne his son. Once more

she ordered the bed beside Lelia to be prepared for her. She was suffering, but she was rejoicing in the thought that her life was at this moment more full of purpose than it had ever been.

She was accustomed to read a chapter from the "Imitation of Christ" every night before going to sleep. She asked Lelia if the light disturbed her, for in that case she would not read, and she repeated her question twice before receiving an answer. At last an almost inaudible "No" reached her. She concluded it would be wiser to put out the light, and presently, hearing a sigh from the next bed, she called :

"Lelia !"

As before, there was no answer, but she decided to go on with what she had to say.

"May I talk to you?"

Silence.

"Please answer me. I want to speak about myself. I want to ask you to do something for me. Will you listen to me?"

This time she heard a listless "Yes." The voice seemed to say, "I cannot refuse you, but why will you torment me?"

"Forgive me, dear!" the sweet voice went on. "Do you wish to go to sleep at once?"

As before, Lelia moaned, "No."

Donna Fedele was silent for a time, thinking how to tell a story which she hoped would result in great good, and which only the dark gave her courage to utter.

"Will you give me your word not to repeat to any one what I am going to tell you?" she began at last.

The other voice answered sadly, but no longer listlessly :

"Yes."

There was another pause.

"You don't know," Donna Fedele began slowly,

"no one knows, and no one must know, that I cannot live very much longer."

She waited for a word, a movement of surprise or protest, but none came.

"I have been ill for more than a year. I have shrunk from examination, and probably it is now too late for anything. I suffer terribly. But my pain is not all physical—I suffer mentally as well."

The slow voice sank lower.

"There was one terrible time in my life. At eighteen I fell in love with a man who was not free. You have already guessed who it was. Do not think my love for him was entirely spiritual. I loved him with my whole soul, my whole being. Fortunately, he did not reciprocate my love, and almost begged me to forget him. It was then I thought of taking my life. I cast about me for a way that should not look like suicide, for my father's sake, and I finally decided upon a long walk among the hills, a dangerous path, and a fatal slip. Fortunately, just at that time my father fell ill. I was all he had, for my mother had died when I was thirteen. My love for him, which had been numbed by that other passion, now awoke once more, and my religious feelings awoke too. I do not know whether my father read my heart, but during his convalescence he spoke much to me of God, of Christ, of the soul, of grief, and of love—never reproachfully or warningly, but very gently and with a tenderness that made me realise how sinful I had been. The nuns at my convent school had given me but a superficial religion. It was my father who made me believe from the bottom of my heart. Poor father!"

Donna Fedele was silent, overcome by the sad memories that had rushed in upon her as she talked. Presently she asked:

"Do I tire you?"

The "No" that answered her now was neither listless nor sorrowful. It was almost eager.

"The saddest part is yet to come," Donna Fedele went on. "I was seven-and-twenty when my father died, and I was living in Turin with a companion whom my father had chosen to take me into society. I went out a great deal at that time. An officer fell in love with me. He was younger than myself, and poor, but gifted, far finer in character than I was. I liked him, and thought I might come to love him, but unfortunately I was foolish enough not to let him know my feelings. At last he asked me to marry him, and when it was too late I realised that nothing more than friendship could ever be possible between us. He left me without a word, and went home . . ."

"He killed himself!" Lelia whispered.

Donna Fedele was silent, but becoming conscious of a little hand moving towards her along the edge of the bed, she reached out for it and took it in hers. She felt her own hand drawn and touched by two hot lips. It was her reward for having opened her heart to this woman who was almost a stranger to her, and whom she had loved only for the sake of another.

"Dear!" she murmured softly, and for a few moments was unable to go on with her story.

"He was an only son," she said at last, "and he left a mother and sister. They were in straitened circumstances, and they hated me because they believed I had first encouraged him and then cast him off. They would never have consented to accept aid from me. The mother is dead, but the sister lives in Turin, quite alone. I will give you her address. I help her secretly. Should I leave her something in my will she would not accept it, and so this is the favour I would ask of you. What I should leave to her, I will leave to you instead, and I wish you to continue to help her as I do at present. I beg you also to see her after my death, and convince her that I did not try to

lead her brother on, that I was only mistaken enough to fancy that I might come to return his affection, and that the grief of my error was ever with me, even until the hour of my death. Will you do this?"

Now it was Donna Fedele who stretched out her hand towards the other bed. It was quickly seized and pressed, but there was no answer. Once more she questioned, "Will you do this?"

Twice she felt the back of her hand pressed to wet eyes, and then heard the whispered words:

"You must not die! You must get well!"

"But should I not get well, will you do this for me?"

The imprisoned hand was pressed violently.

"Do not make me answer at once."

Donna Fedele withdrew her hand, which Lelia did not try to prevent, and said no more. But suddenly the girl cried:

"I know——!" and paused.

"What do you know?"

"Nothing!"

Both were silent for a time, and then Lelia crept slowly out of bed, put her arms round her friend's neck, and laid her head upon her breast.

"I know why you confide this mission to me," she said, in a voice that was hardly audible. "I know why you changed my room. I know——"

"Hush!" said Donna Fedele, trying to stop what she feared was coming, and when Lelia began again, "I know . . ." the older woman ordered her almost harshly to be still, and go back to bed. "You can give me your answer to-morrow," she said.

Lelia got into bed with a sigh, and without having either consented or refused. Presently, hearing her friend move, she asked if she had put out the light on her account, and begged her to light it again and read, as usual. When Donna Fedele had done so and begun to read, Lelia asked what the book was, but without replying her friend turned over

a few pages, and then read aloud the following passage :

“ ‘But now I oftentimes groan, and bear my happiness with grief. Because many evils occur in this vale of miseries, which do often trouble, sadden, and overcloud me, often hinder and distract me, allure and entangle me, so that I can have no free access unto Thee.’ ”

“ ‘Unto Thee ?’ ” said Lelia. “ To whom does that refer ? ”

“ To Jesus Christ. ”

Lelia said no more. Donna Fedele went on reading to herself for a few minutes, and then put out the light.

* * * * *

Towards daybreak Donna Fedele was seized with pain so violent as to wring a groan from her. Lelia, who was still awake, sprang out of bed, lighted the lamp, and did what she could to relieve the sufferer, who, seeing her distress, smiled at her even before she was able to speak. Not until it was broad daylight did she get relief from pain.

“ Well, ” said she, “ are you going to do as I wish ? You see what my condition is. ”

“ First, you must promise me to undergo an examination, either at Padua or Turin, ” said Lelia, “ and to follow the doctor’s advice afterwards. ”

“ Then will you also promise what I asked ? ”

“ Yes, ” was the prompt and decided answer.

Donna Fedele promised, and, stretching out her arms, embraced Lelia very tenderly. During the day she felt much better, and judging from past experience, looked forward to an interval of calm, and accordingly proceeded to make arrangements for carrying out her promise. It was really necessary for her to go to Turin on business, as her agent lived there. She determined to consult Carle, and should he consent, she would go to some cool spot,

perhaps in the neighbourhood of Monte Rosa or into Val d'Aosta. Would Signor Camin allow his daughter to accompany her? Lelia declared, in her usual short and conclusive manner, that she would go without his consent. Her friend smiled, and called her a silly child, telling her that her father had the right to send the police to fetch her home. "He would never dare!" cried Lelia, remembering the many humble letters he had written her, the sums of money she had so often sent him. Donna Fedele's eyebrows went up somewhat, but she refrained from comment. Presently, of her own initiative, she wrote a note to Camin. The gatekeeper took it to the Montanina, and brought back word that Signor da Camin was expected home on the following morning. Even before Donna Fedele asked her, Lelia declared that, should her father come to the Villino, she would refuse to see him, and she was so vehement and resolute in her declaration that her friend deemed it prudent to refrain from any argument at that moment. She put the subject aside to be brought up again in the night, when their talks were more confidential. She had suggested that Lelia might like to return to her own room, but the girl had declined to do so, wishing to be near the friend who had shown her such motherly devotion, in case she should need her. Donna Fedele was glad of her refusal, for she felt she could get nearer to the girl when she had her with her at night-time.

That evening, as soon as the room was dark, she began :

"And so if your father should come——?"

"If my father comes, I shall send word that I am not well yet, that I have a headache, and cannot see him."

Donna Fedele pointed out gently, and in a quiet voice, that this was impossible. It was contrary to all propriety, contrary to her duty as a daughter,

contrary to her own interest. Lelia protested that she cared nothing either for propriety or interest. But how about duty? Donna Fedele asked. Duty indeed . . . and with such a father! She had given him money, and would give him more, if she had it, but that was all. After all, he wanted nothing but money! He certainly did not want affection.

"But you are religious . . ." Donna Fedele ventured to suggest.

"That has nothing to do with it."

"Yes, indeed it has!"

Lelia was silent.

"I really don't know whether I am religious or not!" she suddenly burst out.

"You don't know?"

Donna Fedele had introduced this topic not so much to remind Lelia of the religious side of her filial duties as to discover what her religious opinions were. Lelia answered dryly:

"No, I really don't know."

"But you pray?"

"I don't pray any longer—at least, not as the priests teach us to pray. I hate them!"

"But why?"

Lelia did not answer.

"Years ago," said Donna Fedele, "I had a maid who would not drink wine because she had once mistaken the bottle and drank ink."

Lelia was silent for a time, and then asked:

"What do you think about religion?"

"I have always told you I am an old-fashioned Catholic, and, moreover, I do not confuse bad priests with religion itself."

"I thought you held the same views as—"

The girl would not go on even when Donna Fedele demanded, "As whom?" But the elder woman had guessed her meaning.

"What do you know of that person's views?" she asked.

"There you go!" cried Lelia hotly. "You will never allow him to be touched!"

Donna Fedele burst out, throwing her usual precaution to the winds:

"As you failed to understand his sentiments, my dear, you have proved yourself entirely incapable of understanding his views!"

"His sentiments, indeed!" Lelia muttered. "He did not go and kill himself!"

The thoughtless and uncalled for words, jarring upon such painful memories, wounded Donna Fedele to the quick.

"He certainly did not try to kill himself," she retorted. "You do not know what true religion is, and Alberti does."

After this neither spoke again, even to say good-night.

II

Shortly after eleven on the following morning Sior Momi gently and discreetly pushed open the main gate of the Villino delle Rose. His honest intention was to put forward in the same gentle and discreet manner his desire to have his daughter with him, but upon this he was not going to insist; and, above all, he was determined to ingratiate himself with Lelia's friend and counsellor. It never entered his head to boast of his paternal authority with her, as he had done to Molesin. With only a few months of power in front of him, he had settled on his policy. It was to appropriate during this short time as much movable property as possible; to show humility and repentance, in order that Lelia, on coming of age, might be moved to make him a handsome allowance; and to humour that precious Checco sufficiently to obtain favourable terms with his creditors. He understood perfectly Molesin's

motive in encouraging him to demand Lelia's return, but he was not going to aim at so complete a conquest. He knew that it would never be possible for his daughter and Carolina to be in the same house. Lelia would immediately refuse to have anything further to do with him. It was still more out of the question to send Carolina away. Grasping as was he himself, and even more obstinate, she had a certain hold upon him, and they were fond of one another in their own way, though at times they had violent quarrels.

Sior Momi walked slowly along the avenue of linden-trees, and walked round the house, for he was not sure which was the visitors' entrance—the verandah in the front or the low door on the opposite side. He blinked rapidly, but at last instinct led him to run his head in at the low door. His "May I come in?" followed by a loud blowing of his nose, brought the maid hurrying downstairs, and, having ushered him into the drawing-room, she went to tell her mistress. Unlike Dr. Molesin, Sior Momi always stiffened visibly in the presence of people of quality or position. As she observed his rigid attitude, his pasteboard mask, and red lids, blinking over glassy eyes, Donna Fedele once more asked herself if he were a knave or simply a fool. She repeated to him more or less the same information contained in her note, while he punctuated what she was saying by fragmentary sentences, aimless expressions of gratitude, and vague exclamations, such as, "Quite so! . . . Free, perfectly free!" When, in order to prepare him for a possible refusal, on her part, to grant him the interview he must certainly desire, the Signora alluded to his daughter's character as somewhat eccentric, he uttered his perpetual "Aho, aho!" which on this occasion was expressive of jocose assent. He then proceeded to express his entire approval of the journey to Turin. "Delighted—quite delighted, I assure you, Signora.

. . . An honour—a great honour!" And finally as if he had been worked by machinery, he delivered the speech he had prepared.

"If it is no trouble . . . no trouble at all. I should like . . . if it is really not inconvenient. Nothing further being forthcoming, Donna Fedele concluded that this was his official demand to see Lelia. Was that what he wanted? "Well, yes, Signora . . . If I may make so bold . . ." She warned him that Lelia was not feeling quite well yet, but said she would let her know of his presence. Donna Fedele had previously so strongly urged him to see her father, if he should call, that the girl had given way.

Lelia received him standing, with great dignity and a stern face. He hastened towards her, starting, "Ciao, ciao! How are you? How are you?" and kissed her on both cheeks.

She shuddered, but nevertheless allowed herself to be kissed. She did not ask him to sit down, although he cast sidelong glances at a chair, but did not venture to take it. He expressed his approval of her journey to Turin. "It would be a good thing . . . delighted, quite delighted!" Then taking out his pocket-book, he said that, the Signora having written to him of this journey, he had brought the "wherewithal." He drew a small packet of ten-lire bills from the pocket-book and handed them to Lelia.

"Things have changed," he said. "Aho, aho . . . Ah! but it is all yours, all yours, of course. Only a few months longer, and I shall have to render an account!" Another inane laugh followed, and then Sior Momi cleverly converted his exclamations into a mark of interrogation. "Isn't that so? Shan't I have to render an account?"

"It is quite the same to me!" Lelia exclaimed with a glance of contempt, and without stopping to consider her words. Sior Momi found them great

to his taste, and swallowed them slowly, figuratively stroking himself the while, and quite forgiving Lelia for keeping him standing there like any servant.

"You have been indisposed, have you not?" he said presently, with touching solicitude. "What was the matter? Fever, influenza, indigestion, or anæmia?"

He popped out this strange list like so many shots from a revolver.

"Rheumatism," said Lelia shortly.

"Ah! rheumatism. And will you come to your own home on your return from Turin?"

"No."

"Ben, ben! Well, well!" said this meek and docile parent, slipping into dialect from the Italian he had always used with his daughter since her return from boarding-school. He would have liked to kiss her again at parting, but did not dare to do so. His embarrassed and choppy mode of speech, his awkward laugh—"Aho, aho!"—his rigid bearing in the presence of those he looked up to or feared were really the result of a certain nervous timidity, which was another boon, as precious as his fool's face, and was like a thick wash of virginal innocence over his well-laid plans. His daughter's intellectual and moral superiority and her haughty manner had always filled him with shyness.

"Will you write?" he mumbled on the threshold.

Lelia's only answer was a short "Goodbye," and Sior Momi proceeded downstairs.

He did not forget Donna Fedele, and once more entered her presence in a state of the utmost rigidity. "My respects! My respects! Very happy indeed. . . . I wish you a pleasant journey!"

And with this he left the house, already thinking how he should break the news to dear friend Molesin that he had been forced to yield, that his daughter had been most hostile in her attitude, that there were no plums to be got from this pie—unless they were stolen ones.

CHAPTER X

THE GAME BEGINS

I

FRIEND Molesin did not believe a syllable of the story Momi told him—that he had not seen his daughter, or anything else. But the worthy doctor, nevertheless, pretended to grasp and hold fast the two infinitives—to wait and to hope. There was not the slightest doubt, he said, but that matters would mend. At lunch he ate little, saying it was too late and that he had lost his appetite, but he displayed great good-humour, talked of the surrounding country and of the villa with increased approval, and having told Momi of his conversation at the parsonage concerning the funeral service, found no difficulty in persuading him to write and beg the archpriest to have the service read at the earliest possible date. He expressed the friendly intention of attending it, should he not be obliged to leave after the two days, and if his lengthened visit were agreeable to his friend. He was growing to like the place, and—poor doctor!—he was sadly in need of rest. Sior Momi ejaculated, "Of course! Delighted!" but he was blinking rapidly, nevertheless. After luncheon Molesin proposed a short walk, and he and his friend started up the path under the pleasant shade of the chestnut-trees. But he sat down on the first bench they came to, and motioned solemnly to Momi to do the same

"Sit down, man," said he, and after a short silence he felt moved to recognise the beauty of his surroundings.

"Belo, belo! Beautiful, beautiful!" he said.

Then suddenly he turned on Momi and sprang the following proposal upon him.

"See here, Momi—let us do a little business."

Sior Momi assumed his most idiotic expression, and answered:

"What did you say? Business?"

He saw at once that Molesin intended to propose a figure for the famous adjustment with his creditors, and quickly assumed the defensive.

"Now you, most worthy Sior Momi," the doctor went on, using the Italian diluted with Venetian that he reserved for solemn occasions, "are the parent and master, so to speak, of a fine fortune—I may even say of a large fortune."

"Aho, aho!" giggled Momi ironically, but his friend went on, unmoved:

"And now you are in a position to make yourself comfortable for ever, and set your conscience at peace as well by paying one hundred per cent."

"Son of a . . .!" cried Momi, with another grotesque laugh.

"What ails you?" Molesin demanded. "Ain't I right? Go along with you! I am only trying to befriend you, after all, and I will undertake to get my clients to accept seventy-five per cent."

Sior Momi could not repress an exclamation.

"Bravo putèlo! Good lad!" said he, and having offered this tribute to his friend's childlike simplicity, Sior Momi for the first time became heated, both in face and language. He was no longer Sior Momi. Two burning spots appeared upon his yellow cheek-bones, he frowned heavily, his head wagged upon his neck as he talked, while from his lips, as from an inverted bottle, there gushed a stream of talk, uninterrupted by a single "aho," or rather,

perhaps, resembling a swift river of "ahos," which swept the wreckage of many words along with it. They asked for seventy-five per cent. now, when he was no longer in a position to pay even the twenty-five he had once offered! He was amazed that Molesin did not see this! He had made his offer at a time when he had a right to believe that his daughter, on coming into her fortune, would be willing to make some sacrifice for her father. Then he could have found some one to advance the money for the twenty-five per cent. But now, when the girl had proclaimed her hostility, refusing even to live with her father—now they had the face to demand seventy-five per cent. ! He had made his humble offer precisely because he knew he could not count, to any great extent, upon the help of an eccentric girl, who had never shown the slightest affection for him. And now there was proof of this. To any great extent, indeed! To no extent whatsoever! And where was he to find the money? Did they expect him to steal it? To rob his own daughter? He had one comfort left, and that was, that he could prove himself to be an honest man, in spite of the calumnies that had been spread by certain persons. He had another comfort also, and he was willing to admit it was a great one—that he should never want for bread, for his daughter, willingly or unwillingly, would be obliged by law to support him.

"Enough, enough!" cried Molesin. He rose, and intentionally omitting the *da* from the other's name, said:

"Listen to me, Camin! I warn you that at home I have the numbers of all the Government bonds held by this old gentleman here."

Momi declared that he did not care a rap if he had, and made an offer of five per cent.

"Drop that, I tell you!" the other retorted.

Molesin started to walk away, but presently

stopped, turned half round, planted his stick firmly, and flung a glance over his shoulder out of the corner of his eye.

"We will make it seventy," said he.

"We will make it seven," said Camin.

For the time being the conversation ended here. In Momi's mind a hope was born that Molesin would now alter his plans, and take himself off that very evening.

II

Towards five o'clock Molesin received a note from Don Tita, begging him to come to the parsonage. He started at once, and was received by Don Emanuele, for the archpriest had gone to Seghe, leaving the field clear for his chaplain, who had been anxious for this interview, but had not wished to ask for it directly, in order not to place himself before his superior in a spiritual matter. He regretted that, during his conversation with Molesin, his superior had not laid sufficient stress upon the moral necessity of removing Signorina Camin, no matter at what cost, from under the evil influence of Signora Vayla. The young priest's soul was full of rancour against Donna Fedele, a rancour he justified to himself by calling it proper zeal against one whose unseemly attitude of disregard of ecclesiastical authority in matters of religion and morals was well known—against one who presumed to read and explain the Gospels to her dependents, who had formed a warm friendship with a priest of doubtful orthodoxy like Don Aurelio, and who shielded a rascally Modernist like young Alberti. Whenever a sharp point of this suppressed rancour pushed upwards and pierced these holy wrappings, Don Emanuele made honest efforts to press it under again, and salved his conscience by praying for the eternal salvation of the soul of this woman who was

both in danger and dangerous, the more so because, in her life and in the observance of the practices of religion, she appeared irreproachable. He himself now proposed to undertake the task of snatching the girl from her, the archpriest being too good-natured and easy-going.

When the servant announced Dr. Molesin, Don Emanuele, who was reading his breviary, had a vision of his meeting with Signora Vayla in the sacristy, and of the scene upon the Mea road, and he crossed himself piously in order to rid himself of any spirit of vengeance, and prepare himself to inflict injury upon her in the cause of righteousness. His compunction betrayed itself upon his brow, in his melancholy and watery eyes, and even in his stately tread and the slow movements of his lean person.

"What the deuce can this long, lean creature want!" thought Molesin, and he made him a low bow, to which the long, lean creature responded by a slight inclination of his head and a sweep of his hand that was full of prelatival condescension. Immediately and respectfully Molesin inquired for the archpriest, adding a few words of warm satisfaction at his prospective advancement. Don Emanuele ignored this subject, and having apologised for his superior's absence, stated that he had been charged to represent him. The archpriest, he said, had been deeply gratified on hearing of Signor da Camin's good intentions towards his church and the poor of his parish. The needs of both were indeed great. But what pleased the archpriest most were the pious inclinations his new parishioner displayed. He would strive to show his gratitude in the way best befitting a Churchman and a parish-priest, by helping him in his domestic difficulties, and acting as intermediary between father and daughter, that they might be brought to a peaceful understanding, which would be greatly to the advantage both of their temporal and spiritual interests.

Thus far worthy Dr. Molesin, seated opposite the chaplain, with legs apart, hands resting on his knees, and eyes downcast, had confined himself to raising and lowering his head like a polar-bear—now with a simple movement of assent, now with waggings to right and left, that testified to his abundant approbation. But on catching the closing words of the second part of Don Emanuele's speech, his bowed head suddenly ceased to saw the air.

The chaplain felt constrained to touch upon a very delicate subject. Neither the archpriest nor he himself would be able to do anything to promote Signor da Camin's domestic peace, unless a certain scandal were put an end to. Did Signor Molesin understand his meaning? Molesin, who had ceased his waggings, but still sat gazing downwards between his knees at the cracks in the board floor, suddenly straightened himself, laid the fingers of one hand flat upon his mouth, fixed his eyes on one corner of the room, puckered his brow, and sat stiffly silent in a mighty effort at comprehension. He might have been seeking to grasp the meaning of some Babylonian inscription or trying to recall the name of some prehistoric ancestor.

"No," said he, raising troubled eyes to Don Emanuele's. "I fail to understand."

Don Emanuele, in his turn, fixed his eyes on his companion's troubled ones, and Molesin instinctively began to pucker them slowly to avoid the penetrating gaze. "No, you must excuse me, but I really do not understand," he repeated.

"That unfortunate creature," Don Emanuele suggested slowly and almost in a whisper, "who, I believe, is also at the Montanina——"

"Ah! . . . Yes!" Molesin admitted at last. "Yes, I understand. You allude to the housekeeper. It would be better for her to go away. I see, I see! Her presence might interfere with the peace that should reign between parent and child. The

daughter might be led to believe . . . that . . . so to speak . . . and so forth and so on. . . . You wish Momi to send her away. Very well, he shall do so. I will answer for him, although, as a matter of fact, I really do not believe—”

“She must go, and that at once,” Don Emanuele put in.

Molesin made a silent bow of assent. Then Don Emanuele, with a gesture that savoured of mature age, as indeed did all his rare and measured movements, gathered the five fingers of his left hand into a point, and holding them up before his face, stared intently at them.

“As soon as that unfortunate creature is out of the house, the daughter must return.”

Having restored his fingers to their normal position, he gazed at Molesin with deep melancholy in his watery eyes.

“The thought of that young girl in the hands of that woman,” said he, “is the archpriest’s greatest anxiety. And the archpriest does not know all I know.”

Neither did Molesin, who, nevertheless, heaved a sigh for the archpriest’s anxiety, in order to be on the right side no matter what might follow. The sigh was so deep that, for an instant, the watery eyes were raised; then Don Emanuele dropped them again, and returned to the subject of his superior’s ignorance of facts. The archpriest was unaware that, influenced by the atmosphere of Signora Vayla’s home, the poor child had gone the length of contemplating the perpetration of a horrible crime. “Good Lord! Had she proposed to murder Momi?” Molesin asked himself, terrified at the bare idea of Momi slipping through his fingers. But Don Emanuele gave no further particulars of the crime, and contented himself with deploring at length the poisonous atmosphere of Signora Vayla’s home. The girl, who was his penitent, had been

both virtuous and pious. They might still hope for a strong reaction in her, such a reaction as sometimes brings a heart, wounded by the world, to devote itself entirely to God. But this reaction must be encouraged, and that it would be impossible to do in the present surroundings. Lelia's father must interfere, and, if needs be, make use of the paternal authority given to him by law. It was Don Emanuele's opinion that the girl's rebellion was due entirely to Donna Fedele's influence.

Once in her own home—when that other person should have left, of course—Lelia would change completely. The archpriest, Don Emanuele himself, and Don Tita's siste-in-law, a woman of exemplary piety, would do all in their power to cultivate the latent piety in the girl's soul, a soul that already sought to sever itself from the world, and was above the love of riches.

"I assure you that child would surrender all she possesses to her father, without so much as a sigh of regret."

The chaplain was anxious to impress these words on Molesin's mind, but that worthy hardly gave him time to finish before he began discussing the spiritual interest involved, as if the other side of the question did not exist for him. He referred to a great-aunt of Signor Momi's, who had been a nun, and raising his eyebrows as if testifying, from philosophical experience, to the recurrence of great events in history, and the hidden workings of Providence, he blew a trumpet blast into his cotton handkerchief as a signal that he was about to make his departure.

III

During dinner, which was very late, Sior Momi announced his intention of inviting the archpriest to dine with them on the morrow in honour of his

friend. Molesin thanked him, but a certain note of hesitation and of coolness in his answer revealed the anxious state of his mind. He had learnt from the cook the very unpleasant cause of the delay in serving dinner. There had been a scene between Carolina and Teresina, and all about a glass of Marsala which Teresina had given to the cook for cooking purposes. Sior Momi's housekeeper, on one of her frequent incursions into the kitchen, had nearly drained the glass, whereupon Teresina had "given notice," and all Sior Momi's earnest entreaties had failed to alter her angry determination.

Teresina leaving, and Carolina triumphant! A fine moment for inviting the archpriest, thought Molesin. After dinner Sior Momi led the way into the drawing-room, and proposed a game of cards. He felt bound to soothe this adversary, whom he could not get rid of, and who was capable of diabolical plottings and of inciting the Velo priests to influence his daughter in a way that would be disastrous to himself.

Molesin was unacquainted with the game Momi proposed, and could only play whist and a game called *terziglio*. Presently Giovanni came in with the steps to light the lamps.

"Be off with those confounded steps!" cried Sior Checco, in an angry tone. "A small lamp, any small oil lamp, will do. I like oil lamps." But there were none in the house, and so Giovanni brought a couple of candles. With a timid "Aho!" Momi inquired if his friend would like a game of *terziglio*.

"What?" snapped Molesin, for *terziglio* is a three-handed game.

Momi uttered another timid "Aho!" There was a third person in the house who could play, he said.

"Ah, no!" gasped Molesin, taken aback for the moment. "Ah, no! No, indeed! By the rogue Bacchus, no! The very idea of such a thing! No,

thanks!" He blew out one of the candles angrily. "Catch hold of that other candle," he commanded in a fierce tone, and, regardless of Sior Momi's oft-repeated question, "What is up? What is the matter now?" kept on ordering him to "Catch hold of that other candle," until Momi, grumbling, "Well, well! Have your own way," finally obeyed. He would have liked to utter an "ahoi" of pacification, but lacked courage to do so. Besides, he did not understand the turn things had taken.

"And what now?" said he, gazing at Molesin, and clasping the candlestick.

"Now we will go into the study."

* * * * *

There was no light nor sound in the drawing-room. A pale moonbeam illumined the gallery at the head of the double stairway. Teresina, who was busy collecting her belongings preparatory to her departure the next day, passed along with a light, and looked down into the shadows, thinking of the former master and of the present one, and then hastened away, her eyes big with tears, and feeling that the walls, the furniture, the very shadows that flickered round her little lamp were echoing her own sadness.

One, two, three quarters of an hour passed. An hour crept away, and still the drawing-room remained silent and empty. Giovanni came in with a note that had arrived from the archpriest. Finding the room in darkness, he hesitated, and then went out to the open verandah. There was no one there. Could they be in the garden? He went forward a few steps, and then caught sight of the light in the study. Returning to the house, he entered the billiard-room, and heard Molesin's voice. The doctor was talking softly, but angrily. Giovanni knocked gently at the study door. Molesin himself opened it, and said, in an irritable voice:

"What is the matter now? What do you want? You can't come in. Go away! Be off!"

Giovanni handed him the note and stole away, without waiting to ask if there was an answer, for he had learnt from the messenger that the note simply contained the information that the funeral service for Signor Marcello would be held on the following Monday. He returned to the kitchen to tell of the secret confabulation that was going on between Molesin and the master. Carolina, who had ere this cast languishing glances upon him, on hearing this news, caught the young man boldly by the hand, ordering him to take her where she could hear; and as he showed honest reluctance to do as she asked, the woman inquired, with a meaning smile, if he were afraid of the master? But Giovanni stood his ground, and with a contemptuous shrug, Carolina went off by herself. That old fright of a Molesin, on whom she had wasted more than one of her wiles and graces, was simply odious to her now. She ran into a door, fell over several chairs, but reached her goal at last.

Before leaving the kitchen she had ordered coffee, but long after it was ready and waiting she had not returned. Giovanni went to look for her, but neither he nor Carolina came back. At last, however, the footman burst into the kitchen, in a state between fear and mirth, and announced that an awful row was going on in the study. Carolina was raving like a wild beast, and he thought he had heard blows. The entire staff—cook, gatekeeper, gatekeeper's wife, and Giovanni—started for the scene of the quarrel. On tiptoe they entered the billiard-room, and immediately heard Carolina, shouting her own praises, "I would have you know that I am" this and that, while Sior Momi brayed, "Hold your tongue! Be quiet! Have done!" and Molesin groaned, "Yes, yes, my good creature! I know, I know, my good creature!" Giovanni rushed into the garden and

peered in at the window. There was Sior Momi standing between the table and the easy-chair, and stretching imploring hands towards Carolina, who was advancing, with shoulders thrown forward and clenched fists resting on her hips, towards the unhappy doctor, who, whiter than his own shirt, was edging backwards in the direction of poor Signor Marcello's bedroom. Giovanni saw him clutch the door-handle and escape through the bedroom to the salon. He himself rushed into the house and gave the alarm to his companions, who fled back, as hard as they could go, to the kitchen again. Then Giovanni, who had overheard much and guessed more, gathered them around him, and proceeded to explain. This is what had evidently happened: When Carolina had applied her ear to the door the new master and Molesin had been discussing her. The new master had praised her, and probably, afterwards, Molesin had abused her. Hereupon she must have rushed into the room and kicked up a row. Giovanni had come away while the master was still speaking, but on going back he had heard the woman shouting, "Me? Me? Send me away, would you?" At this point Giovanni's story was interrupted by Molesin's voice calling, "Hallo there! Some one bring a light!" The group broke up and Giovanni, seizing a lighted candle, started to find the doctor. He came upon him in the drawing-room. He was trembling and appeared quite upset, and muttering, "What a confoundedly dark house this is!" he took the candle and started upstairs, calling back to Giovanni to wake him at five on the following morning.

Carolina reappeared in the kitchen in dignified gloom, and drank her coffee in silence. Sior Momi came into the drawing-room, rang the bell, and inquired for Dr. Molesin. That worthy had hung about the gallery in the hope of catching a glimpse of the master and his housekeeper, should they leave

the study together, and of overhearing what they might say. From between two columns he now peered down into the room below, and flung an angry "I am here!" into Sior Momi's upturned face.

"She has been persuaded!" Momi answered in an undertone.

Molesin glared down upon him for some seconds, and then informed him that, for his part, he was persuaded only of his own intention to leave on the following morning at six. Hereupon he withdrew his head from between the columns, but a moment afterwards he reappeared, his lighted candle in his hand.

"Good-night," said he.

Signor Momi hurried upstairs and confronted him.

"Don't you believe me? She is really persuaded. She will go."

Wrapped in gloom, Molesin answered:

"We shall see."

"You *will* see!" Momi retorted. Suddenly the doctor remembered another promise Momi had made just before Carolina's furious entrance into the study.

"And the girl?"

With the same calm assurance with which he had said "She will go," in speaking of Carolina, he now said, referring to his daughter:

"She will come."

"We shall see!" Molesin repeated emphatically.

Sior Momi assumed a tone of affectionate familiarity, and, placing his hand on his friend's arm, persuaded him, by dint of many blandishments, to return to the drawing-room, and then proposed that they should end the evening in peace at the card-table. They could play a game resembling *tresette*, that needed only two players. They began their game, Molesin frowning over the bad cards that fell to his lot, Sior Momi laughing his foolish laugh over the good ones he held. Neither alluded to the all-important "affair," although neither

thought of anything else, Molesin often forgetting to play his trumps and turn up his cards, but not so Sior Momi. Molesin, indeed, was reflecting that his adversary was certainly trying to get the better of him, and reading, both in his expression and in his friendly bearing, a malicious certainty of success, he began to wonder what sort of a trap his enemy had set, and to cast about in his mind for the best means of bringing Momi to reasonable terms. His thoughts were struggling towards this goal much as an ironclad may proceed at night through a channel beset with danger, cautiously, with all hands at their posts, throwing its searchlight in all directions athwart the encircling darkness. Carolina would go—he was sure of that. She would only pretend to leave, but that mattered little so long as she went. But the girl! Would she return? And would she really enter a convent, leaving all to her father, as Don Emanuele had suggested? But the chief thing was, he admitted, to get her home, and then it would be time enough to make further plans. After reaching this conclusion, Molesin turned his attention to the cards and no longer forgot to play his trumps.

