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OUT OF THEIR ELEMENT.

A Novel.

BY

LADY MARGARET MAJENDIE,
AUTHOR OF 'FASCINATION,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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OUT OF THEIR ELEMENT.

CHAPTER I.

‘**EVIL** youth that thou art! I tell thee that thou shalt not do it!’
‘I do as I will.’

Mariuccia and her son stood together at the door of the house in the Via Ceretani, just as the hot summer day was cooling into evening. Ceccho held a basket in his hand full of vegetables, and crowned by a huge orange-coloured gourd; he wore no coat, and his black mop of hair was covered by a cook’s white cap of office.

‘I must be gone,’ he said. ‘*Zitto*, mother!

do not keep me all night long with thy reproaches. My dinner must be got ready. I take a pride in my dinner—*via!* Not for the sake of the padrone whom I hate, or for the sake of the padrona whom I do not love, but for the sake of the dinner itself: the brown roast, the delicate little birds, the new way of dressing fowls—white and beautiful! It is the happiest moment of the day when it is sent up, looking as perfect as a work of art can be!

‘Do they dine so well at the Signor Avvocato’s?’ cried Mariuccia wonderingly. ‘The time is not so distant since Annibale Baldova was glad enough to dine off a fritata fried in oil, and a salad. He ate the fritata, and his wife the salad! So they live well now, *hein?*’

‘Should I serve them otherwise?’ said Ceccho superbly. ‘It is since we have had a Montenero in the family the time for fritata and economy is over—nothing is too good for her. Her apartments are furnished in yellow satin and gold; her carriage is

superb. The padrone has not now time to enjoy his wealth ; as for the padrona, the old habit remains, she still dines on the salad ; but Donna Colomba ! she did not eat so well at the Marchese's house, I warrant : she enjoys that which is good. She is the best comfort I have. Signor Giuseppe—Capitano he calls himself when out of his father's house—has no thought for anything but Donna Colomba, and he sits and makes eyes for her.'

'And the padrone ? does he vouchsafe no word of commendation ? no *buona-mano* from time to time ? The wages are not great—eh ?'

'The padrone grumbles—he grumbles at everything ; nothing is right—nothing is good ; no one does their business well. Life is not long enough to bear it ; he himself wished to send me away six weeks ago, but I forgave him then ; but now——'

'Thou shalt not leave ! Ceccho, good places are not to be had every day.'

'Bah ! I am not without a few pauls. I

shall leave. I am no slave! I will be free while the money lasts; and I wish to spend it.'

'All?'

'Why not? Youth is the time for enjoyment; when I have spent, I can make more. But I must go; the padrone will be like a mad bull with rage if the soup is not on the table at the right moment. So, little mother, dear mother, good mother, thou wilt not tell me when the young Conte comes home? *Diamine!* one does not gain much advantage when one fights against the Holy Father.'

'I will tell thee nothing, unless thou promise me first, evil boy that thou art, that thou wilt not leave thy situation.'

'Willingly; I leave it not,' he answered, lying glibly. 'I endure all that is said to me with a gracious "Thanks, Signore."'

'Thou art so hot, so impatient, Ceccho; foolish that thou art, what are words? Do they break bones?'

'That's as may be. Let people say what they will. While I want money I will put up with that; but hands off—*via!*'

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His black eyes gleamed, and his right hand sought something in his breast.

‘Our young Conte is as quick as thou art, Ceccho, yet he bears no malice; he forgives. Would that thou wert the same!’

‘He has nothing to forgive.’

‘Nothing to forgive? Think you he knew not of that letter, my wise one? The letter that found its way into the gendarmes’ hands? Eh, eh! he knew how it was lost.’

‘Truly?’ And Ceccho’s face grew pale.

‘Fortunately it was the wrong letter, as thou knowest, and thou got no thanks; but the deed was the same. Twice he had found thee listening at the door; twice he had warned thee that he knew thy evil ways, that he would protect the next contadina that refused to listen to thee and loved thee not! Who can wonder? All his family are alike—too good for secrecy. He scorned to injure the son of his old Mariuccia.’

‘Injure! He insulted me—*basta*, I will say no more! but where is my honour?—the honour of a Roman?’

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‘*Zitto*, foolish child! you attract attention!’

Ceccho’s manner changed instantaneously.

‘Now, mother, dear little mother, you would not dream that I could hurt him? Bah! are we not his servants? Have we not been with his family for a whole generation? Let him even trample or beat me if it suit his gracious humour. I will say nothing more. Tell me, for charity, when does he come, and where will he take apartments? I die for news. I have told thee I will be good. I will be patient; I will endure still the grumbles of the *padrone*, and will say nothing. Have I not earned that thou shouldst tell me what I ask?’

‘Count Camillo is here.’

Ceccho started, and a strange look came over his face—the look of a cat that has caught sight of her prey. The pupil of the eye dilated and closed again, and once more he softly handled something secreted in his breast.

‘Dear little mother,’ he said, in his softest,

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most oily voice, 'only tell me—where does he lodge? When did he come? How long has he been here? Is he, then, with Count Giacinto?'

'I will not tell thee where he is,' said Mariuccia, more startled than she liked to confess even to herself, and fully aware that she had disobeyed her old master's strict commands in speaking to Ceccho at all of Camillo's arrival. 'But I will tell thee this,' she continued, 'that we are in great confusion to-day, and I stand gossiping here while I have a hundred thousand things to do in the house, and two gossiping girls to help me, who spend all their time with their heads out of the window.'

'Truly! but what is it? Does Count Giacinto take a wife?'

'Wife! bah! he knows better. Signora Bianca and her English *sposo* come to-day, and the padrone, he is wild with excitement. He paces now the *salone*. He cannot be quiet!'

Ahimé! I hear no news. My padrone is

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so particular that I labour from morning till night, and Signor Giuseppe eats for three.'

'Is it true? He is a fine, well-grown man. Our Camillo will never be so stout. Does Signora Baldova get on well with her new daughter?'

'Not badly. Now that our Signorina is gone to San Gemignano she goes back to the old politics, and Signor Giuseppe meets with scant sympathy. So Signora Bianca comes home?'

'Yes; they say she has become English altogether. Ah! it will be like fresh dew in the morning to see her sweet face again. Coming, padrone! coming!'

Count Giacinto came out on the balcony and shouted. Mariuccia answered him at the top of her voice, and hurried indoors. Ceccho raised his basket to the top of his head, and resting one hand on his hip while he beat time with the other, he walked off, singing an air from the 'Barbiere.'

About seven o'clock in the evening there was quite a little commotion in the Mercato

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Vecchio, for a large *vetturino* carriage, drawn by four steaming horses, pulled up at Count Giacinto's door in the Via Ceretani.

The anxious faces of Giacinto and Camillo, Mariuccia and the new women who had been engaged to help her, had long been watching from balcony and windows ; now all rapidly descended to the door.

Arthur and Bianca were in the *coupé* in front, the two servants in the carriage itself. Arthur was the first to descend, and to lift down Bianca.

Rapid footsteps came running up. There was a cry, almost a shout.

‘ Bianca ! Bianchina ! ’

‘ Lillo ! oh, Lillo ! ’ And the brother and sister were once more in each other's arms. They were kissing each other, hugging, caressing, looking into each other's eyes, then kissing again. Bianca had forgotten the very existence of her husband. Like children they rushed upstairs. Bianca threw herself into Count Giacinto's arms. She could not speak, she could only look round

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her in ecstasy. Mariuccia had captured her hands, and was covering them with kisses.

‘Bianca! my little Bianca!’ cried the old uncle, the tears of rapture in his eyes. ‘At last I have my children with me again. God is good.’

Bianca sank down on the old hard sofa, holding both Lillo’s hands; her voice came back. ‘Ah, this is home! home at last!’ she cried.

‘But there is your husband, Bianca!’ exclaimed Count Giacinto. ‘He will not know where we are. Shall we not fetch him? You must present us—we die to know him!’

Bianca rose up and went to the door. Willing not to disturb the first rapture of their meeting, Arthur St. Leger had remained below, giving directions about the luggage. He wished the English servants to take part of it to an hotel; an intuitive feeling told him that they would be out of place here.

He finished giving his orders, and then slowly mounted the stairs. Bianca met him at the door.

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'Arthur,' she said in Italian, 'come in! here is Camillo, and this is my uncle Giacinto.'

The two Italians held out their hands eagerly, and kissed him on both cheeks. Arthur became crimson, but looking up at the faces beaming with welcome and goodwill, he felt touched, and would willingly have said some pleasant words of thanks; but they would not come easily to his lips in Italian, and he stood feeling shy and embarrassed beyond measure. Camillo drew forward a chair for him, and he and Bianca sat down as before, their arms entwined. Old Count Giacinto ambled backwards and forwards, with the erratic delight of a dog that has but just discovered the return of a long-lost master.

A most extraordinary sensation had come upon Arthur at the sight of Camillo, a feeling that never till this moment had he understood what an absolute Italian his wife really was.

Camillo was not tall, but very slight and

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well made, with a dark-olive complexion, and perfectly black hair; his hair fuzzed out naturally, being exceedingly thick and curly, and it was brushed well upwards; he wore a black moustache, which did not hide his finely chiselled mouth; his small nervous hands gesticulated vehemently, and he could scarcely speak one word of English. Except that both faces were of the same delicate oval in shape, at first sight there was no actual likeness between the young officer and his twin-sister; only the feeling of familiarity with a face which strikes the beholder, without exactly knowing why, in the appearance of near relations.

Count Giacinto was still more Italian, if possible; and now Arthur St. Leger saw his bride seated between these two men, talking to them and caressing them, her own nearest and dearest kinsmen, and an almost agonized sense of incongruity came over him, and a certain feeling of a kind of rueful amusement at his own odd situation which made him smile involuntarily.

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Bianca's face was literally transformed with happiness; she spoke in her own language, and with such rapidity that, with his newly acquired and still somewhat imperfect knowledge of it, he could hardly understand one word. They all spoke at once; the three Italian voices made a noise to which he was quite unaccustomed.

He sat watching them, till Lillo, with gentle courtesy, suddenly perceived by the bewildered look of his eyes that their conversation was incomprehensible to him, and he immediately addressed Arthur in very broken English :

'I do grieve,' he said, speaking slowly, 'I can talk not English. Have the journey good been?'

'I am afraid Bianca is very tired,' answered Arthur, feeling attracted by the manner of his young brother-in-law. 'It was a long day crossing Mont Cenis, the roads were very dusty, and it was slow travelling.'

'Ah!' said Camillo, who had not under-

stood. 'You say very good? I rejoice myself.'

Arthur felt despairing, 'but he laughed kindly. 'Pray speak your own language,' he said in Italian. 'Do not mind me. I understand pretty well. I shall soon learn.'

'Yes, very soon,' said Camillo, with a little nod of friendly encouragement.

He seemed to burst into Italian—manner, voice, everything changed as he joined in the eager conversation between his uncle and sister; and Arthur smiled and listened and nodded, and made-believe that he understood quite well everything that was being said.

Presently, in spite of the excitement in her face, Arthur saw that Bianca was growing paler and paler.

'My darling,' he said, bending forward and speaking to her in English. How precious it seemed to him to speak to her in English—a sort of link between them; for, after all, was she not his—his own? But Bianca, perhaps, also felt that, and it was to her as a little clank

www.libtool.com.cn She looked up at him, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

‘Bianca,’ he said, ‘will you not rest a little while, and take off these things?’ and he touched her travelling-wraps, that she had not yet removed.

‘I am not tired,’ she answered in Italian; ‘I have yet ten thousand things to say and hear before I move.’

Lillo looked up; a curious intuitive tact made him see that Arthur had hoped that Bianca would come away with him one little moment—only one—just to let him feel that she was not leaving him quite alone outside her own world. Arthur would have been grateful for so little, but there was nothing to show it but the instinctive feeling in Camillo’s breast that he also would have felt the same.

‘Let me show you your room,’ he cried, rising and passing his arm through Arthur’s. ‘They are very poor,’ he said, a little wistfully. ‘But you know we have not much money among us, we Italians, in these times; but if there

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is anything you want that we could get for you, you will ask me as a brother. Is it not so?' and he looked up into Arthur's face with a kindly, rather anxious look. His heart was full of anxiety about this strange new brother-in-law, and he wanted to read in his eyes whether he meant to take Bianca from them, and keep her all to himself or not. Undoubtedly Lillo felt that he had the right to do so, if he chose; but would he have the heart to do it?'

Then when Lillo saw the look in Arthur's blue eyes that just glanced at Bianca as they left the room, a sudden new idea flashed into his mind; the whole was reversed. It was he, Camillo, who must be generous; he must not let his twin-sister starve out so great a love as this; the power lay in his hands, not Arthur's, to make or mar their lives.

Lillo passed his hand through his black hair; all was evidently not so simple as he had imagined it to be.



CHAPTER II.

ARTHUR ST. LEGER had come to the Via Ceretani of his own free will and choice. Mrs. Dalton, with some idea in her mind that Bianca might become altogether reabsorbed into her own family if they went there, had tried to persuade him to take her to an hotel ; but he had preferred his own plan. Bianca also had set her heart on returning to her mother's old apartments and the old mode of life, at all events for a time, and he himself had a strong wish to realize to the full what the charms of the old home had been which made his young wife so utterly unable to reconcile herself to a new one ; he wished to share it to the

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utmost, to understand and put himself into sympathy with all the past years of her young life, before he had known and loved her.

Arthur had often pictured the situation before, and in the picture he had always seen Bianca turning to himself, and, with her face radiant with joy, thanking him for her happiness. He was determined to hope for this still—it would be so after the first excitement was over ; he had so long schooled himself to patience, and only a very little more patience was needed now.

All was curiously different from what he had imagined ; there was nothing romantic about the appearance of the rooms, everything was very hot and oppressive. Arthur threw open the closely shut persiennes when he found himself alone, with an Englishman's idea that cool fresh air would stream in ; but it was even at eight o'clock too soon, for the stone pavement had been baking all day in the sun, and the window-sill was still burning hot. The street was full of life and motion. Arthur leant out of the window and looked

to the left-hand side, and his eye was suddenly filled with a sense of beauty and colour, as it fell on the glorious marble-encrusted Duomo standing up against the deep blue of the cloudless sky. The bells of the convent on the opposite side of the street suddenly began to ring ; then from all round in every direction bells took up the chime, some with a loud harsh clang, some with full musical notes, some with a modest tinkle ; and through the many voices boomed out the huge bell of the great Duomo, deep and low, and of wonderful richness of tone. The world seemed vibrating and throbbing, everything all round ringing with sound. The air seemed emptied and quiet when it died into silence.

Arthur drew in his head : he looked all round the room in which he stood ; it was uncarpeted, but the wooden floor was waxed and polished till it shone like a mirror ; there were two or three hard chairs covered with yellow damask ; a little vessel for holy water hung beside the bed, which was shut in by

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mosquito-curtains as white as snow. His portmanteau had been brought in.

Arthur did not wish to go back at once to the studio; he had a vague little hope that Bianca might think of him, might come to look for him for one moment. He began to unpack his portmanteau himself, and to get out some books. Presently he was rewarded, for Bianca came gently through the rooms that all opened one into the other, and came up to him.

He looked at her; he saw her eyes first glance all round the rooms with a look of bitter grief.

'These were mamma's rooms,' she said, speaking in Italian; 'here we used to live. We were so happy; oh mamma, mamma!'

'My darling!' said Arthur gently; 'you are glad to be back again? Are you very tired?'

He was looking wistfully for his reward.

'I am not very tired,' she answered. 'The rooms are cool. I shall soon be quite rested again.'

‘Tell me,’ he said, drawing her to him, ‘you are happy, are you not? Tell me, you are happy?’

‘Happy? It is like heaven—it is home!’

For the first time she turned of her own accord, and held up her sweet face to him to be kissed.

A little curl of her fair hair had become loosened, and was straying on her neck. Arthur’s heart was bounding within him with joy and gratitude for her answer. He drew a penknife from his pocket, and cut off the little curl.

Bianca looked down at it and laughed.

‘But why?’ she said.

‘Because I love you, *anima mia!*’ he said.

Then she went away, with her eyes shining, singing to herself.

Camillo was waiting to ask Arthur to come and smoke a cigar with him. He looked a little anxiously in his brother-in-law’s face to see what expression it wore. Lillo could not be quite happy unless he felt that the strange Englishman, to whom he owed so much in

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the bringing home of his beloved sister, was happy also.

He was satisfied, for the wistful look had quite gone ; Arthur looked bright and joyous, and Lillo, putting his dark slender fingers through his arm, gave it a little squeeze of pleasure like a boy.

Arthur had recovered the use of his Italian also, and his ear began to get accustomed to the rapidity of Lillo's speech ; they were able to talk together quite comfortably, to the great content of both.

They did not stay out very long, for both were anxious to get back to Bianca.

Innumerable acquaintances spoke to Lillo, but he only gave them friendly little nods, and shaking of fingers in the air, and to some a quick grasp with the left hand.

'My friends will all be dying to know you,' he said. 'Another day you will permit me to introduce them ?'

'It is what I wish most,' replied Arthur warmly. 'I want to know your friends, and to learn from you all about Italy, and your

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politics and your hopes. I want to enter into it all.'

A look of swift pain passed over Lillo's expressive face.

'Our affairs are not so happy as they should be,' he said; but he added, with the sudden radiant smile that so reminded Arthur of his sister, 'still, those who take away liberty cannot deprive one of hope; and hope is the morning-star of night. But these are not words for the streets: it will be my greatest pleasure to make you one of ourselves; then I shall feel even more than I do at this moment that I have not lost my sister, but gained a brother.'

Arthur looked up quickly. Lillo's dark cheek was flushed with feeling.

He went on:

'I am, however, afraid that you will find everything very different from England. You will find it perhaps a little difficult to get used to us, and to like us.'

'That, at least, I shall not find difficult,' said Arthur warmly.

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‘You are very good,’ said Lillo. ‘We will do all we can. I should like to tell you how grateful we feel to you. You have brought back to us what we love better than life itself—our little Bianca! and I think she would have died in England.’

‘I always hoped that time would have done much,’ said Arthur.

‘Yes; but time was not wanting. Two years! it is like two centuries. If one thinks of all that happens in two years: of the changes in families—some born, many dead; some married that had never seen each other before; some gone quite away into the cloister where we shall never know them again but through the heart, which discerns the fruits of their prayers. We cannot call two years a short time when one is young.’

‘No,’ said Arthur thoughtfully. ‘To me also it has been the very longest period of my life. And you think that Bianca would never have been happy?’

‘I cannot tell now, for now she has you. It is different when one loves; where the

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loved one is, that is home—that I can understand. And I know that so it was with my mother; that she became an Italian was doubtless at the cost of some sacrifice at first—and that sacrifice Bianca might have been willing to make, but for nothing short of love; and the sacrifice would have been of her heart's blood. I think she might have died in making it. She is made in a different mould from my mother; she is more narrow—she sees but one object at a time. Therefore I cannot thank you enough; my whole life shall prove my gratitude that you have given her so much.'

Arthur did not speak; a bitter feeling crossed him, that already before they had been two hours in Florence, Camillo's sharp eyes had discerned that his lovely wife had no love for him, that all was yet to win. Lillo, with his quick tact, felt that a look of pain had come into Arthur's eyes, and he changed the subject.

They were returning to the Via Ceretani, and stood for a moment in the Piazza dell' Duomo.

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‘Look!’ he said, pointing upwards to the exquisite Campanile. ‘Have you such works of art in England? They tell me not. We Italians admire all that is English; we love your country, and wish for your sympathy; but we are also glad when we see you admire what you have not—like that.’

‘It is glorious!’ said Arthur, looking round him with growing admiration.

With such a background, every little group formed a picture; an old man went by with a basket of big water-melons; little brown children, with yellow handkerchiefs knotted round their heads, played on the Duomo steps. There was a sharp but not unmusical sound of jingling bells, and a train of mules came slowly past, each with its big cloth of vivid red on its brown back.

Arthur thought of the great ‘Italia Una’ at Osterleigh, and the opinion that all of them had then formed of what Italian modern art must be; but here, in every unstudied group, every ordinary piece of colouring, he found it. He thought how his mother’s

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cultivated artist eye would have enjoyed it all.

The lad who had been driving the mules stopped them with a word, while he stood and haggled for a big slice of water-melon. The whole picture remained long on his memory.

‘It grows late,’ said Lillo. ‘We have finished our cigars. Will you take coffee indoors with Bianca and my uncle, or shall we order it at a *café*?’

‘Let us go in,’ replied Arthur, rousing himself; then he gave a little start. ‘Ah!’ he exclaimed, ‘but that is a pity!’ pointing to the blank, unfinished façade of the great cathedral.

‘Yes, it is a pity,’ said Lillo lightly. ‘But it is, alas! eminently characteristic. It is like all we do—we of this country. Our doings and our enterprises and plans and ideas may be alike great, but there it is: some portion is unfinished or impracticable, and the whole thing is marred. You say rightly—it is a pity!’



CHAPTER III.

THEY found Bianca and her uncle in the studio. The room looked very large and bare; the easel stood in its old place, with a half-finished picture on it, of some Greek classical subject; the lay-figure was draped in a Greek robe and peplum edged with purple. But now the windows were thrown wide open, and chairs were grouped together near them; and on a little marble table, with lyre-shaped bronze legs, Mariuccia had placed the coffee.

Arthur knew that Bianca must be tired, and the sofa on which she sat was quite upright and very hard. He longed for the soft

cushions and easy comfort of one from England ; but Bianca did not seem to mind. She was silent now, leaning her head on the hard wooden back ; and when they came in, she held out her hand to Lillo and drew him down beside her, and held it tightly in hers.

Count Giacinto tried to make himself polite to Arthur, offering him coffee ; but he was rather deaf, and he found it difficult to understand his answers.

About half-past nine Mariuccia threw open the door, and two gentlemen came in to pay an evening visit. Bianca received them with looks of enchantment, holding out both her hands. She introduced them to Arthur as *Avvocato Baldova* and the *Capitano Giuseppe Baldova*, whereat the *avvocato* shook his fingers at Bianca in reproach, and again a perfect babel of voices began as they all took their seats.

