

TEMPTATION  
BY::RICHARD : BAGOT

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## CHAPTER I

**I**N a by-street of the ancient city of Viterbo, its exterior remarkable for nothing unless it were a heavy portico of Renaissance architecture, stands a grim, square building a story or so higher than the houses on either side of it.

In the early part of the seventeenth century Palazzo Vitali was one of the residences of a powerful family which, had it not been for the rise of the great house of Barberini, would in all probability have succeeded in seating one of its members on the Papal throne.

Cardinal Astorre Vitali, in the Conclave following the death of the Ludovisi Pope, Gregory XV., was among the most prominent of the candidates in the Sacred College for election to the Chair of St Peter. The influence of France, however, in the Conclave, secured to a Cardinal of the Barberini family the Papal tiara, and Cardinal Astorre did not very long survive the disappointment in his ambition to reign over Rome and the Catholic world.

The Cardinal's Roman palace was sold at his death to his kinsman, Monsignor Pamphili, afterwards Pope Innocent X., who subsequently demolished it in order to enlarge the neighbouring Pamphili residence into the stately Palazzo Pamphili as it now exists; whence Donna Olimpia Pamphili, of famous or rather infamous memory, trafficked in the rich benefices of the Church, sold episcopal sees to the highest bidders, and in these and other matters caused scandal generally throughout Christendom.

The once extensive domains of the Vitali family had long passed into the hands of other families connected with it by marriage, or into those of strangers. Cardinal Astorre's palace and property at Viterbo, however, had remained in the possession of Casa Vitali, and the Cardinal's arms yet surmounted the

heavy portico declared by the Viterbesi to be the work of Bramante, notwithstanding the fact that the famous architect had been dead nearly a hundred years when Cardinal Astorre Vitali built his palace; a far inferior genius, to wit, Bernini, being in all probability responsible for its rococo style.

Once inside the courtyard of the palace, the forbidding impression created by its exterior faded. Immediately opposite the great entrance a massive, yet graceful open loggia disclosed a vista of terraced gardens, of formal hedges of box and shady ilex avenues; while, beyond these, a vast tract of open country—hill, dale, and woodland—spread away as far as the eye could see.

The fact that the gardens were no gardens, but rather a wilderness in which everything grew at its own sweet will and pleasure, that the box hedges were neglected in a manner sufficient to drive a topiary gardener mad, and that the terraces were tracks of lush weeds broken here and there by flights of crumbling stone steps, added rather than the reverse to the fascination of the place. If the first thought of a foreigner, and especially of an English visitor to the gardens of Palazzo Vitali was apt to take the form of regret that these should be so neglected, the next thought, were the visitor possessed of an artistic sense, would infallibly be to hope that nobody would ever think it necessary to put them into order.

Not many foreigners, however, do more than visit the principal monuments of Viterbo, and very few have occasion to penetrate into that quarter of the town where Palazzo Vitali may be seen standing out grim and forbidding amid the squalid dwellings surrounding it.

The actual possessor of Cardinal Astorre's palace, Count Ugo Vitali, was a very good specimen of the Italian petite noblesse, the small nobility of the provinces, of which the great world of Rome and the other large cities of Italy know little and care less. A robust, handsome man of little over thirty, Count Ugo could never have been mistaken for anything else than a "provincial." His face was ruddy and sun-burned, and his hands brown with a brownness that rarely knew gloves. Altogether the owner of Palazzo Vitali was the true type of the *campagnuolo* who was also

a gentleman by birth and descent, and whose good blood showed itself in his easy, simple manner, and independent bearing.

Although it was scarcely yet seven o'clock, and the dew was still lying on the roses and box hedges in the gardens of Palazzo Vitali in places as yet untouched by the rays of the May sun, Count Ugo had been round and about his property since shortly after daybreak. He kept no agent—his *fattore* being one of his own peasants having somewhat more education than the rest—preferring to occupy himself in person with the management and superintendence of his lands, and not disdaining, when necessity arose, to overlook the peasants at work in his vineyards or among his crops of hay and corn.

On this particular May morning, Ugo Vitali had been engaged in minutely inspecting some acres of vines, and superintending the dressing of them with the solution of sulphate of copper which was to protect them against the dreaded phylloxera. He was returning to Palazzo Vitali fresh from the sloping vineyards lying immediately below the gardens, and the sweet, dewy scent of the country seemed to cling to him as he ascended the steps leading to the loggia of the palace.

As he crossed the terrace, an old man, shabbily clad in a pair of ill-brushed black trousers and an alpaca jacket of the same colour, advanced from the house to meet him.

“Signorino,” he began—Count Ugo had been a married man for nearly three years, but all the older servants, and, indeed, most of his people continued to address him as “signorino” all the same—“Signorino, the signora contessa desired me to tell you that she did not wish to be disturbed till the breakfast hour. Emilia says that the signora has slept ill.”

Ugo nodded. “Very well,” he replied, “I shall not disturb her. After all, she is right; it is early yet. A cup of black coffee in my room, Taddeo. I suppose,” he added, “that the signora contessa will come to breakfast?”

The old man shrugged his shoulders. “*Mah!*” he ejaculated, “I know nothing, except that she is not to be disturbed—and the sun risen nearly five hours ago!”

Count Ugo’s eyes gleamed with a quick look of annoyance.

"Bring the coffee to my room," he said briefly, and the man retreated across the courtyard to the servants' quarters.

"Taddeo becomes detestable," Ugo said to himself. "Affection in an old servant is all very well ; but when it takes the form of jealousy it is tiresome."

Count Vitali, in the opinion of many of those who happened to be of his own class, had married beneath him ; inasmuch as his wife had not been of noble birth, neither had she brought him a fortune which could be regarded as an equivalent for this deficiency.

The marriage had been, at any rate on his part, one of love ; and if Cristina Frezzi, the daughter of a well-to-do mercante di campagna, had married him not without a sense of satisfaction that by doing so she was turning herself into a "signora contessa," there had been at all events quite enough of passion in her love to satisfy him that she reciprocated his own.

For the first year or so everything had gone smoothly. The society of Viterbo was small, and, of course, absolutely provincial in its tastes and tone. A certain number of families had never received the new Contessa Vitali into their intimacy, ostensibly because she was not "noble," but possibly also because they had hoped that Ugo Vitali would ally himself with one of themselves. There was no disputing the point as to Countess Vitali being a beautiful woman, but it was a point conceded with a reservation. There were those who said, with a shrug of the shoulders, that Countess Ugo's beauty was of a type to be seen any day among the peasants in the Ciociaria ; and that it could equally be found on the steps of the Piazzc di Spagna in Rome any day during the tourist season.

Count Vitali had not greatly troubled himself as to what might or might not be said by the Viterbesi concerning the wife he had chosen. After his marriage he had taken her to Naples for the honeymoon, and had then brought her back to Palazzo Vitali in order to resume his usual life. As a matter of fact, he had grudged the interruption in his agricultural pursuits. They represented to him a passion older and more intimate than that of love, and he was never really happy when away from them.



It was only towards the end of the second year of his married life that he had become conscious of a change in his wife which he was scarcely able to define. It was not due to any diminution of affection towards himself, so far as he was able to judge; and Ugo put it down in his own mind as the effect of disappointment—not with her life or surroundings, indeed, for the possibility of such a thing would never have occurred to him—but at the fact that no child had hitherto been born to them. It was perfectly natural, he told himself, that Cristina should take this to heart, and that it should make her at times irritable, and less easy to please than she had been in the earlier days of their life together. In the meantime he contented himself with the thought that this disappointment would probably be removed in due course, and that when it was so, Cristina would be more contented, and begin to take interest again in her home life.

Instead of going to his wife's rooms as he had intended, Ugo betook himself to the apartment on the ground floor, in which he transacted his business and discussed matters connected with his estate with his *fattore*.

He had not been there very long before Taddeo entered the room, bringing with him the coffee, and also the morning's post which consisted, apparently, of the newspapers from Rome of the previous evening, and a few circulars. Count Vitali poured himself out some coffee from a quaintly chased copper coffee-pot. He was proceeding to open a paper in order to learn the latest news from the outside world, when his glance fell upon a black-bordered envelope lying partially concealed among the circulars and advertisements of agricultural implements of which, as a rule, his correspondence chiefly consisted.

On examining it, he saw that it bore the Roman post-mark, and was addressed in a handwriting unknown to him. A moment or two later, after glancing through the contents of the letter, he sprung to his feet with an exclamation of astonishment and delight. The coffee remained untasted while Ugo walked up and down the room, reading and re-reading the few lines written on the deep black-edged notepaper, as though to make certain that his eyes had not deceived him.

## CHAPTER II

ONLY a small portion of the once magnificent and still stately suite of rooms on the *piano nobile* of Palazzo Vitali was inhabited by its present owners. The remainder of the apartment, which formed the first floor of the courtyard, consisted of a succession of reception rooms, halls, and ante-chambers, of dismantled bedrooms and bare corridors, that would have needed an income far larger than that possessed by Count Vitali to maintain in a habitable condition.

It had been all very well for Cardinal Astorre, with his many ecclesiastical benefices, his large private fortune, and his Court of gentlemen and retainers, to house himself in princely fashion: nor would the dimensions of his palace have been any too large for the accommodation of a powerful cardinal in the days of Pope Urban VIII. For the needs of a simple country gentleman of the nineteenth century, however, the capabilities of Palazzo Vitali were decidedly superfluous.

The consequence was that the great rooms on the *piano nobile* now presented a strangely dreary appearance, and conveyed an impression of departed grandeur which the shafts of sunlight, struggling through the apertures in the closed shutters and falling upon tattered damask and gilded ceilings, could not dispel.

Nearly everything, indeed, that was saleable in Palazzo Vitali had long ago been disposed of to dealers at insignificant prices, to be resold to foreigners at no little profit. Nothing remained of the works of art which had once adorned the reception rooms of the Cardinal and his successors. Only a few portraits and pictures of no marketable value looked down from the walls, while the furniture was reduced to various chairs and tables distributed here and there about the marble floors.

It was, therefore, not only for reasons of economy, but also for the sake of convenience that Count and Countess Vitali elected

to leave the greater part of Cardinal Astorre's stately apartment unoccupied, and to live in a few rooms which had been re-furnished at the time of their marriage in, let it be confessed, the deplorably bad taste dear to the modern Italians.

It was half-past eleven, the hour at which Ugo Vitali and his wife were accustomed to breakfast. Taddeo, a little, but not much more tidy in his appearance than in the earlier hours of the morning, opened the double doors of the dining-room, and announced pompously that the signora contessa was served.

At the sound of his voice Countess Vitali turned from the open window in which she had been standing. She was dressed simply enough, and entirely in white; a few red roses fastened in the front of her dress being her only ornament. There could be no doubt as to her beauty; even if, as was asserted, that beauty was of peasant rather than patrician type. Her features were regular and classical. Broad, low brows, in which the sleepy-looking brown eyes were set far apart; a mouth that did not err on the side of smallness, with lips full and curved; outlines of form now statuesque, but likely to become coarse in a not far-distant future—all these attributes of Countess Vitali lent some colour to the criticisms passed by her neighbours on her good looks.

Hers was in truth the type of face and form not seldom to be met with among the peasantry around and south of Rome, the possessors of which come to the city during the winter and spring months to earn money as painters' or sculptors' models, or by selling flowers, and other less innocent wares, to indiscreet foreigners. A close observer of Countess Vitali would have noted, also, another feature more common to peasant types of beauty than to those of more refined origin—an occasional and fleeting expression of countenance partly sensuous, but also partly sinister, which seemed at once to fascinate and repel.

What the real origin of the Contessa Vitali's father might have been, nobody was able to say very definitely. For many years Giacomo Frezzi had been regarded as one of the most successful among the leading dealers in agricultural produce and stock in the Agro Romano.

He was supposed to have a considerable capital, and it was rumoured that he did not by any means confine his attentions to his particular line of business only, but that he held in his hands numerous narrow strips of paper, bearing the Government stamp, to which were attached the signatures of some of the largest and most influential landowners in the Roman province. Some people declared that Giacomo Frezzi's father commenced his career, and finished it, as a tender of pigs in the woods around Norcia ; and that his boy, Giacomo, being a clever lad, had been educated by the priests with a view to making him one of themselves.

Whatever his origin might have been, the cavaliere Frezzi, as he subsequently became, had made a position for himself, and at one time had undoubtedly been a fairly wealthy man. He had married, too, the daughter of a prominent member of Parliament, who died soon after the birth of her only child, the future Countess Vitali.

It was not unnaturally supposed, as the cavaliere Frezzi had never taken a second wife, that Cristina Frezzi would bring a considerable fortune to any man who married her. At an early age the girl had been sent to a convent in Perugia to be educated, and there she had remained until she was seventeen. At that age the Mother Superior of the convent had frankly informed the cavaliere Frezzi that, in her opinion, his daughter did not require further instruction, but that she did require a husband. After Cristina had been a short time at home, her father came to the conclusion that the Mother Superior was presumably possessed of wider psychological discernment than her calling would have seemed to demand.

Notwithstanding the fact, however, that various suitors had asked the cavaliere's permission to pay their court to her, the girl had shown no inclination to accept any one of them.

When she married, she told her father, she meant to marry well. Those who had as yet come forward were of the same class as herself ; but perhaps some other aspirant would one day present himself who would be able to offer her a better position.

The aspirant in question did offer himself, in the person of

Count Vitali, who, having frequent occasion to call on the cavaliere Frezzi for business purposes, met Cristina at her father's house and fell desperately in love with her.

The cavaliere Frezzi had every reason to suppose that his daughter would have accepted Ugo Vitali even without a title. Cristina, indeed, displayed symptoms entirely justifying the Mother Superior's acumen. It was a fortunate thing, therefore, that while gratifying her ambition, she could gratify other passions as well.

Count Vitali was not, of course, of the *alta nobiltà*: but he was of an old family, the proprietor of a small, though productive estate, and his wife would be a signora contessa. From another point of view, moreover, and one which Cristina did not discuss, he was young, strong, and decidedly good-looking; and perhaps a lover from the ranks of the *alta nobiltà* would have been none of the three.

Very shortly before the date fixed for the marriage, the cavaliere Frezzi had experienced a serious reversal of fortune. The failure of a great building syndicate in Rome had been followed by the bankruptcy of a great Roman family deeply concerned in it. Unluckily, the cavaliere Frezzi was a sufferer by both disasters. He had invested largely in the shares of the syndicate, and he had lent considerable sums of money to the Roman prince, whose securities would now be worth little more than the paper on which they were represented.

There were many quite ready to assume that, with the disappearance of the greater part of his betrothed's fortune, Ugo Vitali would break off all subsequent negotiations. Had he been a Roman, he would very probably have done so without the smallest scruple; for, as the parents of more than one fiancée on the eve of becoming a Roman princess have had occasion to realise, the Roman noble is by no means above bargaining as to the commercial and social value of his title, and endeavouring to get a better price for it, up to the moment of signing his marriage contract.

Being genuinely in love, however, and not being a Roman prince selling his name in the American marriage market, Count



Vitali had never for an instant contemplated withdrawal from his position. His marriage with Cristina Frezzi had accordingly taken place, notwithstanding the fact that a very few thousand francs were all the cavaliere found himself able to produce as her dowry.

Count Vitali was certainly not a rich man. He was, however, in the fortunate position of having been an only child, and, consequently, had inherited his property from his father unencumbered by the claims of brothers and sisters upon it. Had his wife brought him even a moderate fortune, this would have been acceptable enough ; but when the cavaliere Frezzi had explained that he would no longer be able to give his daughter the sum he had originally named, Ugo had hastened to assure him that, in wishing to marry Cristina, he had regarded her fortune as a secondary consideration.

Needless to say, both the cavaliere and Cristina were relieved at his attitude. With a good dowry added to her good looks, Cristina might possibly have made a better marriage from a social point of view ; but, as things turned out, to become the Contessa Vitali was as much and more than could reasonably be expected.

For a year or so after her marriage Cristina had found no reason to regret her decision. Her ambition for social position had, it is true, for the time been gratified in a limited manner only. The world into which her husband had been able to introduce her was certainly not that world fifty miles away in Rome which she had so often dreamed of entering. Nevertheless she was contented. Other and softer passions than that of ambition held her enthralled for the moment ; and the novelty of being *la signora contessa* was pleasing, more especially in a provincial district in which *contesse* were not numerous. Unluckily, however, the sense of novelty consumes itself ; and Countess Vitali began to find that her new life was likely to prove far more monotonous than she had anticipated.

Although she had carefully kept her aspirations in the background during the first year of her marriage, and, perhaps, had scarcely realised that they were of so settled a character, she had always nourished hopes of being able to prevail on her husband

to give up his provincial life for one more in harmony with her desires. She had not realised how absorbed Ugo was in this life; and it had taken her some little time to discover that his love for her, great though it seemed to be, could not detach him from surroundings and interests which had entered, as it were, into his very nature.

When she did finally discover this fact, the knowledge became a source of perpetual irritation. She saw herself condemned to pass the remainder of her life in a narrow provincial circle of which she had already begun to grow impatient, and, in her heart, contemptuous.

Perhaps the restless meridional blood she inherited from her mother, and the quick Sicilian wit that had brought her grandfather to the front in the Chamber of Deputies, had made her regard so limited a life as that which she saw before her with a feeling little short of dismay. However this might be, the evident impossibility of altering Ugo's mode of life, and the conviction that her own existence must, therefore, be passed in a small provincial town with little or no hope of ever penetrating into the great world beyond it, gradually created in Cristina a sense of revolt against her destiny, which had produced as its first result some perplexity in her husband's mind, and not a little bitterness in her own.

On hearing Taddeo announce breakfast, Countess Vitali was about to ask him if the count had returned, when Ugo entered the room.

He approached his wife with the air of one eager to impart a piece of good news.

"They told me you did not wish to be disturbed, carissima," he said, "or I should have come to your room an hour ago or more. I have had a busy morning, and——"

"So I perceive," Cristina answered, looking at his boots which bore evident traces of a morning spent among the dusty furrows of the vineyards. "You have not even had time to change your clothes, and Taddeo has already announced breakfast."

Ugo laughed good-humouredly. "I apologise," he replied. "Yes, I have come in from the fields in my working clothes, like

a contadino ! but at least I have washed. Listen, Cristina, the post came in just as I was going to change my clothes, and it brought me a piece of news—you will never guess what an extraordinary piece of news ! ”

“ Let us go to breakfast,” returned his wife. “ As to the news, I daresay I can wait for it. You have sold a horse, I suppose, or you have bought some new machine for the farm”—and she went before him into the adjoining room where the midday meal was waiting for them.

They sat down at a broad, square table in the centre of the dining-room—a large and finely proportioned apartment the ceiling of which was vaulted, and covered with rapidly perishing frescoes falsely attributed by local tradition to Zuccari. Taddeo served the first course of the breakfast and afterwards proceeded to fill their glasses from a flask of red wine, the produce of Ugo Vitali’s vineyards, and reserved for home consumption.

Ugo was in excellent spirits, as his wife could not help noticing, and, moreover, appeared determined not to allow anything to ruffle his good humour. There are few things more provoking, under some circumstances, than an imperturbable state of good temper, especially if displayed by a person with whom one is on such intimate terms as to warrant, in one’s own eyes, the right to be annoying when so disposed ; and Cristina resented her husband’s frame of mind accordingly. It was quite true that she had slept badly ; and the result was that she felt more inclined than usual to be unsympathetic if Ugo were going to talk about his stock, or the condition of his vines.

She ate her *spaghetti* with a look of bored indifference on her face, but this morning Ugo refused to see that there was anything amiss.

“ It is not a case of horses, or of machinery,” he resumed cheerfully ; “ all the same, I expected to have heard from Prince Odescalchi’s agent at Bracciano as to whether he means to buy that brood mare. Do you know, Cristina, I must go to Rome—at once——”

Countess Vitali lifted her eyes from her plate and flashed a quick look of surprise at him.



"To Rome!" she repeated. "What can you have to do in Rome?" The words were simple enough; and if sarcasm underlay them, it was lost upon her husband.

Ugo glanced at Taddeo. "I will tell you presently," he said, helping himself liberally to a frittura of brains and artichokes which had followed the *spaghetti*. "I have business there—important business. You will certainly never guess what it is, Cristina, but when you hear, I think you will be pleased, and I am sure you will be surprised. I was never so surprised in my life as when I opened that letter."

Countess Vitali shrugged her shoulders slightly, but unmistakably. "Do you mean to say that you must go to Rome to-day?" she asked. "It will not be possible for you to leave while Fabrizio is here, and you know he comes to-morrow."

Count Vitali's face fell. "Diavolo!" he ejaculated, "I had forgotten all about him. But it does not matter. I will telegraph to him not to come; and besides, I shall see him in Rome. I must go by the one o'clock train. Taddeo," he added, "you can leave that dish on the table; we will help ourselves, and you can serve the cheese and the fruit when I ring."

"It seems," observed his wife, when the door had closed on the old servant, "that you must really have something of importance to tell me, since it cannot be discussed in Taddeo's presence!"

Ugo gave a sigh of relief. "It is not necessary that in less than an hour's time all Viterbo should know that we have come into a fortune," he said with a laugh.

Cristina laid down her knife and fork and stared at him.

"A fortune?" she exclaimed. "What do you mean, Ugo?"

"But precisely what I say, carissima! This letter"—and he drew it from his pocket as he spoke—"tells me that an old aunt of my father—the Marchesa Santoro—died two or three days ago, and has left me the whole of her fortune—something under a million of francs, the lawyer declares. Imagine, the lawyer did not even know where I lived! which accounts for the delay in communicating with me. The poor old lady has been buried by this time. It is a great deal of money, Cristina."

Countess Vitali drew in her breath with a quick gasp. "A great deal of money," she repeated almost mechanically; and then she was silent for a space. "Forty thousand francs a year," she said at length. "It will add forty thousand francs a year to your income!"

"Scarcely so much as that," returned Ugo. "There will be the succession duty to be paid, and that will be heavy. Besides, the lawyer says *under* a million. In any case, it will be a very useful addition to our income, Cristina, and I shall be able to carry out many improvements——"

"But this Marchesa Santoro," interrupted Countess Vitali abruptly, "you have never mentioned her, Ugo—and yet she must have known you well to make you her heir!"

"I have seen her once in my life," answered Ugo. "Many years ago, when I was eighteen, I think, my father took me to see her in Rome. I remember he and my mother used sometimes to talk about her and say that she was very eccentric and would never allow any of her family to come near her. My father always said she would leave all her money to the priests."

"She evidently had more sense than your father gave her credit for having, Ugo mio," observed Countess Vitali, conciliatory for the first time that morning.

"It is extraordinary that she should have thought of making me her heir," said her husband, "though I believe she had quarrelled with all her Santoro relations, and that my father was the only one of her relatives she ever admitted inside her house. As to the letter, you can read it for yourself, Cristina. I had to read it a dozen times this morning before I could bring myself to believe that there was no mistaking its meaning."

Countess Vitali took the letter, and read it. "It is clear enough," she said. "Of course you must go to Rome, Ugo, and have everything settled as soon as possible. I suppose that the old lady could legally make you her heir—that there are no Santoro relatives to contest the will?"

"Her husband was the last of his family," replied Ugo, "and there were no children. Besides, I should think that the greater part of this money represented the Marchesa's personal savings.

She lived the life of a recluse, and probably did not spend a quarter of her income."

"It is certainly a piece of good fortune," said his wife meditatively. "We shall be able to live more in the world now, and do more as other people do in our condition."

A look of annoyance passed across Count Vitali's face. "We live on our own land," he said briefly. "I would not exchange the life for any other, even if I could do so."

Cristina looked at him quickly with an expression that was at once impatient and a little contemptuous. She seemed about to reply, but suddenly checked herself, as though on reflection she thought it better to leave unspoken the words that rose to her lips. Apparently, too, Count Vitali had no desire to continue a conversation that threatened to end in argument; for he got up from his chair and rang the bell, which was answered in due course by Taddeo's reappearance bringing with him cheese, and fruit in the shape of a large dish of wild strawberries.

The remainder of breakfast was eaten more or less in silence. Countess Vitali was apparently engrossed by her own thoughts, and replied to her husband's occasional observations in monosyllables.

Ugo was not a little puzzled by his wife's reception of his good news. He felt that sudden sense of disappointment and of mortification which we all of us are apt to feel when someone we care for declines to enter into our happiness or our enthusiasm. A less even-tempered man than Count Vitali would have been angry, and would have shown his anger. As it was, however, Ugo forgot to be angry. His mind was occupied in trying to account for his wife's unsympathetic mood, and the comparative indifference with which she appeared to regard so important a change in their common fortune.

No doubt, he told himself, Cristina would have exhibited more pleasure in this unexpected addition to their wealth were it not for the disappointment over which he believed her to be perpetually brooding. After all, he could sympathise to a certain extent with her attitude; for, if they were to have no

children to come after them, what was the particular advantage of this increase of capital ?

As matters stood, were he, Ugo, to die without children, his property and title would pass to his next of kin—his cousin Fabrizio Vitali—who would certainly sell the lands, and probably gamble away the proceeds in impossible speculations on the Bourse.

But it was not in Count Vitali's nature to dwell at any length on disagreeable reflections. He had assured himself so often of late that his wife's capricious moods were due to her hitherto ungratified desire to be a mother and to have in her life the interests attendant on motherhood, that he was quite convinced of the truth of his assurance. Unconsciously, too, he was glad to be thus convinced. He realized, perhaps, that, were he obliged to find some other explanation of the change which in the last few months had come over Cristina, it might not be of a nature to justify him in believing that at any moment the cause of that change might disappear.

### CHAPTER III

THE fortune left by the Marchesa Santoro proved to be even larger than Ugo Vitali had been led by that old lady's lawyer to expect.

Capital representing a million of francs had been invested by the marchesa in Italian rentes; while, in addition to this sum of money, it appeared that she was also the owner of several houses in Rome which were let in tenements, at rentals amounting in all to some forty thousand francs yearly.

The marchesa herself had occupied a small apartment on the third floor in one of her own houses, in which she lived after the fashion of a poverty-stricken widow. Her entire household consisted of an old man and his wife, the latter acting in the double capacity of cook and personal attendant; while the duties of the former included the performance of every other domestic work needed in the establishment.

Count Vitali had certainly been correct in assuming that his aged relative lived beneath her income. Comforts of every kind had been rigorously banished from the marchesa's surroundings, and only those acquainted with the interior arrangements of a certain type of old-fashioned Italian establishment can realise to what an extent the art of living uncomfortably can be cultivated.

Unlike many of her compatriots, however, the marchesa Santoro had not lived in penury within doors in order to be able to drive up and down the Corso, or round and round the Pincio with a carriage and pair of horses. Her economies had been practised, not with a view to spending the money saved at the price of a lack of comfort in her home life almost amounting to squalor, on outward and visible signs of affluence, but because she was in fact something very near akin to a miser.

As Ugo Vitali had heard from his parents, the general opinion of those who happened to know of the Marchesa

Santoro's existence was that, being a devout woman who was said to make herself more accessible to priests than she did to her own belongings, she would in all probability leave her money to some religious order.

The marchesa, however, was a shrewd woman of, though not in the world. She was perfectly aware that, had she not the reputation of having money to leave behind her, neither priests nor laity would have displayed any particular desire to climb three flights of steep stairs in order to visit an old woman. Moreover, it was a libel on the clergy to assert that they did visit her. As a matter of fact one priest only was in the habit of climbing her staircase, and he was a worthy man who certainly had no motive save that of old friendship for doing so, and cherished no designs upon her money, either in his own interests or in those of the Church. Indeed, as Count Vitali had afterwards occasion to learn, he owed it to this worthy ecclesiastic that the Marchesa Santoro had, a short time before her death, made him her heir.

Her husband's family by his first wife had made many and futile efforts to secure to themselves the marchesa's savings, but had been skilfully kept at a distance by the simple expedients of receiving their proffered visits but rarely, and omitting to answer letters.

Perhaps the marchesa contrasted in her own mind the attitude adopted towards her by her nephew, Count Vitali, Ugo's father, who had invariably waited to be summoned before calling upon her, and who had only brought his son to see her in response to her special request that he would do so.

However this might have been, it was certain that she had no sooner realised the approach of a new state of existence into which she would be unable to take her savings with her, than she had readily accepted the suggestion of her old friend Don Pietro, formerly parish priest of the village near her husband's property, as to the justice and propriety of leaving her money to her great-nephew, Count Ugo Vitali, who had decidedly not given her cause to suspect him of any attempt to make up to her for the sake of it.



Ugo Vitali did not remain in Rome a day longer than was absolutely necessary after arranging with the Marchesa Santoro's lawyer the business details connected with his inheritance.

There was nothing to keep him in the capital, and much that required his presence and attention at Viterbo. The city, with its restless life and movement, had for him even less attraction than it would have possessed for one of his peasants. The peasant, at all events, would probably have been absorbed in a sense of bewildered curiosity; whereas his padrone, on the rare occasions of his visits to Rome, only experienced the same weary sense of dissatisfaction with his surroundings, and, consequently, with himself, which was the invariable effect created upon him by all large towns.

At Rome, as he had told Cristina he would do, he had seen his cousin Fabrizio, and had explained to him the reason necessitating his telegram begging him to postpone his visit to Palazzo Vitali. Fabrizio Vitali had received the news of the Marchesa Santoro's bequest with outward expressions of congratulations and delight. Although he and Ugo were relatives, they had seen comparatively little of one another. Fabrizio Vitali, indeed, had nothing in common with his cousin, excepting their family name. They were, moreover, cousins only in the second degree. Nevertheless, Fabrizio was Ugo Vitali's nearest of kin and would have the right to call himself Count Vitali should Ugo die without legitimate issue. As it was, he allowed himself to be called Count Fabrizio Vitali without demur, especially by his creditors; and although his visiting-cards did not bear the title, his name on them was surmounted by a count's nine-pointed coronet.

Like many other young men of his age and condition, Fabrizio Vitali was what would be termed in England a rolling-stone. He had been a university student, and was by way of earning his livelihood as a lawyer; but his profession was quite the last thing which occupied his mind. Women and cards were more attractive to him than the study of legal treatise; while Piazza Colonna and its vicinities were places he frequented far more assiduously than he did the law courts at the Filippini.

If Fabrizio had been ill lately, his malady had certainly not been caused by over-work; and when his doctor insisted on the necessity of a change of air, a change of life was no doubt what was meant to be prescribed. On several occasions his cousin Ugo had invited him to spend a few days with him at Viterbo, but Fabrizio's active dislike of the country had hitherto caused him to assign professional engagements of a purely imaginary nature as a cause for declining these invitations. Like a certain well-known French character, the only fault he had to find with towns was that they were surrounded by the country.

Unfortunately it was still too early in the season to resort to any of the watering-places and *bagni* he usually frequented when Rome became deserted during the summer months; and this being the case, Fabrizio had bethought himself of proposing a visit to his cousin at Viterbo. He had consoled himself with the reflection that, however boring life at Palazzo Vitali might prove to be, he would at all events obtain his change of air without having to pay for his board and lodging.

Moreover, there might possibly be some distractions to be found even at Viterbo. He had yet to make the acquaintance of Ugo's wife; and he had heard from various sources that Ugo had married a very good-looking woman.

Fabrizio had hitherto never allowed himself to dwell upon the fact that he was Ugo's heir at law, since there was every reason to suppose that he might at any moment cease to be so. Now, however, he began to reflect that nearly three years had elapsed since Ugo's marriage, and that as yet no children had appeared upon the scene. He came to the conclusion that it would certainly be as well to cultivate a closer acquaintance with him. The knowledge, too, that his cousin had just inherited so considerable a fortune from the Marchesa Santoro had certainly not lessened his determination to endure the tedium of a country visit which might be productive of future advantages. To be sure, the difference in years between him and Ugo was but trifling; but, as he told himself, one could never say what eventualities might not occur. An accident—a fever—and he



might find himself the owner of the Vitali acres around Viterbo.

It was natural, perhaps, that Fabrizio Vitali's congratulations on the piece of good luck which had befallen his cousin would not have been entirely devoid of a feeling of envy. What, he had wondered contemptuously, would Ugo be the better for so large an addition to his income? Ugo himself had answered the question, when Fabrizio had suggested that he would of course now bring his wife to Rome during the winter and spring months, instead of spending the whole year at Viterbo.

And Fabrizio, hearing his reply, had shrugged his shoulders, and had thought regretfully of the different use to which he would have devoted the old marchesa's legacy, had she left it to him. After all, Ugo, in his ideas, was evidently not very far removed from a peasant. It was not surprising, therefore, that he should have married the daughter of a man who, if all accounts were true, had begun life by herding pigs.

Doubtless Ugo's wife was perfectly happy in her provincial surroundings—indeed she would probably be like a fish out of water if removed from them. It would be amusing to see what effect the society of a man of the world, such as he believed himself to be, would have upon her, for it was unlikely that there were many such at Viterbo.

When his cousin proposed that he should return with him to Palazzo Vitali, Fabrizio accepted readily enough; and, as soon as Ugo had been able to conclude the preliminary business matters connected with the Marchesa Santoro's bequest, the two left Rome together.

A very few hours passed in Ugo Vitali's company were sufficient to enable Fabrizio to realise more fully than he had hitherto had the opportunity of doing the frank and open nature of which his cousin was possessed. This was something of a revelation to one who, like Fabrizio, had spent by far the greater part of his life within the walls of Rome. Like most Romans, he was accustomed to look for a motive in the words, as in the actions of his friends and acquaintances, and was, presumably from experience, more prone to suspect evil than good in that motive.

During the journey to Viterbo, while the train crawled across the dreary wastes of the Campagna Romana—less dreary now owing to the mantle of wild flowers donned for a brief space by the rolling-plains stretching away to the blue haze shrouding the Sabine mountains—Ugo Vitali discoursed to his companion about his domestic affairs. On certain subjects the reticence considered necessary among English people is not observed by the Latin races, and Ugo did not hesitate to take his cousin into his confidence concerning his wife's mortification at not being already a mother. All that he said about Cristina added to Fabrizio's curiosity. Had there been a third person present in the compartment, and more especially had that third person been an Anglo-Saxon, he might have thought that Count Vitali was discussing matters relating rather to his stock than to his wife. Fabrizio, however, regarded these confidences as perfectly natural, and certainly not indelicate. Nevertheless he could not help the thought that, under the circumstances, he was the last person from whom his cousin could reasonably expect any genuine sympathy with his grievances. Ugo's frankness, however, was only another proof of his absolute simplicity of character, a simplicity which merely served to convince Fabrizio that he was in very truth nothing better than a *campagnuolo*.

## CHAPTER IV

COUNTESS VITALI received her husband's kinsman with all due cordiality. As a matter of fact she would have welcomed the appearance of any stranger within the gates of Palazzo Vitali. If there be occasions when the presence of a third person makes but poor company, there are unquestionably periods in the lives of most couples, married or otherwise, when such a presence becomes both convenient and desirable.

Ugo Vitali was agreeably surprised at his wife's attitude. When he had left her, he had been not a little mortified at her indifference concerning the unexpected piece of good fortune that had befallen him; while at the same time he had felt vaguely dissatisfied with himself, inasmuch as he was apparently unable to make her contented.

But, during his absence in Rome, Cristina appeared to have recovered much of her former self. She displayed an interest, and a wifely solicitude which Ugo had looked for in vain in the course of the last year or so of his married life. Had these been exhibited only in the presence of the newly arrived guest, Ugo might have had just reason to doubt their being genuine. This, however, did not prove to be the case; although Ugo, when Cristina had welcomed his return with every sign of pleasure and satisfaction, had been almost inclined to suspect that her attitude was assumed in order to keep up an appearance of domestic felicity before a stranger who was also a relative.

"But, caro mio," exclaimed Fabrizio on the first evening of his arrival, when Countess Vitali had finally retired for the night, leaving Ugo and him together, "your wife is charming—absolutely charming! I really do not see of what you have to complain," he added laughingly.

Ugo lifted his eyebrows. "Complain?" he repeated. "I did not know I had complained."

"Oh, well, not complained, exactly. That would be too strong a term to employ. But you certainly led me to expect—something very different from the reality."

"Cristina is decidedly in better spirits than when I left her,"—Ugo observed thoughtfully. "I do not know what has happened to make her more like her usual self. Perhaps it is your arrival, Fabrizio."

"Let us hope not—at least, let us hope that the change is not due to my arrival only," his cousin replied; "otherwise there would certainly be a reaction before very long! But seriously, Ugo, you must have imagined the greater part of all you said to me during our journey this afternoon. Cristina—I may call her Cristina, of course?—does not appear to me to be a discontented woman. There is nothing in this world more tiresome than a discontented woman. After all, the discontent generally proceeds from a single cause."

"What cause?" asked Ugo.

"The wrong man."

Ugo's face flushed. "That is a very cynical remark," he said, with rather a constrained laugh. "If I had known you held so poor an opinion of women, I should scarcely have ventured to tell you that I feared Cristina was discontented. But please remember that I gave you quite another cause to account for her being so!"

Fabrizio lighted a cigarette, concealing a smile by the action.

"Husbands generally do find another cause," he thought; but he did not give utterance to his thought. To say the truth, Fabrizio Vitali was considerably astonished at finding his cousin's wife altogether different from what he had imagined her to be. He had been prepared to see a handsome though somewhat vulgar woman—a woman who no doubt would be little at her ease in the position, such as it was, to which her marriage had raised her, and who would probably attempt to conceal the fact by assuming a disagreeable manner. Ugo's conversation in the train, and little remarks he had let fall one evening when they had dined together in Rome, had tended to confirm his suppositions.

Fabrizio Vitali was, at least so far as one side of his character

was concerned, one of those young men whom modern Italy produces by the thousand, and the keynote to whose nature is a supreme egoism. Of brains he had plenty; but of the self-restraint engendered by discipline and enhanced by a sense of personal responsibility he possessed little or none.

This last deficiency, however, could scarcely be said to be entirely his own fault, since the Italian universities, in one of which he had received the only mental training he had ever experienced, have long ceased to retain any control over their so-called students. These last, on the slightest opposition to their wishes, organize a strike, or threaten the Ministry of Public Instruction with their displeasure; while the Government trembles at their demonstrations and, instead of treating them like unruly boys, flatters their sense of importance by calling out the troops instead of employing less heroic remedies such as the fire-hose.

Apart from his egoism, Fabrizio was by no means bad natured. He was one of those people who, generally by their relatives, are apt to be described as being nobody's enemy but their own—than which nothing more damning can as a rule be said, even by uncles and aunts possessing children. He had all that mental restlessness so often to be found in the Latin races. Possessing just sufficient artistic perception to incapacitate him for turning his life to any practical account, he had neither energy nor perseverance enough to enable him to pursue any branch of art seriously. Such a nature, combined with a total lack of training, could hardly fail to produce a character at once sceptical and material; and that of Fabrizio was both the one and the other.

The standard of that branch of social deportment usually referred to as morals being so largely dependent on latitude and longitude, it would have been hardly fair to assert that Fabrizio was more immoral than the majority of other young men—or at all events of other young Romans.

Religious belief he had none; and in this particular he probably only differed from most of his fellows in that he was honest enough not to pretend to possess it. At intervals, and between more frivolous occupations, he would read assiduously; and



his favourite literature, though anything but spiritual in its doctrine, was not at all of the kind he might have been expected to select. Philosophers and poets were his preferred authors ; and the more pessimistic the philosophy, the more melancholy and despairing the poetry, the greater was the satisfaction he derived from them. Nor were his philosophers and his poets of the drawing-room and circulating library order. They were neither fashionable, nor were their works ever bound with trappings of sage green. He would pore over the pages of Schopenhauer, of Nietzsche, of Spencer and other masters of thought, in translation ; while Leopardi, saddest of Italian singers, was probably responsible for much of his inability to grapple with the practical realities and necessities of everyday life.

Both of Fabrizio Vitali's parents were deeply religious, and his earlier youth had been spent in the most orthodox of surroundings. His father died when Fabrizio was only seventeen ; but his mother was still alive, and was, indeed, barely fifty. She, poor lady, had long endeavoured to combat her son's materialism, and regarded with justifiable horror the volumes she would find lying about his rooms. As long as his age had allowed her to do so, she had insisted on his conforming to the usages and practices of the Church, and his earlier education had, therefore, been conducted entirely under clerical control. The day had come, however, as she had always foreseen it must, when active interference became no longer possible ; but the passive opposition which she substituted for it was assuredly, if not more efficacious, the more pathetic of the two. The Signora Vitali would surreptitiously place pious books in her son's room as an antidote to the subversive volumes she found there ; and sometimes she would hang a sacred picture on the walls, or some object of devotion specially blessed by the Holy Father himself to the statuette of Our Lady of Lourdes which she had with her own hands put on a bracket over his bed.

Fabrizio never read the books ; but to remove any one of the objects his mother had placed about him would have seemed to him to be something akin to sacrilege—and who shall blame

the Signora Vitali for trusting that their silent testimony to things spiritual might one day find a road to her son's heart?

In certain parts of Italy, it not unfrequently happens that those about to commit an evil act will turn a picture of the Madonna, or of their patron saint, to the wall, in order that the personages these represent should not be offended by witnessing a crime—a practice by no means confined to southern Italy, but to which we most of us are apt to conform, albeit in a less literal manner.

Fabrizio Vitali did not, it is true, turn the face of Our Lady of Lourdes to the wall. It is to be feared that he was too deeply imbued with the spirit of positivist philosophy to have for a moment thought such a proceeding necessary. The most materially minded, however, are not always the least superstitious; and Fabrizio had always refrained from interfering with the presence of his mother's spiritual antidotes, not only because he knew she would take it deeply to heart if he did so, but also from a vague fear lest, should he banish them, some bad luck might overtake him.

Signora Vitali had been more than gratified at Fabrizio's announcement that he was about to pay a visit to the head of their family at Palazzo Vitali in Viterbo. The keeping of an ever vigilant eye on the good things of the next world has not always been found to be incompatible with a very natural determination to obtain a fair share of the good things offered in this state of existence; and Signora Vitali never forgot that Fabrizio might at any moment find himself in his cousin's place. She had often counselled him to improve his acquaintance with Ugo Vitali, but hitherto Fabrizio's aversion from the country had outweighed all her arguments.

Fabrizio had passed his first evening at Palazzo Vitali pleasantly enough. Ugo, who was delighted at the change he found in his wife's demeanour, was in excellent spirits, while Cristina had listened with evident eagerness to all Fabrizio had to tell them concerning the social life of Rome, and the scandals in that portion of Roman society in which he perhaps led his cousins to believe he was more at home than was actually the case. It

is always encouraging to self-placency, though scarcely as much so to strict veracity, to feel that one is being agreeable—and during dinner that evening Fabrizio was conscious of making a distinctly favourable impression on both his host and his hostess.

His topics of conversation, indeed, were often beyond the range of Ugo's experiences in life, and Count Vitali's face would occasionally wear a puzzled expression as though he were wondering what his guest was talking about. It was not so, however, with Countess Vitali. Although she had as little or less experience of the world of society, any one possessing far less observation than did Fabrizio would have at once realised that, in her case, imagination and a lively interest supplied the place of such experience.

The hours kept at Palazzo Vitali were early, and altogether different from those Fabrizio was accustomed to keep in Rome. Ugo Vitali, who was always out of doors by six o'clock at the latest on summer mornings, and often earlier, had the best of reasons for not liking to be late in going to bed. At a time, therefore, when Fabrizio was usually wondering how he should employ the remainder of his evening, his host, after several yawns that he was at no pains to conceal, proceeded to light a couple of candles, and suggested that he should show him the way to his bedroom. To reach it the two had to traverse the long suite of unused rooms on the *piano nobile* which had been the state apartments of their common ancestor (if the term can be applied to a Roman ecclesiastic without injury to his reputation), Cardinal Vitali.

The feeble light from the candles only served to make the rooms appear larger and more deserted ; and the footsteps of the two men as they passed across the uncarpeted marble floors re-echoed dully under the lofty, vaulted ceilings. Notwithstanding the warmth of the summer night without, the atmosphere around them felt chill and damp, and Fabrizio shivered a little as he followed his cousin's lead.

Suddenly Ugo paused and looked round. "Nothing short of a fire, or some similar disaster, would induce Taddeo or any of the



people on the place to pass through these rooms alone at night," he said, with a smile.

Fabrizio laughed. "Does the cardinal revisit them in the spirit?" he asked.

"No—not the cardinal. He, no doubt, has been safely in Paradise years ago! But, all the same, the people will have it that these rooms are haunted."

Sciocchezze!" observed Fabrizio contemptuously. When one is anxious to convince oneself that one has sprung from nothing, and will return to nothing, ghosts and their doings cease to be interesting and become merely irritating.

"Altro che sciocchezze!" agreed Ugo. He was as convinced a Catholic as his cousin was the reverse; but, like the majority of Italians, he had no belief in the so-called supernatural, apart from that implied by his religious faith, and inculcated by the dogmas and traditions of the Church.

"Of course," he repeated, "it is all nonsense. But the people insist that Donna Giulia's spirit haunts these rooms."

"Donna Giulia?"

"Our ancestress, Giulia Maidalchini, who married the Count Vitali of the day. Did you never hear of her?" added Ugo.

"I knew we had Maidalchini blood in our veins," replied Fabrizio. "It is not much to be proud of, I am afraid! She was a sister of the famous Donna Olimpia, was she not?"

"Precisely. As you say, it is not much to be proud of. That is supposed to be a portrait of her," and Ugo pointed to a half-length picture of a woman whose heavy and somewhat coarse features bore a decided resemblance to those in portraits of the formidable sister-in-law of Pope Innocent X., Donna Olimpia Pamphili.

"She is said to have poisoned her husband's elder brother," continued Ugo, "who was also reported to be her lover. It is not a pretty story."

"Surely, under the circumstances, she would have been wiser to poison her husband!" observed Fabrizio.

"The lover had become tiresome. Besides, money entered into the matter—and I am afraid her husband was, if not the in-

stigator of the crime, at all events the gainer by it. He had discovered the intimacy; and, together with the Moidalchini family, resorted to the plan of getting rid of his brother and suppressing any scandal by compelling Donna Giulia to poison him. Apparently, she had already grown tired of her lover, so was the more ready to agree to the proposal."

"The husband must have been a courageous man to continue to live with her," remarked Fabrizio.

Ugo laughed. "You must remember that she was a Moidalchini. He probably could not afford to quarrel with his wife's family while her sister, Donna Olimpia Pamphili, reigned in the Vatican. We were bigger people in those days than we are now, Fabrizio, and had larger possessions, more worth confiscating."

"And so Donna Giulia revisits the scene of her crimes," said Fabrizio.

Count Vitali shrugged his shoulders. "The people say so," he replied. "Taddeo would declare to you that he has heard the rustle of her dress as she passed him. He has never, at any rate to me, gone so far as to say he had actually seen her."

A haunted house is so rare a thing in Italy as to be almost singular; possibly because the State religion, inherited from the times we contemptuously dismiss as "pagan," has afforded a wider range among the things not of this world than that supplied in later days by Protestant creeds. The Reformation is probably responsible for many ghosts.

The supposed apparition of Donna Giulia, who had been in her grave two hundred and fifty years and more, interested neither of her descendants; while her story was, after all, only one among many similar domestic occurrences common to life in the Middle Ages.

They had reached the room assigned to Fabrizio by this time, and Ugo, after seeing that everything had been prepared for his guest's convenience, wished him good night.

"You will not see me until breakfast to-morrow," he said, "and when you want your coffee brought to you, you have only to ring. Taddeo will look after you, and no doubt Cristina

will appear by ten o'clock or so and show you about the place."

"And you?" asked Fabrizio.

"Oh, I have an infinity of things to do in the morning, and must be up before sunrise. These days in Rome have been a terrible waste of time!"

"I do not call coming in to a million of francs a waste of time," said Fabrizio, laughing. "I should be very glad if somebody would show me the way to spend my time in Rome as profitably!"

"When I have taken you round the land," observed Ugo, gravely, "you will see for yourself that there is plenty to be done with the interest on a million of francs."

After wishing his cousin good night again, he left the room, and Fabrizio proceeded to arrange his things previous to going to bed. He had only had time to wash, and change his clothes before dinner, and had it not been for Ugo's escort would certainly not have been able to find his way again to his room. Now, however, he had ample leisure to look about him, and to examine the arrangements of his sleeping-apartment. These arrangements were simple and almost primitive. Of comfort there was very little; but of space there was plenty. By degrees Fabrizio became conscious of something about him that he could not describe even to himself. It was only after some little time had passed that he realised what it was that he felt to be all around him, and knew it to be nothing more tangible than the deep silence of the country at night; a silence to which he was so little accustomed. He opened one of the windows and looked out of it. The room looked on to the gardens at the back of the palace, and these lay bathed in the light of a May moon that was almost at the full. The nightingales were silent, as they sometimes are in Italy when the moon is at her height, and only the occasional cry of an owl broke the intense stillness. In the black shade of the cypresses fire-flies were flitting to and fro, and away beyond the gardens a shimmering haze of silvery light partially veiled the vineyards and cornfields stretching away to the faint outlines of the Ciminian hills.

A scent of roses, of orange blossom, and half a score of other perfumes of an Italian summer's night floated into the room through the open window; and if there was silence, it was that of Nature sleeping through the short hours before the summer sun should rise again—than which there is no sweeter music for those who have ears to hear it.

Fabrizio, however, noticed none of these things. The stillness oppressed, and almost irritated him. He would have felt relieved to hear the rattle of carriage wheels, or the cries of the hawkers of the evening newspapers in the streets. He closed the window impatiently and recommenced arranging his things, extracting from his dressing-bag one of his favourite books, with which he hoped to read himself to sleep. Two pairs of inferior wax candles scarcely served to light more than a small portion of the long and lofty room, and the corner of it in which the bed was placed lay in deep shadow. Fabrizio took one of the candles and advanced towards the bed, intending to leave the book beside it. Suddenly he started back with an exclamation of dismay. Lying on the pillow was a black crucifix, the white ivory Christ being concealed beneath the cross. Notwithstanding all his materialism, a shudder of horror swept through him; for a cross to be where it should not is in Italy a sign of ill omen, if not of death. Recovering himself quickly, Fabrizio approached the bed, saying to himself that he must surely be mistaken—that in the dim light he had imagined some article accidentally left on the bed to be a cross. But there was no mistake. The emblem of a faith he did not scorn, indeed, but treated with indifference lay there, where he had been about to lay his head. At that moment Fabrizio did not remember that the crucifix was an emblem of the faith he had abandoned so much as the fact that a cross was a portent of the worst possible kind.

At any rate, the thing should not lie there—nor would he lie where it had been. Stooping down, he lifted the crucifix and, as he did so, his glance fell on a mark on the wall immediately above the head of the bedstead. A small piece of plaster had given way, bringing with it the nail on which the crucifix

had hung, while the crucifix itself had fallen face downwards on the pillow immediately beneath.

If the explanation of its presence there was simple, this did not, in Fabrizio's eyes, remove the *mal augurio* of such an accident. Sleep, if indeed sleep should come to him that night, where the evil omen had fallen he would not ; and, after placing the crucifix in a drawer, so that he should no longer be able to see it, he proceeded to make himself as comfortable as was possible on an old-fashioned sofa at the further end of the room. It was in vain that he tried to distract his thoughts by reading. The very silence seemed to render them more rebellious to his will. His mind reverted to Donna Giulia Vitali. What if it had been her evil spirit which had torn the crucifix from its place and put it where he had found it? *Storie! Sciocchezze!*—and Fabrizio laughed at himself for his weakness in permitting ideas so contrary to his theories to disturb him.

And after some hours, sleep, restless, and broken by dreams, came to him.

He dreamed, among other things, that Donna Giulia was always near him, now tempting him with words and gestures of love—now threatening him with revenge for some unknown crime he himself had committed. Sometimes he saw her as she was in the portrait Ugo had shown him—a woman no longer young, and not particularly attractive ; sometimes, again, the heavy features would change into those of his cousin's wife, Cristina Vitali. Throughout his dreams he was conscious of one leading and predominant sensation. He seemed to be entangled in the meshes of a baneful influence from which he sought in vain to extricate himself. Gradually but surely he felt himself being surrounded by this evil thing which attracted and fascinated him even while he hated it. He knew that it was drawing him on, step by step, action by action, to some disaster unforeseen and yet ever threatening, and that he was powerless to offer any effective resistance against it—nay, that he himself was aiding it to encompass its own ends. Presently, in the midst of his impotent struggles to free himself from this unknown terror, somebody told him that Ugo was dead, and that he was Count

Vitali and the owner of all Ugo's property. Then Donna Giulia bent over him, and he felt her arms round him and heard her laugh. "You killed him!" she whispered in his ear, and laughed again. And as he looked at her he saw that it was not Donna Giulia but Cristina who was by his side. And then, with a cry of horrified protest on his lips, he awoke to find Taddeo engaged in opening the windows of his room and letting in the pure, sweet air of a summer morning.



## CHAPTER V

WHEN Fabrizio left his room that morning, he found Countess Vitali awaiting him. She was sitting under the shade of a large magnolia tree at the end of the terrace immediately beneath the house, and rose to meet him as he emerged from the courtyard.

The prosaic incidents attending his morning toilette, followed by a light preparatory breakfast of coffee and a roll, had done much to restore Fabrizio to equanimity. If he could not altogether shake off the unpleasant impression made upon him by the ill-omened occurrence of the night before, he was at all events able to laugh at himself for having allowed bad dreams to create such an effect upon his nerves.

With a brilliant blue sky overhead, the sun shining on masses of roses around him, and a gentle, refreshing breeze just stirring the tops of the cypress trees, it was difficult to believe that life contained any such terrors as those which had surrounded him in his dreams a few short hours ago.

In his waking moments Fabrizio had almost decided that he would plead some excuse to his cousins and return to Rome that very day. Nothing, he had said to himself, should induce him to remain any longer in a house where so bad an omen had befallen him. This feeling had soon passed, however, when his mind had arrived at a condition in which argument with himself became possible. The purely natural circumstances under which the crucifix had come to be in a position so unpleasantly suggestive of a death-bed could not be over-looked, while the dreams soon lost their intensity, and assumed, under calmer examination, the more reasonable proportions of a nightmare.

It was evident, however, that his recent experiences had left some trace of themselves, even if these were only such as might be produced by a disturbed night. Countess Vitali, as he wished



her good morning, looked at him enquiringly, and after a moment's pause expressed her fear that he was not feeling so well as he had evidently felt the evening before.

Fabrizio laughed, and assured his hostess that he felt quite as well as he had been feeling lately, and that she must not think that he had a relapse and was going to be ill in her house.

"I am not accustomed to the quiet of the country," he said, "and I slept badly in consequence. A 'beater of the pavements' like myself misses the noises of a town, and I confess that your country stillness got upon my nerves last night. No doubt I shall be more accustomed to it by to-morrow evening."

Cristina smiled. "I have always been accustomed to it," she said drily. "Ugo," she added, "as you will have gathered, is miserable in a town—so, except during our honeymoon when he took me to Naples, I have had no opportunity of being otherwise!"

"And you liked Naples?" asked Fabrizio.

Cristina clapped her hands together. "If I liked Naples!" she exclaimed. "I adored it. I saw life. Here I only see——"

"Ugo," interposed Fabrizio.

"Sicuro! I see Ugo. That is as it should be, since I am married to him, and you must not think that I complain of it. Certainly not! all the same, country life is a little monotonous when one has nothing else. That is the advantage you men have—you can go where you like and when you like."

"But, my dear cousin, Ugo is a man, is he not?"

"Indisputably!" returned Countess Vitali, laughing, "but Ugo is not as other men are. He is quite content to be in his fields, with his peasants and his tiresome horses and cattle. I, who was brought up in a convent, hate horses and cattle—they frighten me."

"Men are apt to be much more dangerous," observed Fabrizio, pulling his moustache.

Cristina Vitali gave him a quick glance. "Proprio?" she said, laughing, "my experience of them, as I have told you, is limited."

"Ugo should take you to Rome."

"*Magari!*" replied Cristina, "I have often told him so, but

he laughs at me. Ugo is very proud, although I daresay you would not believe it. Probably he would not believe it himself; but it is true, all the same. He thinks people would despise us in Rome because we are provincials."

"That is absurd," returned Fabrizio. "They would only have to see you—" and he paused expressively.

"Besides," continued Countess Vitali, ignoring the implied compliment, "he says that we have not enough money to compete with your Roman nobles. But why should I bore you with our little differences of opinion? they are, after all, very trifling matters."

"But you do not bore me at all!" exclaimed Fabrizio. "Do you know," he added, "that all the time I was talking to you at dinner last evening I was thinking what a pity it was that you should shut yourself up at Viterbo? You should talk seriously to Ugo."

"And if he will not listen?"

"A woman is always listened to."

"Is she? In the world, perhaps, but not in Palazzo Vitali," returned Cristina. "Ugo has no ambition," she continued, "but absolutely none! Ah, if I were a man, I would not be content with watching my crops grow!"

Cristina's eyes flashed and her whole person became more animated as she spoke. Fabrizio watched her curiously. She was certainly a beautiful woman, he thought—but not a very high-bred one; and when she became excited, the want of breeding showed itself. He had seen enough of the women in that society he had discoursed of the previous evening to realise this. It did not detract from her beauty, however; and, in his eyes, perhaps it rather added to her attraction. It was evident that Ugo had not been mistaken in believing his wife to be discontented, though Fabrizio doubted more than ever whether the reason he had assigned for her discontent was the correct one. He had promised to himself some amusement in seeking out the weak places in his cousins' ménage, and apparently he was in a fair way to obtain that amusement. He had not expected, certainly, that Countess Vitali would be so expansive at the very commence-

ment of his visit ; but, as she appeared to be not indisposed to make him the confidant of her grievances, he was more than ready to encourage her to do so. It is always gratifying to a man to be the recipient of a woman's confidences ; and when that woman happens to be good-looking it becomes a positive pleasure to listen to them.

"What would you do—if you were a man?" Fabrizio asked, after a pause.

Cristina shrugged her shoulders. "Since I am not a man, it is useless to answer that question," she said. "Let us talk of something else," she added abruptly, "about yourself, for instance. Ugo tells me that you are a terrible heretic—a Protestant, or something of the sort. It must be very interesting to have a religion of one's own, instead of believing what the priests tell one."

"But I have no religion," Fabrizio replied. "I am a positivist."

"What is a positivist?" inquired Countess Vitali. "Is he a person who flies in a rage if he sees a crucifix hanging above his bed, and pulls it down?"

Fabrizio started. "What do you mean?" he exclaimed, looking at her in surprise.

"But you must know very well what I mean. You have caused an enormous scandal in the household. Taddeo rushed downstairs after bringing you your coffee this morning declaring that you must be the devil, or a freemason at the very least! He told my maid that you had wrenched the Christ from the wall above your bed and thrown him away—out of the window. Did you?"

In spite of his surprise and some annoyance that the incident of last night should have reached Cristina's ears, Fabrizio burst out laughing.

"I found the crucifix on my bed," he said. "It had evidently fallen. The nail, I suppose, had given way."

It was Cristina who started this time. "Madonna mia!" she ejaculated, "what a horrible thing!—luckily, as you do not believe in anything, you are not superstitious ; otherwise it

would be a *brutto augurio*. But did you throw it out of the window?"

"Of course not! I confess that, for the moment, it gave me a shock to find it on my bed. It looked horribly suggestive, you know. But I did not throw it out of the window. I put it in a drawer, as—as I did not want it always before my eyes to remind me of bad omens."

Countess Vitali looked grave. "It was a dreadful thing to happen," she said. "I am glad it did not happen to me. I should be terrified for months to come. But for you, of course, it does not matter—you are above such weaknesses."

Fabrizio gave a constrained laugh. "We can never quite get rid of our childish superstitions," he remarked. "It will take many generations to free the human race from the yoke of hereditary traditions which only the enlightened know to be absurd."

Cristina did not reply for a moment. Probably she would not have understood Fabrizio's observation even if she had heard it—and this seemed to be doubtful, for her face wore a pre-occupied expression.

"Do not tell Ugo," she said, at length. "He is not like you. He is what I suppose you would call very superstitious, that is, he is a strong clerical, and believes all the priests wish us to believe."

"And you?" asked Fabrizio, "do you also believe all the priests wish you to believe?"

Cristina laughed. "Che!" she replied. "I was brought up in a convent, as I have told you—so I know how much they believe themselves!"

Fabrizio laughed also. "It seems, then, that we agree on certain points," he observed. "But I do not see why Ugo should not be told about the crucifix," he continued. "I had intended to say nothing about it; but as you had heard of its disappearance from the servants, there was no reason for me not to talk of it. Ugo will be sure to hear of it in the same way."

"Not now that you are exonerated from having committed a sacrilege," replied Countess Vitali. "I shall tell Taddeo what really happened, and the excitement among the servants will

subside. As to Ugo, he would be very uneasy if he knew that such a bad omen had happened in the house. Moreover, you have Donna Giulia's room——”

“Donna Giulia's room!” repeated Fabrizio, and his face fell suddenly in spite of his effort to appear indifferent.

“You know the story,” proceeded Cristina. “But of course you do, as you are one of the family. Yes—the room you have is said to have been hers. You shall see her picture. She does not appear to have been a very attractive woman—though her brother-in-law is said to have thought otherwise.”

“I have seen the picture,” said Fabrizio. “Ugo showed it to me last night. He told me her story. As he says, it is not a pretty story.”

“No,” remarked Cristina thoughtfully; “but very probably we do not know her version of it. Perhaps,” she continued, “you would like to be moved into another room? You were put into Donna Giulia's because it is a little more comfortable than the other bedrooms in this old barrack. If you are afraid of seeing your ancestress, however, it is very easy to change your quarters.”

Fabrizio glanced at her quickly. He fancied that he detected the faintest possible tone of mockery in her voice. Like most amateur explorers in the regions of philosophic doubt, he was extremely afraid of being considered to be half-hearted in his allegiance to his new masters. How excellent and desirable a thing would it be if it were possible for the works of great minds to be written with a view to the fact that minds infinitely smaller read and interpret them!

If a little learning be a dangerous thing, dabbling in the higher branches of philosophical research is apt to be positively perilous to any but the strongest natures; and Fabrizio Vitali was only one among the multitude of dabblers existing not in Italy alone, but in the world generally. He was under the firm impression that he had grasped the fruits of his philosophers; but he was unable to realise, or even to suspect that he was incompetent, by reason of an undisciplined mind, to pluck any except those within the reach of ordinary mortals—these last being seldom the ripest.

“Please do not think of moving me,” he said hastily, in reply



to Cristina's suggestion. "I hope you do not think that I am so weak as to be alarmed at such a trifle as a bit of wood and ivory falling from a wall on to my bed! I admit that I would rather the bit of wood had not happened to be in the shape of a cross; but that is merely foolish prejudice, and I am already heartily ashamed of myself for having paid any attention to the incident. As to Donna Giulia, I should be delighted to make her acquaintance, if she chooses to visit me! Perhaps I should then learn her version of the story."

"As you please," said Countess Vitali indifferently. "I thought you were frightened."

"And I believe you think so still!" exclaimed Fabrizio angrily.

Cristina Vitali laughed—a low, and rather malicious laugh.

"Yes," she replied, "I think so still. Indeed, I am sure of it!"

"Perbacco! but if I tell you that I am not? Do you suppose that I believe in omens—or in spirits? As to spirits, I can understand those who flatter themselves that they possess an immortal soul believing in them——"

"But you do not flatter yourself that you possess any such thing, then?" interrupted Countess Vitali, looking at him curiously.

"Of course not! This being the case, how can you suppose that I have any expectation of making the spiritual acquaintance of Donna Giulia Vitali?"

"Do you know," said Cristina meditatively, "that interests me. I am aware, of course, that there are many people in the world who think as you do, but I have never before had the opportunity of talking to one of them. According to your theory, then, it does not matter what we do in this life. It must be all the same thing in the end."

"What we do matters to society—I mean society in the large sense of the term—not to ourselves individually. It cannot affect our future—as we have all been brought up to believe it will do. Since we have had no past, why should we assume that we have a future?"

"Then," said Cristina, "we are all very foolish not to enjoy ourselves as much as we can while we have a chance!"

Fabrizio laughed. "Undoubtedly," he said. "That is true philosophy."

"Philosophy is a much simpler thing than I thought it was," observed Cristina.

"Scusi—but it is not simple at all! The world is still far too prejudiced, and far too much under the influence of ancient myths to allow of its being so. It is a perpetual battle against ignorance and the reactionary forces of Christianity."

"Per carità!" said Cristina, "do not discuss these things before Ugo, he would be horribly scandalised! You must reserve them for me."

"But I have no wish to scandalise you!" Fabrizio returned quickly.

"Oh, as to me, I rather share your views—only I am not clever enough to be able to express them as you do. Besides, I have to keep my opinions to myself. That is one of the disadvantages of being a woman."

"You must admit that it is not every woman who succeeds in keeping her opinion to herself!" remarked Fabrizio drily.

"Ah!" exclaimed Cristina, laughing, "it is delightful to talk to you! Ugo would never have thought of saying such a thing, he is too matter of fact. But you are wrong. Women are much more secret than men. I believe that you have never known a woman well. Perhaps it has not entered into your philosophy to do so!"

"Oh, as to that," replied Fabrizio complacently, "I have had as much experience of women as most men, I imagine. Do not, however, think me impertinent if I confess that you are a surprise to me!"

"A surprise?"

"But certainly—a surprise. I had imagined somebody very different. Oh, I did not mean in looks, of course; I was prepared for what I find in that respect, and I am certainly not disappointed!"

An Italian of a certain category can rarely talk to a woman



without considering it necessary to pay compliments to her; and Fabrizio was no exception to the rule.

"I wonder what kind of individual you expected to find," observed Countess Vitali.

"I hardly know. It is a little difficult to tell you. I think I had expected to find a person who did not possess your evident interest in life and its problems, for one thing."

Cristina laughed—a not very pleasant laugh—and from under her broad level brows flashed the peasant look, half-defiant and half-suspicious. "It is possible to take interest in things with which one has very little chance of becoming acquainted, except from the outside!" she said. "But from whom did you receive your impressions of me?—from Ugo, I suppose!"

"He certainly led me to expect a different sort of character from that which I am sure you possess," said Fabrizio, with a smile. "But," he added cautiously, "no doubt Ugo was quite unconscious of doing so. You say yourself that he has very orthodox views on certain subjects, and that he looks at life from a peculiar standpoint of his own. Probably, therefore, he is honestly unable to realise your standpoint. It may never even occur to him that you have so different a one. It is only sympathy which enables two people to know by intuition each other's mental attitude towards such subjects as those we have touched upon."

"Altro!" assented Countess Vitali. "Do you suppose I have not long ago realised that?"

"If you have not," said Fabrizio in a low voice, "you must surely realise it now! What has it been but sympathy which has enabled us—strangers until last night—to discuss the things we have been discussing?"

Cristina slowly dissected a crimson rose she had pulled from a bunch she was wearing, and watched its petals falling on the grey stones of the terrace. Fabrizio watched her. He was not sure whether she was offended or flattered by his words, for her face told him nothing.

At length she looked up, and, as she was about to answer, suddenly checked herself. Fabrizio, who was sitting with his

back to the façade of the palace, turned round to follow the direction of her gaze. The expression that came into her eyes, and the almost sullen look that settled on her face had attracted his attention.

"There is Ugo," she said quickly; and Fabrizio saw his cousin's form approaching them from the further end of the terrace.

Count Vitali greeted his guest with all the cheerful good-humour of a man who feels he has done a satisfactory morning's work before other people have been out of their beds. He was clad in riding-breeches and gaiters, and his boots were white with the dust from the sun-baked land; for he had been in the saddle since five o'clock that morning, visiting every portion of his property.

"I hope you slept well," he said to Fabrizio. "You have not the *buona ciera*, as the peasants say; but you will very soon get some colour into your face now you have left Rome behind you. Cristina," he continued, "do you recollect me telling you that I had sent one of my best mares to Bracciano? Imagine if I am annoyed! The Odescalchi people declare that she is wrong in the wind. It is they who are wrong in the head! The mare is as sound as I am!"

"Which, I should think, is saying a great deal!" observed Fabrizio.

Ugo Vitali laughed. "I am as sound as most men, I am glad to say," he said carelessly. "You must admit that it is very annoying," he added, turning to his wife again. "They have kept the mare for a fortnight, and of course I thought I had sold her."

"Oh, very annoying, certainly," agreed Countess Vitali.

"Yes, but that is not all," proceeded Ugo. "When one is away, things are sure to go wrong. I have wasted nearly a week in Rome—and a week at this time of year means a great deal."

"Why not have an agent to look after things for you?" suggested Fabrizio.

"Yes, why not, Ugo?" said Cristina. "I have often wondered why you do not have an agent."

"Why should I pay a stranger to do what I can do as well or better myself?" returned Ugo. "Besides," he continued, "the contadini would not work for any agent as well as they work for me. They trust me, and I trust them. We neither of us want any third person to come between us."

"Is it not an ideal state of things?" said Cristina to Fabrizio. "You see that the peasants and my husband thoroughly understand each other; so of course there is nothing more to be desired."

"Cristina is quite right," Ugo remarked. "When padrone and contadino trust one another and work together for the good of the land, I do not see what more can be desired on any property."

Countess Vitali did not answer. She looked at Fabrizio, and their eyes met.

The shadow from the sun-dial on the façade of Palazzo Vitali pointed to eleven, and Cristina rose from her seat under the magnolia tree.

"We breakfast at half-past eleven," she said to Fabrizio; and leaving him and her husband to follow her at their leisure, she walked away and disappeared into the house.

## CHAPTER VI

UGO VITALI had been quite right when he declared that Fabrizio would soon recover his ailments now that he had left Rome behind him.

Although, notwithstanding the legends written home to their friends by over-tired and over-fed English tourists, modern Rome is one of the healthiest of European capitals, the heavy Roman air does not assist a speedy recovery from illness, should illness chance to be contracted there. Fabrizio's malady, however, was merely one of that very general species requiring change of habit rather than change of air or scene. He had been at Palazzo Vitali nearly a fortnight now, and he was unquestionably the better, at all events physically, in consequence.

The days had passed quickly enough—more quickly, indeed, than Fabrizio would have thought it possible that days could pass in the country—and, somewhat to his own surprise, he found himself agreeing with his cousin Ugo that there was no particular reason why he should be in a hurry to return to Rome. Countess Vitali, too, seconded her husband's proposal that Fabrizio should stay at least another fortnight with them ; and so it was eventually settled that no definite date should be fixed for his departure.

Fabrizio did not attempt to persuade himself that life at Palazzo Vitali was exciting ; but he was becoming gradually conscious of the fact that he found it interesting—and this quite apart from any scope it afforded for incidental amusements. Of these last, it might be said briefly that there was none.

Life in an Italian country-house is, as a rule, of a rigid simplicity. There are, of course, exceptions to the rule, but they are to be found only in individual establishments far more pretentious than was that of Casa Vitali. The Italian *villeggiatura* is not lacking in ease, but the comforts and pleasant

refinements common to country-houses north of the Alps are regarded as superfluous, and are usually conspicuous by their absence. During an Italian summer, however, in-door comforts can very well be dispensed with; and Fabrizio, being unaccustomed to exotic luxuries in his mother's apartment in Rome, did not notice the want of them.

Strangely enough, Countess Vitali herself was the one person in the house who resented what she described as an old-fashioned and bourgeois way of living. Considering the circumstances of her birth and bringing up, her attitude towards the subject was, no doubt, both unreasonable and illogical. Probably Ugo Vitali regarded it as such, though he was far too much of a gentleman even to hint to her that he did so. It was evident, nevertheless, that the contemptuous remarks she would often make concerning their mode of life irritated Count Vitali beyond measure.

If the mode of life at Palazzo Vitali was old-fashioned, as his wife declared, it was for this very reason that Ugo Vitali clung all the more closely to it. His father before him had lived in the same manner, and Ugo could see no reason why he should depart from the example of his predecessors so far as his domestic arrangements were concerned. In all things regarding the improving of his lands he was liberal minded enough, and was the first to adopt any modern agricultural appliance that he could afford, or that he believed to be suitable to his requirements. But, apart from his farming, Ugo was conservative *au bouts des ongles*. It would scarcely have been natural had he not been so, since he was one of a type of country gentleman which still exists as it has existed for centuries in the provincial districts of Italy.

Holding himself entirely aloof from the cosmopolitan society of the capital, and of the other large towns, he had never been brought into contact with foreign ideas, or with those foreign customs to which the modern Italian of the upper class has taken so kindly. Of pride he had plenty; but it was not the false pride attributed to him by superficial observers of his character. It was owing to a sense of his own inferiority if he stood aside from the life of Rome with all its political, social,

and religious struggles and intrigues. So far as blood was concerned, he knew himself to be better born and better descended than nine out of ten Roman princes who could trace their nobility to no worthier source than that of some priestly adventurer of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Vitali had been of those powerful Roman barons who had once harassed popes very much at their own pleasure ; consequently, such comparatively modern names as those borne by representatives of papal nepotism possessed, in Ugo Vitali's eyes, no claim to superiority over his own.

In his religious opinions, Ugo was, as Cristina had warned Fabrizio, strongly Catholic, at any rate in the sense of accepting unquestioningly all the propositions the Church imposed upon his faith. In the complicated problems regarding the relations between Church and State he took little or no interest ; but, like the great majority of Italians, he regarded the Papacy as a national institution which, apart from religious prejudices, had an ancient and historical claim to be respected and upheld as such.

Placed by his host and hostess on the footing of a relative nearer in kinship than was actually the case, Fabrizio Vitali had more opportunity than would have fallen to the lot of an ordinary guest of gaining an insight into the more personal details of their domestic life. It was true that Ugo had never again referred to the subject of his wife's disappointment that no child had as yet been born to them, and a less shrewd observer than Fabrizio might well have failed to notice anything unusual in Countess Vitali's demeanour towards her husband. Cristina herself, however, had given him a clue which Fabrizio was not slow in determining to follow up. He had never stopped to ask himself why she should have given it to him so spontaneously, being quite content with the thought that he had so quickly succeeded in establishing a bond of sympathy between himself and a woman who attracted him as much by a personality which puzzled him as by her physical beauty.