Sior Momi, on his part, found the pleasing aspect of his hand in keeping with the inward visions he was enjoying. Molesin, with many distortions of the priest's words, had told him Don Emanuele's idea concerning a religious life for his daughter, but he did not believe for a moment that such would be Lelia's choice. Her nature was much too passionate. "We shall see if I am mistaken," he thought. Meanwhile he would pretend to share the chaplain's conviction, and cautiously second the priest's actions. He could not avoid insisting upon his daughter's return. Should she resist—then he would make different arrangements. To-morrow morning Carolina would take herself off, not to Cantù, as would be given out, but to Padua, with the

house and cellar keys and a nice little pile of money. She would lead a quiet life there, until matters were settled in one way or another. This was the compact that had been sealed by an affectionate embrace, after Molesin's retreat from the study. "We have a sly knave to deal with!" Momi had said to his Moma, as he called her at moments of especial tenderness.

He would write to his daughter saying he had changed his mind, and wished her to return home. Should she take this quietly, which was not probable, it would be a step in the right direction, and all to the good. Should she make a fuss—well, there were other means. . . . Sior Momi, reposing upon a soft, thick layer of Government bonds, "payable to bearer," which had emigrated from the Montanina to Padua, smiled complacently upon the good cards he held.

When the game was over he rang for Giovanni, and, his eyes fixed on his friend, hesitatingly ordered the footman to call Dr. Molesin at five. Giovanni replied that he had his orders already, but Molesin, calmly stretching out his hand towards the servant, said:

"Call me at seven. No, I am tired. Call me at eight."

CHAPTER XI

AWAY FROM LOVE AND THE WORLD

I

DONNA FEDELE, who was in pain, was lying on her bed reading. The maid came in to say that the little girl to whom her mistress taught French had come for her lesson. Donna Fedele hesitated for a moment, and then said she did not feel able to give the lesson that day. Presently the maid returned with a bunch of Alpine roses the child had brought for her teacher. The Signora was touched, and told the maid to call to the little girl from the window, for she was already on her way to the gate.

"I will hear you read," said the teacher, when she had thanked the child for the flowers with a kiss, "Get your book."

The book was "La Fontaine." The child read the fable of the locust and the ant—badly and with an atrocious accent. Donna Fedele was obliged to correct her at almost every word, and had great difficulty in making her understand the lesson the fable is meant to teach. She lost patience both with herself and the child, who, when asked if she had rather be the locust or the ant, promptly replied "The ant," and there was no making her see the harshness and unkindness of that provident insect's answer.

The little girl had just gone when Lelia came in, and found her friend completely exhausted.

"How could I possibly leave you," she said, sitting down beside her, "when you are like this!"

Donna Fedele stretched out her hand to her, and repeated "La Fontaine's" lines in a low tone:

"La cigale ayant chanté
Tout l'été,
Se trouva fort dépourvue
Quand la bise fut venue."

I have telegraphed for a kind 'ant,'" she added.

Lelia hid her tearful face in the bedclothes, as if to stifle the cry that sprang from her heart: "I will not go! I will not! I will not!"

That morning she had received two letters, one from her father, the other from the archpriest of Velo. The letter from her father, which Molesin had carefully revised, was a withdrawal of his permission to go away with Donna Fedele. Sior Momi wrote that both the maid Teresina and his housekeeper had suddenly deserted him. Teresina was bound to leave immediately, and the housekeeper was already gone. His health was becoming rapidly impaired, and his daughter's presence was absolutely necessary. The archpriest's letter, which had been inspired by the chaplain, contained an appeal to Lelia's kindness of heart on behalf of a poor family at Lago di Velo, who were in need of both spiritual and material aid. Signor Marcello had helped them, and the archpriest trusted that Lelia would be willing to continue this work of charity, adding to her kindness a personal visit. Neither Lelia nor Donna Fedele suspected that there was any connection between the two letters, but under the shock of the first Lelia had quivered like some small wild animal. Donna Fedele had given her time to relieve her feelings, and then, very gently and softly, had advised her to think over it. The mere suggestion of the possibility implied by such advice was enough to

make Lelia burst into tears. Then her friend had tried to console her with tender caresses, and, touching as lightly as possible upon the legal obligation to obey the summons, pointed out the good she might do her father by purifying his home and surroundings and by her example. Should anything of a scandalous nature take place in the house, then no one would be able to oblige her to remain, and she should return to the Villino. She, Donna Fedele, would find a means of protecting her. In a few months now she would be of age and her own mistress, and her father could then remain at the Montanina only with her consent. At this point Lelia, who was greatly overcome, confessed that it was her intention to relinquish Signor Marcello's heritage as soon as she should come of age. Donna Fedele shuddered at thought of such an affront to her dead friend, and reproached the girl bitterly, accusing her of unreasoning pride. Lelia, in her turn, became angry.

"After all," said she, "what right have you to talk to me in this way?"

Donna Fedele was too hurt to speak, but presently, with a fresh outburst of grief, Lelia flung her arms about her friend's neck, sobbing:

"I will do as you wish!"

II

This had happened on Saturday. It was decided that Lelia should return to the Montanina in the course of a few days, when the elderly cousin to whom Donna Fedele had telegraphed should have arrived. This cousin would accompany the invalid to Turin, where Carle was to examine her, as soon as she should be able to take the journey. For the time being travelling was out of the question.

That same evening as Lelia was going to sleep

in her own room Donna Fedele called her to her bedside.

"Listen, dear," she began. "I have received a letter from Alberti. I have been hesitating whether to show it to you, but I have finally decided to let you see it. I may not be acting wisely, but I beg you not to make me regret having done so. I wish you, once for all, to see him as he really is. Do not read it here," she said, giving Lelia the letter. "Take it to your own room. You can bring it back to me in the morning."

III

Lelia sat on the edge of her bed with the letter in her hand, trying to fix her thoughts on something that would calm the throbbing of her heart. She remembered "La Fontaine's" fable, and repeated the lines Donna Fedele had quoted. At last she determined to read the letter.

She found it impossible to read it straight through. First she counted the pages. There were twelve. Then she read the address. Dasio? Where was Dasio? She glanced at the first lines: "I am writing to you from a small and lonely village high up among the mountains and the mists. . . ." She turned to the last words: "Pray that I may find peace. I have more need of it now than I shall ever have, and I hope I have discovered the path that leads to it, but I have still a long way to go."

She shook with emotion, but quickly controlled herself, and rapidly turned over the twelve pages, seeking her own name. It was there, it was really there! She glanced at the words—fearfully, thirstingly—reading, and yet not reading. There was much concerning her, and the sweet was mingled with the bitter. Lelia perceived this, but running thus through the pages she could form no

idea of the writer's state of mind, of his feelings toward herself. Would it not be better she thought, to do no more than glance at the words, to refrain from reading them carefully, if they were going to increase her suffering? For she had promised to go on living. Her thirst to read grew, and her determination to resist stiffened. But suddenly and rapidly both began to weaken, one annihilating the other. Automatically she began once more to read, beginning where her name was first mentioned :

"*Lelia!* I am both ashamed of my emotion and angry with myself, dear Mother Fedele, but the truth is that I suddenly felt the blood freeze in my veins, and laying down my pen, I buried my face in my hands, and remained thus I know not how long, struggling against the desire to picture her to myself as being here. Now the spasm has passed, and I am full of contempt for not being able to be just towards a child who is not to blame that she judged me wrongly, that she does not possess the qualities with which I insanely imagined her to be endowed, and for no other reason than that she is beautiful."

At this point *Lelia*, quivering from head to foot, gripped the letter so hard as to crumple its edges, but she controlled herself and read on eagerly :

"But one day I shall even be grateful to her for having repulsed me, for I shall see clearly that I could never have been happy with a woman so far removed, and in so many ways, from my mode of thought. To-day my dangerous inclination would be to seek in love, not an affinity of ideas but only love itself; to-day I would have the woman of my choice ask me for love alone, and I could wish that there exist for us no past and no future, but only an eternal present, wherein only the unreasoning senses should throb in perfect harmony. But I know that should this mad dream come true, life would quickly bring disenchantment. The Scriptures say,

'Woe to him who is alone!' 'No, no! Strength and glory to him who is alone,' say I!

"The healing of my wounds is not my only pre-occupation in this solitude. Would it not perhaps be better to keep them open? They have made a man of me. But the peace of this place enables me to meditate upon that solution of the religious problem for which I once fought, but about which I no longer feel so certain. Dear friend, dear Mother Fedele, to no one save to you could I confess this terrible uncertainty, and perhaps I would not do so even to you did I not feel the horror of it, and, at the same time, the desire to set it before me in black and white."

Lelia looked on to discover any further references to herself and to his love. She saw the names of Don Aurelio and of Benedetto, and turning back, read the same passage over again, beginning with the words, "To-day my dangerous inclination . . ." and ending with "the unreasoning senses, throbbing in perfect harmony." Here she paused, trembling, and, still struggling against pride, she raised the words to her lips, which she pressed half-open upon them, with a gentle touch, as if vaguely forming a kiss that pride half forbade. Once more she read the lines, and kept her eyes fixed upon them until the rest of the page became a misty blur around these magic words. She read no farther, but undressing herself, placed the letter under her pillow and got into bed. She dreamed of a great multitude of wind-tossed beings, with whom she mingled, flying in an agony of fear above a hideous stream, which flowed darkly in the depths below. Suddenly she felt herself falling through space; and awoke. She felt for the letter, suddenly overtaken by the fear that it showed in parts too clearly that Alberti's love for her was dying. She lit a candle, and sitting up in bed, read the letter carefully, studying the most painful passages. It ran as follows:

“ *Dasio* . . .

“DEAR FRIEND,—I am writing to you from a small, lonely village, high up among the mountains and the mists. For the time being I have broken with Milan and with the world. I will tell you all, for I love you as a son, and if his pretence motherhood be not displeasing to you, I should like to call you ‘Mother Fedele.’ May I? And so I am going to tell you everything. I have long felt ill at ease in my uncle’s house. My uncle is a good man who has solved the problem of combining religious intolerance with charity. If all intolerant people were like my uncle they would compel the whole world to respect their doctrines. But he has not kept in touch with religious questions, and, accepting the opinions of certain persons who do not know my true feelings, he sets me down as a lost sheep. Neither in intellectual matters have we anything in common, and I feel, too, that he disapproves of my not having followed some regular and profitable occupation.

“Annoyances of a serious nature, of which Don Aurelio has surely told you, drove me to seek peace and quietude at Velo d’Astico. You know what peace I found there! On my return to Milan I discovered urgent reasons why I should not continue to live on my uncle’s bounty, and it was immediately after our sad visit to the cemetery of Velo that I read in the *Corriere* the announcement of a vacancy for the post of parish-doctor at Valsolda in the province of Como. The announcement attracted me, for I should soon be obliged to go to that place to perform a sacred duty towards the person and memory of the man I have loved best in this world. I started for Valsolda at once, telling my uncle that I was going to apply for the post, and that I wished to see the country, with which I was quite unacquainted.

I did not tell him of my determination to leave Milan for good, if at Valsolda or elsewhere, whether

or not I secured the post, I could find a quiet place of retreat.

“One of the Lake of Lugano boats brought me to a village which, they told me, was the centre of Valsolda. As soon as I had set foot there I saw that it was no place for me, that I should not find there the solitude I desired. I heard of a decent inn in the highest and most remote village in the valley, and here I am in this hermitage called Dasio, resting amidst the cool, dark verdure, beneath mighty crags that tower above it on the north and east. Here I am, apparently at a distance of four or five hours from Milan, but, in reality, immeasurably remote from it. My inn, at which I am the only visitor, is called ‘Pension Restaurant du Jardin.’ I am writing in a comfortable square room, and I have carried paper and ink to the broad sill of a window that looks out upon a vast sweep of verdure, rolling downwards to the lake’s deep mirror, amidst an all-permeating silence. Were my soul at peace, and all the ties that still bind me to the world severed for ever, I should be better able to feel this peace in all things, this harmony between the mighty hills and the tiny churches in the valley, calling humanity back to God. Near my inn stands the village church. From my window I can read the words ‘*Divo Bernardino*’ upon its front. Is it he of Siena? I hope so. Indeed, I do not know any other. On the right, lower down, and in the distance, a campanile stands out above the lake. Had I peace within me I could feel more intensely the peace of these venerable churches, of these stones, that are ignorant of our struggles, and are the guardians of the Catholic spirit of our fathers. Alas! dear Mother Fedele, I can hold no converse either with the hills, the valleys, or the churches. I cannot feel the quiet of all things because there is no peace within my soul, but only a weary round of impulses continuously coming and going. Even

when they cease I am not at rest, but rather faint with a mortal exhaustion. From mortal exhaustion I pass to a state of bitter irritation, and from bitterness to paralysing terrors. I do not give way unresistingly to these feelings, but the very struggle excludes peace. The first effect of the silence of Dasio is to make me even more painfully alive to the voices of the world from which I have fled.

"I feel at times as if some evil spirit had undertaken to keep me mindful of them. My window looks out on the church-place of San Bernardino. Some children are playing there, and a merry voice has just cried out: 'Lelia!'"

Long before reaching this point the young girl had begun to tremble. She trembled lest her pride should forsake her, lest the writer's harshest words concerning her should seem too mild, lest also she should discover some sign that his love for her was disappearing. She passed over the part of the letter she had already read and went on:

"My present state of mind regarding the Catholic faith is not altogether new, but it is only recently that I have realised this.

"As a lad I was often beset by doubts. During my student days in Rome I was like a piece of seaweed that has been torn up by the roots, and floats at the mercy of the tide. But then I met the man whose body will soon be brought hither and laid to rest. I worshipped him, and as long as he lived no shadow of doubt ever again assailed me. I would gladly have given my life for my faith and the Church. I may have wished, at times, that ecclesiastical authority had taken another course in this matter or that, but the possibility of rebellion against it never occurred to me either then or for some time after my Master's death. Then the unjust accusations of wilful dissent from Catholic doctrine brought against him, the hostility which I, as his disciple, met with from a Pharisaical rabble, and,

on the other hand, the corrosive effect of hyper-criticism and contact with certain aimless doctrines—all these influences prepared the gradual dissolution, which is steadily advancing, of the body of my beliefs. Do not think, dear friend, that I am losing my faith as some do, who, less clever and less cultured than they think, despise Catholicism on account of certain ritualistic practices, or of some of its obscurities in its dogmas, that appear to them simply absurd and even laughable. This is but the pettiness of presumptuous minds that know little of Catholicism, and have the audacity to criticise the religion of St. Augustine, of Dante, and of Rosmini. No, it is for other reasons that my faith is weakening. The doubt that is shaping in my mind is that this Divine religion is about to share the fate of Judaism, that the divine element is about to issue from it as Christianity issued from Judaism, leaving behind what was worn out and surpassed. As Catholicism completed Judaism, so a more ideal religion may perhaps complete Catholicism. Are there to be forerunners who must endure sacrifice? Must I sacrifice myself, and preach this Word, in opposition to the Word I have preached heretofore? My Roman friends wish me to speak at the cemetery in Oria, when the body of my Master, Benedetto, is laid in its final resting-place. I fear I could not do so without hypocrisy, because Benedetto believed steadfastly in the immortality of the Catholic Church, and in the duty of obedience. If, presently, I come to think, as I now fear I shall, that he was mistaken, I should be dishonouring his beloved memory by speaking at his grave. A more faithful disciple than I must be found.

“Don Aurelio, who is still in Milan, waiting for pupils, does not know these views of mine. I had not the courage to confide in him, and I shall certainly not be brave enough to write. Besides, why should I cause him such sorrow as he would surely

experience? I cannot look to him for help, for I am already aware what his answer would be. He, in himself, is an argument in favour of the Catholic Church, a stronger argument than any he could bring forward either in words or writing, but insufficient nevertheless; for pure and noble souls, souls full of honest conviction, may be found in every Church, and even outside of any Church.

"There you have the painful truth concerning the state of my mind. The suffering this causes me arises from the conviction that, if I break with Catholicism, I shall lose all positive religious faith, and then how shall I go on living?"

"As I am writing to you as a son I will add a few words about my new financial position. Heretofore I have relied largely upon my uncle's great generosity. But to-day I am happy in the thought that my uncle, who is as niggardly towards himself as he is generous to others, will now be able to benefit some charity with the money he once lavished upon his nephew, who was always more or less reprehensible in his eyes. I shall live upon the income of the small capital to which my parents' fortune has been reduced. It represents something like four or five lire a day, a sum which, here, or in some other place like this, will suffice for my material wants, which, fortunately, are not great. From what I hear, I conclude that it will be useless for me to apply for the position of physician here, as the doctor who has been holding it temporarily is sure to be appointed. This is the chief difficulty. I cannot live without books and papers, and I must therefore earn something by my profession, but any practice I might acquire here would bring me very little. As I said before, this is the difficulty, but I assure you that this new sense of poverty—a poverty that is only relative, and far removed from penury—is very sweet to me. It is not that I exult in my independence of a benefactor; I exult only, in that

I am now almost completely independent of *things*, and also that I am come down among the humble, come down out of a world dominated by conventionalities and hypocrisies to a world of greater simplicity. This would be a true joy to me, if my soul were capable of joy.

"Write to me, dear friend. Direct to Dasio, near San Mamette, Province of Como. You had perhaps better not tell me of the little person I must learn to forget.

"And now goodbye. One of the guards has just come in to beg me to prescribe for his child, who has been eating too much fruit. You see it will not be difficult for me to acquit myself with honour with my first patient!

"I kiss your hand.

"Your devoted son,

"MASSIMO.

"PS.—Fancy! I have only just noticed the sacred picture upon the wall above my bed. It represents Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee, stretching out His hand to Peter, who is afraid that he may sink. Peter doubted Christ, and Christ stretched out a loving hand to him. Will He not stretch it out also to one who doubts Peter, if Peter withhold his hand? At any rate, it is a strange coincidence that at this period of my inner life, here in Dasio, hanging upon the wall of an inn, and above a bed upon which, but last night, I passed long, sleepless hours thinking of Christ and Peter, I should meet with this reproof: *Modicæ fidei, quare dubitasti?*

"But I am not superstitious."

* * * * *

Lelia read the pages that dealt with religion without understanding much beyond their groundwork of grief, but she was conscious of a dull pain at her

own incapacity. She felt also that Donna Fedele had done wrong in not respecting another's confidences, and she felt remorse at having taken advantage of this breach of faith. Nevertheless, she could not resist reading the letter. The expressions concerning the joy of poverty from one whom she had accused of sordid purposes cut her to the heart. She told herself that she was unworthy of him, and that it would be best for him to go on thinking that she despised him.

At the words "the little person I must learn to forget" her heart throbbed, not in anger but in assent. She crept under the bedclothes. From time to time she was still shaken with trembling, and her breast heaved, but not a single tear did she shed.

* * * * *

The next morning when she entered her friend's room she placed the letter on the bedside table, with an air of indifference. Donna Fedele was sitting up in bed writing. She did not answer when Lelia asked how she had passed the night. From the young girl's face her friend judged how her questioner had passed it. Donna Fedele asked for a kiss and whispered:

"Did I do wrong?"

"Of course not," said Lelia coldly. "I knew."

"You knew?" Donna Fedele cried in astonishment. "Surely there were many things in that letter you did not know!"

"Please do not let us discuss it," the girl pleaded.

Donna Fedele on embracing Lelia had felt the throbbing of her proud little heart too distinctly to believe her cold words.

"I have answered his letter," she said. "Please read the answer."

Lelia's first impulse was to refuse, in order to avoid useless pain, but fearing to be led into uttering imprudent words, she took the letter and read it.

"MY DEAR SON,—I gladly accept you as a son and immediately write to you as such. Yet I am so far from my usual self that, had I not four pieces of news that I wish you to know at once, I should put off writing to you until to-morrow. The first, I have told you already—that I gladly look upon you as my son. The second is, that you are greatly mistaken concerning Lelia and her feelings."

Here the girl looked up, and, seizing the pen, drew it, with lightning rapidity, through the last two lines.

"Lelia! What are you doing?" cried Donna Fedele in amazement, stretching out her hand to take the letter. The young girl moved back a few steps, and went on reading without answering, still holding the pen in her trembling fingers.

"Do you think you have any right to retaliate in that way?" Donna Fedele continued indignantly.

She was labouring under the misapprehension that Lelia's act had been an angry protest against the harsh words contained in Alberti's letter. Lelia made no answer, but read on in silence.

"The third is, that Peter did indeed doubt, but on feeling the waters yielding beneath his feet, he called out, '*Lord, save me!*' The fourth is, that your new mother needs you far more than the guard's child does, for to-morrow the Villino delle Rose will be more lonely than Dasio, because Lelia is going back to the Montanina. Her father insists upon it. Write to Don Aurelio. I am not satisfied with the reasons you give for not doing so. I see you with one foot outside the path in which I myself walk humbly, and without feeling the stones, the thorns, and the dust that torment you, with all your science and philosophy. But I am not capable of arguing with you, who are so clever and so wise. Write to Don Aurelio. Goodbye.

"MOTHER FEDELE."

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When she had finished Lelia silently handed the letter to Donna Fedele, who was gazing at her with anxious eyes, and waiting in vain for a single word.

"How do you suppose I can send it now?" said she.

"Forgive me," the girl answered coldly, "but I did right."

And she left the room.

CHAPTER XII

CONCERNING A SOUL

I

THE service for the repose of the soul of Signor Marcello was to begin at ten o'clock. Donna Fedele was not well enough to attend. She had written to Camin, begging that Lelia might be allowed to stay with her until the morrow, for the cousin to whom she had written was not expected until the following day, and Lelia would not hear of leaving the Villino until her arrival. However, no answer had come from the Montanina. About half-past nine o'clock Lelia and the maid started to walk to Velo.

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Lelia refused her father's invitation to sit beside him on the bench that had been covered with black drapery, and sat down near the door, that she might be able to go out as soon as the service was over. But before it began the archpriest's sister-in-law, all smiles and blushes, came to her side, and begged her to look in at the parsonage after the service, as Don Emanuele wished to speak to her. Lelia, who was absorbed in one thought, and perfectly indifferent to anything Don Emanuele might have to say to her, was not even astonished at the request. She would have preferred not to go, both because she had come to detest the two Velo priests and because she longed to be alone. But foreseeing

further demands and annoyances, she concluded it would be best to comply at once for the sake of future peace. She slipped quickly out of church on catching sight of her father coming towards her with Molesin, who was already preparing himself for the introduction. Siora Bettina joined her outside the church, and conducted her to the parsonage with a show of politeness and amiability that cost her many sharp pangs, which nevertheless she endured for the sake of Don Emanuele. She discussed the impressive way in which the service had been conducted, spoke of Don Emanuele's solemn dignity and edifying devotion while officiating, praising him even above her own brother-in-law, whom she described as "a saint, but easy-going." Then she went on to speak of his skill as a spiritual adviser, remarkable in one so young, and she declared that any conscience would be safe in his charge. Lelia paid no attention to any of her remarks, but kept her eyes fixed on the door, longing for this tiresome priest to come and get the interview over quickly.

She had been to confession to him two or three times, but he had at last requested her to go to the archpriest in the future, putting forward as an excuse that his superior might feel hurt that she had not preferred him. Ever since her boarding-school days confession had been a mere formality for her, and she cared little whether it were addressed to one priest or to another.

Poor Siora Bettina herself, having exhausted her conversation, had begun to glance anxiously at the door, when it was opened at last, revealing the chaplain's lank figure. Bettina bestowed a parting smile on Lelia, and murmuring a farewell, rose to go.

Don Emanuele was approaching this interview with the firm intention of working for the greater glory of God and the good of a soul. His grave face and dignified bearing revealed so strong a consciousness of authority that an unfriendly observer

might have mistaken it for pride. Pride is so subtle an intruder, and its presence is so difficult to trace that Don Emanuele may indeed have been honestly deceived in his belief that he was free from it and a humble instrument of the Lord. He was unconscious of his own complacence and pride in the immense power exercised by the priesthood to which he belonged ; and while the recognition of this power renders other and better ministers of the Church humble, not only before God but before men, and fearful of exercising it too rigorously, the chaplain's complacency inclined him to wield it without moderation. As the arrogant menial often usurps the master's authority, so did Don Emanuele persuade himself that in all things he was interpreting the Divine Will. His spirit waged fierce war against his flesh, and gained the mastery none too easily, yet so far from being thereby inclined to leniency in dealing with sinners he was the more relentless towards them.

His reason for acting no longer as Lelia's confessor lay in the fact that his senses were troubled by the faint suggestion of essence of rose that she brought to the confessional. To the peasant nature of Don Tita the perfume would have suggested nothing ; but to Don Emanuele it spoke of crafty wiles for the beguiling and stirring of the senses, and herein arose the desire, prompted still further by the subsequent news of Lelia's desperate attempt at suicide, to win her for the cloister. To snatch her from Signora Vayla's pernicious influence, to use her as a means of getting rid of that scandalous housekeeper, to take advantage of her isolation at the Montanina, and of her aversion to her father, to inspire her with the longing for a religious life—such was the undertaking in which his interview with Molesin had been the first step, and which had already borne fruit in the departure of Carolina. He had not taken the archpriest into his confidence for several reasons :

one may have been that he knew of Don Tita's hope of bringing about a marriage between the Signorina and a certain young Vicentine. Signora Bettina was certainly aware of it. The latter, with many groans, was now bravely seeking to overcome her aversion to any contact with Signorina da Camin, and all out of pure devotion to Don Emanuele, who wished her to try to become Lelia's friend in place of Signora Vayla, and to exert a wholesome religious influence over her.

On catching sight of the chaplain Siora Bettina hoped that, at any rate for the time being, she was going to be released, and she rose, intending to withdraw. Without so much as a glance in her direction the priest detained her by a gesture of his hand, and having saluted Lelia, calmly seated himself on the sofa, while Signora Fantuzzo wriggled uneasily in her chair, eyeing the chaplain meanwhile with an air of humble entreaty, until a frown from him reduced her to a state of subjection. On hearing that Don Emanuele had a favour to ask of Signorina da Camin and herself, she stared wildly. The bare idea of doing anything in collaboration with the young girl sent the blood flaming to her cheeks. She hastened to declare that she was good for nothing, that she was quite incapable in every way.

"Pardon me," said Don Emanuele in the serenely authoritative manner of a superior imposing silence on his inferior, "pardon me." The frightened woman turned her scarlet face towards Lelia and murmured, nervously rubbing her hands together in her lap, as if seeking to wring from them her reasons for resisting, "It is true—really, it is quite true!"

Don Emanuele took no further notice of her, and addressed to Lelia the long speech he had prepared. The pith of it was this: The local Board of Charity had the administering of a legacy for the benefit of mothers of families who were incapacitated for work

by illness or by childbirth. As there were many complaints in the parish concerning this legacy, the chaplain had persuaded the Board to consent to the nomination of two lady visitors, and had proposed the names of Signora Fantuzzo and Signorina da Camin. At every second word the chaplain uttered Signora Fantuzzo groaned *Gésunmaria!* She was willing enough to help the poor from a distance, but coming into personal contact with them was not to her taste. Don Emanuele, with perfect unconcern, begged the ladies to make some arrangements at once for their future co-operation.

"If you cannot stop now, this afternoon or tomorrow Signora Fantuzzo can go to Villa da Camin, and you will then be able to talk the matter over. Meanwhile I will prepare a list of the mothers to be visited at once."

Lelia shook off her indifference, and observed that she was not sure of being at the villa on the morrow. She had, indeed, determined in her own mind not to leave the Villino until after the arrival of the cousin from Santhià. Don Emanuele, who was somewhat perplexed, remained silent, but at that moment there was a knock at the door, and Don Tita appeared. He greeted Lelia heartily, as if the encounter at the Posina Bridge had never taken place, called the chaplain aside and told him something in an undertone, and then mentioned to his sister-in-law to withdraw. She left the room, followed by Don Emanuele. The archpriest came over to Lelia, who had risen.

"One moment, Siora Lelia," said he. "One moment! Papa is here."

The door opened slowly and revealed Sior Momi's red-and-yellow countenance, his twitching eyelids, and parti-coloured beard.

"Come in, Signor da Camin," said the archpriest. "Is everything in readiness?"

"I should say it was, sir," Momi answered, employing the conditional as a mood expressive of

much deferential hesitation, and, turning to his daughter, he greeted her with a timid "Ciao! How are you?" that might have been one of his familiar "ahos." Lelia was in the dark as to what was on foot, and from Sior Momi's gaping mouth there issued no further word of explanation. The good-natured archpriest quickly intervened, however, declaring that her father really did not know his duties, but that he, the archpriest, had undertaken to instruct him. Thus Sior Momi would have allowed Lelia to go home on foot, in all the heat, but he, the archpriest, had advised him to send to Arsiero for a comfortable carriage and pair. Lelia at once scented a conspiracy between her father and the archpriest to get her back to the Montanina. She could not guess that it had been Molesin who had advised a little stratagem of this sort, or that her father, who had pretended to fall in with the plan, in Molesin's absence, had begged the archpriest to intervene, and to preach her a little sermon on the duty of filial obedience and of returning to her own home without delay. But the little sermon never passed Don Tita's lips, for the girl promptly checked it by declaring imperiously that she intended to walk. Sior Momi immediately acquiesced. "Well, well, well!" said he, and Lelia took her departure, with the very slightest of bows, while her meek parent sought to convince his astonished accomplice that the obstinate girl would have flung herself out of the carriage rather than submit to the deceit.

II

A few hours before the time fixed for Lelia's departure from the Villino—she was leaving in obedience to Donna Fedele's wishes rather than to Sior Momi's—the cousin arrived from Santhià. Eufemia Magis was a little, old woman, so bowed

and shrivelled that she seemed more in need of care herself than able to bestow it. Although Donna Fedele was very ill, the sight of Cousin Eufemia sufficed to open the wellsprings both of affection and of fun. Whenever Eufemia was her guest she was anxious that no want or desire of hers should be neglected; but nevertheless she could not refrain from teasing her most unmercifully, rallying her concerning the old-fashioned cut of her clothes, her enormous black cap, trimmed with violet ribbon, the supposed love affairs of her youth, the imaginary matter of her frequent confessions, and her quaint ejaculations whenever she dropped her spectacles on a knitting-pin. Eufemia was present when Lelia said goodbye to her friend.

"I hope your father will often let you come to see me," said Donna Fedele.

Lelia's eyes flashed.

"I should like to see him try to prevent me!" she cried.

Donna Fedele took her hands, and patting them tenderly, whispered, "Be a good girl! Be good! Be good!"

Lelia glanced at Cousin Eufemia, who slipped meekly and silently from the room. The young girl flung her arms around her friend, and laid her head on the pillow beside her. The invalid placed her hand upon Lelia's hair, and said gently:

"Did the letter wound you?"

No word, no sign answered her question.

"Do you really not wish me to tell him anything about you?"

Donna Fedele said this very softly and hesitatingly. She had noted the look Lelia had bestowed upon Cousin Eufemia, and believed she had something to tell her in confidence. Lelia's shoulders heaved, and she shook her head violently.

"Is there anything else you wish me to do?"

Although she spoke caressingly, the invalid's sweet,

youthful voice held a faint note of impatience that seemed to say, "Do speak out!" And there was the same impatience in the large brown eyes. Lelia could not see them, but she knew what they were saying. She raised her tear-stained face from the pillow, kissed her friend, and then left the house.

III

On the following afternoon she returned. Donna Fedele was sitting up reading in her bedroom. Lelia flung herself on her knees before her friend and protested vehemently that it was impossible for her to stay at the Montanina any longer. The invalid patted her head softly, murmuring words of gentle reproof.

"What has happened?" she said at last. "Get up and tell me about it."

It was some time before she could persuade Lelia to raise her head, which she had buried in her friend's lap, and tell her story. As a matter of fact nothing had happened, save that she had been brought face to face with a reality of which she had never really been ignorant. On perceiving how upset she was Donna Fedele's mind had immediately flown to Signor Camin's housekeeper. She did not know how to question Lelia concerning her, and so inquired for Teresina instead, and was informed that Teresina had consented to remain because "that other creature" had taken herself off. But not even Teresina could stand the house, the master, and "those other people" any longer. "Those other people" stood for Dr. Molesin alone, who was about to leave, thank Heaven! Lelia detested that slimy individual, who had sought to ingratiate himself by discoursing of the Camin ancestry, of an old priest who used to say Mass at the Carmelite Church, and of a venerable nun who had been famous as a pastry-

cook. And her father? Was he unkind to her? No, no! Lelia only wished he were! But, on the contrary, he was nauseatingly humble and obsequious. He would not move so much as a chair in the house without asking her permission, and had even asked her leave to have the grass cut. He was equally obsequious with Teresina, and Lelia was convinced he had even been confidential with the maid at times. She said this with such utter contempt that Donna Fedele cried out, "Oh, Lelia!"

"What do I care?" said the girl.

But she refrained from describing how Signor Momi, after a futile attempt at familiarity with his daughter, would beat a sudden retreat, uttering his silly "Aho! aho!" as if he had been in jest. With his timid advances and his hasty retreats, he was like one who stretches out his hand to a hedge of roses in the dark, hoping to grasp a flower, and encounters the thorns instead.

The very walls of the Montanina were no longer the same. Formerly they had been full of life and affection. Now Lelia felt that they were dead and indifferent to her. Her father's spirit had contaminated everything. Had she not feared to shock Donna Fedele she would have confessed her monstrous suspicion that she was not the daughter of this man. Could she possibly remain at the Montanina under such conditions? She paused for an answer to this question.