Camillo still tried to entertain his brother-in-law, till he begged him to desist, assuring him that he understood quite well, and desired only to listen.

It is just the lesson I want in facility and quickness,' he said. And Lillo smiled and joyfully obeyed, adding his voice to the rest.

It was not wonderful that Arthur St. Leger felt bewildered. He saw his wife—his gentle, silent Bianca, whom he had always seen still and calm among her girl cousins; very slow and stately in her movements and way of speaking; impassive, with great sad eyes looking too often into vacancy; and when among strangers, clinging even to little Jacqueline and shrinking behind May—now literally transformed. He could see that she was in her element surrounded by men. 'And such noisy men!' he thought, with some consternation. But he admired her greatly in this new character, though she seemed to him absolutely different from anything he had ever seen before; she had never looked so brilliant and so animated. He drew back out of the little circle, watching her, and feeling that he was doing what he had always intended to do—learning what Bianca

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was at home. It was all new—a revelation to him.

Bianca leant forward, and said eagerly :

‘But you see, avvocato, it breaks my heart not to see Louisa. I do not know what we are to do, or how we are to live without her.’

‘But after all, Signora, it was no news to you. You knew that it was to be her destination ; and she never repined.’

‘Louisa was always brave. If I had had one half the courage of Louisa, I should have been happier in England.’

Lillo gave a quick little glance at Arthur. He fancied Bianca's hasty words might have wounded him ; but he could read nothing but admiration of Bianca in his face.

‘But tell me truly, looking in my face, avvocato. Is she happy—contented?’

‘*Altro!* of course! I should think so, indeed!’ he answered. ‘Her mother says that she would not have it otherwise, and that she has truly found her vocation.’

‘Ah! if Signora Baldova says so, doubt-

less it is true. Does she go often to see her? When may I go?’

‘Not for another six months, dear Signora. She must not be disturbed too soon. They say that it is possible that she may take the black veil in January; and after that, of course, you and her mother may go when you please.’

‘But does she look well?’

‘Not well,’ said Giacinto. ‘But Signora Baldova tells me that she has gained the look of a saint, and the novices all regard her as such.’

‘Louisa a saint! But marvels will never cease!’

‘It is not more marvellous than that you should be an English lady,’ said Signor Baldova, laughing.

‘Ah! two years make a great difference,’ sighed Bianca.

‘When you are young,’ said Count Giacinto. ‘To us, avvocato, they make no difference at all beyond a few more white hairs. Is it not so?’

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Baldova turned again to Bianca.

‘But, dear Signora,’ he said, ‘you have not told me what you think of Giuseppe. Is he not a fine fellow? Is he not tall and broad and stout as an Englishman?’ and he laid his hand on his son’s shoulder with complacency. Giuseppe was his idol.

Arthur bent forward to look at him. The name flashed across him with a sudden rush of recollection—he had not recognised it before. This, then, was the very Giuseppe whom Bianca had half expected to marry. A strong curiosity to see him took possession of him.

Giuseppe hung back when his father would have put him forward. He was tall, and had square military-looking shoulders; his black hair was parted in the middle; his mouth was wide and good-humoured, showing, when he laughed, a row of gleaming white teeth. He wore a fiercely pointed and waxed moustache; his eyes were small, black and brilliant. He was about three years older than Camillo and his sister.

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'It is quite true,' said Bianca, 'he is a brave soldier; that is the effect of the campaign.'

'You mock me!' cried the avvocato. 'Ha! ha! but I will have my revenge! Campaign, forsooth! You would hardly have known him when he came back first, pale, thin, his face like wax, his wounded foot making him lame, with fever and a cough—but such a cough! His mother burst into tears at the sight of him. Bah! it is not campaigns that make people in good condition.'

'Poor fellow!' said Bianca pitifully. 'If it had only been the campaign! but there are things worse to bear than hardships.'

Camillo pressed his sister's hand, Giuseppe twisted his moustache.

'It is but too true!' he muttered.

'Well, well!' said Signor Baldova, for this evening at least in thorough good-humour with himself and everyone else, 'one can only be young once, and to the young follies are natural. Giuseppe is now established in life; he is a personage, a married man. To-

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morrow, my wife and our bride will come and see you. They long to embrace you again!

‘Colomba? yes, it is long since we met—not since we were children; and when she went to the convent to finish her education we saw no more of her. Is she still the same?’

‘She is just the same. She dies to see you!’ said Giuseppe eagerly. ‘She and Louisa are very fond of each other now. Louisa told her that you would be kind to her. Colomba is very timid always.’

‘She always was timid. I remember it well; she was but six years old, and I was eight, when she went into the convent. Louisa used to tease her in the Boboli Gardens, but Lillo and I protected her; and—listen, avvocato—not very long since, when one of her companions came out of the convent, she sent to me by her a box of bonbons and her old doll’s red silk petticoat, to complete an Italian flag!’ cried Bianca, laughing.

Giuseppe showed his white teeth from ear to ear.

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‘Have you the red silk still?’ he asked eagerly.

‘*Che, che!* it has gone—it was two years ago.’

‘Ah!’ said Camillo, ‘Louisa was the strongest of us all, and to think that we shall never have her with us again!’

‘Louisa and Colomba would not have done well in one house,’ said Signor Baldova sagely. Giuseppe did not agree, but he sighed, and passed his hand through his stiff black hair.

They talked on till it was nearly twelve o’clock, when father and son started up, declaring that they did not know that it was so late. Camillo also rose to return to his lodging, and the three men lighted huge cigars, and walked off arm-in-arm together down the street.

Count Giacinto went to his room, and Bianca and her husband were alone. She went on to the balcony to watch till the last sight of her brother had disappeared; he followed her, and they stood leaning over the

balustrade together. The streets were lighted, and the great moon shone like a lamp overhead, making it almost as light as day.

Camillo turned as they reached the corner of the street, and kissed his hand to Bianca. She returned it, and went in, with a little happy sigh of contentment.

‘How will it all go on?’ thought Arthur, when she was gone. ‘But I am not capable of judging to-night,’ which was true enough, for his head ached violently, and he felt quite stunned mentally by the mass of new impressions that had been crowded on him even in these few short hours.

‘Bianca,’ said Arthur the next morning, ‘I have something to say to you, and I do not know how to say it.’

‘Is it so difficult?’ she asked, looking up at him with a bright smile. ‘Is it anything I can do for you?’

She spoke in Italian; she never would speak to Arthur in English now—it caused an odd revulsion of feeling in his mind. In England

it had been so sweet to him that she singled him out by always speaking to him in her own language, and now it would have been even more sweet if she would have talked with him in English ; it would have had a significance to him doubly dear, but it was not to be.

‘After all, it is not a very important thing that I have to say,’ he said. ‘Only it is difficult, for I am afraid that you may perhaps mind my saying it.’

A swift look of distrust flashed across Bianca’s face.

‘What is it ? Is it that you do not like Lillo ? Do not tell me if it is so !’ she said vehemently.

Arthur was thoroughly astonished. ‘Not like him ?’ he exclaimed. ‘My dear Bianca, I never liked anybody so much so quickly in all my life before ; and not only because he is your brother, for that I should like him anyhow, but for his own sake. He is charming.’

‘Ah ! I am glad,’ said Bianca ; but she added proudly, ‘I do not wonder : everyone likes my Lillo.’

‘But,’ said Arthur, ‘to go back to what I was going to say, of course it must be a great expense for your uncle to have us here, and we must not be an expense to him. You see, darling,’ he went on very quickly, ‘if all the money has been spent for Italy and her cause, naturally there cannot be much left, and I want to consider with you how we are to manage it without hurting your uncle’s feelings while we remain here.’

‘Yes, I quite understand,’ said Bianca, nodding her head; ‘I can manage quite well. I will but tell my uncle that now I am at home again, Mariuccia and I will manage all; he need not concern himself about anything in the household: he will be glad to be saved all that trouble.’

‘That will do very well,’ said Arthur, greatly relieved. ‘Mariuccia will understand, will she?’

‘Yes, at once; but Arthur, what about our English servants? do they remain at the hotel?’

‘Is it not best while we are here?’

‘Much the best,’ said Bianca, laughing.

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‘They could not live as we have been accustomed to live—and you will not mind the difference of the hours?’

Arthur did mind very much : it was terrible to him to breakfast at twelve and dine in broad daylight at five o’clock ; but he reassured Bianca, with loving words, it was exactly what he wished, to enter fully into the old Italian ways.

Bianca sent for Mariuccia, and arranged all with her ; the old woman’s face beamed with pleasure.

‘See!’ she exclaimed, ‘what it is to have a rich and amiable Signorino for a spouse. It is long since the padrone has had what he should have ; and a man does not grow grey so quickly when he has plenty to eat and drink. While his whole mind was set upon making a *dot* for you, my Signora, he spent less than ever, and even drank nothing but syrup and water, grudging his daily flask of common red wine—so it was ; but what could I do? What do you say? Soup, roasts, chickens?—and every day! Ma-

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onna be praised! one would almost believe that the good old days had returned.'

'Nonsense!' said Bianca. 'One would almost believe the good days of the future had already dawned; but, Mariuccia,' she went on, the tears rushing to her eyes, 'all this shall never be again; the padrone shall always have everything he wants. Now go—fly; order flasks of the best red Chianti to be sent in for to-day, and I will ask Sir Arthur what he wishes about wine.'

Mariuccia clasped her hands.

'Then we shall have no more pinching and poverty, and the padrone will grow young again; truly, your English Signore came straight from heaven, and that is why he looks like St. George, or the blessed San Michele himself, with his blue eyes and his golden-brown hair!'

'But all the same, Mariuccia,' said Bianca, laying her hand on the old woman's arm, 'not a word to the padrone, except that I take it upon myself to order the household now that I am back. Not one word!'

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‘*Che, che!* what do you take me for?’ said the old woman, laying her brown skinny finger along the side of her nose. ‘Before you arrived, Signora, he said to me that I was to spare nothing; that we would live well while you were with us; and that afterwards——’ she gave an expressive shrug of the shoulders.

‘But that is all over now,’ said Bianca, going away gaily.

Mariuccia was very anxious to show every attention in her power to her young lady’s English husband. When she brought him his coffee, she stood talking and gesticulating to him for fully ten minutes, unheeding his signs that he could not understand what she said.

Arthur found Count Giacinto in a holland blouse, with an old skull-cap on his head, hard at work upon his picture. The big rooms looked more bare than ever by daylight.

Bianca moved about, looking so bright and happy, that Arthur felt as if he scarcely recognised his pale apathetic wife in the bright girl beside him.



CHAPTER IV.

CAMILLO came in to the twelve o'clock breakfast. The brother and sister seemed as if they could not make enough of each other ; they sat talking together for hours ; their conversation was full of allusions to which Arthur had no key.

He began to long for books ; those he had brought with him he had finished on the road. When he asked for some, he was furnished with a ' Dante,' and, by way of lighter reading, Rossi's pamphlet on ' Constitutional Government ;' but these did not suffice to prevent an occasional irrepressible yawn.

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Camillo looked regretful, and offered to take him to the libraries where both English and Italian books could be had ; but he declared it to be impossible to go out till the heat of the day was over.

In the afternoon, Arthur asked Bianca if she felt inclined to go out with him to one of the picture-galleries ; but she seemed so unwilling that he felt discomfited. At last he could bear it no longer, but went out by himself.

The heat was tremendous, and the streets quite empty. Arthur found his way into the Duomo, astonished at the cold vault-like feeling and the darkness, after the heat and glare outside ; but the coolness was very grateful to the senses, and as he slowly went up the great nave his eye, gradually growing accustomed to the darkness, took in all the vast solemn grandeur of the mighty Lombard architecture.

An old woman, kneeling at her prayers, spied him out, and came after him with the conventional beggar's whine for alms ; he

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gave her money, and she went away muttering blessings. But his peace was disturbed, and promising himself to come often to this wonderful dark religious cathedral, he went out again—the heat smiting him as if with a blow when he emerged into the full glare.

He wandered on, choosing the shady sides of the streets, and longing to know where he was, standing in admiration in the great Piazza of the Signoria, and slowly walking through the noble Uffizi till he came upon the Arno. The river was very low, scarcely more than a tawny stream in a vast bed of shingle.

Here he came suddenly upon the old jewellers' bridge, and began to enjoy to the full the peculiar charms of Florence.

He looked with a pleased eye at the pretty trinkets, great strings of rough pearls, beautiful peasants' crosses set with pearls and garnets and turquoises in every shape. He was afraid of venturing upon purchases without aid ; but he chose what he meant to buy for gifts at home. Indeed, had he wished to

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begin making purchases he would have had some difficulty in gaining attention ; everyone who was not asleep in his bed was asleep behind his counter, and a quiet hot stillness hung over all.

He stood in the centre of the bridge under the sheltering arches, which gave him a grateful shade ; and he looked out on the intensely vivid blue of the sky, and the far-away pale mountains, framed in by the picturesque houses of the Lung' Arno and the green trees of the Cascine Gardens. It was all wonderfully charming ; and he went home full of a pleasant excitement over all he had seen and felt.

Arthur found Bianca surrounded by friends : the two Baldova ladies, Colomba beautifully dressed, Signora Fantabrei and her two daughters (the eldest recently married), and all old friends. They seemed to him to be all talking at once, and he fled away to the recesses of his own cool room.

He sat down on one of the hard yellow chairs, and thought to himself what a de-

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generate and luxurious age it must be that he so much missed a comfortable armchair.

Arthur drew out his writing materials, and began a good long letter to his mother.

Why did the pen flag, and at last rest idly on the page? It seemed to him extraordinarily difficult to describe the new life; he was oppressed by the feeling that his mother would want to hear about personalities, how he and Bianca were getting on, whether he was happy, whether her content in returning home had been as perfect as she had anticipated?

Of all this he neither would nor could write. He contented himself with describing Camillo with accuracy, and the old Count fairly well; but there were no characteristic touches: he felt when he had finished his descriptions that the two men would remain as unknown as ever to her.

At last he wrote rapidly enough, and describing the sights and sounds and the beauty he had already seen even in the two short strolls about Florence, he unconsciously

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grew natural and eager. But when he had finished it, he unfortunately read it through, and was struck by its guide-book character, stating facts, giving descriptions, but reserving all the little human touches which make the dry bones live. Such as it was, he sealed it up.

By-and-by he heard the fluttering of gowns and the rustling of silk, and the voices in the *salone* ceased. He was lingering over the direction of his letter, and a half-thought crossed his mind—would his young wife come and seek him? He sighed, drew another sheet of paper to him, and began to write again.

A hand was laid on his shoulder, and a gentle voice said :

‘Arthur!’

Bianca was astonished by his suddenly springing up, throwing his arms round her, and kissing her passionately.

‘But why?’ she said, half laughing.

‘Why? Because you are my own beautiful darling!’ he said.

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Bianca again laughed.

‘Come into the *salone*,’ she said. ‘They are all out, and Uncle Giacinto has gone to speak to a man in the Borgo San Jacopo about a frame.’

Arthur followed her into the other room and sat down. Bianca put her joined hands together on his knee, and looking up at him, she said beseechingly :

‘Colomba and Signora Baldova want me to drive with them up the Bello Sguardo this evening, to see her father and mother. They are at a villa there belonging to Don Marco, the head of the family. We shall spend the evening on the terraces—it is very beautiful. And the Monteneros were old friends of mamma’s. May I go?’

‘My darling, yes, of course. It will be pleasant for you to be with them. Shall I order you a carriage?’

‘No. Colomba has a beautiful one, the gift of the *avvocato*—he showers gifts upon her—we go together. But you also will go with me to take me there?’

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He hesitated.

‘Yes; I will if you wish it.’

‘That is well,’ she said. ‘All foreigners go to Bello Sguardo; the view is magnificent. Villa Montenero is very large and very old; it is greatly admired by foreigners. We shall go at seven, and come back by the light of the moon.’

But when the evening arrived Camillo came in and upset the plan.

‘Do not go with them,’ he said to his brother-in-law. ‘You will find only ladies—six or seven women, at least—and that is only amusing to themselves. Come with me instead. We will sit in the open air, with our cigars, at the *café* near the Palazzo Vecchio. I will make you acquainted with some of our friends. Giuseppe also will be there.’

Arthur infinitely preferred this plan; it had certainly seemed to him an ordeal beyond measure disagreeable to have to spend the evening in a circle of Italian ladies who would look upon him probably

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as a great bore. He was grateful to Lillo, and eager to see something of his friends.

Arthur and Camillo waited to put Bianca into her carriage before starting for their walk together. She came in, looking charmingly pretty in a white muslin gown, covered with knots of pale primrose-coloured satin. Camillo looked at her from head to foot, with an odd expression in his eyes.

Arthur did not understand, when he said drily :

‘So, little sister, you have dressed in such a way that you may receive a friendly reception from the Montenero family. Was that policy learnt in England?’

Arthur was unfeignedly astonished ; but still more so when he saw the effect of her brother’s words upon Bianca. The hot colour rushed into her cheeks, and she exclaimed passionately :

‘This is what it is to live in a foreign country till one ceases to have ideas ! I beg your pardon, Lillo ; but it is soon remedied.’

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She seized upon a penknife, lying on the table, and began ruthlessly to cut off the pretty yellow bows.

‘Bianca! what are you doing?’ cried Arthur, aghast. ‘You looked so pretty, and now you will spoil it all.’

‘Your zeal exceeds mine,’ said Camillo, taking the knife away from her. ‘You are too heedless, little sister. Do not spoil your pretty gown—rather let me do it.’

And kneeling down, he began carefully to detach the bows himself.

‘My zeal exceeds yours because it is remorse,’ said Bianca, still flushed and with glittering eyes. ‘Oh, Lillo! if you had not been here, I should not have seen or remembered. I should have gone; and if Colomba or Donna Francesca had remarked it, I should never have spoken to them again.’

‘But what is it all about?’ said Arthur, somewhat impatiently. ‘I cannot understand. Why do you spoil your ribbons? Are they not becoming?’

‘Becoming!’ cried Bianca. ‘They are hideous! they are bad!’

‘They are yellow, the colour of Austria; and yellow and white, the Papal colours,’ said Lillo, looking up from his task. ‘There, Bianchina, that is the last of them. What shall we do with them?’ And he pointed to the little heap of delicate mutilated finery.

‘Burn them,’ said Bianca excitedly.

‘It is not easy to burn when there is no fire,’ said Camillo, with a light little laugh.

‘Put them out of sight—anywhere,’ said Bianca. And she opened an old bureau which stood in one corner of the room, and thrust them in with no gentle hand.

‘Now you are all white, a true Bianca,’ said Lillo. ‘There is no doubt that your life in England has made you more beautiful than you ever were before. It is quite true,’ he added, looking at Arthur. Arthur looked pleased, but Bianca shook her head.

‘Mamma would not like to see this,’ she said, holding up her hand. ‘See how thin, how very thin it is now! That is not pretty.’

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Arthur took the little hand in his ; it was very white and thin, and the blue veins too visible.

‘But now,’ he said, feeling a little thrill of anxiety shoot through him—‘now you are at home, and are quite happy, this hand will get quite plump again. You feel well, do you not, my darling?’

‘Yes, yes—quite well ; it is nothing,’ she said, drawing her hand away quickly. ‘I hear the carriage. So you will go with Lillo to the *café*, and not to the cool terraces at Villa Montenero?’

‘If you wish it——’ began Arthur eagerly, but Lillo laughingly cut him short.

‘*Che, che!*’ he exclaimed, ‘you are engaged to me?’

As the two men started on their walk together, after Bianca was gone, Arthur asked Camillo very anxiously if he thought that Bianca looked ill?

‘Not ill,’ said Lillo slowly ; ‘I do not think that she is ill, but she has fever in the evenings. Her colour is too bright, too

beautiful—she is very thin. It will soon pass,' he added more lightly; 'it is nothing but excitement; she feels things strongly. She is happy now, thanks to your goodness—but she has suffered much.'

'Yes, she has suffered,' said Arthur, and a quick vision came before him of the little scene in the waiting-room of Ostern station, where he had first fully realized the extent of Bianca's sufferings. He walked on thoughtfully, without speaking.

Presently Camillo broke the silence by saying: 'You must have thought us rather childish, *caro mio*, to cut off all Bianca's ribbons in such a ruthless manner?'

Arthur gave a little laugh. 'You must explain to me the necessity,' he said. 'Of course I can understand that the Austrian colour would be displeasing to you; but your ladies must be much restricted in the colours they wear, if every colour is endowed with a deep political meaning.'

'It is curious how necessary badges and ribbons, and secret signs and colours are to

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keep together bands of men,' Camillo said. 'I suppose it is human nature to seek ever a visible tangible sign of an inner bond; even in matrimony one must have a wedding-ring,' he said, smiling. 'Some hold more to colours and significant nothings than others do, but the fact remains the same; and a man has been known to disappear in Rome for a less offence than wearing colours hostile to the Papal Government.'

'I have a great distrust of all secret societies,' said Arthur anxiously. 'Lillo, I have a brother's right to your confidence now. You will not let yourself be drawn into these dangerous ways?'

Camillo looked up, as if about to speak; but a swift change passed over his face, and he threw out his hands with a little expressive shrug of the shoulders.

'We have arrived,' he said.



CHAPTER V.

THE hot autumn days succeeded each other; the heat of the town became almost insupportable. The Baldovas returned to their little *villino* on Fiesole, and the avvocato resumed his old habit of going backwards and forwards.

Neither Count Giacinto nor Camillo minded the heat, but Arthur acquired a white oppressed look that became speedily evident to Lillo's quick eyes. He spoke of it to Bianca.

'It does not do for an Englishman Bianchina,' he said; 'you must go into the country. You must have a villa with north rooms.'

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'You wish us to go away from you?' said Bianca quickly.

'No, no! you will have me also—your husband will let me come.'

'And Uncle Giacinto?'

'He never leaves his studio—he would not be happy; but it must be done, Bianca mine.'