Fabrizio very soon came to the conclusion that Ugo was completely mistaken in thinking that his wife was fretting at being childless. At first he had suspected that his cousin was either



wilfully deceiving himself, or that he was attempting to conceal from any third person the true state of affairs. A very few days at Palazzo Vitali had sufficed to convince Fabrizio that he was wrong in both suspicions. It was evident that Ugo genuinely believed in the explanation he had found for the gradual change in his wife's demeanour; and moreover, that he was absolutely incapable of understanding the possibility of there being any other.

And yet, to a third person, the situation was clear enough. Cristina was bored — hopelessly bored—not only with the life she found herself obliged to lead at Palazzo Vitali, but also with her husband; while the arrival or non-arrival of a baby on the scene would, Fabrizio was equally persuaded, not alter the position of things in the slightest degree.

It seemed incredible that Ugo should not realise this position, or rather, it would have seemed incredible in the case of any other husband. But Fabrizio had speedily recognised the simplicity of his cousin's nature, as well as his entire want of knowledge of the world; and Ugo's obtuseness, therefore, became more understandable.

And so it had come to pass that Fabrizio had to some extent found the amusement he had anticipated in making himself acquainted with his cousins' ménage, though not after the manner of his anticipation. By degrees he found himself in the position, as it were, of an interested spectator looking on at a comedy—a comedy he did not enjoy the less for being, as he fully believed, in the confidence of the principal player. Circumstances, it must be admitted, afforded Fabrizio every opportunity of availing himself of Countess Vitali's apparent readiness to confide in him. Except at meals and in the evenings Ugo was seldom at home; for it was the season when his vineyards, and, indeed, every department of his property required his constant attention and supervision.

Occasionally neighbours would call on Countess Vitali—for there are country neighbours in Italy as there are in England, and perhaps their habits do not differ very much. When they paid a visit, it was usually a long one. But, unlike their English

counterparts, they did not, at the conclusion of their visits, make elaborate excuses for leaving—a British custom which strikes the foreign observer as being merely an unnecessary manifestation of the national hypocrisy, displaying at the same time a deplorable lack of the sense of humour. Sometimes Cristina would invite a few people to play lawn-tennis in the gardens, and at rare intervals one or two more intimate friends would be asked to dinner, which last was a purely informal meal for which nobody ever thought of doing more than changing their morning garments—the ladies wearing high gowns and hats, and the men donning black coats.

These festivities, however, were few and far between; and as a rule Count and Countess Vitali were alone with their guest. Whatever Ugo Vitali's faults may have been, he was certainly not a jealous husband. He had seen with satisfaction that his wife appeared to like Fabrizio's society, and he was not in the least disposed to resent the fact that she did so. It was something of a revelation to him that Cristina had any interest in literature, and that she should be able to talk to Fabrizio on subjects of which he, Ugo, knew nothing, and perhaps cared about even less. He could not be inspired to know that their conversations were strictly limited in his presence to such general topics as should not offend his more orthodox opinions, nor that Fabrizio reserved his amateur philosophy for moments when Cristina and he were alone together. The fact that his wife was undoubtedly less *difficile* than she had lately taken to be was in itself sufficiently satisfactory; and Ugo argued to himself that it was very natural that she should be interested in the society of a man like Fabrizio, who no doubt was a very clever fellow, though he did not seem to put his talents to any very practical account. Moreover, Fabrizio was his nearest of kin, and a Vitali; and honest as the day himself it never entered into Ugo's head to suspect double-dealing on the part of others, at all events in things lying outside the domain of business, in which last matter experience had taught him the advisability of not judging others by his own standard.

It was natural that the little social world of Viterbo should be

exercised in its mind concerning Fabrizio's appearance in the Vitali ménage. Countess Vitali had never succeeded in winning any great measure of popularity among her husband's neighbours, many of whom could never forget the fact that she had not been his equal in birth. The taint of the Norcian pigs still clung to her, at least so far as the nostrils of some of the Viterbese aristocracy were concerned. Cristina, it was true, had not taken any particular trouble to win her way into the intimacy of this body. She had very soon realised that she was only tolerated as an equal by some of Ugo's neighbours because she happened to be his wife; and she had resented their attitude accordingly, though she had not cared to show her resentment too openly. The men, of course, were quite ready to forget her antecedents and only to remember her good looks; it was their women-kind who were apt to resuscitate the pigs on every possible opportunity, and more especially when some unsuspecting stranger happened to praise Countess Vitali's beauty.

There was one among her neighbours, however, who had from the first stood by Cristina, and whose voice carried weight by reason of the position and reputation enjoyed by its owner not only in the society of Viterbo, but also in far more important communities. The Duchessa di San Felice was one of those people whose lives are chiefly occupied in doing good to their fellow-creatures; but, unlike the majority of the women of her class, she did not advertise her actions. Her name was seldom or never to be found on lists of "patronesses" of the innumerable entertainments professedly offered for charitable purposes during the Roman season, probably because she was too well aware of the extent to which a mysterious leakage in the proceeds of such entertainments is apt to occur before they are finally consigned to their legitimate destination. The duchessa's philanthropy was practical rather than sentimental in its action. She devoted her energies to fighting the causes of disease and poverty, rather than to making spasmodic attempts to remedy their effects. Still a young woman, the Duchessa di San Felice was possessed of most of the advantages this world can offer. Born of a great house herself, she had married well and happily,

though five years after her marriage she had been left a widow. The Duca di San Felice had been drowned while sailing off Livorno in a small sailing-boat he delighted in handling himself. A violent *Libeccio* had come on while the vessel was half-way to the Corsican coast; the boat capsized; and of the four men on board her, only one was saved by a passing steamer to bring the news of the disaster to the mainland.

The duchess, left with two little children, had never married again, though rumour declared that she might have done so many times had she not preferred to remain a widow. If she had not the striking beauty of features and colouring possessed by Cristina Vitali, she was none the less remarkably attractive; and there was about her that unmistakable stamp of birth and breeding which, with all her beauty, were lacking to Countess Vitali. Vittoria di San Felice, *nata* Vittoria della Valle of the princes of Montughi, was a tall, stately woman some five and thirty years of age. Her quiet, somewhat cold manner, was apt to be attributed to indifference or to pride by those who met her for the first time; and this, coupled with a fairness of colouring more like that of an Englishwoman than an Italian, had sometimes gained for her a reputation of stiffness which her more intimate acquaintances knew to be very foreign to her real nature. Although she was known to and appreciated by all the leading spirits, political, literary, scientific, of her country, the Duchessa di San Felice was by no means a blue-stocking. A deep interest in the social and economic conditions of her country did not prevent her from finding distractions in other and less serious subjects. A bold rider, and an even bolder Alpine climber, she had occasionally somewhat scandalised the sticklers for the old order of things who considered dancing to be the only legitimate form of exercise for a woman to take, and who regarded her athletic performances as being no doubt natural in an Englishwoman, but hardly fitting in an Italian princess.

The Duchessa di San Felice had, since her husband's death, been accustomed to spend a great part of the year in her villa near Viterbo, and appeared but little in society in Rome. It was no secret, however, that she might, had she so chosen, have been

one of the Court ladies; nor that the intellectual and gracious Queen Margherita, ever ready to recognise talents and goodness of heart in others with a quick discrimination, had given her many proofs of favour and sympathy.

It was natural, therefore, that Vittoria di San Felice should be looked upon by her neighbours in the district around Viterbo as what in fact she was—a *grande dame* who was at the same time a clever woman in touch with the clever people of the country. The combination being everywhere a rare one, it probably served to increase the esteem in which the duchessa was held by her friends and acquaintances who, to her credit be it said, were to be found in all classes, rich and poor, noble and peasant.

Not even the friendly attitude adopted by the Duchessa di San Felice towards Ugo Vitali's wife, however, had entirely reconciled a certain section of Viterbese society to the daughter of an individual who had once herded pigs. The duchessa, indeed, had laughed at the legend when told it, and had observed that the herding of pigs was a more useful occupation than many others. She was perfectly well aware that Count Vitali's marriage had caused heart-burnings in more quarters than one; but though she might not altogether approve of his choice, she had no intention of making things difficult for his newly married wife by saying so. Although it would have been difficult to find two people of more opposite tastes in many ways than had the Duchessa di San Felice and Ugo Vitali, they had been friends for some years. Ugo, who shunned women's society, had always felt completely at his ease at the Villa Falconara, as the duchessa's villa was called. Not the least of Vittoria di San Felice's charms, and certainly one of the proofs of her cleverness was the gift of being able to interest herself in the things which interested others—always supposing that those things were not in the nature of gossip, for which she had a profound and openly expressed contempt. She was quick to discover the special hobby of any one with whom she talked, and equally clever at extracting anything of interest that person might have to say about it. It was no doubt due to this talent on the duchessa's part if Ugo Vitali was always ready to call upon her at the Villa



Falconara, whereas nothing would have induced him to visit others of his neighbours who might have been supposed to be much more of his own world than was the intellectual mistress of that picturesque but solitary abode.

Notwithstanding the wide difference in the majority of their tastes, there was at least one that Vittoria di San Felice and Ugo possessed in common. The love for the country which was so strong in the latter was equally shared by the former. Vittoria was certainly not a farmer; but most enthusiasms interested her, and she would encourage Ugo to tell her of all his schemes for the amelioration of his property. Her quick sympathy had enabled her long ago to read his nature, and the generosity and simplicity of that nature had met with a ready response from her own. When Ugo Vitali had written to her announcing his marriage, Vittoria di San Felice had been in the Val d'Aosta, engaged in one of her mountaineering excursions. Ugo had made no secret of the difference in position between himself and his bride; and Vittoria, who was liberal enough in such matters, had not been indignant when he explained that Cristina's father was a wealthy mercante di campagna. She possessed at least one acquaintance in the smart world of Rome who had taken a husband or a wife from the same *ceto*, and in each case the gilding of the plebeian pill had been sufficiently thick satisfactorily to disguise any unpleasant taste—at least temporarily. The duchessa, however, knew Ugo Vitali much too well to believe for a moment that he was marrying for the sake of his wife's *dot*. Under the circumstances, she felt convinced that he had married a woman who, if not exactly of his own class, would from the very fact of her origin be more likely to make him happy than might be the case had he chosen his wife elsewhere.

When Vittoria di San Felice decided to take up a position, it was no easy matter to move her from it. By the time she returned to Villa Falconara, Ugo Vitali's marriage was an accomplished fact, and he and his wife were already settled in Palazzo Vitali. Perhaps Vittoria was not without a lurking regret that Ugo had married at all. Marriage has proved to be



the interruption of many pleasant episodes in life. If it adds much to the life of the woman, it also destroys much in that of the man.

On making Countess Vitali's acquaintance, Vittoria came to the conclusion that she must reserve her judgment as to whether her friend had chosen ill or wisely. She was accustomed to make up her mind almost instantly as to the personality of those with whom she was brought into contact, and her instinct had usually proved itself to be correct. With Cristina Vitali, however, she was conscious that her instinct was at fault. She had expected, and hoped, to find that here, also, was simplicity; and she had been prepared to ignore possible vulgarity, or at least to accept it as a lesser evil; since vulgarity, so long as it were of manners and not of nature, was curable.

But Cristina was not vulgar. She was not, to be sure, in all things as Vittoria herself, nor was it likely or natural that she should be so. The little, indescribable *nuances* marking the difference of caste which even Fabrizio had been able to detect, and which were certainly still more apparent to a woman of Vittoria di San Felice's breeding, showed themselves in many ways, trifling, indeed, but unmistakable.

It was not this, however, which caused the duchessa to suspend her judgment as to whether Ugo had or had not found a wife who would make him happy. Countess Vitali's personality puzzled her; and, somewhat inconsequently, perhaps, she wondered how it was that so honest and straightforward a man as Count Vitali had not been puzzled by it also.

Vittoria's nature was much too generous to allow her always to be guided by her first impressions. It was evident, moreover, that Ugo was deeply in love with his wife; though even in those early days of their married life it was by no means so evident to Vittoria that Cristina was in love with him. This last consideration, oddly enough, produced in the Duchessa di San Felice a feeling of impatience, and almost of annoyance, for which she was unable to account and tried not to discuss with herself.

Having made up her mind to give her social support to Ugo Vitali's wife, she had given it loyally; and she had gone out of

her way to show to all whom it might concern that she was perfectly indifferent as to whether the pig story were true or the reverse.

Being fully conscious of her own power in all social matters affecting her Viterbese neighbours, the duchessa had been surprised to find that, notwithstanding her attitude towards her, Countess Vitali was yet looked at somewhat doubtfully. But nobody ventured to criticise Cristina to Vittoria di San Felice, all the more so because Vittoria had far too much tact and knowledge of the world to allow it to be supposed that she had noticed any disinclination on the part of her neighbours to receive Countess Vitali into their real intimacy.

Their reserve towards Cristina Vitali, however, by no means prevented her acquaintances from accepting any hospitality Palazzo Vitali might offer. No people in Europe know better how to draw a subtle but distinct line between friendly intercourse and intimacy than do the Italians, and none can draw this line with greater politeness. The society of Viterbo being limited, it was speedily known throughout its ranks that Fabrizio was paying an apparently indefinite visit to his cousins at Palazzo Vitali. Countess Vitali, moreover, drove about with her guest while her husband was occupied with his own affairs—and this, perhaps, had caused a certain amount of gossip among people who had rarely anything new to talk of. The consequence had been that, as Cristina had on one occasion drily observed—though she did not make the remark before Ugo—she became quite a popular person with her neighbours, and Taddeo had to answer the great, clanging bell at the *portone* of the courtyard more frequently in the course of the last fortnight than he had done at any time since Count Vitali had first brought his wife home.

## CHAPTER VII

“THE signora duchessa di San Felice wishes to know if the signora contessa receives.”

Cristina Vitali was sitting alone on the terrace with a book Fabrizio had lent her lying on the ground beside her, where it had fallen from her lap. It was nearly five o'clock ; and though the afternoon sun still beat fiercely on the drooping flowers in the gardens below, the terrace itself, shaded by the house, was a cool retreat enough.

Cristina had not made much way in her book. As a matter of fact, she was extremely bored by it. To sit and listen, or pretend to listen, while Fabrizio expounded the theories of Schopenhauer, according to his own conception of their import, was one thing ; but to wrestle with that philosopher in print on a hot afternoon was a very different matter. Fabrizio had carefully marked certain passages in the volume for his cousin's special attention ; but Cristina could make neither head nor tail of their meaning, and was, in reality, profoundly indifferent as to whether they had any meaning or not. She harboured a very shrewd suspicion, born, it is fair to add, rather from the interpretation by the disciple of the master's teaching than from that teaching itself, that Schopenhauer and his fellow-philosophers were merely so many imposing pegs on which to hang excuses for doing as one liked in life regardless of ulterior consequences.

Taddeo's appearance on the terrace with the intelligence that the Duchessa di San Felice was waiting to know if she were at home aroused Cristina from a train of thought with which Schopenhauer was only indirectly connected. It would have been difficult to guess from Countess Vitali's expression of countenance whether the interruption was agreeable or the reverse. The smile on her face, as she bade Taddeo conduct the signora

duchessa at once to the terrace and afterwards to bring tea and *granite*, was entirely enigmatic.

As Vittoria di San Felice emerged from the courtyard on to the terrace Cristina rose from the low wicker-chair in which she was seated and went to meet her.

"I have come to congratulate you both," said Vittoria, as they sat down. "I was so very glad to hear of Vitali's good fortune. Do accept my warmest congratulations, contessa!"

Vittoria di San Felice's voice was low and singularly musical—in which she was more blessed than very many of her countrywomen, whose voices are seldom one of their attractions. Though, according to the Italian custom by which ladies address men whom they know well by their surnames only, she spoke of Ugo so unceremoniously, Vittoria had never yet called his wife by her Christian name; she might, indeed, with perfect propriety have called Count Vitali Ugo, since she had known him when he was barely twenty-one, in his parents' lifetime.

"It was a pleasant surprise, certainly, for Ugo," Cristina replied. "Of course," she added, "Ugo was the Marchesa Santoro's nearest relative; but all the same it was, as I say, a very pleasant surprise to him."

Vittoria smiled. "And to you also!" she returned.

"The Marchesa Santoro did not leave her money to me, duchessa," observed Cristina coldly. "No doubt," she continued, "Ugo is very pleased. He says that he will now be able really to improve his property. But that, after all, does not affect me!"

Vittoria di San Felice glanced at her curiously. "Cara contessa," she replied, and there was a distinct note of surprise in her voice, "but of course it must affect you! Ah, I forgot!" and she paused suddenly.

At this moment Taddeo reappeared and aided by a young footman—an altogether modern addition to the Vitali household—began to prepare the tea-table. The Duchessa di San Felice was not ill-pleased at an interruption which relieved her of the necessity to explain what it was that she had forgotten. Her glance fell on the book Cristina had dropped, and which lay close beside her chair. To look at the title of any book near her was a tempta-

tion Vittoria never had been able to withstand. Stooping down, she picked up the volume, and as she read its name, raised her eyebrows in some astonishment.

"Vitali never told me that he had married a student of metaphysics!" she said, with a smile. "Do you really mean to tell me that you were reading Schopenhauer when I disturbed you?" she added.

"Our cousin, Fabrizio Vitali, lent it to me," replied Cristina. "He is staying with us, you know. I am very much interested in the questions he writes of."

"Does he write—your cousin, I mean?" asked Vittoria.

Countess Vitali glanced at her suspiciously, scenting malice in the question. "I meant Schopenhauer, not Fabrizio," she explained. "But you, no doubt, read all his works, duchessa. Ugo has often told me that you are a student of such subjects."

Vittoria laughed. "I?" she exclaimed. "No! I cannot afford myself the time, even if I possessed the brains. My studies, such as they are, are limited to the more prosaic questions of everyday life. So your cousin is a student of philosophy; that is very interesting. Some tea? yes, thank you, but very weak, and with much sugar."

"Here he is to answer for himself," said Cristina, as Fabrizio at that moment appeared on the terrace and came towards them. "Let me present my cousin to you," she added, as he approached the tea-table, "the Duchessa di San Felice," she continued to Fabrizio.

Vittoria di San Felice turned on him the tranquil, penetrating glance which, all unknown to herself, she was in the habit of bestowing on a new acquaintance.

"What have you been doing with yourself?" asked Cristina. "I have not seen you since breakfast."

"I had letters to write," answered Fabrizio, "and afterwards—shall I confess it?—I went to sleep."

"Over another volume of Schopenhauer?" asked the Duchessa di San Felice, smiling.

Fabrizio looked as, indeed, he felt, gratified. It was evident that Cristina and her visitor had been talking about him.

"Ah, no, duchessa," he replied, "I do not go to sleep over Schopenhauer! I read him often at nights, when I cannot sleep."

"That seems to me to come to the same thing in the end," observed Vittoria, a little drily. "At least," she added, "I hope so, for your sake!"

"He has studied too hard," interposed Countess Vitali, "that is the reason why he is now leading our very dull life at Viterbo!"

Vittoria looked at the young man with renewed interest. "You have an object in view, of course," she said to him; "one does not read the philosophers without some special reason for doing so; at least, one does not study them to the extent of injury to health. Some day, I suppose, we shall learn your object in the pages of a work of your own."

Fabrizio Vitali was a little disconcerted. He had never been asked so leading a question before, in connection with his philosophic studies.

"My object?" he repeated, "I really can hardly tell you, duchessa. I suppose my object is to emancipate myself, and help to emancipate others, as much as possible from the childish superstitions in which we were most of us brought up."

Vittoria di San Felice made no reply, and stirred her tea with a thoughtful air as though she were considering Fabrizio's remark, which, indeed was what she was doing, although not in a manner very flattering to the maker of it. "Vitali, I suppose, is out," she observed presently, turning to Countess Vitali.

"He is not often in!" replied Cristina. "He will be very sorry to have missed your visit, duchessa," she added. "As you know, you are one of the few people he cares to talk to."

"Am I?" said Vittoria laughing. "Do you know, contessa, I regard that as a great compliment. Sicuro! your husband and I are old friends, and I am always very pleased to see him. But you will all come and breakfast with me one of these days, will you not? and I insist upon Vitali accompanying you. I will not accept any excuses from him. He may ride over to Villa Falconara, if he likes, after he has got through his morning's business, and meet you and your cousin there."



Cristina looked at Fabrizio. "It would be delightful," she began.

"You will be interested in the villa," continued Vittoria to Fabrizio, "if you care for historical things. By the way, it ought to belong to your family, I believe, if everybody had their rights. It was a Moidalchini villa in old days, and the home of your naughty ancestress Donna Giulia."

"I should like to see it immensely," returned Fabrizio. "How did it come into the possession of the San Felice?"

Vittoria shrugged her shoulders. "I have not the least notion!" she replied. "I conclude they bought it, or stole it. I will show you an old chestnut tree in the garden which was supposed to bear miraculous fruit."

Fabrizio smiled. "I need hardly say that I do not suppose you believe in miracles, duchessa," he remarked.

"This miracle was a practical joke," proceeded Vittoria, ignoring the observation, "probably the only one intentionally played by a Pope on the faithful—at least, as a good Catholic, I am bound to suppose so! The Moidalchini on one occasion entertained their brother-in-law, Innocent X., in what is now called the Villa Falconara. The Pope, together with certain members of the family, caused roasted chestnuts to be placed inside the outer husks of the fruit growing on an old chestnut tree, and these were afterwards beaten down in the usual way. When the chestnuts were extracted and found to be already roasted, the peasants cried *al miracolo!* with the result that the report rapidly spread that the Holy Father had performed a miracle and caused roasted chestnuts to be gathered from the tree. Crowds came from all parts of the district to look at the wonderful tree—much to the Pope's diversion. I always like that story," continued Vittoria, "there is a human touch about it which is refreshing."<sup>1</sup>

"And a miracle as genuine as all the rest we are asked by the priests to believe in," added Fabrizio.

"I will show you the tree," repeated Vittoria. "Of course, it

<sup>1</sup> This episode is described in contemporary MSS. and by Bussi in his *Istoria della città di Viterbo* (Roma, 1472).

cannot be the original tree, as the people declare, but I have no doubt it is a lineal descendant."

A few minutes afterwards, the Duchessa di San Felice rose, and Cristina and Fabrizio accompanied her to the courtyard, where her carriage was waiting for her. "It is understood, then, that you will all come to breakfast with me one day next week, shall we say Tuesday, if that suits your arrangements? Arrivederci dunque, cara contessa, and a thousand things to your husband! Do not forget to tell him that I will positively not listen to any of his excuses."

"I assure you that he will make none!" replied Cristina; and as she spoke she looked at Fabrizio with a scarcely concealed smile. Vittoria di San Felice saw the smile, and kept it in her mind for further analysis during her drive homewards. She was driving herself, and, taking the reins from the groom, she bade Countess Vitali good-bye and with a bow to Fabrizio drove through the gateway, the heavy doors of which were immediately closed behind her by the porter.

Cristina, followed by Fabrizio, returned to their seats on the terrace.

"So that," said Fabrizio, "is the San Felice. I have often heard of her, of course, but I did not know that she was a neighbour of yours. She is certainly an attractive woman. I suppose that is why people are so ready to think her clever."

"You do not find her so?" asked Cristina.

"I cannot say that she impressed me with her cleverness," returned Fabrizio; "her remark as to only having time to occupy herself with the things of everyday life seemed to me to be anything but a sign of being clever."

"You must not say so to Ugo," observed Cristina.

Fabrizio laughed. "Is he so devoted to her?" he asked.

"They are old friends, as you heard her say," replied Cristina. "Ugo always quotes her as being the cleverest woman he knows, though, to be sure, he does not know many women, clever or otherwise. I have often wondered why he did not marry her, as he admires her so much."

"I do not wonder at all," Fabrizio said. "I can conceive no greater contrast in women than you and the San Felice."

"I meant, of course, before he married me," said Cristina laughing. "The San Felice," she added, "had already been a widow for some years before Ugo and I ever saw one another. I often think he would have been much happier had he married her."

"It is incredible!" murmured Fabrizio.

"What is incredible! It is, on the contrary, perfectly credible that he would have been happier. But you must not run away with the idea that I am jealous of the San Felice! she is virtue personified; and as to Ugo——"

"And you," said Fabrizio, "would you have been happier if Ugo had married her? cara mia cugina, you must not think that I am very indiscreet. We have so much in common, so many ideas and feelings which Ugo, with his different mind and temperament, could not enter into, that surely I may be allowed to show you that I can perhaps understand you better than he can. Of course you are not jealous of the San Felice! the sun might as well be jealous of a block of ice."

Cristina did not reply for a moment or two. "She came here to spy," she said presently, with a slight laugh, "like the rest of them."

"To spy?" repeated Fabrizio, "what do you mean, Cristina?"

"You do not know these people!" exclaimed Cristina angrily; and Fabrizio, as he looked at her, thought how like she was at that moment to a handsome woman of the Ciociaria. "The San Felice came to spy, I tell you!" she repeated. "She knew well enough that you were here."

"I?" exclaimed Fabrizio, astonished. "What could the fact of my being here matter to her? I do not understand——"

"It is not the least necessary that you should understand," returned Cristina, "but I understand, and that is enough. These Viterbesi think that I am not good enough for Ugo, because I was not noble. All the same, they can take the trouble to write me anonymous letters!"

"That is a very ordinary proceeding," observed Fabrizio Vitali

tranquilly. "In Rome people frequently get anonymous letters, and in Florence I am told that it is quite unfashionable not to receive them periodically."

"I have only had one," said Cristina. "It was about Ugo."

"Naturally! if Ugo had received one, it would have been about you."

"It said that Ugo only married me after he had been refused by the San Felice."

"And did you show the letter to Ugo?"

"Of course not! why should I have shown it to him? Per carità, do not ever mention it to him!"

"It is another confidence," replied Fabrizio. "I hope you do not think me capable of betraying a confidence between you and me. But, forgive me for asking you, do you believe the story?"

Cristina shrugged her shoulders. "Chi sa?" she answered. "It may be true, or it may be a lie. In any case, it does not matter now. Only, I should like to know who wrote the letter."

"The San Felice herself, probably!"

Cristina clasped her hands together. "Fabrizio," she exclaimed, "you and I certainly see things in the same light! I have often suspected the San Felice of having written that letter. She has always pretended to be so friendly, and that made me suspect her all the more. I daresay she is in love with Ugo, and would have married him had he been of her own world. But I am not jealous of the Duchessa di San Felice—niente affatto! it is more likely that she is jealous of me!"

Fabrizio nodded. "It is very possible," he replied. "She does not take the trouble to conceal her friendship for Ugo," he added, "and yet you tell me that she is a clever woman, Cristina. It seems to me that you are much cleverer than she is, for you do not show her your hand."

Countess Vitali's face suddenly assumed the expression half suspicious and half cunning that Fabrizio had remarked on more than one occasion. This time, however, he did not see it, as he had risen from his chair to pour himself out a glass of *granita*.

"What do you mean?" she said quickly. "I have no hand to show. Of course I have no proof that the San Felice wrote that

letter, and even if I had, as I said just now, it would not matter if what the letter said were true. After all, Ugo married me, and he did not marry the San Felice, so what is done cannot be undone."

"Not legally, certainly; or rather, not until we are civilised enough in Italy to snap our fingers at the priests and legalise divorce."

"Or morally," added Cristina.

"No—but immorally, as the majority would pretend to consider it! as if there were anything more immoral than living with somebody one did not really love. But I do not want to shock you by my theories on these subjects. It is my misfortune to have been born a hundred years too soon, and to be in advance of the age. Another century will see the disappearance of many antiquated theories, and the loosening of many bonds we have tied for ourselves by our religious superstitions. In the meantime——"

"We have to live in this century!" interrupted Countess Vitali, "and you must admit, Fabrizio, that life might be more interesting than it is at Palazzo Vitali. Can you conceive," she continued, rising from her chair as she spoke and standing over Fabrizio, "a man in the prime of life like Ugo vegetating in this hole, when he might be making a name for himself in the world—or, at all events, enjoying what the world has to give? Is it not incredible?"

"It is difficult to enjoy life in the world without money," said Fabrizio.

"But if he has money? What, for instance, would you do with your life if you were in Ugo's position, and had come into a million and more of money, besides the income derived from his property? Would you look on at your land being manured, and your beasts being fed? That is Ugo's life; and I have to listen to his dissertations on the quality of the manure and the prices he expects to get for his beasts or his wine. That is my life."

"Ah," said Fabrizio thoughtfully "if I were in Ugo's shoes, it would not be mine. But that is always the way. Those who have money do not know how to enjoy it."

Cristina Vitali shot a quick glance at him from under her heavy eyelids. "It is odd to think that you and Ugo are of the same blood," she said: "you are so utterly different. No—I do not suppose that, if you were Count Vitali, you would be content to lead Ugo's bucolic existence. You have ambition—artistic tastes—love of society; and you would have money—all the things, in short, which mean success in the world to those who know how to use them."

Fabrizio looked at her curiously. "How did you get your experience of the world?" he asked: "your convent, surely, could not have supplied it!"

"I am not so sure of that," replied Cristina drily. "One has plenty of time for using one's imagination when one is in a convent; and it is quite a mistake to think that nuns and their pupils do not know what is going on in the world. I heard more gossip, and learned more of life, while I was with the nuns at Perugia than I have ever heard or learned since I left them."

"I should insist on Ugo taking me to Rome in the season, if I were you, as I have told you before," said Fabrizio. "Now that he is so much richer," he continued, "there can be no excuse for not doing so. And you would only have to be seen in Rome, Cristina, and the world would be at your feet!"

"And Ugo would kick it away, amico mio!" replied Cristina. "No, if you were Ugo, per esempio, I have no doubt that you would take me to Rome, and perhaps even to Paris; but you are not. By the way, has it ever occurred to you how very near you *are* to being in Ugo's position? I have often thought of it, since we have known each other. If anything were to happen to him, everything except my *porzione vedovile* must go to you. Ugo has often told me so; unless, of course, we should have children. I have many times wondered whether you did not feel how much better you could have done with your cousin's chances in life, had you possessed them. Oh, do not think that I am accusing you of wishing any harm to befall Ugo, or of coveting his goods! but human nature is human nature, and we none of us can help thoughts coming into our minds. Ugo himself said the same thing to me the other day—not, of course, that



you might think how much more you could get out of life were you in his place, he would never understand the possibility of such a thing! but he said he wondered if you ever thought how very easily you might succeed to the title and the property."

It was Fabrizio now who looked at Cristina quickly and uneasily. Her eyes were turned from him, however, and were looking beyond him into the distance of the garden, where long shadows were beginning to creep across the box hedges and fall on the roses clustering round the stems of the cypress trees. Her face was perfectly impassive, and Fabrizio tried in vain to read its expression. She seemed, indeed, to be hardly interested as to what his reply to her question would be. And yet Fabrizio was keenly conscious of how leading a question it was. Had he thought, indeed? Why, he had thought not once but a hundred times of how by any accident, at any moment, he might be, as Cristina said, in her husband's place. And had he not come to Palazzo Vitali, thinking that it would at all events be politic to improve his acquaintance with his cousin? It was strange that Ugo should have made that remark to his wife. The thought that he had done so made Fabrizio feel ashamed of his calculations as to his chances of succeeding Ugo. It was like Ugo's generous nature to feel that he, Fabrizio, might not unnaturally compare their respective positions, and to owe him no grudge for doing so. As to wishing any harm to befall Ugo in order that he should benefit by it, Fabrizio could honestly say to himself that Cristina had only done him justice when she declared that she knew he would not be capable of such a wish. He did not wish it, had never permitted himself to wish it. But, should fate place him in his cousin's place, it would be acting the part of a hypocrite towards himself to pretend that he would find fault with fate.

Indignation at the bare suggestion that he should wish for Ugo's death—for this, after all, was what wishing him harm would mean—made Fabrizio answer Countess Vitali's question more frankly than he would probably have done.

"Of course," he replied, "I cannot pretend that I have never

thought about the possibilities of my succeeding Ugo. You would not believe me if I denied it. As you say, human nature is human nature, and I should hardly be human if I never allowed the thought to cross my mind that I am, at present, Ugo's legal heir. But as to wishing any harm to him, no! I am not so base as that, Cristina, and I should hope that neither you nor Ugo are capable of thinking it of me."

"Have I not told you so?" said Cristina. "Of course I never supposed you to be compassing Ugo's death in your thoughts! But you would certainly be scarcely human had you never allowed yourself to think that he is, after all, mortal like the rest of us, and that an accident or an illness might put you in his place. Nor would you be altogether natural if you did not, with your views of life, sometimes think that you could derive more enjoyment out of that place than Ugo does. I should not believe you if you declared to me that you did not sometimes think so!"

Fabrizio laughed. "Then," he said, "I will not attempt to deny it! Can you blame me if my view of enjoyment of life differs from Ugo's?"

"I?" returned Countess Vitali. "To whom do you say it? Certainly not. But do not let us talk any more about it. As to Ugo, well, he is strong, far more so than you, my friend. I am afraid you must be patient!"

"I should be an imbecile to allow myself to think seriously about the matter," said Fabrizio. "At any moment," he added, laughing, "you may cause the accident."

"*Il*" exclaimed Cristina.

"But, of course! you may be the cause of an accident that would make me no longer Ugo's heir-presumptive. I should say that it is a mere question of time!"

"That," observed Cristina, "is scarcely a subject for confidences. Do you know that it is nearly half-past six? and here," she continued, "comes Ugo, so I think you will agree with me that it is quite time we changed the topic of conversation. You have missed a friend this afternoon, Ugo," Cristina said to her husband when he joined them; "the San Felice has been here,

and was very much annoyed with you for being out. We are to breakfast with her on Tuesday, Fabrizio and I, and you are to come too."

"And no excuses, at any rate on your part, will be received by the duchessa," said Fabrizio. "You are evidently *au mieux* with the lady."

"Tuesday?" repeated Ugo—"let me think—yes, Tuesday. I can go quite well."

"That is very fortunate," observed Cristina—"you are so seldom disengaged in the mornings."

"Yes," answered Ugo, "it is very fortunate. Monday I have a meeting in Viterbo, and Wednesday there is the hiring of the reapers. And how was the duchessa? You had not met her before, Fabrizio, had you? You ought to get on well together—did they, Cristina?"

Cristina shook her head. "You must ask Fabrizio," she said. "If you ask me, I should say only moderately well!"

"Ah," replied Ugo, "she is not always very communicative to strangers, but on Tuesday you will see how clever and agreeable she can be. I am very sorry to have missed her this afternoon. Cristina, is it not nearly dinner time? I am very hungry. What have you two been doing all the afternoon?—talking about books, I suppose. Ah, Fabrizio, you will find the San Felice worth talking to; she is a great reader, and knows all the people best worth knowing in Italy—and in Europe too, I believe."

"Dinner will be ready in a short time, Ugo," said Cristina, somewhat abruptly.

"Meglio così," said Count Vitali; "I must go and change my clothes, I suppose. I wonder why it is that we should need to change our clothes because we are going to eat something."

"It is one of the disadvantages of marrying a wife," remarked Cristina, and her husband burst out laughing, while Fabrizio glanced at her and smiled.

## CHAPTER VIII

THAT evening, when Fabrizio retired to his own room, he felt less disposed towards sleep than usual. He tried to read, but his thoughts resolutely declined to be forced to concentrate themselves on his book. Do what he would, they reverted to the conversation he had with Cristina that afternoon after the Duchessa di San Felice had left them. Needless to say, he had entirely dismissed from his mind the bad omen which had disturbed his equanimity on the first night he had passed in Palazzo Vitali. The crucifix above his bed had been replaced in its original position, presumably by a devout housemaid, and Fabrizio had not attempted to remove it. As to Donna Giulia, she had certainly not given any signs of a desire to revisit her apartment; and Fabrizio, if he thought about her at all, merely connected her in his mind with the ignorant folly of those who could seriously believe that the dead were anything else but dead and resolved into nothingness. All the same, the vividness of his dream that night he had been weak enough to pass on the sofa instead of in his bed remained curiously impressed on his memory, and he sometimes wondered at the persistency with which it would return to his mind.

To-night, however, very different thoughts were rioting through his brain. Never until that afternoon had Cristina spoken so openly of the unsatisfactory conditions of her married life; and never before had Fabrizio found his cousin's wife more attractive than when she had given him what he had every reason to believe was her full confidence. This confidence had flattered his vanity, for it was evident Cristina placed him on a very different level intellectually from that upon which she considered her husband to stand.

But Countess Vitali had succeeded in doing more than flatter Fabrizio's vanity, which would not, after all, have been a very

difficult thing to do. She had succeeded also in arousing his sympathy—and this to an extent of which he was as yet unaware. He had begun to tell himself of late that it was certainly very hard on a woman of Cristina's tastes and ambitions to find herself condemned to lead the life of a farmer's wife, without the occupations that a farmer's wife would have. Ugo, no doubt, was a *buon' diavolo*; and he, Fabrizio, only wished that he were half so good a fellow as his cousin; but, all the same, Ugo was a fool. He could know nothing about women—that was clear. Otherwise he would realise the risk he was running in boring a woman like his wife to death by compelling her to lead a life she hated, and not making any attempt to understand her character and temperament. It must be a mere question of time before a *ménage* so conducted fell to pieces. Fabrizio, like a large number of his countrymen, had no very lofty ideals in connection with women. He had very soon come to the conclusion that whoever Cristina might be in love with, that person was certainly not her husband. The conclusion had neither surprised nor displeased him. It had not even particularly interested him, since the situation was an incident of everyday occurrence. What did interest him, however, was to discover who it might be with whom she was in love; and the fact of being unable to discover that she was in love with anybody interested him still more. But one, at least, of Cristina's disclosures that afternoon had surprised Fabrizio very considerably, and caused him to wonder whether Ugo was so simple as he appeared to be. The story of the anonymous letter concerning the Duchessa di San Felice was at all events strange. Supposing its contents to be true, then Ugo's wife might well feel that she had another and more serious grievance against her husband than the fact that he obliged her to lead a very dull and narrow existence. Perhaps Ugo might not be such a fool after all! For some reason or other, the Duchessa di San Felice might not have been able to marry Ugo herself; but that was no reason why she should not have allowed him to marry somebody else—especially a woman not quite of his own class, who would probably be satisfied with her new position, and whom it would be



possible to regard more or less as a nonentity. But Cristina was not a nonentity; and if Ugo and the San Felice were really carrying out *il comodo loro* at her expense, they would some day find that she was doing the same thing at their own. But Ugo, Fabrizio said to himself, must be a fool in other ways. Was he blind to his wife's beauty?—and could that beauty, full blooded and voluptuous as it was, be compared with the more refined charms of the San Felice? Cristina might not be high-bred. Indeed, when Fabrizio had seen her side by side with the Duchessa di San Felice, he had realised more than ever that she was not so. But if men only found pleasure in women who were high-bred, there would be far fewer complications in the world, and more virtue.

The night was still and warm; and Fabrizio, who had been staring for some time at the open pages of his book, rose from his chair and went to the window. There was no moon now, and the nightingales were challenging each other to a tournament of song in the deepest shadows of the gardens. The air was heavy with the scent of orange-blossom, of roses; and a night-flowering creeper, hanging from a tall cypress tree under the house, wafted the perfume of its waxen-white blossoms into the room. The sensuousness of the scene was not without its effect on him. The train of thought in which he had been indulging had been of an impersonal nature; but, as he stood by the window, the spell of the summer night, with its hot fragrance and passionate song of the nightingales, was cast over him. His thoughts, impersonal no longer, began to dwell upon Cristina's beauty; and for the first time he became conscious that admiration of her beauty and curiosity as to her character had given place to desire. He turned over in his mind all that Cristina had said to him concerning her husband, and much that had hitherto puzzled him seemed now to be clear enough. Given the opportunity of not being so, would Cristina be faithful to her marriage tie? Fabrizio, as he asked himself the question, had already answered it; and the answer sent the blood leaping more quickly through his veins. If Ugo were such a fool as not to be able to understand the woman he had married, some other man



would certainly benefit by his folly. Some other man! Fabrizio started, and turned hastily from the window. His own thought seemed to have been put into words by a voice not his own, a voice he had heard before but could not identify. So clearly it had sounded in his ear, as though spoken by some one at his elbow, that for an instant he almost expected to find that he was not alone in the room. Then, seeing nobody, he came to the conclusion that he must unconsciously have uttered his thoughts aloud. The interruption to his meditations turned the current into a less dangerous channel. Whoever the other man might eventually be, it was absurd to suppose that he himself could be that individual. He was the last person in the world who should take advantage of Ugo's incapacity to understand his wife's nature. He had not come to Palazzo Vitali to make love to his cousin's wife, but with a very different object in view, and a comparatively harmless one. The influence which Cristina's beauty was beginning to exert over him must be checked; and he must watch himself, lest sympathy might kindle into passion before he realised the fact. Moreover, he, Fabrizio, and not Ugo, would be the fool if he allowed himself to fall in love with Cristina. Calmly considered, it would be entirely to his advantage were Cristina to become an unfaithful wife. Ugo might separate from her, but he could never marry again during her lifetime. In this case, at all events, the fact of there being no divorce in Italy was a distinct blessing, though the pandering to the superstitions of the Vatican by the Government in not bringing in a divorce law was a subject on which Fabrizio held the strongest views. No! if there were to be divisions and possible scandals, it was obvious that, for his own future advantage, he must not be the cause of them, however agreeable it might be to be Cristina's lover. It was strange, Fabrizio thought, that Cristina should have questioned him as she had done concerning his feelings as to the position he occupied as Ugo's heir-presumptive. No doubt, however, it was mere curiosity that had prompted her to do so; and after all, she had prefaced her questions by the admission that it would not be natural had he never thought about his possible inheritance. Oddly enough, he had thought but little about it since he had

been beneath Ugo's roof. It had interested him more to study his cousin's domestic life through his conversations with Cristina than to indulge in dreams and speculations which would either never be realised, or only be so when he would probably be an old man. But to-night, perhaps owing to Cristina's allusions to the subject, his thoughts dwelt with greater insistence on the fact that one life only stood between him and comparative riches, as well as a title which, although shorn of its former importance, was among the oldest in the country. Cristina had certainly been right in assuming that, were he in Ugo's place, he would make much more of the position. He had been pleased to see that she had quickly noted the difference between him and Ugo in their respective ways of looking at life; for Fabrizio, who knew no other life than that of a section of Rome, prided himself above most things on being a thorough man of the world.

Sleep came late to Fabrizio that night; but before it did so, he had quite made up his mind that it was very necessary to keep careful guard over himself, lest he should be tempted to an indiscretion which might at the same time turn out to be an irretrievable blunder.

## CHAPTER IX

VITTORIA DI SAN FELICE felt a little ashamed of herself. Her expedition to Palazzo Vitali had been undertaken with a distinct object in view; and that object was not merely to perform an act of politeness in calling upon Countess Vitali. The duchessa, moreover, was conscious of having told an untruth—or rather, of having told only half a truth—which was quite as bad and much less courageous. She had not driven over to Palazzo Vitali for the sole purpose of congratulating the Vitali on their having been left a fortune, and during the whole of her visit she had felt irritated that both good taste and good manners prevented her from saying so. For the first time in her life, perhaps, Vittoria had not only condescended to listen to gossip, but also to allow herself to be affected by it to the extent of taking steps personally to ascertain how much, or how little of that gossip might be true. People had called at the Villa Falconara apparently to express their surprise that Count Vitali should have no misgivings as to the wisdom of leaving his wife to pass the greater part of her time alone with his cousin—a young man of whom nobody at Viterbo had heard before. Vittoria di San Felice did not in the least care whether her visitors were surprised or not, and had conveyed to them her indifference in a manner that was unmistakable, though leaving nothing to be desired on the score of politeness. Nevertheless, she had been obliged to own to herself that she was not indifferent. For some months she had suspected that Ugo's marriage was not the ideal alliance she had hoped it would prove. The Villa Falconara, though some six miles distant from Viterbo, was close to an outlying part of the Vitali property; and Ugo, when his business took him that way, would occasionally ride round by the duchessa's abode in order to pay her a visit. It had not needed a woman's quickness of perception, of which she

had something more than her share, to enable the Duchessa di San Felice to come to the conclusion that her friend Ugo had not found all he had expected in matrimony. Needless to say, Ugo had never complained to her of his wife. He had, on the contrary, complained rather of himself, holding himself responsible for the change he observed in her, inasmuch as the life he was able to provide her with had apparently ceased to satisfy her. Vittoria had agreed with him that the absence of the interests which children would have brought into Cristina's life was a very unfortunate affair. But she had agreed with him on no other point. She could not bring herself to sympathise with Countess Vitali's discontent with her life and surroundings, the more so since these, after all, were very much better than her birth could have given her any right to expect would fall to her lot. Vittoria di San Felice, rightly or wrongly, considered that it was no affair of hers to open Ugo's eyes to the obvious fact that his wife was ambitious to see, and still more so, perhaps, to be seen by the fashionable world. His evident inability to realise that any life could be more satisfying than his own had long been a characteristic trait in Ugo Vitali's nature that Vittoria had always admired, even if she had sometimes been secretly amused at it. She had seen enough of the world to be able to appreciate simplicity and single-mindedness when she came across such idiosyncrasies. They were rare qualities in most countries; and, as she was well aware, rarer still in her own.

So, when Ugo Vitali had consulted her as to what he could do to make his wife more like her former self, Vittoria had not suggested that he should let her see more of the world. The former self alluded to by Ugo she suspected now to have been a purely artificial self—assumed by Cristina for obvious purposes. If she were to play into Cristina's hands by advising Ugo to gratify his wife's ambitions, Vittoria felt that in all probability she would only be instrumental in bringing about more serious trouble in the future.

The remarks which had been made to her during the last few days, however, had caused Vittoria to wonder whether the world might not be a safer place for Ugo's wife than Palazzo Vitali.

For a good-looking woman to be thrown upon the society of a young man all day and every day was a position certainly not devoid of risk ; and that the young man in this case happened to be a cousin made it all the more dangerous.

And so Vittoria di San Felice, not without doing violence to her feelings, had decided to try to find out for herself how matters stood at Palazzo Vitali, and had sacrificed her pride to her friendship for Ugo and her genuine interest in his domestic happiness.

As she drove her pair of strong, black cobs back to Villa Falconara, the Duchessa di San Felice felt that her visit had not been a success. She came away with few impressions, but with plenty of suspicions. Perhaps the deepest among her impressions was that Fabrizio Vitali was a detestable young man, with an air of *petit maître* about him that particularly annoyed her. Vittoria, knowing herself to be a difficult person where new acquaintances were concerned, always tried to be charitable. She wondered whether she should like Fabrizio better when she had seen more of him. The worst of it was that he was certainly good-looking—in his way. That way was not Ugo's ; but this fact would only increase the probability of complications. But the most doubtful feature in the whole business, the duchessa thought, was the philosophy. Amateur philosophy was apt to bear fruits as embarrassing as they were unexpected, when studied by dilettanti of opposite sexes. Vittoria, dexterously flicking a horse-fly from the neck of one of her cobs with her whip, smiled as she thought of Cristina and Schopenhauer. It was extremely improbable that the gossips of Viterbo had ever heard of Schopenhauer ; but that, after all, was an accident which was not likely to affect their opinion as to Count Vitali's rashness in leaving his wife all day in the companionship of a second cousin.

On the whole, Vittoria felt, she was not very much the wiser than she had been when she was driving to Palazzo Vitali. She had not, of course, expected that, always supposing there to be anything between Cristina and Fabrizio, they would give themselves away to a stray visitor. Nevertheless she had trusted to her woman's wits to enable herself to form some idea of the

terms on which they were with one another. Cristina's manner had completely baffled her; and, on reflection, Vittoria had an uneasy sensation that Countess Vitali had divined the primary motive for her visit and had been engaged in the annoying occupation of laughing in her sleeve.

The satirical smile she had noticed on her face when Cristina had declared that her husband would certainly not make any excuse as to being unable to breakfast at the Villa Falconara had puzzled her, and the look cast at Fabrizio Vitali which had accompanied that smile had puzzled her still more. Could it mean that the excuses would come from Countess Vitali and Fabrizio, and that Ugo would be sent over to Villa Falconara by himself?

At this stage of her reflections Vittoria told herself that she was becoming too suspicious. She was already angry with herself for having gone to Palazzo Vitali that afternoon, for, when all was said and done, it would be no affair of hers if Countess Vitali should choose to behave ill by her husband.

She received no excuses, however, from Palazzo Vitali, but only a note from Cristina saying that she and Fabrizio would drive over to Villa Falconara in time for breakfast, and that Ugo would probably arrive before them, as he would be riding.

Villa Falconara was a good specimen of those palatial dwellings erected in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, so often to be found in the country districts of Italy, and which, shorn of their original splendour, present a melancholy, though always picturesque appearance. As Vittoria di San Felice had told Fabrizio, the villa had been one of the residences of the Moidalchini family, so closely allied with the Pamphili Pope, Innocent X., whose brother had become the second husband of the formidable Donna Olimpia Moidalchini.\* The house, a great square pile of four storeys, absolutely devoid of any architectural features, stood on rising ground and at the edge of a tract of *macchia* which had once been forest, and which still contained solitary oak trees of respectable girth and age, groves of gnarled

\* It is perhaps not generally known that Donna Olimpia Pamphili was the widow of Paolo Nini of Viterbo, whose large fortune she brought to the Pamphili family.



ilex and stunted cork trees, and here and there a spreading stone pine with its umbrella-like top.

If the Villa Falconara was not a beautiful structure externally, its interior, or at all events that portion of it in which the Duchessa di San Felice lived, was both stately and comfortable—a rare combination in an Italian mediæval country villa. Notwithstanding the size of the rooms, they conveyed no sense of dreariness or neglect, such as so often depresses the visitor to similar places in Italy. The apartments which Vittoria di San Felice inhabited were as luxuriously furnished as any great English or French country house of the present day. Palms and masses of flowering plants tastefully distributed effectually counteracted the stiffness inseparable from most very large rooms; while books and reviews, of all kinds and nationalities, gave them the air of being lived in and not merely used on special occasions of ceremony.

The Duchessa di San Felice was often quoted as being a very extravagant woman; and, by those of her compatriots of a more old-fashioned school, was sniffed at as being altogether too foreign in her ideas of what was necessary to make life comfortable. Vittoria, fortunately, had a very good income for a single woman, and she saw no particular reason why she should not live her life as she chose; or why, disliking ugliness in all its forms, she should not have pretty things about her. The drawing-room of Villa Falconara, where Vittoria di San Felice was awaiting the arrival of her guests from Palazzo Vitali that Tuesday on which she had invited them, bore ample testimony to the tastes of its owner. Beautiful specimens of old Italian furniture, and valuable pictures, more than one among which were known to the ubiquitous buyers for American millionaires, were so arranged as to harmonise with more modern surroundings. Vittoria was wont to say that flowers and books were the great peace-makers between objects of furniture inclined to swear at one another, and perhaps she was not mistaken.

The windows of the drawing-room opened on to the garden, and green awnings outside them tempered the fierce midday glare into a soft, subdued light, while the splashing of a fountain

was pleasantly suggestive of coolness. The Duchessa di San Felice was not alone. A priest was sitting in the corner of a sofa a short distance from her. He was an old man; and, except for a shrewd but at the same time benignant countenance, insignificant-looking enough, differing only from the usual type of Italian cleric in that he was scrupulously clean both in person and attire.

Sitting cross-legged, a pair of neat shoes with shining silver buckles were visible beneath his soutane. His frail, nervous hands were lightly touching each other at the finger tips which every now and then separated and came together again with an almost rhythmical movement as he listened to Vittoria di San Felice, while occasionally his eyes twinkled humorously.

"Sicuro," the duchessa was saying, "you are a buffer, Don Basilio—nothing in the world but a buffer—for the next few hours, ben' inteso! That is why I asked you to breakfast to-day. You do not mind—no?"

"Altro!" replied the priest. "It is my usual employment, del resto," he added drily.

"Your usual employment?" repeated Vittoria.

"Certainly. A priest, you know," and Don Basilio paused.

Vittoria laughed. "Ah," she returned, "I understand. But in this case I do not see who plays the *rôle* of Domeniddio. But seriously, Don Basilio, I am very grateful to you for coming. During breakfast, of course, it does not matter. But afterwards, Vitali will not want only to talk to his wife—and I—well, I do not think that I want to talk only to that young man—you understand?"

Don Basilio's finger tips tapped each other more quickly. "Perfectly," he replied.

"I think he is a detestable young man," observed the Duchessa di San Felice meditatively; "I am not sure, but I think so. He talked nonsense."

"Cara duchessa," remarked the priest, "if he is only a detestable young man because he talked nonsense—" and he shrugged his shoulders without completing his observation.

"Intellectual nonsense," proceeded Vittoria.

Don Basilio smiled. He had known the Duchessa di San Felice from the time of her marriage. Having been chaplain to the old duke, Vittoria's father-in-law, he had continued to hold the same position in the San Felice establishment ever since. Being also the parish priest of a village on the San Felice property near Villa Falconara, he did not live in the house; but every morning he said Mass for the household in the chapel of the villa. Nobody, probably, knew Vittoria di San Felice more intimately than did Don Basilio; yet he was not her confessor. Independent in her religion as in most other matters, Vittoria preferred to keep her confessor in Rome rather than in her own house. A sincere Catholic, she had at the same time not the slightest intention of being managed by priests, and still less so by any individual priest. Don Basilio, being a sensible man, had never resented the arrangement. Indeed, he was the first to recognise the advantage of not knowing more of the Duchessa di San Felice's spiritual business than she thought fit to tell him. His affection for her was that which a father might have for a daughter, and to this affection was added a profound respect. Don Basilio had been with the Duchessa di San Felice in the hour of her bitterest trial and her most crushing sorrow—when the news had been brought to Villa Falconara that her husband's sailing boat had been lost with all on board but one of the crew. Such moments beget intimacy of the deepest and most sacred kind. When they beget respect as well, they are the foundations of the surest friendship the world can know.

If Don Basilio smiled at Vittoria's last observation, it was because he knew how impatient she was of all *poses*, and of the intellectual *pose* in particular. "What kind of intellectual nonsense?" he asked: "there are so many varieties."

"He is giving the Vitali lessons in Positivist philosophy," answered Vittoria.

Don Basilio raised his eyebrows. "And Count Vitali?" he asked briefly.

"Count Vitali looks after his estate."

"He would do better to look after his wife," observed Don Basilio.

"So I should like to tell him," said Vittoria. "But that is one of the many things one cannot say, even to an old friend. Indeed, it would be easier to say it to a stranger than to a friend."

"A curious woman," said the priest pensively.

"Are you alluding to the Vitali, or to me?" asked the duchessa.

Don Basilio laughed. "To Contessa Vitali, of course!" he replied. "God forgive me if I am uncharitable," he continued, "but, whenever I have met that woman, I have felt myself to be in the presence of something evil. I have never been able to understand why Vitali married her."

Vittoria glanced at him with an amused look on her face.

"Caro Don Basilio," she remarked quietly, "if you had been able to understand it, you would probably not be dressed as you are!"

Don Basilio spread out his hands with a rapid gesture. "Oh, as to that, of course!" he said. "But there are other things which a sensible man looks at when he takes a wife. *Ma via!* one knows that where women are concerned argument is impossible."

Vittoria looked at him attentively. "You think the Vitali a bad woman?" she asked.

Don Basilio shook his head. "I should be sorry to say that," he replied.

"But if you feel about her as you said just now?"

"She may have evil in her and yet not be a bad woman. We have all of us evil in our natures; it is only when we let the evil conquer us that we become bad."

Vittoria was silent. Although she had done her best in a quiet and unobtrusive way to combat the prejudices she knew to exist against Cristina, she had never found her simpatica. She had, when in Countess Vitali's company, always felt herself to be in the presence of a woman whose education was superior to her breeding; but of all people Vittoria di San Felice was the last to look upon this as an offence. She had never, all the same, felt the impression with regard to Cristina to which Don Basilio had confessed; and, knowing him to possess that charity and large-mindedness which so often are the gift of advanced years, she could not

but wonder what it was that he had observed in Countess Vitali to create so sinister an impression upon him.

In the midst of her reflections, the double doors at the end of the room opened and a servant announced Count and Countess Vitali. Vittoria rose to meet them, and presently introduced Fabrizio to Don Basilio.

"I drove with Cristina and my cousin," explained Ugo. "It was really too hot to ride, as I had intended. You see, duchessa," he added, smiling, "that I have not sent you an excuse!"

"I suppose you could not invent one that you thought the least likely to be believed!" returned Vittoria. "You must have had a terribly hot drive," she continued to Cristina. "I am so glad you have brought your cousin: after breakfast he must go over the villa, and when it is a little cooler we can go into the gardens. You can sit and talk to Don Basilio, Vitali, as you know the place as well as I do; so you need not be victimised."

A few minutes later, breakfast was announced, and Vittoria told Don Basilio to give Countess Vitali his arm and lead her into the room where it was served. "Your cousin must take me," she added, addressing Ugo, "as I do not regard you in the light of a visitor."

The breakfast itself was as excellent as the best of French cooking could make it; and very different in its refinement from the dishes *alla casalinga* served up at Palazzo Vitali. This difference was certainly not lost on either Countess Vitali or Fabrizio. Cristina, indeed, observed everything minutely. The excellence of the food seemed to be enhanced by its surroundings. Roses delicately arranged, and chosen from one variety only, decked the table; while all its accessories—china, plate, linen, glass—were *soignées* to the last degree.

Vittoria di San Felice was an admirable hostess at all times; and to-day she succeeded, without any apparent effort, in making the conversation during the progress of the meal purely general, skilfully directing it into such channels as should be free from any hidden rocks.

Breakfast over, she took Fabrizio's arm again, and led the way to a room which she used as her own sitting-room, where the servants presently appeared bringing coffee, cigars, and cigarettes.



Motioning Fabrizio to sit near her, she drew his attention to the ceiling of the room. "It was painted by Pietro Berrettini da Cortona," she said to him; "he painted the frescoes in the Palazzo Pamphili in Rome for Innocent X., and no doubt was afterwards sent here by the Pope to execute work for the Mairalchini. That," she added, pointing to the central figure among a group of allegorical personages, "is said to be a portrait of Donna Olimpia, whose room this is supposed to have been, though what grounds there may be for the tradition I do not know."

"And does Donna Olimpia haunt Villa Falconara, as her sister is said to haunt Palazzo Vitali?" asked Fabrizio laughingly.

"Vitali!" Vittoria called to Ugo, who was engaged in lighting a cigar at a little silver spirit-lamp. "Why did I never know that you kept a ghost at Palazzo Vitali? What does your cousin mean?"

"Did you never hear that Donna Giulia is said to walk through the rooms on the *piano nobile*?" asked Ugo Vitali. "Don Basilio, I am sure, knows the story—as he knows all the folklore of the district," he continued.

Don Basilio nodded. "Sicuro," he said, "the people declare that she comes back, poor soul, to revisit the scene of her crime. As to Donna Olimpia, if she has the same punishment, perhaps she returns to her Roman palace, or to the Vatican, or perhaps to the house in Orvieto where her terrible death found her alone with the remnants of her gold."

Fabrizio looked at him with a sarcastic smile on his lips. "You speak as though you believed in the possibility of such tales, reverendo!" he observed.

Don Basilio shrugged his shoulders. "The spirits of the two ladies are not in my keeping," he replied. "As to possibility, or impossibility, I am no judge. With God all things are possible."

Vittoria di San Felice put her coffee cup down on a little table beside her and rose from her chair. "I will take you through the rooms," she said to Fabrizio, "and we will leave the others here to smoke. There are a few good pictures, if you care for such things."



Fabrizio could do nothing less than accept his hostess's offer, though he would have preferred to embark on an argument with the priest. Vittoria, however, was determined to prevent any such discussion as would have infallibly been the result had the subject been pursued; moreover, she had her own reasons for wishing to improve her acquaintance with Fabrizio. After having shown her guest one or two of the principal pictures the villa contained, the Duchessa di San Felice had rapidly come to the conclusion that art in any of its branches did not appeal to him.

"I gather, Signor Vitali, that you are what is called a free-thinker, are you not?" she said to him somewhat abruptly, seating herself as she spoke under a replica of the misnamed Antinous in the Capitol, which stood at the end of a gallery containing a small but valuable collection of sculpture.

"To be frank, yes," answered Fabrizio. "I hope," he added, "that you are not scandalised, duchessa?"

Vittoria looked at him—more critically, certainly, than she was aware was the case. "Of course not," she said quietly. "Why should I be scandalised? It is a great thing to be able to think at all! Many people do not take the trouble to learn how to do it. I suppose, then, that you believe in nothing. I mean in no future state."

"Precisely. The present is all that I find myself able logically to believe in. Anything else must rest upon theory."

"And you have studied those theories, of course, and have found them to be untenable. I always think that position must be a most enviable one. You must feel perfectly contented, perfectly secure. Nothing that you do, or do not do, can make any difference, except, perhaps, for an uncertain number of years or fractions of years. Yes; it is decidedly an enviable position for those who can arrive at it!"

"But everybody can arrive at it!" exclaimed Fabrizio. "The first step," he continued, "is the most difficult. It is always a hard thing to free oneself from superstitions that one has been taught from childhood."

"Ah," said Vittoria di San Felice quickly, "you experienced that hardship?"

"Oh yes," replied Fabrizio Vitali carelessly, "I suppose most people experience it. Besides, I have a mother who is very devout. Of course, until I grew up I pretended to believe, in order not to distress her. But one cannot keep up that kind of thing later in life, however much one would like to do so."

Vittoria looked at him curiously, but she made no remark.

"I can see that I have shocked you, duchessa," Fabrizio continued, as the pause became somewhat prolonged. "But, surely, it is better to be an honest disbeliever than to pretend to believe what is repugnant to one's own common-sense? I know plenty of men who pretend to be Catholics, and who go to confession and make their communion merely to please their families and to be well with the priests; while in reality they regard the whole business as a farce, concerning which it is not worth while to make a disturbance."

"I am not in the least shocked," said Vittoria: "as I observed before, why should I be so? These are questions each one of us must settle with his or her own soul—and if you lose yours, signore, that must be exclusively your affair and not mine!"

Fabrizio laughed. "That is a logical way of putting it," he returned. "Most people, duchessa, seem to think themselves responsible for the souls of others, and make themselves objectionable accordingly. When one has learned to disbelieve in the myth of the human soul, however——"

"Yes?" said Vittoria interrogatively.

"Things become much simpler," concluded Fabrizio, a little confused by his hostess's interruption, and fully conscious of the weakness of his conclusion.

"I suppose so," observed the Duchessa di San Felice. "Nothing makes life so complicated as a sense of responsibility. It is bad enough to feel responsible for the present welfare of other people's bodies—and as to responsibility for the future welfare of their souls!—but you, of course, feel none. You could, for instance, do a person a great wrong, or cause another to do a great wrong, without being troubled by any sense of responsibility in the matter."

“No, no!” exclaimed Fabrizio, “that, forgive me, is not a fair way of putting it! Disbelieving in a future life, and, therefore, in the human soul, does not imply irresponsibility towards our fellow-creatures in the only life we have any reason to suppose that we shall share in common, but quite the reverse. You would reduce pure philosophy to pure selfishness, duchessa! It is, on the contrary, your Christianity that is the most selfish creed the world has ever known. What unspeakable horrors have not Christians in all ages inflicted on their fellow-creatures, simply as a result of believing human beings to possess an immortal soul destined to future reward or punishment?”

“But you recognise a distinction between right and wrong—I mean, morally speaking?”

“Of course! they are terms in which to express that which is beneficial and that which is injurious to our social organisation. In this sense we have, each of us, responsibility for our actions, not so much towards the individual as towards society at large.”

Vittoria rose from her seat, and began to walk slowly through the sculpture gallery. “We are getting into very deep waters,” she said with a smile. “I cannot agree with you, and presently I will show you why. We do not know each other well, but, all the same, perhaps you will forgive me if I allow myself to ask you a question. It might be an impertinent question, if I wanted an answer to it, which I do not!”

“Signora duchessa,” replied Fabrizio—“per carità! ask me anything you choose, and, if I am able to answer your question, I will do so willingly!”

Vittoria di San Felice shook her head. “No,” she said, “it needs no answer. Some day, perhaps, you will have to ask it of yourself, and answer it for yourself. Have you ever been face to face with a great crisis in your life—a great temptation, or a great sorrow? If you have been so, and if you had no faith in a future existence—no ideal beyond that of a mere opportunism, you must be endowed with an exceptionally strong nature not to have succumbed under the trial.”

“I should hope,” began Fabrizio eagerly.

Vittoria checked him with a little gesture of the hands. “Do

not make my question an impertinent one," she said, smiling. "Remember that I stipulated for no answer! Do you see that Hermes?" she continued. "It was found in sinking a well on a tenuta near Capua, and is of the best period of Greek sculpture. A London dealer makes me offers for it regularly twice a year, on behalf of a client."

"And you cannot come to terms?" asked Fabrizio.

Vittoria di San Felice looked over his head at the Hermes. "I do not answer the letters," she said coldly: "but apparently, in certain matters, it is not easy to teach English and American millionaires good manners, or good taste! Shall we rejoin the others?"

On returning to Vittoria's sitting-room, sounds of children's laughter reached their ears through the open doors, and they found Ugo Vitali engaged in romping with her two little boys.

"Birboni!" she said laughingly, as they rushed up to her, "who told you that you might come here? Vitali, you spoil my children disgracefully! They always find out when you are here, and behave badly in consequence."

The boys, aged nine and seven respectively, showed no inclination to take their mother's remonstrances seriously, and neither, for that matter, did Count Vitali.

"We are going into the garden presently," he said, "to sail boats on the lake; in short, we are going to amuse ourselves very much."

"What have you done with Miss Wilson?" asked Vittoria, speaking in English.

"Her stomach hurts her," replied the younger of the two.

"She has an indigestion," corrected the other, casting a triumphant look at his brother.

"Hush, Livio!" exclaimed Vittoria, repressing a laugh. "How often have I told you that one does not talk of stomachs in English? They will translate their Italian idioms into English," she added to Cristina, "and the results are sometimes embarrassing when their governess is present. She is a good soul, and thoroughly to be trusted, but she has an indigestion once a week. She says it is the cooking, though I order roast mutton for her

whenever it is to be had, for I know that the English of a certain class are miserable if they cannot eat mutton. Next year I must get a tutor for the boys."

"It is better when they suffer from the stomach and not from the heart," observed Don Basilio gravely; "a little magnesia, and everything passes well; whereas——"

"But, Don Basilio!" interrupted Ugo, laughing. "Is he not more incorrigible than Livio, duchessa?"

"A great deal more incorrigible," replied Vittoria. "What shall we give Don Basilio as a punishment, Livio? magnesia, or mutton?"

"Or Miss Wilson?" added Ugo.

"You are worse than either of them, Vitali!" exclaimed Vittoria, laughing. "And the punishment he suggests is out of all proportion to the offence," said Don Basilio, his eyes still twinkling at his little joke.

Cristina Vitali had moved away from her husband and the two children, and was turning over some books lying on a table at the farther end of the room.

"Ugo seems very devoted to children," observed Fabrizio, who had joined her.

"So it appears," replied Countess Vitali indifferently. "I never know what to say to children," she added; "they bore me. Having none of my own, I cannot be expected to take much interest in those of other people."

"Then, perhaps it is as well that you have none of your own," said Fabrizio.

"It is certainly as well for you that I am not likely to have any," replied Cristina, in a low voice.

Fabrizio Vitali could scarcely repress a start of surprise. It was an admission of considerable moment to him, for he had never expected to know definitely what his chances of succeeding to the Vitali possessions might be. For an instant or two he remained almost bewildered, and even shocked, at Cristina's disclosure. It seemed to be carrying the confidence which, as he had repeatedly assured her, was the natural outcome of their mutual sympathy, a little too far. Moreover, there was a certain



cynicism about the remark, a certain brutality, indeed, which gave him a sudden feeling of repulsion. Involuntarily he glanced across the room to where the Duchessa di San Felice was sitting, her arm round her younger boy, who had clambered on to her lap. Possibly Countess Vitali followed his glance, and at the same time divined the thought that passed through his mind ; for her eyes contracted and her brow lowered in the sulky frown of the angry *ciociara* model she was said to resemble. The expression passed quickly, however, to be succeeded by a rapid and furtive look at Fabrizio, who stood by her side in silence, not knowing how to answer her.

"You think I ought not to have said that," she said, almost beneath her breath—"that it was not womanly? I do not know what impelled me to say it. Perhaps the feeling that you might be glad to hear it made me forget that one must not always speak one's thoughts aloud! What did the San Felice talk to you about?" she added, with a sudden change in the tone of her voice, as though to intimate that she wished to change the subject.

Fabrizio hesitated. "She showed me some of the pictures," he said, "and we talked of various things."

"Of Ugo and myself, for instance?"

"No, indeed! she never mentioned either of you. I am sure that the San Felice is a good woman, though evidently a strong Catholic, notwithstanding her liberal ideas."

"Did she preach you a sermon on your infidelity to the Church?" asked Cristina sarcastically.

Fabrizio was about to reply, when Vittoria came towards them. "Please forgive me," she said to Cristina. "I am afraid the boys have been tiresome! I did not mean them to appear so soon, but they escaped from the schoolroom when they heard your husband was here. He has a very demoralising effect upon them, *contessa*, as I always tell him."

"They are very handsome boys, *duchessa*," said Fabrizio.

"Do you think so?" replied Vittoria; and then she added with a smile, "They are my responsibilities."

By this time Count Vitali and the two boys had already escaped into the gardens, whither Vittoria proposed that they should be



followed; "otherwise," she said, "they will all three be getting into mischief."

The gardens of Villa Falconara, unlike those of Palazzo Vitali, were carefully and well kept up. It was still too hot, however, to remain for any time in the flower-garden, which was a long *parterre* immediately beneath the house, a double flight of broad marble steps leading down to it from the sculpture gallery. Wide paths, flanked by orange and lemon trees now in full blossom, intersected this *parterre*, the formality of which was relieved by various fountains, as well as by the blaze of colour of the flower-beds and herbaceous borders; for Vittoria, having been often in England, liked to copy English gardens, so far as the difference in climate allowed.

Groves of ancient ilex trees surrounded this flower-garden, among which were shady walks, and avenues guarded by quaint leaden statues of gods and goddesses in a more or less mutilated condition. In these glades quiet and coolness reigned, even during the hottest hours of a summer day. The quiet was broken now by the merry shouts and laughter of Vittoria's children, who, assisted by Ugo Vitali, were sailing their boats on a piece of water lying hidden away in the recesses of the woods. The surface of the pool gleamed white and gold from a floating carpet of water-lilies, while blue dragon-flies hawking for insects darted to and fro after their prey, flashing like jewels in their setting of sunlight.

On a little island, connected with the mainland by a stone bridge, stood a casino, its white walls nearly concealed under a mass of climbing roses. Within it was a circular room entirely faced with white marble, and this retreat was used during the summer months as a place in which Vittoria di San Felice often read, or wrote her letters. It was as comfortably furnished as though it had been inside the villa, and here also was a profusion of flowers perpetually renewed by Vittoria's head gardener, who knew his padrona's love for them.

It was to this sanctuary that Vittoria di San Felice brought her guests, and from the balcony of the casino they could watch Ugo and the boys in a boat engaged in rescuing their sailing-boats from shipwreck among the leaves of the water-lilies.

"I believe that Count Vitali is enjoying himself as much as the boys are," Don Basilio said with a smile. "He certainly understands how to make children happy," he added, "which is a gift I like to see in a man."

Cristina smiled also, but it was not so genial a smile as that of the priest. "Really, duchessa," she observed, "I had no idea that my husband was of so domestic a nature! It is the first time, I think, that I have seen him with children."

Vittoria looked at her a little doubtfully. The words were simple enough: perhaps only another woman would have been able to detect the traces of a sneer in them.

"After all," proceeded Countess Vitali composedly, "as Don Basilio says, fondness of children—at any rate of other people's children—is a gift in a man; and, as you know, duchessa, Ugo has no chance of exercising that gift at home."

"Cara contessa," said Vittoria gently, "let us hope"—and then, remembering that both Fabrizio and Don Basilio were present, she paused abruptly. "My little boys are devoted to your husband," she continued, "and I am afraid he would spoil them if they were more often in his company. By the way, Signor Vitali," she added, turning to Fabrizio, "I promised to show you the tree which, quite regardless of the fact that chestnut trees do not live for four centuries, is declared to be the original one that produced Pope Innocent X.'s miraculous roasted chestnuts. You can see it from here," and she pointed to a venerable Spanish chestnut standing some little distance from the water's edge, the sweeping branches of which were laden with prickly balls of vivid green.

"It would be interesting to be able to repeople Villa Falconara with the Moidalchini for a few hours, and to see how they really lived in those days," said Fabrizio.

"Ah, I often sit here and try to imagine Donna Olimpia, and the idiotic nephew with the sheep's face whom she caused to be made a cardinal, and all the entourage of the Pope's court that she made her own, walking in these avenues and planning their intrigues," replied Vittoria. "This very casino in which we are sitting was built by Don Camillo Pamphili, Olimpia's

son, and doubtless she and the Pope often sat here on the occasion of his famous visits to the villa."

"And my ancestress, Donna Giulia, also," said Fabrizio, smiling. "Perhaps," he continued, "it was here that she and her husband consulted with the Moidalchini as to the best method of getting rid of her lover!"

"No," interposed Cristina, "I am sure that she thought it all out for herself,—in the room you have, Fabrizio, at Palazzo Vitali."