"Bring me a glass of water," said her friend, "and the bottle with the drop-stopper, from the bedside table."

Lelia obeyed in silence. Donna Fedele, who was past-mistress in the art of not hearing when she did not wish to, swallowed her medicine, and then went on calmly:

"I know what you wanted to tell me yesterday."

Lelia had never become accustomed to her friend's voluntary deafness. It always irritated her.

"Answer me!" she said impatiently. "Am I not justified in not wishing to return? Are you afraid I shall plant myself upon you, here?"

The thoughtless words lighted a flame in Donna Fedele's eyes, but she controlled herself.

"I know what you wanted to tell me yesterday," she repeated coldly, accentuating every syllable. "You were going to confess that you love him."

The moment was ill-chosen. Lelia started, and knit her brows as if an insolent hand had touched her cheek.

"No!" she cried. "Never!"

She sprang angrily to her feet, knocking over her chair against the door at the very moment when Cousin Eufemia was pushing it carefully open with one hand, while in the other she bore a cup of broth on a tray. The broth splashed over her gown. "Mercy on us!" cried the little old woman. Donna Fedele forced a short laugh. If she did not laugh heartily, she was, nevertheless, glad to show her indifference to Lelia's dramatic violence, and to avail herself of her cousin's presence in order to cut short an unpleasant conversation. She stopped Eufemia, who was already starting to fetch more broth, and sent her to the writing-desk for a letter, which she requested her to give to Lelia.

"Now you can go," said she to the little old woman. When Eufemia had left the room, Lelia laid the letter down.

"Read it!" said Donna Fedele.

"Why should I?" the girl retorted. "It will do no good."

"How do you know?" Donna Fedele insisted. "It is not from Alberti."

The letter was from Don Aurelio. He had found a good many pupils and was quite happy on this point. But he complained greatly of Alberti, who had left Milan without even an attempt to see him, and without sending him a line. He had heard of

his departure through Engineer Alberti, Massimo's uncle and benefactor. To Don Aurelio the young man's act appeared in the light of a mere caprice. He could only explain it as a result of the bitter disappointment of Signorina Lelia's repulse, and he added the following words :

" His having left me thus makes me fear he is undergoing a crisis so severe as to affect even his religious conscience. I have reasons for fearing this. Ah ! what a blessing it would have been had I known certain person but understood him better ! "

Lelia laid the letter down in silence.

" Do you see ? " said Donna Fedele.

" Why do you make me read these letters ? " the girl cried angrily. " I refuse to admit that they touch me in any way. "

" So the evil you may cause does not touch you in any way ? "

" What evil ? This religious crisis ? I have passed through mine, and I am glad of it, " Lelia retorted bitterly. " I leave Catholicism to my father and Dr. Molesin, who went to Mass together this morning ; I leave it to the chaplain who officiated, to the archpriest— "

" And to me also, I suppose ? " said Donna Fedele freezingly.

Lelia was silent. She had not intended to wound her friend, but nevertheless, she was glad she had spoken as she had. Presently Donna Fedele added :

" Thank you ! "

She took up the book she had been reading when Lelia arrived, the verses of a great Catholic poet, Adam Mickiewitz, a Catholic, not of Don Emanuele's stamp, but a follower of Dante. Lelia felt that she was dismissed. She thought she saw tears in Donna Fedele's eyes, and was on the point of flinging her arms about her neck, but she choked the good impulse in its birth, and turned to go instead.

She had already opened the door when her friend called her back.

"We have both been disagreeable," said she. "Come and be friends again!" And she held out her hand.

Lelia seized it in hers, kissed it, and then rushed away.

IV.

On reaching the Posina Bridge she paused to gaze into the silent, rapid stream. She had never passed the spot since that momentous night without being assailed by regret for the promise she had made Donna Fedele, without a shiver of desire and repulsion. She had never since stopped to look down, but to-day she did so almost against her will, as if compelled by some unknown force, and to acknowledge, also unwillingly, that she no longer had any desire to die. Only then, as she peered into the depths, was this new, unfathomable state of her own mind made clear to her. Her bewildered soul slowly opened, revealing, in its depths, the instinctive hope of love and happiness, triumphing over all previsions of reason, all generous resolutions of renunciation. Her heart was beating fast as she withdrew from the parapet and started again on her way. She seemed to feel the life imprisoned in all things straining towards love and joy, and their dumb eagerness entered into her. All nature seemed to speak in the roaring of the whirlpool at Perale and to call to her, "For you also! For you also!" And her heart throbbed back, "For me also! For me also!" The very air of the woods seemed alive. She would have liked to follow the path that led upwards on the left of the bridge, and there among the trees to have abandoned herself entirely to dreams and fancies. But the mouth of the path had been closed with logs and brambles, and the main road seemed the only way. She passed

some carts and several people, and her excitement cooled somewhat ; but she trembled at herself, the violent outburst of desire that had blazed within her, and had then shrunk back, like some startled wild animal, into the deep recesses of her soul. She thought of Donna Fedele, who had evidently doubted the strength of her "no" and of her "never," and she resolved to write to her in unmistakable language thus binding herself irrevocably.

* * * * *

At the chestnut-tree she met her father, who inquired timidly if she was on her way from the Villino. He might have been inquiring, half boldly half shrinkingly, if she had been keeping some shameful tryst. Her sharp and challenging answer made him blink rapidly.

"The priests . . . on account of the priests, you see . . ." he stammered with a smile.

This concise utterance meant a great many things. It meant that the priests disapproved of her friendship for Donna Fedele, and that he would advise her to comply with their wishes, but that he would not presume beyond simple advice.

The priests had been to the Montanina with Signora Fantuzzo during Lelia's absence. The chaplain's expression had been absolutely funereal, but Siora Bettina had looked as if a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders. Sior Momi, steering warily between clerical rocks and filial shoals, had gone the length of promising the lady a visit from Lelia. "She will come herself—come herself!" He had listened attentively to the archpriest's conversation, who seemed more interested in Lelia's parent than in Lelia herself, seeing in him a new elector, a future town-councillor, a strong and mighty cat's-paw, working for the parsonage in the Council, and a precious ally of his successor.

That meek and smiling utterance of her father's,

"The priests . . ." irritated Lelia even more than a rebuke or a protest would have done. Her overwrought nerves were deprived of the relief of violent rebellion. She shut herself up in her room and refused to leave it even at dinner-time, in order to avoid meeting her father. She tried to write to Donna Fedele as she had determined, but found it impossible to do so. The knowledge of her father's presence in the house, the thought that at any moment she might hear his voice or step, made concentration of thought impossible. As soon as Teresina had assured her, shortly after ten o'clock, that he had retired, she showed such eagerness to be left alone, that the maid, remembering what had happened that night at the Villino, became alarmed. When Lelia told her to go, she could not help exclaiming, "What are you going to do now, Signorina?" Lelia replied that she wanted to be alone to write some letters. Poor Teresina spent the night in the corridor, seated on a trunk. She heard the key turn in the lock, and then Lelia moving about the room at intervals. From time to time she caught the sound of sobbing, and the noise of paper being torn in pieces. Once she heard a window opened, and was on the point of flinging herself against the door. But after a long silence steps sounded again, the dressing-room door creaked, and she heard water being poured into the basin. Teresina became less anxious, but did not dare to leave her post. She closed her eyes, however, and after a brief struggle, sleep overcame her.

A sharp voice roused her: "What are you doing here?"

She started to her feet. "Gésu!" she exclaimed, and that was all she could say.

"You foolish creature!" said Lelia. "Go down and open the door of the covered passage for me. My head aches, and I want some air," she added more gently.

It was dawn. The Torrarò was sweeping joyously through the Posina valley, through the birches and poplars of the Montanina. Lelia went up to the chestnuts, and flung herself on the ground like a tired child beneath their great branches, in the grass still heavy with dew. She had written, but had not yet fastened up her letter, undecided whether to send it or not. As she lay in the damp grass the words she had written stood out in front of her, and her mind was torn by indecision.

"Please never mention that *great* person to me again." She had arrived at this after many attempts and after tearing up seven or eight sheets of paper. The expression had pleased her, conveying, as she meant it to convey, a retort to a certain reference herself in Massimo's letter. But now she doubted whether it would not be better not to show herself influenced by resentment, that her answer might appear the more decisive. She thought she would read the letter through again, and so returned to the house. On the way she met Teresina, who was coming to say she had made some strong coffee.

"Mother of Mercy!" she cried, as she walked along behind Lelia. "You look as if you had been——" She stopped, and did not add "in the water," for the very word reminded her of what had been uppermost in her mind all the night, namely that a man had but lately drowned himself in the Posina close by.

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No, "great person" would not do at all! Nor would it do to strike out the word "great." She must give another tone to the whole letter, and remove every trace of resentment and contempt. She tore the sheet in two, and wrote as follows:

"DEAR FRIEND,—Please never speak to me again of a person I may indeed respect, but who inspires

me with an antipathy it is impossible to overcome. My unkindness to you yesterday was caused by the same feeling that now urges me to write in this way. Forgive me.

“LELIA.”

She read the lines again and decided that she had expressed herself clearly and to the purpose. There was no need of further corrections or regrets. When that letter had gone all would be over for ever. She flung herself upon her bed completely exhausted both in mind and body, and slept for an hour, and on awaking, sprang up in bed, troubled because she had slept she knew not how long, and bewildered as to what had previously taken place. At sight of the note lying open on the writing-table, consciousness began slowly to return, making her heart throb with a dull pain. She bathed her face and did her hair. The heartache grew, and waves of tears rose, but she did not weep. She took the note up to examine it again, but her hands trembled so violently and her sight was so troubled that she was unable to do so. She went out to read it in the open air, in the garden, where her nerves would not dare to rebel in this manner. She was so weary, there was such peace in the fresh breeze, in the waving of the ripe grasses, in the ceaseless murmuring of the *Riderella*, that for a long time she sat there beneath the walnut-trees, dazed and motionless, the note slipping from her lap to the grass. Something else slipped from her mind at the same time, and she paid no heed to either. At last she stooped and picked up the note, and began slowly tearing it into strips, her eyes fixed dreamily on the grass. As she tore the thought came to her that she was performing a solemn rite, to which it seemed strange that surrounding nature should remain so indifferent, that the wind should sway the grasses as before, that the water should be still murmuring. When she

had completely destroyed the note, her heart beat throbbing violently, as if her lover's arms were about her shoulders and his lips on hers. She sprang from her seat, frightened and aflame with excitement, gathered together the scraps of paper and flung them into the Riderella, watching until every tell-tale scrap had disappeared, and the very act itself seemed to have been annulled.

V

In the afternoon Signora Fantuzzo reappeared at the Montanina, but this time she came alone and without the received by Teresina. Lelia had a headache, and even had this not been the case she would have invented one as an excuse. Official works of charity were not to her liking, especially when they were to be carried out in such company. Sior Momi had scented the coming storm on the preceding day, and had determined to avoid it by a little trip to Padua. Siora Bettina was fairly well disposed towards Sior Momi, in spite of her brother-in-law's somewhat ambiguous description of him. The chaplain, however, to whom she looked up as to an oracle, had spoken otherwise of him. Don Emanuele knew him as well as the archpriest did, and even better, but until Lelia should be fairly started on her way to the convent, he saw in Momi a valuable ally. He therefore declared to Siora Bettina, with an expression of deepest compunction and many twistings of words and phrases, that perhaps the archpriest, in his saintly simplicity and inborn honesty, had attached overmuch importance to slanderous rumours and unduly harsh judgments. Signor da Camin had been unfortunate in business, and was, perhaps, not exempt from certain human frailties, but he was a man of pure faith, free from all taint of modern error, a man who practised his religion, and an excellent Catholic.

He was, in short, a man to make the clergy and the people of Velo thank God that the Montanina had fallen into his hands instead of into those of the young man from Milan.

As neither Lelia nor Sior Momi were visible, Bettina seized the welcome opportunity of a few moments' conversation with Teresina. She was fond of the maid's company, not only because she was at her ease with her, but because Teresina was a woman of good sense and piety. Moreover, she was always so willing to tell all she knew, and she told it in a characteristic way. Teresina, for her part, liked being with Siora Bettina, who was so devout, and who treated her with so much consideration. They met but seldom, but when they did meet their faces always brightened, and they would twitter their bits of gossip like a couple of canary-birds, mingling comments in a wise and God-fearing spirit, and to their mutual satisfaction. Signora Fantuzzo had never seen any part of the Montanina save the drawing-room, and Teresina now volunteered to show her the rest of the house, all save Lelia's room and Sior Momi's, the door of which he had locked himself.

"He is a good Christian, is he not?" said the visitor. Teresina gazed at her in amazement, but seeing she was quite in earnest, answered quickly:

"Of course! Of course!"

"And the young mistress also?" Signora Fantuzzo went on, her face assuming an ambiguous expression.

"Of course—she also!" said Teresina.

"I mean as concerns religion."

Once more Teresina, somewhat troubled this time, replied:

"Of course, of course!"

They had passed from the billiard-room to the open verandah, and here Siora Bettina sat herself down. With much embarrassment and a very red face, she asked whether Teresina did not think that

the influence of the lady at Arsiero, who had so li-
reverence for the clergy, and had been the friend
that bad priest at Lago, had shaken the girl's faith.

"Oh, no, I don't think so at all!" Teresina cried
with conviction.

"Because you know . . . don't you?"

At the moment Teresina did not understand what
it was she was expected to know, and the two women
stood staring at each other, one filled with amazement,
the other with compunction. Bettina hesitated a
moment, and then hinted at the attempt to commit
suicide. Teresina understood at once, her face quickly
betraying the fact, and she dropped her eyes in silence.
Siora Bettina also looked down, that she might collect
her thoughts, and recall the chaplain's instructions.
Should she happen to have any conversation with the
maid. She inquired with great sweetness if the young
girl were in the habit of saying her morning and
evening prayers. Teresina, annoyed at such a personal
question, flushed angrily, and answered shortly
enough that she did not know. And had the Signorina
any religious books? She had a beautiful
New Testament, that had been a present from poor
Signor Marcello. Nothing else? And Siora Bettina
heaved a sigh of relief on learning that Lelia
possessed a prayer-book and a volume entitled "The
Road to Paradise"; both were books she had had
at the convent. But did she read them? Teresina
might have answered that she had never seen any
one of the three books in Lelia's hands, but her
only reply was a vague "Who can say?" Siora
Bettina then braced herself to say, sweetly, that up
at the parsonage they had anxiously hoped that, after
what had happened on that eventful night, the young
girl would soon come to confession. Don Emanuele,
who knew more about the events of that awful night
than did the archpriest, was especially distressed.
In making this speech Siora Bettina had been in
no wise conscious of setting a trap, but a trap it

proved for Teresina, who promptly walked into it. As a good Catholic she also longed that Lelia should go to confession, and now her feelings got the better of her.

"Of course she should go!" she said fervently.

Once more Siora Bettina communed with herself.

"How much better it would have been had the Trentos never taken the girl into their house!" she said. "In her grief at her lover's death she would probably have decided to withdraw from the world, but not in the way she meant on that fatal night. She would have dedicated herself to the Lord!"

"Oh, no! I don't believe she would!" cried Teresina, irritated at any blame being cast upon her old master and mistress. But why not? Ma! Who knows! That "ma" was as a casket full of golden reasons, but carefully locked. Teresina did not see fit to open the casket, and Signora Fantuzzo therefore concluded it was empty.

"It would have been a great blessing!" said she, and was about to add that it might still come to pass, but remembered in time that Don Emanuele had warned her not to go too far. The maid expressed her regret that her work would not allow her to enjoy Siora Bettina's society any longer, and hereupon the visitor rose.

"If only the confession could be managed!" said she.

"I wish it could," Teresina replied.

She went with Signora Fantuzzo as far as the small gate. At the last moment the lady hinted that Lelia might get some one to accompany her to Vicenza, and make her confession at Monte Berico. Perhaps she would be more willing to do it there.

"Perhaps she would," Teresina acquiesced, and Signora Fantuzzo observed that her father would be the proper person to propose the Monte Berico excursion to Lelia.

"Dio!" thought the maid.

CHAPTER XIII

" AVEU "

I

ON the following morning Lelia received a letter from Donna Fedele complaining that she had not seen Lelia since their little quarrel. She was going to Turin almost immediately, the Arsiero doctor having urged her to go. Lelia gathered from this that the physician had examined her, though Donna Fedele did not say so. The letter concluded with an earnest request that Lelia would go to see her soon and that a reply might be sent by the bearer. Lelia answered in haste :

" I am so glad you are going to Turin. I would not come to you because it would be too painful for me to be obliged, as I should be, to refuse to comply with any wish of yours on the eve of such a journey. I am unworthy that you should trouble about me any more. Perhaps it would be better to forget me, and leave me to my fate.

" LELIA."

II

That day Donna Fedele's physical condition was such as to make her extremely irritable. She had been in pain all night long, and it was only toward daybreak that she had been able to get half an hour

sleep. Poor old Eufemia, who slept in the next room, had heard her groan several times, and was in despair. Her very despair and anxiety, which prompted her to ask many anxious questions, earned for her only impatient answers. The effect of Lelia's letter was disastrous. Donna Fedele read the note over and over again in her cousin's presence, and finally tore it to bits. She was annoyed at the refusal to come to her, and by the closing sentences, which struck her as a sentimental repetition of stock phrases: “Forget me—I am unworthy—Leave me to my fate!”

Hardly had she destroyed the note, however, than her mood softened at the thought of Marcello. She thought for a while and presently ordered Eufemia to send to Arsiero for a carriage to take them to the Montanina at four that afternoon. Her cousin protested that this was madness. After an examination, to which she had submitted at last, the Arsiero doctor had ordered complete rest, that she might gain sufficient strength to undertake the journey to Turin. He had recommended Padua instead, as being nearer, but Donna Fedele would hear of no place but Turin and the Mauriziano hospital. The operation might be postponed for a few days, but for no longer. Her cousin's protests were in vain, however, and the order for the carriage was sent, together with a note for the archpriest of Arsiero, begging him to be at the little chapel in the cemetery at four o'clock. This chapel is only a short distance beyond the road to the Montanina. During the night Donna Fedele had really believed she was dying, and now wished to go to confession, but it would be impossible for her to climb the steps of the Arsiero church.

Ordinarily the carriage that came to fetch her waited at the gate of the Villino road, and she walked down to it, but to-day it was ordered to come up to the door. There had been rain, but now the sun

was shining. Cousin Eufemia, terrified by invalid's pallor, once more implored her to stay home, but a smiling order to get into the carriage was the only answer she received. Donna Fedele's pallor was due, indeed, as much to mental suffering as to physical pain. She, as well as Lelia, had pride, and it cost her a painful effort to humble her pride before Lelia's.

She came out of the little chapel another creature and told her cousin that the drive and the air had done so much for her that she felt almost fit to climb one of those "great, ugly mountains," as the little old spinster had called them. The carriage drew up at the candelabrum chestnut, and Cousin Eufemia was sent to the Montanina to summon Lelia.

Donna Fedele sat in the carriage and waited. Usually she chatted with the driver, amusing herself by asking him questions about different people and things, and enjoying his picturesque language. Often the man had been drinking, and at such times she would first reproach him and then encourage him to talk, for the pleasure of hearing him. For his part the driver was only too happy to chat with the "Rose Countess," who, he declared, could talk better than any one else in the world. And so to-day Cousin Eufemia was hardly out of earshot when he inquired if what they were saying at Arsiero were really true, that Sior Momi's housekeeper had given him a trouncing before she left. Donna Fedele ordered him to be silent. She really felt eased by her confession, and the moment was precious to her. Ever since her girlhood she had hoped that death would come painlessly, and that to the last she should keep her senses, and, above all, her joy in life. She did not think she should recover from the operation. The thought did not grieve her, but as she sat here to-day, on this lonely road, along which as a girl she had so often walked, she was moved by a great feeling of tenderness towards the familiar scene.

Nature had never whispered its secrets to her. She was one of those to whom the language and aspect of men appealed much more than did the language and aspect of Nature. But at that moment she wondered at the tenderness she felt for the lonely road, for the quiet beauty of the landscape, for the faint voice of the falling water, for the eternal hills. It was the tenderness of a farewell. She would not return to this spot before going to Turin. And afterwards . . .

Afterwards, would she meet Marcello? She did not count on this. Who knows what feelings may awaken in that future life! Still, the thought troubled her that she had not been able to shape Lelia's future as her dead friend had desired, that she must leave her work unfinished.

The time passed and Cousin Eufemia's prolonged absence made her anxious. She heard steps behind her and looked round. It was Don Emanuele with Siora Bettina. Don Emanuele suddenly turned to his companion, said something to her, and then tore away at a great pace. Signora Fantuzzo kept on her way, and passed the carriage with a flaming face, but without looking up. Donna Fedele, who had met her once or twice, made her a charming bow, which she acknowledged with a slight inclination of her head as she hurried along. The Signora saw her go up the steps of the church, and disappear beyond the gate. "What will happen now?" she thought. "Perhaps Lelia will not come." A moment later Lelia and Cousin Eufemia appeared together at the gate. Donna Fedele drew a long breath of relief.

Cousin Eufemia, who knew that her presence was not required during the interview, sat down on the steps of the church. Lelia came towards the carriage, slowly at first, and then in haste, as she saw Donna Fedele attempting to get out, with the driver's help. She was glad that a little incident of ceremony should

relieve the embarrassment of their meeting, and Donna Fedele could be prevailed upon to stay in the carriage, the interview, in the presence of the driver, would be less painful. But Donna Fedele insisted upon getting out. She had seen that the gate leading to the narrow strip of field and to the woods beyond was open.

"We will go in there and have a little talk," said she, with her familiar smile—"where we went once before. Do you remember?"

Lelia, to whom Eufemia had spoken anxiously concerning her cousin's condition, pointed out that she would overture herself. Donna Fedele replied that she would sit down on the grass. Lelia foresaw a trying interview, and her face showed it. For a moment she hesitated, but meanwhile the attentive driver, who had overheard Donna Fedele's remarks and who knew that the grass was still soaking after the rain, took a rug from beneath his seat, and pushing open the gate, cried:

"Where will you have it, Signora Contessa?"

Then, leaning on Lelia's arm, Donna Fedele walked slowly towards the low bank between the chestnuts and the stream, where every blade of grass seemed already aware of what each woman was going to say.

Donna Fedele sat down, but Lelia remained standing.

"You have been very naughty," said the elder woman, when the driver had left them.

"I am still naughty," the young girl made answer, gazing into the stream.

Donna Fedele was silent a moment, and she also gazed into the water. Presently she said softly, without looking up:

"You should consider that you may not see me again."

"When do you leave?" Lelia inquired, in the same low tone.

Her friend's voice became a shade less gentle.

"I am starting for Turin in a day or two, but I fancy I shall shortly be leaving Turin on a longer journey."

"Don't think of such things!" Lelia cried, struggling with her emotion.

"When you hear of my death," Donna Fedele went on, "will you remember your promise to me?"

In a voice that could scarcely be heard Lelia answered, "Yes." Donna Fedele drew two letters from her bag, and handed one to the young girl.

"That contains everything," said she, "names, addresses, and instructions. My will simply contains the legacy to you."

Lelia took the letter in silence.

Donna Fedele felt that she was moved, and asked her if she were still glad she had written as she had. The girl dropped her eyes, and murmured :

"No."

"Well, here is your note," said Donna Fedele, offering her the second envelope.

"You destroy it," said Lelia, with a lingering touch of pride.

Donna Fedele opened the envelope and showed her the ashes it contained. Lelia's face flushed hotly. With a proud gesture she seized the envelope, and flung it into the stream.

"Another thing," said her wise friend. "You told me that you leave Catholicism to me. Yes, yes—to me. I know you named others as well, but you meant to wound me. Never mind if you succeeded or not! It is only the loss of faith that matters. Do you wish to inflict this last grief upon me, when I am about to die?"

"Can I believe or not, at my pleasure?" Lelia cried passionately. "It has not been your fault that I have lost my faith. I was irritated when I spoke in that way. But don't say you are going to die!

Why will you torment me ? Is not that Turin surgeon a famous operator ? He will save you ! "

" My dear," Donna Fedele replied, " I am not even sure of getting there in time for the operation. Even if I am in time, I feel that inwardly I am suffering a wreck that the shock will be too much for me. But never mind that. You will not forbid me to pray for you both in this life and the next. That is all I ask. You see, I am as proud as you are. I have just been to confess these sins of pride, with deep repentance. You must also try to rid yourself of them. Soon you will be of age, and your own mistress. I beg of you not to listen to pride there. For it is all pride with you. You know what I mean."

Lelia smiled bitterly to herself. Donna Fedele, with all her cleverness, had failed to understand.

" Remember," Donna Fedele went on, " a man is losing himself through your fault."

" Losing himself ! " Lelia murmured sarcastically.

" Yes, losing himself."

" Because he no longer believes what the priests say ? "

The sarcasm was more strongly marked now, and Donna Fedele thought for an instant.

" My bag is a very letter-box to-day," said she, and drew forth another envelope. " This is a letter I received this morning," she went on. " I don't want you to read it now. You can do so later. I leave it with you. Don't return it. I give it to you to keep. Read the closing paragraph over and over again. That is all I have to say about it. And now help me to get up. We have kept the archpriest's sister-in-law waiting far too long already."

Moved by an irresistible impulse, Lelia took the letter, thinking at the same moment that she was acting unwisely in so doing. As soon as she had taken it she wished to give it back again, but Donna Fedele was already making painful efforts to rise.

She must, of course, help her, and it proved a difficult task. When the first moment was past she could no longer return the letter with an impetuosity sufficient to enforce its acceptance, and Donna Fedele's condition forbade any contest. She told herself that after all she need not read it. Donna Fedele, who was exhausted, paused every few steps to rest, leaning heavily on Lelia's arm, and glancing frequently into her face, with a whimsical little smile at her own weakness.

"No further leave-taking, please, dear," said she. "I don't ask you to come to the Villino again. I need perfect rest before undertaking this journey. Send me a few lines when I get to Turin—Ospitale Mauriziano."

Lelia remained silent. The letter was burning her hand and her heart. On reaching the carriage it was found that the rug had been forgotten. The driver hastened to fetch it, and Cousin Eufemia, who had been having a friendly chat with him, reported that the lady from Velo had passed on her way home, and had left her apologies for not waiting for Lelia, adding that she would return on the following afternoon. Lelia seemed not to notice that she was being spoken to.

When she was about to get into the carriage, Donna Fedele murmured lovingly, and with a tender smile:

"Goodbye, my dear."

Then, at the last moment, the girl begged her to take back the letter, speaking in an undertone and with the hesitancy of one who foresees that her request will not be granted.

"Nonsense, nonsense!" said Donna Fedele.

When they were gone Lelia was seized with violent palpitation. Her heart throbbed even in her temples. She hid the letter in her dress, and sank upon the steps of the little church.

To calm herself she reflected that the letter prob-

ably spoke only of religion, and of faith lost regained, and that these were matters of perfect indifference to her. Nevertheless, its mere content filled her with a vague eagerness, with a dizzy sense that her own will had been reduced to impotence in the whirlpool of fate. She heard steps descending on her left, and rose. A couple of peasants from Lago passed her, and raised their hats. She determined to go into the house, but when she had gone a few steps, she changed her mind. In the house, in the seclusion of her own room, she would no longer be able to resist the temptation to read the letter at once, and she did not wish to do so immediately. She paused, hesitating. At last she went mechanically down the steps, and started to walk along the Lago road.

On reaching the hollow in which Lago lay Lelia took the path that led to the pond in the park, but hearing women's voices at the washing-place she retraced her steps and passed between the rows of cottages that made up the village of Lago. Now she had a fixed goal in her mind. She would go along the military road across Priaforà, overhanging the gorges of the Posina, where she had often been to gather rhododendrons. She reached the wild stretches, swept bare by landslips, as the sun, that had already touched the upper peaks, was rapidly leaving them. A cold wind was blowing in the gorges of Posina, over the heap of dead stone, and the enormous boulders which have rolled downwards from the naked, forbidding heights into the ravine, so full of shadow and ceaseless roarings. Leaving the road, Lelia climbed upwards on her left among the blossoming rhododendrons. She seated herself there, the only living figure in this great windy desert, and began mechanically to pick the flowers on each side of her. She heaped them in her lap and held them in her hands, and for a long time let her eyes and thoughts rest quietly

upon them. Then, with as much composure as she could muster, she brought out the letter, restrained her desire to glance through it in search of her own name, and proceeded to read it slowly from beginning to end.

"DEAR MOTHER FEDELE,—I would have you know that I am on the high-road to fame and fortune. The day before yesterday the family of a young man whom I had attended for a sprained ankle sent a regular greengrocer's shop to the hotel for me. There was goat's cheese, and there were sausages and mushrooms. Yesterday a very neat, timid, and humble young priest made me a present of a small phial of Modena vinegar,¹ because I had refused to accept a fee for a visit I paid to his old mother, who is suffering with varicose veins. The Lord only knows how he came by the vinegar! This morning the sacristan's wife sent for me, and the child who came with the message brought me a basket of walnuts at the same time, that I might not be able to avoid going. The inn-keeper's wife says I have a great future before me, and that if I go on like this, I shall soon be sent for even from remote Puria, which is a small cluster of houses, some twenty minutes' walk from here.

"Can one on whom fortune thus smiles wish to die? Alas, yes! From time to time I myself am that foolish person! At such moments I feel that I should be happy to sleep beneath the stunted cypresses of the little Dasio cemetery, which are as melancholy as my own sad destiny. And, as I am not wanting in poetic sentiment, I dream that the stunted cypresses, feeding on my heart, would grow

¹ Modena vinegar is prepared in small barrels from the best of wine, to which certain aromatic herbs are added. It is allowed to become very old and, when thoroughly mellowed, a few drops added to a bottle of ordinary vinegar impart a most delicious flavour.—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE.

into two great dark columns, marking the triumph of death. When I rouse myself and accuse myself of cowardice, I am forced to confess that, although cowardice may be contemptible, I have, after a very little to live for.

"I do not allude to the friends to whom my death would bring sorrow; as a matter of fact, there are but two in number—yourself and Don Aurelio and I believe that could Don Aurelio know I had died a natural death, in my bed, after having received all the consolations of the Catholic religion, he would think me fortunate, and be comforted. You, dear friend, would take things less philosophically, and would mourn for me a little longer, but, if I mistake not, you yourself do not greatly value this life, and would therefore not mourn too much for a good friend who had set out on his journey towards the next world, having made his exit with every mark of respect for Holy Mother Church. You may wonder that I now talk of marks of respect, after what I wrote in my last letter, and you will quickly infer that, feeling myself about to sink, I have cried out, 'Lord, save me!' as you advised me to do, and that He has answered my appeal. Dear friend, it is true enough that I have cried out, and it may also be true that the Lord is even now accomplishing my salvation, but not in the way you think. Truth rests, perhaps, at the bottom of the sea, rather than on its surface. But if I were about to die, I should send for a priest, in order to avoid scandalising these good people here. And this would be no act of hypocrisy. A supreme desire to meet death truthfully and humbly would move me to confess my sins, and I should receive the Communion in memory of Him whom I could have wished to follow into the high places and across the waves of Galilee, instead of following the endless procession of mitres, skull-caps, tricorns, and hoods, and of black, white, and

purple robes that to-day walks before us. But this is not yet the root of the matter. I feel I am still floundering in troubled waters, but I know that I still cling instinctively to my old faith, and that I shall find rest and freedom from doubt in that untroubled haven where all must come at last. If I compared what I believed a year ago with what I believe to-day, I ask myself—and the very question fills me with horror—if to-morrow I shall still believe in God. This light of my spirit, that until yesterday burned steadily enough, is already beginning to waver.

"Well, I should be uttering falsehood if I told you that I wished to die for this reason. No, were it only for this I should long more intensely still to live. I should forbid myself to think of religious matters, I should forbid myself both denial and belief, I should become the father, brother, and friend of these poor people, seeking to bestow upon them all I have that is worth giving, living poorly myself; I should seek a companion whom I could love both with my spirit and my senses, and fall asleep at last, unaffrighted by an unsolved mystery. But I am cruelly shut out from this Paradise. If I wish to die it is because the fever that I sought to overcome, that, for a moment, I believed I could conquer, the fever that is called Lelia, now rages more fiercely than before, burning me, and consuming my being, while I am powerless to resist."

At this point the blood coursed hot through Lelia's veins, a cloud came in front of her eyes, and she felt herself as a helpless atom in the presence of a compelling fate. She spread the letter on the heap of rhododendrons in her lap, raised them in her trembling hands, and held them to her face, as if to inhale their perfume, wishing to hide, even from the spirits of the air, the yearning kiss she pressed upon those wonderful words. She was conquered, she was his, she was the woman of his desire,

who would live in poverty with him, who would shut herself up with him in that nest among the mountains, far away from the world, who would comfort him for all the past bitterness, who would help him to do good and with him face the inscrutable mystery of life, aye, and if need be, of death too. Tears rose in her throat, and letting the flowers fall to her lap again, she tried not to think and to forget herself in looking at a wild pink that trembled in the wind as her own hands were trembling. When she felt that she was once more mistress of herself, she went on reading.

"It may be that here I am easily governed by fancy, or that the sad and tender poetry of the place appeals to me. I cannot say. I only know that I am torn with longing, that I spend hours in looking, not at her picture, for that I do not possess, but at a scrap of paper on which she one day wrote the name of a piece of music for me. I bend over it and breathe in the faint perfume that still clings to it, and wrings my soul as did the divine music of Schumann's 'Aveu' which she once played to me. You see, dear Mother Fedele, I am indeed telling you everything, as a son would. This morning I could bear it no longer and walked out beyond the village, whence I could see, rising above the tops of the mountains, a solitary peak that reminds me, oh so much, of the peak I stood gazing upon through the window in the upper gallery at the Montanina, as I listened to the music of 'Aveu.' I cannot bring myself to turn away from it—its associations are so vivid.