'Oh, if Arthur had wished it, he would have said so. He told me we should be many months here before he took a house of his own.'

Camillo said very gently: 'He does not say it, because his one thought, the only object of all his life, is to please you, little sister. But that is no reason why we should not think of him; no, on the contrary, we should make him the first object of our thoughts—we owe him so much.'

'You are right,' said Bianca, putting her arms round his neck. 'How is it that you are so much more good than I am? I am like a person that has been beaten with rods, still sore and stiff, jealous of every movement for fear it should hurt.'

Camillo saw, with the strange far-seeing intuition that he possessed, that Bianca was beginning to think more and more of her husband—to watch his looks, and listen for his words; and he also saw that she was afraid of letting herself care for him, that a jealous fear existed (though unrecognised) in her breast, that if once love gained the mastery in her heart, the old gods that had held their sway there so long would fall into dust. The meaning of the beautiful lines of our greatest poet of modern times was in his soul :

‘Love took up the harp of Life, and smote on all the chords with might ;
Smote the chord of Self, that, trembling, pass’d in music out of sight.’

‘Then, Bianca,’ he said, ‘it is decided. Go to Arthur—ask him to take you into the country; and to-morrow evening, after dinner, we will go in search of a villa.’

‘Could you not ask him?’

Lillo looked at her, and gave her a quick little kiss.

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'I love him too well to deprive him of any pleasure,' he said, laughing.

He was determined that if any words or actions of his could help Arthur to win his wife, they should not be wanting.

There was, however, no time for Bianca to speak to Arthur that evening; he did not come in till late, and when he did so the *salone* was full of evening visitors.

Arthur had made rapid progress in his wife's language; as he now never spoke any other excepting a few words night and morning to his English valet, he acquired an unusual facility in both speaking and understanding. He did not, however, join much in the conversation of the Italians by whom he was always more or less surrounded; he still wondered at the extraordinary rapidity of their sudden transitions from laughter to frowns, from humour to pathos. Sometimes the sounds became confused in his ears, and he felt inclined to put his hands to his ears and cry, 'Do be silent for one moment!'

Sometimes an odd sense of amusement

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came over him as the thought flashed across him, 'What would Roger do in like circumstances? how would he look and bear himself?'

The *salone* was always full every evening with people coming and going: some in evening dress, some not. The brother and sister were exceedingly popular.

Bianca, unlike most Italian girls of her class, had been educated at home, and plunged from her earliest childhood into all the consultations, intrigues and mysteries which surrounded the followers of the Liberal party; the society of men—earnest, enthusiastic, modern men—seemed a return into her native element: she entered with all her heart and soul into their hopes and plans, and attracted them greatly by her beauty and her sympathy.

Arthur, seeing her now, began to understand what an utter change the life at Dalton had been to her, and how the pleasant girlish pursuits and duties of May and Jaqueline had seemed to her so entirely void of all interest.

That evening, when he came in late from walking under the trees in the Cascine Gardens, whither he often went in hopes of a stray breath of fresh air from the river, he found Camillo, Giuseppe, and the Fantabreis, all sitting round Bianca, with some other young men who had many of them shared the dangers of Charles Albert's campaigns.

Bianca was all in white, as he loved best to see her, and in her fair hair and on her breast she had fastened crimson roses with green leaves—the colours of Italy, as she pointed out to Camillo triumphantly.

‘ Il *verde* la speme tant’ anni pasciuta ;
Il *rosso* la gioja d’ averla compiuta ;
Il *bianco* la fede fraterna d’ amor.’*

All who were present in the *salone* that night were Liberals—all but old Count Giacinto, who was not a real Codino, and indeed had so much sympathy with the young men that they never scrupled to say what they would before him.

One of the Fantabreis asked Camillo to

* Berchet.

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tell them something of the fatal siege. The siege of Rome was a theme which ran like a thrill of fire through audience and narrator.

Arthur, leaning with his arms on the back of Bianca's chair, watched the swift emotions crossing each other over all those dark-skinned mobile faces.

Camillo, with his full low voice, told well what he had to tell : he described the fighting with animation and gesticulations ; then with pathos, which made tears course down bearded faces, described the massacre, the daily, hourly fall of the besieged—man after man filling up the empty gaps, and dying at their posts. Everyone there had friends, acquaintances, or kinsmen among them, and hands were clenched, and eyes blazed as the young soldier spoke.

Bianca's beautiful eyes in especial flashed with excitement ; the hand which held Lillo's trembled, and was as cold as ice. Then suddenly, as it were, angry feelings subsided, a new expression came on all, and the men drew nearer and talked so low that it was

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almost whispering together, and their faces grew secret and eager, and they did not know how time was flying.

At last, when a bell suddenly loudly clanged out, they sprang apart like guilty men.

‘That is the Misericordia bell,’ said Bianca simply.

Angelo Fantabrei quietly slipped out, and walked off down the street.

‘Where has he gone?’ asked Arthur, sitting up in his chair, and betraying by his looks that during the last part of their conversation he had been almost asleep.

‘The Misericordia bell.’

‘What is that?’

‘It is one of our institutions,’ said Camillo, rising to his feet. ‘A brotherhood, we join rich, poor, all alike, and we bind ourselves for one month in every year to assemble when the bell rings. This is one of our duties.’

‘What for?’ asked Arthur.

‘We go to any accident that may have

taken place; we carry the sick to the hospital; we beg when money is wanted; there are many good works to be done. Some of us are wanted to-night. There is probably an accident. It is Fantabrei's month—that is why he has gone.'

'And do they always go at once, like that?'

'Yes,' said Bianca. 'From balls, from the theatre—wherever they may be. Angelo is very good; he is always ready. You have seen them, Arthur; they wear a black dress and masked veil. See! they are going now down the street with a litter. Some one must have been hurt.'

'So those are members of the Misericordia?' said Arthur. 'I have seen them often. It is a noble institution,' he added warmly.

'Yes; it does much good,' remarked Camillo simply.

The bell now ceased ringing. Bianca gave a quick little shiver.

'I do not like the sound of that bell,' she

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said. 'It tells of suffering and pain, and I wish that no such things existed on earth,' she cried passionately.

'So do I, little sister,' said Lillo gently. 'For then it would not be earth, but we should have gained heaven.'

Count Giacinto now came forward and glanced out of the window.

'Giuseppe,' he said, 'I saw that rascal Ceccho to-day.'

Bianca grew very pale.

'I thought he had gone back to Rome?' she said.

'No,' answered Giuseppe. 'But he is no longer our cook. My father is too difficult to please—and I do not wonder. *Per Bacco!* I would rather be his son than his servant.'

'I hope you do not walk unarmed, Camillo,' said Count Giulio Fantabrei, who had heard the story of Ceccho and his evil deeds.

'Armed? *che, che!* too much trouble, Giulio mine.'

Arthur had only laughed at Bianca's terror.

He was astonished at the importance the Italians seemed to attach to Ceccho's threats.

'Surely there is no real danger?' he said inquiringly.

Count Giacinto shook his head.

'It is not good to have an enemy,' he said.

'Did you speak to Ceccho, Uncle Giacinto?' asked Camillo.

'He had the impudence to speak to me—to tell me he had lost his situation, and was seeking one once more. He asked me if Sir Arthur wanted anyone——'

'You told him no?'

'Of course.'

The guests rose up to take their leave. It was growing late. Camillo would have lingered till all were gone, but Bianca, with feverish earnestness, entreated him to go with the others. He laughed, and called her silly little coward; but the others, anxious to have his company, seconded her, and all walked away together.

When they were gone, Bianca went up to her husband, who had risen to his feet

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and passed his hand sleepily through his hair. She took hold of a button of his coat, and said shyly :

‘Arthur, I have been thinking—that is, Camillo thinks—that Florence is too hot for you. Would you like to take some villa? I do not wish it, it is not for me ; but—but Englishmen do not like the heat.’

‘My Bianca,’ he said, very much surprised, and feeling as if the prospect of getting into the country was like the opening of the gates of Paradise, ‘I cannot tell you how much I shall like it.’

‘Are you so soon tired of my home?’ she asked.

‘No, no, no! do not think that. It is only—it is so hot, Bianca. And, as you suggest it yourself, I should—oh, I should so like it! But,’ he added quickly, ‘not unless Camillo and your uncle come with us.’

‘Lillo will come ; but Uncle Giacinto, no. He never leaves his studio ; he would not be happy. He will come up to us in the evenings ; we shall see him every day.’

‘My darling,’ said Arthur tenderly, ‘you are so good! I thank you so for thinking of it for my sake.’

‘It was Lillo,’ faltered Bianca. But Arthur would not think that; it must have been her own idea, he thought and believed.

‘It is very late now,’ he said; ‘but it is the coolest hour, and I want to consult you about your uncle.’ He put his arm round her and drew her close to him. ‘You see, my Bianca, in the old days before you were mine he worked hard to make money for you—his one thought was for you. It is your turn now to think for him.’

She looked up at him with her sweet face troubled.

‘I, Arthur? What can I do?’

‘We must think how we can manage it together. He is old; he must have good food and wine, and money in his pocket; he is longing to buy that easel in the Via Maggio, of which he talks so much. And look here, Bianca.’ He lifted up the old palette, and showed how everything was

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wanted—new brushes, new paints, new canvases. ‘Listen to my plan. If we ask him to accept a little income from you——’

‘Oh, Arthur!’ cried Bianca, hiding her face in his breast, ‘you are too good to me! —you are too good!’

‘No; only listen, my own darling! If we do this, he will spend it all on the studio, and leave nothing for the table. Now you can perhaps think of some way of managing to prevent that. Let us call the sum a hundred pauls a week. Do not cry, Bianca—do not cry!’

‘They are only happy tears,’ she said, looking up radiantly. ‘You are so good. A hundred pauls a week! but with that there will be no more trouble, no more hungry, empty days—he will be quite rich!’

‘But how can you explain to him? what can you say so as to make quite sure that he will accept? One thing, Bianca, you must promise me—the gift is to be entirely from yourself to him; it is your right to give it to him.’

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'Ah! it will not be difficult, put like that. You are too good to me—you are too good!'

She put her arms round his neck and kissed him very gently.

Arthur gave a quick little sigh, suppressed at once, lest she should hear it. Her kiss and her pretty gratitude were sweet to him, but he wanted more. They were not love!





CHAPTER VI.

THE Villa Caprini is to be had,' said Camillo, coming in to breakfast the next day.

Bianca had resumed her old habits, and breakfasted always in a peignoir, with her hair hanging down behind in one magnificent plait.

She started at his words.

'That is the villa of which I spoke to you at the Manor House, Arthur,' she said. 'It is very beautiful!'

'Ah!' he exclaimed eagerly. 'That is just what I should like. There are plenty of rooms, you said; and they are large?'

'They are very large; I have been into

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the house. There is a great hall, with a stone floor—it is cool and dark ; there is a terrace, hanging over a garden, with orange and lemon trees, and I think you would like it.’

‘So you are going into the country ?’ said Giacinto slowly. ‘You are quite right, Sir Arthur. Bianca has fever too often ; she wants more air.’

Arthur looked at his wife, startled at the old man’s observation. What did they all mean, saying that she had fever ? She looked well—brilliant—with a lovely colour in her cheeks.

‘It is nothing,’ she said, half-laughing. ‘I am well ; it is not I that require the change.’

‘We will go this evening, shall we not ?’ asked Camillo ; ‘and see whether the villa is suitable for you or not ?’

When the cool evening came, they drove there all together in the carriage that Arthur had procured for Bianca’s use.

The Villa Caprini was situated half-way up the hill of Fiesole ; it was a large, fine old

house, standing on a raised terrace, in the middle of a truly Florentine garden—a garden containing the much-prized bosco of ilex-trees, and a little pond inhabited by gold-fish. The terrace was adorned with orange and lemon trees, as Camillo had said, and was gay with oléanders in full crimson glory.

Arthur went out upon the terrace, and looked at the glorious view—the grey, olive-tinted valley, the river, the great Duomo with its exquisite campanile, and far away on the horizon of the most delicate amethyst colour the lovely outline of the marble hills of Carrara.

He came back to Bianca and Camillo in enthusiastic admiration.

‘It is divine!’ he exclaimed. ‘It is a glimpse of Paradise!’

‘It pleases you?’ said Bianca. ‘Yes; this is my Italy.’

‘Will you not see the rooms?’ asked Lillo. ‘The contadina here takes care of them; and behind him they saw a slender, brown-

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skinned, peasant woman, holding her baby in her arms.

‘ I hope Vossignoria will take the villa,’ she said. ‘ We shall be so glad.’

The rooms were all that they could wish : very large, very cool, and with splendid views.

Arthur wrote to the owner, and took the villa that very night ; and the following days were all spent in getting it ready to move into, and in finding servants.

Camillo was indefatigable ; he saw that the idea of the villa was to Arthur like cold water to a thirsty man, and he gave all his energies to the work, so that before the week was over, not only were they installed comfortably in the Villa Caprini, but a certain amount of comfortable armchairs and sofas had been found by Camillo and bought by Arthur.

The first evening that Arthur spent in the new house, it seemed to him that never before in all his life had he known what comfort was.

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One day passed much like another ; by degrees the heat diminished as the autumn months rolled away, and cooler, fresher weather began. Then winter settled over the world, and Arthur's bodily vigour and strength came back, and all the lusty energy of his English blood.

Then began to tell on him a kind of life to which he was utterly unaccustomed : he had nothing to do. Inwardly he began to fret over the idleness of their life, and to long—no one knew how intensely—for the work, the business, and the active sport of which he had never hitherto known the want.

Bianca seemed to do nothing all day long. She wandered about the rooms ; she received her brother's friends, and visited her own in the afternoons and evenings ; she was fond of sitting at the window of the studio in the Via Ceretani, looking out ; and she drove at the fashionable hour in the Cascine Gardens. She sometimes did a little embroidery, and she was always ready to talk on the subjects which absorbed her thoughts ; but she was no

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companion to her husband in any sense of the word.

When the winter began, Arthur regularly every day devoted time to visiting picture-galleries, churches, and all the curious and interesting things to be seen in the neighbourhood. He bought books, he studied history, and endeavoured in every way to create interests and occupations. For a long time he persevered in trying to persuade Bianca to accompany him, especially to the picture-galleries, and once or twice he prevailed; but she seemed to care so little, and to grow so quickly tired, that he found his own enjoyment of them spoilt by solicitude for her, and he gave up the attempt at last.

In these days his thoughts would, even against his will, wander away homewards, and rest on the image of his mother, always busy, always employed, not only on the useful occupations of the practical Lady Bountiful, but on beautiful drawings, good music, interesting books, intelligent and improving

conversation. He would allow himself to build castles-in-the-air of how that mother's influence would elevate the tone of Bianca's mind, educate her thoughts and opinions; but as the long days passed on, and every little attempt he made to interest her and draw her into his own modes of thought were one after another abandoned, he began to see that the castles-in-the-air were truly myths, and Mrs. Dalton's words came back upon him with a force they had not possessed at the time they were uttered, 'Do not commit the fatal mistake of thinking you are going to write your own ideas, thoughts and habits on a blank page. Bianca is not a blank—she is not a child: she is a passionate unhappy woman.' Ah, not unhappy now, at least, thank God! and when Arthur thought that, he felt that whatever might befall, at least he had had the only reward he had ever definitely promised himself—he had made her perfectly happy.

Camillo was very much occupied. He was obliged to be in Florence all day, but

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he always came back to the villa in the evening. Arthur did not know the exact nature of his occupation: he seemed to belong to some office; he was studying much, and sat up reading often far into the night, and his young eager face often looked anxious and preoccupied. But with all his own occupations he had time to see that at the Villa Caprini everything was not going quite as he would have had it. He saw Arthur looking dull and dispirited, yawning often, and more inclined to remain in his own room, shrinking away from Bianca's numerous visitors; and even in his own inexperience Camillo saw what ailed him—that he was devoured by deadly *ennui*; but he only felt harassed, he did not know how to remedy it.

Arthur grew more and more weary; he welcomed every night as it finished every day, as month after month went on; and strangely enough, instead of entering more completely and fully into Bianca's former longings for her own native land, he began to wonder what the attraction had been, for

in every man's breast, be he French, English, German, or native of lovely Italy, is the belief deeply engrained that there is no place like home.





CHAPTER VII.

IT was the month of March; cold east winds were sweeping over the country. In the large somewhat bare rooms of the Villa Caprini, Arthur fancied that he had never felt such cold in his life. Time was hanging even more heavily than usual on his hands. Bianca was not well; she had had a long feverish cold. She grew very thin, but a bright pink colour was on her cheeks; her eyes were brilliant; she was languid and listless when alone with Arthur, but in the afternoons, and when among her friends, she was more animated and full of excitement than ever.

Arthur bought a horse, and took long

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rides. One or two Englishmen came to Florence, and though he enjoyed their visits, they soon went on their way, and he saw no more of them.

At last one day a letter arrived which struck like an electric shock upon Arthur, rousing up every thrill of energy in his composition.

It was from the Chairman of the Conservative Association of his county, and it informed him that Captain Sandown had announced his immediate intention of accepting the Chiltern Hundreds, and that it was necessary to nominate a Conservative candidate at once. The Liberals had already entered the field; but if no time were lost there would be no danger whatever from the opposition, for the Liberal candidate was not a strong one, and Arthur possessed very great local influence and popularity.

The Chairman, Mr. Wilson, urged him to come home at once, in the strongest terms; he said that Captain Sandown had put off his

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announcement to the very last, and the matter must be decided as quickly as possible.

Arthur read the letter over twice; it was quite unexpected; he had not anticipated Captain Sandown's resignation at all that year, though he knew that his strong-minded wife was a hunting lady, and absolutely detested London, and that when they had been married a very short time she announced openly that she would give her husband no peace till he gave up his seat. Still he and Jaqueline had said in joke that they thought their neighbour's resolution and pluck would keep him going one more year at least. But no, the moment had come; there could be no mistake about that letter.

Arthur could read between the lines a certain anxiety as to his own conduct, and he knew, as well as if he had been told it, that worthy old Mr. Wilson had been sitting with Lady St. Leger and talking over with her the possibility of his immediate return, and that they had worked themselves up into alarm and

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anxiety enough about it to account for the urgency of the appeal.

Arthur turned over his letters; he was alone in the dining-room; Bianca had not yet appeared, though it was twelve o'clock, and breakfast ready. He expected to find a letter from his mother, and he found one from her and one from Jaqueline, both addressed to his wife, and one from Colonel Dalton to himself.

He opened this one; it was very short—written evidently in a great hurry.

'MY DEAR ST. LEGER,' it said,—'I hope that you will let nothing stand in the way of your immediate return. I do not think Wilson is quite so happy about his team as he used to be. Poor Sandown has been very idle in Parliament, and has neglected his constituents; and Mrs. Sandown is exceedingly unpopular. On the other hand, your opponent, Colonel Gregson, has of course no local interest, but he has a prodigious gift of the gab, he has the charm of novelty, and he is

one of those troublesome sort of individuals who leave no stone unturned to gain their ends.

‘The seat always has been safe, and I do not doubt that it will be so this time ; but we have had a recent lesson as to the folly of over-certainty in the loss of Cranstone last year. So I can only urge you not to lose time.

‘Your mother is rejoiced at anything happening to bring you home, and I need not say how glad we shall all be to have you back. You have missed some capital runs this year. I have only been out twice, owing to my usual enemy the gout. Your aunt and May desire me to send their love to you and Bianca. I hope that her cold is better now.

‘Your affectionate uncle, etc.’

Arthur laid down the letter with a beating heart. It expressed not a single word of doubt about the possibility of his return home. Could it be that there really existed no

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such doubt? that it would be as clear to both himself and his wife that it was his plain duty to go at once to fulfil the duties to which he had pledged himself?

He covered his face with one hand, and tried to think calmly. His pulses were bounding, his head throbbing. He could hardly realize how intensely he wished to go; how glorious the prospect seemed of home, work, hope, keen interest again! He had always looked forward eagerly to a Parliamentary career, and now that the possibility was so near, the charms of it were proportionately tempting. It would be life again—real, active, useful life!

He rose up and stretched all his strong young limbs with a glad free movement. His blue eyes lighted up. He read his uncle's letter again, and a bright smile was on his face.

Suddenly came on his ear the soft delicate brushing of his wife's gown as she came across the stone floor of the big hall; with a quick movement he seized the letters, hers

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as well as his own, and thrust them into his pocket ; at all events, let them breakfast in peace. He was as hungry as a boy ; he had not felt so hungry for a long time. He would choose his own time to talk over the arrangements for their departure with her. It would no doubt be a grief to her ; poor Bianca !

He met her at the door, and, putting his arm round her, led her tenderly to her place. He thought with a little pang that he had never seen her look so very white, her eyes so large.

She wore a long pale-blue peignoir, and the big plait of fair hair, hanging lower than her knees, seemed as if the weight must be too great for the slender white throat.

Arthur took it up in his hands.

‘What wonderful hair you have, my Bianca !’ he said.

‘Yes, it is long ; but it is very heavy—it makes my head ache,’ she said wearily.

‘Did you not sleep well ?’

‘No ; I had dreams. They frightened

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me,' she answered, seating herself by the table.

'Well, let us eat our breakfast, and then you shall tell me your evil dreams,' he said, helping her and himself. 'See, what a beautiful sunshiny day! I am so hungry.'

'I cannot eat,' replied Bianca, pushing away her plate. 'It is cold; and I am tired.'
'Do not let the dreams trouble you, *anima mia!*' said Arthur caressingly. 'You know, in England we always say that dreams go by contraries.'

'I know. It is not that I am afraid of their coming true; but I dreamt of what is past, and it brought back the old suffering, and I could not bear it. I thought I was at Dalton again; and I was crying again for Lillo and home.'

The colour faded out of Arthur's face; he pushed away his food—the very taste seemed to have gone out of it.

'Poor little Bianca!' he said softly. 'Were you alone?'

'Yes; quite alone.'

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'I was not there?'

'No; if you had been there, I should have known that it was all right, and that you would take me away.'