"Certainly," said Vittoria, laughing, "I had much rather that you kept Donna Giulia at Palazzo Vitali! I do not at all want her here, and should be sorry to think she planned her crime in my casino. Don Basilio, will you be so kind as to ring on the telephone? and when they answer, will you tell the servants to bring tea to us here? You will not think of driving back to Viterbo until it is a little cooler," she added to Cristina. "In the meantime you and I will go for a little walk, and leave your cousin and Don Basilio to discuss Donna Giulia's iniquities together."

## CHAPTER X

“ I WONDER,” remarked Fabrizio, “ that the Duchessa di San Felice does not marry again.”

It was the day following the visit to Villa Falconara; and Fabrizio was sitting in the apartment which, in virtue of a dilapidated billiard-table and a few pointless cues, was called the billiard-room. Cristina and he had been alone at breakfast, for Ugo was absent for the day on business, as he had warned his cousin the evening before that he should be. By this time it had become quite natural to him to find himself alone for the greater part of the day with his cousin's wife. Ugo, it was true, invariably returned to breakfast; but after that meal he would usually disappear again until shortly before dinner-time.

It was now nearly a month since he had arrived at Palazzo Vitali, and Fabrizio had enjoyed ample opportunities of accomplishing the object for which he had come there, namely, that of improving his acquaintance with the relative whose possessions might one day pass into his hands. As a matter of fact, however, Fabrizio could not truthfully say to himself that he was on any more intimate terms with Ugo than he had been at the commencement of his visit. From the first, Ugo had treated him with the same careless confidence with which any man of a frank and genial nature might treat a kinsman whom he had no particular reason, apart from the fact that he was a kinsman, to mistrust. Fabrizio had soon come to the conclusion that, in the case of a *campagnuolo*, such as his cousin evidently was, there was not much to know, and in this view of Ugo's character he had been confirmed by many remarks which Cristina had let fall in the course of their conversations together.

By degrees, and by a mutual consent never openly expressed in words, it had become a habit with both Fabrizio and Countess Vitali to reserve the more interesting topics of these conversations

for the hours when Ugo was not present. The *banalités* only were kept for discussion during meals and in the evenings. Occasionally, when he and Fabrizio were alone together after Cristina had retired for the night, Ugo would comment with satisfaction on his wife's improved spirits, which he laughingly attributed to the fact of Fabrizio having awakened in her an interest in books and philosophical arguments. So long as Ugo was content, and entirely unapprehensive lest interests of a more material nature might not be awakened, Fabrizio saw no reason to disclaim any connection on his part with the alteration in Cristina's frame of mind upon which her husband congratulated himself. Moreover, he was by no means sure as yet that the pleasure Cristina apparently took in his society, and the interest she displayed in his conversation, were other than purely platonic and innocuous. That his own interest in his cousin's wife was indubitably becoming less and less platonic as the days succeeded each other, Fabrizio was beginning to be fully aware. He was too sure of himself, however, to fear lest his feelings should betray him into taking any false step. Did not Schopenhauer contend that Will alone was the determining factor in human life, and that both thought and intellect were but secondary accessories? And even should passion threaten to conquer Will, his own interest must prove an additional safeguard against allowing passion to gain the ascendancy; since, as he often told himself, whoever might in the future play the part of "the other man" in Ugo's ménage, that individual must clearly not be Ugo's presumptive heir.

Countess Vitali, who was idly turning over the pages of a novel, looked up quickly as Fabrizio spoke. "Why should she marry again?" she asked: "the San Felice has everything she can want in life, and of course her retirement from the world to Villa Falconara for a few months in the year is all a *pose*. A woman with her position and fortune is always in touch with the world. Apparently she has made a great impression on you, Fabrizio; but for that matter, she does so on most men!"

"All the more reason for wondering why she does not marry again," replied Fabrizio.

"She likes her independence," Cristino said: "after all," she



added, "it is a great thing for a woman to possess, and a rare thing. What did she mean when she spoke of her children to you as being her responsibilities? You must have had some serious conversation together while she was showing you the villa. I could not ask you before Ugo; one cannot discuss the San Felice before him, for he regards her as a piece of perfection!"

Fabrizio hesitated. He would have preferred not to have been asked the question. He had seen Cristina look at him enquiringly when the duchessa had made the remark to which she alluded, but he hoped that she had forgotten the circumstance. Vittoria's words had returned to his mind somewhat persistently. What she had said to him regarding the danger of being without any faith in futurity, and, therefore, without any sense of responsibility for the future of oneself or of others in the critical moments of life, had been said with an earnestness that was unmistakably sincere, and as unmistakably prompted by motive. The suspicion as to what that motive might be had immediately entered into Fabrizio's mind, and caused him some uneasiness. But it had at the same time caused him to wonder whether the Duchessa di San Felice might not be more in Ugo's confidence than even Cristina had led him to suppose. It was impossible to believe that Ugo had expressed to the San Felice any fears lest a cousinly intimacy between his wife and his guest should develop into an intimacy of another nature, but he might in all innocence have talked to the duchessa in the same strain as that in which he had talked to him, Fabrizio, concerning the evident pleasure that Cristina found in discussing abstruse matters with him; and the duchessa, being a woman, might have jumped at conclusions very different from any that Ugo, in his simple-mindedness, would be at all likely to form. "Of course," proceeded Cristina, looking at Fabrizio inquisitively, "children are supposed to be a responsibility. The Felice need not have wasted her breath in telling you as much!"

Fabrizio laughed a little uneasily. "You were quite right, Cristina, when you suggested that she had been preaching me a sermon on my infidelity to religion!" he replied. "She declared that nobody could have any sense of responsibility, either personal or impersonal, who did not believe in a future life. That, of



course, is the usual argument of the Catholics, but it is a very weak argument."

"What does she mean by impersonal responsibility?"

"Ah, the expression is mine. She meant a sense of responsibility towards others, responsibility for their actions, I suppose—I hardly know what she did mean. Religious people are very seldom logical."

"As regards the difference between their preaching and their practice, do you mean?" asked Cristina.

Fabrizio laughed. "No," he replied, "I did not mean that, though the difference is often very apparent to all but themselves."

Countess Vitali knitted her brows. "It is very apparent to me that you do not want to tell me what the Duchessa di San Felice really did mean!" she said impatiently.

"You do not like her," returned Fabrizio, diplomatically avoiding any more direct reply.

Cristina shrugged her shoulders. "Ma!" she exclaimed, "can you expect me to like her, knowing what I know?"

Fabrizio stared at her. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"But you are dense to-day, caro mio cugino, decidedly dense! Have you forgotten what I told you about the letter I received? and your own suggestion as to the origin of that letter? No doubt the San Felice is a very religious woman, and makes very edifying remarks as she seems to have done to you. She is in love with my husband all the same."

"Cristina!" Fabrizio exclaimed.

"There is nothing surprising in the fact," continued Countess Vitali tranquilly. "I do not say that Ugo is in love with her now; but that accident would not prevent her from being still in love with him."

"Then you believe what that letter said?"

"And why not?"

"In that case," observed Fabrizio, "the San Felice is extremely unlikely to have been the writer of it. I thought you did not believe it, or I should not have suggested that the duchessa herself had written it."

"I am sure she wrote it," Cristina replied doggedly. "It is just the thing that a jealous woman would do."

"But not the San Felice, I think."

Cristina's eyes flashed angrily. "I believe you are in love with her yourself!" she said, with a short laugh. "Why should you suppose her to be above writing an anonymous letter?"

"She is not that kind of woman. Besides, if she is in love with Ugo, her object surely would be to keep the fact from you. Why should she go out of her way to enlighten you?"

"In order to make my life more detestable than it is!"

Fabrizio was silent. In Cristina's reasoning, the suspiciousness of the peasant—dull and ever ready to look to the lowest motives—showed itself clearly. It was true that Fabrizio Vitali's life had not brought him into much contact with the peasant class, but he knew enough of its characteristics not to labour under any romantic or sentimental ideas as to their simplicity, the said simplicity being rarely to be found except in that purely imaginary type created by foreign novelists.

"You mean to say," he replied, at length, "that you think the San Felice capable of deliberately opening your eyes to the existence of some—well, let us call it understanding, between herself and Ugo in order to make bad blood between him and you——"

"For her own benefit, yes!" interrupted Cristina. "Did I not tell you that she is jealous? She has allowed Ugo to marry me, but she has no intention of permanently losing him as a lover, none at all! I daresay you wonder why I confide such matters to you."

"Yes—why?" asked Fabrizio quickly.

"Who else have I to confide in?" exclaimed Cristina abruptly. "Besides," she added, with a constrained laugh, "confidence is a result of sympathy, is it not?"

"Yes," said Fabrizio; "but——"

"But?"

"Confidence and sympathy between you and me are dangerous things. I have begun to realise the fact."

Countess Vitali gave him a quick look, and a momentary gleam came into her eyes, whether of satisfaction or of a certain malicious amusement Fabrizio could not tell; but it was not one of displeasure, of that he was sure.

"Why do you say that your life is detestable, Cristina? It is a terrible thing to say. After all, Ugo cares for you, and in time you will probably succeed in getting him out of his groove, and in making him understand that he cannot keep you perpetually here at Viterbo. I know that as yet he does not understand. He thinks that you are only suffering from disappointment."

"From disappointment!" re-echoed Cristina.

"Yes, in not having children."

Christina laughed. "So," she said, "it seems that you are the confidant of both the husband and the wife! It is certainly a curious position. And you believe Ugo?"

"No."

"Of course you do not believe him! you have too much penetration. And, moreover, you know me better than you know him. As to the matter of the children, that is an invention of Ugo's—an excuse. I am thankful that I am never, as I have already told you, likely to have a child. But if you think that Ugo can be persuaded to leave his groove, as you call it, it only shows how little you know him—as little as I did when I married him!"

"Then you look upon your marriage as a mistake."

"As a colossal mistake."

"Marriage usually is a mistake," observed Fabrizio, "and, in our country, it is still a mistake that cannot be remedied, thanks to our childish fear of offending the priests."

"But you must not think that I complain," said Cristina hurriedly; "we must all of us take the consequences of our mistakes. I suppose that in marrying me, Ugo thought that he was marrying a good *massaia* who would be content to lead a simple country life."

"And you, in marrying him, what did you think?" asked Fabrizio, looking at her curiously.

For a moment or two Cristina did not reply. Then she said suddenly, "Why should I not tell you the truth? I knew that Ugo was desperately in love with me—with my body, I mean, not with myself! I thought that I should be able to make him do what I wanted, to give me a position in the world. That was my mistake. I should have married a man who understood *me*, not a man who merely gloated over my face and my form! Surely you, of all people, can understand what I mean, Fabrizio! I am an ambitious woman, I do not deny it. I would have liked to see my husband a statesman, a politician, anything that brought him and me into contact with the great world. Instead of that, I have married a farmer who does not know how to turn the advantages of possessing lands and a title to any account, and who cannot understand anybody having a mind above horses, and cattle and crops!"

"Then you married for ambition only; love did not enter into the matter, on your side?"

"That depends upon what you mean by love," answered Cristina slowly. "Women are apt to mistake passion for love. Men make no mistake between the two, unless they are very young men. They only pretend to do so. Afterwards, it is the woman who remains *desillusionée*."

"But Ugo," Fabrizio said hesitatingly, "Ugo has something more than mere—well, than mere passion for you, Cristina. You must forgive my frankness. You and I can afford to dispense with conventionalities. No, I think you misjudge the nature of Ugo's affection for you, or rather, you forget that he is incapable of a passion that is intellectual as well as merely physical."

Countess Vitali was certainly not an angler. Nevertheless, seeing that her fish was disposed to make a run, she was quite prepared to let him have as much line as might be judicious.

"No," she said quietly, "I do not forget it, Fabrizio. It is one of my *désillusions*, which must be borne with the rest. But it is quite right of you to be loyal to Ugo," she added; "and it is because I know you are so that I feel I may talk openly to you—as one of the family, so to speak. No doubt it is this feeling which has led me to give you my confidence; this, and realising

that *you* understand what we have agreed that Ugo could never understand."

"Are you so sure that he cannot understand? He has, for example, a great admiration for the Duchessa di San Felice. Yet nobody can accuse the San Felice of interesting herself only in cattle and crops."

"And why should it not be due to those other causes?"

"For the best of reasons. He married you! Surely that is a proof of the physical type which appears to his—sense of admiration. The Duchessa di San Felice and the Contessa Vitali are as different as the moon is different from the sun. You could not both appeal to the same man's passions: it is impossible, or, at any rate, it is improbable; for where a man's passions are concerned nothing is impossible."

"Or a woman's," interposed Cristina quickly. "The San Felice, your moon, is, like Diana, not always cold!"

"Are you comparing Ugo with Endymion?" asked Fabrizio laughing. "He is certainly more robust than Endymion is usually represented as being, and also rather older."

"Si capisce!" said Countess Vitali drily, "it is a question of temperament. I know nothing about Diana's temperament; perhaps she liked very young men."

Fabrizio chuckled. "Where did you learn your psychology, Cristina," he asked, "in your convent?"

"Your visit to Ugo has been a great comfort to me," said Countess Vitali, a little irrelevantly. "There was nobody with whom I could discuss these things. Except yourself I do not suppose that I have a friend in the world. It is a pity that you and Ugo are so different."

"Would you prefer that I should be like him?" Fabrizio rose from his chair as he spoke and stood beside Cristina's sofa.

"No," she replied in a low voice, "no, I should prefer the reverse."

Their eyes met, and both remained silent for a space.

Suddenly Cristina laughed. "Let us be children," she said, "and play at pretending. Did you never play at pretending when

you were a child, Fabrizio? We will pretend that Ugo is dead—that Ugo never existed, but that you are he. Yes, you are Count Vitali, and you have money, and lands; and—and a wife who is not ugly, via! Do you shut yourself up in this dilapidated old palace, and let the world pass by you? I think not. You use your money and your position to make a name for yourself, in politics, in literature—anything! And your wife helps you. A wife who is ambitious—and who is not ugly—is a useful companion in life——”

“If she loves her husband,” interrupted Fabrizio.

Countess Vitali clapped her hands. “Bravo, Fabrizio!” she exclaimed, “I see you can play the game. Sicuro! if she loves her husband. But of course, in your case, we must assume that you married for love, and not for the other reasons only, and that the woman you married was not taken by you as *faute de mieux*! Now it is your turn to pretend. What would you do with your life under such conditions? Would you do as Ugo does?”

“I do not see that it is of any use to pretend,” said Fabrizio, almost sullenly.

“What would you do?” insisted Cristina, looking up at him from her sofa.

“I should live, and not vegetate as Ugo does! But I do not like your game, Cristina, it gives me——”

“What?”

“Thoughts I would rather keep out of my mind. Why do you so often make me think what I would do if I were in Ugo’s place? Ugo is a much stronger man than I am. He will probably outlive me by many years. It is absurd, your game, since we are not children! Moreover, I hate the subject. It makes me feel as though I wished some harm to befall Ugo, when I know that I wish nothing of the kind. But you do not wish him well, Cristina. Sometimes I think that you hate him!”

Countess Vitali glanced at him quickly, and there was an angry gleam in her eyes, which disappeared, however, as rapidly as it came. “My dear cousin,” she said, with a slight laugh,



“it is you who are absurd, not my innocent little game! Why should you jump to the conclusion that I hate my husband simply because I have confided to you that he made a mistake when he married me? Do you not say yourself that most marriages turn out to have been a mistake for one or the other of the people concerned? But between realising that one has been mistaken in a person’s character and hating that person, there is, surely, a wide difference. As to making you feel that you wish harm to Ugo, we have discussed that point before. Of course I know that you do nothing of the sort! Evidently, Fabrizio, you do not understand me as I believed you to do; you do not realise that I have no one else to confide in except yourself.”

“Forgive me, I had no reason to say what I said,” exclaimed Fabrizio penitently. “You are quite right. It is I who am absurd.”

“After all,” continued Cristina, apparently without noticing his apology, “one never knows what may happen. Have you ever realised what a misfortune it would be for you if I were to die? Ugo would certainly marry again. Very likely he would marry the San Felice and have children. She is not too old to have more children, you know. You ought to say your prayers that I may outlive Ugo.”

“Cristina!” exclaimed Fabrizio, “per carità! Have I not told you that I do not wish to think of certain things? Let us talk of something else. Do you know that I have been here more than a month? It seems to me that it is quite time I returned to Rome.”

“It is incredible that you should have been able to endure our life here for so long!” observed Countess Vitali drily. “You had better confess it,” she added, “you are becoming horribly bored!”

“It would have been easy to go away before, if that was the case,” Fabrizio replied.

“Then why do you want to go away now?”

“I do not want to go!”

Cristina gave a slight shrug of her shoulders. “If you do

not want to go," she returned, "why do you not stay? Are you afraid of outstaying your welcome? You will not do that."

"It would be wiser of me to go away."

Cristina looked at him inquiringly for a moment. Then the expression of her face suddenly changed to one of suspicion. "The San Felice has been trying to make mischief between you and me," she said contemptuously. "Why do you believe what she says? I know that she talked to you about me yesterday."

Fabrizio looked at her in astonishment. "I assure you that she never mentioned your name, Cristina," he replied. "We talked of—well, of things and not of people."

Cristina was silent for a moment. "And so you mean to go away," she said presently. "You will go back to Rome and forget all about us! I am sorry."

"You are sorry?" repeated Fabrizio, and then he paused. "I am not likely to forget all about you!" he continued slowly, "I think you know that, without my saying it! that is the reason why, as I said just now, it is wiser for me to go, before it is too late."

"It need never be too late!" answered Countess Vitali softly; "and you are too scrupulous, amico mio, much too scrupulous. Of course you cannot stay here indefinitely; no doubt there are many at Viterbo who think that you have been here long enough as it is. But there is nothing like accustoming people to an idea, and very soon your presence here would come to be regarded as perfectly natural. After all, Rome is so near; and what could be more natural than that you should often come to Palazzo Vitali?"

Fabrizio was silent. His instinct warned him that Cristina was leading him on to dangerous ground, and that she was doing so, moreover, with a deliberation of purpose that she apparently scarcely troubled herself to conceal. This last thought was gratifying to his vanity; and it was also stimulating to those feelings which he could no longer pretend to himself that his cousin's wife had not aroused in him.

Cristina Vitali sat silently watching him from beneath her heavy eye-lashes. "I am afraid—" Fabrizio said at length hesitatingly.

"Of what? of me?"

"Of you, yes, and of myself. It would have been better not to take me into your confidence, Cristina!"

"Perhaps. I am only a woman. Men are more cautious than women, more careful to consider their own interests. You are afraid of compromising yourself, is it not so?"

"You are unjust! Have I not told you that I do not wish any harm to happen to Ugo? and certainly I do not wish harm to come to him through me. That is not fear of compromising myself."

"What do you mean, Fabrizio?" asked Cristina hastily. "I do not understand. What harm could Ugo suffer from our friendship? No doubt people would gossip, they always do! but Ugo is the last person to have any right to resent our friendship. Has he not the San Felice?"

"It is not a parallel case," said Fabrizio quickly. "You are not the sort of woman to inspire a platonic friendship. That is why I am afraid of you, and of myself!"

The room in which they were sitting was already darkened, for the sake of coolness, by the closed shutters outside the windows, but during the last few minutes the light had gradually faded into a semi-obscurity. Cristina rose from her sofa and, going to one of the windows, threw open the *persiennes*. The sun was hidden behind a mass of inky-black clouds rolling slowly up from the southward, and not a breath of air stirred the tops of the cypress trees in the gardens beneath the house. All Nature seemed to be lying under the spell of a hushed expectancy; for even the cicale had ceased their metallic rattle, and deep silence reigned everywhere.

"The air is suffocating," exclaimed Cristina, "we are going to have a terrible storm! You say that you are afraid, Fabrizio—I do not mean of the storm, but of yourself and of me? But you are only afraid because I happen to be Ugo's wife. Why do you not confess it?"

Fabrizio looked at her earnestly. "That is true," he replied, "you are Ugo's wife. Otherwise—" and his eyes said the rest.

Cristina smiled a little satirically, but she made no remark.

“You seem to be amused!” Fabrizio continued, and there was an offended tone in his voice. “But you do not understand. You imagine that I am afraid of making an enemy of Ugo, lest I should injure my own prospects in the future. It is not that; but, I should feel ashamed of myself for deceiving Ugo. He has implicit confidence in us both, because I bear the same name, can you not understand? I see nothing to amuse you in the fact that I do not want to betray that confidence!”

“I am amused at the difference between your theories and your practice,” replied Countess Vitali. “Notwithstanding your theories as to the immorality of marriage in the present state of human society, you are more scrupulous than many people who are by way of being devout Catholics! I believe that you would make a model husband!”

Cristina laughed as she uttered this last sentiment, but her laugh was accompanied by a swift look at her companion.

“I believe I should be a very jealous husband, if I were married to you,” returned Fabrizio, laughing also. He was not sorry that Cristina seemed to be disposed to give a less serious tone to the conversation; and yet, at the same time, he upbraided himself for his timidity. His ideal of woman was not a high ideal. Foreigners from the north are apt to marvel at the restrictions by which Italian women are surrounded, and to laugh at the precautions taken to guard unmarried girls, and even middle-aged spinsters from possible contamination on the part of the opposite sex; while Italian husbands, from “il Moro” of Venice downwards, have always been bye-words for jealousy. Fabrizio Vitali, however, was not of the north; and hitherto his creed concerning women, married or single, provided that they were attractive, was limited to a careless determination to obtain from them all the satisfaction they might be induced to afford him. Had any one told Fabrizio that he would have hesitated to take advantage of a favourable opportunity of making love to a beautiful woman merely because she happened to have a husband, he would probably have considered himself to be insulted by the suggestion. He was unable, therefore, to explain satisfactorily even to himself his present hesitation. He could

scarcely doubt, after the language something more than suggestive which Cristina had allowed herself to use, that any advances he might make would not be rebuffed; nevertheless, he was conscious of a vague sense of some peril he could not define.

“Do you think I should give you cause to be jealous, if you were married to me?” asked Cristina.

“Do *you* think so? that is more to the point!” replied Fabrizio.

“No,” said Countess Vitali slowly. “But what is the use of discussing the subject?” she added. “As I have already told you, I have long realised that our marriage, Ugo’s and mine, was a mistake. I am quite frank with you on that matter. He married me because he could not marry the San Felice, and I married him because—because I thought he could give me the life I wanted. To Ugo, the mistake does not matter so much, he has his friend the Duchessa di San Felice.”

“You do not believe that there is anything more than friendship between them!” exclaimed Fabrizio. “You have said so yourself to me more than once.”

“Chi lo sa?” returned Cristina abruptly. “But even if the friendship be merely platonic, it is better than nothing—no?”

“I am not sure,” Fabrizio said. “Under certain circumstances I should prefer nothing! As I told you just now, you are not the Duchessa di San Felice, and——”

A vivid flash of lightning, instantly followed by one of those sharp crashes of thunder denoting the immediate vicinity of the storm, interrupted him. The centre of the mass of black thundercloud had changed in colour to a deep, angry purple; and a sound, which was not that of wind, gradually increased from a distant murmur to a hissing, crackling roar. The tops of the cypress trees swayed gently as a breath of icy-cold air reached them, and then the purple pall lowering above them seemed suddenly to dissolve itself into a white mist as a storm of hailstones, some round and large as pigeons’ eggs, and others jagged pieces of ice, swept over the gardens and rattled against the front of the house with a noise like a discharge of musketry.

Countess Vitali, who had retreated from the open window,



momentarily startled by the flash of lightning, rushed to it again and leaning out endeavoured to close the *persiennes*. "The hail!" she exclaimed. "There will not be a pane of glass left, Fabrizio!" The shutters however were refractory, and Cristina was unable to detach them from the iron catches. A second flash, blue, and accompanied by a sound like the crack of a whip, seemed to encircle her in a blaze of light, and she started back from the window with a little cry of pain.

"Cristina!" Fabrizio shouted, "for God's sake come away, the lightning is too near! I will close the *persiennes*. Good heavens!" he added, "what is the matter? did the lightning touch you?" and he sprang to her side.

Cristina smiled, though the colour had left her face and she was very pale. "No," she said, "not the lightning, but the hail. Look!" and she held her arm out towards him. A trickle of blood came from a cut on her wrist where a hailstone had struck it, and the blood showed red against her white skin.

Fabrizio took her hand and tried to stop the bleeding with his handkerchief, but the cut was deep and the blood began to flow more freely, obliging him to turn back the sleeve of her light muslin dress. Suddenly he raised her arm to his lips and kissed it.

"For an instant I thought you had been struck!" he exclaimed. "It was horrible—you were surrounded by flame!"

"It is nothing, a scratch," Cristina said softly, "but if it had been the lightning, if I had been killed, would you have cared, Fabrizio?"

For all answer Fabrizio kissed her arm again, heedless of the blood that stained his lips; and then, his passion mastering him completely, he kissed her face with rapid, eager kisses. Cristina suffered him to do so for a moment, and then she drew herself away from his embrace. It was as well that she did so, for immediately afterwards the door opened and Taddeo entered the room hastily.

"The *scuri*!" he exclaimed, "they are open, signora contessa, and the hail will break everything!" and rushing to the window he closed them. As a matter of fact, the hail had already



done its work, and most of the panes of glass were shattered, though neither Countess Vitali nor Fabrizio was aware of it.

"We tried to shut them, but could not," said Cristina. "The hail has cut my hands," and she pointed to her wrist around which Fabrizio had bound his handkerchief.

Taddeo looked at it, and then he looked at Fabrizio. "The signore, also, is wounded," he observed.

Fabrizio hastily passed the sleeve of his coat across his mouth. "I?" he replied quickly, "no."

"The signore was helping me," interrupted Countess Vitali, giving him a rapid glance. "I will go to my room," she continued, "and have the cut properly dressed. This hail, Taddeo, it will do much damage."

"It is a *rovina*, everything will be burned black as if the devil had touched it! And the poor signor conte, he will be in despair when he returns this evening—*mah!*" and Taddeo lifted his hands expressively.

"It is very unfortunate," remarked Countess Vitali, a little absently. "Sicuro, Taddeo, the signor conte will be very much annoyed," and so saying she went quickly from the room, after adding that if Fabrizio needed *taffetana* to place on his cut, she could supply him with some.

## CHAPTER XI

AFTER Cristina had left him, Fabrizio Vitali walked up and down the billiard-room wrestling with his thoughts and trying to force them into something like coherence. Taddeo had closed all the outer shutters of the windows, and, save for various expletives muttered to himself, had completed the process in silence and quickly left the room. The semi-obscurity was illumined by frequent flashes of lightning, and the rattle of the hailstones was gradually succeeded by a more muffled sound, as the rain began to descend with almost tropical violence. A heavy, damp air came through the closed *persiennes*, bringing with it a sulphurous odour ascending from the steaming soil of the gardens below. Fabrizio, restlessly pacing to and fro, felt almost as if the lightning had struck him some sudden blow. He was vaguely conscious that Taddeo was in the room fumbling with the rusty iron catches of the shutters, and he was scarcely aware of the fact when, having completed his task, the old man retired leaving him alone. A feeling that something had befallen him—something entirely unexpected—seemed to have taken possession of him; and mingling with this feeling was an impression of evil, almost of personal danger, indefinable and yet persistent. Suddenly Fabrizio paused in his restless walk and looked quickly behind him. "Did you laugh, Taddeo?" he asked sharply; and, receiving no answer, he realized for the first time that Taddeo was no longer in the room. The sound of his own voice seemed to help him to concentrate his thoughts. He could have sworn that someone had laughed, a low, scornful laugh. It was fancy, of course, the storm had excited his nerves. All the same, if he heard that laugh again, he should certainly mention it to his doctor when he returned to Rome; for it was a particularly disagreeable form for nerves to take, and produced an unpleasant impression upon him that he was at a loss to describe even to himself.

When he returned to Rome? Unquestionably his only course was to return to Rome without delay—to leave Palazzo Vitali before he should have time to be drawn into some further folly. The position was altogether too dangerous—he realised now how dangerous. He had told himself over and over again of late that whoever Cristina's eventual lover might be, that lover must certainly not be himself. He would be bringing dishonour on his own name—and it would be an act of treachery towards Ugo, who had gone out of his way to treat him with a confidence that he might have shown towards a brother. And apart from honour, and loyalty to his own kin and the head of his house, he would be acting against his own interests, destroying future possibilities for the sake of gratifying a passion for a woman in whom he was conscious of finding something repellent even though she attracted him as no woman had ever attracted him before. Confident of possessing that strength of personal will which Schopenhauer had taught him was the predominant factor in the life of every reasonable man, Fabrizio had played with his passion from day to day during the past weeks, secure in his conviction that he could always prevent it from compromising his interests, and still more so from gaining a mastery over him. It was this confidence which now lay, as it were, at his feet, shattered and ruined in a moment's irresistible impulse. His philosophy had not gone far enough to teach him that no such thing exists as an act committed on the impulse of the moment, but that all human acts are but links in the long chain of psychical phenomena which some call character—links which, did we but realise it, we have the privilege of fashioning, to be our support or our undoing for years yet far in front of us. To Fabrizio, the unexpected had happened that afternoon, and he felt as one might feel beneath whose feet the ground had suddenly crumbled.

Half an hour or so passed, and the storm rumbled away into the distance. The darkened room grew lighter and the air fresher, while the noise of the falling rain had entirely ceased.

Fabrizio went to the windows, and after throwing open the *persiennes*, looked out into the gardens. A scene of devastation met his eyes. In spots more or less sheltered from the sub-

sequent heavy rain, masses of hailstones lay white upon the ground, some round, some jagged wedges of ice. Boughs of roses and flowering shrubs were scattered about in all directions, some of which looked as though they had been cut off with a knife, while others hung in mutilated shreds to the parent plants. The orange-blossoms, which an hour or two before had filled the air with their scent, were now black and shrivelled; and on the terrace beneath the house lay bruised corpses of birds caught by the hailstones and beaten to death. Full as his mind was of far other things, Fabrizio found himself wondering what must have been the damage to the vineyards and the crops on the Vitali lands from the storm that had swept down so suddenly from the Sabine mountains and rolled across the campagna to the sea. Already the sky was clearing, and in another half-hour the sun would be shining as brilliantly as before. Within the house all was quiet. Fabrizio left the billiard-room and walked through the other reception rooms on the *piano nobile*. He wondered if Cristina would appear again. As a rule, they had spent the latter part of the afternoon on the terrace until it was cool enough to drive or walk in some of the sheltered lanes leading from the ridge crowned by the walls and gates of Viterbo to the plain below. What, he asked himself, would be Cristina's attitude towards him after his outbreak of passion. The first feeling of self-reproach and self-contempt for having yielded to what he believed to be a sudden impulse was quickly becoming less intense, while the uncomfortable presentiment of some threatening evil had already faded from his mind. A second phase, the inevitable phase of self-excuse had set in, and was fast smoothing over the rougher edges of self-condemnation. After all, what he had done was a *sciocchezza*—a trifle which it was absurd to think about seriously. Moreover, Cristina had certainly led him on; and she could not, therefore, pretend to resent his action as an unwarrantable offence, or as an abuse of his position as a relative and a guest. Yes, she had certainly led him on! her look when she asked him whether he would really have cared had the lightning struck her—her gesture as she raised her wounded arm so as almost to brush his lips—what man could be expected

to keep his head when tempted to lose it by such a woman? Assuredly he, Fabrizio, was a fool to allow himself to be troubled by scruples when such a piece of *bonne fortune*, as the French would say, was thrown in his way! What other man of his acquaintance would hesitate to take advantage of the fact that a beautiful woman found his society preferable to that of her husband? And Ugo? well, Ugo need never be any the wiser—it would be easy to avoid rousing any suspicion in the mind of one so unsuspecting by nature as Ugo had already shown himself to be.

Would it not be time enough to return to Rome—afterwards? The whole affair might be nothing more than an episode—an adventure such as many men could count by the dozen in their lives. It was absurd to regard it as likely to produce disagreeable complications.

A slight sound—perhaps the creaking of a piece of furniture caused by the sudden dampness in the air after the dry heat of the last few days—caused Fabrizio to look up. In the course of his meditations he had wandered through the long suite of the cardinal's reception rooms and found himself in the gallery immediately beneath Donna Giulia's portrait. A ray of sunlight filtering through the *persiennes* fell upon the picture, and the heavy eyes seemed to Fabrizio to be following him with a malicious smile. He turned away from it abruptly, almost expecting again to hear the low, scornful laugh he had heard in his dreams, and which had since repeated itself in his fancy. No further sound, however, real or imaginary, broke the silence of the empty rooms; and Fabrizio, turning his back on the portrait of his ancestress, left the gallery and descended the staircase leading down to the courtyard. The terrace would be in shade now, and he thought he would sit there in case Cristina should reappear. But Countess Vitali did not reappear; neither did Fabrizio see or hear anything of her until just before dinner that evening, when she came into the drawing-room where her husband and Fabrizio were awaiting her a moment or two before that meal was announced.



## CHAPTER XII

THE damage done on the Vitali property by the storm had not been so serious as might have been expected. By one of those strange caprices of Nature so frequent in summer storms in Italy, the hail had been confined to a track of only two or three hundred metres in width. Within this track vines and fruit trees had been stripped bare, or at the best left burned and shrivelled, while corn and maize had been beaten down in hopeless ruin. The storm had burst so suddenly that the peasants had had no time to use the great funnels from which heavy charges of gunpowder are exploded, the concussions of which break up and disperse the gathering masses of purple-black clouds which herald an onslaught of the dreaded scourge. On either side of this narrow track, however, little damage had been done, and, indeed, some good, since the heavy rain had washed away the insects from the crops and refreshed the parched soil.

On Cristina's entry into the drawing-room Fabrizio cast an enquiring glance at her. Her manner was the same as usual, and she apologised to him for having left him to his own devices for the whole of the afternoon. Taddeo threw open the doors of the dining-room a moment after her appearance, and taking Fabrizio's arm they went in together, followed by Ugo. The conversation naturally turned on the storm of that afternoon.

"Imagine, Ugo," said Countess Vitali, "I was closing the *persiennes* in the billiard-room when a flash of lightning came, and at the same moment I felt a pain in my arm and thought I was struck. Fabrizio thought so too; did you not, Fabrizio?"

"Indeed, I did!" assented Fabrizio. "You were very white, and I saw blood trickling down your arm. It never occurred to me that it was caused by a hailstone cutting you."

"People who are struck by lightning do not bleed," observed



Ugo. "Was it a bad cut, Cristina? ah, I see you have a bandage round your arm."

"It was a deep cut, and bled a good deal," replied Cristina. "Fabrizio was wounded also—he was helping me to close the shutters, as the window panes were being broken by the hail. But yours was a mere scratch on your face, was it not?" she added to Fabrizio.

"A mere scratch," repeated Fabrizio quickly.

"It has not even left a mark," continued Cristina, looking at him steadily, "whereas I shall probably have a scar on my arm for days. Luckily Taddeo came in and closed the remainder of the *persiennes*, or I believe every window would have been broken. You really should have the fastenings renewed, Ugo, they are so old that they are useless. I should think they had never been changed since the cardinal's days."

Fabrizio, happening to glance at Taddeo, saw that the man was listening attentively. "My cut scarcely bled at all," he said. "The hailstone can only have grazed the skin of my face, for when I looked in the glass I could not see any trace of a cut."

"But you certainly had some blood on your face," insisted Cristina; "I saw it, and so did Taddeo, if you remember. Has the storm done much damage, Ugo?"

"I believe not," replied Count Vitali. "I only returned half an hour ago, and have not had time to examine things for myself; but they tell me that the hail was restricted to a very narrow area, so most of the land will have escaped."

The conversation during dinner that evening was, to say the least of it, intermittent. Ugo Vitali, who had had a very long day, confessed to feeling tired, and Cristina declared that the thunder had given her a headache.

"It seems that the heat in Rome is terrible—thirty-eight degrees," Ugo observed, during a prolonged pause which no one seemed inclined to break. "I am afraid that means more hailstorms, and I am by no means fully insured against hail," he added.

"I certainly do not look forward to returning to Rome, if the thermometer stands at thirty-eight," Fabrizio remarked.

Ugo looked up from his plate. "Why should you return to Rome?" he asked. "Nobody but a lunatic would leave the country in order to grill in a town at this time of year. It has been hot enough here, certainly; but at least we have fresh air and cool nights, compared with what you would find in Rome just now. You do not mean to say that you are really thinking of leaving us, Fabrizio?"

Fabrizio nodded. "Seriously," he replied, with a smile. "I have paid you a very long visit—and there are also other reasons why I think I should be in Rome."

He looked at Cristina as he spoke, but she appeared to be engrossed with her dinner.

"Oh well, if you have other reasons, I have no more to say," returned Ugo; "but," he added cordially, "if you are only going to Rome because you think you have been here long enough, I do not think your reason at all a good one. What do you say, Cristina?"

"I should say that Fabrizio is perfectly right," remarked Countess Vitali tranquilly. "He is probably bored with life at Palazzo Vitali, and not unnaturally wishes to find himself in a more amusing place. Indeed, I wonder that he has been able to remain with us so long."

"At any rate," said Ugo, ignoring his wife's reflection on the dulness of existence at Viterbo, "he has benefited in his health by leading our country life for a few weeks. When you came to us, Fabrizio, you were a very different person."

"A very different person, indeed," responded Fabrizio; "but, all the same, Ugo, I feel that it is time I returned to Rome. My mother, too, will be wondering why I remain so long away."

"It seems to me to be absurd to go back to Rome in this heat," his cousin replied. "Why not persuade your mother to join you here, and remain with us at all events until the middle of July? By that time the season at the *bagni* will have begun."

I think you told me that your mother always went to Montecatini for the *bagni*. What do you say, Cristina? would not that be a good arrangement? After all, everybody will be leaving Rome now, I suppose, and it will be nearly as dull there as you say Fabrizio finds it here."

"But I do not find it dull at all," interrupted Fabrizio; "if I had found it so, I should not have remained for more than a month—should I, Cristina?" he added, appealing to Countess Vitali.

Cristina shrugged her shoulders. "Health resorts are said always to be dull," she remarked drily. "No doubt you have accepted the dulness as part of the cure! But Ugo is quite right. If you think that your signora madre would join you here, we would do our best to make her comfortable."

"My mother?" exclaimed Fabrizio quickly, "ah, no! I mean," he added, suddenly realising the abruptness of his reply, "my mother never visits; she never leaves home except for the six weeks she spends every year at Montecatini. You are both very kind to think of asking her here, but I am sure that it would be of no use, she would not pay a visit."

"But a family visit is a different thing," insisted Ugo. "She ought not to feel a stranger in Palazzo Vitali."

Fabrizio shook his head. "A thousand thanks, Ugo," he said, "but it would be impossible."

The tone of his voice was such that Ugo did not press the point further. Countess Vitali looked at Fabrizio quickly, with the expression in her eyes that was half cunning and half malicious. The dinner by this time was over, and Taddeo and the footmen proceeded to serve the fruit—strawberries of the small, old-fashioned kind with a delicate, scented flavour; the strawberries now and again still to be found in some cottage garden in England, as superior to the modern "improvements" as are the cabbage and moss roses more fragrant than all the productions, possessed of high-sounding names and gorgeous colouring, of the modern rose-grower; and early figs, known as *fiori*, which are but a somewhat vapid foretaste of the fruit yet to come later in the summer.

Count Vitali looked doubtfully at the figs as they were offered to him.

"The signor conte need not be afraid," remarked Taddeo, noticing his hesitation, "the figs were gathered before the rain came on; otherwise, there would be danger of fine pains in the stomach, if not of more inconvenient things."

Presently Cristina rose from the table, and, taking Fabrizio's arm went into the adjoining room where coffee was brought to them. The windows on to the terrace were all opened, and through them came wafts of fragrance on the evening air from the country refreshed by the rain. The moon was rising, and the short Italian twilight was fast yielding to its yellow rays. The nightingales were silent, their season of song being already past; and now only an occasional hoarse croak, easily mistaken for that of a frog, issued from the brown throats that until lately had made the gardens resound with the melody. The fire-flies, too, had extinguished their lamps of love, though now and then a belated female, still hoping to attract a lover, flitted fitfully through the dark shade cast by the cypress trees. The soft sound of the bell-frog in the low-lying ground beneath the gardens; the plaintive *chiù-chiù* of the little grey owls calling to each other among the ilex trees; the whirring note of a fern-owl, now and again interrupted the ceaseless chirping of the *grilli* in the grassy banks of the vineyards. A voluptuous repose had settled on all Nature. Even the irrepressible *grilli* seemed to be singing in their sleep.

For some time the three sat on the terrace, Ugo and Fabrizio smoking their cigars in silence. There was a certain fascination in watching the moonlight gradually stealing up the dark foliage of the ilex and the slender shafts of the cypresses, changing their blackness to a silvery sheen.

"And you wish to exchange this light for the electric lights in the Corso, and the sounds we hear for the yelling of the newspaper sellers and the noise of the trams!" said Ugo Vitali presently. "I say nothing of the exchange in smells," he added laughing. "It seems to me that you are mad, Fabrizio."

"I think I am," Fabrizio replied, looking at Countess Vitali as he spoke. "But your country is a dangerous place; I feel that it would be wiser for me to run away from it before"—and he paused.

"Dangerous?" repeated Ugo. "I should say that a city like Rome is much more dangerous! You have not many temptations here at Palazzo Vitali, unless you wish to take the trouble to look for them in Viterbo, and I do not know that the search would repay you, though to be sure the Viterbesi are a good-looking population. No doubt you have discovered that for yourself. But I am told that the best looking of the women are apt to go to Rome."

"Perhaps that is why he is anxious to return there," observed Cristina sarcastically. "He wishes to pursue an adventure commenced at Viterbo. We are beginning to understand, Fabrizio, why you have been able to endure life here for so long!"

Ugo laughed. "What have you got to say?" he asked of his cousin.

"It does not seem to have struck Cristina that, in returning to Rome, I might be anxious to escape from an adventure begun at Viterbo," Fabrizio replied.

Countess Vitali's eyes flashed angrily. "I did not suppose you to be so faint-hearted!" she exclaimed, with a laugh belied by the look on her face.

Ugo yawned and stretched himself in his chair. "Perbacco!" he said, "but I am tired! It was infernally hot riding to-day. I shall leave you and Cristina to settle the matter for yourselves, while I go in-doors to read the papers. I do not say that you will not find me asleep very shortly," and getting out of his chair he left his wife and Fabrizio together.

For some minutes neither of them spoke. A faint air stirred the ilex leaves, and the tops of the cypress trees swayed gently. Cristina drew a lace scarf about her neck and shoulders. "Let us walk a little," she said. "I think it is damp sitting here."

She rose from her seat, and with Fabrizio by her side began



to walk slowly up and down the terrace. As they passed the open windows of the drawing-room, they could see Ugo with his half-smoked cigar between his lips engaged in turning over the newspapers arrived that afternoon from the capital.

“Cristina!” exclaimed Fabrizio suddenly, in a low voice, “You do not understand——”

Cristina glanced rapidly towards the house. Then she fixed her eyes full on his face. “I understand—everything,” she said briefly. “How should I not?”

“But——”

She checked him with a quick gesture. “Wait,” she said softly. “Not here. In a few minutes we will go down into the gardens,” and she glanced again at the windows of the room in which Ugo was sitting.

A few minutes passed; and then, on again looking into the drawing-room, they saw that Ugo had let his newspapers slip on to the floor by his side. He had thrown away his cigar, and was evidently fast asleep.

“He often sleeps like a log, after dinner,” said Cristina, and there was a contemptuous tone in her voice; “but Taddeo will come in presently with the syrups and will rouse him. Wait——” and she went quickly into the room and stood beside her husband’s chair.

“Ugo,” she called to him, laying her hand upon his shoulder. “Why do you not go to bed? You are very tired, and it is better to sleep in bed than in that uncomfortable position.”

Count Vitali sat up and blinked his eyes. “Sicuro,” he said, “I dropped asleep. Yes, I am very tired, Cristina; and, as you say, it is better to sleep in one’s bed than in a chair. But it is early yet—we will go to bed presently.”

“It is half-past nine,” replied Cristina. “You had much better go to bed, otherwise you will not be able to get to sleep again for some time. As for me, I am not at all sleepy. I rested all the afternoon in my room—after the storm. It is so lovely out of doors to-night that I shall remain a little longer on the terrace while Fabrizio smokes.”



“Bene,” answered Ugo, yawning again. “I think I will take your advice, Cristina. Riding under that hot sun for so many hours to-day has made my head feel heavy. Will you tell Taddeo when you and Fabrizio come in that I have gone to my room, and that I do not wish to be called before seven o’clock to-morrow? Luckily, to-morrow is a festa, and I need not be out early.” He drew his wife’s face down to his and kissed her as he wished her good night. “Do you think Fabrizio really wants to leave us?” he said, “or is it that he is afraid of outstaying his welcome? I have no doubt that you will be able to get the truth out of him. After all, what he said about a country life being an idle life for a man who has no property is very likely true, and I have often thought he must feel that it is all very well for me, the owner of Palazzo Vitali, to be contented here, and that he must sometimes wish he were in my shoes. After all, he might be in them at any moment, so I like him to feel at home here for as long as he chooses to remain.”

Countess Vitali shrugged her shoulders with an air of indifference. “If I were you, I should not press your cousin to remain,” she said. “By this time he surely knows us well enough to understand that you would always be glad to see him here. As to his wishing to be in your position, he has of course never even alluded to the fact of his being your presumptive heir—any such allusion would have been in decidedly bad taste, would it not? No, let him return to Rome, if he wants to do so. You might ask him to pay us another visit later on—during the vintage, for instance.”

Ugo nodded. “Of course,” he replied, “and now,” he continued, “I am really going to bed, Cristina, I can scarcely keep my eyes open. I think the sun must have touched me a little.”

When the door had closed behind him Cristina did not immediately return to the terrace. She could discern through the windows Fabrizio’s figure on the terrace without. He had reseated himself in one of the chairs they had lately occupied, and was apparently waiting until she should have spoken to her husband. She stood for a few instants lost

in thought, an evil look upon her face. If she could have seen her at that moment, the Duchessa di San Felice would have understood what Don Basilio meant when he said that while in Countess Vitali's presence he had more than once felt as though he were in the vicinity of evil. But Don Basilio had a theory that it was part of the punishment of evil spirits who had existed on earth in the past to exercise their malign influence over human beings actually living, whose natures were willing to respond to such influence. He declared that this theory alone could account for the commission of many premeditated crimes, the object of which was quite insufficient to explain their unreasoning malignity. Vittoria di San Felice would laughingly tell him that his theory made him regard individuals not as wholly responsible beings, but as marionettes answering to the directions of a spiritual wire-puller.

Countess Vitali stood looking through the window at Fabrizio who was sitting with his back turned towards the house all unconscious of her gaze. Every sentence that she had just uttered to her husband had been a lie ; and now she was rapidly considering in her mind how she could best lie to her lover. The process of lying had always had a fascination for her. She had lied as a child ; lied throughout her convent life ; lied in her marriage to Ugo Vitali. In fact lying had been for Cristina Frezzi a *divertimento*—an excitement in an otherwise monotonous existence. Perhaps she was scarcely conscious that the playing of a part had become a second nature to her ; if, indeed, it had ever been anything else since her earliest childhood. The years spent under the care of the nuns in the convent at Perugia had certainly given her free scope to practise her talent for acting. Her shrewdness had caused her quickly to discover that among the nuns, as among her fellow-pupils, there were those who were honest in their religious convictions and those who were merely outwardly conforming, for reasons of their own, to forms and ceremonies. That these forms and ceremonies were anything more than tedious and unavoidable accidents in her daily life at Perugia, Cristina never doubted for a moment. She had no religious proclivities, and not the smallest

interest in the sayings and doings of the saints, or even in those of more exalted personages in the celestial hierarchy, except when these sayings and doings cast side-lights on the worldly matters they sought to combat. Perhaps the only genuine portion of her life with the nuns at Perugia was its educational portion.

The education provided by the convent of the Assumption was, as in all houses of that Order devoting themselves to teaching, extremely good within its own limits. All the subjects likely to be useful in later life to young girls were taught, and taught well. With nuns recruited from every nation, modern languages, and the literature of those languages—this last being, naturally, subjected to a process of severe expurgation—were imparted to pupils not, as in British educational institutions, in burlesque form, but thoroughly, and practically. Cristina Frezzi dedicated herself to these studies *con amore*. Among her fellow-boarders were girls belonging to noble families, being fitted by the nuns for the positions they might subsequently have to occupy in that great world which she hoped some day to enter. Natural shrewdness and ambition combined, both qualities no doubt inherited from her grandfather the Sicilian politician, caused Cristina to realise even at the age of fifteen or so that she must be able to compete with those girls of noble birth who were not being prepared by the nuns merely for spiritual wedlock. She knew herself to be possessed of greater physical attractions than any of her nobly born companions; and she was perfectly aware of the marketable value of this possession. She was told by other girls that her father was rich—by girls whose own fathers had reason to regard the cavaliere Frezzi as an individual blessed with an inexhaustible supply of ready money to advance in exchange for a signature. But she was shrewd enough to realise that the lack of noble blood in her veins was a handicap to her ambitions that could only be adjusted by education. Indeed, a Bavarian sister, herself of noble birth, with whom she studied German, had told her as much. The Baroness von Rosenheim—in religion Sister Teresa—had very quickly discovered that Cristina was anything but spiritually inclined. As a matter of fact, Sister Teresa's own aspirations in that direction were not of

a very high order. She had entered religion for family reasons not unconnected with material affections. There is no greater mistake, however, than to suppose that the Church, which is always and before all things the Church militant, concerns itself exclusively with the things appertaining to the next world; and the religious orders devoted to education work upon a system embracing all contingencies of character and temperament among the youth of both sexes confided to their care. If a girl or a boy displays distinct signs of a religious temperament, she or he will in all probability be useful to the Church in the Church; if, on the other hand, the worldly nature is seen to be predominant, the girl or the boy must if possible be so moulded as to be useful to the Church in the world. The strength of Catholicism, in common with that of all the older creeds from which it is evolved, has ever lain in its power of reconciling the spiritual with the material aspirations of human nature—a psychological combination the advisability of which Protestantism has been apt to overlook.

Sister Teresa had more than suspected that Cristina was little else than a pagan at heart, but it was part of her duty to insist upon the truths of German grammar, and not upon those of the Catholic Church. These last lay within the province of another department. Cristina's character had, all unknown to herself, been the subject of much discussion in that inner sanctum where, in the presence of the Mother Superior, every detail concerning the *pensionnaires* was minutely examined. It had soon become perfectly clear to the nuns where Cristina's vocation lay, and directions to those sisters entrusted with her education were given accordingly. Through Sister Teresa, to whom Cristina gradually confided as much of herself as she thought fit, the girl's natural inclinations became known to the authorities. She gave every promise of being a beautiful woman in the future; and she would be rich. But neither her beauty nor her wealth could be of any direct benefit to a spiritual bridegroom. This being the case, it was distinctly better to encourage her in her ambition to supplement her beauty and prospective riches by an education which should fit her to assume any position in the world that

these might one day help her to obtain. The influence of the convent education would probably assert itself in after life; and the bread flung upon the waters in some way or another contribute in the future to the sustenance of the Church. Of all the community in the convent at Perugia, Sister Teresa was probably the only one who suspected that Cristina was utterly indifferent to the religion which all practised with greater or less devotion. No advantage, as the girl very well knew, was to be gained by displaying any overt signs of this indifference which would at times develop into a contempt no less bitter because it had to be concealed. She was happier at the convent than she would have been at home with some old governess who would perforce have to look after her during her father's perpetual absences. At the convent, moreover, she had the constant society of other girls who were her superiors in rank and birth. It had needed all the cavaliere Frezzi's influence with certain of his clerical clients, and some of his money, to prevail upon the Mother Superior to admit the daughter of a *mercante di campagna*, however wealthy, amongst the pupils in her convent; for the houses of the Assumption vied with those of the Sacré Cœur in their exclusiveness.

And so it happened that, although it was soon confessed with sighs and shaking of heads that Cristina Frezzi had no vocation for the religious life, the nuns had no suspicion that they were harbouring a pagan in their midst. Sister Teresa kept her own counsel on the matter; her conscience being of sufficient elasticity to allow of her not communicating to her superiors all she had succeeded in learning of the girl's character.

Cristina interested her; and she looked forward to following her pupil's career when, her education being completed, she should begin her life in the world. Even Sister Teresa, however, was far from realising how very little she knew of Cristina. The Bavarian lady of long descent was no match for the cunning and the love of falsehood for falsehood's sake that Cristina Frezzi perhaps inherited from some unusually *cattivo soggetto* among her Norcian peasant ancestry. As to Cristina's confessor, the poor man never heard the truth from her lips at any time;



and as, even had he heard it, his own lips would have been sealed, there was nobody to suspect that Cristina, even though she had not "the vocation," was less of a believing Catholic than countless other young girls who were not conspicuous for their devotion to matters connected with the next world.



## CHAPTER XIII

TWO or three minutes after her husband had left the drawing-room Countess Vitali rang the bell. Whatever the thoughts might have been that caused her face to wear for a few moments an almost sinister expression, the look had passed when the young footman appeared at the door to answer the summons.

"Where is Taddeo?" Cristina asked of him. The boy spread out his hands with an apologetic gesture. Taddeo had gone in città—to the farmacia, he explained. Taddeo's wife had the fever, and he had gone to get her some saliceto. He had told him, Cesare, to answer the bell if it rang. Did the signora contessa require anything.

"You can bring in the syrups and leave them here," said Cristina, "and tell Taddeo that we shall not want anything more this evening. I am sorry to hear his wife has the fever. Tell him, too, that the signor conte has gone to his room, and that he is not to be called until seven o'clock to-morrow morning."

"And the windows?" asked the lad, with a glance at the open *bersiennes*.

"We, Count Fabrizio and I, will shut them," replied Countess Vitali, "and we will also put out the lamps. We are going to remain on the terrace for a little longer. You can bring the syrups now."

Cesare was about to leave the room when Cristina stopped him. "You quite understand, Cesare," she added. "When Taddeo returns, you will tell him that nothing more will be wanted to-night, and that Count Fabrizio and I will see that the windows are properly closed and the lamps put out before we retire. When you have brought the syrups, and Taddeo has returned, you can go to bed. Taddeo will be glad to be with his wife. The fever is not high, I suppose?"

"Signora contessa, no! an *alterazione* only—a *sciocchezza*."

Cristina nodded. "That is well," she replied. "Do not forget to tell Taddeo that he need not come upstairs again. "Buona notte, Cesare," she added pleasantly to the lad, and picking up her lace scarf she passed out on to the terrace. Fabrizio, hearing her footsteps behind him, rose from his chair and advanced to meet her.

"What have you done with Ugo?" he asked of her.

"Ugo has gone to bed," she replied. "I suggested to him that a bed was a more comfortable place to sleep in than a chair, and he agreed."

"And you—are you going to follow his example?"

Cristina looked at him. "Is that a hint that you wish to get rid of your hostess?" she inquired, with a smile. She stood in front of him, the moonlight falling upon the white folds of her dress, and glinting upon the thick coils of her hair.

Fabrizio laughed nervously. "Of course not!" he said hesitatingly, but——"

"It is early," proceeded Cristina tranquilly, "and I do not feel the least inclined to go to my room." She drew one of the wicker arm-chairs to her as she spoke, and turning it so that she could see into the windows of the drawing-room, sat down in it.

"So," she continued, a little abruptly, "you really mean to leave us and return to Rome."

"What else can I do—now?"

"I am sorry," said Cristina in a low voice, as if to herself. "But, after all, from your point of view, from a man's point of view, no doubt you are right. A man can go away, and forget. A woman must remain."

"Cristina!" exclaimed Fabrizio. "Do you not see? can you not understand? it would be a *tradimento*. Ugo——"

Countess Vitali interrupted him with a warning gesture. Within the drawing-room Cesare was moving to and fro, arranging a tray on which were syrups of various kinds of fruits, ice, and fresh spring water. She called him out on to the terrace. "You can close all the windows but the centre one," she said to him. "Has Taddeo returned?" she added.

"Signora contessa, sì—and I have given him the messages.

He has gone to give the saliceto to his wife, and has told me to close everything downstairs and to go to bed. Has the signora contessa any further orders?"

"No, that is all."

"Felice notte, signora contessa!" In a minute or two came the sound of closing shutters, and the lamps in the drawing-room cast a streak of yellow light across the white, moonlit terrace.

"If I go away," said Fabrizio presently, when the footman had left the drawing-room, "it is not to forget. If I were any other man, and not myself, if you were not Ugo's wife, I should not want to go away before—before it was too late!"

"And if it is already too late?"

Fabrizio looked at her. "Already too late?" he repeated.

Cristina Vitali laughed—a bitter laugh.

"Not quite, you think," she said quickly. "But that, again, is from your point of view—from a man's. It is never too late, from the man's point of view, until he has got all he wants from a woman; and even then—" and she completed her sentence by a shrug of the shoulders.

"No!" Fabrizio exclaimed impetuously. "You have no right to put that construction on my motives, Cristina, no right at all. Why is it that you cannot, or that you will not understand? Ugo has treated me well, and—and—oh, for the love of God do not look at me like that, one is not a stone, you know! Did you not tell me yourself the other day that of course I could not remain here indefinitely? Why will you not let me go away now, while there is yet time?"

"You are afraid of compromising yourself with Ugo," Cristina said in a low voice, "but you do not think of me! Why do you not tell me the truth?"

"I told you the truth this afternoon," returned Fabrizio; "or, if I did not use words, it was the same thing."

"And I," said Cristina, looking at him always, and her brown eyes seemed to dilate and gleam golden in the moonlight—"I did not use words, either. Come," she added, as Fabrizio with a sudden movement rose to his feet and drew nearer to her, "let

us walk a little. We are too close to the house to talk freely. Some servant might be listening from behind the *persiennes*." She moved away as she spoke and walked slowly down the terrace towards the central flight of steps leading down to the gardens beneath. Leaning against one of the grey stone vases flanking the balustrade of the steps, she glanced upwards at the house. With the exception of the open window of the drawing-room and the faint light issuing from it, not a sign of life was to be seen in Palazzo Vitali. The green casements on every storey were closed, and the lofty façade rose bare and cold in the moonlight. Not a sound was to be heard, except the chirping of the grills, the gentle splashing of a fountain, and now and again the plaintive *chiù-chiù* of the owls. Cristina turned, and followed by Fabrizio descended the steps. Turning down a broad path bordered on each side by hedges of box they entered the ilex avenue skirting one side of the gardens. The moonbeams straying through the heavy foliage cast little chequered patterns of light and shadow on the path beneath, falling here and there on the seamed trunks of the trees that had seen medieval pope and cardinals pacing beneath them, and Donna Giulia Vitali in converse with the lover who was destined to be her victim.

"Why do you accuse me of fearing to compromise myself with Ugo?" Fabrizio said, pausing in an open glade in the avenue, in the centre of which was a statue of Ganymede, whose hand was reposing on the back of a headless eagle.

"It is natural that you should fear to offend him," answered Cristina coldly. "Are you not his heir?"

Fabrizio muttered an impatient exclamation. "His heir-at-law—yes," he said, "but that means very little. Ugo might sell his property if he chose. Besides, as I have told you before, he and I are too nearly of the same age to make it worth while to consider such vague contingencies."

Countess Vitali smiled. "They are less vague than you think, Fabrizio. Ugo has been talking to me lately about his affairs. Except my *porzione vedovile*, everything, as things stand at present, would go to you should he die before you."

Notwithstanding his efforts to appear indifferent, Fabrizio Vitali

could not repress a slight start. "Even so," he said, after a slight pause, during which Cristina watched him with the same smile on her lips, "the contingency remains as vague as before. There is no reason why I should outlive Ugo, and I do not wish to think about it," he added impatiently.

"No," observed Cristina thoughtfully, "as you say, there is no reason why you should outlive Ugo. But one never knows. Life is an uncertain thing, non è vero? No, decidedly, one never knows."

"Why did you marry him? why, Cristina?" asked Fabrizio suddenly.

"*Ma!*" exclaimed Countess Vitali, with a short sigh. It is perhaps lucky for you that I did, amico mio. Had he married a woman who had brought him children, where would you be? Besides, when I married I did not know anything of life; worse than that, I did not know myself. How can you expect a girl just out of a convent to know what life may contain?"

This contradiction to assurances he had heard before from Cristina's lips as to the occupants of convents being far from ignorant of what passed in the world outside their walls, escaped Fabrizio's notice.

"As for why I married Ugo, you have asked me that question before, and I have answered it," proceeded Cristina. "It was a mistake, but I never realised until lately how great a mistake."

"Until lately?"

"Until very lately. This afternoon, perhaps!"

Fabrizio felt as if the blood were mounting to his head and surging through his brain. He caught her hands and drew her to him.

"Cristina!" he exclaimed, "do you mean that?"

She let her hands remain in his for a moment and then drew them gently away.

"Ah, no?" she whispered. "It is useless, Fabrizio, you can never take back that kiss, never! All the same, you will leave me, because I am your cousin's wife and not another woman whom you could have loved without endangering your own interests."



“Perdio,” swore Fabrizio, “you are unjust! Do you think I would not sacrifice my interests to have your love? You are unjust, Cristina, and you are cruel as well.”

A silence fell between them. From the open country beyond the gardens came the faint whirring of the goatsuckers hawking for moths. A great bat swooped down from the higher branches of the ilex trees and almost touched them with its wings as it circled round them. Fabrizio could see its eyes, and its lips drawn back in an evil grin; and something in the creature, he knew not what, recalled Donna Giulia’s face to his mind, as that face had gazed at him from the canvas in the gallery a few hours before. The impression passed in a moment, however. Cristina stood before him, her gaze fixed upon him, and he had no thought then but for her beauty. Had she not confessed that she loved him, and did he not know now that she was ready to give herself to him?

Cristina’s voice, low and rapid, broke the silence. “You are right to think of your interests,” she said, “and I think of them also. Some day, perhaps, I will show you that they have been safe in my hands. But,” she added, with a ring of contempt in her tones, “you are afraid to trust me. All the same, you were not afraid this afternoon!”

“And I am not afraid now!” burst out Fabrizio. He seized her hands again, and drawing her to him, kissed her with hot, passionate kisses. “I am not afraid any longer,” he continued, “you have conquered, Cristina, and we belong to one another from this night. Why should I throw away what the Gods have sent into my life? are there not hundreds and thousands of people in the same condition as ourselves—who love each other but may not confess their love before the world?”

He was unconscious that his words were addressed as much to himself as to her. His passion had mastered him, and his scruples of honour, nay even his self-interest, were thrown to the winds. The philosophers were forgotten, and with them the exercise of the power of Will that was to dominate action and teach men to be reliant only on themselves.

Into Countess Vitali’s eyes as she listened to his words



came a fleeting expression of a triumph. But her eyes had lightened with another expression as well, and one that was not wholly assumed. Ugo Vitali had seen it, during the first months of his marriage, and had mistaken it for love. And yet on this occasion Cristina's eyes had not lied. In yielding herself to Fabrizio's kisses she was conscious that she was moved by something more than passion, something that had never before entered into her life. That afternoon, when she had shut herself into her room after leaving Fabrizio, she had experienced a surprise that was almost bewilderment. Was it possible, she asked herself, that she loved Fabrizio—not with that love she had felt for her husband, which had scarcely survived its material satisfaction before it became a weariness, but with a love that was not all passion? The thought was absurd. As a man, Fabrizio was inferior to his cousin in everything, save perhaps in his intellect. She knew his weaknesses, realised his egoism that formed so prominent a contrast with Ugo's frank generosity of character. She even despised him for his vacillation, for the weak way in which he allowed his good impulses to hinder, but only to hinder, his bad ones, causing him to search for excuses to himself even at the moment of yielding to his desires. But in spite of his inferiority to Ugo in character, in bodily strength and manly bearing and good looks—perhaps even on account of the contrast in all points between him and her husband, Cristina had of late become conscious that Fabrizio had aroused sympathies in her which Ugo had entirely failed to call forth. From the first she had played with him, as a cat may play with a mouse, secure in the conviction that sooner or later she could give him the *coup de patte* which would stun all other feelings in him. It was true that she had no respect for him, and even a little contempt; but many women have given their love where they could not give their respect, their ability to do so forming not the least of the complexities and contradictions of the female temperament.

For a moment or two Cristina remained passive in Fabrizio's embrace. Then she released herself from it, looking apprehensively into the deep shadows cast by the ilex trees all around the spot on which they were standing.

"But of course!" she murmured. "Is it so rare a position—yours and mine? I have heard that, in Rome, it is the rule rather than the exception, such love as ours."

"Ah," returned Fabrizio quickly, "in Rome it would be easy enough! but here—" and he paused.

Cristina frowned. "We must think," she said briefly.

"You must make Ugo bring you to Rome," Fabrizio continued. "But the winter is a long way off, and in the meantime——"

"In the meantime," interrupted Cristina, "we must be careful, Fabrizio, we must think, as I said just now. Of course you must return to Rome—this week or next week, what does it matter? You will come back to Palazzo Vitali later on. Ugo means to ask you to return here for the vintage, when you have been to the *bagni*. You must trust everything to me, and you will see that we shall be happy, *amor mio*. Perhaps I shall be able to persuade Ugo to pass a season in Rome—who knows?"

Fabrizio looked at her eagerly, "But you will not send me away from you without giving me——"

Cristina checked him with a sudden gesture. "Pazienza!" she whispered. "We must have patience, Fabrizio mio, and prudence. Before you go, you shall be happy. I swear it."

"Cristina!" exclaimed Fabrizio. "Cristina!"

"Hush! You must be patient." She spoke as though soothing a child. "Andiamo, Fabrizio," she continued quickly, "andiamoci! we have been here long enough. The clocks are striking ten."

She turned as she spoke, and together they retraced their steps down the avenue. The moon had passed behind the house, the front of which was now in shadow; only the light from the drawing-room streamed across the terrace. Ascending the steps in silence they passed into the room, and Cristina quietly closed and bolted the *persiennes* and the window. Not a sound was to be heard within the house. Countess Vitali lighted a candle, and pouring a little syrup of oranges into a glass, added some water, and drank it.

Fabrizio gazed at her earnestly, questioningly. "Another

quarter of an hour," he pleaded. "The house is asleep, we shall be undisturbed here."

Cristina shook her head. "Pazienza," she repeated, with a smile. "For this evening, I have given you enough. Buona notte, Fabrizio, sleep well! and before you leave the room, remember to put out the lamps, and to take a candle with you, or you will lose your way to your room. I hope Donna Giulia will not appear to you as you go through the gallery!" and passing him quickly she disappeared through the double doors leading to the apartments she and Ugo occupied.

Left to himself, Fabrizio poured himself out a glass of iced water and drank it hastily. The coldness of it refreshed his throat which was dry and parched, and seemed to calm the blood running riot through his veins. Almost mechanically he extinguished the old-fashioned moderator lamps, and taking up the candle Cristina had already lighted for him, he left the drawing-room by the doors opposite to those through which she had just vanished. He walked through the suite of deserted rooms on the *piano nobile* and on reaching the gallery, unconsciously quickened his steps. At the end of the long room, by the door through which he had to pass to gain the ante-chamber out of which his own apartment opened, hung the portrait of Donna Giulia Vitali, but to-night Fabrizio was determined that he would not allow his glance to fall on it. Turning his head in the opposite direction he reached the door and closed it behind him, not without a sense of relief that he had not again encountered the eyes that had seemed that afternoon to follow him with their mocking gaze, nor heard the laugh that since his dream on the night of his arrival at Palazzo Vitali had haunted his imagination.

On gaining his own room he set his candle down on a table near the bed and flung himself into an arm-chair, trying, as Cristina had told him to do, to think. But connected thought was impossible, for chaos was reigning in his brain, and a mad desire. Patience? till to-morrow, the day after, for how long. It could not be for long. Ugo was away nearly every day, for hours, and Ugo would never know. Besides, Cristina did not know—did not realise what she was doing when she married Ugo,

she had not known what love meant. He was sorry for Ugo, but, after all, in love and in war people must take their chance; and if fortune had chosen to favour him and not Ugo, it was no fault of his. Besides, if Cristina's suspicions were true, and Ugo were in love with the San Felice, Ugo could console himself,—probably had consoled himself before now.

At length, wearied with trying to collect his thoughts, Fabrizio rose, and lighting the candles on the dressing-table began to take off his clothes preparatory to going to bed, unlikely though it was that sleep would come to him for at any rate some hours. He selected a book—not a philosophic work, but a novel from among some which Cristina had lent him—and after blowing out the other lights on the dressing-table carried it, together with a candle, to the bedside. Suddenly he started back with an exclamation of horrified dismay, while book and candle fell together on the floor plunging the room into what seemed for the moment to be absolute darkness. It was only gradually that the moonlight filtering through the shutters showed Fabrizio that his eyes had not deceived him, and that here was no trick of disordered nerves. On the bed, as he had found it the first night he had passed in Palazzo Vitali, was the crucifix, with the ivory Christ concealed beneath the ebony cross which stood out, an omen of death, black and forbidding against the white linen of the pillow beneath it.

## CHAPTER XIV

IT was late the following morning when Fabrizio Vitali left his room. After the first feelings of dismay that so unlucky a portent should have repeated itself had subsided, he began to reason with his superstitious fears. A hasty examination of the spot where the crucifix had hung showed that the nail had evidently again given way. That the crucifix should have fallen face downwards was also natural, since the ivory figure of the Christ was of course heavier than the cross itself. Nevertheless, as he had observed to Cristina on the former occasion, the sight of the object lying where it did was unpleasantly suggestive of things upon which he, at all events, did not care to allow his mind to dwell. Had this repetition of so sinister a portent occurred at any other moment, it would almost certainly have created a much deeper impression on Fabrizio than was actually the case. His mind, however, was occupied with thoughts far more material, and the turmoil of passion banished all other feelings, leaving him considerably more indifferent to the presence of the cross upon the pillows of his bed than he had been on the first night of his visit to Palazzo Vitali.

He was, indeed, in the mental condition of one who, having decided to stifle scruples of conscience, becomes reckless from the dread of any longer hearing their voice. The very feeling that Cristina was still something of a mystery to him—that while she roused in him all his desires there was yet something unknown and intangible about her which repelled even when it attracted him, added to his passion. He longed to realise this unknown element in the woman who had that evening promised to give herself to him—as a traveller presses forward to explore some fresh tract of country temporarily hidden from his view by the windings of the road he treads.

Sleep had come to him at last with the early hours of the

morning; and his sleep, very unlike that into which he had fallen on the night when he had first found the crucifix on his pillows, was untroubled and dreamless. The entrance of Taddeo with hot water awakened him at an hour when he would gladly have slept on; and the hot water was less than tepid when he finally roused himself.

An exclamation of dismay from the old servant on seeing the crucifix lying on the table where Fabrizio had placed it caused him to raise himself in bed. Taddeo's countenance expressed the liveliest concern and, indeed, horror.

"Santissimo Dio!" the man ejaculated, at the same time crossing himself, "did the signore find the cross again upon his bed? It is incredible! and I who drove the nail in firmly with my own hands! *mah!*" and he shook his head anxiously.

Fabrizio smiled at his consternation. He was not going to allow his own superstitions to be kindled afresh. "Of course the crucifix has fallen again," he said carelessly. "If you look at the wall, Taddeo, you will see that the nail has broken away as it did before. The crucifix is heavy, and the plaster of the wall will not support its weight."

Taddeo looked at him earnestly. "Signor Fabrizio," he said solemnly, "the wall has borne that Christ for forty years to my knowledge, and I believe it has hung there ever since Donna Giulia's days—may her soul rest in peace!" and he crossed himself again.

"In that case, it is all the more natural that the crucifix should fall now," said Fabrizio. "The nail was probably corroded by age," he added.

"How corroded by age?" returned Taddeo indignantly. "It was a new nail. I bought it myself at the tinsmith's. It is a brutto augurio. To happen once—well, it might be an accident, perhaps; but to fall twice, after so many years—" and he shook his head again despondently.

"Sciocchezze!" exclaimed Fabrizio irritably. "You can leave the hot water, Taddeo, and close the shutters a little, I am sleepy still, and it is early. You can bring me the coffee when I ring."



Taddeo obeyed, muttering to himself the while. He lingered about the room, and more than once took the crucifix up and examined it attentively.

"Signor Fabrizio," he said hesitatingly, as he opened the door.

"Well?" Fabrizio asked drowsily.

"The signore will pardon an old man, but if he has any enterprise on hand, of money, love, che ne so io?—he will do well to take the warning and abandon it, for it will end ill."

Fabrizio turned impatiently. "Storie!" he exclaimed contemptuously. "You can see for yourself, Taddeo, what caused the crucifix to give way."

"Scusi—but it is the signore who will see for himself that the nail is a new nail, and that the plaster has been torn away by force from the wall," and returning to the bedside, Taddeo held the nail out for Fabrizio's inspection. "It was hanging to the ring of the cross," he added, "and as the signore may see, it is all bent, as though it had been torn from the wall."

Fabrizio looked at it, and saw that the man was evidently not mistaken.

"And who can have torn it from the wall?" he asked, half of himself.

Taddeo looked at him quickly, and then he crossed himself. "Chi sa?" he replied, in a low voice. "It is Donna Giulia's room—I myself have heard her walking through these apartments——"

Fabrizio laughed. "Basta!" he said scornfully. "As to Donna Giulia—she has been dust for two hundred years and more. You are an imbecile, Taddeo, and I want to sleep again."

Taddeo shrugged his shoulders. "*Puo' essere,*" he observed tranquilly; "but, if the signore is wise, he will not proceed in any adventure in which he may be engaged. *Finirà male,*" and he closed the door behind him, repeating the words "*finirà male*" as he did so.