"And there is one other thing I must tell you, the most important thing of all. There is no contempt in my love now. I no longer feel that I have the right to despise one who misjudged me only because she did not know me. My only right, a right and a duty at the same time, is to preserve my dignity, should we two ever meet again."

At this point Lelia smiled, and then quickly pressed a kiss upon the words, as if craving pardon for her smile. She read on.

"To-morrow I am going down to Albogasio to make the final arrangements with the mayor for the interment of Benedetto's remains in the cemetery there, in a few days' time. I have written to his friends in Rome that I gladly undertake all the arrangements, out of respect for his dear memory, but that I do not feel I can speak at his grave, as my friends wish me to do. My faith in an immortal Catholicism will rest in that grave with him. Should I speak I could only say that I mourn for him who inspired it, and for the faith itself.

"And now, goodbye. Write to me about yourself. If you really believe I could do better for you than your own doctors, I will come to you. But I myself do not think so. They are men of experience, while I am but a novice, and must now set out to attend the sacristan's wife. Once more, goodbye.

"Your

"PRODIGAL SON

"(who must be satisfied with the husks!)"

Beneath the signature were the words :

"Make no mistake. The ruining of this soul is your work—yours—yours alone! Yet I feel that God will restore him. May He, in His wisdom and mercy, make you the restorer. Then think of your poor friend, and pray for her.

"FEDELE."

Lelia did not linger over this postscript, but turned once again to those other passionate words, reading and kissing them again and again. At last she put away the letter with a long sigh of contentment. A tremendous sense of physical wellbeing seized her; and she stood up and stretched out her arms as if

to embrace a wonderful new world that had been given her. Then she looked around, afraid lest she might have been seen, but no one was near. She stooped to gather up the flowers that had slipped from her lap, and started homewards, eager to reach her own room, and eager also to experience this joyful new feeling in the presence of others. She walked rapidly, with the elastic, buoyant tread of a happy being.

Just outside the villa she met Teresina, who was full of admiration for the flowers—at least, so she said; but in reality the maid was amazed by the new light in the Signora's eyes. She reported that Siora Bettina had seemed annoyed at being neglected for Donna Fedele. "Was she?" said Lelia. "I am sorry. What did she want?" And she went to her room without waiting for an answer and again lost herself in the letter. She hung the bunch of rhododendrons upon the headboard of the bed, with the blossoms downwards, that they might touch her hair and that, by raising her face, she might kiss them. Drawing one flower from the bunch, Lelia went down to the dining-room, and placed it on the table in a tall glass, that she might look at it while dining alone, later on. Then she passed into the drawing-room, and, seating herself at the piano, began playing "Aveu" as she had never played it before, and it seemed to her that the piano understood and was inspired too. The thought came to her that *his* being might perhaps vibrate in response, there in his far-away retreat. She played the melody through several times, then wandered about the room in search of the spot whence she could see the dolomitic peak. Once more she returned to the piano, and wrung from it the broken accents of an overwhelming passion.

"Gésu!" thought Teresina, who was setting the table, "whatever ails her now?"

CHAPTER XIV

A DROP OF THE PATERNAL BLOOD

I

LELIA requested Teresina to wait upon her at dinner instead of Giovanni, and talked to her very pleasantly on several unimportant matters. The maid, finding her in such good-humour, ventured upon a delicate subject, and mentioned Siora Bettina, who intended making a short excursion to Monte Berico. Ah, how Teresina would have liked to accompany her! Signora Fantuzzo had told her of one of the Fathers there who was a wonderful confessor. Would not the Signorina herself like to make this little excursion? Monte Berico was such a beautiful spot, and Siora Bettina would be a delightful companion. Such a good creature, poor Siora Bettina! They could start in the morning at six o'clock, reaching Vicenza at eight, and go directly up to Monte Berico. If they wished to, they could catch the eleven o'clock train home. But there was no hurry, for there were plenty of trains back. As Lelia made no remark, Teresina volunteered to suggest this arrangement to Signora Fantuzzo.

Lelia sat with a far-away look on her face that told Teresina nothing. Still, it was encouraging not to meet with a definite refusal. Giovanni came in with a telegram, but not even when he had left the room did the maid venture to press Lelia for an immediate answer. The telegram was from Sior

Momi, who had been expected to arrive by the train, and now announced that he would not come until the following day. Towards nine o'clock the archpriest and his chaplain appeared, expecting to find Sior Momi at home. They entered the drawing room unannounced, the archpriest leading the way, with his familiar, drawling greeting, "C'permesso!"

Lelia was playing. It was no longer "Ave Maria" but some other music she remembered to have played when Massimo had been there. Greatly annoyed, she rose from the piano. Over and above her own particular grounds for disliking the two priests, she loathed the archpriest's tone of familiarity, his coarseness, and his want of personal cleanliness. Neither could she bear the chaplain's mannerisms. Her reception was glacial. She gave no order for the lamp to be lighted nor for coffee to be served as usual, and when the archpriest mentioned that his sister-in-law had been disappointed at not having seen her she offered no word of excuse. The chaplain spoke of a poor mother at Lago, whom he wished the two ladies to visit, and Lelia's only response was to inquire where the woman lived, without saying whether or no she intended to visit her. Hereupon the archpriest advised her not to delay their visit, as his sister-in-law was going away very soon, to be gone a day or perhaps two. Lelia showed astonishment. "To be gone two days? Yes, very probably. Don't you remember Tita remarked that the chaplain was going to say Mass at the church of Santa Maria on the morrow, and he would ask Siora Bettina to be there, that the ladies might then arrange for their visit. Having brought his little speech to a close he sealed it with a "Sipo, sipo! Just so, just so!" The archpriest's "just so!" always meant leave-taking. If he said it in his own house, his visitor was intended to understand that it was time for him to go. If he said it in the house of another, gently rubbing

his thighs the while, he intended it as meaning that he himself was about to depart. He had indeed half risen from his chair when an unexpected question from Lelia made him sit down again. She inquired where his sister-in-law was going. The archpriest's expression, which had been frosty enough up to this moment, now thawed into genial warmth, and the chaplain's watery eyes, which had been roaming aimlessly among the books on a table near at hand, were quickly raised to Lelia's face, and rested there while the archpriest explained wordily that his sister-in-law had long wished to perform her devotions at the sanctuary on Monte Berico, that she furthermore intended going on to Castelletto del Garda to visit the nuns of the Order of the Holy Family, but that she would have to give up this part of the excursion unless she could find a travelling companion.

"I asked," said Lelia, "because I think I myself might like to go with her, at least to Monte Berico."

"Oh!" cried the archpriest in great glee, "nothing could be better! Nothing could be better!"

Lelia hastened to add that she could not promise at present, that she would think it over, and that, at any rate, she must consult her father. Having said good-night, the archpriest departed with the chaplain, voicing his satisfaction in an undertone: "Good! Good! Splendid!" He had hardly left the room, however, when he came back again that he might see Lelia alone, and confidently assure her that the inspiration to go to Monte Berico had really been sent by Our Lady herself, and that, if she went, she must see Father . . . , naming the monk whose praises Signora Fantuzzo had sung to Teresina.

On rejoining his companion, who was waiting for him half-way to the gate, the archpriest walked rapidly away beside him, with the step of one who is gratified and full of hope. He asked no more than that the girl should approach the Sacraments

of her own free will. It would perhaps have been better had the archpriest served God and the Church more intelligently, with greater wisdom, and with more of the warmth of the true evangelical spirit; but it could not be denied that he was an honest and faithful servant. Like many of his fellow-priests he had very little true charity for such as erred in matters of faith, and he would have pitched the cheerfully from the crags of Mea into the rushing Astico beneath, calling them "poor, unhappy creatures" as he did so. But for sins of any other description he had a rough tolerance and a forgiving heart, for to do him justice he took a broader view of the world and conduct than from the standpoint of the rigid dogmatist. His conviction was that Lelia was a wayward girl, ignorant in matters of religion, and quite capable of committing blunders both in conduct and practice; but that, after all, if she would but set herself right with the Church, one might safely rely on the indulgence of Him who had seen fit to give her the nature of an unbroken colt. In his secret soul he laughed at Don Emanuele for hoping to make a nun of her. To Don Emanuele, the pilgrimage to Monte Berico was but a first step, and he dared not rejoice over-much, when he considered the influence Donna Fedele was continuously wielding over the girl. He was, moreover, in possession of a piece of alarming information, which, should it reach Lelia's ears, would certainly cause her to turn ever more eagerly to the Villino delle Rose. Carolina Gorlago was not at Cantù, but at Padua, hiding in Camin's house. This intrigue which had not been dropped, which was reprehensible in itself, and doubly so because it was boldly incautious, might throw discredit upon the culprit's ecclesiastical friends. And who would profit by this if not Donna Fedele? She was undoubtedly working to bring about the Camin-Alberti marriage. Fortunately, however, Lelia shrank from this union, as her at-

tempted suicide proved clearly enough, and, fortunately also, Donna Fedele would be compelled to be away for some time. This fact was also known at the parsonage. Don Emanuele would not allow himself to hope for anything worse than an operation and a long convalescence. He was even willing to assume that she would recover, although this was more than she deserved, for the probability justified him in adopting decisive measures during her absence in Turin. The first step to be taken was to turn the girl's thoughts towards God, and to discover a means of once more arousing within her that rebellious contempt for the world that had moved her to attempt to take her life. Then the prospect of peace and safety in a religious life must be skilfully held out to her, but it must be a religious life carefully suited to her. Castelletto del Garda would not do at all. That was foolish Siora Bettina's idea. Lelia was not fitted by Nature to teach or to nurse the sick. She must enter a contemplative order. Thus did Don Emanuele, trotting towards Velo beside the archpriest, ruminatè upon all these considerations, but he carefully kept them to himself.

* * * * *

As Lelia returned to the piano she thought: "After all, perhaps I have a drop of my father's blood in my veins!"

She would not allow the lamps to be lighted, and going to her room presently, stationed herself at the window. The east was bright with countless stars, and above the great crest of black, majestic forest the sharp mountain edge fretted the clear sky. Lelia saw neither the sky, the crest of forest, nor the peaks of Summano. Her mind was centred upon a fixed purpose, and her unseeing glance rested upon the encompassing shadows, while her slender frame trembled and quivered with the wild beating of her heart.

II

On the following morning Don Emanuele came to say Mass at Santa Maria at half-past seven, half an hour earlier than was his wont. Siora Bettina, who had arrived before him, informed him that Lelia was out. The maid Teresina believed she had gone to Villino delle Rose, but, in reality, she had climbed up to the rhododendron patch once more. Don Emanuele, putting on his look of extreme godliness considered for a moment, and then begged Siora Bettina to wait for him after Mass. He said Mass with profound devotion, and then, bending low over his kneeling-stool in the sacristy, with his head in his hands, he prayed at great length, that the Lord would grant him strength and guidance in his struggle against the demon who was seeking to frustrate the plans for Lelia's salvation, by raising up two of his own handmaidens against them, one a creature of pride, Donna Fedele, the other a creature of lust, Carolina Gorlago. He prayed on and on with all the confidence of the inferior who is on terms of comparative familiarity with his superior, terms established in part through long intercourse, in part by services rendered by the suppliant. While a rivulet of pious Latin still flowed from his lips, he passed unconsciously from mental prayer to thoughts that clustered about a further anxiety concerning possibilities that were troubling him most seriously, and that were incessantly appearing, disappearing, and flashing forth again before his mental vision. One consideration would become entangled in another, and Don Emanuele could neither see the end of the tangle nor did he know where to look for it. At such moments of anxiety the rivulet of Latin would cease to flow from his tight lips. At last, however, he discovered the right end to pull in order to loosen the very heart of the

tangle. He pulled and pulled, and the cord ran out straight and easily as if Providence had planned this snare for Don Emanuele's especial benefit, that this fisher of souls might have the merit of finding the right way, and go on unwinding until he should have demonstrated that all this tangle of knots, loops, and twists could be straightened out into one divine length of cord, for the manufacturing of his own net. Such, at least, was the fisher's honest conviction.

Meanwhile Siora Bettina was asking herself if she had not better peep in at the door of the sacristy, for she had been waiting a long time seated in front of the altar, and her devotions were exhausted. She had found it difficult to keep her mind from wandering off to the splashing of the fountain in the vestibule, in preventing herself from wondering where the water came from, where it went to, and whether it were cold and pure. Then there was a spot on the green carpet that covered the steps leading to the altar, to which, all too often, her eyes would revert, and which excited her curiosity as to whether it were a grease spot of long standing or the result of a recent wetting. No, it would not do to look into the sacristy, so she sought to cast off the temptations of fountain and spot, by meditating for her own edification on Don Emanuele's sanctity and on the state of mystic abstraction that was detaining him so long.

He rose from his knees at last, but his expression was no brighter than when he had first knelt down. Requesting the altar-boy to go and see if Lelia had returned, he followed him out of the sacristy, and signed to Siora Bettina to join him in the little porch. The boy soon returned and reported that the Signorina was still absent.

Don Emanuele now addressed himself to Signora Fantuzzo, and related the conversation that had taken place between Lelia and the archpriest on the preceding evening. Siora Bettina, who had not seen her brother-in-law since the conversation in ques-

tion, received the impression from the chaplain's recital that Don Tita's and Don Emanuele's prayers had been graciously answered, her own humble petitions having perhaps helped somewhat. She asked what she was to do next. First of all she must write for Lelia and tell her that she had been informed by the archpriest that Lelia was thinking of accompanying her to the sanctuary at Monte Berico, and perhaps also to Castelletto del Garda. Siora Bettina hastened to correct what she took to be a slip of the tongue. She had not had her information from the archpriest, but from Don Emanuele himself. The chaplain, however, requested her to keep back his name, and to mention the archpriest only. "To tell the truth," Siora Bettina ventured timidly, "my brother-in-law has not . . . Never mind!" Don Emanuele broke in. "The Lord wishes you to speak as I shall instruct you," and Siora Bettina in all humility and good faith bowed to his superior knowledge of the Divine intentions.

But his edifying instructions did not end here. Probably the Signorina would tell her, as she had told the archpriest, that she must first obtain her father's permission. Now, this permission must be made to extend to Castelletto del Garda also. Siora Bettina brightened visibly. She was longing to go to Castelletto, but would never dare to go so far alone. A different companion, Teresina for instance, would have been more acceptable to her, but out of devotion to her spiritual guide, she gladly accepted the slight drawback of Lelia's company. She was also pleased on her brother-in-law's account. He had already formed a scheme for placing these sisters of the Order of the Holy Family in charge of some charitable institution in his future diocese, and was anxious to obtain some necessary information direct from them. Observing her satisfaction, Don Emanuele reflected for a moment, and then proposed that they should continue their conversation

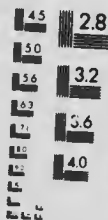
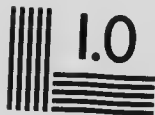
while they walked along the Lago road. Bettina became vaguely aware that he had something still more important to impart, and that he wished to make his disclosure in a spot less exposed to interruptions. In fact, as soon as they had reached the shade of the great chestnuts on the Lago road, Don Emanuele, his eyes now fixed upon the ground, now glancing around to see that no one was in sight, began with a preamble on the absolute necessity that Siora Bettina should keep silent concerning what he had decided to communicate to her. Without mentioning him directly, he made her understand that the archpriest was to be kept in ignorance. The very thought of hiding anything from the archpriest sent the blood coursing painfully through her veins, but as Don Emanuele, in a tone of honest conviction and lofty authority, was now speaking of a path that Providence Itself had pointed out to him for the saving of two souls, she concluded that the path was too narrow for three to walk abreast, and waited for the Word, in the pleased consciousness of having been chosen as an instrument. The Word was to the following effect. As Signorina Lelia had alluded to the necessity of obtaining the paternal consent, Siora Bettina could now dispense with consulting the girl herself. She must interview Sior Momi instead, who would return from Padua at one o'clock, and ask his permission (in the archpriest's name as well) to propose the pilgrimage to Monte Berico and Castelletto del Garda to his daughter. Then she must proceed to make this proposal and to fix the day. "To-morrow is too soon," said Don Emanuele. "Arrange for the day after." Had he himself been an all-powerful Providence, he could not have mapped out the future with greater assurance and more calmly settled the affairs of other people.

"At Monte Berico," he went on, "you will closely observe the Signorina's bearing on approaching the Sacraments. After Mass, go directly to the station.



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When you get there, tell your companion that you are not feeling well, and have decided not to go on to Castelletto, but to hear a Mass at the church of the *Santo* instead. You will then take the eleven o'clock train to Padua. After Mass suggest to the Signorina that, out of respect to her father, it would be fitting for her to pay a visit to his apartment, where there might be letters, papers, or cards for him. Now that apartment harbours a person who has no right to be there, for it was publicly given out here that she was going into Lombardy, and was separating definitely from Signor Camin. Signorina Lelia must meet this person. It is necessary that she should meet her. I believe I have nothing further to add."

Poor Siora Bettina was so horrified that she stopped short.

"Good Lord! Good Lord, Don Emanuele!" she cried. She could put up with the disappointment of not going to Castelletto, she could put up with the many falsehoods, but the scene that would be sure to follow this meeting! She had a vague idea of the nature of the relations existing between Sior Momi and Carolina, but her scrupulous conscience had never allowed her to dwell on the subject, and now that Don Emanuele had opened her eyes, the prospect of meeting the woman filled her with horror. She asked anxiously whether she must indeed do this. The priest gave her a silent answer, bending his head and joining his hands piously, as if in humble submission to the Higher Will, which they were both bound to obey.

"You may say I am ignorant, Don Emanuele! You may say I am stupid, but——" Poor Siora Bettina did not dare to go beyond this pathetic admission, and confess that she failed to grasp the reason for all these tactics. Don Emanuele understood well enough, but did not enlighten her. His plan was based on certain fragile chances, too slight

for definition, and he was not going to imperil his scheme by an explanation. He relied upon the impression which contact with what was degrading should make upon Lelia. Should it induce her to take refuge in a religious life, an important result would follow . . . the Trento fortune would not be swallowed up by her father's depravities. Thus was poor Sior Momi secretly cast overboard by his ally the chaplain, who, however, continued piously to hope that the scandal in Padua might result in much good to Momi's soul.

Instead of satisfying Siora Bettina's anxiety, he inquired blandly if she proposed to turn back or to walk on by way of Lago and Sant' Ubaldo.

"I myself am going to read my office," he announced, bringing out his breviary.

Siora Bettina knew that Don Emanuele always avoided showing himself in public in the company of women. She chose the Lago—Sant' Ubaldo route, fearing to meet Lelia on her way home from the Villino, for, as she had been instructed to see Sior Momi first, such a meeting would have proved embarrassing. The chaplain had believed she would choose the other and shorter way, and as he himself had no desire to meet Lelia there was nothing left for him save to stop where he was, open his breviary, and say :

"Well, then——"

And although Siora Bettina longed to implore him to relieve her of the obligation he had forced upon her, she could only murmur a melancholy farewell and start on her way to Lago.

Don Emanuele did not move until she was out of sight ; then he went slowly onward. On reaching the first legitimate break in his devotions he closed the book and pocketed it again. He had just passed through the rows of Lago cottages and was walking along the road that skirts the base of the hill upon which stands the little church

of Sant' Ubaldo. He was thinking of Don Aurelio and of the power that he, Don Emanuele, had exercised in that priest's affairs. It was he who had sent almost daily information to Rome concerning the doings, sayings, and omissions of the suspected priest, colouring all things in accordance with what he suspected and not what he saw. The archpriest's future bishopric was of his promoting also. It was he who had spoken to his uncle the Cardinal concerning Don Tita, who had set forth his fearless ecclesiasticism, his veneration for tradition, his merry good-nature and affability, which could not fail to render him popular.

The idea of now winning a precious and imperilled soul for the convent sent the blood coursing joyously through his veins. Instead of raising his face to the breeze, and delighting in his own valour, he bowed his head before God, like a faithful servant upon whom his astonished master heaps praise for some great service rendered. Then, forgetting to be humble, he allowed himself to triumph gently over Donna Fedele, identifying himself, as it were, with the Providence who had decreed this illness in order that it might become more difficult for her to hinder his pious plans, and that, through suffering, she might be brought to recognise her evildoing. The road he was following as he thus mused had been Don Aurelio's daily walk, and at such times Nature had spoken in her myriad voices to that pure and humble soul, who with St. Francis welcomed all things as his brothers. But poor Don Emanuele, never doubting the worth of his appreciation of St. Francis, passed along with no strange, mystical sense of a life in natural things, without even a glance at flower or leaf. The only God he knew spoke in those false imaginings of his own mind—he saw no other light but that narrow one within his own soul.

III

When Giovanni announced Siora Bettina, Sior Momi was busy writing to Carolina, from whom he had parted during a quarrel that had arisen between them on account of the woman's jealousy of Teresina. He was now informing her that this same Teresina had not only left his room in disorder, but had as yet failed to show her face, and he added that he really feared he should die in this stupid hole without his precious Moma. Siora Bettina followed Giovanni into the room before he had finished announcing her, thus giving Sior Momi barely time to turn over the sheet and display the whiteness of an immaculate page. He started to his feet, much embarrassed by the disordered state of his garments, and overwhelmed his visitor with excuses and his servant with reproaches. "For mercy's sake! Oh, Giovanni, Giovanni! In this state, my dear madam!" As he was minus both waistcoat and cravat, he hastily buttoned his frock-coat and turned up the collar. At sight of his bare neck and voluminous expanse of shirtfront, Siora Bettina had felt most uncomfortable, but the upturned collar and snugly-buttoned coat having transformed him into a sort of symbolic statue of up-to-date modesty, the good lady regained her composure somewhat, confessed that it had been all her fault, and that she had followed at the footman's heels so closely because, as she must speak to Sior Momi in private, she had wished him to receive her in the study.

Signora Fantuzzo began by saying timidly that she had come to ask a great favour. Sior Momi blinked rapidly, wondering what tiresome subject she was going to broach.

"Anything I can do for you . . ." he said, without enthusiasm.

Siora Bettina smiled, forcing herself to be friendly and stated that for many reasons she had long desired to undertake a certain short journey, for which the right moment appeared to have arrived, for she would accommodate her brother-in-law the arch-priest to have her go now; but that there was an obstacle in the way of her carrying out her plan. Here she paused, fixed her eyes on Sior Momi, and smiled with a meaning that she believed was rapidly being made clear to him.

"Money?" Momi wondered. "Can it be money?" and he grew very red.

"I am all alone," Siora Bettina went on. "And you see . . . it is so unpleasant to travel alone!"

"Upon my soul!" the amazed Momi exclaimed to himself, as it suddenly struck him that she was going to ask him to accompany her.

"I am very sorry," he began, "but—" Here he stopped, his mouth open, and his face wearing an expression so eloquent that Siora Bettina could not help understanding. Her outraged modesty made her shrink into herself, and she sought vainly to hide her scandalised face behind the handle of her parasol. The fear betrayed on that red-and-yellow countenance was so monstrous that she was as incapable of protesting against it as she would have been of pronouncing an improper word.

"My only hope is in Signorina Lelia!" she hastened to say. "I have come to ask your permission to take her with me if she would like to go."

Sior Momi, who was greatly relieved, again repeated, "I am sorry," adapting his tone as well as he could to the altered circumstances.

"I am sorry, but I have no idea whether she would care to go." He then inquired where Signora Fantuzzo was going, and by what route. He was glad that Monte Berico was on the programme, and remarked that he himself had made a pilgrimage

there years ago, as a member of a religious association. Of Castelletto he had never even heard, but on learning of the monastery, and noticing Siora Bettina's embarrassment—for as a matter of fact she was not in the habit of deceiving, and took no pleasure in so doing—he interpreted her very obvious nervousness as a sign that this little journey was part of the pious scheme friend Molesin had communicated to him. Assuming his most idiotic expression, he gurgled, with a short laugh:

"A very good opportunity—aho, aho!" happily conscious that the giggle and the words might mean anything—approval, irony, or laughing scepticism.

Presently he inquired if Lelia had been consulted. No, not yet, but if Sior Momi felt inclined to allow . . . Here Momi acquiesced with a bow. Perhaps, then, it would be well to see the Signorina at once. The archpriest himself was anxious that she should avail herself of this opportunity of going to the sanctuary on Monte Berico, and he would like her to decide immediately, without first consulting certain dangerous persons.

"Quite right!" said Sior Momi. "Quite right, I am sure!"

Having thus elliptically expressed his agreement with Siora Bettina's and the archpriest's opinion of "certain dangerous persons," he rang the bell and ordered Giovanni to show the visitor into the drawing-room, and to call the Signorina.

"Arrange everything yourself," he said, on taking leave of Signora Fantuzzo. "It will be all quite right, quite right, I am sure."

As soon as he was alone once more he rang for Teresina. He had long since become aware of her devotion to Lelia, and now he talked to her of his daughter as if he had been talking into a gramophone.

He began by telling her of Siora Bettina's plans, adding that he had refrained from raising any difficulties because it was not his intention to force his

authority upon his daughter in any way, but that he greatly feared they were trying to push her in a direction of which he distinctly disapproved. His one wish was to find a good husband for Lelia. Having accomplished this, he would turn the property over to him, and return to his old life in Padua. But he must know the girl's inclinations. The Signora Fantuzzo seemed a good creature, and the archpriest was a holy man. If Lelia were really destined to lead a life of devotion, why, of course he must bow to the will of the Lord, but if, on the other hand, she were destined to remain in the world, his duty as a father made it imperative for him to safeguard her against these pilgrimages and these visits to nunneries.

"Do you catch my meaning?" Sior Momi concluded. He had been blinking fast while delivering his cunning speech, but had never dropped the idiotic expression he was wont to assume when conversing with his equals.

"Mark my words!" said Teresina. "You can safely let Signorina Lelia visit a hundred nunneries. There is not the slightest danger. And if she performs her religious duties at Monte Berico tomorrow, it will be a very good thing!"

* * * * *

"Well done!" she exclaimed later, on learning that Lelia had promised to start with Siora Bettina on the day after the morrow for Monte Berico and Castelletto. Sior Momi, who also seemed astonished, sent to invite the archpriest, the chaplain, and Siora Bettina to dinner on the next day. That same evening, before going to bed, he begged Lelia to allow him a few moments' conversation. He addressed her in an undertone, in a half-serious, half-joking manner, and gave her to understand that he had an idea the Velo priests and Siora Bettina had some designs upon her, and that he felt it his

duty to put her on her guard. With a great show of gravity he added that he himself disapproved of those designs, and that it would give him great pain should she allow them to be carried out. Lelia listened in icy silence.

"Is there anything more?" she inquired, when he had finished speaking. "Thank you," she said, and left him.

IV

The archpriest had been summoned to Vicenza by the Bishop to receive the official communication of his appointment, and so could not attend Sior Momi's dinner-party, but the chaplain and Siora Bettina came. Bettina, who was some hundred yards in front of the priest, suddenly came to a standstill by the steps of the little church. Thereupon the chaplain stopped too. Siora Bettina, looking behind her to see if he were coming, made a sign that conveyed nothing to him, and then, to his utter amazement and great indignation, actually started to meet him. It had just struck the poor woman that, after all, she had not made the precise purpose of their pilgrimage to Monte Berico clear to Lelia. She had indeed mentioned one of the monks who was an admirable confessor, but the girl had said nothing from which they might conclude that she intended to avail herself of his ministrations. It would be too late to discuss this tomorrow on the journey. What should she do? There was nothing for it but to consult the oracle.

"Go, go all the same," was the oracle's reply. "Don't worry, don't be anxious."

She went on ahead again, somewhat downcast and mortified, and in the little porch she met Teresina, who found an excuse for detaining her until the chaplain had passed, walking very stiffly and soberly.

When he was some distance away the maid, who had a weight upon her mind, proceeded to relieve her feelings. Where was this Castelletto? How far away? How many days did Siora Bettina intend to remain there? Signora Fantuzzo grew very nervous and stammered somewhat as she assured Teresina that she intended to pay the nuns only a short visit. As she answered she saw herself on her knees before the confessional at the sanctuary of Monte Berico. Should she or should she not confess the lie she had been ordered to tell? Absorbed in this consideration, she paid little heed to the beginning of Teresina's speech. The maid was extremely uneasy, and declared she could make nothing of what was going on, because, although the Signorina talked of a speedy return, she had made her put a good deal of linen into the portmanteau, together with several religious books and some holy pictures that had always been in the house, but to which Lela had hitherto been perfectly indifferent. Her very expression seemed changed since this journey had been decided upon. She had got hold of a railway time-table, and did nothing but study it. That very morning, while Teresina was brushing her hair, she had looked up from the time-table to inquire abruptly, "Teresina, would you be sorry if my hair were cut off?" The woman had answered that of course she would, and added, "But why should you talk about cutting it off?" "Oh, you know, it sometimes happens that hair is cut off by thieves." And presently she had asked, "Teresina, did you ever want to become a nun?"

"Just think of that!" the maid concluded. "This is either madness or fever. For the love of Heaven, don't make any mistake, don't imagine she has a vocation! She has not, I tell you—not in the slightest degree!"

"Gésummaria!" thought Signora Fantuzzo, paying but little heed to Teresina's scepticism. And

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they were not really going to Castelletto after all !
And Don Emanuele was in ignorance of all this !
She could not suppress a groan, and, her legs almost
giving way beneath her, she sank upon a beam that
had been left there to serve as a bench. " Oh, oh,
oh ! " she moaned, but Teresina did not understand
the true meaning of these lamentations.

" Never mind," she said. " Only you must insist
on bringing her home with you."

" Yes, indeed ! " poor Bettina assured her, but
she could not keep back another pitiful groan. She
rose at last, however, and started up the path. Lelia
came out to meet her, and inquired with eager in-
terest if she had thought to let the nuns at Castelletto
know they were coming. Poor Bettina had so com-
pletely lost her head, and the infection of the first
lie had spread so rapidly, that she now told an
unnecessary falsehood, and declared she had
announced their arrival. She had not finished
speaking, however, before she longed to recall her
words, but she lacked the courage, and was altogether
so dazed and bewildered that she hardly knew where
she was.

During dinner she never opened her lips either
to speak or to eat, notwithstanding Sior Momi's
respectful encouragement and the noisy attentions of
the new curate of Lago, a fat and florid young
man, overflowing with good-humour and banter,
which, by reason of its flippancy and frequent im-
propriety, was most distasteful to Don Emanuele.
The merits of his Excellency Don Tita formed the
first subject of conversation, and were discussed at
length. His promotion was now a matter of public
knowledge, and Don Emanuele—who made sure of
being appointed secretary to his Excellency, but
who was destined to be unceremoniously cut adrift
by that same cunning prelate, who had flattered him
even while longing for the opportunity of ridding
himself of him—Don Emanuele, with unctuous

solemnity, took upon himself to deliver a very panegyric of the new bishop, whom, in his secret soul, he looked upon as a poor creature, and a superior whom it would be easy to lead by the nose. As it happened, however, it was often really the chaplain's nose that was held firmly between the episcopal thumb and finger. Don Emanuele did not praise Don Tita for the virtues he really possessed—for the purity of his life, the firmness of his faith, the number of his charities—but precisely for those attributes which he lacked, such as learning and eloquence. Siora Bettina sat watching him with sad and anxious eyes that said plainly enough, "I *must* tell you something!" Don Emanuele, believing she wished to reopen the discussion he had warded off on their way to the house, paid no attention to her mute appeal.

Dinner over, Sior Momi, having consulted Lelia by a humble glance, invited his guests to repair to the terrace in front of the villa for coffee. Siora Bettina continued to look appealingly at Don Emanuele, and at last, feeling sure of the cause of her insistence, and having completely lost his patience, he asked Lelia's permission to give her a message from his Excellency. He made it clear that he wished to speak to her apart, but was careful not to withdraw quite out of Siora Bettina's hearing, as he handed to Lelia a rosary that had been duly blessed, and recommended, in becoming language, that she should hold it in her hand on approaching the Sacraments on the following morning. Lelia thanked him, and took the rosary.

Sior Momi himself led the conversation towards the nuns of Castelletto. Steering his bark cautiously between the filial Scylla and the ecclesiastical Charybdis, he declared his satisfaction that his Lelia should have the opportunity of visiting them. The facetious priest, who had but slight regard for nuns in general, and was unacquainted with this par-

particular order, mumbled: "They are probably just like all the rest! They are all alike!" Don Emanuele cut him short; Sior Momi gave his modest support to this reproof, and then, turning to his daughter, trotted out the pious relative whom Molesin had so highly praised. "My aunt, you know! My aunt the nun," said he, speaking in his idiotically jerky style. The facetious priest, who knew something about the real Sior Momi, could not help exclaiming to himself: "Fiol de na pipa!—Oh, you son of a pipe!" but aloud he declared that he had simply meant to say that all nuns were good and holy women. Don Emanuele, who had also heard Molesin's praises of the pious aunt, congratulated Momi on the loving remembrance in which he still held her. "You see," he proclaimed, "what a blessing the memory of such a relative is to a family. It is like the protecting wing of an angel, spread above all its members."

Beneath this imaginary wing, Sior Momi assumed a fitting expression of humility.

* * * * *

Don Emanuele did not walk back to Velo with Siora Bettina, but went round by Lago with the new curate. She was waiting for him, however, at the door of the parsonage, and wearing an air of stern resolution, for her heart was full of what Teresina had told her. Breathlessly the poor woman poured it all out upon the impassive chaplain, on whom it appeared to make no more impression than water poured upon marble.

"It is all the more necessary that you should go to Padua," said he. "After that, you can make further plans. If you see that the girl is really anxious to visit Castelletto, go there from Padua."

The dialogue was here interrupted and definitely brought to a close by the clanging of the bells that

announced his Excellency's return, and summoned the people to the Seghe station to welcome him home.