'Will you not eat something, my darling?' said Arthur.

'No—I cannot eat;' and she rose up from the table and went and stood in the flood of sunshine that was pouring in at the window.

Arthur rang the bell.

'Let us go into the other room,' he said. 'You are cold; there is a better fire there.'

She shivered, but did as he wished. She suddenly stopped at the door.

'But, Arthur,' she urged, 'you said you were so hungry, and you have not finished; do go back. I am afraid everything is cold; let Pietro make you an omelette.'

'No, no!' he replied, with a quick smile; 'I was mistaken after all. I was not hungry; I have had quite enough.'

'I will then go and finish my toilette. Will you drive with me to the Cascine to-day?'

'I do not know; we will see,' said Arthur,

feeling that before that little trivial question could be decided, a step affecting the whole future of his life must be taken.

Bianca went away to finish dressing, and Arthur threw himself into a chair to re-read his letters, trusting that they would act upon him like a spell again, and restore to him the confidence that he had felt before his wife's appearance ; but the confidence would not be conjured back : a sickening dread had taken its place. He altogether distrusted Bianca's affection for him ; he knew he had no reason to trust in it. He distrusted his own resolution even if it were clearly proved to his own mind that the right course to take was to oppose her will, and to go back to his home-duties. He loved her as passionately as ever ; to the hope that that love might yet be returned, he clung as a drowning man catches at a straw, unreasoningly.

He felt as if he could not tell her : he was a very coward about giving her pain, after the words she had used that morning at breakfast especially. But it must be done ;

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he must write that very day : had not both Mr. Wilson and his uncle said that every day was of importance, and any delay would not be right or fair to his party ?

Bianca did not appear again till nearly two o'clock. She had fancied her husband looking troubled, and with a gentle wish to please him, she had caused herself to be dressed in the colours he liked best : she wore the sapphire-blue velvet gown, and sapphire rings he had given her on her slender white fingers.

She felt a little disappointed that he did not notice her dress ; she drew her chair close to the fire, and with the bellows blew it up into a cheerful blaze.

'Arthur,' she said, 'you did not tell me whether you would drive with me to the Cascine to-day ; and I have promised to go with Colomba to the Pergola theatre to-night, to take there little Giovanna Montenero. It will be a pleasure to see the child's delight. Will you not come ? Lillo and Giuseppe both join us.'

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'I will, I dare say ; we will see,' replied Arthur restlessly.

Bianca looked up astonished.

'Why do you not sit still?' she said. 'Why do you walk up and down, up and down like that?'

'I will sit still,' he answered resolutely, throwing himself into a chair.

'There, that is better,' she said. 'Now we can arrange our plans more comfortably.'

'Yes,' returned Arthur hoarsely, feeling that it must be done, but conscious that, do what he would, the announcement must be a shock to his young wife. 'Yes, my Bianca ; and I want very much to talk to you about something that——'

He was interrupted by the door opening and Camillo coming in. Arthur started up to meet him, feeling as if his entrance were quite a reprieve.

'I have got away early,' said Lillo, kissing his sister. 'We have a holiday to-day, and I thought I would come up to see what you proposed doing this afternoon.'

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‘I am going to drive down to Florence,’ said Bianca. ‘Will you both come with me?’

‘Camillo!’ interrupted Arthur, with a sudden determination coming into his mind; ‘I want very much to consult you on a matter of business. It is really business, my darling,’ he added, seeing that Bianca had raised herself in her chair with a startled look. ‘I will not keep him longer than I can help; but we will go to my room. You will not mind being left, Bianchina?’

‘No, no,’ she answered, sinking back satisfied. ‘I will wait for you; but if the carriage comes before you have finished, take notice I shall send for you, so lose no time;’ and she shook her finger with a little playful movement.

Camillo answered her merrily, and then followed Arthur from the room.

Arthur’s sitting-room was on the north side of the hall. It felt cold; he knelt down before the stove and blew up the fire within it. Then he took out cigars from a drawer, and handed one to Camillo.

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‘The room is cold,’ he said. ‘But the stove burns well ; it will soon be warmer.’

Camillo, looking up, was startled by his brother-in-law’s looks.

‘But you are as white as a ghost, Arthur,’ he said. ‘Surely you have not had bad news?’ And his dark soft eyes looked up at him full of anxious sympathy.

Arthur tried to laugh lightly.

‘I do not know what to call it — good, or bad news,’ he said. ‘But it is very important news to me. Can you read English letters?’

‘A little ; not very well,’ said Camillo.

Arthur handed him the letter, he felt it might be easier so ; but he soon saw by his puzzled brow and contracted looks that he did not understand.

‘It is no use,’ he said. ‘Give it to me ; I will try to explain.’

‘I am very stupid,’ said Lillo, with a sigh. ‘But there are technical expressions in the letter. Why do they want you to return? It is a long journey.’

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‘I have pledged myself to stand for the county,’ went on Arthur—‘long ago, before I was married. You understand? To be elected—to go into Parliament.’

‘Ah, I understand,’ said Lillo suddenly. ‘They will be much disappointed. I am sorry for you; it is painful to have to disappoint expectations. I am very sorry.’

‘But I do not see how I am to disappoint them,’ seeing with consternation that not for one moment did the possibility of his return occur to his brother-in-law.

Camillo still misunderstood.

‘It is not easy,’ he said. ‘But I always think that, even in matters of business, one does not waste words if one is very explicit. It is so much better that everything should be clearly understood on both sides.’

‘Yes,’ said Arthur, ‘that is quite true; but I don’t think you understand me, Lillo. This is a very serious question; it affects the whole of my—of our future.’

Camillo looked up at him with grave, thoughtful eyes, but did not speak.

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'Don't you see?' went on Arthur, with a very little touch of impatience in his voice. Why could not Camillo see at once, and save him all these explanations? 'I cannot spend all my life in idleness; that is not the life that a man can lead in this world. He is not only responsible to himself, but to his country. You, of all men, must see and recognise that.'

Camillo nodded gravely.

'But,' said Arthur falteringly, 'what am I to do?'

'I think it is of no use,' replied Lillo. 'I think you will find it better to give it up and remain here.'

'If it were only my own happiness,' said Arthur quickly, 'you know that I would not hesitate.'

Lillo put his hand gently on his brother-in-law's shoulder. He understood him well enough.

'But it is not only happiness—there is my duty. I cannot see my way clearly,' he said, with a distressed look. 'I recollect too well

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what Bianca suffered in England before, to subject her to that again ; but I thought that now—she has been with you all, she is very happy, the longing and home-sickness are quite gone—I thought that it might be different. If I consent to enter the political arena, we should have to go home at once—I mean back to England ; but we could return here after the Parliamentary Session was over, and perhaps every year. Oh ! cried he, with another of those restless stretches of all his limbs, ‘ you can hardly understand how I long to be at work again—and such work, political life, has always been my ideal.’

‘ Yes, I understand it all,’ said Lillo slowly. ‘ Only you will forgive me if I think of my poor little sister.’

‘ Lillo !’ said Arthur eagerly, ‘ listen to me. Could you not come with us ? it would do more to reconcile Bianca to our departure than anything else in all the world. Lillo, I have learnt to look on you quite as a brother of my own. Do as I ask you

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now I be a real brother to me, and help me, for I need help sorely.'

'If you could wait another four months,' said Lillo, 'then I would come with all my heart. But now I am tied hand and foot, I could not go. I wish I could, if——' and he hesitated.

'If what?' said Arthur quickly.

'If you really do go.'

'But do you not understand that I must go? Lillo, Bianca is so young now—she will fall more easily into the ways of English life if I take her home now.'

'And the ways—are they so different?'

'She found them so.'

Poor Arthur walked up and down in his perplexity.

'What can I do?' he said, unconsciously throwing open his hands like an Italian. 'I cannot be idle, I cannot neglect my duty. I have my work like other men, and there are large numbers dependent on me—English landlords have heavy responsibilities. All this apart from this opening into political life.'

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‘I am very sorry,’ said Lillo, with a look of grief which pained Arthur.

‘You cannot be more sorry than I am to take her away,’ he said.

‘And it must be?’

‘Do you yourself see an alternative?’

‘The only alternative I see is one I scarcely like to mention,’ said Camillo sadly.

‘What is it, Lillo?’

‘It is a further sacrifice from you of everything your heart holds dear—of your hopes, even of your obvious home-duties, to love.’ Lillo spoke passionately and quickly, then his voice fell suddenly: ‘But it is too much, it cannot be; even if you offered it, it should not be accepted.’

Arthur did not speak for a moment, then he covered his eyes with his hand and said:

‘Lillo, I only promised myself one happiness when I married one who had never given me a thought or word of love, and that was to see her happy again.’

Camillo clasped his hand. He went on:

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‘But even then my sacrifice was not complete, for I never gave up hope, and I thought—I thought (God help me!) that such devotion as mine must win from her some return; that if I could win her heart she would be willing to give up a little, a very little, for my sake; but the time to ask it has come too soon, and it is this that makes me despair. I do not know how to ask her to go with me.’

‘If you could only wait a little while—a few months more.’

‘My best hope would be your coming with us. Is it quite impossible? And then,’ he added humbly, ‘you could teach me how to make my poor little wife happy.’

Camillo was touched, the tears rushed into his eyes.

‘Only a few short months,’ he said.

He thought or fancied at first that only time was needed to develop Bianca’s love for her husband; but of late he had fancied that he might be mistaken, that it might not be so after all.

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‘Arthur,’ he said, ‘will you let me talk to Bianca, or would you rather tell her yourself?’

‘Oh, if you would!’ cried Arthur earnestly, ‘I cannot tell you how grateful I should be. I dread it more than I can say.’

‘I can understand that,’ said Camillo. ‘I will drive with her this afternoon. She might dine with Uncle Giacinto, as she did last time we went to the theatre. Will you join us there at dinner? Then I shall have told her all. You will see how she has borne it, and you will be able to judge better whether it is possible to take her away. Yes, yes, I know,’ he said hastily, stopping Arthur’s words as he began again to say that the thing was quite inevitable. ‘It must, it shall be made possible. Does my plan please you, then?’

‘It will do,’ said Arthur. ‘Thank you, Lillo; you are good to me.’

Lillo did not answer—his heart was very full.

There came a light tap at the door, and Bianca’s voice cried gaily :

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‘How much longer am I to wait, my friends?’

‘We are coming,’ cried Camillo. ‘That is, I am coming, for Arthur has letters to write. He will join us in the Via Ceretani at five o’clock.’

Arthur came out. He did not speak, and something in the troubled look of his face made Bianca forbear to question him. He took her to the door and put her into her pretty carriage with its white fur rugs. Camillo followed, and they drove away together.

Bianca looked back and waved her fingers to him as they turned out of the *cancello* into the road.





CHAPTER VIII.

‘**W**HAT is the matter with Arthur, Lillo?’ said Bianca, as the horses began to trot rapidly down the hill. ‘Something must have happened to disturb him.’

‘You ought to know best — his wife,’ answered Camillo gravely.

She gave a little shrug of the shoulders.

‘But I do not,’ she said. ‘He does not tell me.’

‘No; he only tells you his pleasures, not his troubles, I am afraid, little sister.’

‘But if he did, I should perhaps not understand them,’ said Bianca. ‘Naturally, all his affairs are English.’

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Camillo fancied her tone was indifferent, and, fresh from his interview with Arthur, he could not help feeling a little indignant even with his beloved twin-sister.

‘If mamma had thought as you do, our father’s life would have been very different to what it was.’

‘Yes,’ said Bianca. ‘But then we are not like papa and mamma; it could never be the same.’

‘But after all, Bianchina,’ went on Lillo, ‘you have married an Englishman.’

She began to look startled—her eyes opened, she caught hold of his hand.

‘What do you mean, Lillo?’ she said. ‘Do not frighten me! What have I done? Arthur does not complain of me?’

‘No, no, no! Complain of you! why, he loves you more than the whole world beside, and you know it quite well. It is not that.’

‘Ah!’ she said, a little pettishly. ‘Then why do you say in that grave voice, “after all, you have married an Englishman,” when

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you know that all my life I am trying to forget that he is not one of us ?'

'But it will not do to forget it, Bianca,' said Lillo. 'It would be useless to ignore what is a fact, especially as the fact must entail consequences. Arthur has his own country to think of, and his own duties to perform.'

'But that is all over,' cried Bianca, looking at him with startled eyes. 'He brought me home ; he will not change his mind.'

'He has done a great deal for you, Bianca,' said Lillo. 'But do you wish always to accept in this world, and never to give anything in return ?'

'But I have nothing to give,' she faltered.

Camillo saw that she was fencing with him, trying to put off what she felt with an instinctive dread might be coming.

'Bianchina,' he said, taking her hand gently, 'you must go some day to your husband's home.'

'Never !' she cried, tearing her hand away

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from him. 'What do you mean? Go back to prison? I should die!'

'Some time you must go back,' he said firmly. 'You remember how you suffered in exile?'

'Remember!' she cried. 'It is burnt in on my brain as if with a red-hot iron.'

'And would you see Arthur suffer as you did then?'

'He cannot, he never would!' she cried. 'You do not know the English, Lillo; they are not like us, they could not understand. They told me I could be reconciled if I chose to try. Well, Arthur can do as they said. They thought it would be easy, and no doubt they are right for themselves.' She spoke fast, in great excitement; then, turning round to her brother, she went on: 'But what does it all mean, that you are saying to me? Is he tired of it already? Does he want to go back to England? Tell me quickly, Lillo!'

'Bianca, darling, he does not want to go; it is not that. It is that he *must* go. He has duties to perform—he has to go into

Parliament—these things are the business and occupation of a man's life. He cannot give them up.'

'He promised me!' she said, with clenched teeth.

'And he has fulfilled his promise,' said Lillo quickly. 'There never breathed a more honourable man. He has brought you home. If you go back with him now, he will bring you again to Italy after the summer is over.'

'I will not go!' she cried. 'Oh! Lillo, Lillo! do you not see what it means?—that Florence will never more be my home! You do not know. If Arthur goes back to Osternleigh, he will be at work again. People are always wanting him; he has great estates to manage. And I know an Englishman who is in Parliament; he is tied—tied hand and foot. If he goes now, he will never bring me back. Now all is arranged: his mother manages for him, other people do his work, all goes on well in his absence. You do not know.'

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‘All this makes me understand poor Arthur better than I did before,’ said Lillo. ‘Oh, Bianca mine! we cannot live only for ourselves. Can you give up nothing—nothing for your husband?’

She looked at him with trembling lips and terrified eyes.

‘I would give up everything but this!’ she cried. ‘But I will not go.’

They had arrived already at the walls of Florence, and were beginning to drive rapidly through the streets. Camillo was startled at Bianca’s paleness.

‘We had better go first to the Via Ceretani,’ he said. ‘And there you can become more calm; we cannot go to the Cascine like this.’

Bianca lay back in the carriage. She clasped her hands together so convulsively that one delicate grey kid glove was cracked across. Camillo bent forward and desired the coachman to drive to Count Giacinto’s house.

When they arrived he would have helped

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Bianca to get out, but she dashed his hand on one side, and ran upstairs impetuously.

Count Giacinto was standing before his easel ; he looked round in great astonishment, for Bianca, hardly knowing what she did, rushed to him, threw her arms round his neck, and clinging to him, exclaimed :

‘ Oh, do not let him take me away ! keep me ! keep me ! If I go back, I shall die !’

‘ But what is it, Lillo ?’ asked Giacinto, looking at his nephew in extreme astonishment. ‘ Has he been unkind to her ?’ and his arms tightened round his niece and his eyes blazed.

‘ Unkind ? Oh no !’ said Camillo, greatly disturbed. ‘ He is more kind than words can express.’

‘ I sometimes think that you would take his part against your own flesh and blood,’ exclaimed Giacinto. ‘ You are so fond of him.’

‘ Yes,’ said Lillo ; ‘ I love him as a brother. I never met a nobler nor a more unselfish nature.’

‘ It is true,’ cried Bianca, with a sudden

revulsion of feeling. 'He is very good! Oh! no one can say how good he has always been to me. I always knew that I might trust him to save me; and he will do it again,' she said, nodding her head, with the pathetic look in her eyes of one who tries to convince himself against his better reason. 'He will not exact this—he was only trying me!'

Lillo's very heart was wrung; what could he do? It was all wrong together—too hard a Gordian knot for mortal hand to unravel.

'Bianca,' he said, longing to make one more effort for Arthur's sake, 'do you not see his very goodness and unselfishness constitute a claim? You cannot refuse him everything.'

'What are you talking about?' asked Giacinto. 'What does he want you to do, Bianca? Tell me all about it.'

'He wants me to go back to England.'

'No, no!' said Giacinto firmly. 'There I also have my voice. I said nothing about

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your removing to a villa—that was natural ; but I will not have you taken away from me again. I am the head of the family. Do not be afraid, Bianca, I will arrange this matter.’

‘But,’ said Camillo sorrowfully, ‘Bianca must think a little of her husband’s wishes, and his happiness.’

‘I do! I will!’ cried Bianca eagerly. ‘I will ask Jaqueline and her husband to come here—and his mother; they could come. There is plenty of room in the Villa Caprini.’

‘Sit down, Bianca,’ said Camillo, for she was still clinging to her uncle; ‘sit down, and I will get you a glass of wine. You must be still, my darling!’

She sat down.

He brought her the wine, but she only put it to her lips, and pushed it aside untasted. Her face was still white with excitement, and quite suddenly tears began to stream down her cheeks; she stretched out her hands tremblingly to Camillo.

‘My Lillo!’ she cried, ‘for mamma’s sake,

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for the sake of all our happy childhood, do not turn against me! help me! do be kind to me! I cannot—I will not go!

‘You shall not!’ said Uncle Giacinto, sympathetic tears in his eyes. ‘You shall stay with me.’

Lillo did not know how to persist in his part.

‘Darling!’ he said, ‘I ask nothing but your happiness; and I do not know,’ he went on, with a pained puzzled look in his great soft eyes—‘I think if you tried to please Arthur a little, to give up something for his sake, you would learn to love him.’

‘*Per Bacco!*’ cried Giacinto, ‘what can you know of these things? Leave it to me, Lillo.’

But Bianca did not heed; she caught Lillo’s hand and said feverishly:

‘I will love him, Lillo! I will love him with all my heart, if he will give me this one thing more—not to take me away.’

Lillo sighed deeply; he was disappointed and troubled beyond measure.

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'I can say no more, little sister,' he said tenderly. 'The good God will arrange it all for the best ; but oh!' he cried, with a sudden burst of feeling, 'never before have I so wanted mamma for you.'

'You say too much, Camillo,' said Count Giacinto angrily, for Bianca hid her face and sobbed as if her heart would break. 'You had better go.'

But Lillo knelt down by his twin-sister and soothed and caressed and comforted her, till her tears ceased to flow ; and then he persuaded her to drink the wine. She was exhausted ; but, strangely enough, the old habit of trusting implicitly in Arthur came back with a soothing sense of strength.

'I know it will come right!' she said. 'He always saved me, and he will do it again ; he will never fail me—will he, Lillo ?'

Camillo nodded.

It was very hard to know what to do or say. He kissed her lovingly, and bade her be quiet and rest till dinner-time ; and then he wandered out restlessly into the streets,

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wondering what Arthur would do, and feeling an almost unbearable sympathy for both.

As the afternoon advanced, Arthur St. Leger started to walk down to Florence. He had been writing all the morning. He wrote to Mr. Wilson ; he wrote to his uncle ; he composed his address, and enclosed it for immediate publication ; he announced that he would be at home as quickly as the journey could be accomplished ; he wrote to his agent, telling him of a great tenants' dinner and ball he meant to give, desiring that the horses that were not in use by his mother might be taken up from grass, etc.

Then he began a long letter to his mother, giving a list of the places at which they would stop on the road, and to which letters might be sent. He also wrote a few lines to Roger Fitzroy, urging him to bring Jaqueline to Osterleigh, and to make arrangements for staying there as long as possible, to assist him in canvassing.

He walked down the Fiesole road to

Florence, with all these letters stamped and sealed in his pocket. He was too late for that day's post, but by putting them in late at the post-office they would go early on the following morning.

The writing of the letters had revived all his bright anticipations again; his mind was wholly occupied by the coming election: he was wondering whether some expression he had made use of in his address was quite strong enough—whether it might be wiser to open that letter and add a few lines more.

He was so absorbed in his thoughts that he quite started when he felt a hand laid lightly on his shoulder. Camillo had come to the Porta Pinti to meet him.

'You are coming to the Via Ceretani, are you not?' he asked.

'Yes; but I am so glad to have met you. Where is Bianca? Is she still at the Cascine?'

'Bianca is not at the Cascine,' said Camillo, hesitating a little. 'We did not go; she could not have gone to-day.'

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‘Ah!’ sighed Arthur, understanding, and looking round at him with anxious eyes. ‘Well?’

‘I am afraid I have no good news to tell you,’ said Lillo, sorrowfully. ‘Do not be too sorry.’

‘Does she feel it so very much?’ said Arthur slowly.

‘I do not of course know how it was when she was in England; but from what I see, I imagine it must be just the same.’

‘Oh no, no!’ cried Arthur, involuntarily putting out his hands as if to ward off the very idea. ‘Please God, not like that!’

‘I am afraid,’ said Camillo simply. ‘I thought you would like to know, so I met you.’

‘Thank you, yes; it is best to know,’ answered Arthur. He felt a great shrinking from the scenes that lay before him, as if somehow he could not face them; but bracing up his courage he turned to Camillo with a forced smile, saying: ‘I will go in at once; it can do no good putting it off.’

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His English friends would have thought Arthur St. Leger looking many years older in these short months; a line had come in his brow that would never again be smoothed away—a certain hollow look beneath the eyes.

Camillo gave his arm a little kindly pat as he left him at the door.

‘*A rivederti!*’ he exclaimed, as he walked down the street. ‘I shall be in in time for dinner.’

Arthur went up to the *salone*. A quick glance round the room showed him that his wife was not there, only Count Giacinto, who was stirring up the ashes in the great brass brasier to extract a little heat. He returned Arthur’s greeting very coldly.