The desire to sleep left Fabrizio. He remained thinking over Taddeo's words. It was certainly strange that the crucifix should have fallen a second time, and stranger still that, as Taddeo had pointed out, it seemed almost to have been wrenched from the wall by some physical force. As to Donna Giulia having anything to do with the matter, that was obviously absurd—a piece of childish superstition, the result, no doubt, of tales told among the servants concerning her pretended appearances in the apartments she had once occupied. Nevertheless, the man's evident fear of some imminent misfortune being foreshadowed by the occurrence revived Fabrizio's own misgivings. Nor did Taddeo's warning tend to diminish his uneasiness. Was it possible, he wondered, that the old servant had some suspicion as to his feelings towards Cristina? That Taddeo was devoted to Ugo, with that unswerving devotion to their employers often to be found among dependents in Italy, Fabrizio was well aware. He knew, too, that Taddeo was by no means equally devoted to Countess Vitali. On one occasion, Ugo, half amused and half annoyed, had told him that he believed Taddeo to be jealous of Cristina, with the jealousy of an old retainer of a fresh influence brought into the household. Count Vitali had appeared anxious that his wife should not notice that Taddeo's manner towards her was of an unvarying formality, respectful but dry, which concealed a secret dislike and was altogether very different from the semi-familiarity, also invariably respectful—but at the same time the evident outcome of affection and esteem—of his attitude towards Ugo himself.

On further consideration, however, Fabrizio dismissed as improbable the idea that Taddeo's warning had been uttered with any *arrière pensée* in his mind. Taddeo would no doubt himself suspend any business he might have in hand had he happened to find a cross lying on his bed. Such an offering to his superstition would be perfectly natural on the part of an old man brought up among the traditions of his class, and a devout believer in all things in which he, Fabrizio, had long ceased to believe. Moreover, Taddeo had named money enterprises—and

not those of love only, as necessary to be abandoned in deference to the evil omen—doubtless under the impression that a young man was tolerably sure to be engaged in the pursuit either of the former or of the latter commodity, if not of both simultaneously.

When he eventually left his room he found Countess Vitali already seated in her usual corner of the terrace. On learning from him that he had again found the crucifix lying on his bed, Cristina displayed a sudden agitation which caused him no little surprise, and, it must be confessed, no little satisfaction. Her demeanour was very different from the mocking attitude she had adopted on the former occasion. She seemed, indeed, to share Taddeo's view that this second fall of the crucifix could not be regarded as a mere coincidence, but rather as a warning of some impending calamity.

It was Fabrizio now who, in his efforts at once to reassure himself and her, mocked at the idea of the incident being due to any but purely natural causes, and at the folly of regarding it as having any special significance, sinister or otherwise.

But Cristina was not easily reassured. A cross was a cross; and, except in its normal surroundings, a sign of misfortune if not of worse things. Fabrizio reminded her that she had scoffed at him only a few weeks before for having had the same fears. "If it had occurred only once," he insisted, "we might look upon it as a bad omen; but the same thing having happened a second time is a proof that the fall of the crucifix is simply due to natural causes. It is absurd to be afraid, Cristina, and I cannot think what has made you so."

"You have made me so," she replied briefly.

"I?" returned Fabrizio. "But have I not been telling you that it is ridiculous to be so superstitious?"

Christina looked at him. "You do not understand," she said in a low voice. "I am not afraid of misfortune for myself—but for us. You laugh at me because you recollect that a few weeks ago I looked at the matter very differently. That is quite true. But since then—" and she paused.

“What has happened since then to change your ideas?” asked Fabrizio, smiling.

“Everything. You have come into my life—and now I am afraid—afraid of anything that seems to threaten us.”

Her words sent a thrill of pleasure through Fabrizio, for could he need a fuller admission that she reciprocated his love for her?

“You are not like Taddeo, then,” he said presently, with a smile, “you would not advise me to abandon any enterprise in love on account of the omen.”

Cristina started. “Did Taddeo say that?” she exclaimed, frowning.

Fabrizio nodded. “For a moment,” he replied, “I wondered whether the old man had any suspicions—but I am convinced he spoke in good faith—for he coupled money enterprises with those of love as threatened with ill-luck. A proposito, Cristina,” he added, “do you know the history of that crucifix? Has it hung, as Taddeo evidently believes, in the same position ever since Donna Giulia’s days?”

“That I cannot tell you—but it is possible. Very little has been changed in Palazzo Vitali during the last two hundred years. The crucifix is undoubtedly a very old one, and it has a peculiarity which you will probably not have noticed. Ugo once pointed it out to me.”

“It seems to be like any other crucifix,” observed Fabrizio, “a painful representation of a barbarous punishment. But religion seems to need the perpetual contemplation of horrors!”

“It is not like other crucifixes,” Countess Vitali replied. “The Christ has his eyes wide open. That is quite heretical, it seems—so much so, indeed, that in the eleventh century, a town not many miles from here<sup>1</sup> was utterly destroyed and its inhabitants massacred because they persisted in the heresy of representing the Christ on their crucifixes with open eyes. Ugo will tell you all about it; for as I say, I derive my information from him. It is quite likely that the Vitali possessed one of

<sup>1</sup> Ferento, the Etruscan Firentinum, the ruins of which still exist.

these heretical crucifixes taken from Ferento; but Donna Giulia, I should say, would hardly have ventured to hang it in her bedroom, as she was so closely connected with a pope."

Fabrizio laughed. "What an edifying story!" he observed; "a town destroyed and its population murdered because the eyes of Christ were open! But, after all, it was a sensible precaution of the priests to insist upon Christ keeping His eyes shut."

"Altro!" said Cristina drily, "but do not say so to Ugo. Fabrizio," she added suddenly, "you may laugh at me if you choose, but I wish the crucifix had not fallen again. I will have it removed altogether from that room."

"If I were Ugo, I would sell it," observed Fabrizio. "As it has the peculiarity you speak of, some Englishman or American would probably give a good price for it. I should declare it belonged to some famous character—Lucrezia Borgia, for instance."

Cristina smiled. "Why Lucrezia Borgia particularly," she asked.

"She was supposed to be a poisoner, so was Donna Giulia Vitali, only nobody knows about Donna Giulia. I imagine, Cristina, Taddeo firmly believes that Donna Giulia placed the crucifix on my bed. Poor Donna Giulia, she probably only did what the force of circumstances compelled her to do."

Countess Vitali looked up. "I have often thought that," she said.

"All the same," continued Fabrizio lightly, determined to distract her thoughts from dwelling upon evil presentiments, "I shall never understand why she did not poison her husband, and continue her liaison with her lover. It would have been more natural. She must have been a weak woman to allow her husband and the Moidalchini to frighten her into playing their game."

"A weak woman? perhaps," said Cristina thoughtfully.

"There is certainly something mysterious about the cardinal's apartments," continued Fabrizio, after a pause during which

Countess Vitali traced patterns with the point of her parasol on the flagstones of the terrace. "One feels the atmosphere of the past in them. Do you know, Cristina, that once or twice I have imagined that someone laughed close beside me, when I have been passing through those rooms? If I were a superstitious person, and believed in people having souls and all that kind of thing, I might fancy that the laugh came from Donna Giulia. Unfortunately, I know that it only comes from my own imagination, for I heard the same laugh for the first time in a bad dream the night of my arrival here. Of course, as I was not very well then, it must have become in some way impressed on my memory."

"You never told me that," Cristina said quickly.

"No; because you would have laughed at me, as I should have laughed at myself had I believed it to be anything else than a mere trick of the brain."

"It is strange the people here should be so firmly convinced that Donna Giulia haunts the place," Countess Vitali remarked. "I should like really to know the history of that woman," she added, "the history of her inner self, I mean. Ugo has some old letters, I believe, relating to her story, but I have never seen them."

"Perhaps she will appear to you some day," said Fabrizio, "and then you could ask her to explain why she got rid of her lover instead of getting rid of her husband. After all," he continued, "family difficulties were dealt with simply in those days—if somewhat crudely. If relatives were in the way, they were promptly removed."

Cristina looked at him quickly. "Yes," she said with a sudden laugh. "If we had lived in those days, you and I, we should have poisoned Ugo, or paid some *bravo* to assassinate him."

Fabrizio laughed too. "Or Ugo would have done the same by us," he replied lightly. "On the whole," he added, "perhaps it is better that we live in more civilised times, and that we employ lawyers instead of *bravi* to settle our differences."

Countess Vitali did not speak for a moment or two, but her



eyes were fixed upon Fabrizio with an enquiring expression as though she were trying to read his thoughts.

"Supposing Taddeo were right," she said presently, "and that it was Donna Giulia who placed the crucifix on your bed, that her spirit has been near us all the time?"

"Cristina!" exclaimed Fabrizio. "What absurdities have you got into your head? It is all very well for Taddeo to have such ideas, he is an uneducated man, and from his earliest childhood has probably heard silly tales concerning Donna Giulia. Of course I was joking when I said just now that perhaps she would appear to you!"

"I wish she would!" said Cristina. "I should like to ask her——"

"What?" demanded Fabrizio, as she paused.

"Oh, many things."

Fabrizio shrugged his shoulders. "In any case," he said in a low voice, "I do not suppose you want to take Taddeo's warning?"

"Do *you* want to do so?" she asked.

"*Giammai!*" exclaimed Fabrizio emphatically. "Do you think me so weak as to listen to such nonsense, nothing would make any difference now, surely you must know that!" He glanced up at the windows of the house as he spoke, fearful of explaining himself further, lest his words might be overheard.

"Nothing?" asked Cristina abruptly. "Whatever might happen in the future, we should still belong to each other." She dropped her voice to a murmur.

Fabrizio leaned forward. "I swear it!" he replied.

"And I—I swear it also," and Cristina's eyes flashed as she said the words.

"And so," Fabrizio said with a laugh, raising his voice again to the usual pitch. "Donna Giulia may do her worst!"

"Her worst—yes, or her best," returned Countess Vitali ambiguously.

"And Ugo?" Fabrizio asked suddenly, "he is out as usual, I suppose?"

"He has gone to mass," replied Cristina. "To-day is a festa,

you must know. Oh, not one of the great feste of the Church, but a local affair. You would not be any the wiser if I told you the name of the saint Viterbo is honouring to-day. Ugo will be back before breakfast-time."

"Then we shall not have to-day to ourselves," said Fabrizio, and he looked at her meaningly.

Cristina shook her head. "Pazienza!" she answered with a smile. "Every day is not a festa," she added.

"But my days with you are limited now," urged Fabrizio.

"For the moment. But early in September you will come back, for the vintage. We must settle that matter with Ugo to-day, so that it shall be an understood thing. You have never assisted at a vintage, of course, and you are very anxious to see one."

Fabrizio laughed. "Sicuro!" he replied, "my country tastes——"

"And after the vintage," proceeded Countess Vitali, "comes the autumn, and winter is not far behind it. And in winter I shall make Ugo bring me to Rome."

*Magari!* exclaimed Fabrizio. "But how will you persuade him to do that, Cristina?"

"It will not be I who will persuade him."

"Who, then?" Fabrizio asked. "He will scarcely be persuaded by me," he added drily. "There would be something—well, original in the situation. No, Cristina, Ugo is simple, unsuspecting, it is true, but he is hardly so simple as all that. Were I to say more to him on that subject than I have already said, he would certainly begin to wonder what my motives might be for taking so much interest in his movements!"

Countess Vitali glanced at him. "It seems," she said, "that you are nearly as simple as Ugo! No, I should not think that the suggestion would come any better from you than from me—and, as you say, there would be something decidedly original in the lover persuading the husband to take such a step, a situation savouring of a French *pocharde*."

"But who, then?" repeated Fabrizio. "I do not understand."

"*Ma!*" returned Cristina with a slight shrug of the shoulders, "from the San Felice. Decidedly, Fabrizio, you, too, are simple and unsuspecting, it must run in your family to be so!"

"Not always," retorted Fabrizio, smiling, "the husband of Donna Giulia, per esempio, he was not so! But seriously, Cristina, do you mean to say that you believe the San Felice to have more influence over Ugo than yourself?"

Countess Vitali laughed—a hard laugh.

"Do I think it?" she replied sarcastically.

"But I remember you telling me—the day when the duchessa called here—that her friendship with Ugo was purely platonic. To be sure, what you told me afterwards of the anonymous letter, and other remarks of yours, have made me suspect that you yourself do not believe in its being platonic."

"I told you as much," interrupted Cristina almost angrily. "Of course I do not believe in its being so. The San Felice knows very well that I do not. I could not tell you all, Fabrizio mio," she continued in a low voice, "not then, but now—well, now our interests are one. You can understand how much I have had to endure since I married Ugo, and how quickly I realised that our marriage was a fatal mistake."

Fabrizio looked at her compassionately. "Povera la mia Cristina!" he murmured. "Yes, I understand, and I am glad that I understand. Shall I tell you why I am glad?" he added.

"Yes, tell me! Tell me everything," said Cristina eagerly.

"Because the knowledge that Ugo has not been faithful to you removes the last of my scruples. After all, what right has he to complain if you pay him back in his own coin?"

"Ah, you understand. I am glad," said Countess Vitali, simply—and her eyes expressed the rest.

"I wish you would show me that letter, Cristina, I should like to read it," Fabrizio remarked, after a pause.

Cristina's expression changed, and she gave him one of her rapid, stealthy glances.

"I destroyed it," she said.

“That is a pity,” observed Fabrizio, “the letter might have been useful some day—one never knows.”

“It was foolish of me to destroy it,” Cristina continued, “but I did so immediately. After all, I had nobody to confide in—nobody to help me. But now—” Her voice changed suddenly. “Here comes Ugo,” she said quickly—and at that moment Count Vitali appeared at the end of the terrace.

## CHAPTER XV

C RISTINA VITALI was fully conscious that she had succeeded in establishing her influence over Fabrizio. She had not been unaware of his struggles, feeble though these had been, to escape from the nets she had gradually drawn round him ; and his incapacity to break through their meshes had given her a sense of satisfaction and security in her power over him. She was convinced that the fear of injuring his future interests was the only reason which had caused Fabrizio to hesitate to declare his passion for her. The scruples of conscience as to injuring his kinsman's honour and repaying Ugo's kindness with ingratitude she did not for a moment believe to have any real existence. They were, she told herself, mere excuses which Fabrizio advanced in order not to allow her to think that his only real scruple was lest he should compromise his own interests. That her lover should think it worth while to advance such scruples filled Countess Vitali with an impatient surprise, since they were of a nature which in no way appealed to her, nor could she understand them. This being the case, she had contemptuously dismissed them as *storie* which were merely put forward to save appearances and not to be regarded as affecting the matter. It was impossible, she argued to herself, that Fabrizio should be otherwise than envious of his cousin's position, and that his mind should not dwell upon the fact that chance might yet place him in that position. She had shrewdly suspected, moreover, that Fabrizio's original motive in visiting Palazzo Vitali was not altogether unconnected with a desire to improve his acquaintanceship with Ugo and to ascertain for himself what Ugo's intentions might be as to the future disposition of his property should he continue to be childless. That her husband had in the past invited his cousin to Palazzo Vitali on more than one occasion Countess Vitali knew ; and she was convinced that Fabrizio's tardy acceptance was only due to the

fact that now nearly three years had passed since Ugo's marriage and no children had appeared to oust him from his position as his cousin's presumptive heir. It had not been difficult to make Fabrizio admit that his mind occasionally dwelt upon the possibilities this position might in the future open out for him. This admission had in itself been sufficient to convince Cristina that, whatever he might profess to the contrary, Fabrizio regarded her husband as an obstacle between him and a state of life which, compared with his present condition, would be prosperity. It had been part of her plan to encourage this idea in the mind of the man who, sooner or later, she knew would become her lover ; and by suggestions more or less subtle and concealed beneath a show of sympathy ; by scarcely veiled hints as to his being far more fitted than Ugo to possess lands and money and to be Count Vitali which flattered Fabrizio's vanity, she believed that she had done so.

She was aware that, at all events during the first few days of his cousin's visit, her husband had talked to him of her when they were alone together ; and it was evident that Fabrizio was convinced of Ugo's affection for her. Such a conviction was undesirable, and must be removed. Cristina had no wish to appear as a woman capable of deliberately preparing to deceive a husband who was devoted to her. She preferred that Fabrizio should regard her as a wife whom force of circumstances obliged silently to submit to being wronged. The thought had flashed across her mind on the occasion when the Duchessa di San Felice had driven over from Villa Falconara a few days after Fabrizio's arrival, that it would be amusing to lead him to suspect a liaison between the duchessa and her husband to which she, Cristina, had to feign blindness. Very soon she had come to see how this pretended liaison might with advantage be still further developed and insisted upon. The anonymous letter, by which Ugo's marriage to her was revealed as being nothing more nor less than a clever contrivance on the part of the duchessa to enable Ugo and her to continue their relations without scandal, had no existence save in Cristina's ready imagination ; but, although purely visionary, it had served its purpose. It had convinced Fabrizio that his



cousin's wife was to be pitied—and, as he had himself told her, it had removed the last of those scruples which she believed to be as imaginary as the letter itself. Fabrizio would henceforth listen to Ugo's professions of marital affection with his tongue in his cheek.

In the early days of Fabrizio's visit it had been an amusement to Countess Vitali to exercise her powers of fascination over a newcomer. To exercise them over Ugo had long ceased to interest her, and Fabrizio, after all, was the first man with whom she had had any opportunity of becoming intimately acquainted since her marriage; for she did not regard the young Viterbesi who occasionally came to Palazzo Vitali as being worth her attention, since they did not belong to the world into which she was determined some day to enter.

She had very soon begun to make comparisons in her own mind between her husband and her husband's cousin, and the making of comparisons under certain circumstances is apt to be a dangerous occupation. The hours passed in the latter's company soon became hours she looked forward to as bringing with them a welcome change from the limited topics to which the conversation of the former was usually restricted. Moreover, the difference in personal looks and physique between Ugo Vitali and his cousin was not omitted from her comparisons. No two men could have been more unlike, and each was of a type looked upon with favour by women, though more rarely, perhaps, by the same women. But there are some women, as there are many men, who are attracted by change, and seek it; and Cristina was one of these. She had wearied, both mentally and physically, of the more animal type as represented by her husband, perhaps because that type was more nearly akin to her own; whereas Fabrizio, in form and features, bore the impress of greater refinement of temperament.

It was not until Fabrizio had displayed evident signs of a determination to bring his visit to a close and to return to Rome that Cristina realized all that his society had meant to her. She looked forward with impatience and weariness to resuming the tête-à-tête life with her husband. Yet Fabrizio could not, of

course, remain at Palazzo Vitali indefinitely. People had, no doubt, already begun to comment on the duration of his stay, for the ties of relationship between him and Ugo were, after all, not very close. He certainly could not form the third of a permanent *ménage à trois* in Palazzo Vitali, as another Vitali had done a couple of centuries ago when Donna Giulia Maidalchini was in the place which she, Cristini Frezzi, now occupied. Had Fabrizio been Ugo's brother— The first time this thought had come into Countess Vitali's mind in the course of her meditations she had recoiled from it with a sense of repugnance. There was something sinister in the connection of ideas. The lack of any high standard of morality on the part of Donna Giulia in allowing herself to become her brother-in-law's mistress had never greatly concerned Cristina. It was no doubt a somewhat flagrant breach of rules laid down for the well-being of society generally, but she had read enough of the medieval doings of her compatriots to know that they were not in the habit of practising their immoralities in any half-hearted or scrupulous manner. Donna Giulia's erratic behaviour, however, had led to unpleasant consequences for her lover. There was a lurid atmosphere of crime and death enveloping the whole story. Its exhalations seemed to Cristina to reach her across the centuries together with the thought that, strangely enough, she found herself in a position somewhat similar to that in which Donna Giulia Maidalchini-Vitali had found herself some two hundred and fifty years previously.

Cristina brooded over this thought. Fabrizio, to be sure, was a distant cousin and not a brother-in-law, and the difference certainly made the situation less *scabrosa* than had been the case in Donna Giulia's affair. Nevertheless, it was strange that at the close of the nineteenth century a Countess Vitali should find herself in a position similar to that of a Countess Vitali of the seventeenth century. She wondered whether Ugo resembled in character his ancestor, Donna Giulia's husband, and whether Donna Giulia, also, had fallen in love with her brother-in-law through force of contrast. And what had really been the cause of the tragedy which ensued? Donna Giulia, at all events, had

been clever enough to issue unharmed through it all. It was no uncommon thing in those days for a guilty wife to be murdered, as the result of a *conseil de famille*; and Cristina called to mind the story of the Duchessa di Palliano, and other well-known examples of such summary vengeance. Had Donna Giulia, she wondered, continued to live placidly with her husband after having consented to put her lover out of the way? As Fabrizio had more than once observed, why did not Donna Giulia get rid of her husband? it would have been a more reasonable proceeding.

During the last few weeks Donna Giulia's story had possessed a greater fascination for Countess Vitali. Hitherto she had rarely given it a thought, since there were plenty of old families, such as that of her husband, whose annals contained episodes equally grim. Of late, however, she had found her thoughts perpetually recurring to the mystery surrounding Donna Giulia's crime. There seemed now to be a link between her and the Moidalchini woman who was said still to haunt Palazzo Vitali—a bond of sympathy. She, Cristina, had always said that before condemning Donna Giulia it would be well to know her version of the story. She felt now that she was beginning to understand some of Donna Giulia's difficulties, and perhaps some of her temptations. The affair of the crucifix had made an even greater impression on her than she had admitted to Fabrizio—but curiously enough she did not regard it in the light of an evil augury for the newly-born passion that had arisen between Fabrizio and herself. She looked upon it rather as a warning of some evil threatening to befall her lover from which she determined that she would shield him. If it ever occurred to her that she herself might be the evil, she put the thought away from her—as in critical moments of our lives we are all apt to put away from us thoughts distasteful to our frame of mind, or antagonistic to a cherished project.

Sometimes Cristina would go into the gallery and gaze at Donna Giulia's portrait, as if to seek inspiration from the heavy eyes drooping in a smile at once scornful and voluptuous. Formerly she had scarcely ever given the picture so much as a

glance in passing it ; but of late it had become to her as a friend and counsellor, and she looked at it with far more interest and attention than she ever bestowed on the Madonna—a genuine Tiziano, and one of the few pictures remaining in Palazzo Vitali of the Cardinal's collection—which Ugo had caused to be hung in her bedroom.

The day on which Fabrizio had recounted to her how he had again found the crucifix lying on his pillows, Countess Vitali had spent some minutes studying Donna Giulia's face as it looked down upon her from the wall of the gallery. She was thinking to herself that Donna Giulia and her lover must have managed their affairs very badly not to have been able to carry on their intimacy unknown to Donna Giulia's husband. Suddenly a thought struck her, and it sent a thrill through her body like that of a current of electricity.

Donna Giulia never could have married her lover, supposing that her husband had died ; but she, Cristina, could marry Fabrizio, should anything happen to Ugo. There could be no possible hindrance, legal or ecclesiastical, to such a marriage—were she free. The idea that she could be Fabrizio Vitali's wife had never before suggested itself to her. She had, it was true, resolved that she would make him love her, and in pursuing her object she had found her own affections entangled. She had looked forward to a liaison which would give her a fresh interest in her life ; and which could, with ordinary tact and prudence, be carried on without bringing complications in its train. She had determined to make Fabrizio useful to her, and had looked forward to the time when she would be able to persuade Ugo to take her to Rome where she would by degrees form a salon and become a well-known personage in the society of the capital. She was quite aware that, to be successful in Rome, it was advisable for every woman to have at least one lover ; and from his conversation she believed Fabrizio to be far more in touch with the inner circles of Roman society than was actually the case.

As she looked up at the portrait of Donna Giulia a new and hitherto unconsidered view of her own position seemed suddenly

to be as it were thrust upon her. Donna Giulia's eyes seemed to convey to her words which the full and somewhat coarse lips from which age had stolen the redness could not utter. "If you were free, you could make your lover marry you—I could never have married mine!" she imagined the eyes said to her—and Cristina felt the blood suddenly tingle in her veins. The words—if you were free—seemed to ring in her ears, as though some voice assuredly not her own had spoken her thought aloud.

She sat down in a heavily gilded arm-chair, the red damask of which was tattered and faded here and there to a pale pink, that stood, one of a long row of similar chairs, beneath the picture, with its back to the wall. Not a sound was to be heard in the gallery, nor indeed in all the house—for it was early in the afternoon and, herself excepted, probably everybody in Palazzo Vitali was sleeping through those hottest hours of the day.

"If you were free." The echo of the words lingered in Countess Vitali's brain, causing the silence in the deserted rooms around her to seem still deeper.

Ah—but she was not free—she had no prospect of ever being free. How often had Fabrizio not reminded her—when she had insisted on the fact of his being his cousin's natural heir and successor—that between him and Ugo there was little difference of age, and that Ugo was a stronger man than he? She scarcely knew why she had dwelt on the fact so persistently to Fabrizio, unless it were in order to make him look upon Ugo's existence as an obstacle to his own happiness and to the complete satisfaction of his passion for Ugo's wife.

Cristina Vitali, sitting under the portrait of her husband's and lover's common ancestress, in a chair that Donna Giulia Vitali had no doubt often sat in, knitted the low, broad brows which caused people to liken her to a woman of the Ciociaria and lost herself in thought. Presently she got up, and moved slowly and mechanically—almost as though she were walking in sleep—across the gallery, placing herself in the chair opposite to that she had just occupied. She felt as if she must sit where she could see the picture and look into Donna Giulia's eyes. And the



eyes, with their slight smile of mockery, looked into her own. If anything were to happen to Ugo, she could marry Fabrizio—that was evident. She would still be the Countess Vitali; but she would be free to live her life as she wished to live it. Fabrizio was not like Ugo; he, like herself, wished to live in the world, and to get something out of the world. Fabrizio, too, had brains. With some money, and lands, and a title, he could use his brains and enter politics—and she, Cristina, could help him to make a career. He might even become a minister of State—an ambassador. The future, brilliant with promise, seemed to unfold itself as Cristina pursued her train of thought. She saw herself in the position in which she had always longed to be—always intended to be; the wife of a prominent man, with the world at her feet.

Suddenly a shadow seemed to fall across these visions of future success. The frown on Cristina's brows deepened, and her face assumed the expression of one striving to work out an intricate problem.

Would Fabrizio marry her, if she were free? Men were by no means always ready to marry their mistresses when marriage became possible. Ay, but she was not Fabrizio Vitali's mistress as yet. True, she had promised to give herself to him—and that before he left Palazzo Vitali—but the irrevocable step had not been taken. Would she not be a fool to take it? Rather, should she not sacrifice her desires to prudence, and bind her lover still more firmly to her by leaving his love, at least for the present, unsatisfied? The world, she knew, was apt to sentimentalise over people who married their old loves—but to assume a very different attitude towards those who had forestalled the privileges of matrimony, or broken its already existing bonds. No! she must not allow her inclinations to cause her to commit a folly. To go slowly was to go safely, and Fabrizio must wait. He must also bring his present visit to Palazzo Vitali to an end without delay, odious as it would be to find herself again quite alone with Ugo, more *noioso* than it had ever been. She must have time to think—to shape her course, and to see how matters turned out. Perhaps Ugo would go to Rome next winter after



all, and in Rome who could tell what might happen? At Palazzo Vitali, on the contrary, a chance word or look might betray both Fabrizio and herself, and Ugo's suspicions might be aroused by some busybody. Fabrizio must certainly go, and at once. Otherwise when they were alone together, as they had been last night, for instance, she might yield too soon.

At this point in her reflections Countess Vitali made a sudden movement of impatience. Soon—late—what did it matter? The obstacle was always there—would always be there, unless some unforeseen chance of illness or accident removed it! What if she were to be prudent only for nothing—and if Fabrizio, indignant at her for not fulfilling her promise, were to return to Rome and console himself elsewhere? Why could not fate intervene, and rid her and Fabrizio of this obstacle to their common welfare? Perhaps Fate would intervene—but when, and how? And Cristina, looking across the room, met the gaze of Donna Giulia fixed upon her.

“You were not prudent,” she said to herself, addressing the portrait in her thoughts, “and afterwards—well, afterwards Fate compelled you to remove an obstacle you had yourself created, but for what scope, or under what pressure, after all these years who can tell? But, all the same, you succeeded. You removed the obstacle. If it be true that your spirit returns here, why cannot you tell me how you succeeded?”

She rose from the chair, and it was with a sensible effort that she withdrew her eyes from a gaze which seemed to her imagination to enchain her own.

A clock in the adjoining room struck four; and Cristina retraced her steps through the cardinal's state apartments and went to her own rooms previous to descending to the terrace, where her husband and Fabrizio had said they would join her before driving to the old Farnese palace of Caprarola which Fabrizio had not as yet been taken to see.

## CHAPTER XVI

VITTORIA DI SAN FELICE was sitting in the casino on the lake at Villa Falconara, ostensibly occupied in dealing with a voluminous correspondence. Her writing-table was strewn with missives, many of which were as yet unopened, while a large dish of Oriental china standing on another table within arm's length of her chair contained some half a score of letters she had already written since beginning her morning's work.

It was an understood thing that, save under exceptional circumstances, the duchessa was not to be disturbed in her retreat by any of her household. Even her children never thought of invading the casino without being summoned thither. The telephone, it was true, connected Vittoria with the villa and the outer world; but there were occasions when, by the simple expedient of placing a piece of cotton-wool between the bell and its hammer, she would render that instrument powerless to annoy her.

The Duchessa di San Felice's interests in life were many and varied. Not the least among them was an earnest desire to see her own sex exercising a wider and a deeper social influence in her country than was actually the case. Many of her friends, perhaps the majority of them, were apt to laugh at Vittoria di San Felice's ideas upon the subject as being one of the results of her Anglomania. It might be all very well for Englishwomen to speak on public platforms and generally conduct themselves as though they were men masquerading in petticoats, but Italian women were different from Englishwomen; and, what was of even more importance, Italian men were different from English men in their attitude towards the female sex. To such as these Vittoria did not trouble herself to expound her views, and would content herself with the observation that no doubt every nation had the women, as it was said to have the government, it deserved.

Moreover, for certain Englishwomen she had met during her frequent visits to England who thrust themselves before the public, using religion or social reformation as means to self-advertisement, she had no admiration and not a little quiet contempt. Their profound ignorance of the very problems on which they were so ready to discourse in speeches prepared for them by some obscure dependent had been speedily revealed when she had asked them a few simple but leading questions on what she had been informed was their special subject ; while in the case of one at any rate of the lady-reformers of English social evils, Vittoria had enjoyed some opportunity of contrasting the practices of the said lady at Paris and elsewhere on the Continent with the socialistic theories she enunciated with such *aplomb* on English platforms and to interviewers for the English Press.

Vittoria di San Felice's efforts on behalf of her sex in her own country were certainly not prompted by any desire to gain notoriety. In common with an ever increasing number of Italian women of her own class she was anxious to contribute towards the raising of the intellectual and social status of Italian women of all classes ; to aid them in emancipating themselves from being mere machines for the bringing forth of children, or to minister to the more material necessities of their mankind. Her motive was not individual, nor even entirely feminine. Rather, in a sense, it was national. To pave the way towards making the Italian woman more of a practical and less of a sentimental factor in the social life of her country was an ideal which formed a part of the Duchessa di San Felice's patriotism. According to her view, many of the shortcomings in the average Italian character deplored by all Italian thinkers ; the want of discipline and self-control, the egoism, the widely spread materialism, were largely due to the sentimental traditions which forbade women to take their proper place and exert their legitimate influence. Vittoria di San Felice, it must be confessed, was looked upon with some suspicion by her more conservative compatriots, and also by the high authorities at the Vatican. These last appeared to disapprove of any expansion in the sphere of womanhood ; nor was it unnatural that they should do so, since

emancipation of women in a country as yet by no means freed from the yoke of clericalism would in the near future give to that clericalism a death-blow that no legislation could ever succeed in dealing.

Vittoria, however, and her associates continued their crusade unobtrusively, but none the less effectually, encouraged by the fact that, notwithstanding repeated douches of cold water from ecclesiastical sources, their efforts were regarded with sympathy in the highest of official and intellectual quarters, and by the feeling that they were working, however slowly, for the progress not of their own sex alone, but also for that of their country and their race.

On this particular morning Vittoria had not considered it necessary to muzzle the telephone, as she expressed it, since she had confined herself to answering the letters which the early post had brought to her from Rome and elsewhere. She had just finished writing a note when the telephone bell rang, and a moment afterwards the maggior-domo's voice informed her that Count Vitali had called, and asked if the signora duchessa would receive him.

Vittoria di San Felice hesitated for a moment before replying. A morning visit from Ugo Vitali was certainly a departure from the usual procedure in such matters. He would occasionally call upon her in the afternoon, should he be in the neighbourhood of Villa Falconara; but a morning visit implied some more weighty object on the part of the caller than a desire for half an hour's ordinary conversation. What, Vittoria wondered, had Ugo Vitali come to talk about? She hoped that he had not come to talk to her about his wife. It was always embarrassing, she added to herself a little cynically, when men wished to talk about their horses or their wives. One was sure, sooner, or later, to say the wrong thing about either purchase.

"Tell the signor conte that I shall be happy to receive him," she replied through the telephone.

"In the casino, or in the house?" demanded the maggior-domo.

Vittoria hesitated again. "Here," she said at length, "and,

are you there, Giovanni?—ask Miss Wilson if she will be so kind as to come to the casino in about twenty minutes' time—not immediately, you understand—but in about twenty minutes. Meanwhile, you can have the signor conte conducted here.”

Vittoria took up her pen again and proceeded to address the envelope of the note she had just concluded, afterwards placing it in the china dish with the remainder of her correspondence. Presently, the double doors of gilded bronze dividing the room she had converted into a sitting-room from the entrance-hall of the casino were opened, and a footman announced Count Vitali, quietly reclosing the doors as Ugo advanced towards the writing-table.

“Good morning, Vitali,” Vittoria said, easily, as he bent over her outstretched hand and kissed it. “You are an early visitor, and you find me busy with my letters. You will excuse my receiving you here in this informal manner instead of in the house?”

“I was riding past your gates,” Ugo replied, “and I thought you would forgive me if I ventured to call at so unconventional an hour as eleven o'clock in the morning.”

Vittoria motioned him to a chair, and, leaving her writing-table, placed herself on a sofa at a little distance from him.

“Had you become bored with your horse's society?” she asked, laughing.

“He had become bored with mine,” replied Ugo; “so bored, indeed, that he has been doing his best to get rid of me more than once this morning. He is a young horse, and he bucks. But seriously, duchessa, I owe you an apology for intruding upon you at this hour of the day. The fact is, I wished to take the opportunity of seeing you personally on a little matter of business, and of ascertaining your views. It is about the exchange of the land at Cetri.”

Vittoria knitted her brows pensively.

“Your agent and I have been in correspondence about the matter, as of course you know,” continued Ugo; “but there is the question of the drainage.”

“Caro Vitali,” observed Vittoria plaintively, “what can I



possibly know about the drainage of my land at Cetri? No doubt I ought to know all about it, but I was never taught drainage. It must be a very interesting study."

Ugo Vitali laughed a little nervously.

"Naturally," he said; "it is a technical matter; you could not be expected to understand. It is a question of levels."

"Of levels?" repeated Vittoria, glancing at her writing-table, and her letters that yet remained to be opened. "Everything in life is a question of levels."

Ugo stared at her. "What do you mean, duchessa?" he asked.

"I mean," replied Vittoria, with a smile, "that we are always trying to get even with things, and that we seldom or never succeed!"

"Ah, that is true!" said Ugo, with a short sigh.

Vittoria di San Felice looked at him quickly. "But about the drainage," she observed. "You really must not expect me to have any views—indeed, I never before connected drainage with views. In my ignorance, I had merely connected it with the sense of smell."

Ugo Vitali did not reply. He seemed scarcely to have heard her remark, and was apparently gazing thoughtfully at his brown leather riding-boots.

"One is always trying to get even with things, and never succeeding," he repeated presently.

Vittoria shrugged her shoulders. "It is a question of levels," she insisted drily, and immediately afterwards regretted her remark, as she saw her visitor's face suddenly flush.

"What did I say to myself just now?" she thought. "He has talked of his horse, and he is going to talk of his wife; and I have said the wrong thing already!"

"I meant to say," she continued hastily, aloud, "that we are always attempting to judge people—for of course it is people who produce what are alluded to as 'things'—from our own level quite forgetting that they may be on quite another. I wonder," she added, "what 'things' you are trying to get even with, Vitali, apart from the drainage of an outlying portion of my property, ben' inteso!"



Ugo looked at her hesitatingly for a moment ; then he seemed to gather confidence from the duchessa di San Felice's steady, tranquil glance as her eyes met his own.

"It was all nonsense about the drainage," he said frankly ; "at least, I made it an excuse for calling upon you at this hour——"

"A sufficiently feeble excuse," interrupted Vittoria, "inasmuch as you could not possibly expect me to believe that you called on me with the object of discussing the subject. I must say, Vitali, that I think you might have chosen a more plausible reason, if you could not at once tell me the true one !"

"You are right. It was absurd of me to search for any excuse," returned Count Vitali. "But I want a woman's counsel, Donna Vittoria, the counsel of a good woman who is also a good friend. That is why I have come to you."

Vittoria found herself wondering whether he had noticed that he called her Donna Vittoria, as he used to do in past days, before the death of her father-in-law, the old duke.

"If you need a woman's counsel, you should seek it of your wife," she replied a little coldly. "Surely," she added, with a smile intended to soften the coldness of her words, "she would also be a good friend !"

Ugo Vitali laughed drily. "Under the circumstances," he said, "I could hardly seek counsel of my wife. Will you read this letter, duchessa ?" and he took an envelope from his pocket-book as he spoke.

Vittoria shook her head. "I would rather not," she said. "If the letter contains anything about your wife, I would rather not read it," she continued.

Ugo Vitali's eyes gleamed. "Ah," he exclaimed, "you suspect that it contains something concerning my wife ! Why should you be so ready to suspect that ? Well, you are right—but why will you not read it ? are you not a good friend ? you have always made me feel that you were so."

"I am a good friend—yes—but I am also a woman. That is why I will not read the letter. You may show it to another man if you please—but you should not show it to another woman."

She glanced at the envelope he held out to her as she spoke. "It is an anonymous letter, I conclude," she added, contemptuously, "and evidently written by some uneducated person. No, Vitali—I will not read it; but, as you wish for my counsel, I will give it to you. Take the letter to your wife and make her read it. It is the only honourable thing to do—unless, indeed, you would not be wiser to tear it up at once and throw the pieces out of that window into the lake. An anonymous letter! it is not worth while thinking a second time about such a thing!"

Ugo looked at her. "You should have been a man, not a woman!" he exclaimed. "Nine women out of ten would have read the letter."

"Ten men out of ten would have read it!" retorted Vittoria di San Felice. "You do not know enough of women to judge them. Take the letter to your wife."

"But if it warns me that she——"

Vittoria stamped her foot on the marble floor. "I will not read the letter," she interrupted, "and I forbid you to tell me its contents. Would you have your wife think that you trust me more than you trust her? It is altogether an absurd thing for you to trouble yourself about an anonymous letter. Some day the post will bring one to your wife concerning you!"

"But it affects my honour!"

Vittoria laughed. "That is the usual excuse you men give for making idiots of yourselves," she observed. "Does it not affect your wife's honour, *per esempio*?" she added drily.

"It is the same thing."

"Theoretically. Practically it is not at all the same thing. If it were so, you would be more careful of it than to play into the hands of an anonymous accuser by confiding the contents of that letter to a third person. According to you men, a woman's honour consists in her being careful to preserve her husband's honour intact. She has none of her own, in your view."

"But to confide in you is quite different," said Ugo Vitali almost sullenly. "You have always been different. I mean——"

“What do you mean?” asked Vittoria tranquilly, as he hesitated.

“I mean, different from any other woman in my eyes. How many times have you not allowed me to consult you when I have been in a difficulty?”

“About a horse or a cow, perhaps—or even about one of your tenants’ wives—but hardly about your own!” The thought was present in Vittoria di San Felice’s mind as she spoke that Ugo had certainly omitted to take her into his confidence when he determined to marry the daughter of a *sensale*, but she naturally kept it to herself. To her surprise, and somewhat to her dismay, Ugo Vitali appeared to have divined her thought, for he said, after a pause :—

“Do you know, Donna Vittoria, that of late I have often wished that I had consulted you three years ago—before I married. I very nearly did consult you; but you were away—in the Alps, they told me—and I did not like to write to you about my own affairs. If you had been here, I should have told you what I was intending to do.”

Vittoria was silent. It was the second time that he had called her Donna Vittoria, and the name seemed to her to convey with it an appeal to her sympathy—a reminder of the days when they had been on far more informal and intimate terms with one another than had been the case since her widowhood.

“You would have sought my counsel too late—when you had already made up your mind,” she said slowly.

“No, if I had been able to see you, I should have asked you whether you thought I was about to make a great mistake.”

“Why should you have supposed that I could be any judge?” asked Vittoria coldly. “I could not possibly be a judge,” she added hastily, “and in any case it is too late to discuss the subject.”

“I have often wondered what your advice would have been,” persisted Count Vitali.

“I do not suppose that I should have presumed to offer any advice,” returned Vittoria, “but if I had, you would probably not have taken it. When people are in love they do not listen to

advice, even if they think it necessary to ask for it. *Del resto*, you have come here to-day to ask my advice, but you have not the slightest intention of acting by it."

"Because you ask me to do an impossible thing," replied Ugo, "or, at any rate, a useless thing. If I took this letter to Cristina she would of course swear that its contents were entirely false."

"And why should you not believe her?" asked Vittoria abruptly.

Ugo hesitated. "I do not know," he said, "except that—" and he paused.

"I think that you should believe her," Vittoria said gravely, "or that you should at least let her see that you intend to believe her. It is much harder for a woman to continue to deceive a man who insists upon placing his full confidence in her, than it is for her to deceive a man who allows her to suspect he distrusts her. I do not know what that letter contains, and I do not intend to know, as I have told you; but I should certainly advise you not to allow so contemptible a thing as an anonymous letter to come between you and your wife. You do not live in the world, my friend,—if you did, you would know that, at any rate in our Italian world, the sending of anonymous letters is a favourite form of mischief-making. After all, you say yourself that you do not know why you should not believe your wife's word."

"Except that she no longer cares for me as she used to do. I have begun to realise that."

Vittoria di San Felice looked at him in silence. "You have begun to realise that you have made a mistake," she said to herself.

"*Adagio, Vitali*; let us reason a little!" she said at length, lightly. "You jump too quickly to conclusions. Has it never struck you that it is possible your wife may be disappointed?"

"*Altro!*" exclaimed Ugo eagerly, "I have always thought that, had she had a child, things would have been very different. It is very strange, you know, there is nothing whatever to account

for it—Conradi at Viterbo has declared as much several times. It is a coincidence—a disgrazia. Moreover, it is certainly no fault of mine.”

“I should imagine not,” observed the duchessa di San Felice with a scarcely perceptible smile. “But I was not alluding to the disappointment of not having children,” she continued. “It is possible that your wife may be disappointed in other ways.”

Ugo opened his eyes more widely. “In what other ways?” he asked. “She has everything she can want. It is not as if I had taken her from some prince’s palace in Rome.”

“If you had done that,” remarked Vittoria, “she would probably have been quite contented to lead your life, otherwise she would not have married you.”

“Then you think that Cristina is not contented with the life I have given her—quite apart from the question of children, I mean.”

“Possibly. She is young, and she is good-looking. Also, she is a woman.”

“Che vuol dire?”

Vittoria laughed. “Caro Vitali,” she replied, “it means—everything! What were we saying just now? that we were apt to regard everybody else as being on our own level. Well, you are regarding your wife as though she were on your level, and she is not—I mean, of course, psychologically. The things that interest you, bore her. A woman, when she marries, usually does so under the impression that her whole life is going to be changed. That is an impression quite independent of any sexual influence. It is engrained in the female nature by hereditary transmission of ancient tribal customs dating from God knows when!”

“Duchessa!” exclaimed Ugo, “per carità! when you begin to talk of these things, you know that I cannot follow you. Besides, I never know when you are speaking seriously, and when you are only laughing at me.”

“I am quite serious. When your wife brought you her cow and a possible goat or two, she was under the impression that

she also would acquire additional social importance from the number of enemies' heads you had hanging up in your dwelling. But you have kept her cow and her goats, and you have not allowed her to show your heads to her neighbours—a thing which of course every woman likes to do."

Count Vitali smiled. "I understand," he said. "But as to the cow and the goats, my wife and I are quits there—for Frezzi kept them, as I daresay you have heard. You think, then, that I shut Cristina up too much—that I should take her to Rome? But you forget, duchessa. She was not noble, and I do not care to expose my wife to the possibility of certain humiliations."

"She is the Contessa Vitali," interrupted Vittoria, "and you are too old-fashioned in your ideas, my friend. The ridiculous prejudices you allude to are fast dying out, even in Italy. I am afraid that our nobility itself has taught people to regard it as a parasite to be got rid of, rather than as a caste of which to be proud—though, thank God, there are still many exceptions among us. No, you do not seem to have taken into account that your wife may be ambitious; that in marrying you she looked forward to escaping from her former life and taking her position as the Countess Vitali in the great world. Instead of which, she has found herself thrown upon her own resources in a provincial town."

"If that be so, she did not marry me for myself, but for what she imagined the marriage would bring her," said Ugo.

"Probably she married you for both reasons. Did I not tell you just now that a woman's innate desire to change her conditions of life by marriage is often quite independent of—well, of other things? If she can gratify at the same time that desire, and others, she has probably made what is called a happy marriage."

"You were always much too clever for me, Donna Vittoria," said Ugo, looking at her with a smile, "but even I can understand the drift of your arguments. You are reproving me for not allowing my wife to go into what is called the world. But what is she going to get out of the world?"



“What? Why, what every woman longs for, admiration. She will get plenty of it, and she knows it.”

“Precisely. And you advise me deliberately to expose her to that, when—oh, I am going to be quite open with you—when I have every reason to think that she no longer cares for me? Of course she would find plenty of admiration, and plenty of men ready to make love to her.”

“Of course. But there is always safety in numbers. It is when a woman eager for admiration is constantly thrown in the society of one admirer that danger is to be apprehended.”

Vittoria spoke carelessly enough, rising from her chair as she did so to re-arrange some flowers on a little table near her. Her visitor did not answer her observation, and by his silence she hoped that her hint had not been lost upon him. The thought was a relief to her mind, for she had determined to give him the hint on the first favourable opportunity, and she had often wondered how she should frame it so as to appear neither untimely nor offensive.

“Yes,” she continued, in a more earnest tone, “if I were you, Vitali, I should certainly take your wife to Rome next winter—and I should certainly show that letter to her, and to nobody else. Whatever may be written in it, I do not for a moment suppose to be true. But even were its contents true, wholly or in part, it is an evil nature that does not respond to a generous confidence—and, believe me, many women, and, for all I know, many men have been saved in the hour of temptation by feeling that the person they were about to wrong trusted them.”

Ugo Vitali looked at her in silence for a moment. Then he replaced the letter in his pocket-book. “I daresay you are right,” he said, “and I will take the letter to Cristina. As you say, it is an evil nature that does not respond to confidence. As to next winter—c’è tempo. Many things may happen before then, and I may see my way more clearly than I do at present. I am glad I came to you this morning, duchessa—a thousand thanks for receiving me.”

“Will you not stop to breakfast, and see the children?” asked Vittoria. “Ah,” she exclaimed, as a slight tap on the door

interrupted her. "Here is their governess—she was to come to me at twelve o'clock. Come in, please, Miss Wilson! you know Count Vitali. And you will not stay to breakfast, Vitali—no? Well, Miss Wilson and I will come to see you mount your buck-jumper," and taking up a parasol the Duchessa di San Felice led the way from the casino to the stables where Ugo's horse had been put up, talking alternately in Italian and English to her companions.

## CHAPTER XVII

THE letter which Ugo Vitali had received, though obviously written by an uneducated person, was guarded enough in its language. It warned Count Vitali that he would be wise to watch his wife's movements, as his honour and the honour of Casa Vitali were in danger. The document was, of course, unsigned ; and, save for the Roman postmark, bore no clue as to its origin. Ugo had received it by the afternoon post, the day after the expedition to Caprarola, and had spent a disturbed night in consequence.

His first sensation on reading the letter had been one of indignation that anyone, of however obscure or insignificant a position, should dare to send him such a missive ; and his first impulse was to tear it up contemptuously and determine to dismiss it from his mind. He found himself, however, unable so to dismiss it.

What if Cristina's capricious, and sometimes irritable moods, and the change that had come over her during the last months, were due—not, as he had always assured himself, to her disappointment at having no children, but to the fact that she no longer cared for him but did care for some other man? Ugo read and re-read the letter. He thought of all the men with whom his wife had been brought into contact since he had married her. They were not numerous, and belonged exclusively to that small society which existed in and around Viterbo. He could not call to mind any one of them in whom Cristina had ever displayed any particular interest. He had, indeed, often heard her sneer at the provincialism of those young men who would occasionally call at Palazzo Vitali ; and, with the exception of his cousin Fabrizio, she had not had the opportunity of seeing any others. It was absurd, he told himself, to think of Fabrizio in connection with this anonymous warning. The two were

excellent friends, as they might have been were Fabrizio his brother instead of his cousin. Since Fabrizio had been with them, moreover, Cristina had certainly been less irritable, and apparently altogether more contented with her life than before—and he, Ugo, had been glad that the two should discuss together things in which he could not pretend to take any interest. Could it be, he wondered, that there was someone for whom Cristina had cared before she married him—and who, in some way unknown to him, had come again into her life?

The more he pondered over the matter, the more undecided he felt as to whether he should destroy the letter and endeavour to forget its contents, or whether he should act in accordance with the advice it gave him. In the midst of his reflections he thought of the Duchessa di San Felice. Sicuro! Donna Vittoria was a loyal friend, both to himself and to Cristina. She was also a woman of the world, tactful and prudent, who could be relied upon not to make mischief or to give him anything but sound and sensible advice. He would take the letter to Donna Vittoria, as he always called her in his thoughts—and would hear what she had to say about it. He more than suspected that the duchessa had some intuition as to the state of affairs which had grown up during the last year or so between Cristina and himself. Donna Vittoria at all events knew that Cristina took little or no interest in those country pursuits and duties which formed his life, for he himself had admitted as much to her on more than one occasion when the duchessa had half laughingly reminded him that, now he had married, it was his wife whom he should consult, and not herself.

The thought that within a few miles of him was an old friend in whom he could confide his difficulty did much to soothe Count Vitali's troubled mind. To take the letter at once to Cristina scarcely occurred to him; or occurred to him only as a thought to be immediately dismissed as impracticable. He shrank instinctively from doing anything that might cause the breach between them, which had appeared of late to be somewhat reduced, to widen again. Donna Vittoria, with her sound judgment, her knowledge of her own sex, and her utter

disregard for gossip or scandalmongering, would certainly be able to point out the wisest course for him to pursue. Very likely the letter was merely an impudent attempt of an evilly-disposed individual anxious to make mischief between him and his wife; or it might be the work of some impostor who would follow it up with other letters asking for money. But if there were anything—*if*—well, the Duchessa di San Felice, the friend of his early youth, would surely be a better counsellor than any other. At least she would not fly off and tell all Viterbo that Count Vitali had received an anonymous letter hinting at unfaithfulness on the part of his wife. And so that evening Ugo Vitali had kept his own counsel; and if he had been silent and preoccupied neither Cristina nor Fabrizio had noticed the fact. The following morning he had ridden about his property as usual, choosing as a mount a young horse—a recent purchase—that needed all his patience and skill to ride, accustomed as he had been from childhood to the saddle. He had chosen the animal purposely, feeling that in the management it would require he would find a means of escape from his own thoughts. The object necessitating his morning's inspection of various portions of his land being completed, to pay a visit to the mistress of Villa Falconara had seemed a comparatively simple affair until he found himself within a kilometre or so of his destination, and saw the woods—once a portion of that mysterious Ciminian forest so long believed by the ancient Romans to form an impassable barrier between themselves and the rich Etruscan cities on its further confines—which surrounded the villa standing in their midst on the hill above. As he approached Donna Vittoria's home, however, his task seemed gradually to assume a more complicated nature. For some reason he could not explain to himself, he felt that it would not be so easy as he had imagined to take the Duchessa di San Felice into his confidence. An uncertainty arose in his mind as to whether she would allow him to confide so intimate a matter to her, and whether she might not resent his attempt to obtain her advice as presuming too much upon her friendship towards him. It had been this feeling which had caused Ugo to search

for an excuse for calling at Villa Falconara before mid-day ; an excuse of which the duchessa had exposed the flimsiness almost as soon as he had made it.

Ugo Vitali had certainly not anticipated any such counsel from the Duchessa di San Felice as that which she actually gave him. He did not, indeed, altogether know what he did expect of Donna Vittoria, unless it were her sympathy. Different as their lives were, Ugo felt that she had always understood him, and that she had never regarded him as merely a *campagnuolo* with no aims and objects beyond those of gathering in his crops or breeding serviceable stock. He knew that she understood, and shared, that almost passionate devotion to the country, and to the things animate and inanimate of the country, which was a part of his nature. This love for the country had been the earliest link between Vittoria di San Felice and himself, and had formed the foundation of their friendship. It is a love all too rare among Italians generally ; nevertheless it is occasionally to be found among individuals of all classes in Italy.

Not the least bitter part of the gradual process of destruction to which his illusions concerning Cristina had lately been subjected was the knowledge that she was incapable of understanding his nature, or of sharing his interests. During the first year of their married life this want of harmony had not struck him so forcibly as it had since done. He was beginning to suspect that Cristina, in those days, had feigned an interest which in reality had never existed, and this suspicion had increased as time went on until it had become almost a certainty. He had begun to realise that Cristina had married him not for himself, but because he was Count Vitali, a man who could give her a position in the world, and who, as she had thought, was of the world. This suspicion, more perhaps than anything else, had aroused in Ugo Vitali all that obstinacy of character which had been accentuated by the narrow surroundings amid which he had been brought up from his earliest infancy. He had determined that he would be deaf to his wife's repeated suggestions as to the necessity of changing their mode of life. When he had offered himself as a husband for Cristina, he had



explained his position clearly to the cavaliere Frezzi; and Cristina had taken him knowing that in doing so she was marrying a country gentleman who had no intention of living any other life than that which his father had lived before him.

As he rode homeward after his interview with Vittoria di San Felice, Ugo had pondered deeply over the advice which had been given him. Donna Vittoria, he told himself, had set him two tasks which were hard to perform, but in doing so she had indirectly appealed to his generosity. It had been, indeed, the appeal of one generous nature to another; and, in making it, Vittoria di San Felice had not erred in her calculations as to the response it would meet with.

She had refused to admit that he should turn to any other person than his own wife for an explanation as to the contents of the anonymous letter he had received—if any explanation were necessary. She had also gently reproached him for his egoism in not attempting to place himself, as it were, in Cristina's position, and endeavour to make allowance for one who had views different from his own as to what constituted a happy or a useful life.

And Ugo Vitali's nature had at once responded to the call made upon his generosity. He told himself that Donna Vittoria was right. He would take the letter to Cristina, if only to show her that he intended to have implicit confidence in her, and that he refused to allow any misunderstandings to arise between them. As the duchessa had said, it was an evil nature which could refuse to return confidence for confidence, and he was not going to assume Cristina to be of such a nature. No doubt, too, Donna Vittoria was equally right in advising him to give way to his wife's desire to see more of the world. She, Donna Vittoria, was a woman, and as such might be supposed to understand her own sex better than he could do. Moreover, woman of the world though she was, she was all that was the reverse of worldly; and, therefore, if she sympathised, as apparently she did sympathise, with his wife's wish to see and be seen by the world of society, she doubtless had a very good reason for counselling him to do something towards gratifying that wish.

Notwithstanding the fact that Vittoria di San Felice's counsels immediately prevailed with him, Ugo was unable altogether to dismiss the fear lest his wife might misinterpret his motives in showing her the anonymous letter. Would she respond to a generous confidence as—well, as Donna Vittoria herself would have responded under similar circumstances? He had not thought it necessary to tell the duchessa, when she insisted that he should take the letter direct to Cristina, that this course had occurred to him, and that he had not even considered it but had at once dismissed it from his mind. Donna Vittoria would have at once proceeded to reason with him on the subject; and in the process he would have scarcely been able to avoid letting her know more of his domestic troubles than would be becoming to admit even to an intimate and trusted friend.

He had speedily determined, however, that he would follow the advice he had sought; and as he rode up the long slope of the rising ground dominated by the walls and gateways of Viterbo, and turned into a by-lane leading into the grounds behind Palazzo Vitali, he had resolved to banish his doubts as to the spirit in which Cristina might receive his confidence, and to seek an early opportunity of showing her the letter.

"Of course," he said to himself, "the whole thing must be nonsense, an impudent attempt on the part of somebody Cristina has offended to make mischief, at which she and I will be able to laugh." But, often as he repeated the words in his mind, they proved powerless to drive out the doubt that refused to be convinced by them.

It was considerably past the breakfast-hour when Ugo reached Palazzo Vitali. Entering the dining-room, he found that Cristina and his cousin had nearly finished that meal. His appearance was evidently unexpected, for Cristina started slightly as he came into the room.

"I thought you said you would probably not return to breakfast," she observed quickly. "Fabrizio and I have nearly finished."

"It does not matter," replied Ugo, "I am not very hungry."

I will ring the bell, for Taddeo does not know that I have returned. I can eat up what you and Fabrizio have left."

"You had better order something fresh," said Countess Vitali; "some eggs *al piatto* and some cutlets *alla milanese*; those can be ready in a few minutes. Are you going out again after breakfast?"

"No, I have done my business for to-day," Ugo replied. There was a pause, during which Taddeo appeared in answer to the bell and hastily departed to the kitchen.

"It is a good thing that you have returned early," observed Cristina presently. "You and Fabrizio will be able to see something of one another before he leaves us."

Ugo looked up surprised. "Leaves us?" he repeated. "Do you mean to say that you are going away to-day?" he added to Fabrizio.

"Well, not actually to-day," Fabrizio replied, "but I am afraid that I must return to Rome to-morrow morning, by the first train——"

"Fabrizio has had a letter from his mother," interrupted Cristina. "It appears that she wants him to come back at once. Some business matter, is it not?" she continued, glancing at him.

Fabrizio laughed nervously. "Yes," he said, "a mere trifle, but, as you know, Ugo, my mother has nobody except me to attend to her affairs for her, so I'm afraid I must really leave you this time. I have said the same thing so often, that you have probably ceased to believe me!"

"I am sorry," said Ugo, a little absently. "But, of course, a matter of business, *that* must be attended to, and no doubt your mother needs you."

"But he will return here later on, for the vintage," Cristina observed. "That is an understood thing, Fabrizio, is it not? You promised Ugo that you would do so, and if you do not keep your promise, we shall conclude that our country life here has been too dull for you to venture to repeat your visit. We expect him for the vintage, do we not, Ugo?" she added, turning to her husband.

"Of course," replied Ugo hesitatingly, "that is," he added, "if nothing unforeseen happens. Yes, of course you must return, Fabrizio."

Cristina gave him a quick glance, one full of suspicion. There was a lack of cordiality, of genuineness in Ugo's voice which was not natural to him.

"Fabrizio will have ample time to invent an excuse before the vintage begins," she remarked indifferently. "We are only in July, and September is some way off! No!" she added, as Fabrizio began to protest, "the more you say now, the more difficult it will be for you to invent excuses afterwards! So be careful, Fabrizio, and do not say too much." She laughed as she spoke, but her eyes fixed themselves for an instant on Fabrizio with a warning look.

Ugo smiled also. Cristina's words and manner were perfectly natural. It was only her quick glance at Fabrizio which, had he noticed it, might have led him to suspect that her observation was intended to convey a different meaning to each of her listeners.

"After that remark," he said to Fabrizio, "you will not dare to tell us in September that you are engaged. When I say September," he added, "I mean quite early in that month. The heat has brought the vines forward very rapidly this year, and the grapes are already considerably larger than is usually the case in July. I expect that by the middle of September we shall have already finished our vintage round here."

It had been somewhat of a surprise to Ugo to learn that his cousin was really leaving them the following morning; and at the same time the intelligence afforded him a certain relief. The question of Fabrizio's departure had, of course, been discussed more than once; but as there had been no definite reason—beyond the fact that his visit had already been of considerable duration—for his leaving, the matter, by common consent, had been allowed to remain unsettled. Whatever latent doubts Ugo Vitali might have as to whether his anonymous correspondent had not intended to warn him against Fabrizio's presence under his roof, these were completely dispelled by his wife's last remark.

He immediately regretted his want of cordiality in seconding her suggestion that Fabrizio should return in order to assist at the vintage, the more so as he now recollected that this suggestion had originally proceeded from himself.

As soon as Ugo had finished breakfast, and they had left the dining-room he approached his wife. "I have a little matter of business to talk over with you, Cristina," he began, "a letter——"

"More delays in the settlement of the Marchesa Santoro's affairs, I suppose," Countess Vitali interrupted impatiently. "Really, Ugo," she added, "those Roman lawyers are too bad—they are *farabutti*, all of them!"

Fabrizio laughed. "It is part of a lawyer's business to create difficulties," he said. "You forget, my dear cousin, that I am a lawyer."

"By profession," retorted Cristina drily.

"It seems to me," observed Ugo, "that a dentist might just as well say that it was part of his business to poke holes in sound teeth. But it is not a question of the Santoro lawyers, Cristina—but merely of a letter I have received that I think—that I wish you to see," he concluded hastily.

"How mysterious!" exclaimed Countess Vitali lightly. "When you have smoked your cigar you will find me in my room. It is much too hot to think of going out till five o'clock"; and, so saying, she took up a book and went out of the drawing-room, leaving her husband and Fabrizio alone together.

After she had gone, Ugo Vitali exerted himself to talk to his cousin, but Fabrizio quickly saw that his host was pre-occupied with his own thoughts.

"I have been thinking," Ugo said suddenly—after a prolonged pause during which he had puffed abstractedly at his cigar—"that it might be a good thing to take an apartment in Rome next winter. It is very dull for my wife to be shut up here during the winter months. What do you think, Fabrizio?"

Fabrizio started. He could hardly believe that he had heard aright.

"But I thought you hated Rome!" he said, not knowing what else to say.



"So I do," returned Ugo emphatically, "but Cristina would like to spend at any rate a part of the season there, and once in a way, perhaps, it might be a good thing to do. You see, Fabrizio, she has very few interests here. It is not as if she had her children to occupy her. And, after all, women like society."

"I have often told you that you should take your wife to Rome," observed Fabrizio guardedly. "She certainly will be very much admired there," he added.

Ugo sniffed contemptuously. "Of course!" he said. "Every one of the wretched little specimens of our sex, who, I am told, run from one tea-party to another in Rome, will try to make love to her! but I am not jealous, caro mio; and I can trust Cristina to take care of herself."

"Si capisce!" returned Fabrizio hastily. "All the same," he continued, "I am surprised, Ugo. I thought that you would never go to Rome, or indeed to any city, for the sake of its society."

Ugo laughed drily. "Neither would I!" he replied; "but I have wondered lately whether I ought not to consider Cristina's wishes a little more than I have hitherto done. No doubt she has often told you that she would like to see more of the world?"

Fabrizio hesitated. "Often, no," he replied. "She has occasionally told me that she was bored with the very small society you have here at Viterbo, and that she would like to make the acquaintance of people who formed part of the real life of Italy and elsewhere. She has said the same thing to you, Ugo, in my presence, is it not true? Cristina is a clever woman. Though her life has been a very secluded one, she has read a great deal; and I have sometimes been surprised at the ease with which she can talk on subjects of which I should have thought she would scarcely have heard."

Ugo sent a little ring of smoke curling up into the air and watched it meditatively.

"That is true," he said presently. "Until you came here I had never realised that Cristina was so much interested in all that is going on in the world. Your conversations together



have often been quite out of my depth, though they might easily be that, for I am ignorant of everything except my own particular business. She would know that it would be waste of time to talk to me as she talks to you."

Fabrizio looked at him suspiciously ; but it is evident that he was speaking in perfect sincerity.

"And as she would talk to anyone else who she felt shared her interest in those things," he said.

Ugo nodded. "One should try to put oneself on the same level as other people," he remarked ; "or, at any rate, to realise that they have a different level from one's own."

Fabrizio stared at him.

"I do not understand," he began.

Ugo laughed shortly. "No?" he asked. "I mean that when I married Cristina, I thought that she and I were, intellectually, on the same level. She is not on my level, but on a higher one, and I have been trying to compel her to descend to mine. It is very simple."

"And now?" asked Fabrizio.

"Now I shall not try any longer to make her descend to mine," replied Ugo.

Fabrizio looked at him enquiringly. "I wonder," he observed, "what has made you suddenly arrive at this decision? Two or three days ago you told me that nothing would induce you to waste your time by going to Rome."

Ugo did not answer the question. "If you do not mind my leaving you, I will go to Cristina," he said, "and later we can all meet on the terrace."

Without further delay he went to the apartment Cristina used as a sitting-room, a large room which in past times had served as an ante-chamber to the suite they now occupied. The windows of this room looked into the courtyard, as did those of Ugo's bedroom which was immediately beyond it : while the apartment in which Cristina slept communicated with it by lofty double doors situated at the opposite end. As is the case in most Italian palaces, this second suite of rooms formed as it were an independent establishment which, having its own staircase and

servants' offices could, if necessary, be completely separated from the rest of the house.

The room was darkened to keep it cool and fresh, and the windows hermetically closed to shut out the hot air rising from the courtyard beneath, on which the fierce July sun was beating pitilessly.

Cristina was seated near her writing-table, an open book, which she put aside as the door opened upon her husband, lying in her lap.

"You have brought me the mysterious letter?" she asked, as Ugo approached her chair. He came and stood by her side.

"Yes," he said hesitatingly, "but——"

Cristina stretched out her hand. "I am to read it, I suppose?" she interrupted. "Why do you look so grave, Ugo?"

"I want you to read it—yes," returned Ugo; "but, first of all, Cristina, I want to be sure that you will understand why I give it you—that you will see that it is because I trust you."

Cristina sat up in her chair, all her suspicions aroused by his words. Could the letter contain some warning as to her relations with Fabrizio? she wondered.

"Ma, caro mio," she exclaimed impatiently, "it is nothing unusual for a man to trust his wife—no? Do not let us waste time in complimenting one another! From your grave face one would imagine the matter to be serious."

Ugo put the letter into her hand in silence.

She read it eagerly, once, twice. Then she laughed.

"Ah!" exclaimed Ugo, drawing in his breath sharply, "you laugh?"

Cristina looked at him tranquilly. "But certainly I laugh!" she said. "I do not see what else there is for me to do. And you, why do you not laugh also, Ugo, instead of looking so grave? Is it possible that you have allowed yourself to be disturbed by this ridiculous thing?"

Ugo Vitali looked at her keenly. "That is all very well," he replied; "but you forget, Cristina, I have some reason to be

disturbed by the fact that such a letter could be written about my wife. Moreover—” and he hesitated.

Countess Vitali scarcely seemed to hear him. She was apparently engaged in studying the handwriting of the letter, which she still held.

“So!” she exclaimed; “you are to watch my movements! That should not be a difficult thing to do, since here at Viterbo they are necessarily somewhat limited.”

“I should have destroyed the letter, and should have thought no more about it,” continued Ugo, “only——”

“Only?”

“Only that you have not been quite so happy of late as you appeared to be when we first married,” said Ugo bitterly; “and when a woman is not happy with her husband it is generally because she is thinking all the time of some other man with whom she believes she would have been happier.”

Cristina looked at him curiously.

“So you believe that your anonymous correspondent is right,” she observed quietly, “and that I am thinking of some other man! I wonder who you suspect the other man to be? Corti, perhaps, or Malvezzi,” and she mentioned two young men who prided themselves on being *viveurs* in Viterbese society.

“I do not suspect anybody,” returned Ugo hastily, “and *you* least of all, Cristina! Cannot you understand? It is because I do not suspect that I have brought you the letter?”

Cristina was silent for a moment. Presently she asked quickly: “When did you receive this absurd letter?”

“Only yesterday. When we returned from Caprarola I found it among the other correspondence which had arrived by the afternoon post.”

“And why did you not tell me of it at once—yesterday?”

Ugo hesitated. “I did not know what to do for the best,” he said at length. “It required consideration. You see, Cristina, I was afraid that you would not understand, that you would think I was bringing the letter to accuse you. Via! I will be quite frank with you, and then we shall understand each other: no! I

needed advice, the advice of someone I could trust as being a good friend to both of us. So, before showing you the letter I consulted——”

“Fabrizio?” exclaimed Countess Vitali.

“Fabrizio? but of course not! I went to Villa Falconara. The San Felice is a woman of the world, and your friend as well as mine.”

Cristina sprang up from her chair. “You showed that letter to the San Felice?” she exclaimed.

“No. I intended to have shown it to her, but she refused to allow me to do so. She even refused to hear or to know its contents. When I explained to her that it referred to you, and asked her what she would advise me to do, she told me that I should take it to my wife only, and to nobody else.” He paused, and looked at her earnestly, but Cristina made no reply. She stood twisting the letter in her hands, her brows knitted. But there had been an expression of absolute incredulity on her face as she listened to Ugo’s words.

“And so,” she said presently, “acting on the Duchessa di San Felice’s advice you have brought the letter to me to give me an opportunity of justifying myself.”

“My first impulse was to bring it to you,” answered Ugo simply; “but I was afraid, as I have told you, that you might misinterpret my motive for doing so. But you do not misinterpret it, Cristina? You do understand both why I was afraid to bring it to you at once, and why I do so now, do you not?”

For some moments he waited in vain for her answer. Then Cristina turned to him. “If I had received a similar letter concerning you,” she said, “I should not have consulted a third person. But of course you and the San Felice were intimate friends long before you knew me!”

Ugo’s face flushed. “What do you mean, Cristina?” he asked shortly.

Countess Vitali shrugged her shoulders. “Merely what I say,” she replied coldly. “The Duchessa di San Felice is, no doubt, very disinterested—but if your confidence in me is only due to

her counsels, you cannot expect me to be much flattered by that confidence !”

Ugo stared at her in bewilderment. “Do you mean to say,” he exclaimed, “that you are jealous of her?”

Cristina’s eyes flashed. “I do not give myself the trouble,” she replied. “I have always been aware that she was your—friend. Marriage does not necessarily interfere with such friendships, does it?”

Her voice was loud and sneering, and there was something in its tones and in the expression of her face that made Ugo Vitali think of some peasant woman quarrelling with her husband or her lover. A momentary feeling of disgust was quickly replaced by anger at the malicious suggestion contained in her words, and for the first time in his life with her he lost control over his temper.

“*Perdio!*” he exclaimed, “You are suggesting what you know to be a lie. Perhaps you are lying in order to search for some excuse for being unfaithful to me! Are you? answer me,” and he seized her arm roughly.

Cristina recoiled from him. She was frightened, and not a little surprised. Often as she had tried her husband’s patience in the last couple of years, she had never seen him give way to anger. Even in her alarm, however, her inherent astuteness did not fail her, and her suspicious nature at once led her to believe that she divined the real cause of his anger. Her shaft, sped at random had, she told herself, hit the mark, and Ugo’s sudden outburst of anger was a proof that there was more than old friendship between him and the Duchessa di San Felice. In at once assigning the lowest motive to her husband’s unexpected outbreak of contemptuous anger, the instincts of the Norcian peasant blood came to the surface; as they had done during her lapse into the peasant coarseness of tone and gesture a moment before. In an instant she decided on her course. An open quarrel with Ugo must be avoided at all costs; and the knowledge she believed she had gained must be reserved as a weapon for future use, if necessary.

“Forgive me, Ugo,” she exclaimed gently. “I was wrong; it

was odious of me to say that. But it is you who do not understand. A wife resents the thought that her husband has sought the advice of another woman—has confided in another woman rather than confide in her. I was mad to speak as I did! Of course I know that you and the San Felice have always been friends—real friends, I mean, and that she is my friend also. But for the moment—to feel that you had confided the contents of that letter to her——”

Ugo caught her hands in his own, and before she had ceased speaking every trace of anger had vanished from his face.

“Cristina!” he exclaimed. “It is for you to forgive me! I am an imbecile, and it is I who have not understood. You are right to reproach me, for I should have had more confidence in you than to seek advice from another, even from so old a friend as Donna Vittoria.”

Cristina passed her handkerchief over her eyes, and then she looked at him and smiled. “Tell me all the San Felice said,” she replied. “At any rate,” she added, “I am grateful to her for having given you good advice, though I shall always think that you might have done without it.”

Ugo took her in his arms suddenly, and kissed her. “You cannot reproach me more than I reproach myself!” he said tenderly. “As to Donna Vittoria,” he continued, “she knows nothing; because, as I told you, she refused to know. She, too, reproached me, Cristina, for not at once confiding in you. She said that it was an evil nature which did not return confidence for confidence, and that it was my duty to show you I trusted you implicitly.”

“So she did not read the letter?” said Cristina.

“No. Neither would she hear its contents. I have told you so already. But she did more than reproach me for not showing you the letter. She made me understand that I have been a selfish husband to you.”

Cristina looked at him with genuine surprise.

“Selfish?” she repeated.

“Yes; in keeping you here at Viterbo. She told me that I ought to take you to Rome next winter, and allow you to see more



of the world. I see now that she is right. Donna Vittoria is a very sensible woman, Cristina."

"Altro!" observed Countess Vitali briefly, with an enigmatic smile.

"Not many women would have abstained from gratifying their curiosity by refusing to know the contents of that letter," pursued Ugo. "I told her so," he added.

"And what did she say?"

"She told me that I did not know enough about women to be a judge of them."

"I should think that was true," remarked Cristina quietly, and she smiled again.

Ugo Vitali laughed. A great weight had been lifted from his mind. Donna Vittoria had been right, and he was glad he had taken her advice. He was glad, too, that he had told Cristina he had sought that advice. Her anger at learning that he had confided in another woman what he had hesitated to confide to her was surely a proof that, after all, she cared for him. He almost forgot his own indignation at the way in which this anger had found its expression, and his wife's sudden lapse into a want of refinement in voice and manner that had startled him and jarred upon all his nature. The indifference which Cristina had displayed to the letter had completely set at rest all his suspicions that his anonymous correspondent might be telling the truth, and this in a manner which probably no amount of angry denial would have done. He found himself hoping that a reversion to their former life together, while Cristina had apparently been happier and more contented, would date from that afternoon. How right Donna Vittoria had been to urge him to confide in his wife and in his wife only! An indiscreet, or a mischievous adviser might have caused a life-long bitterness and mistrust to arise between them.