V

On reaching her room Lelia wrote a short note to Donna Fedele and placed it in her silver chain bag. Then she opened the portmanteau that Teresina had helped her to pack earlier in the day, removed the books of devotion and the sacred pictures, locked them in a drawer in her writing-desk, and packed some of the rhododendrons and the precious volumes of Schumann in the portmanteau in their place. Having drawn an easy-chair before the long mirror in the wardrobe, she sank into it and fell to contemplating her own face in the glass, which was but half lit by the electric lamp, suspended at some distance.

There came a gentle knock at the door. It was her father who desired admittance, and who, having opened the door half way, now poked his head in, stretching his neck to the utmost.

"Money? Do you need money? You are sure you don't? You still have those five hundred lire?"

She was on the point of declaring that she had spent or lost part of the money, that she might ask for more, but suddenly a shudder of loathing seized her. Her veins might contain one drop of her father's blood, but they certainly did not hold two. She answered that she needed nothing. Mommo withdrew his head, but presently poked it in again and said softly:

"You do not intend to take so much money with you, I suppose? Shall I keep it for you? Well, well, no, no!" and seeing the expression of his daughter's face, he vanished into the outer dark-

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ness of the corrido. and closed the door. Presently she heard his voice saying humbly:

"We shall see each other in the morning, any way."

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Then silence once more encompassed her. She began to undress very slowly, trembling, and with a beating heart. Suddenly, when she was but half undressed, she felt her strength deserting her, and, sinking upon the edge of the bed, she half gave up for an instant the plans she had secretly made. It was a moment of weakness that she quickly recognised, and the mere recognition made her start like the cut of a whip. Oh, no! There should be no cowardice. She would go to him as a slave, as something that was his by right, without thought of the morrow, without thought of anything save of her voluntary submission to his will. Rapidly undressing, she crept into bed and turned out the light.

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Feverish visions of the flight she had planned excited and tormented her. She put up both hands and drew down the rhododendrons that hung above her pillow, seeking in them visions of love that should banish all her fears.

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CHAPTER XV

OH ! POOR ME !

I

THE next morning at half-past five, half an hour before the train started, Lelia was on the platform at the Arsiero station with Teresina and Giovanni who had brought her portmanteau. She felt that Teresina was watching her closely, and, taking her aside, told her to keep her eye on Giovanni and the cook, who were, she believed, on terms of greater intimacy than was desirable. She then gave minute instructions concerning the preparations to be made for her return, saying she would telegraph, that she desired to find the bath ready heated, and plenty of flowers in her room. Teresina felt comforted.

Presently Signora Fantuzzo came hurrying up with her servant, in a great state of anxiety lest she were late. When the ladies had taken their places a couple of officers entered their compartment, one belonging to the Engineer corps, the other to the regiment of Chasseurs. Siora Bettina took the seat opposite Lelia, and placed her own hand-bag beside the girl, that neither of those terrible beings might attempt to take that place. As soon as the train had started she began saying the rosary, while Lelia lowered the window and sat watching for a glimpse of Villino delle Rose. She caught sight of it at last. All the blinds were drawn save those of Donna Fedele's room. When the house was

passed, Lelia ceased looking out of the window and pretended to sleep. Just beyond the Seghe station Siora Bettina gently touched her knee, and she opened her eyes. They were passing San Giorgio with its cemetery, where Signor Marcello lay. Lelia immediately became so absorbed in looking at it that she heard nothing of what her companion was saying. Bettina was begging her not to sleep, but to hold herself in readiness to change cars at a station to which they were fast coming. These changes were a perfect nightmare to the poor woman. Lelia smiled, assured her that they would not change for some time yet, and once more closed her eyes. Two minutes later she was roused again. Her companion was greatly upset because she could not find her ticket. Presently Bettina tried in vain to lower the blind, and to her intense vexation was obliged to accept the aid of one of the officers. Then, when they had changed cars, she had another moment of dismay, thinking she had forgotten a certain parasol, which, however, Lelia had taken care of. At Dueville two vulgar individuals got in, and promptly began talking of the doings of priests and their Perpetue¹ in a most disgusting way. Once more the beads of Siora Bettina's rosary began to run through her fingers, and her lips to open and shut agitatedly. At last the train rolled into the Vicenza station, and she alighted, exhausted by her numerous anxieties, and as thankful as if she had reached dry land again after a long voyage on a stormy sea.

Having left their luggage in the cloak-room, the two ladies took a carriage and drove up to the sanctuary. It was not yet eight o'clock, and their plan was to start for Verona and Desenzano towards eleven. At the sanctuary Signora Fantuzzo asked

¹ *Perpetua*: the name of Don Abbondio's maid-servant, in Manzoni's famous "Promessi Sposi," now often applied generically to the female servants of priests.—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE.

for the Father whom she knew. "If you do not mind waiting," she said to Lelia, "I will go to confession first." The young girl made no answer, but when the Father had appeared, and entered the confessional, she went towards another confessional nearer the sacristy, and in the darkest part of the church, where her companion could not easily see her. This confessional was occupied also, by presently the peasant woman who had been kneeling there rose. The Father came out, looked about him, and glanced at Lelia, who was the only person near, but as she gave no sign that she desired his ministrations, he withdrew to the sacristy. In due course Siora Bettina rose also and glanced around anxiously. Hereupon Lelia came towards her out of the shadow, and informed her that she had been to confession already. A Mass was about to begin at the high altar. At the *Domine non sum digna* Siora Bettina rose from her chair to approach the altar-rail, and stood waiting an instant for Lelia to do the same. Seeing that the girl did not move, and not daring to address her at that moment, she went forward to receive Communion alone.

On rousing herself from her devotions, she reflected that, in all probability Lelia had carelessly broken her fast before leaving the Montanina, or it might be that she had not felt in the proper mood at that moment, and had determined to wait for another Mass. The clock in the campanile was just striking nine. There was plenty of time. A priest in surplice and stole approached the high-altar, and several worshippers went to kneel at the altar-rail. Lelia did not move. When the priest had withdrawn to the sacristy, Siora Bettina mustered up all the courage she could—which was only just enough to enable her to put half a question—and addressed Lelia.

"Excuse me, my dear girl, but don't you intend . . . ?"

Lelia had no difficulty in guessing the other half of the question.

"I shall wait and go to Communion at Castelletto to-morrow morning," said she.

Signora Fantuzzo returned to her prayers, and remained absorbed for another quarter of an hour. She would gladly have prolonged her devotions, good, pious creature that she was, had not Lelia risen to her feet without waiting for a sign from her, and showed plainly enough that she had had enough of the sanctuary.

They walked down the hill on foot. Siora Bettina was silent for a long time. She was finding it difficult to bring out the necessary untruth. But at last she began nervously :

"Signorina, I am not feeling very well. Let us alter our plans a little. Might we not go to Padua, for the present, instead of Castelletto? We could visit the church of the Santo there, and if I feel better later on, we can still reach Castelletto before evening."

Lelia was astonished and did not answer at once, seeking to gain time for reflection. She would consult the time-table, she said at last. At the station café she did this with silent attention, and her eyes sparkled with satisfaction as she discovered that, by leaving Padua at 2.52 they could be at Castelletto at 7.55. It was then half-past ten o'clock, and the train for Padua would leave at 11.8. The waiter brought the coffee they had ordered. Lelia drank hers, waited five minutes longer, and then announced that she was going to post a letter and buy some picture-postcards. She furthermore offered to get the tickets for Padua. Siora Bettina accepted gratefully, and began getting out her purse.

"We can settle later," said Lelia, rising. As she was about to turn away, she inquired easily :

"Second class?"

"Yes, second class," said Siora Bettina, with a

bland and humble smile. Lelia walked away. Ten minutes passed and she did not return. A voice cried out:

"Verona, Brescia, Milan!"

Siora Bettina began to display so much uneasiness that the waiter, who was polishing the table after removing the tray, inquired if she were leaving.

"Yes, indeed."

"Where for, Signora?"

"For Padua."

"Oh, then you have plenty of time. The train for Padua does not start for another twenty minutes."

The minutes passed and still Lelia did not come back. Bettina could sit still no longer, and went to look for her. She was not in the vestibule beyond the café. She thought she espied her among the crowd round the booking-office. No, it was not she. She caught sight of the porter who had carried their luggage on their arrival, and inquired if he had seen her companion. He replied that he himself had just carried her portmanteau to the train and found a good seat for her.

"No, no!" cried Signora Fantuzzo impatiently. "My companion has not left, she is still here."

But the porter insisted.

"No, signora! I tell you she is gone! She left by the Milan express not five minutes ago."

As Signora Fantuzzo continued to protest that he must be mistaken, he asked somewhat impatiently if her friend had not been wearing a grey dust-cloak with large blue buttons, a blue hat with grey veil, and grey gloves, and whether she had not carried a dark blue parasol with a gold handle. Yes, this was all correct. Well, then, that lady had come out of the café, had posted a letter, and then gone with him to get her luggage from the cloak-room. She had taken a ticket, and ordered him to carry her portmanteau to the third-class waiting-room, although she held a first-class ticket. Hardly had the express

from Padua come to a standstill in the station, than she had rushed across the platform and climbed into a carriage with the agility of a squirrel. The porter had inquired before they left the waiting-room if her friend was going with her, and she had replied that the other lady was going to Padua.

Poor Siora Bettina felt her legs giving way, and her sight becoming dim, and she would surely have fallen had not the porter supported her. Four or five people soon gathered round her, and carried rather than helped her back into the café, where they tried to make her drink some Marsala. This she waved aside with all the energy she still possessed, while one zealous soul sprinkled water over her. "Don't, don't! My bonnet! My bonnet!" moaned the unhappy woman, fearing they would deluge her headgear, which would, indeed, have been a calamity. Perceiving that, after all, there was nothing much the matter with her, the on-lookers presently withdrew, leaving her with the waiter and the woman from the bookstall.

"It is nothing, nothing!" this kind soul vaguely assured her. "You will see it will be all right, Signora."

"Oh, Dio!" groaned Siora Bettina, beginning to feel better. "She has gone to the convent, and left me here all alone!"

It struck the bookstall woman that the Signora was more troubled at having been left "all alone" than at the thought of her companion's flight. She inquired if the girl were her daughter.

"Gésummaria, no!" cried poor, forsaken Bettina, and she rose with difficulty, declaring her intention of returning to Arsiero at once. The waiter went outside, and quickly returned with the news that the train for Arsiero had been gone about five minutes. In the meantime a police officer had entered the café to question Signora Fantuzzo concerning the flight, about which the whole station

was talking. Siora Bettina could not have been more confused had the Minister of the Interior himself been interviewing her. The officer inquired kindly if she had any idea where her companion had gone and whether she wished the matter to be investigated. Siora Bettina declared the young girl must have gone to Desenzano, and the officer went to make inquiries, but returned presently to say that no ticket for Desenzano had been issued.

II

The letter that Lelia had posted at Vicenza reached Donna Fedele towards seven that same evening. Anxious to husband her strength for the journey to Turin, she had remained all day in her easy-chair. She suffered, but she was at peace. She felt that she was dying. She foresaw that the operation, which Carle himself was to perform, would be successful, but that after that the end would come very quickly. She felt herself too complete a wreck to live much longer. She was glad to suffer and thus expiate the many sins of which she had been guilty in her youth—sins of affection, sins of pride, that had been born, had lived and died deep down in her mind, of which she had whispered in the gloom of the confessional, and which the afflicted soul had never succeeded in casting out entirely. She was glad to suffer and also to know that soon she would suffer no more. That morning she had received a cheerful letter from Don Aurelio. He wrote that he intended going to Valsolda when poor Piero Maironi's body was brought from Rome to Oria. He hoped to spend a few days with Massimo, and to cure him, with God's help, of a depression that had begun to cloud his intellect. She had immediately written to the friend she respected so highly, telling him of Alberti's last letter, and speaking of

Lelia also, who loved him (of this Donna Fedele was convinced) and who, swayed by her unconquerable pride, was now struggling against love, but would probably one day yield. It was unfortunately only too true that Lelia's love would not prove a spiritual support to Alberti, for indeed she had no faith nor religious feeling. But Donna Fedele was sure that God had chosen Don Aurelio to bring this wandering sou^l one day back to Him.

She had then told him of her departure for Turin, and had hinted vaguely at the purpose of her journey. She promised to telegraph at what hour she would be passing through Milan, so that perhaps he might meet her at the station. She ended her letter with a whimsical description of a certain ancient and oft-dyed shawl that poor old Cousin Eufemia, in spite of the heat, insisted upon wearing on the journey, and of the bewildered state they would both be in—like a couple of owls in the sunshine—remarking that these particulars would make it easy for him to recognise them amongst the gay throng in the buffet.

Now as she gazed upon the great crags of Barco, still glowing in the setting sun, she went over in her mind the list of objects that were precious to her, which recalled dear memories and associations, and which she wished to have with her in Turin, should she die there. Cousin Eufemia was attending to the packing of everything else, and it was she who now interrupted Donna Fedele's musings. She brought in the post and a plate upon which lay six small trout from the Astico, which the consumptive at Seghe had sent as a present. Donna Fedele envied this man, who would die in his own home and native place. Presently Cousin Eufemia bore the "poor beasts" away, and Donna Fedele began opening her letters. The first was from the hospital in Turin. It announced that her room was ready, and that the professor would see her on the

morning after her arrival. The second letter was from her Turin agent, repeating the same information, and begging her to telegraph on leaving Arsiera. The third and last was from Lelia. On glancing at it Donna Fedele did not recognise the handwriting on the envelope. She tore the letter open, and turned immediately to the signature. "By post?" she wondered.

The very first lines made her open her eyes wide and as she read on an astonished exclamation burst from her lips. She sat up very straight in her chair and immediately read the note through a second time.

"Oh, my God, my God!" she cried, and dropped the sheet upon her lap. The note ran as follows:

"MY DEAR FRIEND,—I am just taking the train that will carry me from Vicenza towards Dasio. I am going to tell him that I have been mad and am guilty and that, if he will have me, I am his forever.

"My father knows nothing, and all this must be kept from him as long as possible. In order to accomplish my purpose I have pretended and lied so cleverly as to prove myself a true child of his.

"Forgive me! What I am doing is an act of love, humility, and justice. I owe the strength and resolution necessary to carry it out to you alone. Do not reproach me. I throw myself into your arms and implore your blessing.

"LELIA."

* * * * *

The day was fast dying, and Cousin Eufemia looked in again to see if the invalid needed a light or desired to go to bed. Donna Fedele replied with her usual gentleness that she desired to remain alone until she should ring her bell. Hereupon the little old woman withdrew, but an hour later she returned,

uneasy because she had not been summoned. Pushing the door open very softly, she peered into the room, and saw her cousin's tall figure at the window, standing out against the clear, starry sky. It seemed to Eufemia that her face was bowed upon her clasped hands, as if she were praying. The old woman drew back softly without being seen. A few minutes later the bell rang, and Cousin Eufemia hastened to the room with a light. Seated in her easy-chair, Donna Fedele dictated a couple of telegrams to her which were to be sent off early in the morning. The first, addressed to Massimo Alberti, ran, "May some one show himself to be a Christian and a gentleman." The second, for the Turin agent, contained the words, "Inform Maurizioano that unforeseen circumstances oblige me to postpone arrival."

"Oh, poor me!" said Cousin Eufemia, instead of writing the word "postpone." She shrank from doing so as she might have shrunk from signing a death sentence. What had happened? The nature of the unforeseen circumstances must certainly have been contained in one of those letters. For what written foolishness was Donna Fedele going to postpone such an important matter? At last the invalid nearly lost her temper.

"Write!" she commanded. Eufemia groaned "Oh, poor me!" once more, and then penned the hateful words. Presently she helped Donna Fedele to undress. When she was in bed she called for the railway time-table and turned it over, studying it in silence for some time. At last she dictated a third telegram, addressed to Don Aurelio:

"I shall be in Milan——"

"Good, good!" cried Cousin Eufemia, glad to know that at least they were going to start, and that in the direction of Santhià.

"Day after to-morrow?" she suggested.

"No, to-morrow."

"To-morrow?"

She was staring in open-mouthed astonishment now. To-morrow was Friday. But Donna Fedele went on dictating:

" . . . at eleven p.m. Please engage two rooms at Hotel Terminus. Regards and thanks."

"But we cannot possibly start to-morrow!" cried Eufemia. "We should have to pack all night!"

"We do not leave until the afternoon, and besides we are not taking any luggage to speak of," said Donna Fedele.

"No luggage?"

Donna Fedele thought for a moment. Yes, her cousin had better take her box, but she herself would need only a portmanteau and a dressing-bag. Cousin Eufemia was forced to admit that under these circumstances it would be possible to start on the following afternoon. Her own box, which was small, was already packed. Donna Fedele reminded her not to forget to send the telegrams and to order the carriage from Arsiero for two o'clock. Then she asked to be left alone.

When she was alone once more she gave way freely to the sweetest tears she had ever shed. In those tears she had not wished her cousin to see. During her silent meditation she had determined to sacrifice her own life, and while standing at the window she had solemnly offered it to God, in the presence of the stars. She was giving her own life that thousands of souls, who had wandered from God, might return to Him; that the girl whom Marcello had loved for the sake of his dead son might pass through the perilous ordeal unscathed. She would not go to Turin. She would forego the operation, which would not have been much good in any case, and she would go instead to this mad girl in Valsolda, claiming her obedience in memory of Marcello, claiming Alberti for the sake of his dead mother. At first she had thought of taking Cousin Eufemia to Valsolda with

her, but now she made up her mind to send her home to Santhià and go alone. "It will make much more impression on them if they see me arriving alone, from such a distance, and as ill as I am," she thought.

And now she looked back over her life. It seemed very empty to her, very poor in good deeds, and she esteemed it a sweet privilege to end it in this way. Lying stretched on her back, with her hands clasped over her poor, aching body, she thanked God for the blessing of such an end. A wave of relief swept over her; she smiled at herself in the dark, smiled at the thought of her father, mother, and grandparents, who had loved her so fondly in her childhood, looking down upon her now, surely with approval and rejoicing that she would soon be with them. She lighted the lamp and drew from a drawer in the bedside table a precious little volume, the diary of her mother, who had died when only two-and-twenty years of age, in giving her birth. She read the closing words:

"Oh, my God! Bless the little angel that is coming to me, that it may remain for ever Thine!"

Closing the book, she murmured ecstatically, "For ever—for ever!" Yes, her mother in heaven must be glad now. And her dear old grandmother, who had taught her to pray, and told her so many delightful stories! The little volume contained a loose sheet of faded pink paper, on which her beloved grandmother's tired hand had traced a prayer for Fedele's special use:

"Most humble Jesus, destroy my pride and my self-esteem. Glory be to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost! Jesus, pattern of gentleness, grant that I may become entirely gentle and infinitely charitable toward my neighbour. Glory be to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost!

"Virtue to be practised:

Lilla.

"To remain silent under vexation."

Yes, dear grandmother, silence under vexation, and silence in happiness also. Fedele laid the book volume down, put out the light, and a hush fell upon her sweet spirit.

III

The maid brought Donna Fedele's coffee at seven and told her of Lelia's flight. She had heard it from the gatekeeper, who had received his information from a railway employé at the station the night before. The woman who had just brought the milk knew of it also. At nine, when Cousin Eufemia was in the midst of her preparations for the journey, Teresina appeared, weeping bitterly. She hoped Donna Fedele might know something about Lelia. Eufemia, convinced that her cousin was as much in the dark as every one else, and moreover, anxious that she should not be disturbed, told Teresina so and dismissed her, having first inquired what Sior Momi's opinion was. Teresina could not say. He had gone to Vicenza, intending so it would seem, to place the matter in the hands of the police. Signora Fantuzzo was of opinion that the Signorina had fled to a convent, and certain circumstances had led Teresina to think the same at first, but she had now come to the conclusion that the young girl had purposely misled them and that she had really gone away to "do away with herself." She had been on the brink of the precipice once before. After Teresina's departure Cousin Eufemia told Donna Fedele of the maid's fears. The invalid said nothing, but wrote to Teresina as follows:

"DEAR TERESINA,—I am so sorry not to have seen you. You need not be afraid of what you think

happening. Lelia gave me a solemn promise in regard to this.

"Yours affectionately,

"F. V. DI B."

She wrote another note to the sick man at Seghe, which was to be sent to him with some amusing books and the photograph that she had promised him some time before. A third note was addressed to her little French pupil, to say that the lessons must be interrupted, and setting her a task. She was to write a composition on the theme of *La Mort de la Cigale*.

Donna Fedele was feeling comparatively well. She was sure the relief was due to her state of moral exaltation, and she feared lest she were taking too much pride in her own sacrifice. She told herself that, in offering her life, she was really offering a thing without value—a thing that hardly belonged to her any more, a light that was about to flicker out. Just before leaving the Villino she had a moment of weakness. Seated on the verandah, she was pointing out, one by one, to the gatekeeper, who was armed with scissors, the few last roses remaining in the garden. She was going to take the roses with her, and each flower that fell into the little basket filled her with sadness and seemed to speak of her own ending day and of the last, sad parting with this dear home. The gatekeeper placed the laden basket before her. "Are there enough?" he asked. "Yes," the golden voice answered softly, "there are enough." The man retired in silence, grieving deeply over the necessity for the operation and over the dangers of which he was aware; for to him, as to his wife also, the Signora was little less than the Madonna herself. The man's presence had, in a measure, held Donna Fedele's rising emotion in check. Alone once more, and fanned by the silent breath of the noonday

breeze stirring among the rose-bushes and of the small open green in front of her, she yielded to the on-rolling wave of feeling, and she became conscious of the silent leavetaking between surrounding objects and her own mortal heart. Down below the great verdure-clad valley was smiling, heedless of the parting, and thence came no farewell. But Barco, Summano, and Priaforà knew and understood and the three hills stood locking down upon Donna Fedele as silent figures stand around a bed upon which a man lies dying, his parting glance resting upon them. She felt that she was on the point of breaking down, and sought to control herself. At that moment Cousin Eufemia appeared equipped for the journey, and wrapped in the famous shawl that had survived so many dyeings. It had been dipped the last time in Turin, and its snuffy, nondescript hue was a never-failing stimulant to Donna Fedele's love of teasing. Even at this moment she could not refrain from rallying her cousin concerning the ludicrous garment, laughing nervously the while. In her delight at seeing the invalid in good spirits, Cousin Eufemia herself laughed merrily at her own poor old shawl, and her own poor old faded self.

On approaching the carriage the travellers found the driver and the cook discussing Lelia. The cook remembering the other attempt at flight, declared that the Signorina had gone away, goodness only knew where, to commit suicide. The driver, who was more of a philosopher, laid it down as Gospel truth that when a young girl runs away, she always runs to a lover and not to death. During the drive from the Villino to the station the subject of the snuff-coloured shawl would not have sufficed to keep Donna Fedele in good spirits, but she discovered presently that Cousin Eufemia was smuggling a fried trout away with her, and immediately began teasing the poor old lady again. Having reflected that it was Friday, that she might perhaps be unable to get

a fish supper at the hotel in Milan, and also that the trout from the Astico are especially succulent, Cousin Eufemia had got the cook quietly to fry one of the "poor beasts" for her, and the incautious cook had allowed Donna Fedele to overhear her whispered information to Eufemia that the "parcel" was in a certain umbrella-case.

Donna Fedele caught the word on the wing, and began tormenting poor Eufemia with extravagant questions. What did the parcel contain? Rouge and face powder? An improper book? Love letters? Her cousin laughed and wriggled, and kept declaring that it was "nothing—nothing worth mentioning!" until at last, horrified by Donna Fedele's absurd suggestions, she blurted out:

"It is only a trout, I tell you!"

Hereupon the invalid became more pitiless than ever, but the jeering voice was hushed as they passed the little church in the cemetery at Arsiero, where she had received Communion two days before, and presently, on going downhill towards the station, she caught sight of the Montanina, resting as white as a cube of snow upon the tender green, against its dusky background of chestnuts.

At the station Cousin Eufemia asked where she was to send her box. "To Santhià," said Donna Fedele. Were they going to Santhià, then? No, only as far as Milan to-day, but to-morrow Cousin Eufemia would go home, and Donna Fedele would decide what to do with herself. Her cousin protested hotly, but the Signora carried her point, and the luggage was registered to Santhià.

The travellers took their places in the train. Don Emanuele's long, lank figure passed beneath the window of their compartment. He went to get his ticket, and returning, made straight for Donna Fedele's carriage, but catching sight of Cousin Eufemia in time, he turned away quickly. Eufemia was telling her cousin of this as the train started.

Donna Fedele closed her eyes as if to sleep, but only in order that she might not see the dear country she was leaving without hope of returning. In her mind's eye she saw the chaplain's lank figure, his pale face and watery eyes. She had confessed to the ill she had thought and said of him, and she now felt her heart free from any shadow of rancour against the poor man, who honestly believed he might serve God by crooked means and with bitter malice in his soul. For him, among the rest, Christ had died; and this thought brought her peace, but almost immediately that tiny mocking imp within her, whispered: "Peace, peace indeed! But if he were seated here beside you, you would be greatly annoyed, all the same!"

At the café of the Vicenza station, where the travellers had to wait two long hours, Donna Fedele passed through some moments of anguish. In the first place, the uncomfortable carriage and the frequent changes had tried her greatly. Suddenly she shivered with cold, and her sight grew dim. She drank a few drops of brandy, and gradually revived, but she felt aghast at the thought that she might die before she reached the end of her journey. She had not considered this danger before starting, but now a fearful dread overtook her, and all the way to Milan her thoughts would keep recurring to that one appalling possibility. She was especially anxious about the journey she must take on the morrow, and was undecided whether to push on immediately from Milan, thus making sure of reaching her destination, or to rest, that she might arrive in a less sorry plight. When they had passed Treviso, the thought of soon seeing Don Aurelio comforted her greatly. It would be Paradise could she have his company on her further pilgrimage, and feel him near and ever ready to afford her spiritual aid. But there would be one great disadvantage to this arrangement; in order to gain the greatest influence

over those two young people, they ought to see her arriving alone, and almost in a dying condition.

IV.

Don Aurelio was waiting for her at the station, and she gave him her usual, sweet smile. That smile only increased his sorrow at seeing how pale and how changed she was. Having told her that her rooms were ready for her, he would gladly have left her, for, if possible, he always avoided being out late. But she insisted upon his coming to the Terminus, and kept him talking for some time in the public reception-room, which, at this hour, was deserted and half dark. She told him everything except the alarming condition of her own health, and of the sentence the doctor had passed upon her. Don Aurelio was therefore justified in supposing her fit to continue her journey on the morrow, and he advised her to go by way of Porto Ceresio. He expressed regret for Lelia's foolish act, but was in no way uneasy concerning the line of conduct Massimo would pursue. This surprised Donna Fedele somewhat. Passion, solitude, the weakening of the restraining influence of religion, all these conditions she believed must favour the sway of instinct. Her own inner experience had taught her the power of passion far better than Don Aurelio could ever learn it through the confessional. He took leave of her at last, despite her reluctance to let him go, promising to be with her again at ten the next morning. She had settled to start for Porto Ceresio at eleven.

She passed a sleepless night, but one almost free from pain. In the morning she felt greatly exhausted, however, and fearing she would be unfit to start at eleven o'clock, she told her cousin and Don Aurelio that she had decided that it would be more

convenient to lunch at Milan, and leave three hours later. Don Aurelio brought the welcome news that he himself would soon be going to Valsolda. He was hourly expecting a telegram announcing that Benedetto's remains had left Rome. A priest was to accompany them as far as Milan, and he had been asked to perform the same solemn duty from Milan to Oria. He had accepted partly that he might prevent the marring of the solemn ceremony by any demonstration or speeches which he in whose memory they had met together would have condemned, and also partly that he might have the opportunity of seeing Massimo. The friends in Rome had entrusted Massimo with all arrangements at Albogasio, and had also wished him to speak at the grave, but Don Aurelio had received a sad letter from him a few hours before Donna Fedele's arrival saying that he had made all necessary arrangements but that he did not wish to speak at the grave, for only a Catholic should do that, and he no longer felt himself such. This Don Aurelio told with deep sorrow.

At lunch Donna Fedele could eat nothing. Her fellow-guests in the dining-room glanced at her frequently, struck by her snowy hair, her great dark eyes, her air of suffering, and her aristocratic features and bearing. She preferred to drag herself to the station on foot, rather than get in and out of the omnibus for so short a distance. She begged her cousin to enter the compartment with her, that she might take leave of her more quietly, and teasingly implored her not to get lost in the great station, and let herself be carried to Venice or Bologna instead of Santhià. As the moment of parting drew nearer Cousin Eufemia regretted more acutely that she had not insisted upon going to Valsolda with the invalid. She returned to the subject once more, and begged and implored to be allowed to go. Donna Fedele made light of this. "To Santhià you go

—to Santhià!" she said. "What good could you do by coming all the way to Valsolda?"

"It isn't at the other end of the world, after all," Eufemia retorted.

"Who knows?" said Donna Fedele. "It may be the end of the world for me."

The little old woman was silenced, but as several travellers bustled in, in search of seats, she became ever more anxious. The hour of departure was drawing near, and she must get down. Her place was immediately taken by a pleasant-faced, insignificant little woman, with a small dog. "Oh, dear!" sighed Eufemia. "A dog also!" The new-comer overheard her words, and began to explain timidly that her dog could not bear to be separated from her, that he was so very affectionate and perfectly well-behaved.

"I won't be separated either!" thought Cousin Eufemia to herself. "Surely I have as much heart as a dog!" and she said goodbye, having fully determined in her own mind to enter another compartment in the same train, unbeknown to Donna Fedele, whose last words were:

"Take good care of the roses!"

She smiled at the little old woman's bewilderment, who was far from imagining that the roses alluded to were those of the Villino, which would one day belong to her sisters and herself. The invalid calmly fell to picturing the arrival at the Villino of the new owners, of the three old ghosts clad in black, and to imagining what each would do first. Eufemia, the youngest, would immediately hasten to inspect a certain kneeling-stool that she had long coveted; the second sister would examine the kitchen, while the eldest would repair to the wine-cellar. But her pleasant-faced neighbour did not allow her to follow up these half-painful, half-amusing fancies. She saw that the Signora was ill, and began putting a series of questions for the purpose of discovering particu-

lars. Then she entered upon a history of the complaints with which various members of her family and several of her friends had been afflicted, and finally said that she was on her way to Varese to visit her sister, who was the mother of four children, and that she had brought Friend along with her because her little nephews and nieces simply adored him. Donna Fedele could not close her ears to all this chatter, but as she closed her eyes from time to time the little woman concluded she was suffering from a headache, and placing the dog on the invalid's lap, with a profusion of apologies, she dived into her handbag for some phenacetin tablets. From Rho onwards the poor Donna Fedele could do nothing but long for Varese, where the insignificant little person got off at last, congratulating herself on having performed an act of kindness by amusing the invalid with her conversation, and congratulating her little dog for having contributed towards the Signora's comfort by his decorous behaviour and silence. Most of the travellers got out at Varese, and Donna Fedele was left alone with a young doctor, who was on his way from Padua to his summer home at Cuasso, which information had transpired from his conversation with two other young men who had left the train at Varese. He now began studying his travelling companion with respectful interest, and becoming aware of this, and fearing he might guess the nature of her malady and be induced to speak to her, Donna Fedele turned towards the window, and did not look round again until the train drew up at Porto Ceresio. Here the first glimpse of the lake moved her profoundly. She was nearing her destination at last—she was sure of arriving there, of seeing them both. She was at once delighted, terrified, and uneasy. The porter who carried her luggage was obliged to support her as far as the café, for she was hardly able to stand. "It is madness, Signora, to go about alone and in such a state!" he said, a

she begged him to come for her when it should be time to go aboard the steamer.

Cousin Eufemia was careful not to show herself, for she feared a round scolding, and, what was far worse, being sent back to Milan. She had determined to keep out of the way until it should have become impossible to send her back. She was rather anxious, indeed, concerning the box that had gone to Santhià, but that could not be helped now.

The boat for Lugano which would come from Ponte Tresa was not yet in sight. Seated outside the café, on the terrace that overlooked the water, Donna Fedele hardly touched the milk she had ordered, simply for the sake of ordering something. Her heart had never before throbbed so violently. The terrace, strewn with little tables, was deserted. The mirror of green water was deserted also, lying there motionless beneath the burning sun. White Marcote over opposite was quietly watching the silent waters. Peace and rest breathed from the mighty hills piled high beyond and above the winding course of the lake towards distant Lugano. Donna Fedele felt very sad that she could enjoy none of this peace and rest. The Ponte Tresa boat appeared at last, rounding the wooden promontory on the west. She would have to rise presently and drag herself to the landing-stage. It was but a few steps to go, but what if the porter should fail to come? . . . Ah, here he was! It was still very early, he said, but later he would have the luggage to attend to, and might not be able to come for her.

The invalid rose with difficulty. She wondered how Cousin Eufemia would act in her place, and, saying to herself, "Oh, poor me!" she took the porter's arm.

CHAPTER XVI

NIGHT AND FLAMES

I

HAVING made her hurried entrance into a first-class compartment, Lelia detained the porter on one pretext and another, so that there was no danger of his running up against Signora Fantuzzo before the train was clear of the station, should she have come out of the café in search of her companion. There were four other persons in Lelia's compartment—an old lady with a daughter of about thirty, a young commercial traveller, and a music-hall *chanteuse* in shabby finery. Lelia was conscious that her face and neck were crimson, and did not doubt but that her excitement had been noticed, though in reality no one had as yet paid the slightest attention to her. The young man went on talking with the daughter, and the *chanteuse* went on sucking lemon drops and sniffing at a bottle of scent. The train sped along, hastening away from Vicenza, away from the Montanina, bearing Lelia ever nearer to *him*. Her heart was beating in time with the quick and rhythmic clinking of the wheels, and she felt as if her thoughts as well as her sight were muffled in a thick veil. Involuntarily she glanced at her travelling companions from time to time, observing, as through a hot mist, the vulgar rivalry that was going on between the two young women for the attentions of the commercial traveller.