‘Where is Bianca?’ asked the latter.

‘Bianca is in her own old room,’ answered the artist. ‘But I think you had better not go to her; she will be best alone for a time, until she is a little more able to try and be composed.’

Arthur’s spirit rose at the tone in which

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these words were uttered, and with the colour flushing into his pale face, he answered haughtily :

‘Thank you, but I believe myself to be the best judge of that matter ;’ and he went down the passage.

He opened Bianca’s door so softly that she did not hear him, and went in. To his great distress he found her on her knees, weeping in the old wild uncontrolled way that he remembered only too well.

‘Bianca !’ he exclaimed ; ‘Bianchina !’

She started up at his voice.

‘Ah, leave me !’ she cried. ‘Let me alone a little while.’

But he came forward, and put his arm gently round her.

‘Is it so terrible a trial, my poor darling ?’ he said tenderly. ‘Had you never thought of it before ?’

‘Never, never ! God help me !’ she cried passionately. ‘Oh, what shall I do ? Will you not leave me ? I cannot bear to see you at this moment ! Will you not go ?’

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Bewildered and miserable he drew back, and left the room.

‘I cannot bear it! I cannot bear it!’ he heard her moaning to herself as he shut the door.

Poor Arthur went out again—out into the cold evening air, and wandered from one street to another, and along the bitterly cold Lung’ Arno till it was very dark and late.





CHAPTER IX.

WHEN Arthur looked at his watch at last, it was eight o'clock. He had been walking for several hours; he had had no food; he felt chilled through and through. He went back to the Via Ceretani to ask what Bianca was going to do—whether she had gone home, or was still there. Camillo met him at the door of the studio.

'I am glad you have come in,' he said. 'I was on the point of going to look for you. You look tired, *caro mio*.'

'I am tired,' said Arthur, sitting down. 'Where is Bianca—can you tell me?'

'She is at the Pergola. I took her to

the box where Giuseppe and Colomba already were, and little Giovanna, and then I came back to look for you. My uncle has gone to visit his old friend Signora Baldova this evening.'

'Bianca is better, then? She could go to the theatre?'

'She thought it would change her thoughts. It was best—she is happy there.'

Arthur made no answer.

'Arthur,' said Lillo suddenly, 'where did you dine to-day?'

'Nowhere,' he answered, with a dull kind of smile.

'Come!' said Lillo. 'One cannot suffer and suffer and not eat! come with me. This *salone* is as cold as the North Pole. We will go to my *café*; and after, we will fetch Bianca from the theatre, and drive home with her. Come!'

He put his hand through Arthur's arm. Arthur was sorely in need both of food and of kindness. Lillo's thoughtfulness touched him to the heart.

The *café* was full of light and warmth. Food and heat drove the chilly feeling from his limbs, and brought back the colour to his face.

‘There!’ cried Camillo, with a little laugh. ‘Now I shall not be so much ashamed of presenting you at the Pergola, for fear people should think I was bringing a ghost with me. Will you have a cigar? No. Then shall we go?’

They walked together. They passed the post-office on their way. The sight of it suddenly recalled his letters to Arthur’s recollection.

‘Stop one moment, Camillo,’ he said; ‘I must post my letters.’

He went up the steps as he spoke, and took the letters from his pocket. Lillo’s quick eye saw what it meant, and though apparently indifferent, he watched every movement of his brother-in-law with keen anxiety. Arthur stood for an instant hesitating; it seemed as if the resolution of this moment would determine the whole future course of

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his life. The letters once posted, there could be no further drawing back ; he would be irrevocably pledged.

What should he do ? For one moment he leant against the wall, and a sickening feeling of discouragement came over him ; then came a quick, short, passionate prayer from his inmost soul that God would guide him to do what was right. Then he returned the letters to his pocket—he would wait one more night, he told himself.

Camillo saw it all, but he made no remark, and they reached the theatre without anything being said on the subject.

They found Bianca sitting forward in the box, looking bright and excited, a brilliant colour in her cheeks, and nothing but the dark line under her eyes to betray what she had been going through.

Arthur, who was not dressed for the theatre, sat in the background and waited. His eyes were fixed on his wife with a kind of fascination. She was constantly a fresh surprise to him. Hitherto, when in one of

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her wild states of grief, self-control had always seemed an absolute impossibility to her ; but to-night it was quite otherwise. There was something strained and unnatural in her look and in her constant laughter, which showed that she was making a vigorous effort.

As the play ended she turned to Giuseppe and said :

‘ Will you give your mother a message from me ? ’

‘ With all my heart, ’ he answered, putting her thick furs round her.

‘ Tell her that I will go with her to San Gemignano to-morrow. ’

Arthur gave a little start. To-morrow ought to be spent in making preparations for their immediate departure. He was just about to say something, when an imploring look from Lillo caught his eye, and checked the words on his lips.

Bianca went on :

‘ Tell your mother that I will be with her at the Casa Baldova at eight o’clock to-morrow morning, so that we may go together. I

have put off going too long. Sometimes,' she said, with a strained laugh, 'if one puts off over and over again, it ends in one never doing the thing after all.'

'That is quite true,' said Giuseppe, who was ignorant of the under-current of strong feeling in all this. 'Life is short.'

'Do you go to-morrow, Colomba?' asked Bianca.

'Yes, *cara mia*. I shall go this week, but when I go next, I must go with Giuseppe. I do not like to take up too much of Louisa's time, when her mother is there. I have already seen her twice since she took the black veil.'

'Well, then, to-morrow at eight! You will not forget?'

'No, no!'

With good-nights, and many last words and merry gestures, the little party broke up. Bianca and her husband got into the carriage. Bianca suddenly put out her hand, and caught hold of Camillo.

'You come with us?' she said anxiously.

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‘I am cold; I thought of walking,’ he answered.

It had struck him that during the drive home together, Arthur and Bianca might come to some understanding; but Bianca’s voice had a sharp ring of nervousness in it.

‘You shall not walk home again!—you shall not! Come in, Lillo!’ she implored.

‘Come with us, Lillo,’ said Arthur; ‘it will be better.’

So they drove home together. Bianca threw herself back in one corner of the carriage, and drew all her furs closely round her; she did not speak. The two men made to each other a few commonplace remarks about the play they had witnessed, and then they also were silent.

There was a large fire burning in the stove in Bianca’s sitting-room, and the servants brought in wine and soup. Bianca threw off her furs; she was still in the dark velvet gown she had worn in the morning—its heavy folds made her look as white as snow.

As soon as the servants were gone, she

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took up the cup of soup that was waiting for her, and drank it feverishly. Lillo knelt down before the stove; it was burning well, but he blew it up nervously, with the bellows, all the same. He wondered whether he should go, and leave husband and wife alone together: there was an electric thrill in the mental atmosphere, as of a coming storm.

Suddenly Bianca turned, and came swiftly up to Arthur, with both her hands stretched out; there was a ring almost of agony in her voice.

‘Arthur,’ she cried, ‘only tell me that you do not mean it! Set me at rest—do not leave me in this horrible doubt!’

Camillo was rising to go, but she turned to him, crying passionately: ‘Do not go, Lillo! stay with me—take my part! And if we ask together, with all our hearts, he cannot be cruel to us; it is pleading for everything—for life itself!’

Arthur rested his elbow on the high cornice above the stove, and covered his

face with one hand. He shrank from her words as if they were knives that cut him.

‘What can I say?’ he said. ‘Bianca, you know the truth better than Camillo can; yet I have explained it all to him, and he understands. Is it not so, Lillo?’

‘Yes,’ said Lillo slowly, ‘it is quite true—a man cannot spend his whole life in idleness.’

‘Are there not things you could do here? Other Englishmen have lived in Italy, and been very happy—mamma was happy!’ her voice faltered.

Camillo winced uneasily, he could not bear that allusion; it was all wrong together, a reversal of the natural and right order of things. But there was no time to think, for Bianca spoke again in the same strained agonized voice:

‘If you take me away from my home I shall die. I cannot face the old life again, it will kill me; and you do not want me to die! You do love me still? It was true that you

www.libtool.com.cn did love me, Arthur? That also is not false? Tell me, Arthur!

Arthur put out his hand. 'Do not—do not, Bianca!' he said hoarsely.

'But I will say more!' cried Bianca, and her whole manner, look and voice changed; she looked like a beautiful fury, her eyes flashing, her hands held down and clenched. 'Why did you come to me with a lie in your mouth? Did you not promise to take me home? Did you not pledge your honour? Why did you stop me, when I was flying to take refuge with my uncle? Was it not for this—this only that I married you? because I looked upon you as my refuge, as the only hand that was stretched out to save me from a life that was death to me! You said you gave up all for my sake—and that also was false—as false as your broken word! as false as the promises you made to win a woman for your wife, to whom you have turned traitor!'

'Hush! hush, Bianca!—for God's sake be silent!' cried Lillo, terribly shocked.

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Arthur never moved, he stood like a rock.

Camillo caught hold of Bianca, and held her in his arms. 'You shall not speak like this,' he said; 'he is your husband, Bianca! you are mad!'

Bianca turned from her husband with a kind of movement which seemed like loathing. Her voice changed to a sort of moaning wail as she hid her face on Camillo's breast.

'He told me he loved me!' she moaned. 'Lillo, Lillo! he told me he loved me!'

Lillo felt her hold relax, and her weight increasing on his arm.

'Quick, Arthur, help me!' he cried. She had fainted away. Arthur started forward, and they lifted her on to the sofa together. Lillo knelt beside her and chafed her hands; he looked up at his brother-in-law with burning tears in his eyes.

'Arthur,' he said, 'forgive her, and forgive me. Among us, we have wrecked your life also.'

'It cannot be helped,' replied Arthur in a

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dull voice. 'We have much to forgive each other.'

For some minutes the efforts to restore Bianca proved unsuccessful. Then she slowly opened her eyes; as they fell upon her husband she gave a sharp shudder, and turned her head with a little moan. Arthur saw it; it went through him like a knife; he shrank back, almost reeling.

'I am going, Lillo,' he said. 'I will send her maid. I am better out of the way.'

'For the moment, perhaps,' said Lillo, who was still holding his sister's hands. 'But do not go out again.'

Arthur was gone already. He felt as if he must get away, anywhere into the open air, to try and forget this terrible scene. Bianca's words rang in his ears over and over again, like the vibration after the blast of a clarion. She had called him false—false and traitor! What should he do? He remembered, with bitter regret, how Mrs. Dalton had urged a perfect clearness of understanding as to the future between himself and

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Bianca. He had thought her warning superfluous, he had felt it to be so certain that Bianca understood; and if he had erred in his certainty that he would be able to win her love, he was punished—a punishment almost too heavy to bear.

With quick step he mounted the broad Fiesole road, up and' up; but he gave no thought to the glorious valley beneath him, lying flooded in moonlight. His teeth were clenched; he breathed hard; his hair, in spite of the sharp cold of the night, was wringing wet.

It was hours before the wild energy of the walk subsided, and Arthur found himself miles away from home, with every limb aching from the long tension, and far away the first pale streaks of dawn beginning to break the black clouds of night.

He turned his steps homewards, and by the time he reached the door was so exhausted that he almost staggered into Camillo's arms, who was standing waiting for him.

A glance at his face showed that he could

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bear no more. So Lillo said nothing, only went up with him to his own room, gently, quietly, as his own mother might have done.

‘Good-night, Arthur,’ he said at the door ; but he received no answer. He turned back and saw that he had thrown himself dressed on the bed, and was already in the deep sleep of exhaustion. Lillo came softly in again, and drew a thick covering over him.

‘It is very cold,’ he said, shivering, as he left him to rest.

Arthur did not wake the following morning till nine o’clock. He felt tired and bruised from head to foot, and he looked at his clothes with a moment’s astonishment before the truth came flashing back upon his mind. He dressed and came downstairs.

Camillo had not gone down to Florence yet. He was waiting for him in the dining-room.

‘Good-morning, Arthur !’ he said cheerily. ‘Will you forgive me for telling your servant to let you sleep on ?’

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‘Yes ; it was good of you,’ returned Arthur.

‘Have you seen Bianca yet ?’

‘No,’ said Lillo, with a little hesitation.

‘She went so early—she started at seven o’clock.’

‘Where?’ asked Arthur.

‘Do you not remember ? To join Signora Baldova on an expedition to San Gemignano.’

‘And she was better ?’

‘It will perhaps do her good to see Louisa,’ said Lillo evasively. And Arthur asked no more.





CHAPTER X.

‘**H**ARDLY expected you, my child,’ said Signora Baldova, as she and Colomba took their places with Bianca in her carriage, in which they were to take post-horses to San Gemignano. ‘It is so early for you to start, and it is such a long way.’

‘I always long to see Louisa,’ replied Bianca. ‘And now more than ever, for I suppose it will be to bid her a last farewell.’

‘Your uncle told me and my husband yesterday,’ said Signora Baldova, ‘that your husband proposed to return to England ; but he thought it might not really be. Is it to be so, Bianchina ?’

‘I do not know,’ she said restlessly.

‘But why do you go? Can you not persuade your husband to stay?’ asked Colomba. ‘They say he is so amiable; he adores you. Camillo tells me that there is nothing he would not do for you.’

‘It is true,’ said Bianca, in a choked voice. ‘But he has his mother still, and England is his home.’

‘But there is so much for a man to do here. He could paint in the galleries, or join the clubs, or the musical societies; why should he want to go?’

‘It will kill me,’ said Bianca quickly.

‘But is it, indeed, so inevitable?’ persisted Colomba.

‘My poor child!’ said Signora Baldova pityingly. ‘Still one must obey one’s husband.’

‘I do not see that,’ returned Colomba quickly. ‘I cure mine of his dangerous politics; let Bianca cure hers of his patriotism.’

A slight suppressed smile flitted over Bianca’s pale lips: one seemed as impossible

as the other. She knew of secret meetings in different places, when Camillo and Giuseppe were supposed to be taking long walks for country air and exercise, but for worlds she would not have shaken the confidence of the young wife.

‘But it is terrible, terrible!’ continued Colomba. ‘Can you not ask your uncle to interfere?’

‘Do you think it would do any good? Oh no!’

‘After all he is your guardian; he might tell him to make a home for you here.’

‘I am afraid.’

‘Alas!’ said Signora Baldova. ‘In my opinion, when a woman is married, she is wiser if she does as her husband wills; he has always the best in the long-run.’

‘But to go to England, dear mamma!’

‘Even to go to England, my little Colomba! It is a perpetual soreness otherwise; he will never forget it all his life, and will always have his sacrifice to twit you with.’

Bianca sighed deeply.

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'Do you love him, child?'

'Oh yes, of course!' she answered.

Signora Baldova looked at her attentively, then said: 'Alas, poor child! without that there is nothing to make thee happy!'

'I shall never be happy again!' cried Bianca passionately.

'Do not despair, my child! you are very young,' said Signora Baldova. 'Look at Louisa! she wept bitterly, she wrung her hands when she went to San Gemignano. You will judge for yourself to-day that she is content.'

'Truly she has become a saint,' said Colomba gravely.

'It is difficult to understand,' said Bianca; and indeed when the idea of the rebellious Louisa came before her, always in disgrace and trouble, she could hardly believe that they did not allow their imaginations too free a scope.

'You will be happy about her when you see her,' said Signora Baldova.

'Yes, to see her for the last time.'

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‘No, no.’

‘Yes, if I go back to England, it will be to die.’

‘Bianca!’

Bianca turned round with one of her wild looks. ‘Do not speak of it any more,’ she said; ‘I cannot bear it; let us talk of other things.’

As they drove on Bianca talked incessantly, and seemed more gay and excited than ever; and entering into her humour, her companions said no more on the subject of England.

The day was one of those exquisite ones in March, which come as a foretaste of the sweetest days of summer; a cloudless sky above, and all around, in every nook and corner, leaves of tender green beginning to peep from their delicate coverings, violets and primroses showing their dainty heads, and a pleasant freshness through all the sunny air.

The little party changed horses twice on the road.

For the last stage they found a pair of sturdy little black horses, with bells all over

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their harness. They got over the ground at a great pace, in spite of the ascent, which grew steeper and steeper as they drew near their destination.

When they came in sight of San Gemignano, Bianca, who had never before seen the lovely little town, sat forward, eagerly admiring it. Like a very crown it lay on its steep green hill, the light shining on the numerous slender towers which raised their sharp outlines against the blue sky. The old walls, the towers, the churches, all of that mellow, soft colour which attracts the warmth and glow of the sun into itself, and gives it out again in richness of beauty.

‘But it is beautiful! I never saw anything like it before,’ exclaimed Bianca.

‘Yes, the little quiet sacred place,’ said Signora Baldova, smiling. ‘The Mother Superior says that all the towers are fingers pointing to heaven. The little town and all those rich *poderi*, with the olive and vineyards, mostly belong to the convent. The Mother herself is very wealthy; she came

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there long years ago from Spain, when she was quite young, and she arrived in a closed carriage in the night, so that she has never seen her own domain. She is very clever; she manages it all, and gives her orders to her contadini every morning through her closed grating. Sometimes she asks such strange questions, which show how little she really knows of what lies all round her in the outside world.'

'All one's life thus!' said Bianca, with a sigh.

'But she is the happiest woman in all the world,' said Colomba.

The road became more steep, but the little horses pulled with goodwill, their bells ringing gaily out on the fresh air.

'I dread finding Louisa so much changed,' said Bianca rather nervously.

'She is changed, *cara mia*—strangely changed. All her petulance, her strong feelings, seem to have gone—she has become still, calm, passionless.'

'Is it peace, or is it despair?'

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‘I think it is peace,’ answered the mother thoughtfully. ‘While she was still at home, life was very full of anxieties, troubles and griefs; yet she was young, and rebelled in thought against the convent. Now the partings are all over, she has discovered the higher life—the life of sacrifice. She gives herself to prayer, being not in the world for those who are in the world. She has found peace in submission.’

‘And happiness? Is no one to be happy?’

Signora Baldova did not answer that question, which came as a very cry from Bianca’s heart.

They were turning into the gate of the town, and the horses scrambled and slipped on the steep paved streets. They drew up at the door of a small house belonging to a peasant woman named Celeste. Signora Baldova had hired a room in this cottage, to which she could come whenever she visited her daughter. They went up a narrow ladder-like staircase to this room, which looked

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very clean, with its well-swept brick floor and distempered walls.

‘We have no time to lose,’ said Signora Baldova; ‘we have only three hours. We had better start for the convent at once. Celeste!’ The old woman appeared. ‘Have something to eat by the time we return. What have you? Bread, soup, a fritata, macaroni—that will do. Colomba, help me to take off my travelling-cloak. There, shall we start?’

Carefully holding up her long trailing gown, Signora Baldova led the way, and Colomba and Bianca followed her to the convent.

The streets were narrow and steep, rough even for walking, and Bianca’s heart was beating as much from the fatigue of the unwonted exercise as from excitement at the prospect of seeing her friend again. They arrived, and were conducted by the concierge to a small side-door. She went away to send in their names, and they all went in.

They entered a large bare room, without any furniture save three or four rush-bottom

chairs. It was lighted by a large window over the door by which they had come in. In one corner they perceived what appeared to be a window in the inner wall, which was grated with two thick iron gratings, with a space of about six inches between them ; on the side of the inner grating a thick black curtain was closed.

Signora Baldova drew her chair up to the grating and sat down ; Bianca and Colomba followed her example, and they waited without speaking.

Bianca thought the five minutes that followed almost interminable ; then she started as the inner curtain was drawn swiftly back, and a dark figure stood behind the grating.

‘ Louisa !’

The nun did not speak. Could this indeed be Louisa ? Bianca looked and doubted, and looked again ! This pale, careworn woman, with the close white bands hiding her thick dark hair—this the bright, wilful, turbulent companion of her childhood ! Why was there not one sound of joy or glad-

ness of greeting? The sudden tears rushed into Bianca's eyes.

'How are you, my child?' asked her mother, with a strange kind of reverence in the tone of her voice.

'I am well, very well in health. So Bianca has come to see me. Look up, Bianca. I would see your face, dear.'

'Louisa!'

'They call me Sister Mary now.'

'Ah, Sister, how many changes have taken place in our lives since we last met!'

'All is well with me.'

'And with me—oh, Louisa, would that all were well!'

Signora Baldova and Colomba had both drawn back; they saw the yearning look in Bianca's eyes, and would not interrupt the meeting of such old loving friends.

Louisa said gently: 'There is no peace in the world.'

'And thou—shut out from all this outside misery—tell me, Sister, hast thou found peace?'

There was a pause; a little bird alighted

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on the convent window, twittered a foolish little song, and flew away. The Sister bent forward and said slowly :

‘ Yes, Bianca, I have found it.’

‘ And where ? Tell me where ?’

‘ In submission.’

‘ And happiness ! Is there no such thing as happiness ?’

‘ Why should there be ? Can we not watch with Him one hour ?’

‘ I am so tired of suffering.’

‘ Poor child ! Poor little Bianca !’ The tender changed voice touched Bianca’s heart ; she clasped her hands.

‘ Louisina,’ she said, ‘ do you remember the old, old days—how happy we used to be ? Then we had no troubles—no cares. You say nothing ! Have you forgotten our love for each other ? our old silly vows of eternal sisterhood ?’

A smile flitted over Louisa’s face, softening away the rigid calm, as she replied :

‘ I have forgotten nothing, Bianca. But I trust the evil has been pardoned in us all.’

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'Evil?'

'Did I not help to free my brother? to send him with my own hands to that sinful war? God forgive me! Many a prayer I utter night and day that that crime may not be laid to his charge; that I—I only—should bear the punishment.'

'Ah! the changes are very great, Louisa.'

'Great, and I trust blessed.'

'Teach me what to do. I am not good, like you.'

'Humble yourself, as the saints humbled themselves; give up your soul to Heaven, your life to sacrifice.'

'But,' cried Bianca passionately, 'God has given me other gifts: my heart, my hopes, the power of enjoyment, the longing for happiness! Can I not serve Him with these also?'