"We understand one another better now, Cristina mia," he said gently, "do we not? and you will see that in the future I shall not be so selfish. We will go to Rome after Christmas, and you shall not always be shut up here at Viterbo with nobody more interesting than Corti and Malvezzi to talk to. No doubt

the Duchessa di San Felice will help us in making our appearance in the Roman world. She is going to spend most of next spring at Palazzo San Felice she tells me."

Cristina looked at him curiously. "That," she observed quietly, "is a very fortunate coincidence. I thought the San Felice scarcely ever spent more than a month in Rome during the season."

"It is certainly a fortunate coincidence for us," agreed Ugo. "You like the prospect of a season in Rome?" he added, smiling at her.

"But of course! One vegetates here—I have always told you so! All the same, Ugo, I do not see how you can be away from the land for so long, unless you have a *fattore* to look after things in your absence."

"Oh, we will arrange all that," replied Count Vitali cheerfully.

"After all," he continued, "Rome is not so far away. I can go backwards and forwards very easily, when you are settled in some apartment. It will be better to take an apartment than to live in an hotel—the hotels are full of foreigners."

"Yes," said Cristina absently, and taking up a little paper fan she had placed between the leaves of her book she began to fan herself.

"You are tired," said Ugo, "and I will leave you to rest until five o'clock. I suppose Fabrizio has gone to his room. He really means to leave us to-morrow?"

"Yes; his mother insists on his returning. There are some papers to be signed."

Ugo nodded. "He must do as he likes," he said carelessly. "Addio, Cristina, riposati bene!" and stooping down he kissed her. "I think I shall go out again," he continued; "there are one or two things I want to look at on the farm. One of the horses is ill, and the veterinary should have come this morning, so I must hear his report. By the bye," he added, "I had forgotten all about that infernal letter! You have it, Cristina, have you not? Give it to me and I will tear it up, and we will never think about it again."

Cristina's hand closed over the already crumpled paper. "No," she said; "I will keep it—as a souvenir!"

Ugo shrugged his shoulders. "As you please, carissima," he said; "but if I were you, I should tear it up."

Cristina looked after him as the door closed upon his retreating figure.

"Che sciocco!" she muttered to herself. "Besides," she added, as if in response to some afterthought, "it is too late—much too late!"

## CHAPTER XVIII

FOR some time after her husband had left her Countess Vitali remained in her room fully occupied with her own thoughts. Only once, in the course of their recent discussion—a discussion which had left Ugo Vitali under the happy impression that it was to lead to the re-establishment of a more satisfactory state of things between himself and his wife—had she allowed the resentment she felt in her heart to come to the surface, and she had been instantly conscious that she had committed a tactical error in doing so. Until now she had never believed in her own theory that Ugo would have married the Duchessa di San Felice had the duchessa thought it worth her while to accept him as a husband instead of as a lover. It was a fiction which she knew to be a fiction; and at first she had used it in order further to excite Fabrizio's interest in her and his compassion for her lot. Latterly, she had almost succeeded in persuading herself that her fiction was true. The reason of this semi-persuasion was, of course, clear enough, had she had either the inclination or the power to analyse it. Her growing passion, however, for the man whose scruples she had determined to conquer and who, she had resolved, should become her lover had gradually made her more than ever anxious not only that Fabrizio should believe that she was compelled by force of circumstances to pretend ignorance of her husband's unbroken relations with another woman, but also that she herself should believe in the existence of those relations. Hitherto, her grievance against Ugo in this respect had been a purely imaginary grievance, which she had felt obliged to foster by every means in her power in order to render it plausible to herself and convincing to her lover. She had invented the story of the anonymous letter she was by way of having received; knowing that, as Fabrizio had at once told her, such communications were favourite methods with her compatriots of making

mischief, or of conveying information for which the writers would not care to be held responsible. For a few moments that afternoon Cristina had felt a very unpleasant alarm lest her husband's suspicions might be immediately directed towards his cousin. She had seen at once, however, that this was not the case, and she had rapidly come to the conclusion that to allay Ugo's misgivings she had only to display a contemptuous indifference to the suggestions contained in the letter he had received. The fact that such a letter should have been sent to her husband did not greatly trouble her. There were, without doubt, various friends and acquaintances in Viterbo who were exercised in their minds as to Fabrizio's prolonged stay at Palazzo Vitali, and also as to the fact of his being constantly seen walking or driving alone with her while Count Vitali was engaged elsewhere. Such persons, she had reflected, could only tell Ugo what he already knew and approved of. Of the conversations which she and Fabrizio had had, and especially of such episodes as had occurred on the day of the hailstorm and in the gardens that same evening, nobody could tell him anything. The letter, as Ugo had said, was in all probability the attempt of some impudent busybody to make mischief; and it was fortunate that Ugo had seemed quite disposed to accept this explanation of it, when once he had seen that she was not disturbed by its allegations regarding herself.

But when Ugo had proceeded to tell her that he had taken the letter to the Duchessa di San Felice Cristina had felt that here, indeed, was a genuine grievance, and, moreover, an additional proof of the intimacy which she had wished to convince Fabrizio, and subsequently to convince herself, existed between the two. She forgot, or she did not choose to remember, that it was she who had driven her husband to seek counsel of another, and not counsel only, but also sympathy. She was determined to disbelieve both in the honesty of Ugo's expressions of self-reproach for having allowed himself to confide more readily in another woman than in herself and in the disinterestedness of the duchessa's advice.

She must see Fabrizio, she said to herself, without delay, and

acquaint him with this fresh proof that Ugo had deceived him in his professions of affection for her; that these professions had been merely, as she had more than once hinted to her lover, as so much dust thrown in his eyes in order to conceal the fact that his relations with the San Felice had not been interrupted, nay, had been rendered more easy of maintenance, by his marriage. Fortunately Ugo had gone out again, and she would have an opportunity of seeing Fabrizio alone; an opportunity which she might not again have, as Ugo would naturally make a point of not absenting himself on the eve of his cousin's departure. It was lucky, Cristina thought to herself, that one of the farm horses had been taken ill, for Ugo would probably be detained all the longer. Indeed, the whole situation was fortunate, if she could succeed in making Fabrizio see it in the light in which she intended he should see it. She had full confidence in her powers of simulation. They had not failed her that afternoon with her husband, and there was no reason to suppose that they would do so with her lover. It was certainly strange, she thought, that she should have pretended to be the recipient of an anonymous letter in order to appeal more forcibly to Fabrizio's feelings, and that now there had appeared a real letter which, though it reflected on her own conduct, could be used materially to strengthen her hold over him. The position was one full of possibilities for misrepresentation, and intrigue of the kind which had always had for her a certain fascination, and in which years ago she had exercised her powers when she had only the nuns of the Assumptionist convent at Perugia upon whom she could practise.

Presently Cristina passed from the boudoir into her bedroom adjoining it, and, after giving a few touches to her toilette, went through the cardinal's apartments to the billiard-room where she thought that she might find Fabrizio. He was not there, however; and, after considering for a moment or two Countess Vitali decided to retrace her steps to the gallery, through which Fabrizio would have to pass when returning from his room whither he had probably retired when Ugo left him. Walking the length of the gallery she paused almost mechanically in front of Donna



Giulia's portrait. How many minutes might have elapsed while she remained engrossed in her thoughts Cristina could hardly have told, when the noise of a door a few paces from her being opened roused her, and she turned round quickly to find Fabrizio entering the room. He gave a slight start as he saw her white-clad form standing immediately beneath the picture in the semi-obscurity of the darkened gallery.

"I have been looking for you," she said hurriedly. "I thought you might be in the billiard-room. I have much to tell you."

Fabrizio glanced at her quickly. "What has happened?" he asked nervously.

"A great deal has happened," returned Countess Vitali laconically. "I have been insulted—insulted, Fabrizio!" she added, speaking almost beneath her breath.

Fabrizio made a rapid step towards her. "Insulted," he repeated; "Ugo?"

"Sicuro—Ugo! He has gone out—to the farm. A horse is ill. He thinks more of his beasts than he does of his wife."

"Cristina!" exclaimed Fabrizio. "What in the world do you mean? Ugo left me to go to you. He was full of a new idea that seems to have taken possession of him, an idea which, I confess, surprises me. He told me——"

"Yes?" interrupted Countess Vitali eagerly. "What did he tell you?"

"That he meant to take an apartment in Rome next winter, in order that you should pass the season there. He reproached himself for having—oh, well, for having thought only about his own interests in life and not about yours. I never heard Ugo talk in that way before, and, as I say, it surprised me. What in the world has happened, Cristina? for certainly something must have happened, and I do not understand anything at all!"

Cristina laughed harshly. "Of course you do not understand! Ugo does not intend that you should. He thinks that *I* do not understand—but I am not an imbecile—I!"

Fabrizio stared at her. "If you would explain——" he began.

"Wait!" interrupted Cristina. "Ugo said nothing to you, I

suppose, about a letter he had received? another anonymous letter, which, this time, I shall be careful not to destroy."

For the first time Fabrizio noticed that she held a piece of paper in her hand. "A letter?" he re-echoed, and his voice had a tone in it of apprehension and dismay. "No; he alluded to nothing of the kind."

"All the same, he has received a letter, warning him to watch my movements—'for the sake of the honour of Casa Vitali!'" returned Countess Vitali.

"Ci siamo!" exclaimed Fabrizio bitterly. "But," he added, as though a fresh thought had just struck him, "I do not understand—Ugo has just been talking quite confidentially to me; not as he would talk had he any suspicion——"

Cristina smiled sarcastically. "But do you not see that it is a comedy which is being played?" she asked. "Sicuro! Ugo did not mention the letter to you—but he took it to the San Felice before showing it to me! He does not hesitate to insult me by confiding in his mistress rather than in his wife, and by acting on the Duchessa di San Felice's suggestions. And he thinks that I am such an imbecile as not to understand!"

"But this sudden determination to take you to Rome," said Fabrizio. "Ugo told me that, though he hated the prospect of going to a town for so long, he was doing it for your sake."

Cristina looked at him almost contemptuously. "You are very ingenuous, Fabrizio mio," she said drily, "or you are very dense. The San Felice, also, will spend the winter in Rome. You will see."

"Diavolo!" exclaimed Fabrizio. "So it is for that——"

"Of course it is for that!" interrupted Countess Vitali.

Fabrizio shrugged his shoulders. "All the better for us," he observed. "They can suit their own convenience, and we—we can suit ours, Cristina. What have I always told you? in Rome it will be easier to make opportunities for being together; whereas here, in Palazzo Vitali, the risk is too great—even if it were possible for me to remain here indefinitely."

"But you do not see—can you not understand?" said Cristina

suddenly, in a low voice. "You did not believe me when I first hinted to you that there was something more than an old friendship between Ugo and the San Felice," she added quickly. "But now—what further proof can you need of what I have had to endure? Ugo has never trusted me. It is to the San Felice he goes for advice, even in matters concerning his own wife—his own honour, as this letter pretends to say! Is that not an insult? But, after all, it is only one of many that I have had to pretend not to notice."

She spoke in an agitated whisper, and Fabrizio took her hands in his and kissed them. "Do they matter now—those insults?" he asked tenderly. "Have you not got me, Cristina? If Ugo chooses to be unfaithful to you, you have surely the right to protect yourself, and to live your own life!"

Cristina shook her head. "A woman who has been married for the reason for which I was married has no life of her own," she said bitterly.

"For the reason for which you were married?" repeated Fabrizio.

"Do you not know the reason?" returned Countess Vitali, and her eyes flashed angrily. "If you do not know it," she continued, "my husband and the San Felice know it—especially the San Felice! You had better ask her."

Fabrizio Vitali stamped his foot impatiently. "Why do we live in a priest-ridden country?" he exclaimed, "under a government afraid of those hypocrites of the sacristy? In any civilised country—in France, in England—anywhere—you could free yourself—we could free ourselves—per dir' meglio! But here in Italy we are still bound, not by any belief in what the priests tell us—we have got rid of all that—but by fear of the Church as a political power. When Italy is free, and we have a law of divorce compelling the priests to marry divorced persons if called upon to do so—" He turned abruptly away from her and walked a few steps across the gallery.

"But in the meantime," said Countess Vitali, "the priests have their own way, amico mio. There is no mode of escape from the bonds of a marriage such as mine, excepting one.

According to your friends the priests, death—or the Pope—is the only loosener of the bond.”

Fabrizio's back was turned towards her and he did not reply. Suddenly he looked round sharply. “Why do you laugh, Cristina?” he exclaimed.

Countess Vitali stared at him. “I?” she replied. “I did not laugh! far from it. What do you mean, Fabrizio?”

Again he did not answer her. His face, always pale, became a shade paler. “Are you sure you did not laugh?” he asked presently.

“Of course I am sure! are you mad, caro mio?”

“I don't know,” muttered Fabrizio. “I certainly thought I heard you laugh—either you, or—” and he glanced at Donna Giulia's portrait above them.

Countess Vitali followed his gaze, and then she looked at him again inquiringly. “We are alone,” she said, with a slight smile, “so, unless it was your ancestress, Donna Giulia, who laughed, I think your nerves must be out of order again. After all, perhaps Donna Giulia is amused,” she added mockingly. “It would be natural that she should be so, always supposing that her spirit still exists!”

“Sciocchezze!” exclaimed Fabrizio irritably. “You are talking nonsense, Cristina! My ears deceived me, of course—as they have done before. What were you saying? I forget. Ah, that the priests say death, or the Pope, alone can break the bonds of matrimony. It is very easy for them to say it, since they have taken good care to exempt themselves from the bonds they have imposed on others!”

“Exactly—death, or the Pope,” returned Cristina slowly. “In the present case,” she added, “we may leave the Pope's intervention as being scarcely likely to occur!”

“As little likely to occur as the other,” observed Fabrizio.

“The other is bound to occur some day.”

“Si capisce! but it will probably occur too late in the day to be of any advantage,” Fabrizio replied, with a slight laugh.

Countess Vitali glanced at him, with a rapid, searching glance. “One never knows,” she said indifferently. “The unexpected

sometimes happens. For instance, I might have been killed by the lightning the other day. If I had, Ugo would have been free to marry the San Felice!"

"Per carità!" ejaculated Fabrizio. "I wish you would not say such things, Cristina! I was not thinking of Ugo being freed—but of your own freedom."

"Ah," exclaimed Countess Vitali, "but my freedom is not—" and she paused abruptly.

"Is not what?"

"Is not necessary to you," returned Cristina, in a low voice. "If I were free, you would not want me. Men are like that."

Fabrizio gave a gesture of dissent. "I shall always want you," he said quickly.

"And," proceeded Cristina, "if I were free, you would be Count Vitali, and in Ugo's place."

Fabrizio drew closer to her. "I should be Count Vitali—yes," he said; "but whether I should be in Ugo's place would depend upon you!"

Cristina's eyes looked into his own. "Cristina!" he said hurriedly, "do not put thoughts—bad thoughts—into my head!" and he passed his hands across his eyes as though to shut out his gaze.

"You would want to fill Ugo's place—wholly?" she asked slowly; "you would want me—always?"

"Non lo sai?" The question seemed as it were to be wrenched from him by a physical force which possessed itself of his will and dominated it. Mechanically he stretched out his hands towards a table, as if to steady himself by grasping something material. Presently the blood seemed to cease beating upon his brain, and he was conscious of a sensation as though a part of his personality were returning to him and re-asserting itself. "I wish no harm to happen to Ugo," he exclaimed almost roughly.

Cristina smiled quietly. "No harm, Fabrizio mio, of course not!" she said. "I was merely wondering what would happen if—if you were suddenly to find yourself in Ugo's place—as his legal heir. That is not assuming you wish any harm to befall him. Perhaps," she continued, after a pause, "I should not have told



you about this letter. But you must remember that you were sceptical as to Ugo's relations with the San Felice being anything more than friendly. Now you can scarcely be sceptical any longer. You see for yourself that Ugo consults her in everything, even in the most private matters. Can you wonder if I regard his having taken this letter to the Duchessa di San Felice as a cruel insult to me? At least, I should regard it as a cruel insult, did I believe that the letter was genuine."

Ugo looked at her with a puzzled air. "How, genuine?" he asked. "What do you mean, Cristina?"

Countess Vitali laughed a little harshly. "They are playing a comedy—those two!" she said. "The whole affair is nothing but a scene which has been already rehearsed between them. This letter—it was not necessary to take it to the San Felice, since she knew its contents already! Do you not understand, Fabrizio?"

"Niente affatto!" returned Fabrizio frankly. "I understand nothing."

Cristina tapped her foot impatiently on the floor. "So it would seem!" she replied. "Nevertheless, the whole thing is very simple. This display of confidence in me on Ugo's part was pre-arranged with the San Felice. The letter was composed by them."

Fabrizio spread out his hands despairingly. "I cannot follow you," he said. "I thought it was the want of confidence in you displayed by Ugo that made his action so insulting——"

"Listen," interrupted Cristina, and she spoke low and rapidly, "and you will understand better! Ugo brought me this letter with many protestations that it was his complete confidence in me which made him do so. He reproached himself for having failed to have this confidence in me in the first instance, and explained how the San Felice had told him that he was wrong—and that he should bring the letter to me. Bene! had Ugo stopped there, I might have believed him. I might have thought, as it was intended I should think, that the Duchessa di San Felice was indeed a true and disinterested friend both to my husband and to me. Unluckily, Ugo made a mistake—two mistakes, and both were



clumsy. In the first place he went out of his way to assure me that, though he had wished the San Felice to read this letter, she had refused to do so, and had refused even to know its contents. È troppo forte! What woman would refuse to read an anonymous letter about another woman—especially if it referred to her friend's wife? In the next place, after telling me that he had been selfish in obliging me always to lead this life at Viterbo and that he meant to take me to Rome, he accidentally mentioned that the San Felice, also, intended to spend next winter in Rome—and the San Felice, as everybody knows, has never spent a season in Rome since her husband's death. Is it so difficult to understand that two and two make four?"

"It is incredible!" exclaimed Fabrizio. "Had it been anybody else, and not Ugo."

Cristina looked at him with a slight smile. "Caro Fabrizio," she observed quietly, "you have always been deceived by Ugo's apparent frankness. It is natural. Until six weeks ago, you scarcely knew him, and you do not know him much better even now. But I, who am married to him, know him better than you can do! Some people cultivate a simple manner. It is a useful thing to cultivate, when one wishes to throw dust in other people's eyes."

"Then you believe the whole thing to be a pre-arranged affair between Ugo and the San Felice," said Fabrizio; "and that Ugo has no suspicions of—of us? This letter, in short, is merely part of the comedy, as you call it!"

"Ah—finalmente ci siamo!" exclaimed Countess Vitali. "It is very simple. Ugo married me, because the San Felice did not find it convenient to marry Ugo. Those things happen occasionally, is it not true?"

"Povera la mia Cristina!" murmured Fabrizio.

She drew herself gently away from him. "It does not matter—now," she said softly. "Before you came into my life, Fabrizio, I suffered—yes! but now——"

"And I must leave you to-morrow, knowing all that I know!" Fabrizio exclaimed.

Cristina shrugged her shoulders. "Ci vuole pazienza!" she

replied. "You will return here in a few weeks, and we must both of us be prudent, Fabrizio mio, very prudent, for your sake as well as for mine. Ugo has no suspicions, of that I am certain. He thinks only of so arranging matters as to be able to follow the San Felice to Rome. Ebbene, so much the better for us! But, in the meantime, we must be prudent, I tell you, and you must be patient. *Tout vient à qui sait attendre.* Remember your position with regard to Ugo. That position must not be destroyed, you understand? We must wait, amico mio. When you return—or in Rome—perhaps we shall be freer. And in the meantime you will be guided by me. Perhaps some day you will see that I have had your true interests at heart in not allowing our love to interfere with those interests—Zitto, per carità!" she broke off abruptly, and moved quickly away from him down the gallery.

"Cristina—wait!" exclaimed Fabrizio. "Why do you go? there is nobody——"

"I heard footsteps in the next room," returned Countess Vitali hurriedly. "It is probably Taddeo coming to open the windows now the sun is gone from the courtyard. Let us go to the terrace, Fabrizio, to our usual place. Ugo will soon be coming back from the farm, and it will be better that he should find us talking together as if nothing had happened. Of course you will be careful not to let him suspect that I have told you anything concerning this letter," and she thrust the paper into the body of her dress as she spoke.

Fabrizio Vitali followed her in silence. He told himself that Cristina was right; that he must be patient and wait. It was difficult to believe that his cousin's simple, straightforward manner was nothing more than a manner; that Ugo's confidential conversations with him, in which he had figured as an affectionate husband, had been merely intended to deceive him as to the real state of his domestic affairs. Had Ugo been one of his Roman friends, he would not have been in the least surprised, and certainly not in the least scandalised, that he had a mistress as well as a wife. But from the first there had been something in his cousin's careless, unsuspecting way of looking at life in

general that had appealed to Fabrizio's respect, and, perhaps unconsciously, also caused him some envy, even while he had sometimes laughed at him in his mind for being a *campagnuolo*. The feeling that he was trading upon this simplicity, and deceiving it, had not been one of the least clamorous among the scruples of conscience which Fabrizio had experienced of late, and it came upon him as something of a shock to discover that his respect had been misplaced and his scruples unnecessary.

## CHAPTER XIX

FABRIZIO VITALI had hoped that some fortunate chance would have allowed him to be once more alone with Cristina in the course of the evening preceding his departure. It was with decided regret, therefore that he learned from Ugo, who returned from the farm shortly after he and Countess Vitali had settled themselves in their accustomed seats at the end of the terrace, that the ailing horse was fairly on the road to recovery.

During the whole of the evening Count Vitali appeared to be in excellent spirits, and in no wise disposed to be left out of the conversation, or, as was so often the case, to fall asleep after dinner. It was natural that Ugo Vitali should discourse of the sudden illness of one of his best horses; and somewhat to Fabrizio's surprise, as well as to his annoyance, Cristina appeared to take unusual interest in the symptoms of an animal which had been tactless enough to get better instead of worse, thereby destroying his hopes that Ugo would have paid another prolonged visit to the farm that evening.

"Imagine," Ugo observed, after describing the treatment for an internal inflammation to which the offending horse had been subject, "the veterinary has ordered two injections of morphia—one every six hours—as though the animal were a Christian. They say injections of morphia are the fashion now, is it not so, Fabrizio?"

Countess Vitali laughed. "Let us hope the horse will not develop a craving for the drug," she said.

"That is what I said to the veterinary," returned Ugo. "Of course," he added, the doses are very small—scarcely larger than would be given to a man. I do not think they can make any mistake at the farm and inject too large a dose—otherwise the horse would be poisoned."

Cristina's face showed an increased interest in the subject.

"Is it true that so many people use morphia?" she asked of Fabrizio, "I mean, people of the world."

"Altro!" he replied, with a shrug of the shoulders; "the habit becomes more common every day—at least, so the doctors declare. Your sex, especially, is addicted to it, Cristina. A syringe and phial of morfina are a part of the outfit of many fashionable ladies."

"And why do they not occasionally give themselves an overdose by accident?" asked Countess Vitali.

"Oh," replied Fabrizio, "as to that, the doses are regulated. Each *fiale* contains from two to five centigrammes, I believe."

Ugo laughed. "Fabrizio seems to know all about it," he observed.

"By a combination," Fabrizio answered. "The taking of drugs is not one of my vices," he added; "but it so happens that I have had to study the subject—from the lawyer's point of view. There was a famous trial some two years ago—a case of suicide or murder; which of the two it really was the jury were unable to decide unanimously—and in the course of that trial I learned many particulars concerning the morfina from the doctor's evidence."

"But you were not engaged in it professionally—as one of the lawyers, I mean?" asked Count Vitali.

"Professionally—no," returned Fabrizio; "but I was always present in the Court—as a student, you know."

"What would be a fatal dose to a man?" inquired Ugo.

"Do you mean by injection, or taken by the mouth?"

"Diamine! either way you please. It would be the same thing in the end, I suppose."

Fabrizio hesitated. "I think not," he replied. "It would be impossible to inject a dose which would prove fatal at one time, with the syringe ordinarily in use. And if swallowed, such a quantity would produce violent sickness, and very likely defeat its own ends—supposing those ends to be murder, or suicide."

"But that is interesting—very interesting!" observed Cristina,

stopping in her task of peeling a peach and looking at him. "How many things you know, Fabrizio," she added. "Tell us some more about the morfina."

"Yes," said Ugo, "tell us how you would set to work to murder somebody, or to murder yourself with morphia. As Cristina says, it is very interesting. All the same, I hope Giovanni will not murder my horse!"

"The morfina is cumulative," explained Fabrizio. "I mean, cumulative in its action." Nothing pleased Fabrizio Vitali better than to feel that he was being interesting, and he would talk on any topic provided his vanity were flattered by seeing that he was listened to with attention.

"The action is cumulative," he repeated, a little pompously. "That being so," he continued, "repeated injections of, we will say, five centigrammes of morfina until some twenty centigrammes had passed into the blood, would have a fatal result."

"Then you would prefer to inject the poison, rather than administer it by the mouth?" asked Ugo.

"Undoubtedly; if my object was to murder someone," answered Fabrizio smiling. "Do you remember," he added, "that diabolical attempt to murder a man by challenging him to a friendly wrestling bout, during the progress of which his arm was to be injected with *curare*, by means of a tiny syringe his antagonist kept concealed about his person? Well, the attempt did not succeed, because no good opportunity presented itself of using the syringe unobserved. But a scratch would have meant death in a few hours—and that death would have probably been attributed to virulent blood poisoning produced by some infected instrument, or by the bite of some insect that had been feeding on putrid matter. Sicuro—to administer poison by injection is much the more practical method—especially in these days when anybody can walk into a chemist's shop and provide himself with all the appliances for injecting morfina into his own or his enemy's veins!"

"But without a doctor's order no chemist may sell poison to a customer," objected Ugo.



“No chemist may sell certain poisons without a doctor’s order—that is true,” replied Fabrizio; “but unfortunately chemists are often careless about the sale of morfina. Strychnine, curare, and other poisons are of course unobtainable, but you—I—anybody can often buy from a chemist our apparatus for the injection of morfina, our pastilles of corrosive sublimate also, if we prefer that poison, without many questions being asked.”

Countess Vitali half filled her glass from a flask of red wine which stood near her on the table. The wine remained untasted, however, and her eyes were fixed on Fabrizio.

“And the symptoms?” she asked him suddenly. “What would the symptoms be, in the case of a fatal dose of—well, of morfina, we will say—since you seem to be more at home with the morfina than with the other drugs you name?”

Fabrizio laughed. “I am not a doctor, *ben’ inteso*,” he replied. “But, in the case of a fatal dose of morfina administered by injection, I have been told by doctors that the symptoms would closely resemble those of some acute intestinal disorder, and that these would be succeeded by unconsciousness—and the unconsciousness by—” and he shrugged his shoulders significantly.

“In fact,” remarked Ugo Vitali laughing, “the symptoms—always excepting the unconsciousness, which I trust will not occur!—would more or less resemble those of my horse, who has eaten too much young grass and has a colic.”

“I am not a doctor,” repeated Fabrizio, “so I am afraid I cannot answer your questions scientifically. It has always seemed to me an odd thing that greater restrictions have not been placed on the sale of these hypodermic syringes and phials of morfina. What is to prevent a person from providing himself with a number of these phials for administration to others, or to himself? Fortunately——”

A sound of glass breaking interrupted him. With a sudden movement of her arm Cristina had accidentally overturned her wine glass. Rolling off the table it fell with a crash and shattered into little pieces on the marble floor of the dining-room, while the red wine spread with a blood-like stain over the white tablecloth.

"How clumsy of me!" she exclaimed. "I forgot that I had just filled my glass. Luckily the wine has all fallen on the cloth, and not on my dress. Yes, Fabrizio, what where you going to say?"

"I was going to say that, fortunately, there are such things as *autopsie* to be reckoned with; otherwise any one might poison his neighbour more or less with impunity, as was the case in old days."

"Ah!" exclaimed Countess Vitali, "that is true. Donna Giulia, for example, had not to think about such inconveniences as *autopsie*."

Fabrizio raised his eyebrows a little impatiently. "Always Donna Giulia!" he thought to himself. Donna Giulia had not entered his mind while he had been talking, and the thought of her seemed at that moment to be more distasteful than usual to him. He made no reply to Countess Vitali's observation, and Cristina seemed indisposed to pursue the subject. She appeared to be absorbed in her own thoughts, and her gaze was fixed abstractedly on the red stain of the wine on the tablecloth in front of her. Presently she rose from her chair, and taking Fabrizio's arm proceeded to leave the dining-room, while Ugo, who was roasting the end of a *Virginia* cigar in the flame of a candle preparatory to smoking it, lingered behind to complete that necessary process.

"Perhaps he will read the newspapers," Fabrizio said to her quickly, as they reached the drawing-room; "and we can go out into the gardens. It is my last evening with you, Cristina!"

Cristina shook her head decidedly. "No," she replied. "No, let us be prudent, Fabrizio mio. After all, in a month, six weeks, you will return here—if we are prudent. Be guided by me—and have patience."

"But—for a few minutes only," pleaded Fabrizio. "Tomorrow morning I go," he continued; "and six weeks is a long time to wait—for what you have promised to give me," he added in a whisper.

"No!" repeated Cristina, almost angrily. "Do not be a fool, Fabrizio. Would you risk spoiling everything—our future happi-

ness—for the sake of a few minutes' folly? Why will you not trust me? As to these few weeks during which we shall be separated—I have need of them—to think."

"To think?"

"But, yes, to think!" replied Countess Vitali impatiently; "to think for you and for myself. Via, Fabrizio," she continued, and the angry note in her voice gave place to a soft, caressing tone. "Do not tempt me to give way—before the time! Some day you will be grateful to me for having saved you from committing a folly—from ruining your own chances—Basta!" and, turning away from him quickly, she went to the window as Ugo Vitali, his cigar by this time well alight, entered the drawing-room.

"Are you going to sit out of doors?" he asked, as he saw his wife looking out into the gardens.

"I think not," answered Cristina quietly. "There is no moon, and there is too much air this evening. It will be more comfortable in the house. You will not forget, Ugo, that Fabrizio goes by the eleven o'clock train to Rome? The carriage must take him to the station."

"And we will accompany him, to wish him buon viaggio," said Ugo.

"E felice ritorno," supplemented Countess Vitali, with a quick glance at her husband.

"Sicuro," agreed Ugo; "for the vintage, that is an understood thing!"

A momentary expression of satisfaction passed across Cristina's face. "Always supposing that Fabrizio has nothing more amusing to do," she observed, indifferently. "After all, we cannot expect him to leave his occupations or his amusements for the sake of assisting at the gathering of our grapes. That, no doubt, is an interesting spectacle to us, but then we are *campagnuoli*."

Although Countess Vitali had assured Fabrizio that her husband entertained no suspicions concerning him, she was as yet by no means certain that this was really the case.

Since Ugo had left the anonymous letter in her hands, she had found moments to read it again and again with scrupulous attention. Notwithstanding her assertions to her lover as to its origin and its

scope, she was persuaded in her own mind that the letter had been written with the intention of directing Ugo's suspicion into the right channel; and that it was certainly not the result of an intrigue on the part of the Duchessa di San Felice whereby she, Cristina, was to be deceived into believing she possessed her husband's full trust and confidence. She was even aware, on thinking the matter over more calmly, that in wishing to make Fabrizio believe the letter to be the handiwork of the duchessa and Ugo she had overstepped the bounds of probability. She had remembered how she had ultimately succeeded in convincing Fabrizio that the Duchessa di San Felice had been the author of the imaginary letter whereby she had learned that she had been married merely to enable her husband to carry on an old liaison with greater facility and less risk of scandal; and, in her anxiety to afford him further proof of the existence of such a liaison, she had forgotten that even a lover's credulity might hesitate before accepting her assurance as to the origin of this second anonymous missive. He might argue to himself that neither the duchessa nor Ugo could derive any advantage from taking so unnecessary a step. Cristina was not a little troubled by this reflection. It annoyed her, too, to feel that there should be any flaw in the tissue of misrepresentation she had woven so carefully in order to complete her lover's subjection by affording him plausible reasons for stifling the scruples she had from the first realised that he possessed.

At the same time Countess Vitali would have given much to know what had really passed between her husband and the Duchessa di San Felice on the subject of the letter. She did not for a moment believe—indeed, she would have been incapable of believing that Ugo had given her a true account of his interview with San Felice. Of course the duchessa had read the letter; and having read it, of course she would have at once set herself to think who the lover of her friend's wife might be! Had she, Cristina wondered, suggested Fabrizio as being in all probability that lover? This was more than likely, since Fabrizio was the obvious person to suggest. But if this suggestion had been made, Countess Vitali had every reason to believe that she

had at all events succeeded in, if not altogether banishing Ugo's suspicions, at all events considerably diminishing them ; and the fact that her husband's manner towards his cousin showed no lack of its accustomed cordiality did much towards confirming this belief.

## CHAPTER XX

“**H**OW right you were, Donna Vittoria!” said Ugo Vitali; “but then,” he continued, “you always are right. I have proved that many times.”

Vittoria di San Felice laughed. “Am I?” she asked. “I wish I could think so—no, I don’t wish anything of the kind!” she added hastily; “for if I did think so, I should be a very odious person, which I hope I am not!”

She and Ugo Vitali were sitting in the shade of a group of magnificent plane trees in the grounds of Villa Falconara. A tea-table, thoroughly English in its equipment of daintily cut bread and butter, scones and cakes, stood beside them. Of recent years the custom of having tea in the afternoons had become fairly frequent among the Italians of her world; but the Duchessa di San Felice had been enamoured of the practice in the course of her repeated visits to English and Scottish houses during the autumns she had spent in those countries, and had imported it into her own long before it became more or less recognised by her compatriots.

Ugo Vitali had not again seen the duchessa since he had sought her counsel as to how he should act with regard to the anonymous warning he had received. That, however, was now more than a fortnight ago; and every day which had passed had made him feel more assured of the wisdom of the advice she had given him, and also of his own wisdom in having asked for it.

Since Fabrizio’s departure everything had gone smoothly at Palazzo Vitali. In countless little instances, trifling, perhaps, in themselves, but none the less eminently satisfactory to Ugo who had been watching anxiously for them, Cristina had appeared to be desirous of showing her husband that she appreciated the confidence he had displayed in her by bringing her the



anonymous letter. Every day she seemed to be gradually becoming more like her old self. Her coldness, and her occasional fits of ill-humour had disappeared; and, if she was sometimes silent and pre-occupied, her manner had no longer that ungracious sullenness which had so often wounded and distressed him.

As though by a mutual consent which had not needed putting into words, the subject of the anonymous letter had not again been mentioned between them. Whatever vague suspicions Ugo might have entertained as to his cousin Fabrizio, these had been completely set at rest both by Cristina's demeanour and by that of Fabrizio himself. Nothing could have been more natural than that demeanour. Fabrizio had departed, and as the dirty and ill-appointed train, considerably behind its time like the generality of Italian trains, had lumbered slowly out of the Viterbo station, Ugo had repeated his invitation that he should return at the commencement of the vintage. That he had been able so quickly to dismiss from his mind all suspicions concerning his cousin had been a great relief to Count Vitali. It would have been a monstrous and almost an incredible thing had Fabrizio been so treacherous as to repay his confidence in him as a kinsman, and his goodwill towards him as his probable successor, by bringing dishonour upon his house.

Like the majority of people possessing a generous nature, Ugo Vitali was always prone to blame himself rather than others. In the present instance he felt that there were ample grounds for self-reproach, and that he had nobody but himself to thank for it if his wife had become discontented with the life he had hitherto obliged her to lead. He felt, too, that his friend Donna Vittoria considered his attitude towards Cristina to have been egotistical, and that she had wished to point out to him his error in not having attempted to put himself, as it were, in Cristina's place and understand her views of life as well as his own.

Ugo had not the least doubt in his own mind that the improved relations now existing between Cristina and himself were largely due to the fact of his having promised to spend a season in the capital. He assured himself that women must have a certain

amount of society, that they must be allowed to feel that they were seeing and being seen by the world, if they were to remain happy and contented at home. Even his model among wives and mothers, the Duchessa di San Felice, notwithstanding the simple and comparatively retired life she had led since her husband's death, was careful to keep herself in constant touch with the world, and made no secret of the pleasure she took in mixing in the society of her own and other countries.

It was all very well, however, for the Duchessa di San Felice, who both by birth and marriage belonged to the *alta nobiltà*, and whose fortune was an unusually large one for a woman to possess, to take up the position she had taken up regarding the world. Whenever and wherever she chose to go into that world her name as well as her fortune assured her a cordial welcome. It might, and probably would be otherwise with Count and Countess Vitali, members of the *piccola nobiltà di provincia* with only a modest income. There were comparatively few people who would know that Count Vitali represented an ancient and at one time illustrious family, nor that his blood and his descent were far older than those of the vast majority of those Roman nobles who would in all probability look down upon him.

When Countess Vitali had told Fabrizio that her husband was in reality very proud, she had for once in a way spoken the truth; and this particular form of pride, coupled with the sensitiveness it invariably begets, had exercised more influence on Ugo Vitali's nature than he was at all aware was the case. It had caused him throughout his life to imitate the tactics of the snail, and to retreat into the shell of his provincialism on the slightest touch to his susceptibilities. This sensitiveness on her husband's part had been a perpetual source of annoyance and disappointment to Countess Vitali. Of plebeian blood herself, she could neither understand nor sympathise with it. It had been as well, perhaps, that she could not understand it, at any rate to the extent of realising that she owed the fact of her being Countess Vitali to those very peculiarities in her husband's nature which, with some justice, she regarded as being both absurd and exasperating.

It was perhaps strange that Vittoria di San Felice, with all her

powers of discernment, should never as yet have fully realised the extent to which this pride and its accompanying sensitiveness had influenced the career of the man she had known from boyhood. She had always known, indeed, that Ugo was proud of his ancient descent, and of the fact that he held lands which had been owned by his forefathers long before Cardinal Vitali had added to the fortunes of the family by becoming a member of so profitable a syndicate as was the College of Cardinals in the Middle Ages. His attachment to this soil, and to his country life had seemed to Vittoria, whose own love for the country and country things was almost a passion, to be natural enough. She had, consequently, sought for no other reason for Ugo's manifest aversion from enlarging his social sphere. Moreover, her own position in the world being so undoubted and so secure, it had never been her custom to limit her choice of her friends and acquaintances to those belonging to one section of society only; and, therefore, the idea that Ugo Vitali might be influenced by other motives for so resolutely refusing to spend any portion of his time in Rome than disinclination to leave his country occupations had never up to the present occurred to her.

Ugo had purposely allowed some days to elapse before acquainting the duchessa with what he had every reason to believe were the good results due to his having acted upon her advice. Finding himself, however, that afternoon within a short distance of Villa Falconara, he had been unable to resist the temptation of calling upon her in order to tell her of these results.

"There is nothing so tiresome as people who are always convinced that their views of life must be the right views," Vittoria di San Felice repeated.

"But it is true," Ugo insisted. "Whenever I have followed your advice, it has always proved to be right. That is why I came to you, why I should always come to you, if you would allow me to do so."

Vittoria di San Felice poured herself out a cup of tea with some deliberation. "That is precisely what I should not allow you to do," she observed presently. "Before you were married,

it was a different matter; but now—" and she paused expressively.

"But there are many things concerning which Cristina is not capable of giving advice," returned Ugo quickly. "She has not your experience, duchessa, indeed, she has no experience. How could she have any?"

"Then you should give her the opportunity of gaining some," replied Vittoria.

"I know. You told me so before, if you remember. That is why I am going to take her to Rome. On that point, also, I am sure you will prove to be right. She will see the world; and if she loses some of her illusions concerning it, that will be so much experience gained."

Vittoria smiled. She wondered whether he was conscious of a slight cynicism, but concluded on reflection that it was quite unlikely. "Why should she lose her illusions?" she asked. "The world will probably make itself very pleasant to her," she added.

Ugo tapped his brown-leather gaiters with his riding whip. "We cannot compete with your Roman world," he said briefly. "We have no money, and we are not in—what do you call that little red and gold book you have on your writing-table in the casino?"

"The Almanach de Gotha, do you mean?" asked Vittoria di San Felice laughing. "Well, my friend, and what does that matter? You are—yourselves—are you not. Of course Rome has become very vulgar—horribly vulgar; and every impossible foreigner—American, English—what you will, whom even London is not yet vulgar enough to receive, for, after all, London still likes something beside mere dollars—comes to Rome; by dint of feeding the Romans an adventurer can go everywhere; and if she is a woman, and under sixty, probably marries a Roman prince. All the same, there are Romans and Romans you understand. We are not all of us vulgarised, even yet, either in our manners or in our blood!"

"In Rome it will always be remembered that Cristina was, well, Frezzi's daughter," said Ugo. "Even here, at Viterbo——"

“Caro Vitali,” interrupted Vittoria, “you are altogether too old-fashioned in your ideas! You are thinking of the Rome of fifty years ago, which you have heard about from your father, probably. Besides,” she added, with a smile, “the fact of your wife having been born as she was can be nobody’s business but your own! You did not marry her under the impression that you were marrying a woman with sixteen quarterings—no? Believe me, in these days the absence of money is resented much more deeply than the absence of quarterings. All the same, I do not imagine that you will want to compete with the Americans, and become a species of *cucina economica* for that section of Roman society that runs about the city in search of free dinners.”

Ugo laughed. “Scarcely!” he replied. “My cousin Fabrizio has been telling us about that phase of life in Rome.”

“Ah,” observed Vittoria di San Felice; “your cousin. Is he still with you?” she asked, after a slight pause.

“No, he left us some days ago; nearly a fortnight ago, indeed.”

The duchessa seemed as though she were about to ask another question, but suddenly she checked herself. She would have liked to know if Fabrizio Vitali’s departure had been in any way due to the hint she had given Ugo in the course of their last conversation together.

“It is no affair of mine,” she thought, and reproved herself for her curiosity.

“But he is to return to us for the vintage,” proceeded Ugo.

This time Vittoria was unable to repress a slight movement of surprise.

“Your cousin did not strike me as being particularly interested in that kind of thing,” she remarked drily.

“I don’t suppose he is,” returned Ugo smiling; “but at any rate, from his point of view, he would miss nothing by being out of Rome in September. I am glad he is coming back to us. He amuses Cristina. Do you know, Donna Vittoria, that until he came to us I had no idea my wife took so much interest in——”

“In what?” asked Vittoria abruptly.



"Oh, in books and intellectual things generally. You will say that I ought to have known it; but those things are not much in my line. I have sometimes sat and wondered what in the world she and Fabrizio were talking about!" Ugo added laughing.

Vittoria did not reply, but looked at him with a perplexed expression on her face.

"And so he is coming back to pay you another long visit," she observed, presently, conscious of having nothing more definite which she could permit herself to say.

"You see," said Ugo, "my cousin Fabrizio is my nearest relative. If anything were to happen to me, he would inherit."

"My dear Vitali!" exclaimed Vittoria, almost angrily, "what nonsense are you talking? You are a strong robust man, not a delicate town-bred—well—" she broke off abruptly. "One does not wish to make comparisons. Besides, who is to say yet that your wife will not have half a dozen children?"

Count Vitali shrugged his shoulders. "One never knows what may happen," he said. "At any rate," he added, "Fabrizio is a Vitali. The land would not go away from the name were he to succeed me. It is a good thing that he and Cristina get on well together. Under the circumstances, it might have been quite the reverse. She might have taken a dislike to him as occupying the position a child of her own should have occupied."

Vittoria di San Felice looked at him curiously. "I think you are rather premature," she said, at length; "but, of course, you must know your own affairs better than I can know them—especially such intimate affairs as the appearance or non-appearance of children of your own to come after you!" she added with a smile. "All the same," she continued, a little hesitatingly, "it would be natural if your wife resented your over-readiness to accept a cousin as your successor. But, apparently, she does not object!"

Possibly the Duchessa di San Felice had thrown more meaning into her words than she was aware of, for Ugo glanced at her quickly as though a sudden thought had struck him.

"I must confess," he said, "that when I showed you that letter I received——"



Vittoria stopped him with a little wave of her hand. "Let us be accurate," she interrupted. "You mean to say, when you wished to show me a letter the contents of which I refused to know."

"I beg your pardon!" returned Ugo. "You are quite right, duchessa. I do not forget your delicacy on that occasion. I told my wife of it."

Vittoria started a little. "You told her that you had consulted me?" she asked. "But—was that necessary, Vitali—or wise?"

"Why not?" returned Ugo, simply.

"Thank heaven," thought Vittoria, "that I did not read that letter! "Bene," she continued quietly, "why not? as you say. You must know your own affairs better than I can know them, as I told you just now. At least," she added; "you are sure Countess Vitali understands that I did not read the letter, and that I do not know what it contained?"

"But of course!" replied Ugo. "I told her so."

"And she believed you?"

He looked at her in surprise. "Why should she not believe me?" he asked. "But I was going to tell you, Donna Vittoria, *a proposito* of my cousin Fabrizio, that, when I received the letter you declined to read, a horrible suspicion came into my mind. I wondered if the writer intended to warn me against Fabrizio. Fortunately, I followed your advice; for, had I not taken the letter at once to my wife, I might have imagined my suspicion to be well founded. As it is——"

"Yes?" interposed Vittoria, slowly stirring her cup of tea.

"I saw instantly how ridiculous such an idea was," continued Ugo. "Cristina did not even take the letter seriously. No, Donna Vittoria, you do not know what sensible advice you gave me the other day! You were quite right when you said that Cristina would respond to the confidence I showed in her. For a few moments, I admit, she was angry."

"Angry? at your telling her of your suspicion regarding your cousin?"

"*Macchè!*" exclaimed Ugo. "I never mentioned that to her—and afterwards I was thankful I had not done so. No, I

mean she was angry at hearing I had consulted you—oh, but for a moment only,” he continued hurriedly, as Vittoria’s expression changed suddenly. “Immediately afterwards she explained why she was angry. It was as you said, she resented my not having immediately confided in her. But she understood—oh yes, she certainly understood! and the proof is that ever since she has been—well, more like she used to be.”

“And your cousin, when did he leave you?” asked Vittoria suddenly, and somewhat irrelevantly.

“The next day. When I returned to Palazzo Vitali after my visit to you, I found he had received a letter from his mother begging him to go to her at once, on account of some matter of business. Naturally, when one’s suspicions have once been aroused, no matter how unnecessarily, one cannot help watching people’s manner, but indeed there was nothing to watch.”

Vittoria di San Felice made a slight gesture. “Caro amico,” she said hastily, “why do you enter into these details? Have I not said that I did not wish to know what may have been written in this famous letter?”

“I tell you because I feared lest you, too, had some similar suspicion, and I wished to show you how unfounded it would be did it occur to you. But,” he continued hastily, “do not think that I came here this afternoon for this object. I came to tell you how right you were in making me trust Cristina, and to thank you for yet another piece of good counsel. I shall think of you as another Madonna di Buon Consiglio, Donna Vittoria!”

Vittoria drank her tea in silence. In truth she did not know what to say. Ugo Vitali had been very far from convincing; so far so, indeed, that she wondered whether he had really succeeded in convincing himself, or whether he were only attempting to hide his doubts from one whom he suspected of sharing them.

It was with a sense of genuine relief that she saw the frail, spare figure of Don Basilio appear round the corner of the house and turn down the rose-bordered walk leading to the trees beneath which she and Ugo Vitali were sitting

“Here is Don Basilio,” she said quickly. “I am glad if my

advice was of any use, Vitali—very glad. As to my having any suspicions, that would be absurd. What possible reason or right could I have to entertain them? When I said to you the other day that it was better for a woman to have a multitude of admirers than to be thrown too much in the society of one only, I meant what I said and nothing more. After all, what would of course entail no danger to Countess Vitali, might possibly not be so harmless to a young man constantly with her. Ah, Don Basilio, you have arrived in time for some tea, or would you prefer black coffee? Count Vitali has been paying me a visit. *A proposito*, he has made a stupendous resolution! you will never guess what a resolution."

Don Basilio and Ugo shook hands warmly. "What is it?" the priest asked. "To purchase an automobile?"

"Dio me ne salvi!" exclaimed Ugo laughing. "I prefer my horses. But what is my stupendous resolution, duchessa?"

"To pass a season in Rome," replied Vittoria, addressing her chaplain. "Imagine, Don Basilio."

Don Basilio felt surprised, and showed his feelings on his face. "Davvero?" he said. "Well," he continued smiling, "he might spend a season in worse places. A young man should see the world. But you will feel rather lost without your usual occupations," he added.

"Altro!" assented Ugo; "but when one has a wife to consider—" and he paused.

Don Basilio smiled. "Most young men do not wait until they have a wife before seeing the world," he remarked drily.

A few minutes afterwards Ugo Vitali took his leave. Don Basilio, sipping his black coffee, looked at Vittoria di San Felice inquiringly. Accustomed to read every expression of her face, he saw that something was troubling her. He asked no questions, however, knowing that if she needed any advice or assistance from him she would tell him so.

For some minutes Vittoria remained silent, apparently engaged in arguing out some problem in her mind. Presently she looked up. "What a mistake it is," she observed, a little impatiently, "to meddle in other people's business!"

Don Basilio replaced his coffee-cup on the table and folded his hands. "That depends on the nature of the business, and still more, perhaps, on the nature of the individuals whose business one meddles in! Del resto, it is part of my trade to meddle in other people's affairs."

Vittoria laughed. "In their spiritual affairs—yes," she replied; "but hardly in their domestic affairs. You are not one of those priests who interfere in matters outside their province."

Don Basilio shrugged his shoulders. "The spiritual and the domestic are sometimes so intermixed, that it is difficult to give advice regarding the former without appearing to interfere in the latter," he said.

"How right you are when you say that the nature of the individual in whose business one may have been foolish enough to meddle is of more importance than the business itself!" Vittoria remarked thoughtfully. "There," she continued, smiling, "is the training of the confessional. You being a priest, at once regard the matter from the psychological standpoint."

"Scusi, but what matter?" asked Don Basilio; "there are so many!"

"Ah, I forgot!" replied Vittoria. "I was following the clue of my own thoughts, a clue you do not possess. The fact is," she continued, looking at the priest earnestly, "that in wishing to do good, I think I have very probably done a great deal of harm. It is always like that when we amateurs attempt to meddle."

"Not always," returned Don Basilio quietly.

"No, not always, perhaps. But, in this case, something tells me that I have done harm."

"But if the harm was not intentional."

Vittoria smiled a little sarcastically. "There spoke the priest again!" she exclaimed; "but the conventional priest, saying the conventional thing. A stupid action often has far more serious consequences than a deliberately wrong action. 'Intention' may be a very important detail in the confessional; but in everyday life it is of no account whatever."

Don Basilio laughed gently. "Cara signora duchessa," he remarked, "I will not argue the point. When you become

practical, I know by experience that you can be a very dangerous antagonist!"

"But I want to be practical!" said Vittoria eagerly; "and perhaps you can help me to be so."

"I?" and Don Basilio tapped his soutane significantly. "But if you have just told me that I am conventional, with the conventionality of the confessor!" he added, with a twinkle of humour in his eyes.

"Only," proceeded Vittoria, "we must agree to exclude 'intentions,' for, in the present instance, they do not matter at all. I have been talking to Vitali."

"Si capisce—since I found you together," observed Don Basilio drily.

"He talked about his wife," said Vittoria.

Don Basilio looked at her quickly. "Why does he come here to do that?" he asked.

"Benissimo! I see that you mean to be practical," returned Vittoria. "Well, some days ago he asked me for my advice. He wanted to show me a letter—an anonymous letter—he had received——"

"Also about his wife?"

Vittoria nodded. "I would not read it," she said; "neither would I allow him to tell me what it contained. I advised him to take the letter to his wife, and to nobody else—certainly, to no other woman. Do you think I was right?"

"Conventionally—yes."

Vittoria di San Felice stamped her foot. Then in spite of herself, she laughed. "What do you mean, Don Basilio?" she asked.

"I mean, that you undoubtedly gave him the right and proper advice for a woman to give a man, under the circumstances. Whether many women would have given it is another question, and one which does not signify. Only——"

"Only—what?" asked Vittoria, as he hesitated.

"Only you omitted to take into account the possibility that Countess Vitali's nature might not be like your own."

"I know that you distrust her," said Vittoria.

"Distrust!" echoed Don Basilio; "that is not the term. I may be wrong," he continued; "but I should not believe a word Countess Vitali said. She is false—I feel it—and, God forgive me for thinking it, I think she is evil. I hope that Count Vitali will not regret taking her to Rome."

"I advised him to do so," said Vittoria quickly. "I do not know, as I have told you, what that anonymous letter contained, but I can guess. Vitali is too generous to be suspicious. He could not act dishonourably himself, and therefore cannot imagine that others could do so by him. In Rome, at all events, his wife will be thrown with a variety of people, and not with one person only, as has been the case lately. All the same, Don Basilio, I am not sure whether I have not made a mistake in giving Vitali any advice at all. When I gave it, I did not think he would have let his wife know that he had consulted me."

Don Basilio joined the tips of his fingers together and looked at her thoughtfully. "That was a mistake," he said gravely.

"It was an excess of confidence," returned Vittoria.

"It is the same thing. And what has been the result, duchessa?"

"The result? it is sufficiently perplexing. I do not believe that Vitali himself is quite sure what the result has been. Apparently, however, his wife has succeeded in convincing him that certain suspicions he had momentarily entertained regarding his cousin—that young man who came to breakfast here, you remember—are altogether unfounded. Apparently, too, Countess Vitali is now exerting herself to make her husband happier than I suspect him to have been lately. I know I ought to believe all this to be genuine, but something tells me that it is not."

Don Basilio looked at her keenly for a moment. "The something," he observed, "is your friendship for Count Vitali."

"Perhaps," returned Vittoria di San Felice simply. "It is very natural. I have known him most of my life; and it has distressed me to see that his marriage has not been altogether a success. I thought that, in marrying where he did, he had perhaps done more wisely than if he had taken a woman



entirely of his own class. As you know, I have always tried to befriend Countess Vitali. I considered that the people here talked nonsense about her origin, or, rather, her father's origin."

Don Basilio was silent for a moment. "I do not quite understand what is troubling you," he said, at length. "You think you have given bad advice—is that it?"

"I think that I should have given no advice," replied Vittoria. "But when an old friend asks for one's advice, it is not easy to refuse it. All the same, as I could not tell Vitali all my suspicions, it would probably have been better to hold my tongue! Moreover, I have a presentiment of some evil, some horror. It is vague, and I cannot explain it, but it troubles me."

"Did Count Vitali tell you what his wife said when she learned that he had consulted you?" asked Don Basilio suddenly.

"He said that she was angry at first, but that she soon understood why he had done so. But, Don Basilio, she would never really believe that I had refused to know the contents of that letter; though she may have pretended to Vitali that she believed him when he told her so. I would rather she had continued to be angry."

"And so would I," agreed the priest. "It would have been more natural."

Vittoria glanced at him. "You think that I should not have interfered," she said, a little bitterly. "After all," she continued, "I think so myself. I have done no good, and I may have done Vitali harm. I believe the writer of that letter is a more honest friend than I am."

"But if you do not know its contents?" hazarded Don Basilio.

"*Ma!*" exclaimed Vittoria. "It is not difficult to divine them. Vitali is being deceived, I am confident that he is being deceived."

"We shall see," observed Don Basilio.

"He is to return for the vintage," said Vittoria drily.

"He—who?"

"But the cousin, of course! That is what I wanted to make

Vitali understand would be—madness ; and I had not the courage to tell him my thoughts. Could it not be prevented ?”

Don Basilio considered for a moment or two before replying to the question. “Yes,” he said, presently, “perhaps it could, duchessa, but not by you ; certainly not by you. You must not place any weapon in Countess Vitali’s hands which she might use against you—and her husband. Do you understand me ?”

Vittoria di San Felice turned towards the tea-table and began somewhat aimlessly to arrange the cups on the silver tray beside her. “Yes,” she said, quietly ; “perhaps I do. Thank you, Don Basilio.”

## CHAPTER XXI

JULY, with its long, scorching days, was over, and had given place to the more sultry heat of August. In the vineyards the grapes were fast colouring; the fig trees were laden with their scented fruit of rich purple or fresh green; and the tall, yellow spikes of the ripened maize rustled and crackled whenever a faint breeze touched them. It was a season when, for the moment, agricultural labour was almost suspended. The great white oxen were standing idle in their stalls; the peasants were occupied in the gathering of the figs, peaches, pomegranates, and all the divers fruits from the trees scattered through the vineyards. It was a time of semi-repose for men, women, and beasts before the beginning of the grape-harvest; when from early morning to dusk the country would resound with laughter and songs as row after row of vines were despoiled of their purple and white clusters and the oxen plodded slowly off drawing the carts laden with fruit for consignment to the wine-presses.

For Cristina Vitali, who took no interest in the various phases of the agricultural life passing around her, the time which had elapsed since Fabrizio's departure had passed monotonously enough. During the first few days that she once more found herself quite alone with Ugo she had set herself steadily to remove from his mind all lingering suspicions as to the letter he had received being anything else than the attempt of some mischief-maker to sow discord between a husband and wife, and in this endeavour she had succeeded fairly well. Little as Ugo knew the world, he was quite aware that such weapons as anonymous letters were often enough employed for similar purposes. Possibly, too, he was the more easily convinced that mischief-making was the real object of the letter, inasmuch as he knew that his marriage had been regarded with anything but favour or sympathy by his neighbours. Cristina, indeed, did not hesitate to

avail herself of this argument, and to point out to him that in all probability the letter owed its origin to the jealousy or disappointment of one or another of these neighbours. On several occasions when, after Fabrizio's departure, she and Ugo had reverted to the subject of the letter, Cristina had been on the point of telling him the same story she had told Fabrizio concerning the imaginary missive she herself had received. Ugo would certainly feel that it would be ungenerous on his part to brood over anonymous allegations concerning her when she had dismissed from her mind as a matter unworthy of her consideration an allegation of a similar nature concerning himself. The recollection, however, of her husband's sudden outburst of indignation and anger when she had insinuated that he and the Duchessa di San Felice were on terms of more than mere friendship had caused her to think twice before venturing to include this latter argument among the others she employed. It was no part of her scheme to make Ugo angry. Moreover, if there were really any secret understanding between him and the San Felice, her wiser course would be to affect ignorance, at any rate for the present, and until such time as she might have positive proof that things were as she had made Fabrizio believe them to be.

For the first two or three weeks after Fabrizio had left Palazzo Vitali Cristina felt that she was succeeding admirably in the rôle she had decided to play. The part, however, was a difficult one; and, as time went on, it became ever more difficult. The change in her attitude towards Ugo—the change which she had at once settled that it would be necessary to feign—brought about its natural consequences. Her husband became once more her lover. Perhaps she had scarcely understood that this would be the result, or that it was, indeed, a proof of the success of her deception. Nevertheless, it was a result which had to be endured, and the endurance of it became terrible to Cristina. Never before had she realised so completely that the love she had for a brief space imagined herself to possess for her husband had been a purely animal passion which had long ago burned itself out. And now, when the ashes of that passion were stirred, the stirring of them uncovered repulsion and disgust.

And yet it had to be endured ; and the strain both mental and physical involved in its endurance became ever more intolerable in proportion as her husband's love rekindled under the feigned affection she felt herself obliged to show him.

At times it would startle her to find how deeply rooted her love for Fabrizio had become ; and the necessity of submitting herself to a love, which was not the love she longed for with all the force of her southern nature, was an ever increasing torture. As the weeks went by, it had grown more and more difficult to play the part she had thought it would be so easy to assume. To her, who had from her earliest childhood found excitement and delight in deceiving those about her, and who had succeeded in deceiving even such acute observers of youthful characters as were the Assumptionist nuns at Perugia, it had seemed an easy task to throw dust in the eyes of any one so simple and unsuspecting by nature as Ugo. She had not, however, reckoned with the fact that she would be called upon to do violence to feelings, the depth of which she had never until lately recognised. A disgust, both physical and mental, with her husband's love only served to add fresh fuel to the furnace of desire burning within her to enjoy to the full the satisfaction of that other love which, almost unknown to herself, had taken entire possession of her.

The constant strain entailed by this new deception quickly began to have its effect upon Cristina. She grew restless, and full of a suppressed irritability. As long as Fabrizio had been at Palazzo Vitali she had been resolute in adhering to her determination not to accord him all he had sought from her. It was a dangerous thing, she had told herself again and again, for a woman to give everything until she was more sure of her lover than she, Cristina, was sure of Fabrizio Vitali. She would keep Fabrizio unsatisfied at any rate until something should happen which would enable her to bind him to her irrevocably. What that something was going to be, she had not up to now dared even to formulate in her mind. It was not until Fabrizio had departed that she realised how she, too, was unsatisfied. It was useless, worse than useless, for her in certain moments to shut her eyes and try to imagine that these were Fabrizio's arms

which were around her ; that the kisses on her lips were Fabrizio's kisses. Could her husband guess, she wondered, that his love rekindled by her pretended return to that affection she had shown him in the earlier days of their married life, roused in her heart a turmoil of mingled feelings in which hatred was beginning ever more and more to predominate? Sometimes it seemed to her that he must realise it; that something of the passionate loathing that caused her almost to shudder as she endured his embraces must communicate itself to him. The very ease with which she was able to deceive Ugo, his readiness to respond to every word and look—to all the by-play of the comedy she had set herself to act to him—far from appealing to her compassion or causing her to reproach herself for trading on his love merely aroused in her a sense of impatient contempt.

And the impatience, the contempt and the hatred grew. They grew until by day and by night her thoughts, even if temporarily diverted from it, always flowed back into one channel. If Ugo no longer existed, if Ugo were dead, Fabrizio would marry her—must marry her. It had been this thought, and not the fear of detection or of its ensuing scandal, which had given her the strength to resist her own longing to give herself wholly to her lover. The cautious cunning of her nature had warned her against being too hasty to part with all she had to give to Fabrizio. It might be that something would set her free from Ugo some day ; and if not—well, then it would be simple enough to content her lover, and nobody, least of all Ugo, need be any the wiser. But if something should happen to set her free, then Fabrizio must marry her, and marriage should be the price of what he desired from her. Often she lay awake in her own room, when the night was yet early, pondering over these two contingencies, and sometimes it had happened that, as she pondered, she would hear Ugo's step crossing the ante-room dividing his apartment from her own. And then she would shut her eyes that he might not read in them all the disgust and hatred his caresses let loose to riot in her heart.

Between Fabrizio and herself a frequent correspondence passed. In this matter, also, Cristina's habitual caution had not deserted



her. Her own correspondence was necessarily extremely limited, being confined almost exclusively to notes from neighbours, or communications from shops in Rome with which she had occasion to deal. It was not advisable, therefore, that Fabrizio's letters should be known by the small household of Palazzo Vitali to arrive at the rate of three or four weekly, nor that her almost daily letters to him should be consigned to Taddeo's care to be posted. If the signora contessa received small parcels by the *pacco postale* more frequently than had ever before been the case, Taddeo, when he brought the postman's book for her signature as the addressee of these packets, could not be inspired to know that they merely contained a letter enclosed in a cardboard box; neither could he guess that the various missives addressed sometimes to an imaginary name at the *poste restante* in Rome, and sometimes to an equally imaginary individual at a bookseller's shop in the same city, were in reality intended for Fabrizio Vitali, who called for them at these addresses with an unfailing regularity. This correspondence, indeed, became to Cristina as food and drink in her daily life. She would spend hours over the composition of her letters to Fabrizio, studying her phrases as carefully as she would have studied her words had she been speaking them to him. They were not impassioned letters such as Fabrizio wrote to her; but they conveyed nevertheless a sense of dependence upon him which was calculated at once to appeal to his sympathy and compassion, as well as to his love. Countess Vitali, in fact, had quite succeeded in persuading herself that she had been married merely to enable her husband to continue an intrigue with a woman who had never been able to make up her mind to marry him herself. It was certain that Ugo's action in taking to the Duchessa di San Felice the anonymous letter he had received had afforded Cristina the best possible pretext for completing this process of self-persuasion. The knowledge she had gained of her lover's character had long ago convinced her that he would eagerly seize any excuse wherewith to quiet his scruples of conscience with regard to his conduct towards Ugo. Nothing, as she had quickly realised, could have been a more efficacious anodyne for those scruples than the knowledge

that Ugo was himself an unfaithful husband, and that she, Cristina, was a wife who was being systematically wronged and deceived.

Fabrizio Vitali's letters clearly shewed that, however difficult it might at first have been to him to believe in the existence of an intrigue between his cousin and the Duchessa di San Felice, he was now firmly persuaded of Ugo's duplicity. As Countess Vitali had anticipated would be the case, his sense of compassion was fully aroused, and with it had been aroused also a certain sense of chivalry none the less eager because it was misplaced.

But now Cristina's mind, ever restless and ever calculating, found itself confronted by a fresh problem; one which, notwithstanding all her ingenuity, she found herself entirely unable to bring within the range of an even possible solution. By day and by night this problem haunted her, and seemed as it were to eat its way into her very brain. Not the least of its difficulties lay in the knowledge that she must keep the fact of its existence rigidly to herself, that she could as yet scarcely venture to discuss its solution even with herself. There had been a time when she had nourished a half-formed hope that Fabrizio might help her in effecting its ultimate solution, and she had cautiously felt her way with him as one trying to pass over unknown and perilous ground. She had speedily drawn back, however, realising intuitively that neither with her lover nor with any living human being could she share her problem.

It had been this intuition, this knowledge that she must grapple alone with the fleeting, restless thoughts which of late had crystallised themselves into one predominating idea, which had caused her, gradually and almost unconsciously, to seek inspiration as to its solution not from the living but from the dead.

It was absurd, of course—she told herself again and again that it was absurd—but whenever she went into the gallery and sat before the portrait of Donna Giulia Vitali, after a short time had elapsed during which her own eyes seemed to be held enchained by those in the picture, she would feel no longer either afraid or

ashamed to formulate her problem to herself. Those eyes, always looking into hers, seemed to give her courage to debate calmly and dispassionately with herself; they seemed to draw all the horror out of her predominating thought as though by a natural process, and to reveal that thought to her under a different aspect, no longer irrational or repulsive but reasonable, and of a strange fascination.

After Fabrizio's departure it had become a constant habit with Cristina to resort to the gallery and dream away the hours of the long August afternoons. She knew that no one would disturb or break in upon her meditations, for neither Taddeo nor any other members of the household of Palazzo Vitali cared to enter that apartment unless it was absolutely necessary to do so. Countess Vitali could scarcely have explained to herself why she felt an ever-increasing desire to be alone with Donna Giulia's portrait. She certainly did not believe in the tales that were told of Donna Giulia's periodical re-appearances on the scene of the crime she had perpetrated nearly three centuries ago. The supernatural appealed to her as little as it does to the vast majority of Italians, which is tantamount to saying that it did not appeal to her at all, but left her both incredulous and indifferent. For some time, however, she had experienced a strange pleasure in allowing her mind to dwell upon the tragedy in which Donna Giulia Vitali had played so prominent a part. The story, it was true, was little more than a tradition. The papers and manuscripts of Casa Vitali, of which Ugo possessed a considerable collection, and which, owing to the accident of his father's only brother having taken an intelligent interest in such things, were in fairly good order, contained neither record of nor allusion to Donna Giulia's crime, although among the documents of that period there were numerous letters written by Donna Giulia herself, by her more famous sister, Donna Olimpia Pamphili, Princess of San Martino, and by other members of the Mairalchini family; as well as autograph epistles in the handwriting of their apostolic brother-in-law, Pope Innocent X. The Vitali, no doubt, had been careful to destroy any documentary evidence of the domestic tragedy which had taken place within the walls of their palace at Viterbo; but they

had been unable to exercise a similar discretion in the muniment-rooms of their neighbours. The entire story of Donna Giulia's love intrigue with her husband's elder brother, and her subsequent agreement with her husband to rid herself of her lover by poisoning him and thus to place her husband in possession of his brother's inheritance, had been duly chronicled by a contemporary writer belonging to a Viterbese family which had at that time been nearly as powerful as the Vitali themselves, although it could not boast of a near connection with the reigning pontiff. This document had been copied by various students of medieval history. It had already become to all intents and purposes public property when scarcely more than a century had elapsed since Donna Giulia, acting in accordance with the deliberations of a *consiglio di famiglia*, murdered the man whose mistress she had been for several years by a gradual process of poisoning.

Cristina Vitali would certainly have been unable to explain, even to herself, why her frequent visits to Donna Giulia's portrait seemed to exercise some peculiar influence over her ; nor, indeed, could she have accurately described that influence. She was only conscious of the fact that when she was alone in the gallery the eyes of the portrait seemed to be following her every movement, and that she had no longer the sense of being the only occupant of the room. This feeling, however, was a secondary one. What she realised more definitely was a mental rather than a physical influence. Her thoughts, which at other times would revolve restlessly and incoherently round an idea as yet but partially conceived, seemed as it were to be set in order for her. Her mind no longer turned with fear and dismay from that persistent idea which lurked like a shadow in its innermost recesses, but welcomed it and cherished it lovingly. Had not Cristina been absolutely ignorant of all the modern revivals of ancient occultism, it might have occurred to her that perhaps she was deliberately opening the gates of her mind to the entry of occult influences. As it was, she was entirely unconscious that she was doing any such thing. Although she knew vaguely that there was a numerous and rapidly increasing body of people in Italy which occupied itself with spiritism in all its various forms, the subject had never come

within her horizon ; consequently, it would never have entered into her head to ascribe to some occult influence that strange sensation of relief and satisfaction at finding herself, when alone with Donna Giulia's portrait, able to reflect calmly and remorselessly upon the possibility of carrying into effect a scheme upon which at other times her thoughts would refuse to dwell except in an unconnected and disorderly manner.

Whether some occult powers were in reality exercising their influence over her mind, or whether she herself was gradually training her mind to accustom itself to the reception of a terrible idea, the fact remained that Cristina now regarded her repeated meditations in Cardinal Astorre's apartments in Palazzo Vitali as a necessity of her everyday life. But, notwithstanding the mental satisfaction she was sensible of deriving from her half unconscious communings with the portrait of her husband's ancestress, she felt that the solution of the problem which occupied her mind was as far removed as ever. When they were alone together at dinner Countess Vitali would often sit in silence, gazing at Ugo. He was so strong, she said to herself impatiently—so healthy—like a healthy animal in its prime. Would anything ever happen to take him out of her life—anything natural ? It was all very easy for Donna Giulia—but, in these days, when healthy people died suddenly, there were enquiries, and doctors opened the bodies.

Often Ugo would notice his wife's abstraction, and then he would begin to talk about their approaching season in Rome.

Then Cristina would rouse herself from her meditations. She was determined that she would keep him in a good humour, and unsuspecting ; unsuspecting of Fabrizio, of her, and of her secret thoughts, those thoughts which now never left her except when she slept, and which even then would often haunt her dreams. It was terrible to have to work alone to gain her object ! She had hoped at first that Fabrizio might have helped her, but Fabrizio would not dare so much, nor could she venture ever to hint to him anything of her purpose. He would turn from her in horror, and yet she would be carrying out that



purpose for his happiness as well as for her own. If she could succeed in removing Ugo from their path, would she not be giving her lover money, lands, rank, and herself?

By degrees the primary incentives which had influenced her, the desire to escape from the narrow surrounding of a provincial life, to force for herself an entrance into a wider sphere in which it would be possible to gratify her ambitions, and in which the beauty she was fully conscious of possessing would open out for her an easy path, had assumed a secondary place in her mind. It was only after Fabrizio Vitali's departure, however, that she fully realised the position into which she had almost unconsciously drifted, and knew that she loved him with a love she had never believed herself capable of feeling. And now that she did realise the fact that, for the first time in her life, this love had come to her, she was resolved sooner or later that all obstacles to its enjoyment should be removed. The fear she had formerly felt of allowing her mind to dwell upon the only event which could satisfactorily remove the chief obstacle to her lover's and her happiness was now almost entirely absorbed in the thought that by bringing about its removal she would be securing to Fabrizio the position which she was convinced that he had always secretly coveted. She told herself again and again that she was working for Fabrizio's cause; that Ugo had proved himself to be quite unworthy of the place he occupied. All these reflections, however, brought the practical solution of the principal problem which confronted her no nearer. Ugo was in the prime of life, to all appearances an absolutely robust and healthy man, leading the active and regular life which makes for health and longevity. It was obviously absurd to rely upon the unexpected happening, some accident or illness. Countess Vitali had certainly never read the works of "George Eliot"; nor, probably, had she even heard of that giantess among modern English novelists. Nevertheless, she unconsciously shared the opinion of Mrs Poyser to the effect that individuals not wanted in this world are not wanted in the next; and she felt that any fortunate chance intervening to remove her husband elsewhere was not worth taking into account.



In the meantime, the days passed monotonously enough at Palazzo Vitali. During the hot hours of the long, August afternoons Cristina would often pace restlessly through the deserted and darkened rooms of the cardinal's apartment, and her steps would be drawn, as though by some invisible magnet, to that end of the gallery where the portrait of Donna Giulia hung. Ugo, as usual, was seldom within doors, and seemed to devote himself more than ever to the care of his property. His absence was always a relief to Cristina. During those hours she felt that she was free, that she need no longer play a part. She could reason with herself, and with Donna Giulia. The portrait in the gallery had become a companion to her, so much so that at times she would forget that it was merely a piece of painted canvas. The eyes seemed to read her thoughts, and occasionally even to answer them.