The music-hall singer got out at Verona, and the

other two ladies, who were going to Bergamo, changed at Rovato. As no one else had entered the carriage Lelia was left alone with the commercial traveller. She did not even notice this circumstance. Since Verona her state of mind had been undergoing a change, and now doubts and anxieties forced themselves where before had been nothing but exhilaration and confidence. During the first hour of her flight Lelia had seen clearly before her in the distant country the main features of the coming event, meeting of two souls, a delirium of delight, and then mist and whatever fate might decree. The nearer she drew to the event, however, the less distinct did her anticipation of it become, while a host of embarrassing and hitherto unconsidered details loomed ever more clearly. She feared she would lack courage to show herself at the right moment, feared lest she had undertaken a task her pride would not allow her to accomplish, feared he might look upon her as shameless or cowardly. Meanwhile the train was travelling onward, and its onward rush seemed to her symbolical of blind forces obeying her will, that had no longer any restraining power.

It was raining when the train reached Porto Ceresio and there was a mist over the mountains, so that only their lower slopes showed darkly, encircling the grey and wrinkled sheet of water. Lelia was glad of the mist. It gave her a feeling of approaching him unseen. She was also glad that no steamer lay at the pier, that no steamer was yet in sight. All this made the moment of meeting seem more distant and less real. When at last a black spot appeared off the promontory on the left, her heart began to throb as it had done in the train at Vicenza. As she stepped on board the boat, her breath almost left her, and she stood for a moment half dazed on the gangway.

There were very few passengers on deck. Lelia

took a seat astern, and seemed as if she were intent upon gazing into the water, but she saw nothing. The dull, mechanical thudding of the pistons and the tick of the valve-gear were all that reached her heart was all she was conscious of. The ticket-collector was obliged to ask twice where she was going. She longed to say "Lugano," but she stammered "San Mamette" instead, as if compelled to do so by destiny. She inquired how far it was to San Mamette, and was relieved to hear that she would not be there for an hour yet, and would touch at Lugano first. Her gaze wandered off across the water, resting sometimes upon the quivering network of innumerable circlets that the rain was stamping upon it, sometimes upon the dark base of the hills. When the steamer slackened speed near Melide, she thought they had reached Lugano, but sank back into her state of torpor once more on learning that Lugano was the next stopping-place, and even failed to notice when they passed beneath the bridge. Presently the good-natured ticket-collector came to point out the direction in which San Mamette lay—over yonder towards the east, where the lake blending with the mist, stretched away like an ocean over yonder lay mystery.

Soon the great hotels of Lugano passed before her gaze, followed by the dripping houses and dusty gardens, sloping upwards into the mist. One, two, three stopping-places. Passengers coming and going. A cry of "Gandria, Santa Margherita, Ori San Mamette, Osteno, Cima, Porlezza!" Slowly the steamer is pushed off, and the throbbing of the pistons begins again. They are under way; the boat swings slowly about, bringing her prow towards the mist of the upper lake; the dripping houses, the hotels, the gardens of Lugano are left behind, and are soon lost to sight.

Then suddenly a fresh breeze seemed to sweep through Lelia's soul. All her reasons for taking this step asserted themselves imperiously. Alone and

motionless, beneath the fine rain, she looked about her, feeling happy and secure. It had stopped raining when they reached Gandria. The lake in front of the steamer showed black beneath the ruffling of a strong wind, and the mist had begun to climb the hills' wet flanks. Galbiga, Bisnago, and the Valsolda dolomites loomed majestically against the sky, and in the far distance Legnone stood out, a grey giant among smoke-like clouds.

Soon the boat met the wind. Lelia's clothes and veil flew back like streamers from a flag, but still she did not move. The wind, the dark lake, the wild black hills, filled her soul with exultation. The wind was shouting to her: "Are you indeed here?" The silent hills on her right and left were thinking: "She is here, indeed!" In front of her the dolomites were revealing; all their tragic history, as if to a watcher who understood.

"Signora," said the ticket-collector, "the next station is San Mamette."

She felt suddenly strong and resolute, and when the steamer drew up at the landing-stage she stepped ashore with a firm tread. A few peasants got off also, but owing to the weather, there were no loiterers either in the *piazza* or at the wharf. The guard on duty there pointed out the Valsolda Hotel, near at hand. She entered the narrow vestibule. It was dark and deserted, and neither hearing nor seeing any one, she stood waiting, undecided whether to go upstairs or not. At last some one came down, and catching sight of her, hurried away again, evidently to summon the proprietor, who soon appeared.

"You wish for—?" the man began.

"A room," said Lelia unsteadily.

During the few seconds she had waited the silence of this unfamiliar place struck her as hostile. It was the first freezing contact with those harsh realities with which she had failed to reckon while planning

her flight, but which she had vaguely foreseen on the journey. She did not know how she managed to say "A room." Fortunately, the proprietor, a kind-hearted little man, saw at once that she was a lady and evidently embarrassed, and treated her with the utmost consideration. He told her that the housemaid would show her such rooms as were vacant—there were, indeed, but few people in the house—and Lelia started upstairs somewhat reassured. Following the maid into a large corner-room on the second floor, she declared that she would take that without looking farther. She asked the girl where she slept, hoping to have her near, but not liking to say so because she was ashamed of her timidity. The girl, who slept at some distance, was far from imagining that the young lady was timid, and inquired if she could do anything more for her. No, no, nothing more. Did the Signorina wish to dine? Lelia felt that she would be unable to eat, but she ordered a light supper to be brought to her room, that the girl might be obliged to return and thus give her an opportunity to inquire about Dasio. On finding herself alone for the night she called herself a coward and a fool, and to her regret herself, allowed her thoughts to dwell on her father on the Velo priests, and the schemes and intrigues from which she had escaped. And at the same time a vision of Donna Fedele came into her mind. She saw her great dark eyes beneath the lofty brow with its delicate arch of white hair: she heard the golden voice saying, "Dear girl! What have you done? But after all, thought Lelia, what was done was done.

Would it not be well to send him a line before the meeting? She rang for writing materials and began to write, sitting for a long time lost in thought with the pen between her fingers. But presently the difficulties of the task appalled her. Might not all be spoiled by a single ambiguous sentence,

single ill-chosen word, a single even slightly clumsy phrase, that would escape her notice? After all, it would be better not to write. Her presence alone must tell everything. Yes, of course it would! She wondered she had not thought of this before. But immediately she was filled with terror at the idea of a chance meeting, and so she remained, torn between doubts, and feeling perilously near to tears.

Through the open window could be seen, far away, amid the darkness of the night, a small point of light slowly revolving and flashing over the surface of the waters and along the coast. Out of the shadow there would start for an instant white cottages, great boulders, or a wooded slope, sought out by that light as by a watchful eye passing all things in careful review. Lelia saw the slim cone of light moving slowly towards her, felt herself and her surroundings enveloped in the white blaze of the inquisitorial eye, and then all was engulfed in darkness once more. Far up on the black mountain-side, near the sky that was hardly less dark, other electric flames shone in a row. She could hear the noise of the waves, and the whole scene gave her the impression of a night of enchantment in the wildest, strangest corner of the earth. She forgot her own doubts and fears for the moment and followed the movements of the electric flash along the wooded base of the mountains and across the ruffled waters, in search of groups of houses. One of those groups might be Dasio. Again the white light flashed upon her, and trembled an instant on either hand before leaving her entirely. She sprang backwards into the room.

Weary at last, she flung herself upon the bed without undressing.

It was a long, never-ending night. From time to time the flashlight flooded the room, and Lelia was glad of this, for it seemed as if the luminous eye were keeping a vigil in her stead. Just before dawn she fell asleep, but awoke again almost immediately,

grieved at having slept despite her resolution not to do so. Later she rose with numbed limbs, and closed the windows. The flashlight and the other lights along the mountain's brow were no longer to be seen. Beneath her window she saw a *pergola*, a muddy courtyard, some narrow grass-plots, and, a few yards beyond, the slumbering lake reflecting the heavy, unbroken masses of cloud. She lay down on the bed again. Day was coming, and she would soon know her fate.

II

Lelia rose and dressed at six o'clock. In washing herself she flooded the room, but nevertheless rang the bell for more water. The maid saw at once that the Signorina had not turned back the bedclothes and glanced wonderingly from her to the bed. Lelia blushed, but did not offer any explanation. Having apologised for the state of the floor, she inquired, half unconscious of hypocrisy, if it were far to Puria. She knew well enough from Massimo's letter that one could walk there from Dasio in twenty minutes. The girl replied that it took less than an hour to go to Puria, and upon Lelia's request, promised to find a boy to accompany her, and act as guide.

"At what time will you start?" she inquired.

"At seven."

Exhausted by her long fast and long hours of sleeplessness, Lelia ate her breakfast with a good appetite. She inquired about the lights she had seen in the night, and was informed that a torpedo-boat bearing a powerful searchlight was always on duty, and that the flames upon the hillside were the electric lights along the funicular railway of Santa Margherita and at the Hotel Belvedere. At seven she started with her guide, astonished at her own calmness and resolution.

The guide was a lad of about twelve, with sparkling eyes and obstinately silent lips. Lelia could get nothing out of him save monosyllables, but, indeed, all she desired to know was that he knew the way to Puria and Dasio. As they walked towards Loggio she looked neither to right nor left, for the higher she climbed the faster did her heart throb, partly from fatigue, partly because her resolution was weakening. At the first turning of the steps above the oratory of San Carlo she was obliged to stop and rest. The sun was not shining, but the air was sultry. A party of young people, all laughing merrily, passed her. The girls were teasing the men for not daring to gather some clusters of cyclamen growing on the brink of a precipice above a mountain torrent. With the agility of a squirrel the little guide suddenly scampered away, returning presently with a bunch of cyclamen, which he silently presented to Lelia. She placed the flowers upon her breast, reflecting that fate had sent them to her for *him*, and that she would not have dared to gather them with her own hand. On reaching the top of the hill, where the path turns to the left, and leads down to the Campo region, she stopped to rest once more. Here the whole of upper Valsolda lay stretched beneath her. In the centre, high above everything, lay Dasio, its campanile and a few roofs alone stretching upwards out of its nest of verdure. Seated on the grass Lelia inquired the names of all the villages, and then let her glance fall upon the small yellow-white campanile beneath the mighty rocks. From the tower she raised her eyes to the heights above it, seeking for the point that had reminded Massimo of the one he had gazed upon at the Montanina, while she played "Aveu." She fixed upon one that was surrounded by mist, towards the centre of the group that slopes downward from the highest summit on the east. Her heart swelled at the memory of the music.

Again, she seemed to hear triumphant voices about her as she had done on first entering Valsolda waters and rising to her feet, struggling with her emotion, she started onwards. On the Dasio road, beyond Puria she ordered the boy, who was walking in front of her, to tell her should he see any one coming toward them. They met a charcoal-burner, a Customs guard and a woman with a basket of mushrooms. Lelia reflected that she might ask for Dr. Alberti, but she lacked the courage to do so. Below the last hill shaded by chestnut-trees, upon the little bridge close to a chapel, she leaned against the handrail, exhausted and trembling, and almost despairing of being able to go on. There was an old woman gathering nuts near by, and Lelia sent the boy to inquire if she knew Dr. Alberti. The old woman, who was deaf and half imbecile, did not understand. Lelia straightened herself with an effort, and glanced into the chapel as she passed, but its gaudiness repelled her. She felt that had there been naught else than the Crucifix there she would have flung herself on her knees in prayer. But as it was, she passed on.

On reaching the narrow, steep path to Drano, two minutes' walk below Dasio, she sat down on the lowest step, and ordered the boy to go on to the hotel. He was simply to inquire if Dr. Alberti was at home, and then return to her with the answer. The reply, for which she waited in feverish agitation was that the doctor was out.

She remained for some time, her face hidden in her hands, thinking and feeling herself utterly alone. Uncovering her face at last, she fixed her eyes, as if in appeal, upon the clustering verdure that clothed the opposite bank of the valley. All was peace and indifference. She sent the boy back to ask some one from the hotel to come and speak with her.

A pleasant-mannered girl soon appeared. It was no easy task for Lelia to inquire for Alberti, but as she could not avoid doing so, she preferred to

do it in this way, rather than at the hotel and in the presence of any number of inquisitive strangers. She learned that the doctor had been summoned to Muzzaglio two hours before. On setting out he had said that he would be back by ten o'clock, and now the clock was about to strike nine. If the Signorina wished to go and meet him, she could not possibly miss him. She must go by Pian di Nava and San Rocco.

"You can stop at Pian di Nava, not a quarter of an hour's walk from here. He is sure to pass that way."

Hereupon the girl tried to explain the way to the little guide, who was unfamiliar with the region, but as he did not seem to understand, she herself offered to act as guide, and led Lelia upwards through the poor but clean village, as far as the public washing-place, where she pointed out the path that turned westwards from there.

"That is the path," she said. "You will reach Pian di Nava in about five minutes."

Lelia paid the boy, dismissed him, and started on alone. She left the path at a point where it crossed a field, and sat down to wait beneath the trees shading one side of it, whence she could see all the windings of the path in front of her.

III

That morning Massimo had risen at dawn, having slept hardly at all. On the preceding day he had been to Lugano to hire the boat that would bring Benedetto's remains from Porto Ceresio to Oria. And now that this was arranged, he had only to wait for the summons to take part in the sad ceremony, but meanwhile he was passing through great mental anguish. The memory of Maironi was still dear and sacred to him, and he would have been happy to

render private homage to his master, but this public homage signified participation in beliefs and ideas which were no longer his own. To refuse it would amount to an insult, to grant it would amount almost to hypocrisy. Benedetto represented the Catholic Creed in its entirety, imperishable faith in the Church and meek and humble obedience to authority. Massimo had ceased to believe. He had begun by separating himself from Rome intellectually, by persuading himself that Roman Catholicism was doomed to perish then, rapidly, had come the separation from the Divine and risen Christ. But despite the apparent suddenness of the change, the old faith died hard, and his outlook on life was still coloured by the traditional beliefs of Christianity. The first step, the freedom from Rome, would have been sweet to him, had the breaking away from Rome not meant also the breaking away from his own past as a champion of the Catholic Faith. But his horror of a subsequent sinking towards agnosticism was so great, and filled him with such intense despair, that he was at times assailed by violent and fleeting paroxysms of reaction. That very night as he thought of the state of his own conscience and of Benedetto, he had lighted the candle in a spasm of pain and hope, and had knelt on his bed before the picture of the meeting of the Saviour and Peter upon the waters. Groaning with misery, he had prayed for faith, faith, and again for faith! But soon the flame that had illumined his soul died down once more. The silent surroundings had seemed to scoff at him as he had scoffed at himself. When he had put out the light he crushed his face into his pillow, his heart calling out to Lelia. Again he scoffed at himself for his foolish cowardice, and angrily repelled the image that would not be driven from his heart, and did but bend before these violent outbursts, as a reed before the wind, only to rise again immediately. He forced himself to think of the sick man at Muzzaglio he must visit on the morrow, whose

his public and ideas it would not almost Catholic Church, Massimo separating him- to perish ; ne Divine sudden- and his additional freedom had the breaking Catholic sinking led him assailed . That own con- candle on his Saviour misery, faith ! ul died seemed When ce into Again e, and driven violent again e sick whose

unhappy marriage had brought him to drink, and who had become half imbecile, living in a foul hovel with four goats and a black sheep. He never came down to Castello or to Puria save to exchange milk for spirits. The birth of a kid or lamb was the signal for a series of orgies, and the man was known throughout the countryside as the "savage." At the present moment he was recovering from pneumonia, and Massimo was making every effort to raise him out of his state of abject misery. With the aid of two kind women from Dasio he had got him decently clean and had removed him to an empty stable (for Muzzaglio consisted entirely of stables), and placed him upon a couch fit for a human being. Every morning the doctor himself carried him eggs, broth, and the small quantity of wine the man could not do without. He had made up his mind to see his patient's wife and persuade her to take her husband back into the house from which she had driven him because he was a drunkard. He must also make her promise not to sell the black sheep which she hated, this hatred of hers filling the sick man with childish terror whenever reconciliation and reunion were mentioned. "She will sell the sheep!" he would cry. "She will sell the sheep!"

Massimo left the hotel before seven o'clock, went to see a sick child, and then returned for the basket with the eggs, the broth, and the wine. On reaching Muzzaglio he found the convalescent sitting up, and after listening patiently to the endless chatter of the two old women who were nursing him, once more turned back to Dasio. A herd of cows was grazing among the pastures of San Rocco, and the ceaseless tinkling of the bells rose above the sound of the river below. He dropped upon the grass and sat listening to the river, fancying that he was back in his room at the Montanina listening to the voice of the Posina, and the old heartache seized him. He walked on, slowly, pausing for a moment in the

wood to notice a cluster of cyclamen, in gazing at which he sought to banish the thought of Lelia, and then, keeping mechanically onward, he reached the level stretch of Pian di Nava.

Then it was that he saw, not two hundred yards away, a lady in a light summer dress, seated on the upper edge of the field in front of him. He paid no further attention to her, for almost every day visitors from Loggio or San Mamette came up to Dasio. The lady was seated beyond the path and some twenty yards towards the right. As Massimo approached, walking slowly, she rose to her feet. Her movement made him glance carelessly in her direction, but he did not recognise her, and turning his face towards the path once more, kept on his way. She started, swayed forward, and then checked herself. Thereupon he also stopped and once more looked at her. She was so pale and her face was so agitated that he would not have recognised her even now had not her eyes been fixed upon him in a glassy stare. He hesitated, trembled, and felt his being turned to stone. She bowed her head, and, staggering, leaned against the tree under which she had been sitting. Massimo stopped short. He saw it was Lelia, but could not believe his own eyes, and raised his hat stupidly, unconscious of his own movement. She lifted her pale, tear-stained face to him imploringly, and her lips moved. He was forced to conclude that she stood in need of some slight service, though to seek his help was clearly embarrassing to her. At the same instant an idea flashed across his mind.

"You are here with Donna Fedele?" he asked, quickly putting himself on the defensive. Evidently Donna Fedele had brought this about, had persuaded the girl to consent, or had coerced her into so doing. It seemed the only possible explanation of Lelia's presence. But Lelia shook her head and looked down.

"Are you with your father, then?" the young man asked, more astonished than ever. Again Lelia shook her head.

Then at last her humble, shrinking attitude conveyed an inkling of the truth to Massimo, and he began to understand. But not even now did he venture to utter a word, to make a movement that should betray his consciousness of the sweet truth. Leaning towards her, half blind with emotion and with a beating heart, he murmured:

"Are you alone?"

Lelia hid her face in her hands without answering. The young man seized her hands, and felt them steadily but slowly yielding, in a wave of self-abandonment such as no spoken word could have expressed. He murmured incoherent words and offered her his arm, feeling that she would shrink from being led by the hand here, where at any moment some one might pass, but still unwilling to relinquish his hold of her.

Aflame with happiness, Lelia had once more become mistress of herself, while Massimo, whose head reeled, did not know which direction to take. He turned towards Dasio. Lelia did not speak, but the arm he held guided him gently in the opposite direction, towards the woods. Once among the trees, he put his arm round her and they kissed for the first time, yet not passionately, but almost reverently. Then Lelia dropped her face upon Massimo's breast.

And he, no longer bewildered, his face bent low into her sweet hair, murmured:

"It is for ever?"

Her only answer was to press her head closer to his breast. They heard women's voices in the wood, and Lelia, raising her head, started forward in front of Massimo, turning often to glance at him. On passing the cluster of cyclamen that Massimo had noticed but a short time before, he gathered one for

her and smiled. She kissed the hand that held out the flower, and then spoke for the first time:

"Why do you smile?"

The low, familiar voice thrilled him. He was more sure than ever now that he was not dreaming, and more than ever did reality appear as a dream. That voice had been familiar to him only in coldness, in scorn, and in anger. These words, trivial in themselves, were the sweet and solemn notes of an unknown chord of love. For some minutes its sweetness so overcame Massimo that he could not speak to tell her, as he did at last, how the sound of the river had reminded him of the Montanina, and how he had stood gazing upon the cyclamen, forcing himself to banish her image that was scorching his heart. The old fire burned again in Lelia's eyes at the story of his past suffering, and betrayed the remorse she felt for her long injustice.

"You are the one who have much to forgive," said he, tenderly, thinking of his own unjust thoughts of her. But the past came back to each with such overwhelming force that neither could speak, in protest or in exclamation. They walked on in silence as far as the open pasture-lands of San Rocco, where the river thundered its greeting to them.

"Listen," said Massimo.

Lelia closed her eyes, for the difference in the landscape prevented this deep voice from awakening in her memories of the Posina. The sharp mountain air and the tinkling of bells from the pastures reminded her only of the wild slope where the rhododendrons grew, and where love had conquered.

Exhausted with emotion and fatigue, the colour suddenly fled from her face, and she told Massimo that she must rest. Anxious and alarmed, he placed her on the grass, and, taking her hands in his, began stroking and caressing them. She sat looking earnestly into his face, her eyes shining with tenderness and love. She would not let him go to fetch

water for her from the river, and presently, becoming more composed, she took one of Massimo's hands in hers and murmured :

"How could you forgive me so soon?"

"Oh, as to that . . ." he cried, and the question he had been withholding ever since she had confessed that she was alone now fell from his lips : "But you yourself . . .?"

She understood at once, and told him she felt unable to explain in words, but that, if he wished it, she would do so in writing. In answer to a further question, he learned that she had arrived the night before and had taken a room at San Mamette. Only one other question did Massimo venture to ask : Did her father know? Lelia assured him that Donna Fedele alone had been told, but not until after her own departure. A troubled silence followed ; then Massimo proposed that they should return to Dasio, where she would be able to rest and refresh herself ; and she agreed immediately, as if it were her part not to acquiesce but simply to obey.

They started slowly, she leaning on his arm in silence. He was beginning to be uneasy concerning the comments her presence might give rise to at the hotel. He thought he saw a look of pain in her eyes, as if she wondered at his silence. He dropped her arm, and, placing his own round her, drew her lovingly to him. She murmured anxiously :

"Have I done wrong?"

Massimo held her closer.

"My wife!" he said.

She laid her head upon his shoulder.

"I have always, always loved you!" she whispered.

At the entrance to the wood they met the women whose voices they had heard some time before. The peasants saluted, and looked curiously at the Signorina. Massimo felt it would be a mistake to feign overmuch, to exert overmuch caution in order

to avoid arousing suspicion. When the women had disappeared, he told Lelia that he should present her to the hotel people as his future wife.

"Yes, yes! But for your sake, not for mine. It was for your sake before!" she said.

She wanted him to understand that if the presence of strangers had made her cautious in her demonstrations of affection, it was out of regard for his reputation rather than for her own. She asked him eagerly to hear him declare the contrary, whether he would not repent later having presented her as his future wife. Meanwhile they had reached the narrow valley that sweeps down from Pian di Nava to Terzo Morta and the little cemetery. Lelia paused on catching sight of the church and houses of Dasio, a nestling amidst the verdure, beneath the two colossal masses of dolomite, one facing south and the other west, that meet at right angles and form the Passo Stretto.

"Not yet," said she. But she quickly regretted her words, as if they had meant disobedience; and she would have gone on, despite her dread of the hotel and her desire to make this sweet home as long as possible. Massimo allowed her to rest for a few minutes—for a few minutes only, because she was so pale! The sky was still overcast, and mirrored upon the grey heights. The unbroken verdure and the ashen tints of the landscape, seemed in silent sympathy with those two souls that were so full of each other.

"Ah!" Lelia cried, enraptured, at last, "if only we could live here always!" And she closed her eyes. Massimo was silent. It would be a dream of delight indeed. But did Lelia realise what it meant to live at Dasio? He concluded it would be wiser not to answer, but his silence made the young girl wonder.

"No?" said she, and smiled.

"Yes," he made answer, "but it would be we

to try it first—to try living here for a few days first."

She stared at him. Her longing glance said: "Can I live here with you for a few days now?" Feeling that perhaps he had spoken imprudently, he took advantage of the fine rain that was beginning to fall to suggest that they should go on again.

Thoughts of the future, called forth by Lelia's words as to their living together at Dasio, had roused them to a sense of reality. They were silent, each trying to escape from the delirious present and to deal calmly with the problem of the future. An impulse of true love had brought her here. She had taken no thought for the morrow. To be sure Massimo had said "For ever!" and had called her "wife!" but what then? She would not have allowed thought of the morrow to trouble her had she not seen that it was troubling him. She would have taken up her abode at Dasio without hesitation. She was quite indifferent to what people might say, but her anxiety was to do or say nothing of which he might disapprove. She gazed into his face, seeking anxiously to read his thoughts. He was silently struggling against this ecstasy of happiness, struggling to be a man and not a headstrong youth, that he might wisely and firmly control, not only his own actions but also those of the woman who was to become his wife. Now the fever of joy would prevail, and he would look at Lelia, this incredible reality, in a way that made her smile; now his manly resolution would assert itself and cast a shadow across his brow.

"And Donna Fedele!" he cried suddenly. "What do you suppose she thinks?"

Lelia could imagine easily enough what she thought. "There is only one person in the world capable of such madness!" Lelia did not wish to say this, however, and stooped to read an inscription

carved upon a stone in a low wall facing the path.

TO GIUSEPPINA LORIO

Who perished here by the hand of an assassin.

Lelia shuddered as she pictured to herself a tragedy of passion, a heart as fiery as her own pierced by steel or lead.

"I would not be murdered," she said; "but to die now, suddenly, would be joy indeed!"

Massimo spoke no word, but he looked reprovingly at her.

"No, no!" Lelia murmured. "I wish to live, to live, to live!"

They entered the village, and for his sake she became more cautious even than he was, not even turning to look at him until they had reached the threshold of the hotel, when she flung him a burning glance. Massimo asked the proprietress to show the Signorina, who was going to stay a few hours, to a room and take her orders for luncheon, which she would take in her own room. While he was speaking, a messenger from San Mamette arrived with Donna Fedele's telegram. He read it and put it in his pocket without comment, and said goodbye to Lelia, saying that he must pay some visits at Puria; but before going he went to his room to write a few lines to Donna Fedele.

"DEAR MOTHER FEDELE,—Lelia is here. Perhaps I did not deserve that you should remind me of my duty as a gentleman. I beg you to ask Signor da Camin for his daughter's hand on my behalf.

"Your

"MASSIMO."

He gave the letter to the messenger and hastened away to Puria.

Meanwhile the proprietress had been singing Massimo's praises to Lelia, hoping thus to pave the way to further exploration. She spoke of his kindness, of his skill, and of her own hope that he might be appointed parish doctor to the Valley.

"Perhaps you are a relative of his?" she ventured at last.

Instead of answering, Lelia asked for writing materials.

Massimo did not return from Puria until two hours later. He had gone there in feverish haste, but had walked home slowly, and without even remembering to glance at the friendly peak of dolomite. He felt as if his reason must weaken, such was the tumult of thoughts and sentiments within him. He had asked for the hand of an heiress without thought for her wealth, but he might easily be suspected of having enticed Lelia to Valsolda in order to oblige her father to consent to a union between them. He was so appalled by this reflection that he asked himself whether it would not be better to sacrifice his happiness rather than submit to such a suspicion. Now he determined to speak to Lelia of this matter, now he was terrified by the thought that perhaps, in the ardour of her passion, she would fail to understand him, and doubting the strength of his devotion, reproach him for being unable to face the comment of the world as she herself had done. Torn by this fear, he wrung his hands, at the same time seeking to convince himself that it was vain, that this horrible suspicion would come to no one, and that, should it do so, Lelia would know how to banish it. On reaching the hotel once more he was wet with perspiration, but as pale as death. Learning that Lelia had not come down, he went to his own room, and almost immediately word was brought him that the Signorina was in the garden, and had asked for him. He forgot his gloomy thoughts, and joined Lelia where she was sitting on the wall at the foot of the garden,

near the fir-tree and a small fountain. In her hand she held a letter, and rose on catching sight of him. She told him that she had lunched in her room and had then done some writing. Massimo held out his hand, believing the letter must be for him, written to tell him of that which Lelia had declared herself unable to utter, the story of the change that had taken place within her. Before giving him the letter she showed him the address: "Signor Girolamo da Camin, Velo d'Astico (Vicenza)." Massimo withdrew his hand.

"No," said she, "you are to read it, only please do not do so in my presence. You have not lunched? Then read it while you are lunching. I am going to rest for a little while."

Massimo escorted the young girl as far as the door. She seemed to have read his thoughts, and to have noted some slight reserve in his manner. At the moment of leaving him she fixed her glance upon him. The fine, slightly bewildered eyes seemed to grow larger, as her lips murmured:

"Do you love me?"

"Now and for ever!" said he.

Massimo went to his room and read as follows:

"TO MY FATHER.

"What I have done and what I propose to do will seem very strange to you. I ask you to grant me immediately that liberty which I shall acquire by law in the course of a few months. I cannot tell you as yet how I shall use it, but this I can and do tell you, that of the income that is mine I shall demand only enough to live here modestly and alone. I shall not inquire how you dispose of the rest. For the present I need nothing. Later on I will write again.

"Greetings,
"LELIA.

"P.S.—Should circumstances make it necessary for

a few days, I shall accept the hospitality of Donna Fedele Vayla di Brea, this being a more suitable arrangement."

A flood of love and joy swelled his heart, and he drew a long breath of happiness and relief. She must take nothing, absolutely nothing, from her father! How much more he felt that she was his very own now, without her wealth! How he longed to press her to his heart! But she must re-write the letter at once and say she would neither demand nor accept anything from her father. He could not possibly postpone telling her of his joy and of the firm decision at which he had arrived, and started to go downstairs to her. Before reaching the bottom of the stairs, however, he had had time to reflect. It would not be fitting for him to see her in her room, and so he went to the garden to wait for her. It had begun to rain lightly again, but, regardless of this, Massimo sat down on the wall where she had sat before. It suddenly struck him that in her letter Lelia had purposely refrained from mentioning him, nor had she dated her note, whereas he had revealed everything through the mission he had confided to Donna Fedele. It might be necessary to send her a telegram, asking her to suspend her action. Or would it not rather be better for Lelia to tell her father openly how matters stood?

She did not come to him, and growing impatient, Massimo began walking up and down the garden. Lelia appeared at a window, saw him, and suddenly disappeared again. Massimo could not resist going to meet her on the stairs. He knew there was no one in that wing of the house, a Milanese family who had arrived over night having been out on the hills since dawn.

"I am happy!" he cried.

She fell upon his breast, clasped her hands behind his neck, and whispered:

Lelia.

"Was the letter right?"

They went out to the shelter of the fir-tree, he speaking eagerly, but in an undertone, she silent and happy, drinking in his passionate words. The girl said at last that she did not wish to be a burden to him, but that she was glad to give way to him, and that, as he wished it, she would write another letter, saying that she relinquished all right to the income. Upon hearing of Massimo's letter to Donna Fedele, she told him about the journey to Turin, and he heard the sad truth for the first time. But even Lelia had no idea that to postpone the operation even for a few days might prove fatal to the invalid.

Surprised and deeply grieved, he complained of not having known of all this in time to offer to accompany Donna Fedele to Turin. Lelia glanced at him. She feared lest her thought, put into words, might sound like selfishness, but her eyes said plainly: "Do you not see that in that case we should not be here together?" He understood, and smiled in recognition. A common feeling of unworthiness kept them from returning to the subject, and moreover, it was time for Lelia to re-write her letter.

While she was writing in her own room, and Massimo was lunching, the Milanese family returned. They were dishevelled, wet, tired, and laden with mountain flowers, cyclamen, aconite blossoms, ferns, mushrooms, strawberries, goat-cheeses and empty bottles. There was no further hope of silence and quiet conversation in the garden. When Lelia came downstairs with her letter Massimo immediately proposed that they should start on her way back.

He looked at his watch. It was nearly three o'clock.

"We will spend four hours going down," said he.

They started amid wind and sunshine. A strong breeze had sprung up, and changed the face of earth and sky. The blue was breaking through in all

directions. The pasture-lands of Rancò, the chestnut-groves of Drano, the sharp and naked summits—everything sparkled. They left the Puria road at the point where the girl from the hotel had talked with Lelia, and went along the narrow country path that lost itself in the soft bosom of a broad valley where the waters of Passo Stretto sang as they swung merrily southward. The path appeared again suddenly, following the waters, rising beside them to the little stone bridge that spans them by a bold spring upwards from the lower bank to the higher, at a point where boulders pressed hard upon the rebellious stream. Before reaching this rustic bridge, which seemed more a part of Nature's work than of man's, the path ran close to a cavern, large enough to shelter two or three persons. The cavern faced north and commanded a view of the slopes of Dasio, of the Passo Stretto, and of the amphitheatre of rocks that dominated the whole. Massimo and Lelia sat down here to rest.

"And which is the dolomitic peak?" she asked.

Massimo stared at her in amazement. What did she know of the dolomitic peak? She bent her head and remained silent. He took one of her hands between his own, and repeated his question more anxiously and pressingly. What did she know of it?

"I should like to answer you with Schumann's melody, and put my whole soul into it," said she, softly, but without raising her head.

Massimo knew now that Donna Fedele had spoken, and he silently pressed the dear imprisoned hand that quivered in his as memory brought back the "Aveu" to both minds.

"Show me the peak," said Lelia.

He pointed it out above the crest of the opposite range. It was a small tooth leaning against the sky, and biting into it just below the summit, towards the east.

"I thought it was that one," said she, "but the

effect is different from the Montanina drawing-room."

"Did you look for it there?" Massimo asked, for the sake of the sweet answer he expected. But he did not wait for the answer after all, but inquired how Donna Fedele had come to repeat his words about the peak. Again Lelia bent her head low.

"I read them all," said she.

"All my letters?"

"Yes, all, I think."

Then he realised that she must be aware of the bitter judgment he had passed upon her.