'Yes; with these also you can serve Him,' said Louisa. 'You can sacrifice them to His Will.'

Bianca covered her face with her hands. Louisa stood silent for a moment. She had

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learnt the lesson she was teaching her suffering friend, but she had learnt it through bitter pain ; her heart yearned over one whom she loved truly as a most dear sister.

Bianca looked up at last.

‘Louisa,’ she said, ‘help me ! I am miserable, and I cannot submit, for my heart cries out, “Give me joy, give me happiness—I am so young.”’

‘Tell me what is wrong, my darling !’ said Louisa tenderly.

‘Sister !’—she bowed her head and spoke very rapidly—‘you know my story. You know how all my life long my whole heart has been bound up in Lillo, and with him in the future of our Italy. You remember, your heart was all with us, Louisina—we were all in all to each other. Then came England—you have heard how I suffered there ; but you can never, never imagine one-tenth part of what the loneliness, the heart-sickness was.’

A faint sob burst from Signora Baldova ; but Bianca went on, not hearing it.

‘Now you know about my husband,’ she

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said. 'He was so good to me; he brought me away, he brought me home, he taught me to look to him as my deliverer, and I trusted him with my whole, whole heart; and I was grateful—oh, how grateful! A little while ago it seemed to me—Heaven help me!—that I was learning to love him, he was so good to me. But now, oh Louisa! he wants to take me back to England, away from all to which I cling—away from home! Think of it! all the suffering to begin again! I see the very places before me—the rooms, the flat green country, the cold rainy skies—and I shudder from head to foot. And this has taught me that I cannot love him, that beside my Lillo and the old home-faces he is nothing to me but an Englishman to whom I am grateful. My marriage seems a chain binding me to a stranger—an alien to all my own world. And I must go—go away with him into that cold exile; must sit by his hearth, and see his wistful eyes asking for love I cannot give him; must live beside him and for him, making him as miserable as

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myself. Dear Signora, do not cry like this! and Bianca threw herself into Signora Bal-dova's arms, sobbing piteously.

'Bianca !'

Bianca started and looked up. There was a tremble in Louisa's voice, though she would fain be calm.

'Bianchina, what does Lillo say?'

Bianca threw out both her hands.

'He says, "Only love him, love him; and where the loved one lives is home." Lillo thinks of mamma; but I am not like mamma, and the love will not come.'

'There is another way,' said Louisa. 'If you cannot submit for the love of man, yet school your rebellious will for the love of God.'

'I am so young!' cried Bianca. 'It does not seem so long ago that I thought no one was so joyous or so blest as I! Ah! I should like to be happy again! I should like to be free! I should like to be once more a child!'

'Alas! what art thou now?'

'I feel so old,' said Bianca, pressing her

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hands together; 'old, with a strange feeling that I am looking back upon my life.'

'No, Bianchina; try to look forward, not to this life, but beyond.'

'My sight is bounded, Sister; I cannot see beyond England—strange faces, unfamiliar voices—the old death in life. Alas! I can see no farther!'

'My darling, above us is the dome of heaven, and it stretches from one end of the world to another.'

Bianca looked up. The Sister looked down on her with eyes swimming in tears.

'Louisina, you are like your own dear self again! Give me your hand. If I could only kiss you!'

They passed their hands through the bars, once more clasping each other tightly as in old days.

'Ah, Louisa! if only I had never gone to England! if mamma had never died!'

'Do not let us think of what might have been. Half the sorrows of this world are in that little word *if*. God rules our lives.'

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'I know. I do not want to complain. It gives you pain ; but oh ! it is such a longing that I have to feel as I used to feel in those old days !'

The pressure of the Sister's hand was tightened.

'Bianca, promise me one thing,' she said. 'You will try to love your husband ? Do you not love him at all ? not a very little ?' she asked wistfully.

'I thought I did. I think of him a great deal ; but I do not understand him. The more I see of him, the more I feel the difference between us. His mother and May know all he thinks and feels. I am not like them. But he is very good to me. If I could only explain to you what it is to feel Arthur's eyes constantly following me, never to be free from him, never to give myself up to freedom —for he is to be thought of. He notices my dress, he thinks I am idle, he always wants me to read, to learn things I do not know ; and this always, always all my life !' Ah, if I am very good, and go to

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England now, perhaps God will soon let me die!

Louisa did not speak. Bianca rose to her feet. 'I have taken up all your mother's time,' she said. 'I ought to go; she has scarcely spoken to you. You will pray for me?'

'With my whole heart and soul.'

'Oh, if I could but kiss you! Put your face closer—closer. I cannot; the gratings are too far apart. There, I can touch your dear hand with my lips. Good-bye—good-bye!'

'Bianca!'

'Do not cry, Louisina.'

'But it is the last time—the last. Dear little sister whom I have loved so well, be good, be happy! God, oh, God in heaven bless you and make you happy in His own good time, and bring you safely home at last!'

'No, not my hand! Louisa, not my hand! Good-bye!' Bianca turned away, and went out of the convent door.



CHAPTER XI.

THE bright sun streamed upon the pavement, dazzling in its glory, bathing the little town in warmth and light. Up the narrow street came a cart drawn by gaily-decorated mules ; the boy who drove them cracked his long tasselled whip with a sounding noise, and sang gaily as he fastened a shiny cock's feather in his broad-brimmed hat. He wished Bianca a 'happy day,' and went off after his animals out of sight.

At the door of a house stood a young mother with a scarlet handkerchief bound round her black hair. She laughed and tossed her

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crowing baby up and down in the air. Bianca watched her for a moment ; the contadina saw it, and held the baby still with a proud smile for her admiration. The door of the church stood open. Bianca pushed aside the great leathern curtain and went in ; it was dark and cold, and full of the sweet fragrance of incense.

All was very silent, but as her eyes grew accustomed to the light, she saw an old woman kneeling before a side-altar with her *scaldino* at her feet, muttering her prayers. Bianca knelt down, hiding her face in her hands, and tried to think over Louisa's words : she had bidden her sacrifice her will, not, as Lillo had said, for human love which would bring its own reward, but to God, hoping for no reward on earth.

She had heard of this before, but to her undisciplined heart it had seemed impossible, the unpractical talk of a religion beyond her comprehension. But now a sudden understanding of it came into her soul ; she was called upon, as the saints of old had been

called upon, to rise up and follow Christ—she was called upon to sacrifice.

She knelt on trembling and praying for awhile, then rose and sat down, very tired, with the last words of her prayer still on her lips: 'Father, teach me to say, Thy will be done.'

The old woman had finished her prayers; she took up her *scaldino* and went out.

'The Signora will look at the frescoes?' said a gentle voice, and looking up Bianca saw the custode standing beside her; he was an old man with a worn, wrinkled face, full of benevolence.

'I will come—I should like to see them,' she said, rising and following him; she felt strangely worn-out and weary.

'Now, Signora mine, look up.'

Bianca looked up. The fresco before her was beautiful. In the midst of a group of figures lay, on a low settle, the form of a very young girl, almost a child, round whose head shone the golden glory of the saints; the young sweet face, with its solemn eyes, struck

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Bianca with a strange sense of touching beauty.

‘The saint is Santa Fina,’ began the custode, in a conventional tone of explanation. ‘She was from her birth the holiest and sweetest of young maidens. She renounced every wish of her own, every desire of her heart. She gave all she possessed in alms. At the age of fifteen she wasted away, and all knew that she was about to die. She was consumed with fever, parched with thirst, and the devil tempted her to long with a fervent longing for an orange to press to her lips. But our saint repented deeply of that sin ; she caused herself to be laid on the bare boards of the room, without comfort, without ease, and in grief and sore repentance bewailed her transgression. Does the Signora see the figure of the old woman there behind her, in a white coif ?’

‘I see her,’ said Bianca. ‘Who was she ?’

‘She was the faithful nurse who all through her life tended and nursed the child-saint. For three days and three nights she held her

little head on her arm to give her some slight ease ; and when she had closed her eyes in her last sleep, the good nurse withdrew her arm, and, behold, it was withered away !

‘Alas ! the poor faithful old soul !’ said Bianca, with a long sigh.

‘Yet see, dear Signora—our saint in death forgets not the living. She raised her hand, her little hand—she touched the old nurse’s arm, and it was healed.’

Bianca turned as he turned, and looked on the opposite wall—on the face of the dead child-saint, peaceful, still, passionless, with the white light of another world softly shining on her fair brow.

Then the dead remember the living, even in the grave ?’

‘Assuredly, dear Signora,’ said the old custode earnestly.

‘Then mother—mother ! think of me now !’ cried Bianca, in her inmost heart. She gave the old man his fee, and walked away to the far end of the church.

‘An orange—only an orange—and that

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was a sin! Does our God demand so much? Why, then, has He given us hearts to enjoy, lips to sing, earthly homes to love? These things are too hard for me.'

There stole into her mind a thought which perhaps her guardian angel had whispered softly to her soul; and as she turned to leave the church, her lips formed the words: 'I will ask Arthur?'





CHAPTER XII.

ARTHUR and Camillo had spent the whole long morning together. It had been very quiet, very still. Lillo would not leave his brother-in-law, though he had much to do, and could ill spare the time ; it had seemed to him as if he must try to do something to atone for the suffering that Bianca had caused him the night before, the traces of which were plainly visible in the haggard face and nervous quiver of the eye-lid. Lillo felt very despondent ; he could not see how it was all to end, or what could be done to help these two people, whom he loved better than all the world.

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When the afternoon came, Arthur went to his sitting-room.

‘Lillo,’ he said, ‘I must write my letters ; they are important. But when they are finished, will you walk down with me to Florence to post them ? It is selfish of me to keep you,’ he added, ‘but if you can manage it I shall be very glad.’

Those few words seemed to reward Lillo fully.

‘I will wait for you with all my heart,’ he replied. ‘Bianca cannot be home till quite late. Signora Baldova gets back to her house generally about eight o’clock when she visits San Gemignano. You will find me here when you are ready to start.’

Arthur sat down before his writing-table ; he took up his pen, he prepared his paper and dated it. Then slowly he took the letters he had written the day before from his pocket, and put them, one after the other, into the stove ; he shut to the little door—he did not like to see them burn. He rested his head on his hand—the moment had come in

which his decision must be made! He could not leave Mr. Wilson's letter unanswered another day; he must not allow himself further time for reflection—it would not be fair on the constituents, or right by the party to which he belonged! He was striving to do his duty, hungering for some help from heaven—some voice to tell him what to do. But no voice came—no apparent help from above. There are times when it seems as if man, unaided and alone, must choose the right hand or the left, and God withholds His aid,—the just responsibility incurred by man when he put forth his hand and took of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The pros and cons pressed on his brain, but above all sounded again and again, like a terrible oft-recurring refrain, Bianca's cruel words when she called him false, and traitor to her and to his word.

What should he do? He rose and paced up and down the room; the agony of doubt became unbearable, and he knew how it would end. He could not bear another

such scene as he had gone through the night before—he could not endure it again! Then the weakness inherent in his nature showed him the other side to the picture. Bianca's joy—Bianca's gratitude—perhaps her love at last as his reward! Must it not be right to think of her first, to whom he had vowed his whole life's devotion? It must be right. It could not be that in sacrificing his dearest hopes that he was doing wrong—surely the pain itself must count for something! He sat down again, the question was too hard to answer. Arthur wrote rapidly, but his words were decisive. His far-off correspondent, when he received that letter, did not recognise the writing; and when he saw the signature, read as if by a flash what it must have cost the writer to pen those lines.

The clanging bells were ringing for Ave Maria when he sealed it, and called Lillo.

'I have been a long time writing,' he said, 'and this only is the result, but it will be enough.' He showed him the one letter.

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Lillo said nothing; he only looked at him with anxious eyes, but could not disturb him with questions.

‘Shall we dine at Florence?’

‘Yes,’ said Arthur. ‘Let us dine at your *café*—that will be best. But first let us go to the post-office.’

They went there, saying little on the way. Arthur stood before the door, and every conflicting doubt rushed once more before him; then, with a strong effort, he entered, and posted the letter.

‘It is done!’ he said, returning to his companion, and looking at him with a forced smile.

Lillo did not ask him what he had done; he almost felt as if he dared not, the decision seemed so momentous to him, whichever way it had been decided.

They went into a *café*, and ordered dinner, but neither could eat; they made a pretence of doing so, then lighted cigars and went out. Would it never be over, this long day full of weary emotions! they were both

so tired of pain. Lillo looked at Arthur wistfully : what should they do now ?

‘Go to the Via Ceretani, Lillo,’ said Arthur kindly. ‘You are tired out, and I want to walk to try and tire myself, so that I may sleep to-night. Do not mind leaving me. Bianca is sure to come there first, before going home, and I will be with you at eight o’clock ; we will all drive up to Fiesole together.’

‘You will be sure to come ?’

‘Quite sure ; but if Bianca comes before I arrive, do not keep her waiting—I can walk.’

‘Yes,’ said Lillo. ‘But I do not agree to that ; we will not go home without you. We shall wait.’

‘Very well,’ said Arthur ; he felt vaguely that he would rather have been free to choose his own time of return, but he was too weary to dispute the point. ‘Then eight o’clock.’

Arthur walked away ; he crossed the river, passed the great Pitti Palace, and went out of the town by one of its farthest gates on to the Poggio Imperiale. He found himself in

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a great avenue of huge sombre cypress-trees. It was growing very dark, and he walked slowly up the hill through the two lines of grand old trees ; the absolute silence was soothing to him after the noise of the town. The sky was of a clear pale green hue, with black clouds overhead, moving majestically down like the fall of a mighty curtain over the world ; the cypresses stood out sharp and black in outline against the pale greenish background. It was very cold, all the colder that the spring sunshine had been so warm and genial all through the day.

When the bells of Florence rang at eight o'clock, Arthur remembered his appointment, and turned back to the town with a sort of loathing of its lights, and odours, and noises, away from the solemn darkness which had now settled down like a pall over the whole world. They were anxiously waiting him, his fair young wife with her brother and Giacinto.

A strange feeling had come over Arthur that all the world was changed, that they also

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were quite changed and different. The smile of Giacinto seemed the grin of a fiend, Camillo's forced laugh a fierce mockery ; even Bianca's sweet face like the apples of the Dead Sea, beautiful to the eye, but dust and ashes to the lips.

They drove up to the villa together, and hardly a word passed between them. Bianca was frightened at the white look on her husband's face, startled at the icy coldness of the hand which had touched hers. She had come home full of new gentle feelings, determined to throw herself on his mercy ; but what she saw in his face was a new look, something that she had never seen before—had not even imagined could exist, and she felt afraid of him.

As they reached home and they entered the house, she caught her brother's hand and held it nervously like a child.

Arthur seemed as if he could not speak ; he helped to take off Bianca's wraps, he brought her food and stood by her, and he nodded and answered Lillo's attempts at talking on

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indifferent subjects with monosyllables. Then Bianca rose up to go to bed, with her large eyes looking frightened and dilated. He lit her candle for her, but it was Lillo who accompanied her to her door, for Bianca held him fast.

‘Tell me, Lillo,’ she half whispered, ‘is it that he is very angry with me?’

‘Angry? no!’ said Camillo. ‘Can you never understand him? he is suffering.’

‘Do Englishmen suffer like that?’ said Bianca. ‘It frightens me.’

‘Go to bed, child,’ said Lillo; ‘and pray for your husband and yourself.’

Arthur sat quite still when they had left him, with his head bowed, and one hand stretched out full length upon the table. When Lillo came back he started, gave a rather bewildered look round him, and then rose to his feet.

‘It is late,’ he said; ‘but I will tell her to-night.’

‘What have you got to tell her?’ said Lillo gently.

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‘Do you not know?’ He put his hand to his head in a stunned way. ‘I have written to give it all up.’

The blood rushed to Lillo’s face, the tears to his eyes; but he hesitated to speak, for Arthur passed him and went heavily up-stairs.

His step faltered as he crossed the passage, faltered so that he had to steady himself by the wall. A little light showed under the door of Bianca’s dressing-room; she had not yet gone to bed.

He went in. Bianca was seated in a low chair by the fire, with a book on her knee. It was a volume of the ‘Lives of the Saints;’ and the page was open at the history of the child-saint, Santa Fina; her hand rested on the page. She turned round at his approach, and looked up at him. ‘Is it very late?’ she said nervously.

Arthur came up to her, and stood looking down upon her.

‘What is it? you frighten me,’ she said, shrinking:

‘Nothing, Bianca—nothing.’ And he knelt down beside her. ‘What are you reading?’ he asked, as if to gain time.

‘The life of Santa Fina.’ Then suddenly the thoughts of the day came rushing back upon her. She turned to her husband and put her arms softly round his neck, and said tremulously: ‘Arthur, I want to ask you something—will you tell me? Is it true that our God demands all happiness at our hands, that all the joy and gladness and brightness of our lives is only food for sacrifice?’

Arthur put his arms round her. The hard cold bands of disappointment and grief seemed to be softening round his heart.

‘It is not true,’ he said slowly. ‘God asks of you no sacrifice; nothing but love for Him, nothing but joy and gratitude from you.’

‘And you, Arthur—you?’

‘For me, ask me not now. A time may come. I cannot tell. I am a man; God will give me courage. Bianca, I have given it all up. We will make this our home. I came to tell you this.

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‘Arthur!’

‘Darling, you shall not leave your own home; you shall not go. At least, I can make you happy; and for that I thank God, my own, my wife!’

‘And you?’

‘And I—I——’

The strong young man broke down at last. Her sympathy was more than he could bear. He laid his head on Bianca’s knee, and sobbed like a child.





CHAPTER XIII.

BREAKFAST was scarcely over at Dalton when all were startled one morning by a commotion in the hall, and the sudden arrival and entrance of Lady St. Leger. She advanced with both hands stretched out, evidently in such distress and bewilderment that Colonel Dalton started up exclaiming :

‘ Good heavens ! what is the matter ?’

May grew very white, and Mrs. Dalton began eager questions.

‘ Is anything wrong ? Arthur or Bianca ill ? or Jaqueline ?’

‘ No, no !’

‘ My dearest Louie, sit down and tell us all

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about it,' said Mrs. Dalton. 'Or rather, come into the other room—we have finished breakfast. If they are well, that is the principal thing after all.'

Lady St. Leger allowed herself to be taken into the next room and seated by the fire.

'Oh, John!' she exclaimed. 'Mr. Wilson has been with me already this morning.'

'Yes?' said Colonel Dalton eagerly. 'What can I do? I suppose he is not really anxious about the seat? Has Arthur sent his address? I hope he has, for it ought to be in the paper to-morrow. Surely there must have been a letter lost. I ought to have heard from him yesterday morning, if he had written by return of post.'

'I hardly know how to tell you,' said Lady St. Leger, 'for I cannot yet believe it myself; but Arthur is not going to stand after all.'

'What!' almost shouted Colonel Dalton. 'But, my good friend, he must! He has pledged himself.'

'I don't know what to think,' said Lady St. Leger piteously. 'There is no ubt

whatever about his letter. Mr. Wilson brought it to me this morning. With the disappointment and worry of it all, he was almost in tears.'

'I must be off to see him at once,' said Colonel Dalton. 'This is likely to be a very serious matter. Are you quite sure?' he added. 'It is so unlike Arthur that I cannot understand it in the least.'

'I can understand it only too well,' said Lady St. Leger bitterly.

He turned round sharply.

'Then what is the meaning of it?'

'Bianca.'

Colonel Dalton gave a low whistle.

'We cannot be sure,' said Mrs. Dalton eagerly. 'An explanation will surely come soon. There is probably some reason of which we know nothing.'

'What did he say in his letter?' said Colonel Dalton.

'I almost know it by heart. He said: "Bitterly grieved as I am to disappoint you, I must not lose another post in letting you

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know that it is out of my power to contest the county. I cannot pretend that it is not a keen disappointment, and all the more so that I feel as if you may justly blame me for not having told you before. But I confess I did not expect that the question would arise so soon. I thought that Sandown would be quite sure to retain the seat at all events till the end of the Session, and your letter took me altogether by surprise; but all the same, I feel that I owe you many apologies for my withdrawal." Then he goes on to offer any assistance he can, and he proposes that Roger Fitzroy should be invited to stand in his place.'

'The very man!' cried Colonel Dalton. 'The idea takes a load off my mind. Arthur's own brother-in-law, with all his influence to back him up. Failing Arthur himself, we could not have a better candidate.'

Lady St. Leger turned to Mrs. Dalton.

'John thinks of nothing but the seat,' she said.

'It is the first question at this moment,'

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said Mrs. Dalton quietly. 'It is doubly important, for Arthur's sake, that it should not be imperilled.'

Colonel Dalton rang the bell. 'The phaeton at once!' he ordered. 'I must go in and see Wilson, and we must send a special messenger for Roger.'

'Do you think he will undertake it?' asked Mrs. Dalton doubtfully.

'I am sure he will,' said May. 'He has always had a sort of wish to go into Parliament, when a favourable opportunity offered itself.'

'Don't keep luncheon for me,' said Colonel Dalton, when his carriage came round. 'I will lunch with Maria; but I shall have a great deal to settle with Wilson, so do not expect me till you see me.'

He went away full of eager energy, his mind entirely occupied with the possible difficulties which might arise should Roger refuse to come to their aid.

Lady St. Leger turned round to her friend, when they and May were alone, and said:

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'You see how it is, Mary—just what I always foretold. I have lost my boy altogether.'

'I think you cannot possibly judge, until we get Arthur's letters of explanation,' said Mrs. Dalton. 'There may be reasons about which we know nothing whatever.'

'The reasons are as clear to me as if I were on the spot,' said his mother despondingly. 'Bianca has either refused altogether to come home, or when Arthur really pointed out to her that it was necessary that they should do so, she has repeated those terrible scenes of last year—that hopeless, wild sorrow, that went through my poor Arthur like a knife. I know him better than even you can. He would never be able to resist.'

'I think it is only too likely,' said Mrs. Dalton sorrowfully.

May did not wait to hear any more; she went away to the schoolroom. Her heart was full—she could not bear to hear either Arthur or Bianca blamed.