One afternoon, it was the festa of the "Ferragosto," the Feast of the Assumption, than which throughout Italy there is no more popular holiday, and Cristina was alone in the gallery. The post had brought her a letter from Fabrizio, and she had been reading and re-reading it as she sat in one of the heavy, gilded chairs with their faded damask coverings which were ranged at intervals along the sides of the room. Presently she folded the letter in its envelope and slipped it into the bosom of the white cashmere dress she was wearing. As she did so she looked up, and her eyes met those of the portrait fixed upon her with their mocking smile.

"Why can you not show me the way?" she exclaimed suddenly, unconscious that she spoke the words aloud. Rising from her chair she crossed the room and stood beneath the picture, her back turned to the double doors at the further end of the gallery. "You did it," she muttered almost angrily, "and you are always silent—always! If it is true that your spirit lives, somewhere, why can you not help us, Fabrizio and me, and show me a way?"

"Cristina!"

Cristina started and turned hastily as she heard her husband's voice. He had entered the gallery by the doors behind her, and

now stood a few paces from her, looking at her with astonishment.

"Do you know that you were talking to yourself?" he asked. "I could not quite catch your words, but you were certainly talking to yourself. It is a dangerous habit."

Cristina looked at him with a half-dazed expression. Then she laughed suddenly. "Why do you laugh?" she said to him, suspiciously. "Are you laughing at what you heard me say?"

Ugo stared at her. "It was you who laughed, not I!" he said, "and I do not know what is the matter with you, Cristina," he added quickly. "I never heard you laugh like that. It was like somebody else laughing, not you at all!"

With an effort Countess Vitali recovered herself. "You startled me," she said lightly. "I had no idea that you were in the room. I suppose I laughed unconsciously, and so thought that it was you who laughed. Sicuro! I was thinking of Donna Giulia when you came in, and I daresay I thought aloud, which, as you say, is a bad habit."

Ugo Vitali smiled. "What do you want of Donna Giulia?" he asked. "If my ears did not deceive me, you said, 'Why can you not show me the way?' I do not think I should select Donna Giulia as a guide," he added.

Cristina gave him a rapid, furtive glance, and then she shrugged her shoulders. "Sciocchezze!" she said indifferently. "I had been thinking of your mysterious ancestress, that is quite true. But I had also been thinking of something more prosaic; that is, of the cut of a new dress which does not please me. I suppose I unconsciously appealed to Donna Giulia to help me out of the difficulty!"

Ugo laughed. "Is that all?" he observed. "I am relieved," he continued, "for really, when I heard you laugh it startled me. It was like—well, I do not know what it was like, but like something evil."

"Grazie!" said Cristina mockingly.

"That is why it startled me," returned Ugo. "It was as if somebody else were laughing, through you—somebody quite different. Oh, I cannot explain, and no doubt it was all my

imagination, and that the laugh was not like your own laugh because you, also, were startled at finding I was in the room."

Cristina was silent for a moment. "No doubt it was imagination," she said, at length; "indeed, what else could it have been?"

## CHAPTER XXII

IT was now late in August, and every day the clusters of grapes hanging in the vineyards were turning a deeper purple or a richer amber colour, according to the variety of the vines. The excessive heat of that summer had brought all the fruits of the earth more quickly to maturity; and the forward condition of the grapes made it evident that the vintage must commence nearly a fortnight earlier than was usually the case.

Ugo Vitali was happier in his mind than he had ever been since the first year of his marriage. Although at times Cristina would be silent and preoccupied, there were hours when she was all that she had been in the earlier days of their married life. Like many proud and reserved natures, Ugo was keenly sensitive, and it needed but little effort on his wife's part to make him respond to the affection which he never doubted was again beginning to reassert itself after a temporary estrangement most probably, as he assured himself, caused by the disappointment she had suffered in not having children having reacted upon her health.

It was perfectly in accordance with his own nature and temperament that Ugo Vitali, while rejoicing at the change in his wife's demeanour, should reproach himself for having made her life unnecessarily dull and monotonous. He did not attempt to disguise from himself the fact that he had in the first instance been mistaken in the character of the woman he had married. He had, it was true, been desperately enamoured of Cristina's beauty; but he had also calculated that in marrying her, the daughter of a self-made man, a girl who had not been brought up with any expectations of playing a part in the world of society, he was marrying a wife who would be content to lead the life from which he had resolved he would never dissociate himself. Ugo had long ago realised that he had been mistaken in this

calculation ; but he had never allowed himself to consider that he had been deceived. Cristina, it was true, had always led him to suppose that she asked for nothing better than the life he had offered her. Even now, after she had furnished him with abundant proof that she had in reality expected something very different from this life, he was determined to believe that, had she only had the satisfaction of being a mother, she would never have become discontented with her lot.

Quite unconsciously to herself, the Duchessa di San Felice's arguments had aroused in Ugo a very insistent spirit of self-reproach. This was certainly not what Vittoria di San Felice had intended when she urged upon him the advisability of allowing his wife to see more of the world than he had hitherto permitted her to do. The duchessa had proffered this advice foreseeing complications of too domestic a character in the near future ; complications which she was of opinion might be at all events minimised, if not altogether avoided, were Countess Vitali to be surrounded by the admiration which could scarcely fail to fall to her share in the larger world of Rome. There was, as she had observed to Ugo Vitali when he expressed his surprise that she should counsel him to expose his wife to the temptations besetting the path of a good-looking woman in Roman society, safety in numbers.

Unfortunately the hint which had been veiled by this advice, though it had altogether escaped Count Vitali, had not borne the fruits which might have been expected. The careless indifference with which his wife had treated the anonymous letter directly pointing at an unnamed individual who could be none other than his cousin Fabrizio had completely disarmed any suspicions that Ugo might otherwise have entertained. More than this, Cristina had, by a clever *volte-face*, succeeded in leading him to suspect that she was jealous of his friendship with the Duchessa di San Felice, and that in consequence she considered herself to be the aggrieved party. At first he had hotly resented his wife's insinuations as an insult both to himself and to Vittoria. This resentment, however, had been quickly succeeded by a feeling of satisfaction that Cristina should

entertain any sentiment of the kind, since the fact of her being jealous of another woman surely proved that she still loved him. This last argument, as any woman could probably have told him, was absolutely unsound ; for the jealousy of a woman is not as the jealousy of a man, and many women are jealous where they have long ceased to love.

Ugo Vitali was obliged to confess to himself that he had given his wife some cause to resent his friendship with Vittoria di San Felice when he had taken the anonymous letter to the duchessa before showing it to her. The duchessa's decided refusal to receive a confidence which she had told him ought not to be made to any woman but his wife had immediately opened his eyes to the false step he had taken. He had taken that step on the impulse of the moment, but also as the result of long habit, so accustomed had he been to seek Vittoria di San Felice's advice in his difficulties, knowing that hitherto that advice had always been frankly and loyally given to him. It had scarcely struck him until the duchess had somewhat bluntly reminded him of the fact, that he had no right to seek the counsel of another woman in matters concerning his domestic affairs, though there might conceivably be circumstances which would justify him in confiding the same to another man.

It should not be difficult, he thought, to convince Cristina that she need feel no jealousy towards the Duchessa di San Felice, although he had undoubtedly acted rashly in preferring to confide in the duchessa before he mentioned to his wife the subject of the anonymous letter. But the thought that ever since his marriage he had persistently refused to listen to Cristina's wishes, that he had condemned her to lead a monotonous existence because he himself found such an existence both agreeable to his predilections and to his interests, caused him to reproach himself all the more severely because it was evident to him that his friend and adviser, Vittoria di San Felice, also considered him to have been not a little selfish in his conduct.

One of the immediate consequences of this self-reproach was to make Ugo almost feverishly anxious to atone for his past shortcomings, and when Cristina displayed, as she now often did



display, a return to her old affection for him he felt that coals of fire were being heaped upon his head.

Countess Vitali was quick to perceive all the workings of her husband's mind. None but she could ever know at what a cost she played her part; for in response to her simulated affection for him, all Ugo's former passion for her began to revive. Not the least convincing proof to Cristina of the complete success of her tactics was a certain estrangement which she had by degrees contrived to bring about between her husband and the Duchessa di San Felice. Since his visit to Vittoria when he had wished to acquaint her with the success that had attended the following of her advice, Ugo had not again gone to Villa Falconara. Cristina, nevertheless, was careful to let him see that, though she might have forgiven him his want of confidence in her, she had not forgotten that he had been ready to discuss her with another woman. That the duchessa had refused to read the letter or to be told its contents Countess Vitali believed no more now than she had believed it when Ugo first told her that this had been the case. She was fully persuaded in her own mind that the San Felice was and always had been in love with Ugo, though latterly she had quite abandoned all attempts to persuade herself that Ugo reciprocated that love. All the same, she distrusted Vittoria di San Felice even more than she would have done had she any reason to believe Ugo to be in love with her. Had not she, Cristina, succeeded in silencing Fabrizio's scruples of conscience by persuading him that she was married to a man whose professions of love for her were merely fictitious—assumed in order to divert suspicion as to the real nature of his friendship with the Duchessa di San Felice? The San Felice, she argued to herself, would certainly pursue the same tactics with regard to Ugo. She would lose no opportunity of pointing out to him that it was absurd to consider himself bound to a wife, when that wife was in all probability already faithless to him. That the San Felice would act as she herself had acted was, indeed, Cristina's principal fear; and, as she realised that Ugo's love for her was as passionate as it ever had been, it was a fear which increased daily. She had amply proved to herself that,

left alone, she could effectually banish any latent suspicions which Ugo might still entertain regarding Fabrizio ; but if the Duchessa di San Felice, in order to increase her influence over Ugo, were to play the part of the candid friend and open his eyes to the truth, Countess Vitali trembled to think what the consequences must inevitably be. She was quick to see that Ugo was by no means displeased with her assumed jealousy of Vittoria di San Felice, and that he made a point of abstaining from visiting Villa Falconara in order to show her that this jealousy was misplaced.

## CHAPTER XXIII

IN former days, before Ugo Vitali's marriage, Don Basilio, domestic chaplain to Casa San Felice, was a frequent visitor at Palazzo Vitali. He had been on intimate terms with the late count; and, indeed, was supposed at one time, during the period immediately succeeding the fall of the papal government, to have exercised considerable influence over him. In those days feeling ran high between the supporters of Italian unity and the adherents to the temporal sovereignty of the pope. As in France at the present time, men who were anything but religious used religion as a political lever, according to the ends they had in view; and, as in the France of to-day, men who were truly religious and not merely "clericali" formed a group of moderates which recognised that medieval abuses could no longer exist side by side with modern progress; and that the Church, like every other human body, must adapt herself to the new order of things gradually created by the changing needs and conditions of society.

The traditions of Casa Vitali, naturally enough, were all in favour of the recently defunct papal administration and its temporal claims. For centuries Viterbo had been one of the chief cities of the States of the Church—a residence, albeit occasionally a forced one, of former sovereign pontiffs; and Casa Vitali itself, although proud of its unbroken descent from one of the great baronial Roman families which dictated terms to popes and councils, owed its possessions in and around the ancient city to the fact that one at least of its members had been a Prince of the Church.

Don Basilio, although a priest, did not belong, and never had belonged, to the so-called clerical party. He was both a learned and a good man. Something of a mystic, he possessed the detached mind of a mystic, and was apt to regard the doings of

human society from a purely objective point of view. Politics, therefore, interested him but little ; and ecclesiastical politics he held in particular detestation. Had it not been for his mental energy and for a profound, if somewhat cynical, sympathy with his fellow-creatures, Don Basilio would have made a good monk—of the contemplative kind. As it was, he had devoted himself to being of use to his fellow-creatures in the world, so far as his somewhat narrow sphere allowed of his being so. Many of his acquaintances wondered that he did not care to enlarge that sphere, and that he was contented to remain a simple parish priest and the private chaplain to the Duchessa di San Felice and her household. Only his intimate friends, and they were very few, knew that he was constantly striving to enlarge his sphere. Vittoria di San Felice knew it, and so did half a dozen others. There were men, and one woman, whom he had never seen in the flesh, but with whom he corresponded, and whose fellow-worker he was ; although, as a priest of the Catholic Church, he set forth upon his explorations of that unseen world, which he knew to be always around him, from a slightly different starting-point. Of these matters he rarely spoke. None knew better than he how jealous is the Church of her spiritual preserves, how severely she discountenances and condemns all attempts on the part of her children to trespass beyond the narrow boundaries which, for the better safe-guarding of her material interests, she has been compelled to erect.

Don Basilio was driving his old pony slowly up the hill to the old battlemented gateway of Viterbo known as the Porta San Giovanni. The pony, and the phaeton which was its contemporary and now rattled and jingled over the loose stones on the hill-side, had been gifts from the old Duca di San Felice at the time when Don Basilio undertook the charge of the parish church some two miles from Villa Falconara—a thoughtful gift presented with the object of saving him from the obligation of using his legs when he came over to the villa to say mass, or to hear confessions on the eve of the great festivals of the Church. Business took him to Viterbo that morning, and an interview with the bishop on matters connected with his parish. The

pony had scarcely commenced the gradual ascent to the city walls when she stopped abruptly, spreading out her fore-legs in front of her and turning her head. Don Basilio smiled, and gathering up the reins twisted them through the rings of the harness. The pony had done the same thing, on the same spot, for the last ten years; and Don Basilio had never failed to take the hint given him by getting out and walking up the hill by her side. The sound of horses' hoofs cantering behind him caused him to look round, to find Count Vitali rapidly overtaking him.

Ugo was mounted on the young chestnut horse he had ridden on the occasion of his visit to Villa Falconara the day after his receipt of the anonymous letter. The animal was going quietly enough now, and Ugo drew up at the priest's side.

"Don Basilio, buon giorno!" he said, raising his straw hat a little as he spoke. "What brings you to Viterbo on such a hot morning? You breakfast with us, of course!"

Don Basilio shook his head. "I have business with Monsignore," he replied; "but afterwards, before I return home, I will pay you and the signora contessa a visit."

"No, no," exclaimed Ugo genially. "You can go to Monsignore after breakfast. He will not offer you any—you know he has not a reputation for hospitality, our bishop! My wife will be delighted to see you. It is long since you have been near us, Don Basilio, and I will take no refusal. Ah, you rascal, would you? Do you think you will get rid of my weight so easily?"

These last words were addressed, not to Don Basilio, but to the chestnut which, with no preliminary warning, hunched its back and gave a violent buck. "The brute will have me off one of these days when I am least thinking of it," continued Ugo, laughing. "None of my people can sit him for long, and he was sold to me as being—quiet!"

Don Basilio looked at the horse—a powerful animal with a strong strain of Irish blood in him.

"I should sell him," he observed, "before he does anything of the kind. Fortunately, you are too much at home in the saddle for him to get rid of you very easily."

"He is better of the habit than he was when I first had him," Ugo said; "but he has a way of bucking quite suddenly, when one is least expecting it. But I like the horse, all the same; and next winter I shall hunt on him, when we are in Rome."

"You have quite made up your mind to spend next winter in Rome, then?" asked Don Basilio.

Ugo smiled. "Yes," he replied; "for my wife's sake—I need hardly say not for my own! It is very dull for her here, you see. The duchessa thinks that I am quite right to take her to Rome. I have got into a groove, Don Basilio, and I suppose it is a bad thing for men of my age to do that. It is a very pleasant thing, all the same, when one feels that one fits the groove."

"Yes," observed the priest; "but, as you say, the signora contessa doubtless finds it dull passing the whole year at Palazzo Vitali."

"There is only one thing about it which really troubles me," continued Count Vitali, and then he paused.

Don Basilio made no remark. It was not his way to ask questions.

"I should be afraid that she will find her life here still more dull after a season in Rome," proceeded Ugo.

The priest glanced at him. "Let us hope not," was all he said.

Count Vitali shrugged his shoulders a little impatiently. "Her interests are not my interests," he remarked. "The fact is, I am too stupid for her," he added simply. "She should have married a clever man. Cristina is a clever woman, you know—but I forgot, of course, you know her very slightly, Don Basilio."

"Very slightly," repeated Don Basilio. "Nevertheless," he continued, "I do not agree with you when you imply that she ought therefore to have married a cleverer man. Two clever people ought not to marry. It is apt to create *disturbi*."

A by-road to the left led through the vineyards to one of the entrances to the gardens of Palazzo Vitali, and Ugo insisted upon Don Basilio coming in with him to breakfast. Arriving at the



stables he gave his horse to one of the men, telling him to see that Don Basilio's pony was put up and given a feed of oats.

Entering the house by the terrace they found Countess Vitali in the drawing-room. Don Basilio could not but perceive her surprise at seeing him, and he fancied that she looked not only surprised, which was natural enough, but also disconcerted at his unexpected visit. If this were really the case, however, she quickly recovered herself, and received him with at any rate an outward show of cordiality. It was already eleven o'clock, and breakfast was very soon announced by Taddeo, who replied to Don Basilio's greeting with evident pleasure ; for the old servant had been accustomed constantly to see him at Palazzo Vitali in the days when the late Count Vitali was alive.

The conversation at breakfast did not flag ; nevertheless Don Basilio did not feel at his ease. He had not met Contessa Vitali more than about half a dozen times in his life ; and when he had met her, the sensations she aroused in him had always been the same. To-day, however, he was aware that these sensations were very much more pronounced than they had ever before been. He was conscious, acutely conscious, of the influence of something evil. At the breakfast table they were only three ; yet Don Basilio found himself wondering whether this were indeed the case, or whether a fourth presence were not with them from which the evil he felt to be near him emanated. As the meal proceeded he grew more and more uncomfortable, and only anxious for the moment to arrive when he might reasonably make his escape on the plea that he had various matters of business to attend to in the city before presenting himself in the bishop's ante-chamber, where he might have to wait some time before obtaining his interview.

Suddenly, in the midst of his efforts to overcome a sensation of oppression and uneasiness which seemed to be gaining a greater hold upon him, Don Basilio was recalled to more material reflections by an observation made to him by his host.

"We are expecting my cousin Fabrizio," Ugo remarked ; "you remember he was at Villa Falconara that day we breakfasted with the duchessa," he added.

Don Basilio looked up quickly from his plate, and as he did so he became aware that Countess Vitali's eyes were fixed upon him sharply and suspiciously.

"Indeed?" he observed. "When does he come?"

Count Vitali glanced at his wife. "When is it, Cristina?" he asked. "He was to write to you when he had fixed the date he could leave Montecatini, was he not?"

"I am not sure," replied Countess Vitali indifferently; "one day next week, I believe."

"Ah, we shall have begun the vintage by that time," remarked Ugo. "My cousin is anxious to be here for it," he added, to Don Basilio.

"Indeed?" repeated the priest, a little drily.

"That is a young man who is wasting his life on dabbling in things better left alone," Ugo continued.

"Many young men do that," Don Basilio observed briefly.

Ugo laughed. "Oh, I mean philosophy, and all that kind of thing," he returned. "It is a waste of good brains—for he has good brains. If I possessed brains, I should try to get some material advantage out of them."

"There are material advantages to be gained from the study of philosophy," said Countess Vitali quickly.

"Of course!" replied Ugo, "but amateur philosophy—that means, as a rule, losing one's way."

Don Basilio glanced at him. Like many people with no pretensions to be clever, Ugo Vitali occasionally delivered himself of a shrewd remark; and it was not the first time that the priest had heard him do so.

"Losing one's way?" he repeated. "It is very easy to do that, conte, without being an amateur philosopher. But, all the same, it is not necessary to lose one's way simply because one studies philosophy—no? Your cousin is young. Most young people lose their way; but, as they grow older, they find sign-posts."

"Sign-posts?" re-echoed Ugo, smiling.

"Sicuro! Sorrow, and unrest. They are signs which are usually clear enough—God's signs."

"But what if your would-be philosopher refuses to admit the existence of God?" asked Count Vitali.

Don Basilio shrugged his shoulders. "Non importa," he replied. "God writes the signs more clearly; that is all."

"I'm afraid Fabrizio is a freethinker," Ugo observed; "but then," he added, "that is the fashion in these days. You and I, Don Basilio, are quite unfashionable in our ideas," and he laughed pleasantly.

Don Basilio did not reply. His face wore a grave and pre-occupied expression; but, as a matter of fact, he was not thinking of Fabrizio Vitali's heterodox opinions. He was searching in his mind for some possible means of opening Count Vitali's eyes to the risk he was running by allowing himself to be deceived into furthering what, the priest felt convinced, was a concerted plan between Fabrizio and the woman who sat at the end of the table, and who, he felt rather than saw, was hanging suspiciously on every word he might utter.

The local gossip concerning Count Vitali's folly in permitting his wife to spend her days quite alone with Fabrizio had not failed to reach Don Basilio's ears, little as he occupied himself with such matters. He knew, too, that it had reached the ears of the Duchessa di San Felice; and that, for some reason which she had not thought fit to expound to him, she had paid much more attention to this gossip concerning Count Vitali's domestic affairs than it was her wont to do when tales of a similar nature were repeated to her. With his intimate knowledge of Vittoria di San Felice's proud, reserved character, and of the breadth and generosity of her nature, he had been considerably surprised at discovering a decided inclination on her part to interfere in a matter which could not be any business of her own. That any such interference would be at once misconstrued by the world in general, Don Basilio had ventured delicately to hint to her. Moreover, any similar action by the duchessa would, as he had at once realised, place in Countess Vitali's hands a weapon which it was by no means advisable that she should possess.

Don Basilio, knowing human nature, had not at first been inclined to attach the least importance either to the rumours which

reached him as to the strained relations between Count Vitali and his wife, or to those subsequent ones which pointed to an intrigue between Countess Vitali and her husband's cousin. When, however, it came to his knowledge that Ugo Vitali had actually received an anonymous letter warning him that he was being deceived, Don Basilio had begun to wonder who might be the originator of these rumours. As time went on the tales had become more defined, and altogether of a more intimate character. Knowing how retired a life Count and Countess Vitali led, it was difficult to imagine the source whence these stories sprung.

In any case it was obvious that Ugo Vitali must be quite indifferent to the anonymous warning he had received, or he would certainly not again receive his cousin Fabrizio under his roof when so short a space of time had elapsed since his last visit. Nevertheless, Don Basilio felt convinced that, in this instance at all events, gossip was telling the truth, and he knew that the Duchessa di San Felice was convinced of it also. He had tried to argue with himself that he was prejudiced against Countess Vitali—that she was, for some reason for which he was unable to account, *antipatica* to him—and that therefore he was the more ready to believe in any stories to her discredit. But his sense of conviction, he felt positive, rested on a surer basis than this, the basis of his instinct: the mysterious power he possessed of feeling the presence of evil as though it were a tangible substance from which he recoiled as naturally as a man recoils from some poisonous creature about to strike at him.

Breakfast was nearly over by this time, and Taddeo was handing round dishes of white *moscato* grapes, and large purple figs ripe to the bursting point. The footman at that moment re-entered the room, bringing with him a telegram which he took to Countess Vitali who opened it leisurely.

"It is from Fabrizio," she said, refolding it; "he suggests arriving the day after to-morrow. I suppose that day will do as well as any other, will it not, Ugo?"

She spoke quietly, and with an indifference which struck Don Basilio as being too pronounced to be altogether natural. Looking

across the table his attention was arrested by a peculiar look on Taddeo's face. The old servant was gazing at Countess Vitali with an unmistakable expression of anger and hatred in his eyes. Apparently he became aware that the priest was watching him, for he turned hastily away, and began to busy himself at a side table.

"Taddeo knows something," Don Basilio said to himself—and then a sudden thought struck him.

"Of course the day after to-morrow will do as well as any other day," said Ugo Vitali to his wife. "But there is no need to telegraph to Fabrizio," he added, "a letter will reach him in Rome to-morrow morning." Count Vitali was careful of his *soldi*, and saw no reason to present any of them unnecessarily to the Government, if he could avoid doing so. "What room will you give him, Cristina?" he continued. "Donna Giulia's?"

Countess Vitali smiled. "I think so," she said. "Fabrizio is not superstitious, you know. He has no objection to pass through the cardinal's apartment at night, when he has to go to his room. So far as I know," she added, "he had no unpleasant experiences when he last occupied Donna Giulia's room."

Taddeo at this moment dropped a plate, which shivered into fragments on the marble floor of the room used as a dining-room.

Ugo Vitali looked at his wife with surprise, and a quick frown passed over his face.

"Why do you say that, Cristina," he remarked hastily, "when you know——"

"Signor Conte!" exclaimed Taddeo suddenly, apparently heedless of his careless action.

Ugo looked at him. "What is the matter, Taddeo?" he asked. "If you would pay more attention to your duties and less to our conversation, you would not break my china. You seem to have forgotten the episode of the crucifix," he continued to his wife.

"Oh—that!" replied Cristina unconcernedly; "of course I had forgotten it—one does not remember such a trifle as an object falling from a wall on account of a nail breaking away! But who told you of that episode?" she asked suddenly. "Taddeo, I suppose."



"Fabrizio himself told me," replied Ugo. As a matter of fact Taddeo had spoken of it to him also, and that before his cousin had mentioned it. Count Vitali suddenly recollected, however, that, in telling him of how he had found the crucifix absent from its usual place, and of how Fabrizio had declared that he had found it on his bed, Taddeo had also besought him not to mention the matter to the signora contessa, and she had forbidden him to name it to the signor conte. Fabrizio, too, had begged him not to speak of it to Cristina, as she seemed to look upon the occurrence as one of ill augury. Knowing that his wife did not share his feeling of regard for his father's old servant, Ugo had no wish to place him in a difficulty, and was glad to be able truthfully to say that he had heard of the matter from Fabrizio himself.

"You had really forgotten that Fabrizio found the crucifix fallen on to his pillow?" asked Ugo. "That is strange," he added, "because I think that Fabrizio was in reality considerably disturbed by the episode—and he told me he had discussed it with you, and that you did not wish any further allusion to be made to it. I cannot think how you can have forgotten, Cristina—and I am not at all sure that Fabrizio will care to find himself again in that room. After all, there are plenty of other bedrooms."

"That is just what there are not," returned Countess Vitali. "There are plenty of bedrooms—it is true—but most of them are uninhabitable."

She rose from the breakfast-table as she spoke, and Don Basilio took the opportunity of explaining how his business in Viterbo would necessitate his departure without, as Ugo Vitali pressed him to do, remaining to smoke a cigar.

Ugo accompanied his guest to the top of the staircase leading down to the courtyard, and there delivered him over to Taddeo, who escorted him to the *portone* of the palace. The man lingered as they crossed the court, and seemed as though he were longing for Don Basilio to afford him an opportunity of disburdening his mind.

Don Basilio, who had noticed the expression on the old servant's face when Fabrizio Vitali's name was mentioned, and



had observed his embarrassment over the matter of the crucifix, was not disinclined to enter into conversation with him.

"So," he observed, "Count Fabrizio Vitali is returning already. He has not been away very long before renewing his visit."

Taddeo stopped short in the middle of the courtyard.

"*È una vergogna!*" he exclaimed.

Don Basilio looked at him attentively. "How has Count Fabrizio offended you, my friend?" he asked quietly.

"The signorino must be blind—absolutely blind," continued Taddeo, "and it is that woman who blinds him," and he shook his fist in the direction of the part of the palace they had just left. "Not but that the signorino has been warned of what is going on," he added.

Don Basilio drew him aside under the arcade running round the courtyard. The porter was fast asleep in his little office at the side of the entrance gate. Don Basilio could see him through the open window—his red face thrown back on the shoulder of his arm-chair, with the mouth open. Except the porter, the only living creatures visible were a black cat lazily washing its face in the sunshine, and some pigeons strutting in amatory mood upon the flagstones.

"It was you, then, who sent the signor conte an anonymous letter some weeks ago," Don Basilio observed abruptly.

Taddeo started violently. "I?" he stammered. "Reverendo, no! why should I have sent him the letter?"

"Yes—why?" repeated Don Basilio. "Just now you declared that the signor conte had received a warning. How do you know that he has done so—unless you were the sender of that warning?"

The man looked at him abashed for a moment or two without replying. Then he said, doggedly: "Reverendo, it is true. My wife wrote the letter, and I sent it to the signor conte. A friend posted it in Rome."

Don Basilio nodded. "But why?" he asked again.

Taddeo's eyes flashed angrily. "Because they are deceiving him," he replied "The signorino has married a bad woman. Oh, I have watched her, and I know! As to the other—*quel*

*Fabrizio*—he is not bad ; he is only weak—a weak boy in the hands of an evil woman—and she will ruin him, body and soul. I have watched, and I know.”

“Gently, my friend,” said Don Basilio quietly. “These are strange accusations to make against the wife of your padrone. Perhaps you are mistaken. You say you have watched—and that you know. But when one watches, one often sees what one wishes to see ; and it is evident that you dislike the signora contessa. Remember that Count Fabrizio is not a stranger, but a member of the family. I think you are talking nonsense—like many other people.”

“What is he returning for ? ” asked Taddeo briefly.

“Ma—for the vintage.”

“Why does he not go to the Castelli Romani, then ? Have they not the vintage there, reverendo ? *macche !* he is coming to pluck another man’s fruit—*si capisce !* ” and Taddeo laughed harshly.

Don Basilio did not reply for a moment.

“It seems to me, Taddeo,” he said presently, “that the signor conte is capable of looking after his own affairs.”

“But if he is being deceived ? ” returned the old servant hotly. “Reverendo, I have known the signorino since he was born—and there is no guile in him—none at all. But in that woman he has married, there is guile—nothing else than guile. She has made the conte Fabrizio love her—and she hates her husband. Have I not seen hate in her eyes when she has thought herself unobserved ? Ah, if only he had married the signora duchessa, reverendo ! At one time we all hoped that she and the signorino would make a match of it between them.”

Don Basilio stared at him. “Storie ! ” he exclaimed abruptly ; “there never was any question of such a thing. The signora duchessa’s whole affections are centred in her children. Why should she have thought of marrying again—either the signor conte, or anybody else ? Such ideas are foolish, my friend—and they do harm. But all this is beside the point. You must have some very definite reason for supposing there to be anything more between the signora contessa and her husband’s cousin than simply family ties. One has no right to form suspicions of people,

and then judge of their conduct in the light of those suspicions. Via—if you have anything definite to say, say it to me. I shall not betray your confidence. But if you have nothing beyond mere suspicions, then do not waste my time and your own in talking nonsense.”

“Nonsense,” repeated Taddeo, “nonsense? no, reverendo. I am not talking nonsense, as I will prove to you. I have seen it all coming—from the very beginning—the gradual dislike of the signorino springing up in the heart of that woman. Then the conte Fabrizio came—and immediately—yes, immediately the signora contessa began to make him love her, for amusement to spite her husband—che ne so io? And I watched—and watched. The signora contessa suspects that I watch, for many times she has tried to persuade the signorino to pension me off; saying that I was too old—that a younger servant was necessary. Oh, I know—she has said it to her maid and to many. The signorino once suggested to me that I should retire—that he would make me an allowance. And what did I say to him in reply? that he might turn me, his father’s old servant, away if he chose—but that I would not take a *baiocco* of his money except as my legitimate wages for serving him and Casa Vitali. That is what I said to the signorino—and he has never ventured to speak again to me as he spoke that day.”

Don Basilio smiled at him. He knew the disinterestedness, and the chivalrous devotion to their employers of which servants of Taddeo’s stamp were capable. But he knew, also, the readiness of their class to think evil where no evil was—and their resentment against anyone who, as they believed, came between them and their padrone.

“Ecco!” he interrupted. “What did I say to you just now? You dislike the signora contessa, because you are aware that she would prefer you to retire from service. It is very natural that you should dislike her on that account. But it is also natural that the signora contessa should want to make changes. Women always do. That, however, is no reason for suspecting her of being unfaithful to her husband, and of inducing her husband’s nearest relative to become her lover.”

"Listen, reverendo," continued Taddeo quickly. "I will tell you all, and then you shall judge for yourself whether I am right or wrong. If you can prove to me that I am wrong, *tanto meglio!* I will go to the signorino, and I will tell him that I wish to retire, and the signora countessa can find somebody new to take my place."

"Speak," said Don Basilio gently.

"Bene. Often, when the signora contessa and the cousin have been talking alone together on the terrace, I have overheard their conversation. Voices rise in the open air, reverendo; and it has so happened that I have more than once been in the rooms on the second floor, through the open windows of which I could distinctly hear all they said. The *persiani* outside were closed, so they could not know that I was in the rooms. Much of what they talked of, I did not understand, and often they spoke in French. But much I did understand—much also that was not expressed in words: for sometimes, even though the shutters were closed, I could see their faces through the chinks. One thing, however, I could always hear. The signora contessa seemed to take pleasure in reminding the conte Fabrizio that, if the signorino should fall ill and die, he would become Count Vitali and the owner of everything. Once she was saying this and the other was angry. 'Perdio,' I heard him exclaim, 'why will you always put things into my mind which I do not wish to think about? Do you suppose that I wish harm to Ugo? but you, Cristina, I believe that you hate him!' That is what he said, reverendo—I could hear the words, and I could see the expression on her face as she listened. It was the expression of a devil, though it passed quickly and I do not think the other one could see it. Then, one evening, it was the evening after the great storm last month. But I will tell you what happened during the storm first. They were alone together in the billiard-room. The hail broke the windows, and the signora contessa while closing the *persiani* was struck by a hail-stone and her arm was cut. It bled, and he kissed it. I am sure that he kissed it; for I came into the room suddenly and they were close to each other, and there was blood on his face, near the lips, though no

hailstone had cut him." He paused and looked at the priest almost defiantly.

"Go on," said Don Basilio quietly.

"Well, that evening after dinner the signorino had a pain in the head; a touch of the sun while he was riding, he said; and they persuaded him to go to bed. Then they went out of doors together. I knew they were together, in the darkness, and I made a plan. I told the boy, Cesare, that my wife had the fever, and that I must go to the chemist for some *saliceto*. I told him to explain this to the signora contessa; but I did not go to the chemist, and my wife had not got the fever. I remained hidden in the garden; and I followed them. I heard all they said, saw all they did."

Don Basilio looked at him inquiringly.

"No," said Taddeo, answering his unspoken question, "no, but he asked her; and she promised that before he returned to Rome she would give him all he wanted. And now, Don Basilio, am I right, or am I wrong?"

Don Basilio said nothing, but he looked very grave.

"Why will you not tell the signorino what I have told you?" asked Taddeo hastily. "He would listen to you, reverendo. I have done all I can. I sent him that letter; I do not deny it. And I did more. I warned the Conte Fabrizio that evil was before him, when the crucifix fell."

"That was a coincidence," said Don Basilio; and perhaps he said it more because he felt he must say something than because he really believed the episode to have been so.

Taddeo gave him a curious glance. "The crucifix fell twice," he said. "That evening, of which I have been telling you, when the Conte Fabrizio went to his room, he found the crucifix again lying on his pillows, as it had been before. But even that warning of *mal' augurio* was not enough, since he returns to complete the signorino's dishonour!"

"But it must be prevented!" exclaimed Don Basilio; "otherwise who knows what tragedy may not happen when the signor conte discovers that he has been deceived by his nearest of kin,

by the cousin whom he has trusted as he would have trusted a brother?"

"Sicuro, it must be prevented," repeated Taddeo, "but how, and by whom? The signorino would listen to you, reverendo," he added, "to you and to the signora duchessa di San Felice, but to others he would not listen; and who else would dare to tell him?"

Don Basilio passed his hand across his eyes. "I must think, Taddeo," he said. "Perhaps I can do something, but whoever interferes in this matter, it must not be the signora duchessa. Another woman, you understand——"

Taddeo nodded. "Of course," he replied. "It is quite enough that there should be one woman in the business."

"Yes," observed Don Basilio drily. "It is always enough; it always has been enough, from the beginning."

And then he turned aside, and, bidding Taddeo farewell, walked thoughtfully across the courtyard and let himself out of the *portone* into the street, unnoticed by the porter who still slept peacefully after his midday meal.



## CHAPTER XXIV

A WARM, golden haze lay over the land. Summer, worn out by its passionate intensity, was dying; but dying so gradually, so peacefully, that its passing was scarcely perceptible. In the vineyards there were patches of bright yellow, and of fiery red, where the vine leaves were putting on their autumn colouring. Little brown and white birds, the *beccafichi*, flew from one fig tree to another searching for the ripest fruit into which to plunge their dainty beaks. As a rule men with guns lay in wait for them, to slay them while their bodies were yet plump and their flesh fragrant with the flavour of the figs. But to-day nobody heeded them, or sought to rob them of their earthly existence. The vintage had begun; and the energies of men, women and children were concentrated on plucking the bunches of purple and of white grapes, on heaping them into baskets, and conveying the baskets to waggons which the patient, white oxen stood waiting to draw slowly away to the *tinelli*, or wine-presses. The sounds of laughter and songs rang through the still September air; of harmless jests, and sometimes, but not often, an oath.

The rays of the sun were still powerful, but no longer with the fierce, scorching power of August; and the air had a lightness in it which spoke of the fresher nights of autumn, cooled by the heavy dews.

Ugo Vitali was in good spirits that morning as he visited various parts of his property on which the vintage was being carried on. A considerable portion of his land he kept in his own hands; but there were holdings which were leased on the *mezzadria* system, by which landlord and tenant divided the produce of the land in equal shares. The lands of Casa Vitali were altogether free from the curse of the middleman—the farming out of the rents to some *mercante di campagna* who paid the owner a fixed yearly sum and put whatever he could extract from

the property over and above this sum into his own pockets. It was true that the *mezzadria* system necessitated the constant and careful supervision of the crops at the periods of harvest or vintage, and a searching examination into the accounts of the sales of these crops; otherwise it was an arrangement which, when scrupulously carried out both by landlord and peasant, worked easily enough, and was fair and equitable to both parties.

As to the vintage of that year, it promised to be exceptionally good and abundant, for there had been a notable absence of hail, and the furious storm a few weeks before had fortunately been very restricted in its course of devastation. So plentiful, indeed, were the grapes, that buyers had already begun to shake their heads. A year or two previously, after an equally abundant harvest, millions of francs had been lost. Owing to the total incapacity of the Italian railway companies to deal with the question of transport, thousands upon thousands of tons of fruit which ought to have been exported to form the basis of foreign wines afterwards to be sold as clarets and burgundies, lay rotting on quays and in the goods yards of the railway stations. And as the railway organisation in the country had steadily gone from bad to worse since that season, there was every prospect of even greater waste in the present instance.

Notwithstanding these gloomy forebodings of official incapacity Count Vitali had no reason to be otherwise than satisfied with his own prospects of a successful vintage. He had already disposed of a considerable quantity of his grapes when they were just reaching maturity to a well-known *mercante di campagna* who had come from Rome to take stock of the Vitali vineyards and make an offer for the crop. If the grapes when despatched rotted in railway stations because the authorities declined, or forgot to afford facilities for their transport, this was no affair of the vendor, whose contract was confined to the selling of the fruit, and not to its final delivery in good condition when once it had left his vineyards.

The crops in the Puglie, and in other southern provinces, whence the bulk of rough, red wine in its primary state of fermentation is despatched to central and northern Italy to be

“manipulated” into “Chianti vecchio” for the hotel-keepers, or to foreign lands for the purpose of manufacturing spurious clarets and burgundies, were, unlike those further north, reported to be less satisfactory than usual; and Count Vitali, therefore, like other vine growers in his neighbourhood, had succeeded in obtaining fairly average prices for his produce.

That morning Ugo had ridden to various vineyards in which his peasants were at work, and everywhere he had been received with smiling faces, and salutations in which cordiality was happily blended with the respect due to *il padrone*. His people regarded him as one of themselves, and trusted him considerably more than they would have trusted one of themselves. They knew him to be absolutely just, both to them as workers and to himself as employer, and respected him accordingly. There were plenty of examples of landlords, owners of vast *latifondi*, who rarely or never came near their properties, nor interested themselves in any way in the condition of those who laboured to make their lands productive. Rome, Paris, Monte Carlo swallowed up the sums of money paid over by the individual who “farmed” the rents; and, so long as those sums of money were forthcoming at their periods, the owner troubled himself not at all, either as to the way in which his land was exhausted by over-production, or as to the miserable condition in which his peasants lived. In Ugo Vitali, on the contrary, the peasants recognised that they had for their *padrone* a human being with a human heart, and not a mere lay figure which, like some fetish of a barbarous people, received into an insatiable maw the tribute wrung from the sweat of their brows. Perhaps a certain amount of tacit sympathy for their young *padrone* also accounted for his ever-increasing popularity among those who worked on the lands of Casa Vitali. It was rumoured that he was not happy in his marriage. The peasants could well believe this rumour; inasmuch as, in their eyes, a childless marriage was altogether an anomaly, and scarcely likely to be happy. They had been quite prepared, moreover, to dislike Countess Vitali from the first, being quite aware that not only was she not *nobile* like their *padrone*, but that she was the daughter of a man who had begun life in the

same position as themselves, and who had no doubt risen in life at the expense of others of his own class. The obvious indifference which Cristina had displayed towards anything concerning the lands of Casa Vitali, and towards those who laboured on those lands, had certainly tended to confirm the dislike and suspicion with which her husband's people had originally regarded her. She was looked upon as proud, and altogether unsympathetic. The country people contrasted her with the Duchessa di San Felice in their minds. The duchessa, they would say to each other when discussing the subject in the osterie, and round their charcoal braziers during the long, winter evenings, was a grande signora—a princess by birth, and the wife and mother of a duke—a lady whom the sovereigns themselves and the Regina Madre, when they came in their automobiles through Viterbo, had more than once gone out of their way to visit at Villa Falconara. And yet this great lady was not indifferent to them—certainly not! Was it not she who searched out the sick and the suffering and saw personally to their needs? Did she not, at Villa Falconara, keep a dispensary where you could get all the medicines you might get at the farmacia in Viterbo with the great difference that, if you were poor, you need not pay for them? And did not she, *la nostra duchessa*, as she was fondly called, bring her sympathy and her consolation to dwellings wherein was the bitterness of mourning and death? Mounted on her horse, or driving her pair of strong, Hungarian cobs, was she not to be found, sooner or later, wherever there was suffering or distress within many miles of her own dwelling?

Sicuro! but the Duchessa di San Felice was a vera signora—bred and born—whereas "*la Cristina*," as some of her humbler neighbours disrespectfully called the Contessa Vitali, was an upstart, and one who before her marriage had been not a whit better than themselves. Certainly the peasantry of the district in which the Vitali and the San Felice estates were situated were shrewd enough to know that there were probably few great ladies of the aristocrazia who had the interests of her poorer fellow-creatures so deeply and so practically at heart as had their duchessa; and perhaps, therefore, they were a little unfair in

their judgment of one who, like the Contessa Vitali, had never been known to interest herself in any of the numerous families living upon her husband's land. Of late, however, rumour had been busy; and the gossip of the upper classes of Viterbo and its immediate neighbourhood had filtered down to lower levels where it lost nothing of its virulence, nor, it must be added, of its suggestiveness.

Whatever may have been in the minds of his peasants, however, as they greeted him in response to his easy, good-humoured salutations by their names to the men, women, and children he found at work among the vines, Ugo Vitali would have struck a casual observer that morning as being a man as free from care as he was certainly in the best of health and prime of manhood. He was mounted on the chestnut horse of which, a few days previously, Don Basilio had advised him to get rid before it did the same by him.

The morning was yet early, and Ugo had left Palazzo Vitali at an hour when both his wife and Fabrizio, who had arrived two days before, were presumably still fast asleep. Had anything been wanting finally to remove all lingering doubts as to whether there had been the slightest ground, save that of pure malice, for his anonymous correspondent's warning regarding the friendship between his cousin and Cristina, the reception given to Fabrizio by the latter would have been sufficient to accomplish that object. Ugo had made a point of being at home when the carriage brought his cousin from the railway station; and, though he felt ashamed of himself for doing so, he had watched the meeting between his wife and Fabrizio very carefully. The result had been that he was more than ever convinced of Cristina's sincerity when she had so contemptuously dismissed the scarcely veiled charge which the anonymous letter had contained as being nothing less than ridiculous. Nothing could have been more natural than the greetings which passed between the two. Had these greetings been cold or indifferent, Ugo's suspicions might have been again aroused. They had been neither the one nor the other, however. Cristina's welcome was the cordial, easy welcome of a hostess to a sympathetic guest who was also



a relative; while Fabrizio's attitude was equally correct. Countess Vitali, did not attempt to conceal her pleasure in the fact that her husband's kinsman had returned to pay them another visit.

"At last," she had said laughingly to Fabrizio, "we shall believe that you were not bored to death when you stayed with us before, shall we not, Ugo? I confess that I have been hourly expecting to receive a telegram saying that he was unavoidably prevented from coming."

Ugo had secretly been delighted at the result of his observation of this meeting, and reproached himself more than ever for having allowed even a lingering doubt to dwell in his heart. Moreover, Cristina's affection for him was daily returning to what it had once been in the days that had lately appeared not only far off, but as if they could never be repeated. It seemed as though, with the near approach of Fabrizio's return to Palazzo Vitali, Cristina had wished tacitly to show him how greatly he had been mistaken in his suspicions of her. She had never, it was true, alluded again to these suspicions, nor to the letter which had caused them. Nevertheless, in a thousand ways she had shown him that her love for him was not dead, as he had imagined. If at moments she was impatient and even irritable, at other moments she would make amends for the pain and disappointment she had doubtless read on his face. And since Fabrizio's arrival she had seemed determined to show him, her husband, more affection than before.

Surely, Ugo thought, as he rode through the dewy country in the golden light of the September morning, the old days were coming back. Perhaps, after all, the past couple of years had been, as it were, a phase in his wife's character. He was more certain now than ever that he was right in the theory he had always held in order to account for the change in her. She had become accustomed, as he had always assured himself that she would do, to the disappointment and mortification of not being a mother, and by degrees her former nature and temperament were reasserting themselves—nay, *had* reasserted themselves.

In his contentment and satisfaction he had been more cordial



than ever to his cousin Fabrizio since his return. Indeed, he treated Fabrizio now as though he were a brother rather than a fairly distant cousin. Fabrizio, he thought to himself, was after all by no means a bad fellow, and it was ridiculous to despise a man simply because that man was fond of society and had no country tastes or pursuits. It was all a question of early training and early surroundings. If Fabrizio had been like himself, born and brought up in the country, he too, would have cared less for the world and more for the pleasures of an out of door life. And, after all, Fabrizio had behaved very well. Although poor he had never thrust himself upon the attention of the head of his family to whom he was next of kin. He had, indeed, declined more than once the invitations which he, Ugo, had thought it only right to offer him.

No; it was absurd, and, worse than absurd, it was unjust to suspect that Fabrizio was capable of dishonourable conduct towards him, or had ever any desire to inflict upon him the cruellest wrong one man can inflict on another by robbing him of his wife's affection. In his heart Ugo Vitali felt a profound satisfaction that all suspicion of Fabrizio's loyalty as a relative and as a friend might be dismissed for ever. Had his cousin been a stranger, a mere friend or acquaintance bearing another name, Ugo felt that he could have borne disloyalty better than he could have done had it been shown him by one of his own house. At all events it would have been easier to deal with, and the honour of Casa Vitali would not have been besmirched by a Vitali. That would have been intolerable to the pride he possessed of his race and descent.

After leaving his vineyards, Ugo cantered across a stretch of open, grassy country at the extremity of which lay the wooded Ciminian hills. Far away on his right the sunlight fell upon the vast façade of the Farnese palace of Caprarola, the many windows of which glittered and flashed in its rays. His horse, impatient at having been walked quietly along the terraces of the vineyards, was eager for a gallop on feeling the turf under its hoofs and seeing the green distance in front; while its rider, exhilarated by his own thoughts, and by the fresh morning air, was equally

disposed to humour it. Ugo decided that he would ride across the valley to the hills where the high road branched off through the erstwhile spirit-haunted Ciminian Forest, which the legions of Rome for many years dared not penetrate, to the capital city some fifty miles away. From the spurs of the hillsides the ancient Etrurian cities, now reduced to squalid villages, Nepi—Sutri, Ronciglione, and half a score of others—shone like yellow patches in the faint, blue haze; while in the valleys, fields and vineyards lay bathed in mellow, golden light. Semi-circled by woods, below the crest of one of the lower ranges of hills, Ugo could see the white façade of Villa Falconara some five miles distant. A longing seized him to turn his horse's head in that direction, and to pay another morning visit to Donna Vittoria, as he always called her in his thoughts. She would be pleased to hear how well things were going with him; how, thanks to her advice bidding him confide in his wife and let her see that he trusted her, he had regained all, or nearly all, that he thought had gone from him for ever. Donna Vittoria, too, would be interested to hear that he had disposed of his grapes well, even before the vintage had fairly commenced.

Almost unconsciously, Ugo found himself heading in the direction of the stately Renaissance villa standing out from its background of oak and ilex trees. Then he recollected himself, and thought of what such a visit might cost him. Consciously this time, he gently turned his horse in the direction he had originally intended to take. There would be time enough to call on Donna Vittoria. Perhaps he would even write to her. Cristina evidently did not approve of his visits to Villa Falconara, nor, he could not help suspecting, did she greatly approve of its mistress. It was absurd, of course; but jealousy was always absurd. Supposing he allowed himself to be jealous of Fabrizio? All the same, Cristina's jealousy pleased him, and the moment had not yet arrived when he could persuade her of its unreasonableness. Half an hour's talk with Donna Vittoria would undoubtedly be very pleasant; but he might have to pay too large a price for it. Cristina repeatedly asked him if he had again seen the Duchessa di San Felice; and always he had been

able to answer that he had not seen her for some weeks, because he had not been to Villa Falconara. Whenever he did go there again, he would announce beforehand to Cristina his intention of doing so. That would be safer; and no doubt fairer to Cristina, as she was evidently jealous of Donna Vittoria since the episode of the anonymous letter.

Ugo cantered on; and presently he reached the edge of the broken ground covered with short turf and patched here and there with juniper bushes rising from beds of asphodel long bereft of its melancholy, ghostlike flowers. A rough path led through the brush-wood on the lower slopes of the hills, and, gradually winding upwards, formed a short cut across a wooded ridge to a corresponding valley below, at the end of which, though some miles away, the brown walls and campanili of Viterbo could be seen crowning the rising ground. These Ciminian woods, silent at all seasons of the year owing to the comparative absence of animal life, were doubly silent in the September stillness. Now and again came mysterious rustlings from the undergrowth as some hedgehog stirred, or a snake emerged from its hiding-place to bask in the sun. Round a turn of the pathway a picturesque figure with slouched hat and blackened face suddenly appeared, causing Ugo's horse to shy; a man who would certainly have been taken for a brigand by an imaginative Anglo-Saxon or Teutonic tourist. Count Vitali, however, was not disturbed in his mind. He knew that the forbidding individual was no brigand, but a simple charcoal-burner, and he wished him a friendly good day. The charcoal-burner responded, courteously raising his felt hat, and then he asked Ugo the time. Count Vitali looked at his watch—he had forgotten all about the time in his meditations. It was already half-past nine, and Ugo rode onwards. It would take him more than an hour to get back to Viterbo, and he did not wish to be late for breakfast. It had been settled that in the afternoon they should all assist at the vintage, and Fabrizio was to be given his allotted portion of work to do, as a new experience for him. If he were to keep to the high road on his homeward ride, Ugo calculated that he must certainly be later than he wished to be. By taking a series of short cuts across the open country he

could diminish the distance by a mile or two, while it would be better "going" for his horse than on the road.

Putting the chestnut to the canter again, he soon came to the end of the valley. At this spot a low dyke, now waterless but during the winter rains occasionally of considerable depth, crossed the valley; and, in order to emerge at the point on the Viterbo road he wished to make for, it was necessary to ride along the embankment skirting the dyke. For precaution's sake Ugo walked his horse along this causeway, which was scarcely more than four feet in breadth. Steadied down by its canter, the chestnut was pacing along quietly enough, and Ugo let the reins fall loosely on its neck while he extracted a case from his pocket and proceeded to light a cigarette. Suddenly, and without the slightest warning, the horse gave a violent buck. Then swerving to one side it lost its footing at the edge of the embankment and rolled over into the dyke, bearing its rider with it.

How long he lay underneath the animal, crushed between it and the side of the dyke, Ugo never knew. The last thing he remembered was the sudden sensation of the horse gathering its legs together underneath it, and feeling its back stiffen and arch as its head went down between its knees. He remembered that, and he laughed to himself as he thought that once again the creature had failed to unseat him, notwithstanding all its cunning. After that he had felt a sudden scramble, a shock—and then nothing more.

Fortunately for Count Vitali, some peasants weeding a quarter of a mile away had been watching the horseman riding slowly along the top of the dyke, and as they watched they had seen both horse and rider suddenly disappear.

Guessing what had occurred, they hurried up to the spot, to find that the horse had rolled away from off its rider, who was lying face downwards and completely unconscious at the bottom of the dyke. Turning him gently on his back, some of the peasants recognised Count Vitali. They stood round him talking rapidly to each other, not knowing what to do for the best. Presently, while everybody was offering suggestions to which nobody listened, Ugo opened his eyes and looked round him. Then he tried to

sit up, but fell back with a short groan. He was very white, but he did not again lose consciousness.

“Andiamo, ragazzi!” he said, smiling at them. “You must get me out of this ditch between you, seeing that apparently I am unable to get myself out of it. Something hurts me. I suppose I have broken a rib or two. Two of you get up to the top of the bank, and two will raise me—so. Now, gently. Ah, bravo! *ci siamo*”—and the men below deposited him in the arms of their comrades above, while these in their turn gently laid him on the causeway.

“And now,” said Ugo quietly, “look to the horse, and see if he is hurt. If he can walk, one of you lead him down the dyke to the ford yonder where he can get out.”

Apparently the chestnut had escaped with no more serious injury than a few cuts, but the case seemed to be otherwise with Count Vitali. He tried again to raise himself, and again a sharp, internal pain caused him to fall back helplessly.

He shook his head. “It’s no use,” he said; “there is something wrong with me—something broken, I suppose. You must carry me to the high road, and one of you must set off to Palazzo Vitali in Viterbo. I am Count Vitali. You must tell them to send a carriage out, at once. Wait—” and he endeavoured to extract a note-book from his pocket, meaning to write a few lines to his wife to tell her that he had met with a slight accident, but that she was not to alarm herself. Again, however, the sudden pain prevented him from moving. He was only comfortable when lying at full length on his back.

“Never mind,” he said. “Go as quickly as you can, and bring a carriage—any carriage—back with you. You will find us waiting for you on the road—there near the ford.”

The youngest of the peasants darted away at full speed on his mission, while Ugo looked round him. “Leave me here,” he said to the others, “and see if you can take that gate off its hinges. If you can, bring it here, and lift me on to it. You will carry me more easily so.”

The peasants did as they were bid, and one of them, the only one who happened to have his coat on his back, took it off and



did his best to arrange it on the gate as a mattress. A threadbare coat, however, could do little to diminish the jolting as four of the peasants carried the gate and its burden to the road. The rough movement caused Ugo to feel intense pain, and what made him fear that his injuries might be of a serious kind was the fact that his legs seemed gradually to be growing ever colder, and more numb. The time seemed endless as he lay on the gate by the roadside, and, indeed, it was considerably more than an hour before the noise of wheels and a cloud of dust announced that the carriage was near.

They lifted Ugo into it, laying him lengthways across the seats. Taddeo had accompanied the carriage, and took instant charge of all the arrangements.

“Taddeo,” said Ugo, a little faintly, as the carriage was being rapidly driven towards Viterbo, “does the signora contessa know?”

Taddeo shook his head. “The signora contessa and the signor conte Fabrizio could not be found,” he said drily. “They had gone out for a walk in the gardens. It would have delayed the carriage had I continued to search for them.”

Ugo nodded. “That is well,” he said. “I shall be able to tell her myself that it is a trifle. It is fortunate she and the conte Fabrizio were out when the news came.”

Taddeo said nothing; but he turned his face away lest the “signorino” should see its expression.



## CHAPTER XXV

IT was not often that Countess Vitali left her own rooms before the midday breakfast. On this particular morning, however, she had appeared, already dressed for walking, on the terrace very soon after her little tray of coffee and rolls had been taken to her by her maid. As a matter of fact, she had already settled the hour of her appearance when she and Fabrizio had been alone for a few minutes after dinner the previous evening. A morning walk in the gardens of Palazzo Vitali before the hour of half-past ten or so, would, they had told each other, be their only opportunity during the day of finding themselves alone together. Ugo would certainly have returned by breakfast time, and in the afternoon they were all three to visit the vineyards and take part in the vintage. There could be nothing to arouse suspicion in Fabrizio Vitali accompanying his cousin and hostess in a walk on a lovely September morning. Moreover, Cristina had observed to Ugo, in the presence of the servants who were waiting at dinner, that now the mornings were much cooler, she intended to be more energetic, and to walk before breakfast instead of remaining within doors.

"It is a thousand pities that I do not ride," she had remarked laughingly to Ugo, "for I might have accompanied you sometimes in your early expeditions," and Ugo had been both surprised and delighted at her suggestion.

"It would be very simple," he replied. "If you really would take to riding, I would find a quiet horse to carry you—one about which you would have nothing to think except how to keep him awake!"

Cristina, however, had declared that she was only joking, and that she was far too terrified of horses ever to trust herself on the back of one, however quiet it might be—and although the subject had dropped, Ugo had been evidently gratified that his wife should have even thought of it.

It could not be said that either Cristina or Fabrizio Vitali displayed any remarkable energy that morning although the air was fresh enough, and the sun as yet had no excessive power. They sauntered leisurely towards the far end of the gardens, and before very long seated themselves on a bench in the shade of the ilex avenue whence neither of them appeared to have any inclination to move.

Fabrizio sat for a long time in silence. That is to say, his tongue was silent, but his eyes never left his companion's face, and were decidedly the more unruly members since they spoke much and clearly.

Cristina was thoughtful also, and almost as silent. She sat and traced little patterns on the gravel with the point of her sunshade, now and again glancing at Fabrizio with a peculiar, slow smile, that rivetted his eyes on her face more closely than ever.

"Do you remember," she said at length, "when before you went to Rome, you were angry with me, and told me that I did not keep my promises?"

"Was it not natural? you did not keep them," replied Fabrizio, in a low voice.

"But now? have I not kept them?"

"Ah, yes! but, Cristina—it was time. If you could know how I have suffered——"

"I have suffered too," said Cristina, and their eyes met again.

"All the same," she added, "now I am afraid."

"Afraid!" exclaimed Fabrizio, "and of what—of whom? of Ugo?"

Cristina shook her head. "No," she answered, "not of Ugo, but of you!"

"Of me?"

"Of you. You are a man. You have got what you wanted; and some day—oh, not to-day, nor to-morrow, nor even next year, perhaps—you will grow weary of what you have got, and you will seek some excuse for casting it away."

"*Giammai!*" exclaimed Fabrizio indignantly. "How can you say such horrible things, Cristina—think such horrible thoughts? Have we not both reflected well? God knows that I have re-

flected all those weeks during which I have been away from you. For your sake I have risked everything—I have deceived Ugo who trusts me—” he stopped abruptly, with a sharp, quick sigh.

Countess Vitali looked at him keenly. Then she smiled. “Surely,” she said, “knowing what you know, you may make your conscience easy as regards deceiving Ugo! We have both deceived him—shall always deceive him; as he has deceived us.”

Fabrizio’s face cleared. “Yes,” he said eagerly; “Ugo has no cause—no right to complain. I say it to myself always—since I have understood what your life really is, and why he married you.”

Cristina sighed. “Yes,” she said. “I did not understand at first, Fabrizio. How should I? I had no experience of the world. As to the San Felice I accepted her friendship as genuine—disinterested. It was only afterwards that I knew. Then you came into my life.”

“Povera la mia Cristina!” exclaimed Fabrizio caressingly. “And you do not regret that I have come into your life—no?”

Cristina smiled. “I do not regret it,” she replied; “but, as I said just now, I am afraid. Until yesterday, I was not afraid. I had not given you all you asked of me. I felt that you were bound to me—by the bonds of a love that was yet unsatisfied. But now—who knows? Perhaps I have loosened those bonds. But it was the joy of seeing you again, Fabrizio, that made me weak—that made me yield. Ah, if you could know what I have suffered lately—with Ugo! It has been torture—torture, I tell you. Sometimes I would shut my eyes and try to pretend that it was you who were beside me—you, whose kisses I felt; but—I tell you it was torture,” she repeated excitedly, “and it always will be torture, until—” and she broke off abruptly.

“Until—what?” asked Fabrizio. His face was troubled. He had not foreseen this complication. In thinking of his own passion he had forgotten, or scarcely realised, the actual position of the woman he had desired to possess. “I thought,” he continued hesitatingly, “that you and Ugo were—well, were no longer——”

"You do not understand!" interrupted Cristina quickly. "How should you understand? To shield you, I am obliged to submit to his passion—not to his love, for that belongs to the San Felice, and not to me. It has never belonged to me. And not only do I have to submit to it, but I have to encourage it—in order that he may not suspect, and that your life and prospects may not be ruined because you and I love each other. Can you not understand the torture? There is no escape from it—none; for escape would mean the discovery of our love, and your ruin."

"Cristina!" exclaimed Fabrizio. "That is horrible—cruel! What can I do, *Dio mio*?"

"Nothing! I should not have told you. Only, I wished you to know what I suffer for your sake, Fabrizio. Do you wonder that I feel afraid when I think that, some day, having tired of me you might cast me off? Men do that, you know. How can I tell that, if my escape were to come—if some unexpected circumstance set me free—you would repay me for what I suffer now?"

"But you do feel it—you must feel it!" burst out Fabrizio. "Do you think that I am a mascalzone, Cristina? If you were free, we would marry, would we not? For my part, I swear that I would marry you, and no other woman—for the sake of my love for you, and for my honour."

"Ah," said Countess Vitali, "honour—that is an elastic term."

Fabrizio winced. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean, that very often men are cruel and unjust to women in order to protect what they call their honour, or the honour of their family."

"Not where men love, and know that they are loved," returned Fabrizio.

Cristina shrugged her shoulders.

"In any case," he continued, earnestly, "if you are afraid, you are wronging me. Have I not sworn to you just now that if by some chance you were to be free, I would marry you? And if you are never free—well, we must live for each other as best we can. Ugo evidently does not mean to continue living the life

he has hitherto obliged you to lead. You will come to Rome, and live in the world—and in the world people who are sensible can make their own lives and their own opportunities for enjoying those lives.”

Cristina let her eyes rest full on his face, and her gaze seemed to hold his own spell-bound.

“You swear that if I were one day to be free, you would marry me?” she asked.

“I swear it.”

Cristina was silent for a moment. “I am not afraid any more,” she said presently. She rose from the bench, and walked slowly down the ilex avenue with Fabrizio by her side. “Ugo will probably have returned,” Cristina observed, as they turned into a *viale* leading towards the house. “There is the clock striking half-past ten,” she added.

As they approached the house, the porter came hastily towards them.

“Signora contessa,” he said, “the signor conte has met with an accident—a fall from his horse. The carriage has gone to bring him home and Taddeo has gone with it.

Countess Vitali’s face flushed suddenly, and then turned very white.

“An accident?” she repeated, mechanically. “Is it—serious?”

“A peasant brought the news,” the porter replied; “the signor conte sent him—and he was to say that the accident was not grave. But the signor conte cannot walk—and who knows? That cursed horse! the signore would ride it, and every one said that sooner or later there would be a *disgrazia*.”

Fabrizio and Cristina looked at each other in silence, and the same thought was in their minds. It was strange how in an instant—in a flash—the whole of life could change. Fabrizio was conscious of feeling a genuine sorrow. Ugo had always been good to him. That was the worst of it. He wished now that his cousin had not been so. He looked at Cristina guiltily, and searched in vain for words, but none would come to his lips.

"Taddeo looked for the signora contessa before starting with the carriage," said the porter, surprised at the silence between them, "and we have sent for Doctor Sacchetti and begged him to come at once, so as to be here when the signor conte arrives."

"Sacchetti?" repeated Countess Vitali. "At this hour he will not be at his house—he spends the mornings at the hospital."

"It is to the hospital we have sent," explained the porter. "The signor dottore will certainly come at once, for he and the signor conte, poveretto, are great friends. *Scusino, signori,*" he added. "I think I hear the carriage in the distance. I will return to the *portone.*"

"Yes, yes, go!" said Cristina impatiently; and, followed by Fabrizio, she hurriedly ascended the steps leading up to the terrace and went into the house.

In a few minutes the dull rumble of the carriage wheels entering the courtyard re-echoed through Palazzo Vitali, and Countess Vitali and Fabrizio were at the entrance door. Ugo smiled when he saw his wife. "It is nothing, Cristina," he said, "do not alarm yourself. I think I may have broken a rib, perhaps—but nothing more serious."

Cristina's face which had been fixed and set as marble changed suddenly as she heard his words.

"You are sure?" she asked quickly.

"Of course. That devil of a horse bucked as usual, and then he must needs fall on the top of me into a ditch." Ugo's voice was weak, and his face betrayed signs of the pain he had endured during the rapid drive homeward. He was lifted carefully out of the carriage under Taddeo's superintendence, and carried up to his own room.

"There is one thing I forgot," he said, as they laid him gently on the bed. "That gate, somebody must see that it is replaced, for there is stock in those fields. And, Cristina, you will send money to those peasants who helped me. But for them, I should be still lying at the bottom of that ditch."

He had scarcely been settled on the bed when Dr Sacchetti hastily entered the room; a little, nervous man with iron-grey hair



and beard, and quick, intelligent eyes. Doctor Sacchetti was well known not only in Viterbo where he was the leading surgeon, but also enjoyed a considerable reputation among his fellow-doctors in Rome. He knew Count Vitali intimately, and the two had a mutual respect for one another.

"Perbacco, conte!" he exclaimed cheerfully, as he went up to the bedside. "What have you been doing to yourself? They tell me you have fallen from your horse—you! I cannot believe it."

As he spoke he looked searchingly into Ugo's face, and then his eyes travelled critically downwards.

In a few words Ugo explained what had happened. "I have a sharp pain when I try to sit up," he said, "but what I mind more than the pain is the coldness and numbness in my legs."

"Shock," said Dr Sacchetti briefly. "It would be a more serious affair, probably, if you felt no pain. Signora contessa, I fear I must ask you to retire while I make a little examination. Everybody, please, will retire, and you," turning to Taddeo, "will remain."

"Go and have some breakfast—Cristina, you and Fabrizio," said Ugo to his wife. "The doctor will join you later, and tell you that I have given you a fright for nothing at all. It is unfortunate, for I shall certainly not be able to accompany you to the vineyards this afternoon, and I had been looking forward to seeing Fabrizio in a blouse, picking the grapes!"

"Conte," observed Doctor Sacchetti, "you will have the kindness not to talk, except when I ask you to answer a question. Signora contessa, may I ask you to leave us at once? in these cases the sooner we learn what may be amiss, the better."

The room emptied at once after this. Countess Vitali and Fabrizio went to the drawing-room and presently the doors of the dining-room were opened by the footman, who announced that breakfast was served. Cristina told the lad to leave the dishes on the table and not to wait. She and Fabrizio went through a form of eating, but Cristina scarcely took her eyes off the clock standing on a console opposite to her chair. The minutes crept by, and the clock had twice chimed the quarters before the

doctor appeared. In the meantime, the two had said little to each other. Fabrizio watched Cristina's face curiously, and wondered what her thoughts could be. His own were in a state of absolute confusion. Supposing Ugo were to be maimed—crippled for life? that would mean the same for Cristina and himself as if Ugo were to recover, and the accident prove to be nothing but a temporary inconvenience. But if Ugo were to die? The doctor was a long time making his examination, what if he had discovered some severe internal injuries that he suspected would prove fatal?

Fabrizio recoiled from this latter thought. It would be terrible if Ugo should die like that—struck down in the prime of life and in a moment of perfect health. Had it been an illness—well, every one was liable to contract a fatal illness—those things formed the chances of war, as it were. And Ugo had been good to him—always good to him. No, he did not want Ugo to die from a sudden accident. It would be unnatural—terrible.

Cristina's face told him nothing. It was an impenetrable mask. Only the expression of her eyes as she had watched the hands of the clock betrayed that she was a prey to consuming anxiety. Long before the doctor's appearance they had risen from the breakfast-table; to which, indeed, they had sat down more from force of habit than from any inclination to eat of things upon it.

Doctor Sacchetti advanced towards them, and his face was grave, but not, Fabrizio thought, by any means despairing.

"Ebbene, signora contessa," he said, "there are no broken bones—no; but all the same, the count will have to be careful—very careful for some days. I have made my examination, and I find—" he paused for a moment.

"What?" asked Cristina abruptly.

"I will explain to you," continued Doctor Sacchetti quietly. "If the count had fallen on his head, he would now be suffering from a concussion of the brain. The case would be simpler than it is. He is suffering from internal injuries, caused by the weight of the horse's body. I have found nothing to lead me to believe that these injuries are dangerous in themselves. Indeed, I believe that they are not so, and that with perfect repose and

proper treatment the count will recover from them in a comparatively short time. But one cannot be sure of how things will go—not, at any rate, for some few days. Some complication, unforeseen at present, might arise unexpectedly to upset all our calculations. That is the danger in these cases of visceral concussion. Of course, signora contessa, we shall do our best to guard against any complication; and you need not be unduly anxious, for there is nothing at present to be alarmed about. Complete repose, and the treatment I shall give, should easily work a cure in the case of so healthy a man as Count Vitali. Of course, if certain complications were to arise, such as internal inflammation for instance, I should be more uneasy than I am; and, in that case, I should prefer to summon a colleague from Rome for a consultation.”

“I understand,” said Countess Vitalia quietly; “you see no present cause for alarm, but sudden complications might arise which would greatly increase the danger of—of a fatal result. Is not this your meaning, signor professore?”

The professor, for he had the right to that distinction which he had gained by virtue of his successful contributions to the literature of scientific research, looked at her with some surprise at her calmness of voice and manner.

“Yes,” he replied, “that is precisely what I mean. I am glad to see, contessa, that you do not underrate the possible—I say, possible—gravity of the case. It is as well always to be prepared for emergencies, though we may have every reason to believe that they will not present themselves.”

“And may one ask, signor professore, what your treatment will be?” demanded Countess Vitali. “I shall take upon myself, of course, to see that it is strictly carried out.”

Doctor Sacchetti rubbed his hands. Countess Vitali, he thought, seemed to be a sensible woman—more sensible than he had been led to suppose.

“As to the treatment,” he replied, “for the present it will be very simple. Complete repose—as I say—and the most careful dieting. The count, I fear, will suffer more pain in a few hours’ time than he does at present. I have given him an injec-

tion of morfina to quiet the system ; and, should the pain become severe enough to make him restless, these injections must be repeated—strictly according to my directions. I can send you an *infermiere*—one of my men from the hospital, if you wish—though I do not know that there is any absolute necessity for the signor conte to have a nurse at present. I mentioned the subject to him, and the idea seemed to annoy him. He declares that his servant can do everything for him, and I do not wish to excite him in any way. A stranger might do more harm than good. Is your servant, Taddeo—I think he is called—a reliable man ?”

“Certainly,” replied Cristina, “and I, signor professore, am also a reliable woman. I should not wish to leave my husband to the care of a servant, or even of a nurse—unless, of course, you see any objection to my being with him. I am sure that a strange face would be unpleasant to him. As you say the treatment is of the most simple, I imagine that I shall be competent to carry it out—under your supervision, of course.”

“Benissimo,” answered Doctor Sacchetti. “The only part of my treatment which might be troublesome to you is the injections of morfina. These, however, if they have to be repeated, I will do myself, lest there should be any mistake.”

“Can the morfina not be given by mouth ?” asked Cristina.

The professor shook his head. “Not in this case,” he said. “We must do nothing to irritate the internal organs. That is why I prefer to inject it, if necessary. The effect is much more rapid, and the risks are considerably lessened, if not altogether avoided.”

Cristina looked at him attentively while he was speaking. “You see how ignorant I am,” she said, with a slight smile. “But, so far as the nursing is concerned, that at least I can superintend. Taddeo is devoted to my husband, yes, but he is certainly more ignorant than I. Ugo has never been ill, and he might rebel against a *régime* of strict diet. There would always be the danger of his ordering Taddeo to bring him something which he should not have, and the man would probably obey him.”

“Exactly!” agreed the professor. “That is always the danger in nursing when it is left to servants. They are apt to regard doctors’ orders as *storie*, and doctors themselves as assassins. I shall be quite satisfied, signora contessa, at all events as matters now stand, to feel that you are here to see that my instructions are carried out to the letter. If I see any reason to send an infermiere from the hospital, you may be sure that I shall do so, and Count Vitali must submit to his presence. I need hardly tell you that all agitation must be avoided; and that the less our patient talks, the better. I have given the servant all instructions, and for the present Count Vitali must be left perfectly quiet. The morfina I have given him will, I hope, induce sleep, which will be the best of all remedies to begin with. Later, he will require a little nourishment. That, also, I have written down. I shall return this afternoon, about five o’clock, and take the temperature. It is now less than normal, owing to shock. I trust we shall have no symptoms of fever, though there is sure to be a rise of temperature between four and six o’clock.”

Doctor Sacchetti declined breakfast, and hurried back to his hospital where he worked from early in the morning to midday, after which he devoted himself to his private practice.

“Do you really mean to nurse Ugo?” Fabrizio asked, after the door had closed upon the doctor.

“Why not?” returned Cristina, and there was a touch of defiance in her voice. Fabrizio did not reply. It was impossible to read Cristina’s thoughts. Did she, or did she not feel this sudden occurrence which, however cautious Doctor Sacchetti might be in his language, might undoubtedly lead to a condition of things that so short a time previously she had qualified as an escape from her present position?

“It is a horrible thing,” he exclaimed suddenly. “I wish to God it had never happened, Cristina!”

She turned and looked at him penetratingly. “Do you really wish that?” she asked. Think what—what Ugo’s death would mean to you. Perhaps it is destiny, this accident. Who knows?”