"And still you came?"

"Had I not read, I should not have come."

Massimo was still clasping the dear little hand, and he continued to stroke it in silence, as if seeking to free it from an affront it had suffered.

"I read the last one," said Lelia, "up among the rhododendrons of Priaforà. It was then I came to a decision, and laid my plans."

She smiled as she thought of Siora Bettina, and Massimo had little trouble in drawing from her the story of her flight. Half angrily, half gaily she told of the Velo priests and Signora Fantuzzo's manœuvres, confessed her own hypocrisy, and made even Massimo laugh by her description of the journey from Arsiero to Vicenza. But never once did she mention her father. As Massimo held her hand, he pulled gently at the ring she wore. She took it off and offered it to him with a sad and earnest glance. The young man read the words "To Leila." Then he remembered that his poor friend Andrea had told him of the dispute he had had with his fiancée about this very name. In silence he placed the ring upon her finger once more, and, still in silence, released her hand.

"I was naughty," she said softly, "and he was so good!"

Again Massimo sought Lelia's hand.

"At the time of his death Andrea's father wished me to take his son's place," said he. "Andrea himself must have put this desire into his father's heart. We will never forget him, dear, will we? Never until death! Would you like me to call you Leila in memory of him?"

"Yes, yes!" she cried, deeply moved. Both in turn pressed the ring to their lips.

"He used to talk to me about you very often," said Lelia. Massimo made no answer. Together they rose as by a tacit understanding, and crossing the bridge, followed the rapidly rising path, which now followed the curving bank, now forced its way into narrow, shady gorges, through which flowed tinkling rivulets. Lelia was the first to break the silence.

"I fear I am too wicked, too strange to make you happy."

Massimo smiled.

"Lelia may have been both wicked and strange," said he, "but Leila is not."

Walking by his side, she took his hand and said softly:

"Yes, henceforward I will always be Leila. What do you wish Leila to be like?"

"I wish her to be more gentle than I am, and her only peculiarity must be that she can love a poor, struggling doctor, who offers her nothing but a life of hardship," said Massimo.

Lelia clasped his arm passionately, as she reproached him.

"Leave that kind of thing for others to say," said she.

But hardly had she uttered the words than she blushed and begged him to forgive her.

"We shall stay here, shall we not?"

Massimo explained that, as yet, he could not be sure of this. He had come to Valsolda intending to apply for the post of parish doctor, but had abandoned the idea because the appointment appeared

to have been practically offered to some one else. But this other man had now withdrawn, and there was some hope for Massimo himself. He had therefore decided to apply. If he failed to be appointed he could not remain here. In that case he must try somewhere else.

"To-morrow," said he, "I am going to call on all the mayors."

"To-morrow!" Lelia cried in dismay. "Shall I not see you to-morrow, then?"

"Perhaps you may, and perhaps not. But Lelia must realise that we cannot be together as we have been to-day until the answers from Velo d'Astico arrive."

The girl was troubled, and murmured that she feared she was not yet entirely Leila. Massimo did not seem to understand, and begged her to repeat her words.

"Perhaps I don't understand very well," she said. "But I will obey. I will do everything you wish."

She would have liked to follow all the paths that led upwards, that they might never reach San Mamette. When, near the washing-place at Drano, they came out upon the paved way leading to the lofty grazing-lands of Rancò, she wished to explore the woods a few yards farther on. Everything here suggested an excuse for lingering—the gigantic boulders, looming out of the deep shadows; a group of slender locusts, lost amidst the chestnut and walnut-trees, a huge and venerable chestnut, the patriarch of the grove, a blue line of distant and sun-flooded lake, showing amidst the branches, and at last, where the path climbed upwards into the open, the walls of rock above Dasio, rising bare and mighty, and the slender dolomitic peak, slanting against the sky. She was evidently very tired, but she would gladly have mounted farther still. This, however, Massimo refused to allow.

"Leila obeys," said she.

Although ready enough to climb upwards, she wished to rest at every step when they were descending, at which they both laughed. Below Drano Lelia stopped to listen to the murmuring of water, hidden beneath the spot where she stood.

"I should like to know whether it is laughing or crying," said she. "You probably think it is laughing at me, but I believe it is weeping because we shall reach San Mamette so soon."

She inquired if they would pass the waterfall she had seen in the morning, and on learning that they would not, glanced at Massimo, laughing and blushing, but without uttering her wish. It was but slightly out of the way, however, and Massimo yielded to her desire to go that way.

There in the shadowy ravine, enclosed between steep and wooded banks, and cut off at one end by a wall of rock, they passed the last hour of this memorable day, seated hand-in-hand upon a grassy mound opposite the silver stream of falling water.

"All this is like Schubert's music of 'Der Müller und der Bach,'" said Massimo at last. "Oh for a summer of love here alone, always alone!"

Lelia looked at him without speaking, so ardently that Massimo's head swam.

"I have an idea," said Lelia. "I should like to find a pool of water in which I could see to put my hair tidy."

They followed the stream downwards to a spot where it spread peacefully, forming a quiet mirror. From the bridge they had noticed this sheet of water reflecting the cascade. With a smile Lelia begged Massimo to go away. He demurred somewhat, but finally obeyed, and loitered along the Puria path. But presently a silvery laugh called him back. Seated upon the bank, she had let down her magnificent fair hair, where the sun and shadow played together. She had lost the tiny ribbon with which she was in the habit of binding her tresses, and

finding it impossible to manage the golden mass was laughing at her own carelessness and awkward plight. In her lap lay two shell combs, and she was trying, with both hands, to form the heavy wave of hair into a knot at her neck. She looked more lovely than ever, and might well have been the naiad of the waterfall. Massimo stood gazing at her, lost in admiration, and she laughingly begged him to turn round, for she could not possibly manage her hair while he watched her thus. But he was unable to take his eyes from her golden head. Yes, she might indeed have been the naiad of the spot, the fair-haired queen of this little kingdom of rocks, of water, and of forest.

"Stay as you are!" said he at last.

"Yes, indeed!" cried the girl. "And pray what would people think of you, seeing you with a wild creature like this?"

She decided to plait her hair in two braids, and to let them hang over her shoulders. Then she sprang lightly to her feet.

"Will that do?" she inquired, turning her laughing face towards Massimo.

"It is a poem!" said he.

"This Valsolda is a poem indeed," Lelia murmured. "Do you think you will be nothing but a doctor here?"

"What else should I be, dear?"

She could not tell, but it seemed to her that he was not the man to be satisfied only with paying medical visits to the peasants.

"I have no faith left," said he. He meant that he had no faith in himself, but Lelia, recalling his letters, placed a different interpretation upon his words.

"Neither have I," said she. "And I am so glad you no longer share the faith of those Velo priests!"

"Oh, my dear!" cried Massimo, interrupting her. "What was poor Signor Marcello's faith, and Donna

Fedele's and my own mother's? I am losing it, have lost it already indeed, but I would not have Leila lose it. However, I was not speaking of religious faith. I meant faith in myself."

"I have so much faith in you."

Massimo smiled. She cast a rapid glance around her, and seeing no one, bent forward to kiss him.

* * * * *

It was time to start for San Mamette in earnest. They went slowly downwards, speaking little, and bearing themselves with prudent dignity. On reaching the parish church brooding over the roofs of the village, beneath a mighty crag, they paused in front of it. Massimo had decided to leave Lelia here and go up to Muzzaglio to see his patient once more. Leaning against the parapet encircling the church place, they made the final arrangements for the morrow. Massimo would not come to San Mamette, nor would he meet her elsewhere, but he would send her a letter towards evening after his visits to the mayors.

"A long letter, please," she begged, and promised to write one herself, which Massimo's messenger would carry back to him. She took the bunch of cyclamen from her bosom, pressed it to her lips, and then offered it to Massimo. Some one was coming up the steps connecting the church place with the village. Massimo kissed the cyclamen again, and then quickly disappeared up the steep path.

V

Shortly after nine o'clock Lelia left the hotel and climbed to the church place to find the exact spot where Massimo had taken leave of her. Here her intense longing seemed to find relief. On returning to the hotel she remained at her window until nearly

midnight, watching the fantastic flashing of the revolving light, as it leaped from lake to stream, from bank to bank, through the misty atmosphere, and watching the signals glowing on Monte Bisnago against the dark sky.

Dreams—dreams—all was a dream! All was night and flames, within her and around her.

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CHAPTER XVII

THE WHITE LADY OF THE ROSES

I

LELIA rose from her bed before dawn, and, without waiting to dress, sat down at her table and wrote as follows :

"The night is still dark ; I am very tired, but, nevertheless, I find it impossible to stay in bed. I have been feeling as if you were going away from me. I must talk to you. Last night, between nine and ten, I went up to the church place once more, to the place where we said goodbye. In memory I went over all the paths we had travelled along during the day, especially the one in the wood, where we went soon after our meeting. I should like to go there now if I could. I believe I should be able to find the exact place, the very tree near which we passed, and from which I pulled a leaf on our return. I am covering that leaf with kisses now. Ah, I am still Lelia, Lelia, Lelia ! But I promise you to become Leila ! Please love Lelia also !

"Now I am going to write what I should never have the courage to say. Perhaps, at the bottom of your heart, you despise me because I have come to you thus, like a mad creature. You will despise me still more when you learn that I came without intending to ask anything of you, because I feel I have no right to do so, because whatsoever you

may do for me, for my honour, for my life, for my love, will be simply a noble gift. My love for you is no sudden thing. I loved you even before I knew you, before you came to the Montanina. The night you arrived I listened with a beating heart to the whistle of your train. Then I rebelled against love. Why? From pride. The more I loved you the more unkind and haughty did my attitude towards you become. This is the truth I deserved all the bitter thoughts you harboured against me. I came here to tell you this, and also to place myself in your hands. And, after all, I told you only of my love, but ah! I had no need to tell you more.

"I feared you would cast me off as unworthy. I should have said, 'It is what I deserve!' I should not have taken my life, for I have given my word not to do that. I should not have entered a convent, for I have lost my faith. I should have arranged, in some way, to live near you, seeing you sometimes without being seen. But you were kind and generous. You took pity on one who has been both proud and sinful. Your lips have pronounced absolution, for you have said, *for ever!*—you have said, *my wife!* The memory of this will be a never-ending joy to me! But your gentleness terrifies me. I tremble lest I may cause you unhappiness, lest I be unable to maintain what I promise, lest I fail to become Leila. I tremble because of the evil blood that flows in my veins. Had I not possessed this evil blood I could not have deceived my father, my devoted maid, and that poor creature who accompanied me to Vicenza, deceived them by acting a part, with perfect naturalness and without remorse.

"But still, still . . . still, when I reflect that you are going to make me yours for ever, I feel that no worshipper has ever served and adored his God as I shall serve and adore you. I have written that

I have lost my faith. I am a creature of passion rather than of reason. I cannot analyse my religious sentiments clearly for you. As long as I could I clung to the religion of my convent school. You may perhaps recall my aversion to innovation in religion, to destructive yet not reconstructive ideas. As long as I could I accepted the religion of the archpriest and of the chaplain of Velo. Even Signor Marcello's religion and Donna Fedele's did not seem entirely pure to me. They spoke of the gospel as if they had a right to interpret it, and I knew well enough that no layman had such a right. I said to myself, 'The whole, or nothing.' As long as I could I accepted everything, and then, when I came to know really well some of those who represent that whole, and to see them intriguing together—the archpriest, the chaplain, the archpriest's sister-in-law, my own father, and a certain friend of his called Molesin—I could stand it no longer, and I said, 'It shall be nothing.'

"But this nothing does not satisfy me, and I turn to you, rejoicing that you are freed from your old beliefs, from your ideas of a renovated Catholicism. I ask you to give me a God whom I can worship in the forests of Dasio, in the gorge where the waterfall murmurs, upon the lake, and in the bridal chamber, a God who shall not force official mediators upon me; a God who shall ask me for love only, and forbid me only to hate; a God who will not torment my intelligence with incomprehensible dogmas, nor annoy me with tedious practices, nor expect to delight me with a paradise and terrify me with a hell.

"Shall I see you to-morrow? Did my window overlook the street, I think I should stand by it all day long, hoping! But my room overlooks the courtyard. Shall I be doing wrong if I start from San Mamette this afternoon at three o'clock, and go and sit on the grass, opposite the waterfall?

Shall I be doing wrong if I linger near a half-ruined chapel, where the path begins to descend, and where a view of the whole valley, the rocks of Dasio, and the dolomitic peak suddenly breaks into sight? Would there be any harm in your passing that spot on your way to visit your mayors?

"Perhaps Leila should not write these things."

"POOR LELIA."

Returning to bed, she slept the deep sleep of fatigue and youth until the sun was high. She could not wait for Alberti's messenger and sent the boy who had been her guide to Dasio with the letter.

She did not leave her room again until two o'clock, and spent the time in gazing upon the hills, the lake, the clouds, the play of light and shadow, and in dreaming and writing. She wrote to Donna Fedele, telling of her joy at being loved and forgiven, craving pardon once more for having left without informing her friend of her intention, telling of the letter she had written to her father, and begging for news of the invalid's condition. She directed her letter to the hospital in Turin, fearing it would not find Donna Fedele at Arsiero. At two she went out to buy some stamps, and on the threshold met a messenger who was the bearer of a letter from Massimo. He wrote :

"Yesterday was such a dream, Leila, that your letter of this morning was welcome to me if only as a proof of the reality of those heavenly hours. And last night, on my way to Muzzaglio, I saw once more, and in reality, the wood where, in less than an instant, we blotted out all the bitterness, all the pain of the past. I did not pluck a leaf, but I lingered there, for the delight of the memory was overpowering. In that precious instant you were still Lelia to me. Please never again speak un-

kindly of Lelia ; it hurts me. Do not speak of kindness on my part, much less of noble actions. Do not use the word 'pity' in connection with the sentiment which you aroused in me when we first met, and against which I also struggled at its birth. Never again utter that horrible thought—which you have never really believed—that I could despise a woman capable of such a miracle of love and humility. And, on my part, I will not ask you to forgive me for my harsh early judgment of you. I will tell you only that my love for Leila now fills and stirs my soul like an eternal melody.

"Dearest, we will seek a faith together. I remember your aversion to my Master and to my ideals at the time, though I thought then that you probably spoke in ignorance and only because you disliked me so. Now I understand better. But—forgive me—I still feel that if you knew those first ideals of mine you would see that, in themselves, they were no barrier to a religion such as you desire and long for, a religion of the open fields and watercourses, a religion of love and freedom from ritual. From my letters to Donna Fedele you have learned what is my present attitude towards dogmatic beliefs and of the grief the overthrow of these has caused me. Only yesterday did I cease to dwell upon this sorrow, and I would not think of it to-day, nor to-morrow, nor for all the time that I might have your love, were it not for a fast approaching event to which I cannot even allude without a feeling of deep emotion and sadness. One who is dead has come forth from his grave, and is drawing near me, is seeking for me. He is my Master, the man I have loved best in this world, the man whose wonderful faith embraced all sinners. His body is to be brought here the day after to-morrow in the evening. I have this morning had a telegram to tell me. I must go to meet him. Dearest Leila, you and I

will indeed seek for a faith together, but the thought of this meeting has paralysed me. I cannot tell you how my mind is torn.

"It will not be possible for me to meet you as you have arranged. I must be at Cima at half-past two to see the mayor. Please start from San Mamette at that hour, and get some one to accompany you to the Sanctuary of Caravina. When you have passed the village of Cressogno, dismiss your guide. You cannot miss the way, for the sanctuary stands alone. Should we not have met before, wait for me at the church. We will proceed to Cima together, and you can return thence by boat to San Mamette, while I go up to Dasio alone. Leila, my own !

"M."

A whistle ! A steamer arriving from Oria. Leila had forgotten to wind up her watch. She consulted a time-table that had been placed in her room, and concluded it must be nearly half-past two. She sent for the boy who had accompanied her before, and they immediately started out, walking rapidly, and in half an hour's time she found herself at the farther extremity of Cressogno, in sight of Caravina. Here she dismissed her guide and went on alone.

She had brought Massimo's letter with her, and now read it through once more, as she sauntered slowly along the pleasant level path beneath the olives and among the vineyards of the sunny hillside, sloping gently downward to the lake. At about a hundred paces from the cypresses that faced the sanctuary she raised her eyes, and her face beamed. Massimo was coming towards her.

For a time they were silent, partly from emotion, partly for another reason. Each felt that the other was thinking of a shadow cast by a dead man, and a diffidence constrained them both.

"You are sad," Lelia said at last softly. "Can I do anything to comfort you?"

"Dearest," he began impulsively, as if he had been waiting only for a word from her to pour out his heart, "there were several things in my letter that do not in the least express my true feelings. I felt this somewhat while writing, but still more strongly after the letter had left me. As long as I possess your love I shall never feel contempt for any one. I shall feel nothing but pity for those to whom such a love is denied."

Lelia did not speak, but gazed upon him with tender eyes. Presently she ventured to inquire timidly about the dead friend. She remembered that one evening after dinner, at the Montanina, she had asked where Benedetto was buried, and that Massimo had answered, "At Campo Verano, for the time being."

Massimo now told her everything, but without touching upon the mental trouble he had referred to in his letter. Lelia approached it gently. She repeated her question softly:

"Can I do anything to comfort you?"

As Massimo made no answer, she added:

"I can see how much you still love your Master."

"Yes," said Massimo, "I love him still."

He spoke excitedly and as if there were further words to follow. At that moment a cloud cast a rapid shadow over olives and vineyards, over the path, and a long, pale-green strip of slumbering lake along the shore. Massimo paused. Lelia, convinced that he was about to speak, gazed anxiously at him as she waited. He did indeed wish to speak, and was struggling to find his way amid the tumult of thoughts and feelings that were warring within him. The words seemed so close to his lips and then they sank back again. He was so fully conscious of this that he never doubted she would not understand him when he cried sadly at last:

"I cannot!"

He stepped away from the olive-tree against which he had been leaning, and begged Lelia to go on, for the sky looked threatening over towards Lugano, and a suspicious mist hung over Capriro and San Salvatore. She obeyed sadly. She was pained that he should not have relieved his feelings, and also because she vaguely realised her own powerlessness. Massimo, feeling that he had grieved her, took her arm, and began stroking her hand tenderly. She laid her right hand upon her left, that both might share in his caresses, and so, in silence, they advanced towards Cima. In the village they heard an old piano quavering: *Sola, furtiva al tempio*. . . .

Massimo paused, and stood listening.

"The prelude to love!" said he. Lelia glanced at him in astonishment. What could he mean? On learning that Massimo had been greatly moved by that melody, which he had heard on the night of his arrival at the Montanina, while the whole house slept, she blushed and smiled.

"It was not I who was playing," she said.

"Not you?"

"No; it was Signor Marcello."

She had flushed hotly, fearing he would be disappointed, and his face did indeed show some slight disappointment. But he saw at once her distressed look, and laughed heartily at his own mistake. She joined in so readily, that he began to suspect she had been jesting, and begged her to tell him the truth.

"It was you who was playing!" he cried.

"Yes, yes!" said she, flinging up her head and smiling, as was her wont at happy moments. "Yes, I was playing!"

Massimo did not know whether to believe her or not, and both laughed in turn, without further discussion, until the noise of distant wheels told them that the steamer had left Porlezza, and was nearing Cima. Now there was a little tussle. Massimo, half

serious, half in jest, proposed that they should not meet on the morrow. They might expect an answer from Lelia's father or from Donna Fedele by Monday. Lelia protested. No matter what the answer might be, it could not change anything, and on Monday, answer or no answer, she was going with him to meet Benedetto's body. It was decided at last that early on the following morning he would send her a letter containing the plans for the day.

Once on board the boat, she took up her position near the stern, and remained gazing at Massimo, who was standing on the landing-stage, as long as she could see him.

II

At six o'clock she dined in her own room, and then sat down to write to Massimo. Towards seven she heard the whistle of the steamer from Oria, and went to the window to see it pass, returning afterwards to her writing. Suddenly there was a knock at her door. It was the housemaid. Two ladies had arrived by the boat, and were asking for the Signorina. Lelia inquired their names. The girl did not know. What were they like, then? They were both elderly; one was short and the other tall. The tall one had white hair, and appeared to be very ill. Lelia sprang to her feet. Donna Fedele! Was it possible? Bewildered and in silence she stared at the girl, who went on to say that she had heard the lady with the white hair inquire of the proprietor if Dr. Alberti were also at the hotel. No further doubt was possible. At a bound Lelia reached the door, thrust the girl aside, and flew down the stairs.

In the narrow entrance-hall she saw Donna Fedele sitting, while Cousin Eufemia stood near, talking with the proprietor.

"You?" she cried, and would have flung herself

into her friend's arms had not the old cousin restrained her.

"The poor Signora," said the proprietor, who was holding a tray with a small glass of Marsala, "greatly fatigued."

Donna Fedele, whose face was as colourless as her hair, forced a sweet smile, while her beautiful voice said painfully:

"This is a surprise, is it not? Are you quite well, and did you have a pleasant journey?"

Lelia could not keep back her tears.

"Tut, tut!" said Donna Fedele. "What in the world are you crying about? Are you sorry to see me here?"

"Poor Signorina!" said the sympathetic proprietor; "it is only because she is so delighted." He was sure there was some mystery, but he did not know what it was.

Meanwhile Cousin Eufemia was trying to persuade the invalid to taste the Marsala. Donna Fedele had almost fainted on entering the hotel. They had hastened to place her upon a chair, and some minutes had elapsed before she was able to ask the proprietor if a young lady, travelling alone, were stopping in his house, and if Dr. Alberti were there also.

The Marsala restored her somewhat, and Lelia also succeeded in calming herself. She arranged that the invalid should have her room, which was the best double-room that was available, and that she should have a small one next to it.

Donna Fedele now declared that she felt strong enough to mount the stairs and go to bed, adding with a touch of her old love of teasing, that her companion, having excited the admiration and curiosity of the natives, was now at liberty to go for a walk and show herself.

"Nonsense, nonsense!" laughed the delighted Eufemia. "The Lord and Our Lady be praised, you are better again!"

With difficulty, leaning upon Lelia's arm and pausing at every step, Donna Fedele reached the top at last, and entered her room, where Lelia and Cousin Eufemia hastened to get her into bed.

As she helped to undress her friend Lelia was horrified by her emaciation, and by the signs of illness. She said nothing in Cousin Eufemia's presence, but as soon as the little old woman had gone out of the room, Lelia flung herself upon her knees, and seizing the hand that hung beside the bed, kissed it passionately.

"What have you done, child?" said Donna Fedele.

She did not understand that the young girl was shedding tears of compassion for her, for the sublime and single-hearted woman whom she had wronged, and who had come to her, sick and fainting, as the tenderest of mothers might have come; while she herself, absorbed in her love, had given so little thought to her and to her terrible sufferings. Lelia sobbed out:

"I am happy, dear friend—so happy! I did wrong not to tell you, but I did right in coming here."

"You did right?"

"Yes. He loves me—he is going to marry me. He is so noble, so good! We had written to you all about it."

"He is going to marry me!" Donna Fedele repeated. "I should think so after what has happened!"

Lelia, still on her knees, raised her head.

"Why?" said she. "It is not his duty for him to marry me."

Donna Fedele silently withdrew her hand from Lelia's clasp, and placing it upon her head, said softly:

"Who knows what strange ideas of duty this little head may contain!"

It was dark in the room, and Donna Fedele could

not see the sudden flame in Lelia's eyes, but she heard it in her voice and in her excited utterance.

"Why should it be his duty? It was I who came to him. He loves me, but at the same time some other brotherly in his affection would protect me even against myself, if that were necessary."

Donna Fedele smiled and stroked the young girl's hair tenderly.

"It is necessary—very necessary," said she.

Lelia took the hand that had been caressing her hair, and pressing her face upon it, murmured:

"Perhaps it is."

"For shame, for shame!" her friend cried.

While Donna Fedele, who had withdrawn her hand, was thus chiding the kneeling girl, patting her head somewhat sharply the while, the searchlight flashed through the room, and they heard a scream from Cousin Eufemia. Even Donna Fedele had been startled. Her terrified cousin came bustling in to close the windows, exclaiming: "Oh, poor man! What an awful thunderstorm we are going to have!" and Lelia had to explain where the light came from before she went away, soothed. Donna Fedele now wanted every detail of Lelia's life during the past three days. The girl gave a colourless account of her doings, and then asked permission to inform Massimo at once of their friend's arrival. Donna Fedele herself desired this, but protested that she would not see him until the morrow. Lelia went into the next room and wrote a few hurried lines, telling Massimo also how ill Donna Fedele was, and then begged the hotel proprietor to have the note carried to Dasio immediately.

Cousin Eufemia, who, in spite of her fatigue, was fully determined not to go to bed until all her preparations for the night were completed, and a supply of broth, mineral water, and Marsala placed in the invalid's room, took Lelia aside and implored her, with tears in her eyes, to arrange so that, should

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prove necessary, a physician might be sent for. She trembled for Fedele, who, by this time, ought to have been in the Turin hospital.

"She thinks she will die," said Eufemia. "She went to confession and received Communion the day before yesterday, and yesterday she sent for her confessor again. If we could only get off to Turin to-morrow! But I am sure she will not wish to go."

Lelia, frightened and distressed, went to inquire about the doctor. The physician who was on duty for the time being lived at Cadate, not ten minutes' walk from San Mamette. Lelia insisted upon relieving poor old Eufemia, and sitting up with the invalid at least part of the night. But Eufemia would not agree to this.

"I must sit on a chair," said she, "for if I lie down, even in my clothes, I shall go fast asleep at once. With my rosary, and my mind fixed on Our Blessed Lady of Consolation, I shall be better off than in bed."

Lelia was obliged to give way. She sent word to the proprietor that the person to whom she had sent the note might perhaps come, some time before midnight, to inquire for the invalid. She did not go to bed, but often went to listen at her friend's door. Once she heard Donna Fedele ordering her cousin to lie down. Eufemia resisted for a time, but Fedele raised her voice, and the old woman was obliged to obey, having first stipulated that she would not undress. Again Donna Fedele made a request in a low tone, and Cousin Eufemia began reciting the rosary. The young girl brought a chair and sat down by the door, determined to spend the night there, prepared to enter the room should it be necessary.

She was sure that Alberti would start as soon as he received her note, and was therefore not surprised when he arrived towards half-past eleven. Hearing voices at the door of the hotel, Lelia went

downstairs. Massimo was very troubled, and was still more distressed by the account of the invalid. They discussed the advisability of his seeing Donna Fedele at once, should she be awake. Lelia did not think it wise, and so he went to the room he had ordered for himself, begging Lelia to call him immediately in case of need, and to send for the Cadate doctor as well.

Lelia was alone in the dark corridor, while the entire household slept. Yesterday there had been light in her heart, and to-day there was shadow. For her sake, entirely for her sake, Donna Fedele lay there suffering, perhaps dying. She felt almost as if she now loved Massimo less, and she wept silently, biting her lip that she might not sob aloud. A small voice did indeed whisper to her that Donna Fedele had not been obliged to come, that it had not been necessary, and that she would have done better to go to Turin. Lelia would have listened to this voice willingly enough, had her motherly friend come to her in good health, and with reproaches on her lips. But she had come in so pitiful a plight, so kindly, and with such tenderness in her words and upon her face! And to whom did she owe her happiness if not to this friend, who had paved the way to it?

Towards two o'clock she feared she would fall asleep, and rising softly, went to her room and stood by the open window that the cool air might banish her drowsiness. She saw a light shining beyond another open window. Perhaps Massimo was lying awake in that room. She withdrew from the window, for she shrank from seeing him and being seen by him at that moment. She listened to the whisperings of the night, the gentle lap of the placid lake, the leap of a fish, the hooting of an owl in the distance, and presently, on resuming her post at Donna Fedele's door, she became conscious that her love was undergoing a transformation, that contact with painful

reality was imparting to it an earnestness and a depth it had lacked before.

At four she heard Donna Fedele ask for something. Cousin Eufemia got out of bed, and ran against a chair, at which Donna Fedele laughed softly. After this all was quiet until morning.

III

At half-past six Cousin Eufemia, who had come out of the room at six, leaving Donna Fedele asleep, cautiously opened the door again, and seeing that the invalid was awake, entered on tiptoe.

"Dr. Alberti is here," said she.

Donna Fedele turned painfully on her side, so that her face was towards the door, and said:

"Let him come in."

Massimo entered briskly, his tall person slightly bent, his face wearing an expression of eager satisfaction.

"What a pleasure!" he exclaimed, partly from force of habit, partly to deceive himself and her, although he was fully aware that those words were not the most appropriate he could have uttered on meeting a friend whose condition was so much more serious than when he had last seen her.

Donna Fedele smiled.

"I don't know about the pleasure!" said she, and held out her hand, which he kissed.

"But why did you undertake this trying journey? I assure you it was entirely unnecessary. How could you doubt—"

Massimo had been about to add "that I should act as a Christian and a gentleman?" But he checked himself, and flushed hotly, for the word "Christian," after his last letter to the woman who was now listening to him, would have scorched his lips.

Donna Fedele gazed at him in silence, but with a scrutiny so penetrating that his colour deepened still more.

"It will depend upon you and Lelia," she said, "to make this the best action of my whole life."

Failing to grasp her meaning, Massimo made no answer.

"And now," said he at last, breaking a silence that was embarrassing, "allow me to act the part of a doctor."

But with a slow shake of her forefinger, the invalid refused. Greatly disappointed, Massimo asked the reason of this refusal. She replied that she did not need a doctor, that indeed she herself had come to act the part of physician both to Lelia and himself. But not at once. At present she wished to know what these young people intended to do. On hearing that Lelia had written to her father, and was waiting for an answer, she pointed out that it was absolutely certain to be a refusal, and that, answer or no answer, the girl could not remain here.

"God will give me strength to take her back to her own home," said she, "or at least to the Villino for a few days."

Thereupon Massimo told her what Lelia had written to her father, and the reason for anticipating a favourable answer. Donna Fedele readily admitted this, and was furthermore pleased to learn that Massimo had hopes of being appointed physician to the Commune of Valsolda. But it was none the less necessary that Lelia should go away with her, and Massimo at once recognised this necessity. He believed, however, that it would be difficult to persuade Lelia, but this he did not say.

"Call her," said Donna Fedele.

Lelia came, but on learning what was proposed the colour fled from her face.

"No, no!" she cried, rather beseechingly than in protest.

Donna Fedele called her a foolish child, and assured her that, as she and Massimo had come to an understanding, matters would of necessity take their natural course. Was it possible she could not see the impropriety, the impossibility of her remaining in Valsolda? Lelia hastened to explain. She had hoped Donna Fedele would remain a few days, that this rest and quiet might benefit her. Then she, Lelia, would have gone to Turin with her friend. Of course she was sorry to leave Valsolda, but it was the bare thought of returning to Velo that horrified her. Her coming of age and becoming her own mistress was simply a question of months now, of a very few months. Donna Fedele pointed out that in Turin she would be left entirely on her own resources.

"If your father would consent," she said, after a few moments' reflection, "I could leave you at Santhià, with my cousin."

After a brief discussion it was decided that Donna Fedele should rest to-day, see the Cadate doctor to-morrow, and, should he consent, start with Lelia, sending a telegram to another cousin to meet the girl at the Santhià station, while Eufemia, who had recovered her box, over which she had begun to sigh frequently in private, should continue the journey with the invalid. Letters coming to San Mamette for Lelia would be sent on to the Santhià address. Donna Fedele determined to act without waiting for Sior Momi's permission. He had always shown himself most deferential towards her, while her cousin's house at Santhià was so safe a refuge, and Lelia so abhorred the idea of going back to Velo, that she felt she had the right to decide on her own responsibility.

The long talk had exhausted her small stock of strength, and she begged for an hour's rest and silence. She made another request, that Massimo would return to Dasio, and that Lelia would make

up her mind not to see him again until that evening between six and seven o'clock, and then only in her, Donna Fedele's, presence. She felt the share she had had in bringing about Lelia's mad flight, and her responsibility weighed upon her more than it would upon a real mother. Lelia showed signs of rebellion.

"Leila, dearest Leila!" said Massimo, with a smile. As by enchantment the little wild animal, with flaming eyes, was tamed. He wished it to be so, and that was enough. Donna Fedele started.

"How is this? You have changed your name?"

"Only for him," said Lelia, blushing. "But for him, I have really changed it."

"But why?"

With a rapid gesture Lelia checked Massimo's explanation, and implored Donna Fedele not to press her for reasons.

"It will be far better for you to call me Leila, also," said she.

Donna Fedele shook her head, and made a gesture as if to say: "Who can make anything out of this extraordinary pair?" And here the conversation ended.

IV.

It was Sunday, and on Saturday, in obedience to Donna Fedele's orders, Cousin Eufemia had sought information concerning the whereabouts of the church and the hours of the different services. She had learned that the church, on the hillside above the town, could only be reached by a flight of very steep steps, and that the one Mass celebrated there was at nine o'clock. Nor were there any other churches in the neighbourhood which were easier of access. She saw well enough that her cousin was in no condition to go to Mass, but nevertheless,

she did not dare to go herself without informing the invalid of her intention. At half-past eight, therefore, she told her. Donna Fedele sent for Lelia.

"Go to Mass with Eufemia," said she. "Unfortunately, I am not well enough to go. You must hear it for me."

Lelia was anxious to stay with her, but she would not hear of this. "No, dear," said she, "I insist upon your going," and added that, had it been necessary, Eufemia could have stopped with her. As Lelia still hesitated, she asked with a smile if, in order to obtain a favour from her, she must call her Leila. The young girl made no answer, but started immediately with Cousin Eufemia.