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‘But oh, Mary,’ went on Lady St. Leger, ‘why has he done this without even going through the form of consulting me? He never used to treat me so.’

‘But there was no time; he could not have put off sending his answer. The summons was altogether unexpected.’

‘Yes, yes—I know. I suppose it is unreasonable. What can he mean to do? Do you think that he means to stay out there altogether? What can one do?’ cried poor Lady St. Leger, almost irritable in her pain. ‘Even you have nothing to say that is comforting, Mary. It is the most unfortunate marriage; and now that she has got him in Italy, she will never let him come home again. I have a great mind to go off to Florence myself, and see what they are about.’

‘At least wait till you have heard from him,’ said Mrs. Dalton; ‘his reasons may be good.’

‘The suspense is so dreadful; and wherever I go, even now, I am beset with

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questions as to when they are to be expected home.'

'Do you think either of them can be ill?'

'But why can't they come home, and be ill like other people?'

Two or three more days passed away, and no letter of explanation came. On the fourth day, Lady St. Leger made up her mind that something must be seriously wrong; and when the end of the week came, she had almost made up her mind to start. One morning the longed-for foreign letter arrived at last. It contained no reasons—no explanations; it only told of all that was going on—of the little daily plans; of the glorious weather, the beauties of Florentine flowers, etc.—not one word of coming home, or of future plans. It was very evident now that an intermediate letter must have been lost.

Meanwhile Roger Fitzroy had accepted the invitation to stand for the county with alacrity. He arrived the very day after he had received the letter, and on the next day was followed by Jaqueline, who came in

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the highest possible spirits, full of excitement about the coming election, and eager to do her part in the canvassing.

Roger proved an excellent candidate. His speeches were precise and carefully worded, and his position as Arthur's brother-in-law secured him all the Osterleigh interest. Before many days had passed the Liberal candidate withdrew, and it was announced that Roger Fitzroy's return would be a walk-over.

Letters continued to arrive from Florence, and their tone was so far reassuring that it was evident that both Arthur and Bianca were perfectly well. Lady St. Leger read them again and again, and took them to Dalton to talk them over, growing more puzzled and distressed than ever. May would never enter into these discussions; they pained her exceedingly. She could not bear to hear Bianca blamed, for whom she felt a most tender, sisterly love. She would not believe that Bianca wished to set her husband against his friends—it seemed im-

possible ; but Arthur's mother in her trouble was always saying so.

One day Signor Pelli called ; he had heard a rumour that Bianca was not coming back, and came to know whether it was true. He was moved almost to tears when he heard that there was no immediate prospect of her return ; and he prophesied with excitement, that now that they had once seen beautiful Italy again, they would never leave it—never come back to this cruel climate. And he glanced at the windows, against which a driving, gusty rain happened to be falling.

It was a keen delight to May and Jaqueline to be together again ; they could hardly leave off kissing each other at first. Jaqueline had so much to tell her cousin, and she had to ask her advice on so many momentous questions—chiefly about the re-furnishing of their home, which Roger had considered insufficiently charming for his little wife.

The two cousins took long drives together, with Dumps, and were always in and out of each other's rooms.

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It was pretty to see how careful Jaqueline now was of her toilette. 'Roger likes it,' or 'Roger would not like it,' were phrases constantly on her lips; though, truth to say, Roger thought everything she did was right, and much of his formal precision and primness had disappeared. Colonel Dalton thought him greatly improved, and did not despair now that time would make him worthy of his favourite niece.

'May,' said Jaqueline one day, 'tell me the truth, have you made up your mind to accept that very eligible individual who I hear is dying for your hand?'

May shook her head, laughing and blushing.

'Now that I am an elderly matron,' said Jaqueline, 'it is my duty to give young ladies sound advice. You will not easily have a better opportunity. He is everything that anyone could wish—clever, distinguished, good-looking, rich, and what the world calls a very rising man.'

'I can't help it,' said May.

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‘So you won’t?’

‘So I won’t, Jaquet.’

‘Have you told him so?’

‘That is not a fair question; but you will, I am sure, keep it to yourself — I have.’

‘I am sorry,’ said Jaqueline slowly. ‘I should have liked it.’

‘Nonsense! why should you have liked it? How would papa and mamma get on without me at home?’

‘As other papas and mammas do, I imagine,’ said Jaqueline. ‘But, my dear, I suppose you will marry some day?’

‘Perhaps,’ said May, laughing. ‘I don’t know; but certainly not your “very eligible” friend.’

‘But why, May?’

May only answered by singing gaily :

‘Il est beau, ce petit Prince
Aux yeux bleus,
Et on ne voit dans la Province
De plus beaux yeux !
Voilà !

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‘Epouse-le belle Fillette
Aux yeux noirs ;
Plus jolie fille que ma Minette
On ne peut voir !

Non pas !

“ Ne veux-tu pas ? sottie enfant,
Dis pourquoi !”

“ Ce beau Monsieur, quoique charmant—
N’est pas mon choix !”

Voilà !’

‘ I suppose, as you only choose to make a joke of it, that there is no use in my saying any more,’ said Jaqueline superbly.

‘ None whatever,’ replied May. ‘ You see we cannot all of us have Rogers.’

‘ But there are others to be found !’ persisted Jaqueline.

May could not help laughing heartily. ‘ Don’t be offended, my little Jaquet,’ she said ; ‘ one cannot arrange these things.’

‘ Did he mind very much ?’

‘ I won’t say another word ; and if you are become a matchmaker at eighteen, it is terrible to contemplate what you will be at fifty !’

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‘I won’t tease you any more, May. Of course I think there is nobody in the world worthy of you, and you shall have somebody whom nobody in the world is worthy of except you; so then you will have found your match. And till he comes——’

‘We won’t say any more about it,’ said May, kissing her, but with a little underlying tone of seriousness in her tone which showed that she meant it.

‘May,’ said Jaqueline presently, ‘Roger has a scheme in his head which I am sure will please you.’

‘Yes?’

‘He says that if he is returned at the election, that we shall have of course to take a house in London, and shall not be able to get away from there until after the Session is over; but then at once, as soon as we can, we are to go out to Florence with mamma, if she likes to come. I feel very uneasy when I think of not seeing Arthur and Bianca for such an enormous time, and knowing so little of what their life is. In one of her letters

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Bianca said that there was plenty of room for all of us in their villa, and from what Arthur says it must be a most lovely place. I shall very much enjoy seeing it.'

'I am more glad than I can say,' said May eagerly. 'Do you know, papa himself has thought of going there; only he has so often that unfortunate gout, that I feel very doubtful about its ever being accomplished. It makes mamma uneasy to be out of reach of Dr. Lawson.'

'Of course; but what an enchanting plan it would be if we could all transport ourselves to Florence, and be all together again! I wonder—oh! I wonder how they are getting on!'

'I get so tired of wondering,' said May, rather restlessly. 'Everybody is always wondering. Aunt Maria can talk of nothing else, and we all live upon conjectures. I suspect they are very quiet and very happy. Arthur appears to be perfectly delighted with Camillo, and, to judge by the charming letter he wrote to Aunt Maria, there must

be something exceedingly lovable about him.'

'I did not hear of that.'

'Oh, it was a long time ago; when they first married, and Aunt Maria announced her intention of leaving her money between Camillo and Bianca, he wrote to thank her, and his letter was simple and manly and altogether charming. Papa said that in every respect, turn of phrase, feeling, and even handwriting, it was exactly what his father would have written.'

'Was it in English?'

'No; he speaks little or no English, it seems. I should like him to come here, and it would please Aunt Maria immensely.'

'I wish he would,' said Jaqueline eagerly. 'If he came, and took to us all, and really liked England, it would be far the best chance for Arthur's future.'

'Well, you must bring him back with you when you go to Italy.'

'I shall certainly try,' said Jaqueline gaily. The election took place. Roger was re-

turned, and, a few days after, he and Jaqueline went to London to take a house.

Lady St. Leger came over to Dalton one day, looking tired and more than usually depressed. Mrs. Dalton was distressed at her looks, and she took her into her room and petted and caressed her, trying to comfort and draw out from her whether anything more than usual was troubling her. It came out at last.

‘I suppose it is the fate of all the old mother birds,’ she said, ‘when their nestlings have taken wing; but I am so terribly lonely. The house is too big for one poor nervous old woman to live in quite by herself. I hear noises that I don’t understand, and I fancy that I am going to see ghosts. Of course I don’t see them; but it is nearly as bad to fancy that you are going to see them. And I torment myself into the fancy that it will be my fate to reign for the rest of my life a lonely queen-regent at Osterreich. Roger and Jaqueline were more than kind: they want me to go to London and spend

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the spring and summer with them; but somehow I can't make up my mind to it. Roger is everything that I could wish—most estimable, most attentive—but, I can't help it, he bores me to extinction. You see, I don't deserve to be happy, Mary,' she said, her voice faltering. 'For though I have a great many other blessings, there is only one which will satisfy the hunger of my heart, and that is the sight of my boy's blue eyes.'

'It is very natural,' said Mrs. Dalton tenderly. 'But the fact is you are altogether overwrought and nervous, and I mean to use a certain amount of authority, and carry you off to London with me immediately after Easter. May is not very anxious for gaieties, but all the same they are good for her, and I like her to meet people and make friends; and John enjoys them thoroughly. So it is quite decided that you come with us to Grosvenor Street; and I will tell Jaqueline myself, so as to prevent her from feeling jealous.'

'I do not know whether I can,' said Lady

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St. Leger. 'But it is a very tempting proposal.'

'I will take no refusal, Louie; and May will be quite delighted.'

'I really think I must consent,' said Lady St. Leger. 'But what will you say to Jaqueline?'

'Oh! it would be much better for the young couple to have their house to themselves; and anyhow, you would not have gone to them. I carried you off by force. I will manage to explain it perfectly well.'

'I wish so much now that I had tried more to make Bianca fond of me,' said Lady St. Leger. 'I cannot help blaming myself, and wondering whether anything that I could have done would have had any effect.'

'Not the slightest,' said Mrs. Dalton. 'Don't torment yourself with "might-have-beens;" they never do any good. Depend upon it, it will be all right; only give them a little time—even two or three years if necessary—and then they will come back and

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settle down at Osterleigh, and be as comfortable a Darby and Joan as you could wish. John, for one, has great faith in Bianca's English blood asserting itself after a time.'

'It is a comfort to hear you say so,' said Lady St. Leger; 'and I will try to believe it. Anyhow, if they do not come home, I shall make up my mind to go out to Florence in the autumn, and spend the winter with them if I cannot persuade them to come back.'

'The best thing you can possibly do,' said her friend.

The London plan was carried out. Jacqueline was in her heart of hearts a little relieved that her mother was to be with the Daltons instead of herself. Lady St. Leger could not easily get over the old habit of finding fault with her, and Roger did not like it, and became pompous and cold, and Jacqueline had to be careful; it was the one crumpled rose-leaf in her perfect happiness. But to know that her mother was close by, quite happy,

and away from the loneliness she had dreaded for her, was everything that she could wish, and she looked forward to London with most pleasant anticipations.





CHAPTER XIV.

ARTHUR ST. LEGER was for a time much disturbed by the tone of his mother's letters. They were full of mingled sorrow and reproaches. Not for some days did he find out that his own first letter to her had been lost. In it he had endeavoured to make the best explanation he could of his resolution not to return, but he had found it exceedingly difficult to explain. He was anxious not to acknowledge that the sacrifice was made for his wife's sake, feeling sure that such a fact would increase home prejudice against her tenfold; but in his eagerness to prove that he acted entirely of his own accord, he rather overdid it, both

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in his first and subsequent letter, giving the impression that he felt no wish to leave Florence, that it certainly suited Bianca a great deal better than England, while in the same letter he described her as being far from strong—languid all day, and feverish and excitable in the evenings ; he said that he had persuaded her to see a doctor, who told her to avoid catching cold with every precaution, and to keep quiet and take medicine, which had apparently done her no good at present, but he thought that she would improve when the cold spring winds were quite over.

Arthur fancied he had said enough, and he felt harassed by reiterated demands from his mother for explanations, and entreaties to let her know when she might expect him home again. It was impossible to answer that, and he left off writing more than was absolutely necessary.

One day Bianca came in from the Cascine, and found her husband sitting in his room writing ; he hastily shut up his desk and began to talk. In the evening they were going

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to visit the Fantabreis, but Arthur excused himself, and she went accompanied by her brother. When she returned Arthur was still writing, with an eager expression of interest on his face.

‘You are busy, Arthur?’ she said, placing her hand on his shoulder. ‘What are you writing with so much attention?’

‘I was composing a speech. The debate on foreign affairs last week incited me to try.’

‘But where is the use? you have no need of that now.’ It was curious that of the twin brother and sister Lillo should have such delicate tact, and that exquisite quality should be so wanting in Bianca.

Her husband only answered, ‘No, no, of course not;’ and asked, ‘Did you have a pleasant evening?’

Camillo had heard her words, and when Bianca had gone to bed he came up to Arthur, and said:

‘By-the-by, Arthur, that paper that you were writing, will you let me see it?’

Bianca’s words were ringing in Arthur’s

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ears ; he answered almost mechanically : 'But what is the use ? it is quite true that I have no need of such things now.'

'I am not so sure of that,' said Camillo ; 'living as you are in the very midst of us Italians, you might do infinite service to us and to our cause, if you would study our home-politics carefully, and write in English papers about them.'

Arthur looked interested.

'Am I not right in thinking that it is quite extraordinary how little the English care for, or enter into our affairs ?' said Lillo. 'A little sympathy would be of great value ; and it is also desirable that they should know some truths that you would have an unusual opportunity of telling them. Of course I speak of the general public.'

'I might try,' said Arthur.

'Then you will not tear up your paper ; you will let me see it ?'

'Certainly ; but French affairs were in my mind when I wrote it, and not yours in Italy.'

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‘It is an anxious time for all Europe,’ said Lillo thoughtfully. ‘I remember well two years ago, when the Grand Duke stood on the terrace in front of the Pitti Palace with the tricolour of Italy floating in the breeze at his side, and the people proclaimed the glorious Federation, that the Minister Cempini turned to Ridolfi, and asked him what he thought of it all. Ridolfi answered, “Questo non   che il frontespizio!”* and I have not a shadow of doubt that his words will prove prophetic; but we are a long way from the end yet.’

‘Lillo,’ said Arthur seriously, ‘I hope you are careful not to run unnecessary risks. It is a dangerous game that you are all playing.’

‘I know,’ said Camillo. ‘But what can one do?’ and he opened his hands. ‘After all, *caro mio*, better men than I have finished their lives in prison.’

‘Only take care.’

‘I will take care; imprisonment is a very

* *Memorie sull’ Italia*, etc., Giuseppe Montanelli.

horrible thing; but we are always cautious, and though I believe that we are watched by the authorities, we are strong, we are many, and it might be dangerous to interfere. Good-night, Arthur. You will think over my request about writing for us in English papers?’

‘I will try,’ said Arthur, going away thoughtfully.

Camillo and Giuseppe and their friends did not confide their plans and proceedings to him. Perfectly trustworthy as he was known to be, there was a natural hesitation on account of his nationality; an unspoken idea that the fewer involved the better. But Arthur knew that Bianca was in the very midst of it, and knew everything. He regretted it exceedingly; it fed the constant fever of excitement in which she lived, and he could not help seeing that all her friends looked upon her as completely their property, and himself as only an accident in her life; he fancied even that Bianca herself felt it to be so.

He could not help being mortified—for he was still young—by overhearing Mariuccia

telling a neighbouring cook that Count Giacinto had decided that Signora Bianca and her English husband were to remain in Italy, and that he, the English husband in question, did not much like it.

The moment when Arthur's courage most failed was when he read the English newspapers, and grew keenly interested in the anxious political debates of the time; a feeling of depression seized on him, like the sick longing of the sailor for the sight of the sea, or the wistful sorrow of the old thoroughbred when he catches a sight of the hounds, and knows that his day is over.

In those days he seemed to be, in a curious way, at a stand-still with Bianca. She was very fond of him, very grateful to him, and she showed kindly feeling for him in many little ways—a new attention to his wishes and comfort, but none of the passionate love which she felt for her brother was extended to her husband. Had he not known the depths that really existed in her nature, he might have been satisfied; but as it was, a

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terrible heart-sinking would come over him at times, when he realized that he was bound for life to a woman who looked upon him as one of another world, incapable of entering into her feelings and sharing her thoughts, because he was not an Italian.

Arthur would not give way to the depression and lassitude that often oppressed him. He read a great deal, he wrote articles on Italian affairs, and sent them to England, where, to his gratification, they found ready acceptance in a leading newspaper; and he sent for books on art, and studied pictures and architecture, and even took up again the violin, which he had once begun to play when quite a boy. In old days he had never known what it was to yawn, but of late he found himself doing so constantly—that long exhausting yawn which brings tears into the eyes; and of this he determined to cure himself, and in order to do so, made a resolution to rush upstairs, and drink a glass of cold water every time he did so.

Camillo saw that he had grown much

thinner and very silent, but even he did not know what a constant warfare with himself he was waging, and that he was bringing a noble spirit of resolution and courage to bear on the meanest and most insidious of temptations—weariness and repining.

Bianca was sitting one morning in her room, with the window wide open, and the warm sunshine of June flowing in, when Signora Baldova was announced. She looked old and tremulous, and a sudden fear seized upon Bianca that something must be wrong ; but she carefully shut the window, and drew her friend on to a low chair close beside her, before she asked any questions.

‘ You look anxious, dear Signora,’ she said. ‘ Tell me—tranquillize me—there is nothing wrong ?’

‘ There is nothing wrong now, Bianca,’ said Signora Baldova, speaking low. ‘ But my heart is full of misgivings.’

‘ Colomba ?’

‘ Oh, Bianca ! I do not know. I came to ask you. You are of the same age, you

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have seen much of her. Is she to be trusted ?'

' I do not feel certain,' said Bianca slowly. ' I wish I could speak with more security—but her family !'

' I know. I will tell you what has alarmed me. Yesterday evening—but first, you know all yesterday Giuseppe and Lillo were away.'

Bianca nodded.

' In the evening Don Marco Montenero—you know, her father's uncle—came to the Via degli Archebussiere, and asked to see Giuseppe. As he was not at home he was conducted upstairs, and shown at once into Colomba's apartments. She was delighted, and wanted to show him how beautiful all her furniture and the arrangements of her apartments were ; but he cut her short by asking where Giuseppe was ? and when she said " in the country," he said, in a voice that was full of threatening, " that a young man might go into the country once too often !" He said also in French, very loud : " Qui va à la chasse, perd sa place !" Then Colomba

shut the door, and I could hear no more actual words ; but I know he was urging her to do something that she did not like, with every argument that he could find. But oh, Bianchina ! I do not know whether she yielded to him, and told him what he wanted or not. After a time he came out, looking like a thunder-cloud, and I went in and saw her weeping. I asked her if her uncle had not been kind to her ? and her face suddenly lighted up with a kind of gleam of pleasure, and she said : “ Yes—yes, he has been kinder to me than he knows ! ” What does it mean ? I wish that Giuseppe and Lillo were back !

‘ But Colomba knows nothing ? One cannot say what one does not know,’ said Bianca, considerably startled by what her friend had told her.

‘ Ah, but I do not know what she knows. You see, it is not as it used to be. Giuseppe loves her as the very apple of his eye. I said to him myself one day : “ My boy, be careful. ‘ Figli di gatti pigliono topi ’—a Montenero

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remains a Montenero, however she may change her name.”’

‘And what did Giuseppe say?’

‘He shrugged his shoulders and he said, “*Che, che!*” They are afraid to tell me anything. See what it is to be a divided family, Bianca mine! I and Giuseppe think alike, and my husband and Colomba; and we two women distrust each other, and the two men go each his own way. *Ahimé!* I could find it in my heart to wish the old days were back, and that no one had ever heard of Italy!’

‘Too late for that,’ said Bianca. ‘But, dear Signora, I will speak to Lillo; he must warn Giuseppe to be careful. It is all very well,’ she said quickly, ‘for Giuseppe to trust Colomba, and I think that if she could help it she would not say one word that would injure a hair of his head; but her husband’s friends—that is quite another affair.’

‘Bianca! do not frighten me!’

‘I suppose she feels as strongly for her side as we do for ours,’ said Bianca bitterly. ‘Why not? And what a heroine she would

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be if she could denounce some of our leaders !
I trust that Giuseppe is prudent.'

'I cannot say. He trusts her.'

'It is an unfortunate marriage.'

'I do not know,' said Signora Baldova.

'I cannot think so, for Colomba loves my boy.'

'But patriotism comes before love,' said Bianca. 'Women have loved, and yet given up their husbands willingly.'

'In Sparta ; but, God be thanked, women are not like that now. No, no, Bianca ; it is not her strength I fear, it is her weakness—of what Don Marco may persuade, almost force her to say.'

'If it is only her weakness that you fear,' said Bianca slowly, 'I do not think that you need be afraid.'

'But you will ask Lillo to speak to Giuseppe ? Tell him to say what you said to me just now : that though Colomba might do nothing that would injure him, her feeling about the others might be different.'

'I will tell him,' said Bianca. 'You know where they are to-day ?'

‘No, no; tell me nothing. I do not want to know. I have always refused to hear anything of their plans or their movements. I do not even know many of their names. It is best so, for I am not to be trusted—I might betray anything if my husband made me do it. You however, Bianca,’ she went on, in the uneasiness of her heart harping on the same string, ‘you are fond of Colomba?’

‘I love her,’ said Bianca warmly.

‘Ah! and Louisa loved her also, in spite of all the great difference there was between them when she was at home. And now, Bianchina, let me try to think of other things. How are you, *cara mia*?’

‘I am well, but for this fever in the evenings,’ said Bianca. ‘But now that the warmth of summer is coming, I shall soon be quite well.’

‘And your husband? Ah, Bianca, I have never told you all I think of him! He is more than good. Women give up everything, it is true, and for them it is nothing; but men, never! I never heard of such a sacrifice.’