Fabrizio turned quickly away from her. “Before God,



Cristina, I swear that I had forgotten all that it would mean to me—I never thought of it until this moment; I do not wish to think of it, for I should feel myself like a murderer. Why do you remind me of it—why have you always reminded me of it? I was thinking of the difference it would make to *us*—to our position. The other is nothing; and I wish that Ugo and I bore different names and had nothing to do with each other. Do you not care, Cristina? do you not care at all that he lies there—so suddenly struck down—and that at any moment some little thing may place his life in danger?”

“I care for you, and for you only,” replied Cristina in a low voice. “I am quite honest, you see. Ugo killed my love for him. He might have had it, but he killed it. You know why he married me, and I, who know it also, can you expect me honestly to say that I care? I am sorry, yes, deeply sorry, and shocked, if you like, and I shall do my duty to the man who is my husband. But I do not care in the sense that you mean. The Duchessa di San Felice, perhaps, will do that, when the news reaches her.”

A sudden wave of repugnance swept through Fabrizio’s heart—a repugnance which for the moment was physical as well as moral.

“You are hard,” he said simply.

“I am just. If something had happened to me, would Ugo have cared—in that way—so long as the San Felice lived? He would have been sorry—shocked, as I am sorry and shocked. But that is compassion, natural sympathy for one in misfortune; it is not love.”

Fabrizio experienced a certain sense of relief, and immediately he reproached himself for having misjudged her. After all, she was honest. How could she love Ugo? and was he, Fabrizio, to blame her for loving him?

“Forgive me!” he said, “I did not understand. Of course there is a difference! But I am glad you feel it, Cristina, and I am glad that you are shocked. I should not have liked to think that you felt nothing. It would be unnatural—inhuman—to feel nothing.”



"But of course! only, do not expect me to feel as I should feel if I loved. I could not—and you could not expect me to do so. Can you not understand, Fabrizio? In my life I have loved no one but you, and nothing, nothing can be to me as our love—yours and mine. Some day, perhaps, you will understand better."

She spoke with an earnestness and a sincerity which would have convinced a far more doubting man than Fabrizio; and, indeed, for once at any rate in her life Cristina spoke the truth.

"There is another thing that I must say to you, Cristina," Fabrizio began.

"Another misunderstanding?"

"I hope not—I think not. Now that this has happened, I cannot stay on here. You must see that for yourself. It would be impossible. To-morrow I must return to Rome, and wait."

"Fabrizio!" exclaimed Cristina. "What are you saying? It is absurd. You have got some scruple in your head. You are full of scruples—I have always told you so. It is not worth while—and besides, they come too late—now!"

But Fabrizio Vitali was obstinate. "I cannot stay here, alone with you," he said firmly. "I will not, Cristina. With Ugo lying ill, do you think I should not feel that I was wronging him doubly? It is a scruple, if you like, and perhaps I am illogical, but to be in Ugo's house now—to be eating his bread while he is helpless and perhaps in danger of his life—no! You must let me go. If anything happened to Ugo, we should be glad, afterwards, that I did not remain here. We are neither of us strong enough, Cristina, less strong than ever now. And if—no! it would be too cowardly, too vile!"

For a moment a look of terrible anger swept across Countess Vitali's face. Her eyes contracted and her whole body trembled with passion.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, "already, Fabrizio, already? I had not expected that you would leave me so soon!"

Fabrizio looked at her in dismay. "Cristina!" he cried, "per carità! Are you mad? Cannot you see that I must go—for your sake and for my own? And Ugo, what would he think if I remained? it would make him, and everybody, suspect!"

Cristina swept past him and began to walk rapidly up and down the room. Presently she came towards him and seizing his hand pressed it to her lips. Her anger had disappeared and her face and manner were equally composed.

"Forgive me, Fabrizio mio," she said softly. "Forgive me! Yes, you are right, you must certainly go! I will tell Ugo, the—servants—that you are going to-morrow. Only, the thought that we must be separated again so soon upset me and made me say foolish things—unjust things. No, go, amore mio, go! Perhaps it will not be for very long. Ugo must either recover, or—" and she paused abruptly. "In either case," she continued, "you would return to Palazzo Vitali. In the one case as guest; but in the other—in the other, Fabrizio, as master of all—of me!" She broke off with a sob in her voice. "Now we must leave each other," she said presently. "I must go to Ugo, and relieve Taddeo who has never left him. We shall meet later, if all is well. Sacchetti must find me with Ugo when he comes again at five o'clock." And without another word she went quickly from the room.

## CHAPTER XXVI

THREE days had now elapsed since Ugo Vitali's mishap. As Doctor Sacchetti had at once discovered in the course of his preliminary examination, Ugo was suffering from internal concussion consequent upon having fallen beneath his horse. When he returned to Palazzo Vitali on the evening of the accident, the doctor found that, as he had anticipated, his patient's temperature had risen from the normal thirty-seven degrees to within a point or two of thirty-eight. The pain, too, which had at first only manifested itself when Ugo tried to raise himself into a sitting posture, had become more or less incessant. This state of things, however, had not continued. After a few hours the temperature had fallen again, to Professor Sacchetti's great satisfaction. It was evident that, for the present at any rate, there was no fever, the temporary rise having been almost inevitable after the shock Count Vitali had received. Nevertheless, that rise had been somewhat higher than the doctor had liked; and he was by no means satisfied that Ugo had not sustained some internal injury which might at any moment cause more serious symptoms to develop themselves.

Although Ugo still complained of pain, and occasionally of nausea, his temperature had not again risen to more than three or four points above the normal, and Doctor Sacchetti argued that therefore no serious mischief was going on, and that it might be hoped Count Vitali would, after a few days' complete rest and treatment, lose every disquieting symptom. The professor had found, indeed, when he visited his patient on the third day, that both the pain and the occasional fits of nausea had considerably diminished, though they had by no means entirely disappeared.

Countess Vitali had been indefatigable in her constant attendance upon her husband, and the doctor had no reason to complain that his instructions were not punctually carried out.

Nothing would induce Ugo to consent to having an *infermiere*. Indeed, Doctor Sacchetti had at once abstained from pressing the point when he saw that the idea of being nursed by a stranger was so distasteful to his patient.

Although he had every reason to be fairly satisfied with the progress Count Vitali was making, the professor was extremely cautious in his statements. Countess Vitali, evidently, was a sensible woman, he thought, and it was not necessary to conceal from her the fact that it was not yet time to assert definitely that all danger of possible complications might be considered as past. There was still pain, and there was still, occasionally, that sensation of nausea which showed the internal organs to be always suffering from "commotion," though in a lesser degree. Countess Vitali herself was the first to ask the professor whether all danger could be considered at an end until these symptoms had ceased, and she had risen in his estimation accordingly. He was fully alive to the necessity for caution in similar cases. Carelessness in following the treatment he had prescribed, or the slightest imprudence in the matter of diet might, he assured Cristina, yet produce the gravest complications.

Up to the present there was certainly no occasion for him to summon another opinion from Rome. All that was needed was judicious treatment, and careful watching for any unfavourable symptom which might point to the existence of some internal lesion which, owing to the nature of the accident, might have been apprehended.

In the meantime, Fabrizio Vitali had taken his departure and returned to Rome. Countess Vitali had promised him that she would keep him regularly informed of Ugo's state. He had left the day after the accident. Notwithstanding her anger when he had first declared that he could not remain at Palazzo Vitali while Ugo was lying ill, Cristina had afterwards appeared to be almost feverishly anxious that her lover should go. When Ugo was able to get about again Fabrizio would, of course, return to complete his visit which had been so suddenly interrupted; but until then, as Cristina assured him, it was better that he should not be at Palazzo Vitali.

Fabrizio himself had been greatly relieved at this sudden change in her attitude. It was illogical, no doubt, but though he had not allowed his scruples to prevent him from deceiving Ugo, he felt he could not continue to do so at this particular juncture. At least by going away he would be placing himself out of temptation. It pleased him to think that Cristina, after a few moments' opposition, had arrived at the same conclusion, and that she had not striven to keep him at Palazzo Vitali. There would be something heartless, almost brutal, in their being together while Ugo was stricken down by an accident of which the doctor was as yet unable to state the severity or possible consequences. Cristina, he told himself, was doing right in devoting herself to Ugo at such a moment—however much Ugo might have deceived her and made her life unhappy. If anything were to happen—any unlucky termination to this accident—they would both be glad to feel that their conduct had not been utterly unfeeling and heartless.

The news of what had befallen Count Vitali had naturally spread far and wide, and the porter at Palazzo Vitali was kept busily employed in answering the many inquiries made at the *portone* of the palace.

Among the first to make these inquiries was the Duchessa di San Felice who, accompanied by Don Basilio, drove from Villa Falconara late the same afternoon and arrived at Palazzo Vitali at the moment when Professor Sacchetti was leaving it after having paid his second visit to his patient.

The account he gave to the duchessa was perhaps a little more unsatisfactory than his report to Countess Vitali. He did not like to commit himself to an opinion at so early a stage, he told Vittoria, who detained him for some minutes by the side of her pony-phaeton. Vittoria di San Felice had asked if Countess Vitali would care to see her, and had been informed that she was in close attendance upon the signor conte and could receive no one. The porter, garrulous as most of his kind, had further volunteered the information that the Conte Fabrizio was leaving early the following morning for Rome; and at that piece of intelligence Vittoria and Don Basilio had exchanged a rapid



glance which they afterwards hoped had passed unnoticed both by the porter and by Professor Sacchetti who was listening to the conversation.

Vittoria left a pencilled note saying that should Countess Vitali like to see her, she would come over at any time ; and that Don Basilio would come to Count Vitali whenever he might be better and allowed to receive a visitor.

In the meantime Cristina's attendance upon her husband was of so close a character as to excite surprise in the small household at Palazzo Vitali ; while it also had the effect of arousing some indignation on the part of Taddeo, who saw in it a want of confidence on the signora contessa's part in his own zeal and trustworthiness.

Nobody could deny, however, that Countess Vitali was a devoted nurse who spared herself neither trouble nor fatigue. Professor Sacchetti himself complimented her upon the way in which his instructions were carried out, and he experienced a genuine satisfaction when he felt able to tell her that, as the third day had now passed without any specially disquieting symptoms having shown themselves, he was beginning to be more confident that no complications would arise. Anxiety had indeed, been apparent on Countess Vitali's face ever since her husband had met with his accident, and Doctor Sacchetti had noticed that, as the days passed, this anxiety certainly did not seem to diminish. There was none of that sudden reaction to hopefulness which in most cases succeeds a grave anxiety which circumstances have tended to lighten. The professor, therefore, was all the more pleased that the moment had come when he felt justified in speaking words which should relieve, at any rate to a certain extent, Countess Vitali's mind.

To his surprise his more confident manner and report did not have the effect he had anticipated. On the contrary, Countess Vitali's anxiety seemed rather to be increased than otherwise by his cautious, though decidedly encouraging view of his patient's case. He came to the conclusion that the contessa must be a person of a temperament the reverse of sanguine ; and he reflected that, after all, perhaps such temperaments were advantageous to



their possessors, as being less likely to plunge them into subsequent disappointments.

But neither Doctor Sacchetti, nor anybody else at Palazzo Vitali could guess that Cristina was in very truth a prey to an anxiety which was as poignant as it was ceaseless. As the hours passed, and her husband showed no signs of becoming radically worse, this anxiety became almost intolerable. She was thankful that Fabrizio had gone. He, and he only, might have suspected its sources, to others it would in all probability appear natural, legitimate, if somewhat exaggerated.

When Doctor Sacchetti would produce his thermometer and carefully take his patient's temperature, which he did regularly at his morning and evening visit, it was with difficulty that she could compose her features to the proper expression of satisfaction when the encouraging results were announced. She found herself longing, almost praying some sudden rise which should send the mercury well above the red cypher of thirty-seven marking the normal point and tell of the presence of some such organic mischief as she had been warned might declare itself.

And as the hours lengthened into days and yet no traces of "complications"—that mysterious word to which Doctor Sacchetti was for ever returning—showed themselves, Countess Vitali's anxiety racked her more and more.

There were hours, of course, when it was possible to leave Ugo alone. Indeed, the doctor was particularly anxious that he should sleep as much and as often as possible; and to this end he had administered the injections of morphia as frequently as he had deemed advisable. At these times Cristina would seek a refuge in the gallery, which nobody ever entered to disturb her solitude. There she would pace restlessly up and down, seeking to solve the problem which entirely occupied her mind. How nearly her longing, that longing which she was now able calmly to admit to herself, had been fulfilled, how simple everything would be had it actually been so! Ugo's accident might so easily have been fatal. Nobody would have been to blame except himself for his obstinacy in continuing to ride a vicious horse. And she would have been free, free to live out her life with a man

she really loved, who would allow her to live that life as she pleased.

Fabrizio had sworn that, were she free, he would marry her, and Cristina knew that she could hold him to his word.

That afternoon—the afternoon on which the doctor had for the first time spoken with an almost assured confidence in his patient's speedy recovery—she had fled from her husband's room lest he or Taddeo should read her face, and had gone straight to the gallery where she knew she would be undisturbed. Everything, she thought to herself, was going right, when with her whole soul she was longing that it should go wrong. Ugo's strength and robust constitution would triumph. There would be no complications—every hour that passed made it less probable that any would supervene. It was useless to be anxious, useless to give way to that strange sense of disappointment from which she would even a few weeks ago have shrunk as from a thought she feared to put into words. Fate was going to be too strong for her.

In her restless walk up and down the gallery which was partially darkened by the closed *persiennes* she would stop now and again beneath the portrait of Donna Giulia. Sometimes, almost unconsciously, she would address it. It seemed to be something human which could interpret her thoughts and sympathise with the terrible anxiety which was consuming her.

It was certainly strange, she told herself, that this afternoon, when anxiety was giving way to a bitter certainty that Fate refused to help her to freedom, the portrait should seem to be more human—more alive—than it had ever seemed before. It was imagination, of course; but Donna Giulia's eyes appeared to be smiling scornfully, and the red lips, which contrasted so vividly with the faded flesh tints of the face, seemed to sneer at her impotence with a conscious superiority which was maddening.

"You can afford to sneer," Cristina exclaimed suddenly, as she paused and looked at the portrait. "Yes, you can afford to sneer, because you found a way. I can find none!" and she did not know that she spoke the words aloud.

All at once, as though a flash had illumined the innermost

recesses of her brain, it seemed to Cristina that she saw rather than heard again a conversation she had until that moment completely forgotten although at the time it had interested her deeply. It was a strange thing, she thought, that feeling of seeing spoken words standing out clear and distinct before the eye instead of hearing them—a strange inversion of the senses. Nevertheless she saw words—Fabrizio's words. They ranged themselves before her vision as though traced by some unseen hand. *La morfina*. She could buy it. And the last effects of over doses of morfina so closely resembled those of acute internal *commozioni*. The words blazed before Countess Vitali's eyes and burned themselves into her brain. It seemed to her that not only did she see them, but that she also felt them, felt them as though some one were striking her with them. Only she did not hear them—had no sense of hearing them, although they were spoken words—spoken by Fabrizio. Wait! she must think! Who was it that was suffering from something—something that the morfina could allay, but most of the symptoms of which it could also produce if given in too great a quantity? And what was the quantity which would produce such a—complication?

Figures rose up before Cristina's eyes. She saw them—falling as it were from Fabrizio's lips. 15. Fifteen—what? Ah, she remembered! fifteen centigrammes, of course—fifteen centigrammes of the morfina—*that drug which was already being administered by the doctor's orders—by the doctor himself!*

Cristina started and turned sharply round. Surely somebody had spoken these words?—this time she had heard them ringing in her ears—she had not seen them.

Of course! Here was her opportunity. A moment ago she had thought that Fate was to be stronger than she; now she felt that she held Fate in her own hands. But she must think—think. There was yet time—not much, perhaps, but still some few days during which the complications Professor Sacchetti had always considered as possible might arise without causing any undue suspicions. If they did arise, what could the doctor say—what could anybody say, except that the internal injuries had been more severe than had been realised. The symptoms would be

the same, or at any rate they would be so similar as easily to be mistaken for those of some sudden complication. There would be no *autopsia*. It would not be necessary, since from the first a doctor of Sacchetti's reputation had managed the case. And even if there were an *autopsia*, and traces of morphia were detected, who could say that the doctor himself had not made a mistake and administered the injections too frequently.

In the semi-darkness and silence of the gallery Cristina thought—and thought. It was extraordinary how clear her mind seemed to be—how ideas flowed to her brain which had never before occurred to her. Surely, she told herself, she must have been very foolish—very dull—not at once to have recollected that conversation, those remarks of Fabrizio's when they had discussed at dinner the possible means employed by Donna Giulia of ridding herself of her lover! When the doctor had mentioned morphia as being part of his treatment, how came it that she had not remembered?

Yes, but Professor Sacchetti had kept the injections rigidly in his own hands, and how could she, Cristina, supplement their number? She did not even know how to use the little apparatus which she had seen Sacchetti take from his pocket. Besides the needle left a tiny scar where it penetrated the flesh, and those scars might afterwards be observed, and counted.

Ah, how dull she was still! Of course—she could supplement the doses of morfina to any extent; not by injection, but by the mouth. It should not be difficult to introduce it repeatedly into the food or the drink sent up to the sick room. How simple it all was, and certainly her wits had been dull until this afternoon. The extra doses she might administer would produce symptoms which Sacchetti would imagine to be caused by some slight relapse, some unexpected disturbance of the shaken and bruised organs; and he would endeavour to quiet these symptoms by further injections, thus increasing the quantity indefinitely. She had nothing to do but to buy a few of the hypodermic syringes and their accompanying phials. The syringes she could destroy, and the contents of the phials she could use at her discretion—as opportunity offered. What had Fabrizio

said? that the action of morfina was cumulative. She could remember smiling at the solemnity of his manner as he made the remark. Well, if it was cumulative, so much the better. The effect would be more natural, more in accordance with what the effects of some sudden complications might be expected to be. Of course! She would buy the apparatus—one here, another there. Chemists were not wanting in Viterbo. Moreover, who could say that she had not bought it for her own use. For her own use? of course it was for her own use!

And, as she said the words to herself, Cristina heard a sudden laugh. Perhaps it was she who had laughed—of course it must have been she! Was she not alone in the gallery? Only, it had not sounded like her own laugh—it was low, and malicious; the kind of laughter that might have issued from Donna Giulia's sneering lips which smiled at her from the canvas above the spot where she was standing.

It was wonderful how calm she felt now. That wearing anxiety had gone. A little courage, a little resolution, and she would be free. And in securing freedom she would secure to the man she loved, and who loved her, the lands and the money he would know so much better how to enjoy than did his cousin—the *campagnuolo*.

Thinking always, Cristina left the gallery, and as she did so the eyes of Donna Giulia's portrait seemed to her to follow her steps; for, turning once again to look at the picture, she encountered their malicious, mocking smile.

Cristina Vitali smiled back at it.

"Grazie, Donna Giulia, grazie!" she said. "At last you have shown me the way."



## CHAPTER XXVII

THE accounts received by Fabrizio Vitali of his cousin's condition were such as to leave little doubt in his mind that Ugo would soon recover from the effects of his accident. He heard from Cristina daily, and each letter dwelt upon the fact that, as yet, none of the complications feared by Professor Sacchetti had shown any signs of manifesting themselves. Countess Vitali gave her information without comments; and it would have been impossible to tell from the tone of her letters whether or not she was satisfied with the course events were evidently taking. This attitude on Cristina's part was not, as Fabrizio told himself, surprising; and it was at any rate, honest. Under the circumstances, any pretence to a feeling of thankfulness that things were not worse would have been merely useless hypocrisy, and Fabrizio was glad to think that Cristina did not consider it worth her while to make any attempt to deceive him on the subject.

It was evident that she was doing her duty by Ugo, as she had declared that she would do. She told Fabrizio in the letter he had last received from her how she had rarely left her husband's room during the first two days, and that it was only owing to the fact of the third day having now passed without any untoward symptoms declaring themselves that she had allowed herself a little more freedom.

Fabrizio Vitali assured himself repeatedly that he was glad Ugo was going to recover from his accident; and, in a sense, these assurances were genuine. He had never wished any harm to befall Ugo, even when he had known him far less intimately than he did at present.

It was a curious thing, and one for which he hardly cared to attempt an explanation, but since his return to Rome he had become conscious of a certain change in his ideas, or rather,



perhaps, in his state of mind. The change was slight, and subtle ; but he felt it was there, and its presence caused him a vague uneasiness. Oddly enough, he knew that he had first perceived its presence at the moment when, as he and Cristina had been returning from their morning walk in the gardens, the porter had hurried towards them to acquaint them with the news of Ugo's accident.

It was not that the intelligence had shocked him so much, as that it seemed suddenly and unexpectedly to cast a new light on his own position, a light which showed this position in a different colour from that through which he had become accustomed to view it. From this position there was now no drawing back. He had returned to Palazzo Vitali as he had promised and intended to do ; and within four and twenty hours of his return he had obtained from Cristina all that she had promised to give him. And now, should anything happen to Ugo—anything that would make Cristina a free woman—he would be bound in honour to keep the oath he had made to her. It was not that, having obtained his desire, his passion for his cousin's wife was satiated, for it was, indeed, only whetted. But Cristina as a mistress was one thing, whereas Cristina as a wife was an eventuality which, as he now was beginning to realise, had seemed so remote as hardly to be regarded as coming within the range of possibility.

As Fabrizio had often argued to himself, Ugo could have no logical ground for complaint if his wife, knowing that he went his own way, chose to go hers. It was absurd to be scrupulous as to deceiving a man who had married his wife merely in order to enable him to carry on more easily an intrigue of long standing which he had never intended should be interrupted. Sooner or later, Cristina would certainly console herself for her wrongs by taking a lover of her own ; and, apart from the accident of his being Ugo's kinsman, there was no reason why that lover should not be himself, Fabrizio, while even this last objection was, after all, purely a sentimental one.

The mishap which had befallen Ugo, however, had instantly brought a remote and extremely improbable contingency within the bounds of possibility, and for some reason which Fabrizio

Vitali could not explain, he had felt a sudden aversion from the thought that he might be called upon to redeem his promise to Cristina—a promise which, in the heat of his passion, he had given the more readily on account of the unlikelihood of his ever being able to put it into execution.

It was with genuine satisfaction, therefore, and perhaps with positive relief, that Fabrizio learned from Countess Vitali's letters of Ugo's probable recovery, and that there was nothing as yet to warrant the fear lest he had received any organic injury. It was true that Cristina invariably reverted in these letters to Professor Sacchetti's obstinacy in asserting that until further time had elapsed it was impossible altogether to exclude the possibility of complications of a serious nature declaring themselves. Apparently, however, Cristina herself believed that the professor was over-cautious; and in her last letter she had reminded Fabrizio that doctors were not always above pretending to regard a case as more serious than it really was, in order to gain additional honour and glory when the patient made a good recovery under their treatment. There were no more allusions to the changes which any fatal results of Ugo's accident would make in Fabrizio's prospects, and of this Fabrizio was honestly glad. He did not wish to allow his mind to dwell on the advantages he would derive from Ugo's death. It would be absurd, he told himself, to pretend that he could afford to ignore these advantages, or that he would find any fault with fate for placing him in his cousin's shoes. But he felt a glow of self-commendation at the thought that he was far from definitely wishing for his cousin's death in order that his cousin's goods might become his own; but a portion of which Ugo himself had certainly regarded in the light of a negligible quantity. All things considered, Fabrizio found himself rapidly coming to the conclusion that he would be quite satisfied with the share he had already secured in this portion, and that a more legal ownership might in the future prove embarrassing. If Ugo recovered, there was no reason why things should not remain as they were. Cristina and he, Fabrizio, would have ample opportunities of meeting, and of being together. Moreover, Fabrizio told himself that he knew his world. By

degrees the relations between himself and his cousin's wife would become an accepted thing—an incident to which nobody would take any exception. Did he not know of scores of similar cases among his acquaintances—and among many who were not his acquaintances? In Rome, the *ami de la maison* was almost an institution. The *amie* lived elsewhere. It was a mere question of accustoming people to the idea; and, once the idea was established, nobody took the trouble to be scandalised. Even Ugo, like many other husbands, would in time find it more convenient tacitly to accept the situation, indeed he had every reason to induce him to do so. Of course Ugo would not accept it now; but Rome would enlarge his ideas, and teach him what life really was and how to make the best of it.

Fabrizio was glad that he had remained firm in his decision to return immediately to Rome. To have stayed on at Palazzo Vitali under the circumstances would have probably resulted in arousing the suspicions not only of Ugo's neighbours, but also those of the household and, finally, of Ugo himself.

Rome, however, was certainly not agreeable in the month of September. The city was deserted; the theatres were for the most part closed, and life might be said to be at a standstill. Even the priests were less *en evidence*, and the "beetles" (*baggarozzi*) as the Romans contemptuously term the gangs of students belonging to the various ecclesiastical colleges, no longer swarmed on the Pincio or in the Villa Borghese, but were still passing the summer vacation in the villas among the Alban Hills, which an impoverished nobility had been obliged to sell. The absence of the "*baggarozzi*," however, was perhaps the one advantage accruing to the capital during the dead season. The spirit of civilisation was no longer offended by the sorry spectacle of bands of able-bodied young men with weak countenances, whose future energies were to be devoted to hindering rather than assisting the intellectual progress of humanity.

The atmosphere of the city was heavy and lifeless, for the first rains of autumn had not yet come to dispel the sirocco which blows so frequently in September. The Embassies were

practically closed, for the chiefs of missions were disporting themselves on the other side of the Alps, and even the secretaries and attachés were for the most part *in villeggiatura* at Vallombrosa and Camaldoli. The Court was in Piemonte; and the Parliament, which in Italy never sits when the ministers can find any excuse for it not to do so, would not reassemble till the winter, when it would probably be again despatched for a holiday on the first available opportunity.

Notwithstanding all these temporary drawbacks, however, Fabrizio was able to make himself fairly happy in Rome. He looked forward to the coming winter, when Cristina would be installed in some apartment which Ugo would rent for the season—for, of course, by that time Ugo would have quite recovered from the effects of his accident. Things would go smoothly enough then—and, as he had always told Cristina, at Rome he and she would have ample opportunities for enjoying “*il comodo loro*” without being perpetually exposed to the eyes of the curious as they would be at Viterbo. Ugo would, of course, hunt two days a week, and be perpetually returning to Palazzo Vitali to look after his affairs. In the meantime Cristina and he, Fabrizio, would be free to lead their own lives, and they would be able to make use of their freedom as many other people placed in the same circumstances made use of it.

But Fabrizio’s anticipations were destined not to be realised. Two days had elapsed since he had last received a letter from Countess Vitali—that letter which had confirmed his belief that Ugo in a short time would be perfectly well again. On his return home late in the evening he found a telegram lying on his table. It was from Cristina, and was laconic enough. Ugo, she telegraphed, was suffering from a severe and unexpected relapse, and she was writing. The news came to Fabrizio as a shock. Sacchetti, then, had been right to be so cautious in his opinion as to the real nature of the case. Probably the professor had from the first suspected the presence of some internal mischief—some lesion, as he had termed it, which no doubt had set up inflammation.

Poor Ugo! it was terrible to think of him with his life thus

suddenly endangered. Cristina used the word *gravissimo* in her telegram, and that could mean nothing less than imminent danger.

Fabrizio read and re-read the short telegram, and then hurried off to the central office at San Silvestro to reply to it. He reproached himself now for having talked and thought so lightly of his and Cristina's coming freedom. But he had never calculated upon that freedom being so complete as now seemed to be probable. *Stato gravissimo!* there was no mistaking the meaning such a phrase must be intended to convey. And Cristina—would she, could she, care at all? That was a terrible thought, which made Fabrizio feel as though in some way he would be guilty—were Ugo really to die. He knew that Cristina would not care—that she would probably make no pretence of caring, at any rate to him. How could she do so, after all that had passed between them?

Yes, Cristina would be free, and, at the conclusion of a decent period during which a simulance of mourning would have to be observed, she would expect him to fulfil his promise and marry her. Somehow or other the thought, once so attractive, now filled Fabrizio with a strange misgiving. Moments when he had been vaguely conscious of a sudden feeling of repulsion—a feeling that had passed as quickly as it had come—now returned to his memory and refused to leave it. After all, what did he know of Cristina—herself? The outer Cristina—her beauty, her charm of manner when she chose to exert it, her aptitude to talk on subjects with which it might have been supposed that she could have little acquaintance—all these things he knew, and they had fascinated him and made him love her. But of her real self, what did he know? He remembered now how often he had been puzzled by the sudden furtive, suspicious glance which he had noticed flash from her eyes—that look which recalled the low-browed *Ciocciara* models when under the influences of anger or jealousy. It was attractive—that look—if only on account of the half-revealed passions which lay behind it—but it was a look one would prefer to see on the face of one's mistress, from whom one could escape, than on that of one's wife from whom escape was not so easy a matter.



Nevertheless, Cristina was a beautiful woman—a woman in a thousand. It might be that he did not yet know the real Cristina, but that was no reason why he should not learn to know her. It might be that the disappointment of her life with Ugo—the discovery that she had been married, not for herself, but to enable another woman to retain her hold over Ugo, had embittered her, and that this accounted for the indefinable things in her which had repelled even while they had attracted him by their mysteriousness.

Fabrizio sent his telegram, and as he wrote it out the conventionality of the language struck him disagreeably. He longed to make it clear to Cristina that he was genuinely shocked, genuinely sorry—but how could he expect it to be believed? And yet he knew that he was both the one and the other. He told himself that, had he been able to foresee Ugo's accident, and still more had he been able to foresee its all too probable results, he would not have yielded to his passion when he had. There would have been time enough—afterwards; and he would not now have to endure the remorse of the feeling that he had wronged his kinsman who had trusted him, and who now lay, perhaps, a dying man.

He returned from San Silvestro to the apartment he and his mother occupied in the Via Veneto. The Signora Vitali was still at Montecatini, and he was alone. There was nothing to do but sit and wait for further news from Viterbo. The letter alluded to in Cristina's telegram would probably reach him by the first post in the morning, and until then it was not likely that he would hear more particulars. He tried to distract his thoughts by reading, but his books were soon laid aside. He felt as a man may feel when conscious of a presentiment of a great change about to take place in his life. To some, such changes come suddenly, unexpectedly, perhaps wrenching happiness and the joy of living out of the heart, and causing life never again to be all that it was before; while to others some warning is vouchsafed.

To-night Fabrizio was a prey to an uneasiness which, do what he could, refused to leave him. He tried to think of what he would do were Ugo really to die and were he to succeed to his inheritance. In former days he had often allowed his mind to



dwell upon this theme, and he had been wont to build many castles in the air in connection with it. To-night, however, the material change in his prospects, which Cristina's telegram had brought within the range of actuality, seemed to concern him only in a secondary degree. He felt that some other change—something that threatened the immaterial part of him—was about to envelop him, and he shrank from it.

The night was close and airless ; and, after vainly endeavouring to turn the channel of his thoughts by reading, Fabrizio determined to go out again into the streets. It would be a relief to find himself among such movement as might be going on at a late hour of a September evening. He sought the quarter of the city which would be most thronged, wending his way down the Via Nazionale and so along the Corso to Piazza Colonna. The Caffè Aragno was crowded with men of business, journalists and others whose daily occupations kept them in Rome even at that season. Fabrizio entered the brilliantly lighted sala and, ordering a cup of black coffee, sat down at a vacant table. A few people passing in and out nodded to him, and one or two came up and talked to him as he sipped his coffee. The distraction of mind which he sought, however, would not come to him, and after a short time the noise and movement in the place began to have an irritating effect on his nerves. He left the caffè, and passed out into the Corso where groups of people were walking up and down or reading the evening papers under the electric lamps. The various clocks were striking eleven, and there seemed to Fabrizio nothing better to be done than to retrace his steps to the Via Veneto. On reaching his apartment he found that no further telegram had arrived from Viterbo, and there was nothing to do but to wait for the news the morning would certainly bring.

Taking a book with him, he went to his bedroom, determined to read himself to sleep. But sleep was long in coming. Always the vague sense of some impending evil was with him and by no effort of the will could he free himself from it. His mind travelled to Palazzo Vitali, and in his imagination he assisted at the scene in Ugo's sick room. Perhaps, he thought, Cristina, now that Ugo was really in danger, would be distressed. It would be terrible

for her to have to feign an anxiety and a sorrow which she did not feel. He had told her that she was hard; and she had replied that she was just—that it was the San Felice, and not she, who had either the reason or the right to grieve. Yes—but Cristina had said that when Ugo's life was not actually in danger. But now—with the presence of death perhaps so near at hand—she would not continue to be hard. No doubt Ugo had wronged her—wronged her cruelly and systematically—but, surely, where death entered all wrongs were forgiven. But it was unconceivable that death should enter! Sacchetti would summon some famous doctor from Rome, and there would be a consultation—probably an operation—and Ugo's life would be saved.

It was a strange thing, Fabrizio thought, that he should be so feverishly anxious that Ugo should not die. He had everything to gain by Ugo's death, from the point of view of worldly gain. Nevertheless, he experienced a feeling which was little short of horror—which was horror—at the prospect of his cousin's death. In some unaccountable way he felt that this death, far from benefiting him, was a menace of evil, a danger which, were he only able to do so, he would ward off at any cost to himself and to his future. The knowledge that he was utterly impotent to alter the course of events by a hair's breadth increased a hundredfold that strange sense of fear which oppressed him. If he could only realise what it was he feared; if he could only define the indefinable, and understand why it should be that an eventuality which he had so often contemplated with perfect equanimity should now, when he was brought face to face with it, fill him with an inexplicable sense of aversion and a haunting fear of some unknown evil which its actual occurrence would bring upon him!

Sleep was long in coming to Fabrizio that night, but it came at last. How long he had slept he did not know, but he knew that he woke with a cry of horror on his lips which seemed to him as if it must surely have rung through the house. For a moment or two he looked round his room, into which the morning light was now penetrating, bewildered and unable to collect his thoughts. Surely, he said to himself, he had been but a few minutes before in another room, Donna Giulia's room at Palazzo Vitali? And

then memory returned to him, with that slow, cruel ruthlessness with which it returns to those who wake again to the trouble that for a few short hours sleep has dulled. Gradually he knew that he had dreamed again the dream which had come to him on the first night he had passed in Palazzo Vitali. Again in his sleep, Donna Giulia had bent over him, and had told him that Ugo was dead, and that he, Fabrizio, had killed him. And then it was no longer Donna Giulia who bent over him, but Cristina who embraced him and held her lips to his to be kissed. Ugo was dead, she had whispered to him, and she was free, free to become his wife. And then she had laughed, and Fabrizio had recognised the laugh. It was some time since he had heard it, and he hoped that it had passed out of his life for ever. But now it had rung again in his ears, and it had grown louder and louder, so that do what he would he could not shut out its sound. Then, as he was struggling to free himself from the arms that held him, Cristina's arms, something had happened, and the laughter, that terrible laughter died away into silence. Ah—he remembered now! the crucifix had fallen, and in his agony he had grasped it, and as he grasped it his dream had passed.

Ah, but it had not passed! He could still hear the echo of that laugh. It had come back to him again, and if he were to hear it perpetually at his side as he had heard it at Palazzo Vitali he would go mad—mad!

That was absurd—childish. He would not go mad, had he not his Will, that Human Will which controlled life, which *was* life? His glance fell on the volume of Schopenhauer from which he had forced himself to read while waiting for sleep to come to him. Of course! what could be more natural in the excited state of his mind than that he should have dreamed again the dream which had impressed itself so vividly only a few weeks ago—so vividly that he had imagined he had again heard the laugh which accompanied it? He was not well yet, and the events of the last few days had made him nervous—as nervous as he had been when he first went to Palazzo Vitali.

Fabrizio rose, and threw open the windows of his room. The weather had changed during the night, and, instead of the sultry

sirocco, a faint tramontana breeze, light and exhilarating, had cleared the sky of its leaden clouds and the sun was shining. Looking at his watch he found it was already seven o'clock. From the streets came the sounds of life. Newspapers were being cried; hawkers were shouting their wares; and in the distance he could hear the strains of a military band as a regiment marched on its way from the Castro Pretorio to take part in some morning manœuvres outside one of the gates of the city.

The fresh air and the sunshine restored Fabrizio to a calmer condition of mind. He determined to dress; and, ringing his bell, told the servant to bring him hot water, and a cup of black coffee. A quarter of an hour passed before the man returned, placing a tray with the coffee beside Fabrizio. A telegram lay on the tray; it had just arrived, the servant said, sent in from the central office as the hour was yet early.

Fabrizio tore it open. It was signed by Taddeo.

*The signor conte died at half-past four this morning. Your presence is necessary. Taddeo Pasquali—maggior-domo—Palazzo Vitali.*

## CHAPTER XXVIII

ACCORDING to immemorial custom in Italy when death occurs in the family owning a palace, the great gates of Palazzo Vitali were shut. Only from this sign could a passer-by have known that mourning had visited the house. The windows of the façade facing the narrow street were open as usual, but groups of Viterbesi, talking to each other in low, eager tones, stood in the roadway and gazed at the closed *portone*. The news of Count Vitali's death had fallen as an unexpected blow on the quiet, provincial city. The circumstances of the accident which had befallen him a few days previously had been, of course, known to all; but it was known, also, that Professor Sacchetti was managing the case, and that the professor of whom Viterbo was proud had only three days since declared his belief in his patient's speedy recovery from a mishap which might easily have had fatal consequences. It had been rumoured that, during the last two days, Count Vitali's condition had not been entirely satisfactory; and those who had happened to meet Professor Sacchetti in the streets had noticed that he looked unusually grave for a man who was naturally of a lively and cheerful disposition. Nobody, however, had anticipated the news which had startled and shocked Viterbo in the early hours of that morning, and the first instinct of the towns-people was to hurry to Palazzo Vitali and see for themselves whether it could be true that the *portone* was closed. There could be no doubt about the fact. The great, wooden gates, heavily studded with rusty iron bolts, were hermetically shut, and only the little wicket door in their centre stood a few inches ajar, disclosing to the curious a glimpse of the grim courtyard within, deserted save for the well-known figure of the porter who, mace in hand, was apparently awaiting some expected arrival. It was evident that the people in the street were also watching for something of the



kind, for when they were not gazing at the *portone* their glances turned towards that end of the street which joined a more important thoroughfare eventually communicating with the railway station.

It was by this time nearly midday, and the train from Rome should have already crawled into Viterbo, were it not for the fact that neither it nor any other train was ever known to arrive or depart *in orario*. As it was, the great bells of the cathedral were already booming out "mezzo-giorno," and were being answered by the bells of the other churches in the city, when a rattle of carriage wheels on the rough paving stones caused a corresponding buzz of excitement among those whose curiosity was greater than their desire to return home for their midday meal.

"Eccolo! eccolo!" went from mouth to mouth, and those furthest away from Palazzo Vitali began to hasten toward the *portone* as a closed carriage dashed round the corner and drove rapidly up to it, without, however, awaiting for the gates to be thrown back to allow of its entrance into the courtyard.

"Eccolo—è proprio lui!" murmured the little crowd of on-lookers; and then there was a dead silence, broken suddenly by one or two low hisses and an ugly word. One half of the *portone* swung open as the carriage pulled up in front of it, and the porter hastily opened the carriage door. Possibly his ear had caught the hisses, or the *jergo* expression which accompanied them, for he closed the great gate again with a crash that reverberated through the courtyard as soon as Fabrizio Vitali, the occupant of the carriage, had crossed the threshold.

The telegram announcing Ugo's death not having reached him till between seven and eight that morning, Fabrizio had been obliged to wait for the departure of a later train from Rome. This delay had been so far fortunate in that it had enabled him to receive Countess Vitali's letter, which, as he had anticipated, had been delivered by the first post an hour after his receipt of Taddeo's telegram.

The letter, it must be confessed, had told him little more than Cristina had already telegraphed the previous night. Everything,



she wrote, had been going on well, when Ugo had suddenly complained of renewed internal pain, accompanied by violent fits of the nausea which he had felt for several days. Sacchetti had, of course, been hastily summoned, and had recommenced the injections of morfina which he had before found it sufficient to restrict to a single injection late in the evening in order to ensure his patient a tolerably quiet night. All the symptoms, Countess Vitali declared, pointed to severe internal inflammation, no doubt caused by some injury which was only now beginning to show itself, but which must have existed from the first. Of course, as she reminded Fabrizio in the letter, Sacchetti had always feared some similar complication, and unfortunately the present complication seemed to be of a very dangerous nature. The additional injections of morfina which the professor had given had not had their desired effect; and indeed had seemed to aggravate the symptoms rather than relieve them. If matters were no better as the day went on, Professor Sacchetti had announced his intention of telegraphing to a colleague at Rome to come down for a consultation, as an operation would probably be necessary.

On re-reading this letter it became evident to Fabrizio that it had been written some hours before Cristina had despatched her telegram describing Ugo's state as *gravissimo*.

The letter was short, and Cristina had certainly not allowed herself to make any comments, or to depart in any way from a dry statement of facts. Under the circumstances, Fabrizio could hardly wonder at her reticence concerning her own feelings. He had been surprised, it was true, that the final telegram should have proceeded from Taddeo and not from Cristina herself. On reflection, however, this also had seemed to be natural. No doubt she had been terribly shocked and upset by so unexpected and tragic a result of Ugo's accident, the more so as everything had appeared to be going on satisfactorily. It was quite likely therefore, that she would have left all details to Taddeo, who had at once thought proper to telegraph the news, and to request the immediate presence of Ugo's nearest relative.

Fabrizio had felt, as it were, in a dream ever since receiving

the intelligence of his cousin's death. On arriving at Viterbo he had been vaguely conscious of the fact that people were regarding him with some curiosity; but engrossed as he was in his thoughts he had certainly neither heard the isolated hisses, nor caught the opprobrious epithet which some member of the crowd had called out as he had entered Palazzo Vitali.

At the foot of the staircase leading up to the *piano nobile*, Taddeo and one or two members of the household were waiting to receive him. The meeting was painful enough, at all events to Taddeo; for the old servant broke down completely as he greeted the new head of Casa Vitali. In one of the numerous reception rooms of the cardinal's apartment Fabrizio found Professor Sacchetti, and a short, alert-looking individual who was presented to him by the professor as the avvocato Filippi, Ugo's lawyer. The avvocato Filippi saluted him with the obsequiousness he considered to be due to a new client. In matters of business the Italian is not apt to be sentimental; and the lawyer went straight to the point which principally concerned him.

"Signor conte," he observed, "it is fortunate that you have been able to be here so quickly. As you are of course aware, this—this deplorable event makes you the successor to the late Count Vitali, and I am entirely at your service as the man of business to Casa Vitali. I trust it is unnecessary to assure you that your interests will be perfectly safe in my hands."

Fabrizio bowed. "I know nothing of my poor cousin's affairs he said quickly, "though I am aware that, being his nearest of kin, I am now his representative. The signora contessa——"

"The signora contessa has, naturally, a first charge on the estate," interrupted the lawyer. "The *porzione vedovile* is ample, and the signora contessa has the right to select any apartment in Palazzo Vitali as a residence for the remainder of her life-time, and any articles of furniture she may choose to place in that apartment. Everything else, signor conte, passes to you absolutely, as sole male heir. I had the honour of drawing up the late count's will at the time of his marriage, so I am fully acquainted with its provisions. Since then, as you are probably aware, he inherited a considerable fortune in money and house property

from the Marchesa Santoro. Count Ugo's will, however, stands to-day as it was originally drawn up. Owing, too, to the accident of your being the sole representative of Casa Vitali, you inherit the lands and the estate intact; no division being necessary as would have been the case had there been other near relatives."

More than once Fabrizio attempted to interrupt the lawyer's somewhat lengthy statement. It was impossible, however, to check the rapid flow of words. When he concluded, Fabrizio turned a little impatiently to Professor Sacchetti.

"How did it happen, signor professore?" he asked abruptly.

The doctor spread out his hands. "*Mah!*" he exclaimed. "It—happened. Ecco tutto! What can I say? A sudden inflammation—the result, without doubt, of an internal lesion produced by the weight of the horse on the viscera. Violent nausea, succeeded by cerebral disturbance producing coma, and death. That, signor conte, is what has happened—so far as I am able to tell you superficially. It would be more satisfactory—ininitely more satisfactory—to hold an *autopsia*. I have suggested as much to the signora contessa, but she is opposed to the idea——"

"But you can insist," said Fabrizio, as he paused.

Professor Sacchetti shook his head. "No," he replied, "I have no legal right to insist on an *autopsia* in this case. Count Ugo, poveretto, was suffering from acute visceral concussion, the causes of which were free from all doubt. Nothing was more likely than that complications might supervene, setting up the acute inflammation which was the undoubted cause of death. I confess that I believed all fear of any similar complications to be at an end, or nearly at an end, and for this reason I should have preferred to make an examination, in order to ascertain what had been the full extent of the internal injuries. Nevertheless, as I say, I have only the moral right, as the *medico curante*, to suggest an *autopsia*. I have no legal right to insist upon it, because the patient succumbed to complications which any doctor would recognise as being not only natural, but which from the first were to be apprehended. Had the signora contessa consented, there would be no more to be said. But those things are painful

to the survivors, *si capisce*, and where there is no legal necessity—" and Professor Sacchetti shrugged his shoulders.

Fabrizio was silent. Why, he wondered, should Cristina object? It was not as if— He put the thought away from him with a slight shudder, remembering what she had told him lately.

Looking up he caught Professor Sacchetti's eyes fixed upon him penetratingly, a doctor's sharp, inquisitive glance.

"If you wish it, professore," he said presently, "I will speak to the *contessa* on the subject, and support you in your suggestion. I can understand that you would like to ascertain why, after so many days had elapsed since the accident, a fatal complication should have suddenly declared itself. It would be more satisfactory."

Professor Sacchetti and the lawyer exchanged a rapid glance.

"Sicuro!" observed the professor, "it would be more satisfactory—not only to me, but also to others. I am delighted to hear, *conte*, that you, at least, do not share the *contessa's* objections."

"I?" returned Fabrizio wonderingly. "Niente affatto! why should I share them? Of course," he added hastily, "I understand them. Those things, as you say, are very painful to the feelings of the survivors. And to the *contessa*—" and he paused abruptly.

"Precisely. They are painful," replied Professor Sacchetti, "but there are other things which might be more painful to the *signora contessa*—and to you, *conte*. Are there not, Filippi?" he added, turning to the lawyer.

"Certainly!" exclaimed the *avvocato* Filippi, "most undoubtedly!"

Something in the tone of their voices made Fabrizio look at them inquiringly.

"Other things?" he repeated. "I do not understand."

Professor Sacchetti cleared his throat with a somewhat unnecessary violence, and then he glanced at the doors of the apartment as though to assure himself that they were closed.

"Signor *conte*," he said, at length, "these are delicate matters. Have I your permission to speak plainly? The *avvocato* Filippi here is the confidential man of business to Casa

Vitali; what is said in his presence will certainly not be repeated elsewhere. And I—" he added with some dignity, " am myself. The confidence of a doctor is, or should be, as inviolate as that of a lawyer or a priest."

The presentiment of coming evil which had never left Fabrizio since he had received Cristina's telegram the evening before, seemed to tighten itself like a band round his heart as he listened to Professor Sacchetti's words.

What could these men mean? he asked himself. There must be something which they knew, or suspected, of which he was as yet in ignorance. Could it be that they suspected how matters stood between him and Cristina? Yet even if they did suspect—and had not Cristina told him that gossip had been busy with his and her names?—what could it matter to them—now? Those were not matters which either Sacchetti or the lawyer would presume to mention to him, however much they might discuss them in other quarters.

He was aware that Professor Sacchetti was watching him, curiously and intently. The avvocato Filippi on the contrary was gazing out of the window, and appeared to be nervous and ill at ease.

"You will permit me to speak freely, signor conte?" repeated the doctor.

"But certainly, professore!" Fabrizio replied. "Del resto," he added, "it is your right to do so. I can only say that I regret the contessa does not agree to your suggestion, which seems to me to be a perfectly legitimate one."

Professor Sacchetti hesitated. "No," he said quietly, "my suggestion is not strictly speaking legitimate. The fact of its not being so places me in a difficult position. I imagine, moreover, that the signora contessa is perfectly aware of this difficulty. I could, of course, by taking a very grave step, make an *autopsia* unavoidable."

The little colour that Fabrizio Vitali ever had in his face left it.

"I must ask you to explain, signor professore," he said.

The professor bowed. "I will endeavour to do so," he answered, "but, as I say, the subject is a very delicate one.



You will understand, conte, that my suggestion is made not so much for the sake of my professional curiosity—if you like to call it so—as for the sake of Casa Vitali. Your cousin was well known here at Viterbo, signor conte—well known and greatly beloved by all classes. Well, you are doubtless aware that when a well known individual dies suddenly the people are apt to hazard strange conjectures as to the true cause of death. In Rome, even at the present time, if a prominent cardinal dies unexpectedly, there are people always ready to shrug their shoulders, and whisper the word—poison. It is a tradition—but unfortunately, there is reason enough for its origin, not only in Rome, but in any other of our cities.”

Fabrizio started to his feet. “Signore professore!” he exclaimed indignantly.

Professor Sacchetti spread out his hands apologetically. “The thing is absurd—ridiculous,” he continued hastily, “but, unluckily, people do not always stop to consider whether the idle reports they circulate be absurd, or not. Why, or how, I cannot tell you—but the fact remains that among a certain class in Viterbo there exists a suspicion that Count Ugo’s death was not entirely due to natural causes. It is a suspicion which, I regret to say, seems to be shared even by his household.”

Fabrizio Vitali groaned. “Gran Dio!” he murmured to himself. The room seemed to circle round him, and staggering back he fell into a chair, wiping drops of perspiration from his forehead.

The doctor looked at him searchingly, critically—and then his keen, black eyes, which had been as hard as steel, suddenly softened.

“Do you still find yourself in agreement with the suggestion I have made to the signora contessa, signor conte?” he said quietly.

There was a pause, during which the avvocato Filippi withdrew his gaze from the window, and looked at his new client.

“I find myself more in agreement with it than ever—more than ever,” replied Fabrizio Vitali dully. “But it is a question for the signora contessa to decide. I am only a distant relative,



though I happen to be my cousin's heir ; but she is his widow. I shall speak to her."

"Caro signor conte," said Professor Sacchetti, "I fear that you will find her strongly opposed to my suggestion. I have not, as you may imagine, as yet given her any hint as to my real motives for making it. I told her that it would be for my own personal satisfaction. That was not strictly true, as you know. However, I trusted that your influence would prevail, and that, after learning your views, the contessa would not by continuing her opposition oblige me to take a very disagreeable step—" and he paused, and looked at Fabrizio gravely.

"And that step would be—?" asked Fabrizio, in a low voice, though he already guessed at the answer.

Professor Sacchetti shrugged his shoulders. "*Mah!*" he replied drily, "the final decision rests with me. I should merely have to declare to the authorities that I was not fully prepared to give a certificate as to the cause of Count Ugo's death, and an *autopsia* would become obligatory."

"There could be nothing to be feared from it," said Fabrizio eagerly.

"Of course not! I am far from suggesting such a thing. On the other hand, there would, in my opinion, be much to be feared were I to feel myself compelled to carry it out in opposition to the wishes of the family. People's tongues would not be silenced. Let us consider a little. I warned you that I should have to touch on delicate matters. Well, the Contessa Vitali is not loved as her husband was loved. I have nothing to do with certain ideas which, it seems, the people here have got into their heads concerning her. It is said that Count Ugo's married life was not a happy one, and I have heard the contessa much blamed. That, however, is no business of mine, none at all! I can understand, all the same, that this hostility to the contessa is at the bottom of certain deplorable rumours which are being widely circulated. You can see for yourself, conte, how desirable—I may say how imperative it is that neither the contessa nor you should lend any colour to these rumours by any action which might be misinterpreted. Do I explain myself?"

"Certainly!" replied Fabrizio. "I am sure," he added quickly, "that the contessa will at once see the advisability of agreeing to your wishes. It is horrible," he continued excitably, "horrible! What could have put such an idea into people's heads?"

Professor Sacchetti shrugged his shoulders. "It is easy to put ideas into people's heads," he said, "more especially uneducated people. The difficulty is to get the ideas out of their heads again. In this instance, I fear that the contessa's unfortunate unpopularity is at the bottom of the whole matter."

"But she nursed her husband devotedly!" exclaimed Fabrizio.

"No one can deny that," replied the doctor. "I have said as much to Taddeo—to everybody."

"To Taddeo!" repeated Fabrizio. "You do not mean to say professore, that Taddeo shares this absurd suspicion?"

"Unluckily, he does share it. It was he who first told me what was being said. I questioned him sharply this morning, but he will not commit himself. I think he wished to see you, signor conte, before explaining his anxiety that there should be an *autopsia*."

Fabrizio was perfectly calm now, but it did not require the experienced eye of Professor Sacchetti to see that his calmness was due to a strong restraint he was putting on himself, and that he was a prey to extreme nervous tension. In truth, he was fighting desperately against a terrible dread. The vague sense of coming evil which had oppressed him during the last few hours seemed gradually to be assuming a definite shape; and he grasped wildly and feverishly at any argument which could form as it were a barrier against its approach.

"If Taddeo suspected anything so horrible," he said; "why did he wait until—until all was over before telling you of his suspicions? The thing is absurd—intolerable! The man is an old servant, and he was devoted to my poor cousin, that I know. At the same time he dislikes the contessa, and the dislike I believe, is mutual. Ugo used to laugh about it, but he would never hear of replacing Taddeo, because the man had been servant also to his father. Do you not see for yourself how utterly absurd the whole thing is, professore? As I say, if Taddeo had

really some grounds for believing my cousin's death to be due to—to foul play, why did he wait until it was too late? why did he not come to you days ago? It is intolerable that such an abominable rumour should originate in nothing more than the unreasoning jealousy of an old servant.”

Both Professor Sacchetti and the lawyer looked at Fabrizio curiously.

“Would it not be well that you should interview Taddeo yourself, signor conte, and ask him that question?” observed the avvocato Filippi, after a pause.

“Sicuro!” the professor exclaimed. “Perhaps the man would tell you more than he has chosen to tell me, conte. I should certainly send for him. Of course we, Signor Filippi and myself, will retire and leave you alone together. But I need not remind you that time presses. The law must be conformed to, and whatever is done must be done quickly.”

Fabrizio Vitali shook his head. “You will forgive me, signori,” he said quietly, “but I am not inclined to attach so much importance to this individual's conjectures. I should prefer to ignore them until I have had an opportunity of speaking with the signora contessa. You can scarcely expect me to consult a servant before consulting my cousin's widow. I have no doubt that, after I have seen the contessa, there will be no reason to interview Taddeo or anybody else. I am confident that, so soon as she learns from me your real motive in wishing to examine further into the causes of her husband's death, she will be the first to withdraw her objections, however painful it may be to her feelings.”

Fabrizio was very pale, and he spoke in a low, though perfectly calm voice, while there was a certain quiet dignity in his bearing which was not lost upon his hearers.

Professor Sacchetti bowed. “I quite understand your feelings, signor conte,” he said courteously. “All that I would venture to repeat is, that time presses—for obvious reasons. I trust that you will be able to tell us that the signora contessa is no longer determined to withhold her consent to an *autopsia* being made. And, in that case,” he added, “it will of course be un-

necessary to take further notice of the existence of any absurd rumours which may have been circulated."

Fabrizio did not reply. He rose from his chair and, crossing the room, rang the bell. In a few moments Taddeo presented himself.

"The signora contessa knows that I have arrived?" Fabrizio asked the man.

"Signor conte, sì."

"Kindly tell her that, as soon as she is able to receive me, I am anxious to see her."

The three men remained in silence, awaiting Taddeo's return. Fabrizio resumed his seat, and sat with his face partially concealed by his hand. Not a sound was audible in the room save the slow ticking of a clock on a gilded console near the double doors communicating with the gallery. Suddenly Fabrizio started up and began to pace hurriedly up and down the room. Professor Sacchetti who was looking at him saw an expression of fear, almost of terror pass over his face, and noticed with surprise that he raised his hands to his ears as though to shut out some sound which distressed him.

In a moment the doctor was by Fabrizio's side. "Conte," he said quietly, "you are unwell—upset. These things are trying to the nerves. Probably you have eaten nothing, and it is late. As a doctor, I must insist on your having some food and some wine before you go to the contessa. It is not worth while to make oneself ill."

Fabrizio shook his head. "It is nothing," he said hastily. "Yes, professore,—as you say, these things are bad for the nerves. You are right—I have eaten nothing this morning. No doubt Taddeo will have prepared breakfast."

At that moment Taddeo re-entered the room.

"The signora contessa will be glad to receive the signor conte at two o'clock," he said.

Professor Sacchetti looked at the clock. "It is now a quarter to one," he observed. "There will be ample time for you to have the breakfast you need, conte. Shall I be in your way if I offer to remain with you?"

Fabrizio assented eagerly. He did not wish to be left alone

with Taddeo. "Most willingly, professore!" he replied, "and I hope that you, Signor Filippi, will also remain to breakfast. I fear that the meal has been too long delayed; but no doubt Taddeo will serve it immediately."

Professor Sacchetti appeared as though unable to take his eyes off Fabrizio's face. He was studying it, as an artist might study the face of a portrait.

But the professor's manner was no longer so dry, and every now and then a gleam of sympathy shot from his scrutinising eyes. As if he were reading in an open book, he could read the signs in Fabrizio's countenance of severe mental struggle, and perhaps of something more. He knew that the man who sat silently at the table opposite to him, eating little but drinking repeatedly, was suffering acutely. Nevertheless, he felt confident that Fabrizio Vitali had been sincere in every word he had spoken.

"All the same," Professor Sacchetti said to himself, "there must certainly be an *autopsia*. The widow will not dare to refuse it. But he—" and he looked again at Fabrizio, "he knows nothing. He only dreads what he may have to know."

## CHAPTER XXIX

DON BASILIO had just finished saying mass. There were very few of his parishioners present, for it was a *giorno di lavoro*. Moreover, every able-bodied man, woman, and child was too busily employed on the vintage to afford the time to attend the mass which their *parroco* said every morning at seven o'clock during the summer months and at eight o'clock in winter. The congregation had been limited to a possible dozen of the old and infirm of both sexes; and even these showed none of their usual inclination to linger inside the church after Don Basilio, accompanied by his server, had disappeared with the sacred vessels into the sacristy. They, too, were eager to make their way to the nearest vineyards; for who could tell whether, when the vintage came round again, they would still be alive and able to watch the plucking of the grapes, or still be able to flatter themselves that they were taking their share of the work notwithstanding stiff limbs and weakness of back?

A certain restlessness had been observable in the little congregation as Don Basilio, the mass concluded, knelt before the altar to recite the few short prayers he was accustomed to offer before leaving the church. One or two old men had actually shuffled out of the building during the reading of the last gospel, confident that the Madonna and the saints would not be offended at their desire to be in time to see the last basket loads of grapes leave Sor Cecco's vineyard behind his osteria—that vineyard which supplied the red wine they hoped to drink on many a festa through the coming winter; wine which, Sor Cecco himself was apt proudly to declare, was fit for both the King and the Pope, if these illustrious personages did but know it.

Don Basilio was leaving the church, and smiling quietly to himself as he saw the scattered members of his flock hastening to the little osteria where, besides the withered bush hanging over



the door, a placard announced in sprawling characters the sale within of *Vino scelto dalle proprie vigne*. He had heard the shuffling footsteps during the prayers, and was inclined to agree with the owners of the feet that, under the exceptional circumstances, the Madonna would be disposed not to stand upon ceremony.

As he turned into his garden, on his way to his house where he would find his cup of coffee and roll awaiting him with which he was wont to break his fast after saying mass, he was surprised to see a low dog-cart driven by one of the servants of Villa Falconara approaching at a rapid pace. With his hand on the gate of the garden Don Basilio paused, waiting for the man to pull up.

"Where are you going in such a hurry, Vincenzo?" he called out, as he recognised the Duchessa di San Felice's groom who always accompanied her when she drove.

"Reverendo, a *brutta notizia* has come from Viterbo this morning. The poor signor conte is dead. The signora duchessa sent me to bring you to the Villa at once. Povera signora—she is very grieved——"

"The signor conte!" exclaimed Don Basilio. "Do you mean to say it is the Conte Vitali who is dead?"

"Proprio lui! He died this morning, before sunrise. Reverendo, will you get up beside me? In a quarter of an hour we shall be at the Villa."

Don Basilio hurriedly got into the dog-cart without bestowing another thought on his coffee.

"It cannot be!" he exclaimed. "It is surely some false report, some mistake."

The boy at his side shook his head gloomily. "It is true," he said, "purtroppo! the *portone* of Palazzo Vitali is closed; all the city knows it. Povero signor conte! everybody loved him—everybody, except—" he paused suddenly, and drew his whip lightly across the horse's flank

Don Basilio looked at him. "How did it happen?" he asked. "Two days ago I called at Palazzo Vitali, and he was going on well—so well that the doctor declared all danger might be said to be over. Two days ago—and to-day!"

"It was sudden, very sudden," said the lad, and then, as he had done before, he checked himself abruptly, as though unwilling to say more. Don Basilio, lost in his own thoughts, did not notice his companion's hesitation. He was thinking of the life thus cut off in the prime of its strength and manhood. He thought too, of Vittoria di San Felice, for he knew that to her the news would have come as a terrible shock. Surely, unless Sacchetti had been mistaken from the first, some unaccountably severe complication must have arisen within the past two days to produce death so quickly! And Sacchetti was not a man who made mistakes—his reputation was too assured for that.

The horse quickly covered the couple of miles between Don Basilio's village and Villa Falconara, and very soon the dog-cart swept into the open courtyard. It was scarcely eight o'clock, but a servant who received the priest at the entrance door told him the signora duchessa had given orders that he was at once to be shown to her own sitting-room. The man escorted him to the room, and opening the door, closed it quickly and silently behind him.

Vittoria di San Felice was standing in the centre of the room. She was evidently awaiting his arrival with anxiety. Her face was very pale, but she was perfectly composed, and her manner, Don Basilio thought, was almost cold. Its coldness did not deceive him. He had remarked it on another occasion, when the news of her husband's death had been brought to her. At the time he had wondered at it; but of late years he had grown to know her better. But what he did wonder at now was the expression he saw on her face. That expression he had never seen before. There was a look of horrified protest in her eyes, and Don Basilio could not help thinking that there was anger, fierce anger, as well.

"You have heard?" she said, as he approached her.

"Vincenzo told me," replied Don Basilio simply.

Vittoria walked to the window.

"They have murdered him," she said, in a low voice.

Don Basilio uttered a cry of horror. "Duchessa!" he

exclaimed. "For the love of God! do you know what you are saying!"

Looking always from the window, Vittoria continued in the same low, level tones. "They have murdered him. Did not Vincenzo tell you that? It is what the people are saying in Viterbo. Why else should he have died?"

"Because God took him. The other is monstrous—impossible. Duchessa—let me entreat you to calm yourself."

Vittoria turned and looked at him. "Am I not calm?" she asked quietly.

"You have heard some ridiculous tale," continued Don Basilio, "some gossip of the *basso popolo* in the city. It is disgraceful that such a thing should have been told to you—that it should have reached your ears!"

"They have murdered him," repeated Vittoria di San Felice. "The people are right—and we, we have stood by and allowed him to be murdered." Her voice broke a little, but the look on her face never changed.

Don Basilio stared at her, convinced that the sudden shock had been too much for her. An intense indignation arose within him against those who, in bringing her the tidings of Ugo Vitali's death, had also told her of some idle rumour that no doubt was being discussed among the lower orders in Viterbo. Had she not been completely upset by the news of Count Vitali's death, it would have been impossible, Don Basilio thought, that she should give a moment's attention to such a report.

"Signora duchessa," he said gravely, "we have no right to say such things, no right even to think them. You must remember that from the first Count Ugo was in the hands of Sacchetti, and we all know what Sacchetti is. No doubt the *basso popolo* in Viterbo have set about among themselves some silly story. It is often the way when death unexpectedly carries off some prominent individual. The people love a mystery, or a scandal. But you, duchessa, should not allow your mind to dwell upon such things. It—it is unworthy of you!"

Vittoria di San Felice looked at him. "I know it is unworthy

of me!" she exclaimed, "but I feel that the people are right—that what they say is true. Listen, Don Basilio. For long I have known that Vitali was not happy with his wife. He never told me so—no! but I knew it all the same. Latterly he has never been near me."

"That does not seem to me to prove he was unhappy at home," observed Don Basilio, a little drily.

"I hoped that it proved the contrary," Vittoria said simply, "but I do not think it did. Do you remember my saying to you some weeks ago that, meaning to do right, I feared I had done wrong—that I had interfered in what was no business of mine? As you know, on that occasion I sent Vitali back to his wife. Meaning to be a loyal friend to him, I—the friend whom he trusted more than he felt he could trust his wife—deserted him. I was afraid of his confidence. Do you understand, Don Basilio? I was afraid."

"Yes," replied the priest gently. "I think I understand. You were right to be afraid of it."

"I only saw him once again—only once," continued Vittoria, "and then I understood that what I had done was of no use. I remember you told me I had been too hasty in supposing that Countess Vitali would look at things from my point of view. Vitali acted upon my advice—yes! and his wife continued to deceive him. I had appealed to his chivalry, do you see? but I was afraid of speaking plainly to him, of telling him that I felt, I knew, he was being deceived. Had I been a man, I could have done it, but——"

"I understand," repeated Don Basilio. "It is true," he continued, "I did warn you that Countess Vitali might take advantage of the fact that her husband had consulted you about a letter reflecting on her conduct. It would have been better had she never been made aware of it. She would never believe that you had refused her husband's confidence, and that you had only advised him to do what was honourable. But all this, duchessa, is beside the point. Countess Vitali may be a bad woman, and she may have deceived her husband. But you have named graver things than these—things which, without

positive proof, you have no right even to suspect. A great sorrow has fallen upon you; greater, probably, than you feel yourself able to acknowledge even to yourself. But a great sorrow should not make us unjust. Even Sacchetti may have made a mistake, and may have been too ready to assume that all danger of some sudden complication was past. Reflect a little, duchessa. Would it not be impossible that Sacchetti should have failed at once to detect any attempt at interference with his treatment of the case? Moreover, if it be true that Countess Vitali had succeeded in deceiving her husband, and I fear, from what I have been told very recently, that there may be some truth in the stories concerning her and Fabrizio Vitali—what motive was there for committing a monstrous crime? She had only to continue her deception.”

Vittoria di San Felice was silent.

Don Basilio misinterpreted her silence, and thought he would press his argument home.

“Forgive me,” he said, “but, if this terrible idea has never been put into your mind—if your servants had never told you of what was being said in the obscure caffè and osterie in Viterbo—would you ever have allowed yourself to suspect such a thing? Surely not, duchessa?”

“I cannot tell you,” replied Vittoria presently. “All that I can tell you is that something assures me the people are right, that Vitali’s death is not a natural death. It is useless to tell me that I have no right to feel this—that I have no proof. I know that I feel it—that I shall always feel it—and, sooner or later, I will find out the truth.”

This time it was Don Basilio who remained silent. He felt, indeed, that it was no moment to argue with a woman who was crushed beneath a grief which, as he suspected, was more bitter than her pride or the *convenances* of the world would permit of her acknowledging. All the same, he was not a little surprised at what he could only believe to be an unreasoning attitude on the Duchessa di San Felice’s part. The idea was too monstrous—too impossible. He did not doubt that the Contessa Vitali was a woman whose nature was evil, for he had felt evil to be near him



whenever he had found himself in her presence. But Countess Vitali could scarcely have acted alone, supposing her to be capable of so diabolical an intrigue; and he could not believe it possible that Fabrizio Vitali, whom he had regarded as nothing more than an amiable if rather weak young man possessed of a thoughtful but untrained mind, could have lent himself to furthering a heartless crime. He told himself that, when the first effects of the shock had passed, the duchessa would recover her better judgment, and would display the same dignified courage which he had seen her display in another great crisis in her life. But in the meantime his heart bled for her, as the heart of a parent might have bled for a daughter. Like many others in the neighbourhood, he had at one time hoped to see a marriage between the duchessa and her old friend Count Vitali. Her life, with all its interests, was still a lonely one, for she was a young woman yet. It had been a disappointment to Don Basilio when Ugo Vitali had looked elsewhere for a wife, and the disappointment had been still greater when it became evident that Ugo had not chosen wisely. The priest had always wondered whether it was loyalty to her late husband alone which had prevented the Duchessa di San Felice from allowing her friendship for Count Vitali to develop into anything more than friendship. He could understand how, owing to the subtle difference in their social grades, a man like Ugo Vitali, nobly born though he was, would hesitate before offering himself to a woman of the *alta nobiltà* like Vittoria di San Felice. Moreover, he knew that Ugo's pride was as great, and most probably considerably greater than the duchessa's. The whole thing had seemed to him sufficiently absurd; but then, as he had argued to himself, he was only a simple parish priest, of middle-class origin, and it was useless for him to try to understand the considerations by which others born in a different sphere from his own might be influenced. But it was certainly a pity to see two people so strongly in sympathy with one another kept asunder, as Don Basilio strongly suspected, by mere social prejudices and by a mutual fear of appearing to be giving or asking too much. Since Count Vitali's marriage the whole matter had seemed to be more pitiful than



ever; and Don Basilio had recently often wondered to himself whether the duchessa did not now realise the pity of it when it was too late. If she did, she had certainly made no sign; and how loyally she had endeavoured to befriend the woman her friend had married Don Basilio knew better, probably, than anybody else.

“What do you wish me to do?” he asked presently. “You know that I will do anything—everything that I can to comfort you, to relieve your mind. Only, I implore you, duchessa, do not allow your thoughts to dwell on that horrible idea! God has acted as He has thought fit. He knows so much better than we, in our ignorance, can ever know, until it pleases Him to open our eyes, as He has opened the eyes of the friend for whom we are mourning. But we have no right to assume that others have dared to interfere with the will of God.”

“He was recovering,” said Vittoria, “and when they knew he was recovering they killed him. How is it that you cannot understand? She—that woman, killed him; how I do not know—yet. And the other, her lover, he takes his cousin’s name and lands——”

“Duchessa!” exclaimed Don Basilio almost sternly, “I will not listen to this. For the love of God, put these thoughts out of your mind. They are morbid thoughts—unworthy of you. You are not yet yourself, or you would not entertain them. Listen! I will tell you what I will do. I will go to Viterbo—to Palazzo Vitali. There I shall learn what has caused this rumour to get about. Sacchetti is my intimate friend. He will tell me everything; and the old servant, Taddeo—he has known me these five and twenty years. But, before I go, I will say a mass in the chapel—you understand? Oh, I am still fasting—there is no difficulty! And afterwards I will go to Viterbo. Coraggio, signora duchessa! coraggio, figlia mia! God knows what is best for *him*, and for us.”

Vittoria di San Felice looked at him steadily.

“I do not lack courage,” she said. “When I know that God has willed this thing, I shall be content. But, until I am assured that He has willed it, I cannot rest.”

“Unless He had willed it, it could not have happened,” said Don Basilio gently. “Even if what you think were true, God would still have willed it, for some merciful purpose of His own, which we do not yet know—but which He will reveal to us if we have eyes to see, and an intelligence to understand.”

A few minutes later, in the presence of Vittoria di San Felice and her household, Don Basilio said a mass for the departed.

When, later on, he took leave of Vittoria di San Felice he looked into her face and saw that the expression he had wondered at when he had come to her had not left it. He turned from her with a sigh, and for the first time a terrible doubt of what he might learn at Palazzo Vitali filled his heart.

Could it be, he wondered, that in some mysterious way the truth had been conveyed to her? or would he be able to return to her with assurances which would dispel for ever the look he read in her eyes?

## CHAPTER XXX

AS the hour approached when he would again meet Cristina, Fabrizio Vitali felt more than ever as a man might feel when about to face a terrible ordeal. The sense of some coming evil—some horror from which he could not escape—oppressed him with ever increasing intensity, and he now no longer struggled to free himself from it. There was no use in struggling. The horror, whatever it might be, was there; waiting for him. He knew that he could neither retreat before it, nor pass it. Again and again he told himself that it could not be *that*—the monstrous thing which Professor Sacchetti had told him was the rumour current in Viterbo. Sacchetti himself did not believe in the possibility of Ugo's death being due to any but purely natural causes. But of course Sacchetti was obliged to protect his own reputation; and his suggestion that an *autopsia* should be held was a perfectly reasonable suggestion. How could Cristina have been so mistaken as to oppose it? To be sure, as Sacchetti had confessed, he had not ventured even to hint to her his real motive for demanding her consent to making an examination—he had preferred to leave this painful task to him, Fabrizio, who was now Ugo's legal representative and the head of a family consisting only of himself. It was incredible to suppose that, had Cristina guessed the doctor's real motive, she would not at once have given way, and have insisted on a full investigation being made which should for ever silence all malicious insinuations. No—*that* could not be the evil he was dreading!

Perhaps, after all, it was Cristina herself he was dreading. It had all been different a few hours ago. Then he was merely in the position of hundreds, of thousands of other men—the lover of another man's wife. The matter had seemed to him to be exceeding simple—of an everyday simplicity. What was it, he asked himself, that had altered the whole aspect of his position—

his and Cristina's? Was it that the presence of death stood between them? Fabrizio remembered with a shudder how he and Cristina had discussed even this contingency, and that she had extracted from him a promise of what he would do should it ever occur.

It was true that he had always shrunk from allowing his mind to dwell upon the chances of his cousin's death. He remembered now the frequency with which Cristina would remind him that, should any fatality occur to Ugo, he would step into Ugo's shoes. Sometimes it had seemed that she took a kind of malicious pleasure in recalling the fact to him. In the earlier days of their acquaintance, Fabrizio had wondered whether his cousin's wife was not attempting to discover to what extent he might be calculating upon his chances of becoming Count Vitali and owner of the Vitali estates. But it was one thing to discuss a remote contingency, and quite another thing to find this contingency suddenly turned into an accomplished fact. The thought that Ugo was lying dead only a few rooms away from him was almost unbearable to Fabrizio in his present frame of mind. He felt as though he were in some way guilty of Ugo's death—that idle thoughts in the past had borne a terrible fruition.