Donna Fedele was suffering. Sharp pains had begun to torment her during her interview with Massimo, and still continued. This was no new form of suffering—she had had these pains before; now, however, she could not help recognising how weak was her power of resistance. She took her Prayer Book and sought to read the prayers of the Mass, but she could not, and presently her hand sank heavily upon the coverlet, and the little book fell to the floor. A heavy perspiration drenched her brow, and coursed down her thin cheeks; but no groan escaped her lips. Shortly before her cousin and Lelia returned from Mass the pains grew less severe, and during the first moment of comparative ease she murmured aloud to herself:

"My dear Fedele, you will never leave this place!"

However, she found strength to receive them calmly on their return, and in answer to their anxious questions, said she had indeed been suffering some slight pain, but that she was better now. She asked for a little Marsala, and her voice betrayed extreme exhaustion. Lelia proposed sending for the doctor.

"Send for him if you will," said the invalid, smiling, "but mind you send for the right one!"

Lelia blushed, and explained that she had meant to allude to the Cadate doctor, and not to Massimo at all.

Cousin Eufemia's heart was full of misgivings, for she reflected that, if Fedele consented to see the doctor, she must be feeling very ill indeed. The sufferer sent her to see that the physician was summoned, and then begged Lelia to pick up the Prayer Book, and read her the following words of St. Augustine's :

"And now it is time that I should come to Thee for all eternity. Open Thy door to me, and teach me how to reach Thy threshold. I possess nought save a willing heart, and I know nothing save that the things of the world and all frailties are to be shunned, while the things of eternity and of truth are to be sought after. This is all my wisdom ; and how to reach Thee I know not. I beseech Thee, therefore, to watch for me, to enlighten me, and to set my feet upon the right path. If those who find a refuge in Thee reach Thee through faith, then give me faith ; if this be obtained through virtue, then grant me to be virtuous ; and if knowledge lead to Thee, then give me knowledge. Cause faith, hope, and charity to increase within me, through Thine own admirable and singular bounty."

At the opening words Lelia had shuddered. Was this a forewarning of the end? As she read on, it no longer appeared so, but her first impression did not fade, and it sounded in her voice until the end of the paragraph.

"Thank you," said Donna Fedele, gently and seriously. "When I shall have crossed that threshold I hope you will sometimes pray thus, in memory of your poor old friend."

Lelia seized her hand and kissed it. After that the invalid lay without speaking until the arrival of

the doctor. His visit was to little purpose, for he was not allowed to make the thorough examination that alone could have enlightened him. Donna Fedele told him of the operation, and said that she had intended leaving for Turin on the morrow, but would not do so without his permission. She therefore requested him to come again the next morning and give his verdict. Meeting Lelia in the corridor, the doctor told her he had found the patient's heart in an extremely weak state, and that he feared the worst.

Massimo came at six o'clock. The invalid was free from pain. Cousin Eufemia, greatly distressed because Fedele had left off teasing her, kept glancing from Lelia to Massimo with questioning eyes which were full of dread and anguish. Silence and the absence of the familiar smile terrified the watchers, but each shrank from confessing this fear to the others. At seven o'clock Donna Fedele begged her cousin to leave the room for a time, and signed to the two young people to come to her bedside. She asked Lelia if she had received an answer from Velo. No, it was not possible yet.

It was apparent that she intended to introduce another topic, and was finding it difficult to connect it with this preamble. She thought for a time, and presently spoke.

"If Lelia has really made up her mind to give up her fortune," she began, "there is no use discussing the matter. But she is young. The day will come when the Montanina will be at your disposal, and I entreat you both not to forsake it. Did I not fear to burden you with such a charge, I would also beg you to have a Mass celebrated once a year, for the repose of my soul, at Santa Maria ad Montes, and—"

She paused, stretched out her thin hands to the two young people, and, finding her familiar smile once more, finished the sentence.

"—and to be present at it."

They pressed her hands in silence, and the sufferer's beautiful dark eyes shone. She seemed to be a little stronger, and requested Massimo to look out the trains for her, in case she should be able to start on the morrow. By leaving San Mamette shortly after ten, the travellers would reach Santhià at six in the afternoon, and Turin at half-past seven. Massimo would go with them as far as Porto Ceresio. Lelia asked timidly :

"Why not as far as Milan?"

He explained to her in an undertone that he could not do so. That other traveller from Rome would reach Porto Ceresio from Milan eight minutes before their arrival there from Lugano, and the steamer he had chartered would start for Oria at once.

"You cannot come?" said Donna Fedele, who had not heard his explanation. "Ah!" she added. "Perhaps for the reason of which Don Aurelio informed me."

Massimo was unaware that she had met Don Aurelio in Milan, and they now spoke of him, of his poverty, and of his untroubled soul. Donna Fedele mentioned the conditions that had made him decide to accompany the body.

"Could they not have left those poor bones to rest in peace in Rome?" she said.

Lelia glanced at Massimo, who made no answer.

* * * * *

Towards midnight Donna Fedele had another attack of severe pain. By dawn she was easier, but the doctor from Cadate who saw her at six found her feverish, and naturally pronounced the journey to be impossible. At ten Massimo started for Porto Ceresio, expecting to be back at Oria with the private steamer by two in the afternoon. From the Albogasio cemetery, where Benedetto was to be buried, it was only a quarter of an hour's walk to San Mamette.

V.

Pale, and with a beating heart, Massimo stood at the entrance to the Porto Ceresio station, waiting to see among the passengers by the train from Milan, which was late, the familiar faces of Don Aurelio and of the friends from Rome, who were expected to arrive at the same time as the body. There was no one of his acquaintance in the train. The first impression, which was almost a relief, was quickly followed by one of vexation that he should not have been notified of the delay, and that he should have left Lelia and Donna Fedele so much earlier than was necessary. He consulted the station-master, who could give him no information, but promised to telegraph to Milan for news. Massimo went to wait at the station café, on the railed terrace overlooking the lake.

Here, in the presence of the peaceful waters reflecting the green mountains, his quiet thoughts also reflected three figures. One was that of the beloved and fiery-souled girl; a second was that of the sweet woman who had come for the sake of the fiery-souled girl and for his own sake, who had come to die, perhaps, in a strange house, moved by a love of a nature different indeed, but infinitely more lofty and serene. A third figure was that of Benedetto, standing at a greater distance, and at once loved and feared. This last figure suddenly drew near to him, and stood alive before him once more. He felt his dying Master's hand upon his head, could almost feel his arm about his neck, the arm that was too weak to press him close. He heard the feeble voice saying, "Be holy!" and he heard the words, "Let each one perform his religious duties as the Church prescribes, according to strict justice, and with perfect obedience." He reflected that yesterday—Sunday—he had neglected to go to

Mass. This had never happened before. The breaking away from the Church in thought had been an easier matter than the breaking away from her external practices, than the breaking with long-standing habits, an act which seemed almost an offence to his beloved dead. A slight twinge of conscience roused him, admonishing him to assert his will against these dangerous impulses, proceeding from a sentiment but imperfectly dominated by reason. The painful conflict that for days had been going on within his soul, and that had become more violent on the news of the arrival of the dead Benedetto, was now reaching the acute stage. The oft-repeated and alternating prevalence of one impulse over another was weakening that of reason, while the impulse of sentiment—a force that never lies dormant, that knows no doubt, and tends constantly to reconquer lost ground—grew ever more vigorous as the meeting with the dead friend grew nearer.

Massimo scanned the surface of the distant waters over towards the point of Melide for the special steamer that, by this time, should have been in port. The lake was deserted in that direction. There were only two small boats to be seen between Morcote and Brusino Arsizio. This second delay was a mystery also. Once more he sought out the station-master. Milan had answered that nothing had arrived there, but that some other persons having also made inquiries, a telegram had been sent to Bologna, and that the answer would be forwarded to Porto Ceresio as soon as it was received. Massimo went back to the café, and at last discovered the white prow of a steamer coming from Melide, and keeping well in the middle of the lake. A slight breeze had sprung up. Now a breath would break the surface of the water into azure ripples above the green reflections of the mountains; then the breath would die down, and the reflections reappear. This new unrest of wind and lake seemed to the young man an unrest of waiting, like his own.

To Massimo's amazement the special steamer arrived crowded with people. The fact was quickly explained, however. The people of Albogasio looked upon Piero Maironi as a benefactor. They had chartered the steamer to Oria at their own expense, and had started, more than one hundred strong and led by their parish priest, to meet the dead son of Franco and Luisa.

On learning that there was no news of the body, these poor souls were somewhat disconcerted, but presently the stationmaster came to tell Massimo that he had been notified from Milan that the body would reach Porto Ceresio at eight in the evening. It was then half-past two. Massimo telegraphed news of the delay to San Mamette. The Albogasio people, who had feared that they had gone to useless expense, and had lost a day's work as well, now appeared quite satisfied, despite the prospect of a wait of nearly six hours. There was some grumbling on the part of those who had come unprovided either with food or money, but they grumbled submissively. These good people would have suffered the pangs of hunger uncomplainingly, had not Massimo and their parish priest arranged to provide them with bread at least, while those provident ones who had brought food with them showed themselves willing to share with the others. A sense of gentle pity and of gratitude towards the deceased, gentle memories of other dear departed souls, a solemn demonstration of deep and unsullied faith, bore witness to the presence of so many other virtues in the hearts of this humble flock, that Massimo was profoundly touched. The parish priest made known to him a woman called Leu, who remembered Benedetto's parents, and who could not say enough in praise of *Sciora Luisa*. But the others were discussing the man who had disappeared years ago from Oria, leaving no trace, and whose dead body was now returning. They spoke of the sensation

that disappearance had caused, of the many mistaken suppositions, and of the good priest, a stranger in these parts, who had seen to it that the charitable dispositions of him who had disappeared were carried out. A few old people remembered the other Piero, the uncle, Engineer Ribera.

Shortly after five o'clock a telegram from Don Aurelio informed Massimo that he was about to start from Milan with the body. When Massimo had read the telegram he handed it to the priest from Albogasio, and walking away without a word, began to follow a deserted path along the shore, on the left of the landing-stage. He continued walking slowly up and down here for nigh on three hours, without being able to formulate a single thought, until evening's welcome shadows fell.

When the train entered the station the darkness was profound, for storm-clouds now lay massed in the sky, where no moon shone. The people from Albogasio had invaded the station, carrying lighted candles and flaring torches, and led by their priest, in surplice and stole. Don Aurelio and Massimo's Roman friends alighted silently and with grave faces. Massimo, shaken by a nervous trembling, bit his lip that he might not sob aloud. Short and measured greetings marked the solemnity of the moment, and many of the bystanders were weeping. Railway employees, carrying lanterns, opened the freight-car that contained the body. Massimo and the young men from Rome stepped forward. Some slight confusion ensued, and excited voices were heard. Don Aurelio commanded silence in a tone of authority, and once more all was quiet as the coffin appeared, borne towards the station entrance on the shoulders of six young men, of whom Massimo was one. The few passengers the train had brought had all passed out. One woman only, dressed in mourning, and accompanied by a maid, followed the funeral procession on board the

steamer. No one knew who she was, and even the glare of the torches failed to reveal her face, hidden by a thick veil.

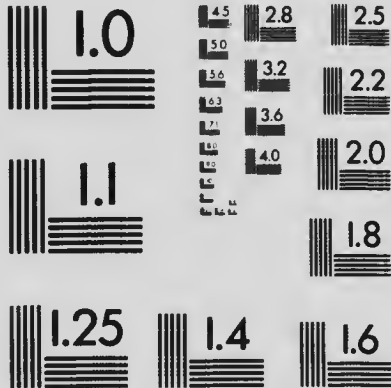
Amidst deep silence the bier was placed upon the fore-deck, and covered with a black pall ornamented with a silver fringe. Amidst deep silence also those who bore lights lined up on either side of the deck. The priest took up his position in front of the pilot-house, and facing the bier. Still in deep silence the rest of the little flock huddled in the stern, leaving the space clear between the candle-bearers and the bier. Don Aurelio, Massimo, and the young men from Rome stationed themselves beside the priest. Without a word of command, the gang-plank was withdrawn from the landing-stage, the crew pushed the steamer off, the captain bent over his speaking-tube, the pistons creaked, and slowly and heavily the paddles beat upon the water. When the boat had swung half round, and brought her prow towards the upper lake, the parish priest of Albogasio began intoning the rosary. The assembly responded, and the combined and steady sounds of the pistons, the paddles, and the water, cleft by the prow, formed a deep-toned accompaniment to the monotonous chant. Like a phantom ship the vessel thus broke the silence of the quiet lake and of the sleeping shores, broke the darkness with two shining lines of funeral candles.

Massimo kept his eyes fixed on the black pall with its silver fringe. The love that the dead man had once borne him, the calumnies, the insults, the outrages of every description for which that poor body and the spirit that moved it had been the mark; the thought of his own desertion, which had come so near accomplishment, while others, like these friends from Rome standing here beside him, had remained loyal to the beloved memory, despite the contempt, the derision, and the animosity of the world—all these thoughts formed within him a confused tumult of



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love, grief, and remorse that completely unmanned him, and slipping away quietly, he went down to the cabin and wept bitterly, his sobs mingling with the combined and steady sounds of the pistons, the paddles, and the flying foam.

"No, no, dear friend! I will not forsake you! I am coming back to you! I am coming back!"

He had not noticed the presence at the farther end of the cabin of the two women who had been in the train. When his sobbing had become less violent, and he had risen to his feet, seeking to compose himself before going on deck once more, she who appeared to be the maid rose and came towards him.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said she, "but can you tell me whether any one will speak at the grave?"

Massimo, who was taken by surprise, hesitated an instant, and then replied in the affirmative. The maid thanked him, and then returned to the dark corner where the lady in mourning was sitting. The young man went up the steps, and had nearly reached the deck when the maid addressed him once more.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but are you going to speak?"

"No," said Massimo.

The woman thanked him.

This was a fresh grief to Massimo, for it showed him that there were those who expected the favourite disciple to speak the last farewell, while he had refused, and now, at this eleventh hour, he would be entirely unable to find fitting language. Grief he felt, and astonishment as well. Why had these women supposed he would speak? Did they know him? Presently he went back to the place where he had stood before. The priest had finished reciting the rosary, and now all was silent, only the sounds of moving things could be heard, while the shadows that were cleft at the prow of the phantom ship by the glow of the candles foregathered once more

about the stern, in a darkness that was deeper still. When they had passed the Melide Bridge, some one standing behind the priest said, in a loud voice :

“ *De profundis.* ”

A hundred voices began intoning the *De profundis*. When the psalm was half over, the steamer, which was making straight for the dark outline of the point of Caprino, suddenly came to a standstill. The chant was quickly interrupted. A great black shadow, set with shining points, passed within fifty yards of them, cutting across the steamer's path. But few were aware of this shadow, and of the danger of a collision between the ship of Death and that other vessel. Those few shuddered in silence. Once more the pistons creaked, and once more the psalm was taken up. In the broad basin between Campione and Lugano the darkness encompassing the funereal illumination that shone on the fore-deck appeared less deep. On all sides majestic profiles stood out in black relief against the sky. The lights of Lugano outlined the curve of the bay. As the boat sped towards Caprino, the lights of Castagnola, of Gandria, and at last the formidable summits and the distant waters of Valsolda, with the lightning flashes from the torpedo-boat, were revealed in rapid succession. Massimo took Don Aurelio's arm.

“ You are going to speak? ” he asked.

Don Aurelio replied that he was, and as he felt the young man draw him towards him, immediately understood that there was something further he wished to say.

“ I have returned to Christ and the Church! ” said Massimo, trembling violently. “ I have returned but now! ”

Don Aurelio folded him in a close embrace, and whispered softly, in a voice that was full of joy:

“ Dear, dear friend, let us thank God! You have lifted a great weight from my heart! ”

Don Aurelio told him presently that he was much

pleased with these young men who had come from Rome, and that the misrepresentations and intemperance of certain innovators had produced a salutary reaction in their minds, so much so that, were it not too late, he would have greatly preferred to entrust the task of speaking at the grave to one of them.

Meanwhile the boat had passed Gandria. The dazzling eye of the torpedo-boat flashed upon Don Aurelio and Massimo, who were going towards the fore-deck. The brilliance swept the vessel fore and aft, following it on its way, then suddenly forsook it. Upon the black brow of Bisnago, over against the sky, the electric signals were glowing like flames upon a sublime altar, whence prayers were ascending for the valleys below. The shore at Oria was crowded with people who had come from Castello and from San Mamette, to meet the body. Those who, from this spot, witnessed the slow growth of the point of light advancing out of the west across the black waters, the flashing around it of the silvery ray that seemed to be guarding its path, the sublime flames upon the mountain-top, and the silent eagerness of the crowd, were filled with a sense as of a mysterious solemnity in which both heaven and earth were taking part. And aboard the boat also the travellers, as they approached the end of their journey, were experiencing a feeling of trepidation for which they could not account. The parish priest gave an order; the black pall was removed; Massimo and Benedetto's other youthful disciples stood forth, ready to raise the bier. The woman who seemed to be a maid came on deck, asked a question, and going down to the first-class cabin once more, presently reappeared with the veiled lady. They went as far astern as possible, evidently desiring to be the last to leave the boat. The steamer came alongside the pier, and the gangway was thrown across. Six young men, of whom Massimo was again

one, raised the bier. Some orders were heard and a few words of warning or reproof, but immediately all was silence once more. The parish priest stepped ashore first, then came the disciples with their burden, while the bearers of candles followed close behind. Then slowly and decorously the other passengers crossed the gangway, the two women last of all. The silent procession passed under a portico, across a small square, through a first dark passage, and then through a second, which lay beneath the house that had belonged to the dead man, and so reached the church, the very church where, but a few years before, Don Giuseppe Flores had learned of the flight of him who was now brought here for his humble burial. The candles on the high-altar were already alight. In an instant the church was full of people and of lighted candles. The veiled lady would not have been able to enter at all had not the crowd parted before her, moved by instinctive respect. The two took up their position in the last row of benches near the holy-water font, and were much stared at. No one knew who they were. Only Massimo and Don Aurelio had any idea as to the identity of the veiled lady, but the two friends exchanged no word concerning her, respect for the past forbidding either to confide in the other.

The funeral service began, and the voice of the congregation was raised in response to the priest. Massimo, upon his knees, his face buried in his hands, remained absorbed in prayer during the entire service, and so also did the veiled lady. There was some slight disturbance, first at the main door and then at a side entrance, because a lad who had come from San Mamette with a letter for Dr. Alberti was trying to force his way in. He did not succeed, however, and the letter, which some one took from him, could not possibly be delivered to Massimo until later on. When the service was over Massimo and his five companions raised the bier once more, and moved forward

behind the priest. The church was soon empty, and the last person to rise from her seat and go out was the veiled lady; but seeing that the path was very rough, and that the candle-bearers were already far ahead, she returned to the church again. Among the stragglers behind the procession her companion found a boatman who was willing to undertake to row them to Lugano later on.

While the procession was traversing the short distance that separates the church from the cemetery, lightning flashes began to break from the banks of heavy cloud, and a sudden gust of wind blew out almost all the candles. The coffin was put down at the head of the flight of steps leading to the gate of the cemetery, and the bearers of the few candles that were still alight took up their position on either side. A second gust extinguished these last candles also, and went whistling away through the olive-groves that slope down to the lake. Don Aurelio, who had remained behind, forced his way through the crowd and reached the steps. Some one tried to strike a match, that he might not stumble on the unfamiliar stairs, but it was immediately blown out. Then a hand grasped his and guided him upwards. Only those who were nearest could see him, the others heard only his ringing tones, carrying above the noise of the wind and of the waves breaking against the embankments far below.

"He is come," Don Aurelio began, "the much afflicted wayfarer, unto his last resting-place, succoured once more by the prayers of Holy Church, who, when he died in her maternal arms, commended him to Divine mercy. It was neither his friends nor his disciples who, to his pain and vexation, proclaimed him a saint, but simple souls from amongst the people, souls full of faith and imaginings. When the Church prays for a dead son, she does so in no spirit of criticism, but, in her austere wisdom, considers only the universal frailty of man, the

universal misery of hidden or apparent sin before the inscrutable mystery of Divine justice. But the Church, remembering the tears that Jesus shed by the tomb of Lazarus, allows poor human hearts to utter words of love and grief beside the grave, allows them to voice the praises which, indeed, are contained in their tears. Love, pain, and praise all now rush to my lips for utterance, but I cannot find words to express them, for I feel within me I know not what hidden influence restraining me; I believe this influence is that of the dead; I believe he desires neither expressions of pain nor of praise, but I also believe that I hear the words he wishes me to speak."

The speaker paused with heaving breast. A quiver of emotion ran through the crowd that thronged the steps. A few voices said softly, "Yes, yes!"

"Peace!" Don Aurelio went on—"peace to thee, O spirit of Piero Maironi! O spirit of Benedetto! I will not speak my own words, the words of love and pain and praise, but rather those that thou biddest me speak! Let these hills of thine send their wind, not to destroy my words, but to waft them far afield, wheresoever thou hast been named with affection and respect, or with anger and insult.

"Listen, my friends! This man spoke much of religion, of faith and of works. Being neither a prophet nor the Sovereign Pontiff, speaking from his high place, he may sometimes have been led astray; he may sometimes have put forward views that the authority of the Church would be justified in rejecting. The true character of his mission was not to agitate theological questions, wherein he might deviate from the true path, but to bring back the faithful, of all orders and conditions, to the spirit of the gospel; it was to reinspire the world with this spirit. He never failed to proclaim his humble submission to the authority of the Church, to the Holy See of the Roman Pontiff. Were he still alive he would glory in giving proof of this as an example

to the world. It is in his name that I declare this! He knew that the world despises religious obedience as cowardice. He, on his part, fiercely despised the contempt of the world, that glorifies military obedience and the sacrifices it imposes, although military authority is assisted by prisons and chains, by powder and lead, while religious authority has no such support. He loved the Church above all things on earth. In thinking of the Church he was wont to compare himself with the smallest stone of the greatest temple, which, had it a soul, would glory in its small ministry. Yes, he did indeed think he could perceive the evil spirits which hell lets loose within Holy Church; which we know cannot prevail against her—we have the Divine promise for this—but which, nevertheless, may inflict cruel wounds upon her by conspiring with those other evil spirits that work their fiendish havoc in the world. He thought he recognised them, and it was an irresistible impulse of filial affection, of filial sorrow, that carried him, a suppliant, to the feet of the Sovereign Pontiff, the Father of the faithful.

“ He wishes me to pardon in his name all those who, possessing no ecclesiastical authority, passed judgment upon him, condemning him as a Theosophist, a Pantheist, and as one who shunned the Sacraments; but that the scandal of these accusations may be destroyed, he also wishes me to proclaim, in a loud voice, that such errors were ever abominations in his sight, and that from the moment when he, a miserable sinner, turned from the world to God, he did always and in all things suit his actions to the beliefs and the prescriptions of the Catholic Church, and this unto the very hour of his death.

“ He died trusting firmly that one day, when the spirits of evil that afflict the Church shall have been driven back behind the gates of hell, all men who have received baptism, and who call upon the name of Christ, will be united in one great religious body

around the Holy Throne of the Roman Pontiff. He implores all those who are his friends to pray for this end.

"Friends and brothers, all you who resented the false accusations brought against this man by Catholic laymen, journalists, and libellers, let us unite with him in forgiving them all. Let us also pardon such as derided and insulted him for his faith. *Nesciebant*, all of them! We ourselves are too ignorant to dare to judge of the ignorance of others. Wanderers amidst the darkness, we question the stars as we grope blindly on our way, we call to each other with voices that ask, that advise, that encourage; we cry out the good news when we have discovered the right path, that others may hasten towards it. But let us not judge him who fails to answer our call, for we know not whether the obstacles that lie between him and us be not greater than his strength may overcome. Let us pray for one and all, as we pass through the darkness, longing for the dawn of the day of God.

"Poor body, that was once so dear to us, rest in peace until the coming of that glorious dawn!"

The coffin was lowered to the side of Elisa Maironi, the last prayers were recited, the grave was closed. The priest had returned to the church to lay aside his robes, and the crowd was fast dispersing. Massimo, Don Aurelio, and the young Romans who had lingered long beside the grave, were descending the steps, and the sexton was about to close the gates, when the woman who seemed to be a maid came to beg that they should be allowed to remain open a few minutes longer. As the sexton hesitated, Don Aurelio and Massimo intervened, and persuaded him to consent. Hereupon the maid withdrew and joined the veiled lady, who was waiting in the lane, to the west of the cemetery. Not until that moment did the person who had taken the letter which the messenger had brought from San Mamette remember

to deliver it to Massimo. Between the gusts of wind Massimo succeeded in reading it by the light of a match :

"Our friend is very ill. Come as soon as possible.

"LEILA."

Massimo implored Don Aurelio to go with him. Don Aurelio should have returned to Milan at once, but he gave up his intention of doing so on hearing what had happened. The two took a hurried farewell of their young friends, who were left behind to wonder at their sudden flight. During the confusion of leave-taking the veiled lady and her companion passed the group of disciples without being seen by them. Presently, however, they noticed that the maid was standing with the sexton at the gate. They saw how inconsiderate it would be to remain there, but as they had retained the services of the steamer, they felt bound to take the two strangers on board. One of the young men went up to the gate and spoke to the woman who was waiting there, but she refused his offer with something like dismay. Hereupon the friends started on their way towards Oria. The sexton saw the tall, slim figure of the veiled lady kneeling by the grave upon the upturned sod. She remained there motionless for a few minutes, and then went down the steps, leaning on the arm of the maid, who told her of the offer, and of her refusal. Her mistress made no comment. On the Oria road they met the boatman, who had come to tell them that the lake was very rough, and that a second pair of oars would be necessary. The lady made a sign, and the maid ordered him to engage another boatman to help him. Shortly before reaching the church-place of Oria they met the parish priest, who was carrying a lantern and offered to guide them through the dark and winding lanes of the village. The veiled lady

pressed her companion's arm as a sign that she was to refuse, but the maid, who had no desire to break her neck, saw fit to accept. Mistress and maid then held a whispered consultation, and presently the servant begged the priest to stop. Producing her purse from a bag that hung upon her arm, she took out a gold coin, and offered it to him.

"From my mistress," she said, "for your poor."

The steamer had not yet started on its way when, by the light of a couple of lanterns, the veiled lady and her companion stepped aboard a boat which lay rocking on the waves. Shot vigorously forward by two pairs of oars, the boat passed alongside the steamer, and was seen in the light that shone from the first-class cabin. The young men were watching it with great curiosity from the deck. The lady had thrown back her veil, and they saw that she was both young and lovely. One of them exclaimed:

"I know who she is! She must be the woman on whose account Benedetto fled from the world."

"Who is she?" another inquired.

All were more or less vaguely acquainted with the main facts of the matter, but no one knew the lady's name. More curious than ever, they hastened to the fore-deck, seeking to catch another glimpse of the little boat, against which they could hear the waves plashing in the distance. Again they saw it for an instant in the light of the electric rays from the torpedo-boat, and then Jeanne vanished from their sight for that night and for ever.

VI

Shortly after twelve o'clock Donna Federica had become suddenly and alarmingly worse. She was suffering no pain, but the fever, which had risen rapidly, convinced the doctor that there was nothing further he could do for her. The end could not

far away now. The sufferer, who was perfectly conscious and aware of her condition, desired to see a priest at once and receive the last Sacrament. The parish priest of San Mamette was summoned, and by five o'clock everything had been done. Greatly impressed by the poor woman's piety, faith, and resignation, the parish priest had given her Extreme Unction. Massimo's telegram from Porto Ceresio troubled her visibly. She did not say so, but Lelia saw plainly that she thought he might have arranged not to go there. After having received the consolations of her religion the young man's return seemed to be the one thought that troubled her. She asked for him so often that at last she begged Lelia to forgive her.

"I know I am foolish," she said, taking the girl's hand, "for according to his telegram he cannot possibly be here yet. I have a few words to say to him, and I am much afraid he will not arrive in time."

Lelia sought to reassure her, but could not do so, for a lump in her throat prevented her speaking. She envied Cousin Eufemia, who appeared perfectly calm. The old woman's affection for Donna Fedele amounted almost to adoration, but her fear of not being able to accept the will of the Almighty with sufficient humility oppressed her even more sorely. She was unceasing in her attentions to the sufferer, but she came and went gravely and calmly, and with dry eyes. Only once was she on the verge of failing in her determination to be strong, and that was when the invalid, reaching out to take her hand, said with the shadow of her old smile :

"Give my dear love to your sisters."

The poor old cousin bit her lips, but did not answer. The pious gentleness of the dying woman and Cousin Eufemia's fortitude, both pointing to a state of the soul at once so humble and so lofty, were a revelation to Lelia, and filled her with amazement and reverence. At six o'clock the parish priest

withdrew, promising to return at seven, and Donna Fedele, begging the doctor and Cousin Eufemia to leave them alone for a few minutes, called Lelia to her side, and signed to her to kneel down, that she might place her arm around her neck.

"Dearest," said she, "tell Massimo that after thinking of him and of his poor mother, I died with a pain in my heart, and a hope also. Will you tell him so?"

Torn by an inner conflict caused by the belief that she knew the nature of that pain and of that hope in which she might not participate, and also because she shrank from the idea of being appointed by another to bring pressure to bear upon Massimo's spirit, while, at the same time, to refuse would be horrible, Lelia breathed a "yes" which did not deceive the dying woman. Donna Fedele sighed and withdrew her arm, murmuring that she had much to say to her, but that her strength failed her. She asked for a crucifix, and then lay without speaking until nine o'clock. At nine she inquired for Massimo once more. Half an hour later Lelia, who was standing at the west window, saw a light appear in the distance amidst the surrounding darkness. The doctor recognised the special steamer, and announced its arrival to the invalid, who begged that a note might be sent to Massimo, asking him to come at once. Hereupon there ensued a period of extreme unrest for her. She seemed to have lost all notion of time and space, and was continually asking, first if the boat had arrived, and then, when it had been seen to stop at Oria, if Massimo were come. And so the time dragged on, and at last it was eleven o'clock. Lelia herself was uneasy, for they had heard nothing from the boy who had carried the note. She could not understand how Massimo, having received the note, had not hastened to San Mamette. Shortly after eleven the proprietor, who had sent some one towards Albogasio, came rushing upstairs, and an-

nounced : " He is coming ! he is coming ! " Lelia hastened downstairs, and met the two men in the vestibule. She had not expected to see Don Aurelio, who, perceiving her embarrassment, left her in the midst of a rapid explanation to Massimo and hastened upstairs. The proprietor accompanied him to the door of Donna Fedele's room. The well-known voice and familiar face, from which radiated content and kindness, revived Donna Fedele somewhat.

" Oh, Don Aurelio ! " she cried. " And Massimo ? "

Placing his lips near the dying woman's ear, Don Aurelio began speaking so softly that the parish priest, the doctor, and Cousin Eufemia, standing at a little distance, could not even hear his voice. But they heard Donna Fedele's short and feeble exclamations, uttered with an indescribable accent of astonishment and delight.

" Here he is ! " said Don Aurelio, raising his head as Massimo entered.

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From that moment Donna Fedele appeared transformed. The chamber of death seemed to have become the chamber of convalescence, so much that for a moment the watchers believed that a very serious, but favourable, crisis had been passed. The first indication of this was when Donna Fedele asked Massimo if he had read a letter from Sior Momi, and pointed to Lelia, implying that she would show it to him. To satisfy her he held before his eyes, but without distinguishing a single syllable of it, the letter in which Sior Momi gave his consent, protesting at the same time that he desired to vacate the Montanina, as he had discovered that the air of those regions did not suit him. The letter further contained kind messages for Massimo, and solicited the favour of a few lines from him, endorsing what Lelia had said concerning the accounts to be rendered.

Presently Donna Fedele begged Don Aurelio and the two young people to draw near to her.

"I was unkind to the archpriest and the chaplain of Velo," she said. "Please let them know that I am sorry."

"Yes, yes! I will see it is done," said Don Aurelio. She thanked him with a long glance full of ineffable meaning, and signed to him that she wished to kiss his hand.

Towards three o'clock they saw from the nervous movements of her hands and the restless twitching of her lips that she wanted something and could not express herself. With her eyes she drew their attention to a glass in which the roses from the Villino were still languishing. Cousin Eufemia placed her ear near the sufferer's lips, and asked:

"Is it the roses?"

The dying woman moved her head in acquiescence, while her hands plucked at the sheet. Her cousin, convinced that she wished to have the roses upon her bed, went to bring them to her, but Donna Fedele shook her head as vigorously as she could. Poor Eufemia was distressed at not being able to understand. Massimo and Lelia understood but did not dare to speak. Don Aurelio, who was more familiar with death, ventured to intervene.

"She wishes to have them scattered upon her afterwards," he explained. Again Donna Fedele thanked him with her eyes.

At last the beautiful dark eyes were closed—those eyes that for two-and-fifty years had shed so much spiritual radiance, so many sweet and gentle smiles. The hands rested quietly upon the Crucifix. Don Emanuele bent over the still face. He was not sure that the end had come, for the long lashes still trembled slightly.

"Dear friend," said he in a loud voice, "pray for us. Are you suffering?"

Her eyes remained closed, but her waxen lips

moved. Don Aurelio believed he caught the words, "I am happy!"

* * * * *

He repeated this to the watchers. "She says, 'I am happy!'"

With his eyes still fixed upon the dying woman he signed to the others to kneel.

A few minutes of silence.

"Yes, she is happy!" he added at last in a loud voice. "Let us worship and rejoice!"

* * * * *

The sun was rising and Donna Fedele Vayla di Brea, clad in black and clasping the Crucifix, lay upon her bed, where side by side with the faded roses from the Villino, there rested many bright blossoms of Valsolda. Death had restored her sweet smile. It shone through the closed lids like the light of a secret vision of delight. It rested gently on her waxen lips. No youthful, living countenance could surpass the beauty of that ivory face, smiling beneath its arch of thick, snowy hair. And thus, having lived according to the faith of her fathers and the spirit of the gospel, having redeemed her promise to Signor Marcello, and consummated her supreme sacrifice, did the White Lady of the Roses rest, in the first light of her mystic dawn.

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