The lawyer and Professor Sacchetti had left him alone as soon as breakfast was concluded; the professor saying that he would return to Palazzo Vitali before four o'clock in order to learn the result of Fabrizio's interview with Countess Vitali. In a few minutes Taddeo would probably come to announce that Cristina was ready to receive him, and Fabrizio watched the hands of a clock as they travelled steadily and inexorably towards the appointed hour. Whatever happened, he told himself, he must be firm in supporting Sacchetti's suggestion. Cristina surely would see the necessity for at once allowing the doctor to have his way. But how could he tell her of this ridiculous idea that had got abroad in Viterbo, in the truth of which apparently even Taddeo and the servants had some belief, or pretended that they had so? Sacchetti had hinted that the rumour had its origin in the hostility of her husband's people to Countess Vitali. He, Fabrizio, was quite well aware of Cristina's unpopularity in

and around Viterbo. She had never taken the trouble to conceal that she was aware of it herself. He knew, too, that gossip had coupled his name with hers. The anonymous letter Ugo had received was a proof that this had been the case.

By degrees Fabrizio was beginning to be able to reason more clearly. No doubt, he thought, as he paced up and down the room waiting for the moment when he should have to go to Cristina, this abominable rumour had been spread by those who had detected, or believed they had detected, the relations between him and his cousin's wife. He knew well how eagerly even the most unlikely tales were believed by the lower classes. The people, Ugo's people, would know that he was the gainer by his cousin's death; and if they believed in a love-intrigue between him and Countess Vitali, it would need little imagination to carry that belief still further and suspect Count Vitali's death to have been brought about by unnatural means and not from results due to his accident.

Who could tell whether Sacchetti and the lawyer were not aware that this was what the Viterbesi were in reality saying? Fabrizio had noticed the look of relief on both Sacchetti's and the lawyer's faces when he had at once declared his intention of imploring Countess Vitali to fall in with the doctor's wishes. He had been conscious that Professor Sacchetti had been watching him narrowly, most likely suspiciously. Notwithstanding the suavity of the professor's words, and the courtesy of his manner, the covert warning which had underlain both had not been lost on Fabrizio. A single word of doubt from the doctor who had attended Ugo, a refusal to give to the authorities the necessary certificate as to the causes of death, and no objections on Cristina's part would have any other result than that of increasing existing suspicions. Yes; he must explain this to her, and point out to her that only by allowing Sacchetti full liberty to make his examination could she silence rumours which, if not proved to be utterly groundless, would place both her and himself in a terrible position. Moreover, he must show her that she was powerless to stop Sacchetti, if he really intended to hold an *autopsia*, and that he did intend to do so Fabrizio was convinced. Naturally

Cristina could have no real objections, why should she have them? Probably she had only regarded Sacchetti's proposal as unnecessary, and, of course, painful. But then Sacchetti had not told her all the truth——

In the midst of Fabrizio's reflections Taddeo entered the room.

"The signora contessa would be pleased if the signor conte would join her in the gallery," he said.

Fabrizio started violently. His back had been turned to the door, and he had not heard the man come in.

"Tell her that I will come immediately," he said.

Taddeo lingered for a moment. He looked curiously at Fabrizio, and seemed as though he wished to speak but could not make up his mind to do so. Something in his attitude irritated Fabrizio's already highly-strung nerves. As he had told Professor Sacchetti, he did not intend to have any discussion with Taddeo before he had spoken with Cristina.

"Kindly take my message at once to the signora contessa," he said quickly. "In a few minutes I will come into the gallery. You need not return. I shall follow you."

Taddeo went from the room without a word. There was something in Fabrizio's manner which effectually checked his desire to speak. Even at that moment Fabrizio found himself wondering bitterly why life seemed altogether changed. What was this thing that had arisen between Cristina and himself? It was not that he did not love her any more. Even then, as he thought of her, his pulses quickened. But something lay between them; that mysterious, oppressive sense of threatening evil from which he could not free himself. Yes, it was that, and that only; not Death, keeping his Court so close to them; not even this odious suspicion that Death had not entered of his own will,—for in a few hours, when Sacchetti's examination had been made, nobody would ever dare again to breathe so foul a rumour. If only he could put into definite form this evil which haunted him! at least it would then be easier to grapple with it and fight it.

Strange! a few days ago he would have hastened to Cristina's side. How many opportunities of meeting had they not planned



together, opportunities when Ugo was away and the servants busy with their various occupations in distant parts of the palazzo? And now, he wished that he and Cristina were a thousand miles apart, and that they were not going to meet again until this haunting fear had left him.

Well, as Sacchetti had significantly observed, time pressed! The dead was waiting; and, what was of even more importance, the living were waiting, to be cleared from all suspicion, however unwarrantable and absurd, of a monstrous crime. Summoning up all his resolution, Fabrizio left the room and bent his steps towards the gallery.

At first, in the subdued light, the long apartment seemed to be empty. It was only after he had advanced a few paces into the room that Fabrizio saw Countess Vitali standing at its further end, beneath the portrait of Donna Giulia. She was dressed in black; and as he drew nearer to her Fabrizio saw that her face was very pale, but that on each cheek there glowed a feverish patch of red.

She came forward a few steps to meet him, and then they stood looking at one another in silence.

"Cristina!" exclaimed Fabrizio, as the silence became intolerable, "I came at once, as soon as I could get a train. It is horrible—horrible! Who could have thought that it would end like this! Certainly not Sacchetti—he——"

"Sacchetti has been mistaken throughout," Cristina interrupted, in dry, level tones. "He should have had another opinion. Yes—it is—a terrible shock, because at the last it was sudden, Fabrizio—very sudden! Sicuro! I blame Sacchetti; but the best of doctors can make a mistake sometimes. After all, Sacchetti warned us from the first that some dangerous complication might arise."

She spoke slowly and calmly, as though measuring her words; and all the time she was speaking her eyes never left Fabrizio's face. It was in her eyes that Fabrizio read a feverish anxiety that belied the calmness of her manner.

"It is horrible!" he repeated. "I would give everything—*everything*, that Ugo were still with us!"

"Everything, Fabrizio?"

Cristina's voice had changed suddenly, but Fabrizio scarcely noticed the imploring tone now ringing in it.

"It would have been different had it been an illness," he continued, "but to be struck down like that—in full health and life——"

"But Sacchetti warned us," insisted Cristina; "you must always remember that he warned us. And it was not really so very sudden, Fabrizio. There were symptoms which Sacchetti did not like. He told me so, but I thought they would pass, and so I did not telegraph to you until—until Ugo was suddenly seized with violent cramps, and then he became unconscious. He was unconscious till—till the end. Fabrizio! why do you look at me like that? Of course I am sorry—shocked—but can I be more than that? You know that I cannot! with *you* I will not be hypocritical enough to play at it. With others, it is a different thing!"

"Yes—with others," repeated Fabrizio. "You are right, Cristina—quite right! For God's sake let us think of nothing now but how we have to conduct ourselves before others! That is why I sent to ask you to receive me without delay."

Cristina started, and her face became paler than ever.

"What do you mean?" she asked quickly. "Of course I shall do all that a woman in my position is expected to do. I *must* do it—for your sake and my own! Afterwards——"

"We cannot think of the afterwards!" interrupted Fabrizio abruptly. "We have to think of the present—to protect ourselves against an unnameable suspicion——"

Cristina turned upon him almost fiercely.

"What do suspicions signify?" she exclaimed. "Do we not know that we have been suspected? Ugo had that letter, you remember. What happened this morning has freed us from all danger of those suspicions, as you call them, being able to hurt us. Now that it is no longer possible to make a scandal, people will soon forget their suspicions, and even if they remember them—afterwards—what does it matter?"

"It is not that," returned Fabrizio eagerly. "You do not understand, Cristina, because Sacchetti did not explain things to

you. But I must explain them; and you must be guided by me."

Cristina looked at him quickly, with a rapid, furtive glance.

"What did Sacchetti not explain?" she asked hastily.

Fabrizio drew nearer to her and led her to a chair. "You must sit down," he said gently, "and let me talk to you. I shall have to say things that are painful, but when you have heard them, you will understand better; and you will allow Sacchetti to do what he wants."

Cristina tore herself away from him.

"Ah!" she exclaimed. "So Sacchetti has told you of the proposition he made to me! But it is horrible, Fabrizio, and I will never give my consent—*never*! Besides, Sacchetti has no right to ask it."

"He has every right," said Fabrizio quietly. "Moreover, if he chooses to insist upon it, neither your objections nor mine would carry the least weight. Listen, Cristina! there is a rumour about among the people that Ugo's death was not a natural death. We know, of course, and Sacchetti knows that this is nonsense. But a report of that kind once started is a very disagreeable thing, the more so as Ugo was not expected to die, either by Sacchetti or by anybody else. Do you not see now that it is our duty, yours and mine, to insist upon Sacchetti's holding an *autopsia*, in order that he may be able once for all to put an end to such a monstrous idea?"

"I see nothing of the kind!" answered Cristina angrily. "I see that Sacchetti realises that he has made a grave mistake in not having discovered the real nature of Ugo's injuries, but I refuse to allow an examination to be made merely to enable him to justify himself. It is useless, Fabrizio—I tell you that I will never consent!"

"But you must consent!" exclaimed Fabrizio. "Cannot you understand? you *must*. More than that, you must send for Sacchetti and tell him it is your wish—and mine as Ugo's representative—that an *autopsia* should be made. If you oppose him, he will refuse to give his certificate of death; and these abominable reports will be believed. People will say that you, that we, have

some horrible reason for wishing to conceal the cause of Ugo's death. Cristina, for the love of God be reasonable! You cannot withhold your consent, now that you know what is being said. It does not matter at all that this story is the gossip of the *basso popolo*. If we are supposed to have placed any difficulties in Sacchetti's way, everybody will continue to suspect us, and all the more because they already suspect us of—of other things. Cristina! per carità, do not look like that! What are you looking at?"

Fabrizio broke off with a cry of horror. Cristina's gaze was fixed on the portrait of Donna Giulia. Her eyes seemed as though they were being drawn from their sockets, and her features twitched convulsively.

"Cristina!" he exclaimed again. "What is the matter? For God's sake do not stare at that cursed picture—but answer me! Why should not Sacchetti do as he wishes? What possible difference can it make to you—now? You *must* consent, I tell you, for your own sake and for mine! Cristina—oh, my God!"

Fabrizio started back horror-stricken, his hands clasped to his head. Countess Vitali had withdrawn her gaze from the picture, and from her lips came laughter—the laughter he had again heard in his dream the night before, and of which he fancied he had caught the faint echo a short time ago when talking with Professor Sacchetti.

"Why do you laugh?" he cried again. "My God, why do you laugh—like that?"

Cristina turned her eyes towards him. The drawn expression had vanished from them, and they were cold and lustreless.

"Are you mad, Fabrizio?" she said, in a dulled, monotonous voice. "Why should I laugh? because Ugo is dead, perhaps? Ah, but now I am free, and belong to you, my beloved! Did I laugh? Well, if I did, it is better to laugh than to cry, is it not? Crying is for the San Felice to-day; but not for us, Fabrizio mio, not for us!"

"Cristina, taci, per pietà, taci! Do you want to make me hate you? Is it I who am mad and hear you say things you do not say—laugh, when you do not laugh?"

“And you have come back, not as guest but as master,” continued Cristina, without heeding him. “Ugo is dead, and you are Count Vitali. The house and the lands are yours. Filippi told you, did he not? And afterwards, I shall be yours too, more yours than ever, Fabrizio! Only, we shall have to wait a little; a year, perhaps. But it will only be a pretence of waiting. A few days ago we knew that we could not wait any longer, amore mio, and——”

“Cristina!”

She glanced at him; struck, perhaps, by the note of agony in his voice. And, indeed, Fabrizio Vitali was gazing at her with an expression of horror on his countenance that he was powerless to conceal. With a visible effort Countess Vitali seemed to force herself into a more natural mood. She passed her hand across her eyes with a gesture of weariness, and when she spoke again it was in a voice more like her own.

“Povero Fabrizio mio!” she said softly. “You must forgive me, but I am scarcely myself to-day. And I am tired, too, oh, so tired! I should like to sleep for a year. What were you saying just now? I forget. Ah, about Sacchetti and his horrible suggestion. Do not let us think of it again. You must tell him that I will never consent to it. The *canaglia* in Viterbo can say and think what it chooses. What does it matter to you or to me what people say?”

Fabrizio looked at her in despair.

“I dare not tell Sacchetti that,” he said. “Cristina mia,” he added, “now you are like yourself again. A moment ago you were not yourself. Your words, your thoughts, your voice even, were as if they were not your own. You are nervous, upset by all you have had to go through during the past few days. But you must be sensible, carissima. You must agree to Sacchetti’s wishes, however painful it may be for you to do so. Besides, as I have already explained to you, we have no choice but to agree. Sacchetti is quite aware that we are in his power. He asked for your consent as a mere formality, an act of delicacy; and he asked for mine as representing the family.”

“And you gave it?” asked Cristina quickly.



“Of course I gave it! Why should I not have done so? And you must give yours, Cristina; you must tell Sacchetti that, had you known what I have since told you, you would never have opposed his wish for an *autopsia*. He is to return at four o'clock, nominally to learn your decision. In reality, of course, he will come prepared to carry out his examination whether you wish it or not.”

“He has threatened that?”

“Practically—yes. He did not actually say so; but he made his meaning clear, nevertheless. Via, Cristina, you can have no serious objection, any more than I can have one! It is absurd, and worse than absurd, for you to oppose it. Moreover, you have never told me why you object.”

Cristina was silent. Fabrizio watched her anxiously.

“I quite understand how painful the idea must be to you,” he continued gently, “but, indeed, we have no choice. We cannot allow anybody to suspect us of some hidden reason for having opposed Sacchetti's wishes. Unfortunately, too, it is not only among the *basso popolo* in Viterbo that this horrible idea has circulated. Even Taddeo seems to be suspicious.”

“Taddeo!” exclaimed Countess Vitali.

“So Sacchetti told me.”

Again Cristina relapsed into silence. Fabrizio saw, however, that she was strangely agitated. She began to walk restlessly up and down the gallery, and her face bore upon it the signs of a terrible mental struggle. Fabrizio's heart sank within him as he watched her, and gradually a doubt stole into his mind from which he recoiled with a feeling akin to terror. Why could she not understand—he asked himself—now that she knew all, what could her reason be for hesitating? Suddenly, that vague sense of evil, the exact nature of which a short time ago he had longed to be able to define, seemed as it were to materialise itself in his mind. He knew now what it was he had dreaded. He tried to wrestle with his doubt as though it were some tangible thing—some Being which he could overthrow and cast out of his path. But the thing closed with him, grappled with him—vanquished him.



He was conscious that Cristina was watching him narrowly, earnestly, with that terrible look of anxiety always in her eyes. The sweat broke out on his forehead again, as it had done when Professor Sacchetti had told him what was being said in Viterbo.

"Cristina!" he cried. "Cristina—you still hesitate? You must be mad to hesitate any longer. Surely you understand everything now! Sacchetti must make the examination—he *must*, I tell you. I shall insist upon his doing so, even against your wishes—for afterwards you will see that I was right, and you will thank me. Why do you not answer? why do you not say at once that neither you nor I have anything to fear?"

Cristina drew nearer to him. "You will insist?" she said in a low voice. "You will allow Sacchetti to make his examination? Well, you are within your right. Did I not tell you that you had returned as master here? Only, you do not understand—that is all. You have never understood."

"Understood—what?" asked Fabrizio. His brain was reeling, and he was scarcely conscious of what he said. Surely the evil was very near to him now—and he was fighting, fighting as though for his life here and hereafter, if there was a hereafter.

"That I have loved you!"

Fabrizio laughed aloud. "Love?" he said. "I do not want to hear about that—now! I want to save our honour—yours and mine. We can talk of love afterwards. Only, for God's sake, speak. Tell me that you do not oppose Sacchetti because—because you are afraid. Why should you be afraid, Cristina—why?"

Cristina looked at him intently, as though trying to read his very soul.

"It is true," she said quietly. "I am afraid."

Fabrizio gave a low cry of horror and dismay.

"You talk of saving our honour," Cristina continued in dry, quick tones, "but you must save me, *me*, Fabrizio! If Sacchetti insists on an *autopsia*, I am lost. It is better that you should know it. You must prevent it—do you understand? At all costs you must prevent it!"

Fabrizio started away from her with a gesture of aversion and horror.

“What do you mean?” he asked hoarsely. “Do you know what your words imply? Ugo is dead—and you are afraid that it should be known how he died! Ah,” he added quickly, conscious that he was fighting desperately to the end, “forgive me, forgive me, Cristina mia—I cannot understand yet—and I have horrible thoughts. You need not be afraid. It will be a mere formality—to satisfy Sacchetti, and to enable him to tell people the truth——”

“Ah, no, no! You must prevent it, Fabrizio, otherwise—Listen,” Cristina continued, in low, passionate tones. “I killed him—killed him, Fabrizio, because I love you. Why should I not tell you, since it was for your sake that I did it. Sacchetti had made no mistake. Ugo was getting well—and when I knew that he must get well, I gave him the morfina. But I dared not delay too long, lest Sacchetti should suspect—and yesterday I gave in the twelve hours the quantity which should have been distributed over three days. That is why I am afraid. Sacchetti will certainly find traces of so large a dose——”

Fabrizio gazed at her in speechless amazement. Not a sign of remorse or pity could be detected in her manner or her words, and still less any sense of horror; only fear of discovery, and perhaps regret at having risked discovery by being too precipitate in the accomplishment of her crime. Even in that terrible moment Fabrizio found himself marvelling at the complete absence of moral sense in the woman with whom he had believed himself to be in love. She was not a woman, nor even human, he told himself shudderingly—only a beautiful animal.

Cristina paused, but presently Fabrizio heard her words coming to him as though spoken at a great distance, or in a dream. They were terrible words—he felt that; but he felt too, that he had no power to check them. His brain and his mind alike seemed to be numbed and paralysed.

“I hated him always,” he heard her saying, “but latterly, for your sake, I made him believe I loved him. That was terrible, for I had to endure his passion, and his passion turned my hate

into loathing. Then came his accident, and with it the opportunity to carry out what I intended to do. Sacchetti prescribed injections of morfina. I bought morfina—you told me it was easy to buy it, Fabrizio—and I gave it to Ugo repeatedly, in his food and drink. So, unknown to Sacchetti, Ugo was daily taking far more than the quantity prescribed. But I made a mistake in giving the morfina too frequently during the last two days—for Sacchetti frightened me. He told me that the time was all but passed when complications might have been expected, and that Ugo would almost certainly be well before long. Do you understand, Fabrizio? I hated Ugo, and we, you and I, had often talked together of how much more fitted you were to be Count Vitali, and owner of money and lands. Well, you are all that now—and my love has given them to you. And you will save me, will you not, Fabrizio? You will prevent the *autopsia*. Perhaps Ugo would have died in any case—but I could not wait. I wanted to feel that I had put you in his place——”

“*Disgraziata!*”

Cristina started. “Fabrizio!” she cried. “Why do you look at me like that—as if you hated me? Have I not risked everything because of my love for you? I never meant to tell you that I killed Ugo. If I had been more careful, nobody would ever have guessed the truth. Even an *autopsia* would not have revealed it. But I could not wait—that was my folly. We must think—think what we can do to induce Sacchetti to give up his idea—must we not?”

She put her hands on Fabrizio’s arm as she said these words, but with an exclamation of horror and disgust he flung them away.

“Do not touch me,” he muttered, “do not dare to touch me! You are right—I hate you—*hate* you, do you understand? You are a double murderess, for you have taken your husband’s life and you have killed my honour. You have made me an assassin like yourself.”

Cristina drew back suddenly, and stood before him rigid and white as marble. A long silence fell between them, and the

portrait of Donna Giulia looked down upon them, smiling always, but sneering as it smiled.

Suddenly Fabrizio broke the silence, speaking to himself. He seemed neither to see nor to heed Cristina. "I must think," he muttered. "I must think, before my brain gives way and I go mad!"

The clock on the garden façade of Palazzo Vitali struck three. The sound seemed to re-echo through the silent gallery and roused Fabrizio as if from a lethargy.

"It is three o'clock," he said, raising his eyes to Cristina's face. "At four o'clock Sacchetti will be here for his answer."

Countess Vitali met his gaze steadily, almost indifferently. "You stand in Ugo's place," she said coldly. "It is for you to give Sacchetti his answer. As you have told me that you hate me, I suppose you will allow him to perform the *autopsia*."

"Yes—I shall do more than allow it; I shall insist upon its being performed," replied Fabrizio calmly. "But I shall do no more than that," he added. "By the result of Sacchetti's examination you shall be judged—but not by me. If Sacchetti finds proofs of poisoning by morfina, an enquiry will be held. So long as you can clear yourself from suspicion without that suspicion falling on some innocent person, I shall keep silence—for I am as guilty as you, Cristina. Only, when I leave this room, I shall never willingly see you again."

As he spoke, Fabrizio Vitali was astonished at his own calmness. The evil which he had felt to be haunting him had unveiled itself, and the very horror of it seemed to lend him temporary strength. The oppression of its presence had been lifted, to be succeeded by a sense of personal guilt. When he had told Cristina that he was as guilty as she, he had spoken what he felt to be the truth, a truth which would be with him until the day of his death.

Countess Vitali listened to him in silence, and when he had ceased speaking she moved a step or two towards him.

"It is three o'clock, Fabrizio," she said quietly, "and at four o'clock Sacchetti comes for his answer, is it not so? Well, that is only an hour. I am going to my room now; but, in an hour's

time, at four o'clock, I will be here again—on this spot. Before you see Sacchetti, will you return here and see me once again? I—I shall have something further to tell you, and I think you will not refuse to come—once more—to me. Then you can take my answer to Sacchetti. It will be as well he should know that I have no reason any longer to oppose his wishes, will it not? You will grant my request, Fabrizio; you will promise me that you will come—here, at four o'clock. You will find me sitting under Donna Giulia's picture."

"I will come," replied Fabrizio briefly.

"That is well. Until then I have much to do—" Her voice broke suddenly. "Fabrizio!" she exclaimed, "before God, I loved you—I love always! and what I have done, I have done for love of you."

She waited for a moment, and looked at Fabrizio wistfully, but he neither moved nor answered. Then she slowly went from the gallery, leaving him alone.

How long he remained there, Fabrizio never knew. The shock he had received had left him scarcely capable of consecutive thought. With that strange wandering of the mind that almost invariably accompanies a crushing blow or a great sorrow, his attention fixed itself on trifling details around him. He found himself wondering why he had never before noticed that the damask of the window curtains in the gallery was of an entirely different texture and design from the damask hangings on the walls, and that more than one of the pictures was badly damaged. Then his glance fell upon the portrait of Donna Giulia and he turned away hastily. He dreaded lest he should again hear the laugh ringing in his ears. It was not any longer a laugh heard in a dream. He had really heard it—nay, it was as though he had seen it—issuing from Cristina's lips only a few minutes ago, the lips he had kissed so passionately, the lips of a murderess. He could not, would not remain alone in the gallery, alone with Donna Giulia's eyes following his every movement. In a short time he would have to return to the room to hear what Cristina might have to tell him before he parted from her; but after that he would be glad if he never had to enter it again. He walked



hastily to the door at the further end of the gallery, and returned to the apartment next the dining-room, where Professor Sacchetti and the lawyer had left him after breakfast. Here at least he hoped to remain undisturbed, to be able to think. What, he asked himself, had he still to learn from Cristina? whatever it might be it could not be more horrible than what he had already heard from her. Had she no heart—no feeling? She had told him that what she had done she had done for love of him! Surely she was like some half-civilised peasant woman, with the glamour of beauty, and the veneer of education concealing a nature devoid of any moral sense and powerless to bridle passions once aroused. She had traded upon the unsuspectingness of Ugo's nature, and to the last had deceived him with words of love, and murder in her heart. Ah, but he, too, Fabrizio, had he not traded upon Ugo's guilelessness, and had not he, too, deceived him? Would Ugo be now lying dead had he not deceived him? If he had been loyal to Ugo and had met his confidence and trustfulness as they deserved to be met, if he had not yielded to the mad passion which Cristina's beauty had excited in him, would Ugo be lying dead—murdered?

The power of thinking consecutively had returned now, and the thoughts came relentlessly; a grim procession of accusing memories, a record of trust betrayed and generous friendship abused. Fabrizio Vitali groaned aloud, and buried his face in his hands. He had come into his inheritance—but at what a cost!

He looked at his watch. Only a quarter of an hour more, and Sacchetti would return. There was no time now for remorse—that would be always with him to the end of his life. But now he must act, and act promptly. He would do as he had warned Cristina he intended to do, insist upon Sacchetti making his examination; but he would keep silence as to what he knew, unless the result of the *autopsia* caused Sacchetti's suspicions to fall on some innocent person. If this were the case, he must speak, or he must force Cristina to speak. Yes; at four o'clock he would return to the gallery and tell her that nothing would move him from this decision. He would hear what she had still to tell him, and then he would go to Sacchetti, or await his



arrival. What was that noise? surely something had fallen, or a door had been violently slammed!

Fabrizio listened intently. With Death in the house a sudden noise jars upon the nerves of the living, who fear lest it should disturb the sleep of the dead. No further sound broke the stillness of the quiet house, and Fabrizio came to the conclusion that the noise he heard must have been imaginary. A few minutes passed, and then the clock of Palazzo Vitali struck four.

Before the last stroke had died away, the door opened; and Taddeo, seeing that Fabrizio was in the room, announced the signor Professore Sacchetti. The doctor advanced; and Fabrizio felt as well as saw his quick, inquiring glance.

"I am punctual, conte," he said, "but as I told you, time presses. I trust you have persuaded the signora contessa to agree with me that an *autopsia* is advisable. I will be frank with you, and tell you that, in order to contradict assertions which are being made more freely than ever in the city, it is absolutely necessary."

"Please understand, professore," said Fabrizio, "that as my cousin's legal heir and representative, I should insist upon an *autopsia* being held, even if you, as the medico curante, saw no absolute necessity for it."

The professor looked at him quickly.

"Sta bene," he said briefly.

"I have seen the contessa," continued Fabrizio, "and— and—" he hesitated, and leaned his arm on the back of a chair as if seeking for support.

"Ah," observed Professor Sacchetti, "and she, perhaps, is still opposed to the idea?"

"She could scarcely be opposed to it, after having been informed of your motive for urging it," Fabrizio replied, in a low voice. "The contessa," he added, "has authorised me to say that she now has no reason to object—and I, as I have already said, have every reason to insist."

Professor Sacchetti's face was impenetrable.

"It is a wise decision, signor conte," he said quietly.

"I must ask you to excuse me for a few minutes," resumed

Fabrizio. "I promised the contessa that I would return to her at four o'clock, and it is now a few minutes past the hour. She desired to see me again before you arrived, in order, I believe, to give me some final instructions as to her wishes. I will return to you immediately."

The professor bowed. "S'immagini!" he said politely. "Pray do not inconvenience yourself, conte. I will await you here."

Fabrizio left the room, and the professor accompanied him to the double doors which Taddeo had forgotten to close. An ante-chamber, the *anti-camera* to Cardinal Astorre Vitali's apartments, separated the room into which Professor Sacchetti had been shown from the gallery, and the professor could hear the sound of Fabrizio's footsteps on its marble floor as he crossed it. Then came the sound of a door being shut.

A moment or two afterwards, Professor Sacchetti started up from the chair in which he had sat himself, for, muffled as it was by the distance, another sound had reached his ears, the sound of a loud, sharp cry.

In an instant he had crossed the *anti-camera* and stood outside the closed doors of the gallery. He paused for a moment, then, hearing no sound of voices from within, gently opened the doors. No sooner had he done so than he uttered a quick exclamation and went hurriedly forward into the long room. From the open doors an unexpected odour had issued, the unmistakable odour of a recently discharged fire-arm. For an instant the doctor had but one idea, namely, that Fabrizio Vitali had shot himself. His suspicions, as he thought, were confirmed by the sight of Fabrizio lying on the floor at the end of the gallery. Hurrying forward he bent over him, and as he did so he caught a glimpse of a black-robed form half sitting in and half lying across an arm-chair. One arm hung limply downward, and clenched in the white hand was a revolver. An open paper lay on the floor, almost at Fabrizio's feet.

"*Cristo!*" exclaimed the professor. "It is she who has killed herself. As to the other, he has only fainted—*povero giovane!*" Rapidly he examined the dead body in the chair. Death had

been instantaneous, and only a drop or two of blood welled slowly from a blackened mark on Countess Vitali's temple.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. "Meglio così!" he said to himself. "It is better to die suddenly than to die gradually in the *ergastolo*." And then he turned his attention to the living who needed him more.

## CHAPTER XXXI

DON BASILIO did not return to Villa Falconara by any means so early as he had expected. Before going to Palazzo Vitali, he had wished to find out for himself how far the reports which had reached the Duchessa di San Felice as to the evil rumours circulated in Viterbo concerning Count Vitali's unexpected death might be regarded as anything more than idle gossip. To his amazement and horror, however, he had quickly realised that the entire city was discussing the rumour in question, and not, as he had supposed, merely that section of its population which was ever ready to believe any tale, however improbable. Wherever he had been he had met with mysterious hints and inuendoes as to what had taken place in Palazzo Vitali; and it was perfectly clear that, at any rate among the *borghesia* of Viterbo, Count Vitali's wife and cousin were more than suspected of being accomplices in a monstrous crime. After this he had hastened to the hospital where he had hoped to get a few words with his old friend Sacchetti; but he had been informed that the professor was at Palazzo Vitali, awaiting the arrival from Rome of a member of the family, who, as he knew, could be none other than Fabrizio Vitali.

Don Basilio had never entertained the least doubt as to how the rumours concerning Ugo Vitali's death had been circulated. He felt convinced that they could only have originated from Palazzo Vitali itself; and that, knowingly or unknowingly, Taddeo was primarily responsible for them. This conviction gave him grounds still to hope that, after all, the whole matter might resolve itself into mere surmise, which of course Sacchetti, when the story reached his ears, would authoritatively dismiss with the contempt it deserved.

From the hospital, Don Basilio had proceeded directly to Palazzo Vitali, hoping that he might have an opportunity of at any

rate interviewing Taddeo, and of asking him on what possible grounds so terrible a rumour could have been based. On arriving at Palazzo Vitali, however, he found that not only was the *portone* closed, as was, of course, natural, but that even the little wicket gate was locked against any possible intruder. The porter who, after a considerable delay, cautiously opened the wicket to an extent just enabling him to see who was outside it, informed Don Basilio that it was perfectly true the Professore Sacchetti was in the house, but that he was engaged with the Conte Fabrizio who had arrived from Rome. He, the porter, had the strictest orders not to admit anybody inside the gates, under any consideration.

Don Basilio saw that it was useless to press the point. He could hardly, indeed, insist on forcing his entry at such a time. Nevertheless, he was determined to see Professor Sacchetti at all costs before returning to Villa Falconara. Until he had some definite information from an official source, he felt that he could not present himself before Vittoria di San Felice.

Sacchetti must certainly leave Palazzo Vitali in due course, and Don Basilio decided to await his egress. The professor would tell him the truth, of that he was sure; for not only was he an old friend, but he would guess that he, Don Basilio, was commissioned by the Duchessa di San Felice to obtain information. And for the duchessa Sacchetti might be relied upon to do anything; since he regarded her almost in the light of a colleague, owing to the practical support she had given to more than one of his schemes for the welfare of the sick and suffering.

Don Basilio had to wait considerably longer than he had expected before Professor Sacchetti finally emerged from the *portone* of Palazzo Vitali. A glance at the doctor's countenance, usually cheerful, but now thoughtful and preoccupied to a remarkable degree, was sufficient to show Don Basilio that something was weighing heavily on his mind. He was accompanied by the avvocato Filippi, who was known to the priest by sight though not personally, and the two were talking earnestly together—so earnestly, indeed, that neither of them noticed Don Basilio who happened to be on the opposite side of the street. Not liking to

interrupt their conversation, and being unwilling to ask questions before the avvocato, of whose business relations with Casa Vitali he was fully aware, Don Basilio followed him at a certain distance. It was not till he saw the lawyer take leave of his companion and turn into a side street that he quickened his steps and overtook Professor Sacchetti.

"This is a sad business, professore," he said, after greeting him. "I have been waiting—oh, but considerably more than an hour—hoping to get a few words with you. As you may imagine, the signora duchessa di San Felice is much distressed; and I have come to Viterbo to learn further particulars."

The professor looked at him sharply. "You have doubtless spoken with others before meeting me," he said. "If so," he continued with a touch of impatience, "you know what is being said in Viterbo."

"That is why I come to you," answered Don Basilio simply. "I do not believe what I hear from others."

"But you know what is said?" insisted the doctor.

"Yes. Unluckily, the same person who brought the news of Count Vitali's death to Villa Falconara this morning also brought an incredible story as to how it had occurred. The story was repeated to the duchessa. I arrived at the Villa too late to prevent it reaching her ears. Of course it is all nonsense! but——"

"Come with me, Don Basilio," interrupted the professor. "If we are seen talking together here in the streets, a hundred people will come to try to get something out of me—as you have come, del resto! but with you it is different. If you will accompany me to my house, there we can talk quietly. It is a brutto affare," and he shook his head.

The two succeeded in reaching Professor Sacchetti's abode without being molested by any curious passer-by, and the doctor took Don Basilio into his study. Having established his guest in an arm-chair, Professor Sacchetti lighted a cigar and began to smoke vigorously. Don Basilio waited in silence. He knew that Sacchetti would speak when he chose to speak, but not before.



"My friend," the professor observed presently, "I fear that we are confronted by an enormous scandal."

Don Basilio started. "Do you mean to say," he exclaimed, "that *you*, too, suspect something wrong?"

Professor Sacchetti shrugged his shoulders. "I know just as much, but no more, as anybody else does at this moment," he replied, "but what I know, I will tell you. Until three days ago Count Vitali was going on well. Three days ago he complained of again feeling internal pains and sickness. Those symptoms, perfectly natural to his case, had previously yielded satisfactorily to my treatment. For some days he had been almost free from any internal discomfort. To my mind the relapse was sufficiently explained by an imprudence in diet which the patient had insisted on committing. I repeated the former treatment and, as I had anticipated, the unfavourable symptoms soon began to disappear. Quite suddenly, however, they developed to an alarming extent. Violent sickness was followed by acute cerebral disturbance, and this last was succeeded by coma, and, early this morning—by death."

"But were these not natural symptoms—the result of some complication causing acute internal inflammation suddenly to develop itself?" asked Don Basilio.

"Did I say that they were unnatural symptoms?" returned Professor Sacchetti, a little irritably. "On the contrary," he added, "they were perfectly natural in a case in which the viscera had sustained actual injury. That is the worst part of the whole business. Now, my friend, Count Vitali had not sustained any such serious injury from his accident. I, Sacchetti, will stake my reputation that he had not! Dunque?" He paused, and looked at the priest significantly.

"Then you cannot account for the catastrophe," said Don Basilio. "And yet," he added, "the case was in your hands from the beginning."

"Yes," the professor remarked drily, "from the beginning. I am beginning to suspect that I helped to hasten its end."

Don Basilio stared at him with amazement.

"Oh, quite unwittingly, my dear friend—though probably you

will say that we doctors usually have that excuse! But I will explain myself. Count Vitali's symptoms were, as I said, entirely consistent with what might have been expected had he received some severe internal injury. He had, however, received no such thing—of that I am confident. He was suffering from a more or less severe visceral *commozione*, caused by his horse falling upon him—but there was no organic injury at all likely, with ordinary treatment, to produce inflammation of a serious nature. Part of my treatment, of course only part of it, consisted in periodical injections of morfina, which I administered myself. Count Vitali, like many strong men unaccustomed to illness, was a restless patient. Moreover, at first he suffered a good deal of pain, whereas perfect stillness and repose both of body and mind are very necessary in similar cases. Bene! It is a curious thing, Don Basilio, but it is nevertheless a fact that the symptoms to which Count Vitali so quickly succumbed might equally have been produced both by acute inflammation resulting from intestinal injuries, and by a series of over doses of morfina. The cerebral disturbance, which I have mentioned as immediately preceding death, would in particular be a feature common to both causes. Mi spiego?"

"You explain yourself perfectly," replied Don Basilio. "But it is horrible," he added, "incredible! Of course I understand now that you suspect poisoning—poisoning by the very drug you were yourself administering in proper quantities, is it not so?"

Professor Sacchetti nodded. "I suspect it—yes," he said, "but as yet it is a suspicion only. I am not infallible, Don Basilio, like you are supposed to believe the Holy Father to be—I say 'supposed,' because naturally, as a sensible man, you believe nothing of the kind. It is always possible that I have throughout failed to discover in Count Vitali's case what I ought to have discovered. But I do not think it."

"Surely," said Don Basilio, "whether or not you have been mistaken can be easily proved—must be proved?"

"Precisely. This morning, when all was over and I could do no more, I suggested to the Contessa Vitali the advisability of an *autopsia*. I confessed to her that I had not anticipated any such

violent relapse, and still less one that would so quickly prove fatal. The contessa resolutely declined to give her consent to any such proceeding."

"And her opposition roused your suspicions? God grant that they may still prove to be nothing more than suspicions!"

"E così sia, Don Basilio!" exclaimed the professor, earnestly. "My reputation would be badly damaged should Count Vitali's death be found to have been due to his injuries—but, believe me, I would a thousand times rather it were proved that I had made a mistake than the reverse! But you ask me if the contessa's opposition roused my suspicions. No—it did not. They were aroused afterwards."

"By Taddeo—the old maggior-domo?" asked Don Basilio quickly.

"No—not in the first instance. It so happened that, on leaving Palazzo Vitali after the event, I had occasion to enter a chemist's shop—a shop to which I seldom go. The news of the count's death was already known; and the padrone happened to mention to me that a few days ago he had sold to the signora contessa two hypodermic syringes with the accompanying *fiala* of morfina for injection."

"Ah!" exclaimed Don Basilio.

"The coincidence struck me as curious," continued Professor Sacchetti, "so curious, indeed, that I visited another farmacia in the city, and apparently the contessa had also purchased two of the same apparatus from that establishment. I cannot find, however, that she has purchased more than these four, at any rate in Viterbo; and a larger quantity of morfina would be necessary to produce any fatal result, even when combined with that which I was myself giving."

"It is monstrous, incredible!" said Don Basilio, "but even yet I hope that there is some mistake. The contessa may have wanted morfina for herself. I am told that ladies occasionally make use of that drug."

"It is possible," returned Professor Sacchetti drily. "At all events," he added, "I shall know by to-night whether it is I who have made a mistake."

“You mean to make the *autopsia*?”

“But certainly! I have had a long interview with Conte Fabrizio Vitali. He arrived from Rome at mid-day.”

Don Basilio looked at him enquiringly, and the professor read his thoughts.

“No,” he said, quickly, “no, amico mio, I am convinced he knows nothing. When I told him what was being said here in Viterbo, he was indignant; and, unless I am very much mistaken, his indignation was genuine. He declared he would support my request for an *autopsia*. Indeed, he undertook to explain to the contessa that she must give way. No; whatever relations may exist between those two—and we have all of us heard certain stories, have we not?—I do not believe that Fabrizio Vitali had the slightest suspicion of what I was obliged to tell him this morning.”

“And now?” asked Don Basilio.

“Povero giovane!” replied the professor. “Now he has the same suspicion that we all have. He is struggling against it, and he is suffering horribly. Imagine what he must be suffering, if things are as some assert them to be between him and his cousin’s wife! He is ill, too; on the verge of a nervous collapse, unless I am much mistaken. At first I believed his nervousness to be due to some guilty knowledge, but now I am persuaded it results from some other cause, and one not difficult to define. If it should turn out that the contessa is,—what some people declare her to be,—I should say the unhappy young man will very likely lose his mental balance and seek to destroy himself. He might do worse, of course; though I suppose I should not say so to you!”

“No,” observed Don Basilio, “not to me, nor to anybody.”

Professor Sacchetti smiled. “I am inclined to agree with you,” he said. “We doctors cannot, as the English poet Shakespeare says, ‘minister to a mind diseased,’ but you doctors of the soul very often can. Who knows that I may not have to call you in as a colleague?”

Don Basilio did not reply; but from the expression of his

face it was evident that he was thinking deeply, perhaps, as the professor more than half suspected, praying deeply also.

“And what am I to say when I return to Villa Falconara?” the priest asked presently. “As yet,” he continued, “you can tell me nothing definite. It is all suspicion, horrible conjecture.”

Professor Sacchetti took out his watch and looked at it. “Caro Don Basilio,” he replied, “as yet I can tell you nothing definite, as you say. But at four o’clock I have to return to Palazzo Vitali, and then we shall see whether the contessa has been persuaded by Fabrizio Vitali to listen to reason. If I were you, I should remain quietly here—in my study. Nobody will disturb you, and you can return to the signora duchessa this evening, by which time I may be able to give you more definite information. I need hardly say that what I have already told you is entirely confidential. Though many people have tried to approach me this morning, nobody as yet has the least idea that I am unsatisfied as to the cause of Count Vitali’s death. I am not fond of scandals; and if I can conscientiously see my way to avoiding this one, I shall do so. Of course, if I find that a crime has been committed, it will be my duty to state my opinion to the authorities, and things must take their course. But I am sorry for that young man,” he repeated. “I am convinced that, if there has been a crime perpetrated, he is entirely innocent of it. All the same, nobody will ever believe that he is so; and he will always be regarded as an accomplice.”

“Sicuro!” exclaimed Don Basilio. “Unluckily for him, he is Count Vitali’s heir.”

“And reported to be the lover of Count Vitali’s widow,” interrupted Professor Sacchetti.

“I forgot that, for the moment,” said Don Basilio.

Professor Sacchetti smiled grimly. “You may be sure that nobody else will forget it,” he observed, “even if the report be absolutely untrue. Now,” he added, “I must leave you, Don Basilio—if, as I suggest, you care to wait here for another hour or so. I have to go to the hospital before returning to Palazzo Vitali, and it is already nearly half-past three, so I have not much time to lose.”



Don Basilio accepted the invitation, since he felt it would be impossible to return to Villa Falconara until he found himself in a position to take back more definite information than he had hitherto been able to gather. Professor Sacchetti snatched up his soft felt hat and hurried away, leaving the priest surrounded by learned treatise and medical works which Don Basilio, in the actual state of his mind, was unequal even to make a pretence of examining.

His thoughts recurred to what Taddeo had told him a few days previously. He remembered the old servant's account of how he had overheard Countess Vitali reminding Fabrizio that, should Ugo die, he would inherit his cousin's possessions, and Fabrizio's entreaty that she would not make him think of things he did not want to think about ; his almost angry assertion that he wished no ill to befall Ugo. Don Basilio could hardly doubt the existence of the intimacy between the two which had become the common talk of the neighbourhood. Taddeo could not have imagined all he had overheard ; and, moreover, the Duchessa di San Felice was evidently firmly persuaded that Countess Vitali was an unfaithful wife and Fabrizio a treacherous kinsman. But the duchessa was also convinced that murder had been done, and that Fabrizio Vitali and the woman who had become his mistress were accomplices in the doing of it. On the other hand, Sacchetti, while full of grave suspicion of Countess Vitali, had just declared his conviction that, although Fabrizio might be her lover, he was innocent of any knowledge of her crime, if crime there had been. It was perfectly clear that, were Count Vitali's death proved to be due to poisoning by morphia, or to any other unnatural cause, the world at large would never believe in Fabrizio Vitali's innocence ; nor, probably, would the authorities of the law.

Apart from the monstrosity of the crime itself, were it proven, and the hideous idea that here, in a civilised city and in a family occupying a high position, such a deed was possible, Don Basilio could not but shudder when he thought of what Fabrizio Vitali's mental state would be if he was indeed guiltless of any knowledge of or participation in it. Indirectly guilty he would



surely always feel himself to be, since conscience would tell him that if he had not yielded to temptation and betrayed the honour of the head of his house, the other and graver crime would in all probability never have been committed.

It was no wonder, Don Basilio said to himself, if, as Sacchetti had declared, the unfortunate young man was now in a state of mind which might lead him to desperation. If, as Sacchetti said was the case, Fabrizio had begun to suspect his mistress of murdering her husband, would not his horror and remorse become unendurable?

And the Duchessa di San Felice? What, Don Basilio thought with a heart full of pity, was he to say to her—if Sacchetti were to find his suspicions confirmed? Side by side with the deep grief he had seen in her face at the unexpected death of her old friend, for whom he was convinced she would have felt more than friendship had she allowed herself to do so, he had also seen deep and bitter anger. She would never believe in Fabrizio Vitali's innocence; Don Basilio was sure of this. On the contrary, if he had read aright the look on her face that morning, she would never rest until those she believed to be guilty were paying the full penalty for their crime.

The period of suspense through which Don Basilio had made up his mind he would have to pass before Professor Sacchetti returned from Palazzo Vitali was shorter than he had anticipated. His painful reflections were suddenly interrupted by the professor's servant who entered the room hurriedly, bringing a note which he said had that moment arrived from his padrone, with directions that it was to be given to Don Basilio at once.

The priest tore it open, with a presentiment of further evil. Professor Sacchetti had written a couple of lines only, begging Don Basilio to come to him immediately at Palazzo Vitali where he would at once be admitted. The note contained no explanation of this unexpected request; but Don Basilio lost not a moment in complying with it.

A hurried walk of a few minutes brought him to the *portone* which he had that morning in vain tried to pass. Apparently orders had been given to the porter to admit him instantly; for

he had no sooner knocked than the wicket gate was opened, and the man as promptly closed it behind him.

To Don Basilio's surprise, the professor was awaiting him at the foot of the staircase leading up to that portion of the *piano nobile* which Count and Countess Vitali had always occupied since their marriage. A glance at the doctor's face was sufficient to convince the priest that his forebodings of further evil were about to be verified. Professor Sacchetti was evidently under the influence of extreme agitation; and Don Basilio, who knew the habitual calmness and presence of mind which had gained for him the reputation of being one of the most brilliant operators among his colleagues, felt assured that he must have learned something which had confirmed his worst suspicions.

"Per carità, Sacchetti," exclaimed Don Basilio, "what has happened?"

The professor drew him aside and whispered a few words in his ear.

The priest started back horrified. "Gran Dio!" he cried. "It is impossible!"

"Zitto!" the doctor said, in a low voice. "Zitto, Don Basilio, per carità! As yet nobody knows it, nobody except Taddeo, and he, for the honour of the family, will not speak until—well, until the authorities arrive. Yes, she has killed herself——"

"Disgraziata!" interrupted the priest, and then he crossed himself.

"For an instant I thought that *he* had shot her," continued Professor Sacchetti, as they slowly mounted the staircase together. "We had been talking, he and I, and he left me to go into the gallery where the contessa was awaiting him. He had hardly got into the room when, in the distance, I heard a loud cry—a terrible cry! I went to the door of the gallery and opened it gently. Then I smelt the smell of gunpowder, and I went in. I found Fabrizio Vitali lying on the floor, and a few feet away from him I saw the contessa. She had fallen across a chair—and she was dead, quite dead. She had shot herself, and the revolver was—is—still in her hand."

"Madonna santissima!" ejaculated Don Basilio, "and he——?"

“He had found her so, and uttered that cry. Then he fainted. Listen, Don Basilio—he had told her that the *autopsia* must be held, and so, in her fear of what it would reveal, she destroyed herself.”

“And he—Fabrizio Vitali—knew that she was guilty! Che orrore!”

“Not at all!” exclaimed Professor Sacchetti quickly. “I was right. He knew nothing. This paper”—and he drew from his pocket as he spoke the piece of paper he had found lying near Fabrizio—“exonerates him from all knowledge of—all complicity in the crime. She planned it, and executed it, and she alone. But who will believe this piece of paper? People will say she wrote it to shield her lover. They will even say he forced her to write it. In the meantime, he is in the charge of one of my *infermieri*. Another is keeping guard over *her*, until the authorities are informed of what has happened and come to verify the suicide. He, Fabrizio Vitali, is in a state of mental collapse. Sometimes he talks nonsense; but for the most part he is, as it were, stupefied. That is why I have sent for you.”

“For *me*!” repeated Don Basilio.

“For you. You are a priest. What did I say to you a short time ago? you priests are doctors for the soul. That unhappy man is innocent, Don Basilio—I repeat to you that he is innocent, at all events of having had any part in his cousin’s death! And he is suffering—suffering the tortures of, well, of what you would call hell, I suppose. I want you to go to him, as a doctor; for your treatment will be more efficacious than mine. Moreover——”

“What?” asked Don Basilio in a low voice, as Professor Sacchetti paused.

“I want you to convince yourself of his innocence,” the professor continued, “so that, when the time comes, you will be able to add the weight of your testimony to mine. When I know that you are with him, I will send to advise the authorities of what has taken place. I have delayed doing so for no other reason than to save that young man from being arrested as an accomplice in the crime. We shall be unable to remove sus-

picion—he will lie under that for the remainder of his life. But our testimony, yours and mine, coupled with the contessa's statement, will cause the authorities to hesitate before they take any proceedings against him."

"But, Dio mio!" exclaimed Don Basilio, "do you not see that he is hopelessly compromised? His position as poor Count Ugo's heir is fatal to his ever being able to establish his innocence in the eyes of the world."

"In the eyes of the world—yes," answered the professor. "But, if he is supported by our testimony, there will always be a minority who will at least give him the benefit of the doubt! I imagine, however, that in a short time it will not matter to him what the world thinks. Unless I am much mistaken, he has not the temperament to stand up against the shock he has received. He will give way to remorse, and remorse will create despair. We all know to what such a condition of things frequently leads."

"Ah, but it must not—it shall not!" exclaimed Don Basilio.

The professor looked at him. "I think," he said quietly, 'whether it does so or not will depend more upon your treatment of the case than mine, my dear friend!'

Don Basilio was silent for a moment. "But I have not his confidence," he said presently.

"Gain it," returned Professor Sacchetti laconically. "That is what I have called you in to do," he added with one of his quick smiles. "If he broods over his remorse, he will probably go mad—especially when he realises, which as yet he probably does not do, that he must always be a suspected man. Make him talk, confess his sins—anything you like—and you will probably save him from himself, and from despair. Is that not a priest's work more than a doctor's work? I will undertake the rest."

"I will do my best," said Don Basilio solemnly; "with God's help, I will do my best. You are right, Sacchetti, it is a duty; but if he is innocent, as you assert and that wretched woman has declared, then it would be a crime to abandon him."

Professor Sacchetti nodded. "Siamo d'accordo," he said. "It is satisfactory when colleagues agree! I will take you to him.

The *infermiere* can remain in the adjoining room while you are with him. Only, make him talk! You will notice that, every now and then, he looks terrified, and puts his hands to his head as though to shut out some distressing sound. He has spoken about a laugh. Del resto, it is a strange moment to think about laughter, but that is all the effect of nerves, of course, and it is precisely these symptoms which make me uneasy. I can sooth the body, but it must be your task to quiet the mind. Let us go, then; for I have much to do. I should have communicated with the authorities before now, and there is the *autopsia*. That is more necessary now than ever, though this paper has already set all doubt at rest as to the true cause of poor Count Ugo's death. Ah, poveretto! I cannot think of it——"

And Professor Sacchetti passed his hand quickly across his eyes.

## CHAPTER XXXII

IT was late that evening before Don Basilio returned to Villa Falconara. He had been able, however, to despatch a messenger to the Duchessa di San Felice with a note in which he explained to her that his presence was required at Palazzo Vitali. It would be useless, he knew, to attempt to conceal from her the tragedy which had taken place. By this time its principal details would have been telegraphed throughout the length and breadth of Italy, and the newspaper editors would be rejoicing. He had judged it better, therefore, to tell her frankly that the popular rumour as to the cause of Count Vitali's death was only too true; and that Countess Vitali, the sole author of the crime, had taken her own life so soon as she had become aware that detection was inevitable.

As a matter of fact, neither Don Basilio nor Professor Sacchetti believed that Countess Vitali had put an end to her earthly existence for this cause only. The priest, indeed, was convinced that she had killed herself, not from fear of what the results of the autopsy might be, but in an hour of despair at the discovery that her lover now regarded her with horror and aversion. Don Basilio argued to himself that Countess Vitali must from the first have contemplated the possibility of an *autopsia* being insisted upon by Professor Sacchetti; and that she had purposely chosen morphia to effect her design knowing that Sacchetti had himself administered it to her husband.

A couple of hours spent alone with Fabrizio Vitali had sufficed to convince Don Basilio that, had Countess Vitali not recognised the fact of her power over her lover being gone for ever—had she not realised that his love had turned to bitter loathing, she would have faced all risks of discovery. She would, he felt assured, have attempted to remove suspicion from herself by insisting on the point that Sacchetti, on the reappearance of



disturbing symptoms, had himself reverted to the injections of morphia.

What passed between him and Fabrizio Vitali during that first interview, Don Basilio would never, of course, divulge. Even Professor Sacchetti had not ventured to question him on the subject. It was sufficient for the professor that Don Basilio left Fabrizio's room convinced of his innocence of any foreknowledge of or complicity in Countess Vitali's action, and that he solemnly assured the authorities that any attempt to implicate Fabrizio in the crime would be a monstrous injustice.

The paper which Cristina Vitali had brought with her to the gallery, and which must have fallen from her hand at the moment of discharging the revolver, contained a concise but full account of how she had carried out her crime. It even explained how she had urged Fabrizio to leave Palazzo Vitali after her husband's accident because she felt she would be more free to perform a deed which she had intended to keep for ever secret from him, but which circumstances had after all compelled her to confess to him.

None but Don Basilio knew exactly what these circumstances were; for even Professor Sacchetti, when he had returned to Palazzo Vitali to learn the result of Fabrizio's interview with his cousin's widow, had no suspicion that Fabrizio knew Countess Vitali to be guilty, though he did suspect that a doubt had already entered his mind and was torturing him almost beyond endurance. None but Don Basilio himself would ever know all that had passed between him and the sick man who, as the professor had speedily realised, needed a spiritual rather than a bodily physician to cure his malady.

Nor had Don Basilio been able to progress very far with his treatment. He had found Fabrizio Vitali in no condition to enable him to do so, and, moreover, he was as yet uncertain as to how he should best deal with his case. He knew that it would be useless, and probably worse than useless, to attempt at once to bring the consolations of religion to one who he was aware had prided himself upon emancipation from all belief in the supernatural. The priest felt that he must gain Fabrizio

Vitali's confidence before he could hope to bring even a ray of hope or comfort to that tortured mind. That was not a thing to be accomplished in a moment ; and its accomplishment would certainly not be assisted by any resort to religious platitudes. The root of the disease, Don Basilio felt convinced, was too deeply seated to be reached by superficial remedies admirably adapted, no doubt, to one who already believed in their worth, but supremely irritating to a sufferer like Fabrizio Vitali, who had for long been engaged in carefully training his mind to close itself against their influences.

During the couple of hours that Don Basilio had remained with Fabrizio he had, perhaps unconsciously, stood aside and apart from his priesthood. Had Professor Sacchetti been present, he would have at once realised that the spiritual physician he had sent to his patient was occupying himself in making his diagnosis in much the same manner as, indeed he himself had already made it. The priest had asked no questions. He had contented himself with quiet observation and the exercise of strong mental effort to establish a current of sympathy between Fabrizio and himself. He had carefully abstained from any attempts to administer religious purgatives ; from pointing out that the position in which Fabrizio found himself was the obvious result of sin, and the chastisement of an offended deity.

By degrees something in Don Basilio's calm, sympathetic manner, something, too, in the quiet, steady gaze of his soft, brown eyes had established in Fabrizio Vitali the first beginnings of that confidence which the priest was striving to create. He had said little, for as yet his mind was dazed and crushed under the weight of the horror that had fallen on him. Broken allusions to that horror, occasional expressions which betrayed the existence of acute mental suffering were all that fell from Fabrizio's lips ; and even these were uttered in a manner which caused Don Basilio to doubt whether he was conscious of speaking them. Sometimes, however, a sudden access of fear seemed to overpower him, a fear which appeared to Don Basilio to be almost as much physical as mental.

"If it would only leave me!" he had muttered during one of

these moments. "If I could only forget it and never hear it again."

And then Don Basilio had bent towards him, and had said to him gently, "What do you hear? what is it that troubles you?"

It was the only question the priest asked; and the answer had startled him.

"Their laugh," Fabrizio had replied. "*Hers*, and Donna Giulia's. When I hear it, I feel that I must go mad."

Don Basilio looked at him steadily. "That is nonsense," he said quietly. "By degrees, you will not hear it any more." For the first time the thought that this was not the only tragedy of the kind which had occurred in Palazzo Vitali struck Don Basilio. What connection, he wondered, could there be in Fabrizio Vitali's mind between the crime of nearly three centuries ago and its counterpart of to-day? There must be something over which Fabrizio was brooding—some reason for his associating in his mind the woman who had been long dead and the woman who had taken her own life. It might be mere coincidence—a perfectly natural association of ideas—or it might be something more than this. Don Basilio's interest was keenly aroused—more keenly, perhaps, than would have been the case had Fabrizio Vitali been evidently only a prey to remorse for his indirect responsibility for his cousin's death and horror at his fate and that of the woman who had murdered him. Fabrizio's words, Don Basilio felt, pointed at something more than this, and he suspected that they were by no means the incoherent and reasonless utterances of a man under the influence of a severe mental and moral shock.

Experience had taught Don Basilio that many influences were at work in the world, and perhaps among them the influences of people and deeds long passed hence and forgotten. As he listened to Fabrizio Vitali's words and heard his reply to the question he had asked him, something told him that he now possessed a clue which would lead him to discover the original causes of the young man's mental suffering. He told himself that it would take time to follow this clue, and that he could only hope to do so by gradually winning Fabrizio's entire trust

and confidence. Even now, though so little had passed between them, Fabrizio appeared calmed and soothed by the priest's presence. He had left promising to return to him the following day, and in a few simple words had succeeded in conveying to Fabrizio that he could both understand and sympathise with him in his trouble. The very assurance of this, unaccompanied as it had been by any attempt to offer so-called spiritual consolation, had produced its effect on Fabrizio; and this, Don Basilio knew, was already a step gained towards the goal he had in view.

On leaving Palazzo Vitali that evening, Don Basilio felt that he had yet before him the most difficult task of his troubled day. It was dark long before he reached Villa Falconara, and he was weary both bodily and mentally from the strain of the last few hours.

Vittoria di San Felice, always thoughtful for others, would have persuaded him to return to his own house and rest; assuring him that, since she now knew the worst, he could come to her the following morning in order to give her further details. To this, however, Don Basilio refused to consent, and he and the duchessa dined alone together. Vittoria herself made a very apparent pretence at eating, but she insisted on Don Basilio making a more genuine effort which, having had but little food that day, he recognised the necessity for doing. The meal was a short one, and both were relieved when it was over and the servants were no longer in attendance listening to every word that was said.

Concerning the actual tragedy of Ugo Vitali's death and that other tragedy which had so swiftly followed it, there was, indeed, nothing more to be said. Vittoria, as Don Basilio quickly perceived, could not trust herself to speak about it in any direct way; and he, also, was glad to shun the subject as much as it was possible to do so.

One thing he had noticed with sorrow as soon as he had seen her again. The look which had been on her face that morning when she had first received the tidings from Viterbo was still there—harder, if anything, and more accentuated than ever.

Well had Sacchetti foreseen what Fabrizio Vitali would have to encounter when he had declared that, however much Fabrizio might be innocent of any part in or foreknowledge of his cousin's murder, only a very small minority would believe in his innocence. The Duchessa di San Felice, it was evident, was not disposed to be of the minority. She displayed bitter indignation when she learned that Fabrizio had not as yet been charged with complicity in Countess Vitali's deed. No words Don Basilio could say were successful in shaking her conviction that the crime had been long premeditated and prearranged between Cristina and her lover. In vain Don Basilio assured her that both he and Sacchetti had good reasons for being convinced of Fabrizio Vitali's entire ignorance of Countess Vitali's terrible resolve. The fact that, in her written confession of her crime Countess Vitali had expressly declared that she and she alone had conceived and carried it into execution, and that she had never intended to allow Fabrizio to know of or suspect its commission, was dismissed contemptuously by Vittoria di San Felice as a palpable attempt to throw dust in the eyes of the authorities.

Don Basilio found himself compelled to abandon for the moment any hope of inducing the duchessa to alter her opinion. The feeling that she would be among the ranks of those who would for ever regard Fabrizio Vitali as guilty of having connived at his cousin's murder, even though the law might not be able to touch him, troubled Don Basilio not a little. The Duchessa di San Felice's influence was great, and he knew that she could use it, if she so chose, in many quarters. Moreover, it might be that, after all, she was right, and that some secret understanding had existed between Countess Vitali and her lover as to the means whereby Count Vitali should be removed from their path. The duchessa had been right when she had insisted on believing the popular rumour that Ugo Vitali had been murdered, and might she not be equally so in refusing to allow that Fabrizio could have been in ignorance that such a crime was in contemplation?

Notwithstanding his conviction of Fabrizio Vitali's innocence, Don Basilio felt that, until he should have won his full confidence,



it would be wiser not to attempt to overcome the duchessa's prejudices by argument. He was conscious, moreover, of having no reasonable argument to advance, since his personal opinion, even though this opinion was shared by Professor Sacchetti, could scarcely be called an argument. Time alone could show what attitude Fabrizio Vitali would eventually take; if, indeed, remorse, and horror at the crime he had indirectly brought about, did not produce that state of desperation which Sacchetti dreaded for him.

The following day, as he had promised he would do, Don Basilio returned to Palazzo Vitali.

Taddeo met him at the entrance.

"The signor professore is with him," he said in response to the priest's inquiry after Fabrizio. "The signor conte is—" he paused, and tapped his forehead significantly.

Don Basilio grew suddenly pale. "Yesterday evening when I left the signor conte," he said, "he was certainly more composed. Has anything occurred further to upset him?"

Taddeo shrugged his shoulders. "Is not what has already occurred sufficient?" he asked drily. "Sicuro—the signor conte is mad. He declares that he hears nothing but laughter, peals of laughter. He escaped from his room last night, while the infermiere was asleep. Before that, he had been quite quiet, for hours. He was found in the gallery, unconscious—and—and——"

"And what?" exclaimed Don Basilio quickly.

"Reverendo," said the old man in a whisper, "lying on the floor of the gallery we found Donna Giulia's portrait. He must have torn it down from the wall and destroyed it. The canvas of the picture is torn to shreds."

Don Basilio was silent for a moment or two.

"Is he still unconscious?" he asked.

"Ah, no, but he raves. Sometimes he is quiet; and then, quite suddenly, he thinks he hears the laughter. It is a judgment—the judgment of God." Ah, reverendo—I did what I could! When I knew how it was between the Conte Fabrizio



and—and that woman, I warned him that it would end ill. It was impossible that such a *mal' augurio* as the fall of the Christ on to his bed, the very night of his coming to Palazzo Vitali, should have been sent for nothing. But he would not be warned. That evil woman had already bewitched him.”

“The crucifix fell a second time, I think you told me,” said Don Basilio thoughtfully.

Taddeo glanced at him quickly. “Sicuro,” he replied hesitatingly. “But the second time, reverendo,” he added, after a slight pause, “it was I who placed it on the Conte Fabrizio’s pillows, where it had fallen before.”

“*You!*” exclaimed Don Basilio.

“Yes. It was the night I followed them into the gardens, and saw and heard all I told you, reverendo. I thought that if I could frighten him, he would go away, or at least that he would accept the warning. I went to Donna Giulia’s room—his room—and tore the Christ from the wall, so that he might find the cross again on his pillows. But it was of no use. The first time I knew that the Conte Fabrizio had been alarmed by the evil omen—but this second time he only laughed. After that, I wrote the anonymous letter to the poor signor conte—*anima benedetta*—and Taddeo crossed himself. “Did I do very wrong?” he asked. “I could think of no other way, and the poor signor conte saw nothing, suspected nothing!”

Don Basilio did not answer him. Indeed, he scarcely seemed to hear what the old servant was telling him, so absorbed was he in his own thoughts.

As they were proceeding in the direction of the room which Fabrizio Vitali was occupying, Professor Sacchetti met them. His face lightened up when he saw the priest.

“I have more need of your services than ever,” he said. “He”—and he made a quick motion with his head—“is to all intents and purposes mad—but it is a madness which will pass—which *must* pass. Only, there are things about the case which I do not understand. Taddeo will have told you what happened in the night. That he should have gone to the gallery, is perhaps natural. It was there he found the contessa—dead. But why

should he have destroyed the picture? and what is the meaning of this laughter which he believes he hears? These things I do not understand."

"I think that I understand them," said Don Basilio, in a low voice. "I think so," he repeated, "but I am not yet sure."

The professor looked at him curiously. He knew something of the theories Don Basilio held, for they had more than once had some discussions together on the subject.

"If you do, amico mio," he said briefly, "so much the better. You may be able to save his reason, for if this state of things were to continue, he might easily become permanently insane."

"I shall try to save his reason," answered Don Basilio, "and his soul." He spoke very quietly, almost as though speaking to himself.

The professor frowned a little.

"As to his soul," he said, drily, "that, from my point of view, is an altogether secondary affair. It seems to me that Domeniddio may very well be trusted to look after his soul."

"If I could get him to believe that," observed Don Basilio, "I should probably succeed in saving his reason. I think you said yesterday that despair was what you dreaded for him, did you not?"

"Bravo! Bravo!" exclaimed Professor Sacchetti. "I forgot to whom I was talking. Perbacco, Don Basilio, if all priests were as sensible as you, we doctors should not delay handing over our patients to them until we realised that we could do no more ourselves! But how do you account for the peculiarities of the case—the things you say you think you understand?"

Don Basilio glanced at Taddeo. "You need not remain," he said to him. "I wish to have some conversation with the signor professore."

"I should like to know how you account for them," repeated the professor, when Taddeo had left the room.

Don Basilio shrugged his shoulders. "Very simply," he

replied. "At least," he added, "very simply from my point of view. That unfortunate young man is still struggling with an evil influence. Unless you rid him of this influence, your treatment, my dear friend, will be of little use. Precisely what, or whose this influence is, one has yet to learn—but one may guess."

"That woman's—the contessa's, presumably—from your point of view," said Professor Sacchetti.

Don Basilio hesitated. "Directly, perhaps—yes," he observed. "But by whom, or by what, was that unhappy woman influenced? Was she acting spontaneously, so to speak—or by suggestion? I am not at liberty to tell you what I learned, or believe I learned, from your patient yesterday. All I dare tell you is, that I am not surprised at what occurred last night. I find it perfectly in accordance with my diagnosis of the case that Count Fabrizio should have gone to the gallery, and that he should have destroyed the portrait of Donna Giulia Vitali. Have you forgotten her history, professore?"

Professor Sacchetti started. "Diavolo!" he exclaimed. "I had forgotten it—yes, until this moment. It is an extraordinary coincidence," he added.

Don Basilio glanced at him. "God does not deal in coincidences," he observed. "Nature, the whole history of creation, teaches us that. Perhaps," he continued, with one of his slight, ironical smiles, "that other Power whose representative you named just now, may do so, and therefore may be more easily defeated in the end."

The professor looked at him gravely, and for a moment or two he was silent.

"I think," he said, at length, "it would be as well if you would go to him. If your theory be correct, the sooner you commence your cure, the better, my friend. Perhaps I ought to laugh at you; but I do not."

"I am glad he destroyed that picture," said Don Basilio suddenly.

Professor Sacchetti gave a slight gesture of impatience. "Ma!" he exclaimed. "I cannot see that it matters. It

is a sign of madness — temporary, we will hope — but still madness.”

Don Basilio shook his head.

“Niente affatto, caro professore!” he replied. “It is a sign that he is fighting. He only needs an ally. Now, if you please, will you take me to Count Fabrizio’s room?”

## CHAPTER XXXIII

SUMMER had come again, and nearly eight months had elapsed since the tragedy which had startled all Italy had taken place in the ancient city of Viterbo. *L'affare Vitali*, as for many weeks it had been generally called, had become almost a matter of history in a country in which domestic tragedies are neither few nor far between.

Largely owing to the exertions of Professor Sacchetti, whose reputation stood above all suspicion to any connivance to defeat the ends of justice, the authorities had quickly come to the conclusion that there were no possible grounds for taking any proceedings against Count Fabrizio Vitali for complicity in his cousin's murder.

Nevertheless, as both the professor and Don Basilio had foreseen, the world at large declined to believe in Fabrizio Vitali's innocence; and those were in the majority who declared that Italian justice had once again afforded a proof of its corruption and impotency.

The sun was setting over the lovely valley of the Arno. The soft breeze of a June evening stole down from the Tuscan hills, bringing with it the scent of roses, of white Madonna lilies, and all the flowers that blossom in the Garden of Italy and breathe forth their sweet incense to Santa Maria dei Fiori.

Outside the gateway of an old villa remotely situated on the heights of Settignano, a carriage was waiting, and the coachman had drawn up his horses in the shade of a group of cypress trees, from the sombre branches of which cascades of roses in full bloom were hanging in luxurious profusion.

In the distance the great bell of the Duomo at Florence was booming furiously, for it was the vigil of a festa.

The villa, which lay buried in the gardens surrounding it, was invisible from the narrow, secluded lane into which its gates

opened. Formerly the country residence of a well-known Florentine family, it had been for some years occupied by a small community of Oratorians and was used by that community more as a house of retreat than as a monastery in the usual sense of the term.

The coachman had waited more than half an hour in the dusty lane beneath the high wall surrounding the grounds of the villa, and he was beginning to get drowsy when the *custode* appeared at the great iron gates and proceeded to unbolt them. A lady, accompanied by two men, one of whom was a priest, came slowly down the ilex avenue, and the coachman backed his horses so as to bring the carriage opposite the gates.

The lady was Vittoria di San Felice, and with her was Don Basilio; while their companion who, though dressed entirely in black, was a layman, was Fabrizio Vitali. As they drew nearer to the entrance they stopped for a few moments, talking earnestly. Then Fabrizio Vitali took leave of Vittoria and Don Basilio, and turning away disappeared in the shadow of the ilex trees.

Vittoria di San Felice looked at the priest. There was a smile on her face, but her eyes were full of tears.

"I am glad I came, Don Basilio," she said in a low voice, as the porter let them through the *cancelli*. "It—it has comforted him to see me. You were right to make me come to Florence."

"It was right to come to him," Don Basilio said gently, "but for you, duchessa, it has been a trial. Nobody knows that better than he does, except myself."

"Let us walk a little," said Vittoria. "Tell the man to drive on, and wait for us in the main road, and we will walk down the hill. Yes—I have been hard, and misjudged him. I know now how greatly I have misjudged him—but you, you believed throughout in his innocence—and you have saved him, body and soul."

"Not I," replied Don Basilio quietly.

"God—through you! He said that peace was coming back to him—peace, after all he has been through! He told me that during those terrible weeks you fought for him—fought until sometimes even your physical strength nearly failed you. And



yet you never said a word to me—you allowed me to continue to misjudge him, to speak of him as a vile assassin, until——”

“Until God won the victory, and the evil departed from him,” interrupted Don Basilio, as she paused.

Vittoria shuddered. “If I had known that she—that terrible woman—had made him believe *that* of Ugo and me,” she said. “I should have understood better.”

“How could I tell you?” asked Don Basilio. “Besides, he made me promise that I would never tell you. He looked forward to the day when he might ask you to come to him in order that he might tell you himself.”

“Was she a devil?” whispered Vittoria.

“No—because, in her own way, she loved him, and she killed herself when she knew that she had lost his love. God will remember if there was but one unselfish thought in her love, however perverted that love was. No—she was not a devil, but she was possessed by an evil spirit that had entered into an abode, finding it swept and garnished. More I cannot tell you, *figlia mia*, for my lips are sealed.”

“Will he become a monk?” asked Vittoria di San Felice, presently.

Don Basilio shook his head. “Never,” he said. “He will go back into the world some day, under the name he has assumed now. He will work, in the world and for the world; and so he will keep that peace which is daily coming to him. Of course he will never return to Palazzo Vitali. People will continue to think, as they think now, that Count Vitali has fled the country because he is a man branded as an assassin. Perhaps you do not know—he did not tell you—that he has already made arrangements to divide his inheritance among various institutions. He has full power to do so, since he has no heirs. It will not be publicly known for another year. He has kept nothing, duchessa, except that he has made a provision for his mother with whom he will eventually live. In a year Palazzo Vitali and the lands will be sold.”

“Vittoria di San Felice turned and looked at him. “If that is so,” she said quietly, “I shall buy them. Ugo would have

wished it. My sons will keep the lands always—for they loved him. The Vitali property shall not pass into the hands of strangers while I am alive.”

They descended the hill together, and below, in the high road leading to Florence, they could see the carriage awaiting them which would take them back to the city. On the morrow Vittoria di San Felice was to leave Italy for the north of Europe where she intended to pass the summer. They lingered awhile on their way, watching the sunset glow deepening over the hills, and turning the distant Arno into a river of flame.

“I am glad I went to him,” repeated Vittoria, speaking her thoughts aloud. “Perhaps I have brought him more peace. Ah, but it was a terrible thing—a diabolical thing—of that unhappy woman to lead him to believe—” she checked herself suddenly. “After all,” she continued, “it is not for me to judge her. She was possessed of an evil spirit, you say—and, if that was so, she was not responsible. Besides, have I not misjudged enough? I have only one wish now—that she may find the peace which Fabrizio Vitali is finding. And for us——”

“*Et ne nos inducas in tentationem, sed libera nos a malo,*” interposed Don Basilio, taking off his broad, black hat, as he said the words.

“Amen,” said Vittoria di San Felice softly.



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