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‘Is it so great?’ said Bianca, smiling. ‘Yet you can be no judge of the difference between England and my Italy.’

‘Yes ; that is what my husband said,’ said Signora Baldova, misunderstanding. ‘He could not understand how it is that a man accustomed to such a splendid country as England, where the government is so good, and the wealth so great, and the proprietors like little kings, each on his own domain, could give it all up, and all his prospects in the Senate, to live in a poor country like ours, all torn with controversies, taxed heavily, and likely before many years to be involved again in ceaseless civil wars.’

‘Did he say that?’ said Bianca, very much astonished at a view of the case which had never once entered her head.

‘Yes,’ said Signora Baldova. ‘He and your good uncle had quite a hot discussion over it, and they spoke so highly of him that I thought you would like to hear it.’

‘Yes?’ said Bianca.

‘At first my husband was inclined to think

that it was quite impossible that he should have made such a sacrifice only for so small a motive as to please you. "It is impossible," he said. "It is for a woman to please her husband, and to live where he chooses to place her." That is naturally his view.'

'Yes, naturally,' said Bianca, a little drily. 'But you see, with Arthur it is different.'

'He fancied,' went on Signora Baldova, 'that there must be more behind—that he might be, perhaps, commissioned by the English Government, holding some secret post of importance, who knows? But your uncle said no; he was a private individual, a great English proprietor, and that he had refused to sit in the Senate itself because you did not wish to leave home, and because he himself had expressed a desire that you should both continue to live in Florence. Bianca, such husbands do not grow on every tree! I never heard of such a thing. Is that what they do in England? Such a thing was never heard of in Italy. Your mamma adopted your

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father's country completely as her own—she was like an Italian wife in doing that.'

'Arthur is very good to me,' said Bianca, with a little sigh.

'Good! but this passes all goodness! You ought to be very happy, child.'

'I am very happy,' said Bianca. 'Arthur knew I could not live away from home; but after what Louisa said to me—you remember, long ago, when we went to San Gemignano together?—I would have said no more, I would have gone with him and died in England; but he would not have it so.' The tears rushed into her eyes, partly from a strange feeling of self-pity when she mentioned that time, and partly from a kind of tenderness for Arthur who had saved her from it.

'Well,' said Signora Baldova, rising to her feet, 'I must go, Bianca. I feel happier now that I have told you about Don Marco's visit. You think it must be all right, do you not?' she said lingeringly.

'I think so, yes—yes; I am sure of it,'

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said Bianca. Her thoughts were so full of the last words of her old friend that she had almost forgotten the real object of her visit. 'Have you a carriage at the door?'

'Yes; I came in a street-carriage. I do not often go out in the morning.'

Arthur St. Leger came into the room at that moment, so she said no more. He took her out to her carriage, asking after Giuseppe and Colomba and talking pleasantly.

When Arthur returned to the room he was surprised by a very unusual action on Bianca's part. She came up to the writing-table at which he had seated himself, and put her arms gently round his neck. He looked up at her and met the earnest, serious gaze of her beautiful eyes fixed on him with an expression he had never seen before. She bent down and pressed her lips upon his forehead—not the gentle, cold kiss to which he was accustomed, but suddenly, passionately. Before he could speak or stop her, she went away very swiftly out of the room.



CHAPTER XV.

WHEN Bianca came down again, her carriage was at the door, and she was dressed to go out; in her hands she carried a magnificent wreath of white flowers.

‘How beautiful that is!’ said Arthur. ‘I thought you did not like to have flowers in the house, Bianchina?’

‘No. I did not like it, but I have told the gardener to bring some in. You always used to have them in England,’ she said; ‘but I never thought before that perhaps you might miss them.’

‘I don’t know—did I miss them?’ he said, smiling, and becoming conscious that his

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eyes, looking round the room, *did* miss the flowers that stood on every table at home. 'There are no vases ; the room is very bare ; could we not buy a few pretty things ?'

'I cannot arrange the flowers, I am afraid, as May and Jaqueline do ; but I can see that the bouquet Beppo brought in this morning is quite hideous—alternate circles of yellow and red and purple, and a pink rose on a wire in the middle.'

'I should like anything not stiff, with plenty of greenery,' said Arthur. 'I wonder why you did not like them in the house.'

'We never do,' said Bianca. 'We think that they are not wholesome.'

'No one seems to be the worse for them in England.'

'No ; and so we will have them here : and when your mother comes, I will ask her to give me lessons in arranging them. But, first of all, we must get some vases. What are you going to do this afternoon?'

'Shall I come with you ; or have you arranged to take anyone else?'

‘No; do come with me! I should like it.’

‘What are you going to do with that?’ he asked, pointing to the white wreath.

‘Ah, if you do not mind, I wanted to go first up to San Miniato, to the churchyard. Did you ever hear me speak of Giovanna Cordini? She was a great friend of mine and Louisa’s, when we were children, years ago. She died before I went to England, when she was only about fifteen. She is buried at San Miniato. To-day is her *fiesta*—St. John the Baptist’s day—and I thought I should like to take some flowers to lay upon her tomb. She has no one left to do it for her: her mother is dead, and her father has married again; her brother was killed at Goito, and her other brother is in exile. Poor Giovannina! I dare say Colomba will remember it also. Then, after we have been there, shall we go to the shops, and see what we can find to hold flowers? I like French vases, but all the English like Majolica. Let us buy Majolica, then.’

OUT OF THEIR ELEMENT.

eyes, looking at the flowers that were there. 'There are some that could well be used in the garden.'

'I can see that as May is quite a good wire in the garden.'

'I have plenty of why not that in the garden.'

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... will most willingly,' answered Arthur. 'But I wish I knew what to buy, to make the rooms look prettier: what is it, Bianca? There were tables and chairs and sofas at home, and there are tables and chairs and sofas here. What else was there?'

'I don't know,' said Bianca, shaking her head. 'Perhaps the flowers? The flowers will do a great deal;' but he was not sure of a want in the rooms, and he did not know how to change them.

... months of April and May had brought a burst of flowers, and the whole garden was decked with them. Arthur had never seen anything so beautiful in the country round Florence.

... were the gorgeous carpet of ... or golden with ... the delicate ... like tiny fairy ... silver-white irises ... To the ... great bushes ... of their

blossoms, hung over every wall; on the grey stones little lizards would flash rapidly, vanishing into invisible crannies, or peeping out with wild bright eyes. The dust in the roads whirled round and round in stifling clouds after every train of mules or slow cart drawn by cream-coloured oxen had passed on its way. The beggars came out like a swarm of flies and began to bask in the sun again, they re-appeared at every corner of the steep Fiesole road.

As Bianca's carriage whirled rapidly down the hill, they only nodded and smiled; but on its return they would follow step by step, urging their prayers in a doleful monotone, till they had received the little coins that Arthur never failed to carry, less as alms than as a protection from the maimed hands and rags and crutches that pursued him with such dauntless perseverance.

All the gaiety of Florence ceased with the Carnival; and during Lent, especially as it drew towards a close, the solemn services of Holy week occupied the hours generally

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spent by the Florentines in their gay Cascine, or stately Boboli Gardens.

After Easter the warm weather drew on swiftly, and people even in June began to make arrangements for getting into the country, or going to the seaside.

Bianca had seen little of Colomba of late; one of her relations, the Marchesa del Monte, who had been so kind to Signora Balдова in her first trouble after her parting with Louisa, had been very ill, and Colomba, who was very much attached to her old cousin, had been engaged in nursing her, and in consequence had neither been able to pay nor to receive visits for some weeks.

Arthur and Bianca drove through Florence, crossed the river, and arrived at the steep hill which led up to the church of San Miniato. There were two ways here, the one so steep and precipitous that it was only meant for pedestrians; the other the main road mounting the hill by zigzags, a long way round to the church. They stopped, and Bianca begged her husband to go up the shorter way

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with her. He was quite willing ; there was something singularly beautiful in this way. They bade the carriage wait for them at the foot of the hill, and began the steep ascent.

The narrow road was bordered by thick dark cypresses. It had been consecrated by the erection of small altars at regular intervals all the way, dedicated to the Stations of the Cross. Here and there, before one of those altars, knelt a contadina with her great basket on the ground beside her, or some brown-habited Franciscan meekly kneeling, and on this Friday evening going through his Via Dolorosa.

They mounted slowly ; about half-way they paused and looked down on the wonderful view—beautiful Florence with her glorious Duomo, lying still and glowing in the golden sunshine ; the sky of the most vivid turquoise blue ; the grass and young corn in its early emerald brilliancy ; the world all young and fresh and sweet as its new-born flowers. The sunny picture framed in by the dark sombre branches of the cypresses.

Presently they turned to move on, speaking to each other softly as if in a church, for the presence of those altars sanctified the whole. Bianca touched her husband's arm lightly, and drew his attention to a figure just before them. They had reached one of the last of the Stations of the Cross, and before it, almost bowed down to the ground, knelt a woman whose black veil covered her face from view; she seemed to be in most earnest prayer. Bianca and her husband passed her, recommending their slow ascent.

Bianca was looking back at her, wondering who she was, and for what boon she was pleading so earnestly, when she rose suddenly, advanced to the next station, and again threw herself on her knees, her hands clasped before her face.

'Arthur,' said Bianca softly, 'do you see that ring?'

'Yes; the diamond one? What about it?'

'That woman is Colomba; that ring was given to her by Giuseppe.'

‘Colomba! impossible! That woman kneeling there is in great distress of mind.’

‘I am certain of it. Oh, Arthur, it frightens me!’

‘Do not tremble so, my darling! Why are you frightened? what is there to fear?’

‘But I must speak to her.’

‘We must not disturb her. Let us go on to the church. If she comes there you can see her; if not, we will go to the Casa Baldova.’

‘Yes, that will be best; I must see her if I can.’

They went on. Bianca sought out the grave of her little friend, and kneeling down began to clear away a few blades of grass that were showing their delicate heads, and to arrange her great white wreath upon it.

Arthur wandered away to the edge of the churchyard, looking down, far down on the great Val d’Arno, and the broad bed of the winding river.

Presently he saw the woman, whom Bianca had declared to be Colomba, finish her devo-

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tions and come towards the church ; he went forward to meet her.

She started when she saw him, but he fancied that her start was one of relief and pleasure.

‘Is Bianca here?’ she said quickly, hardly giving herself time to answer his salutation.

‘Yes, Bianca is yonder,’ he answered, pointing to the grave where Bianca still knelt ; she was not satisfied with her wreath, and she had unfastened it, and was re-arranging the flowers on the little stone tomb in her own way.

‘I will go to her,’ said Colomba quickly. ‘May I speak to her alone?’

‘I will see that you are not interrupted,’ he answered, bowing gravely, and beginning to fancy that there must be some anxiety to account for the extreme pallor discernible even through Colomba’s thick black veil. He stood for a long time looking at the view, and enjoying the sweet freshness of the air.

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Colomba went up to Bianca's kneeling figure and touched her shoulder.

'Bianchina,' she said.

'I thought you would come if you saw me, Colomba,' said Bianca, turning round.

Colomba stood over her, her trembling fingers playing with her little rosary.

'Will you help me to arrange the flowers, *cara mia*?' went on Bianca, her eyes dilating with anxiety as she saw Colomba's white face. 'Your hands are so much cleverer than mine. Kneel down by me—so; now we can talk easily. There is no one anywhere about who could hear what we say.'

'Bianca, it is indeed God Himself who has heard my prayers, and sent you here to-day. I was so anxious, ah! so terribly anxious to see you alone.'

'What is it?'

'I am in great distress.'

'Colomba!'

'Hush! speak low.' Kneeling close to Bianca, she began mechanically to twine some flowers together. 'Bianca, I have bad

news for you, there is some one among us who is not trustworthy, who must have given information.'

'Us—us! but I do not know to which party you belong,' said Bianca quickly.

'Bah! of course I am with you,' replied Colomba. 'Am I not Giuseppe's wife, and do I not love him? It is perhaps as well that I am a Montenero, for no one will believe that I also am not of the old politics, and they say what they like before me; but I fear, I gravely fear that they will soon cease to trust me.'

'Oh, Colomba!' said Bianca earnestly. 'If I only knew, if I could only feel quite sure of you!'

'You may,' said Colomba calmly. 'Giuseppe and I are one.'

'Giuseppe—yes; but the others, they have no claim on you. I wish to trust you, Colomba. I love you, and I cannot feel that you would betray us, but—but——'

'I know all you would say; but oh, Bianca, do not waste time in doubts. I am going to

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give you the proof of my wish to help. You know Don Marco ?’

‘ I know him, yes.’

‘ He came to me yesterday evening, and he wished to see me alone—quite alone. He talked to me a long time of the danger that the young men in Florence were running into by still making plots and holding secret meetings. I thought for a time that his words were only generalities, and my heart was beating fast ; but I agreed with him cordially, and deprecated the bad feeling against the paternal Government.’

Her eyes shone with a little cunning ; Bianca pressed her hand anxiously. She continued :

‘ But it did not end there. He went on to say that suspicion had fallen upon several of the young men that were my husband’s best friends and constant companions. He saw that I was frightened then, and he wanted to frighten me still more. I used to love him,’ she cried passionately ; ‘ but I hate him ! I hate him now ! I still kept very still, and

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I said, would he not tell me the names of those suspected, that I might warn Giuseppe against them, for that if I could help it, he should not run into danger. Then Don Marco told me that they had also his name, my Giuseppe's, on the list of those suspected, and that it was too late to warn him about his friends. But he said this, that if I would tell him the truth about these other men, that he and my father would make it all easy for Giuseppe, that his name should be erased from the police-list, and that he would be in no danger whatever.'

'Oh, Colomba! what did you say? Tell me—I will never, never doubt you again!'

'I asked him for the list of those suspected, and he showed it to me. Conti's was the first on the list, then Giulio Fantabrei's, then Giuseppe's, Mario, Gigio, Annibale, Ettore Pinti, but not Camillo's.'

'You are quite sure, not Camillo's?'

'Quite sure. I remember every name; it was as if they were printed on my brain in letters of fire, when I read them. But I

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wanted to find out how much Don Marco knew. I asked him as carelessly as I could what steps were going to be taken. He was off his guard ; he said that orders had been given to search the houses of each of the suspected ones. Oh, Bianca ! she was panting and trembling.

‘ Yes, yes ; what did he say more ? ’

‘ He said the search would take place this very night ; and he then tried to find out all he could from me, and I would tell him nothing.’

‘ What do you know ? surely you know nothing ! ’

‘ Too much, too much ! ’ she whispered, wringing the flowers in her hands till their pretty petals strewed the ground. ‘ Listen, Bianca ! this is what terrifies me—the papers were all brought in last night late by Nicolo Pesarelli. Giuseppe locked them up, but where I do not know ; he carries his keys always with him. And he went away last night, only leaving a message for me that he

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would not be back before this evening. Is Camillo also gone ?

‘Yes ; they are gone to Luc——’

‘Hush ! tell me nothing ; I have already told too many lies. Heaven pardon me ! What shall we do ? if the gendarmes come to search the house this evening, the avvocato will give them all the keys ; they will find the papers. *Maria Santissima !* what will become of us all ?’

‘Let me think,’ said Bianca, shading her eyes with her hand.

‘I can see but one way,’ said Colomba eagerly. ‘When they return to-night, Giuseppe will come home, and Camillo will go straight to the Via Ceretani. Will you wait for your brother there, and when he arrives, tell him to come and fetch those papers away at once, without one moment’s delay ? Camillo is safe.’

‘You are sure—quite certain—that my Lillo’s name was not on the list ?’

‘Quite certain—could I forget ? You will do it, Bianca ? Think of those papers ! they

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are full of matters that would compromise all—everyone, perhaps,’ she added eagerly. ‘Camillo quite as much as any of them.’

‘It is quite true. Yes, Colomba ; I will do as you wish. God help us !’ she said, while a look of terror blanched her face.

‘Poor Giovanna ! she has few friends to dress her grave with flowers.’

Bianca started at Colomba’s sudden change of tone, and looked up. Arthur had approached, and was quite close to them.

‘She was a friend also of yours, was she not ?’ said Bianca.

‘Yes ; till I went to the convent,’ answered Colomba.

‘Are you ready to come, Bianca ?’ asked her husband. ‘The air begins to grow chilly ; you must not catch cold.’

‘I am ready,’ said Bianca, rising to her feet ; ‘but I am not cold. Feel my hand.’ She laid her little hand against Colomba’s cheek.

‘It is hot—it is burning !’ cried Colomba quickly. ‘Have you fever again ?’

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‘A little—it is nothing. Shall we take you home? The carriage waits.’

‘A thousand thanks; but no. I must enter the church. I have not yet accomplished my devotions. *Addio*. Camillo will call on us to-night? Is it not settled?’

‘I will give him your message. Good-bye.’
Colomba hastened away into the church.

‘Has it been too much for you, my darling?’ said Arthur tenderly. ‘You look so very tired.’

‘No, no; I want to talk to you. I have something I must say at once, and in private. Wait till we reach the carriage.’

‘Do not be frightened, Bianca—you look frightened. I will take care of you.’

She held his arm tightly as they went down the hill together. It felt so strong; there was in the feeling of it a sense of protection that soothed and helped her beyond measure.

In the carriage she bent forward and gave the order, ‘Once round the Poggio Imperiale, and then to the Via Ceretani.’ And not till

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they had left the noise of the streets, and were driving up the broad avenue, did she begin to speak to Arthur of her fears.

‘Bend down, Arthur. I want to tell you everything that has happened.’

Bianca told him all that Colomba had said to her, in a low voice. Arthur looked very grave. He knew, of course, that secret meetings and dangerous discussions took place between the young men who were in the habit of frequenting his own villa and Count Giacinto’s house; but knowing the politics of Giacinto, and that arrangements and assassinations were constantly made under his roof, he had never considered them of vital importance. That papers should be removed from the Casa Baldova that might prove compromising he thought highly necessary. He was, however, very unwilling that Camillo should be the person to fetch them, and would very gladly have undertaken to do so himself; but Bianca felt certain that Giuseppe would refuse to give them up to anyone not of their own set—not that he would doubt

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Arthur for one moment, but the papers compromised others besides himself, some names even of an importance of which he had not the smallest idea, and these men might not share his faith in a foreigner.

Camillo and Giuseppe were not expected home before nine or ten o'clock.

But if the gendarmes should make their domiciliary visit before that hour! flashed on their minds.

'It is of no use anticipating evils which may never come,' said Arthur firmly. 'Only have courage, my darling, and faith in God's goodness, and all will be well.'

They drove to the Via Ceretani, dined there; and then Arthur persuaded Bianca to lie down and try to calm her anxieties by rest.





CHAPTER XVI.

IT seemed as if the long evening would never pass away. Bianca lay still as long as it was possible for her to do so. Then she came into the studio, her face white and drawn, her eyes shining with a feverish brilliancy.

Count Giacinto went on talking to Arthur in his usual way, gesticulating, pointing, shrugging his shoulders. He was discoursing on art, descanting on the meanness of the subjects chiefly popular for pictures in these degenerate modern days, and pointing proudly to his own classical production, which was now finished and gorgeously framed.

‘About frames also,’ went on the old painter, ‘no one understands suitable frames now; but the great masters of painting thought as much of the frame in which he put his picture as a fair lady of the handsome clothes in which she arrays herself. Cima’s frames were part of the work itself; and walk but once through the Accademia delle Belle Arte here and see how Fra Angelico framed his pictures, and Perugino, with exquisite little predellas as fine in their work as the masterpiece they serve to adorn. I have taken some trouble with this frame; this *relievo* on a dead-gold ground, the trophy of classical arms, the Greek chariot—What is it, Bianca, my child? Why do you wander up and down? Come and sit by me.’

‘I cannot,’ she answered restlessly. ‘Let me be. Uncle Giacinto, only let me alone.’

‘Is she not well?’ said Giacinto to Arthur.

‘No, she is not very well; but it will pass,’ said Arthur, thinking it best so to account for her strange looks. Bianca sat down

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again; the beating of her heart made her feel faint.

‘Will you not tell me what is amiss, my child?’ said her uncle.

‘I could tell you,’ she answered; ‘but, Uncle Giacinto, it would be much better for you not to know.’

‘Ah!’ he answered, understanding at once. ‘Alas!’ he said, turning to Arthur, ‘in the good old days we never had anxieties and troubles as we have now. There were no secrets then, no pale cheeks and anxious eyes;’ and he touched Bianca’s cheek tenderly.

She started away from his hand as though the tension of her nerves was such that the lightest touch was agony. The clock struck nine, ten, and Camillo did not come. Regularly every half-hour all the bells clanged out their noisy brazen voices; it seemed as if the music of their tone had gone out of them that night, and the sound was dry and harsh.

Bianca grew whiter and whiter.

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'Truly thou wert not made for a conspirator, my poor child!' said Count Giacinto, with a forced smile.

Arthur tried to persuade her to lie down again, but in vain; she sat close to the window, gazing into the street.

Old Mariuccia came in, looking dull and sleepy.

'It is very late,' she said. 'Will these Signori have some coffee made, as they wait so late?'

'Yes, yes,' said Count Giacinto; 'a very good idea. Brava! Mariuccia! The Signora waits for Count Camillo; she cannot go home till he comes; he will soon be here. Some coffee, yes; and bring the cognac also—we will warm ourselves.'

Count Giacinto could not understand what made them stay so late waiting for Camillo, but he conjectured that something of importance was going on, and decided that he did not care to know what it was: he was always very careful to know as little as possible.

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Mariuccia went out, and presently brought in the steaming coffee.

Arthur brought some to Bianca.

‘Try to drink it, my own darling,’ he said very gently. ‘It will do you good.’

Bianca took it obediently.

‘It is of no use,’ she said, putting down the cup. ‘I cannot swallow.’

Arthur remembered the same thing happening once before in the Manor House at home. He was startled.

‘Will he never come?’ he said to himself.

About half-past eleven steps came along the silent street outside, and three young men arrived at the door; they were talking and laughing gaily.

‘Good-night, Camillo,’ cried one, whose voice Bianca did not recognise. Her brother answered gaily :

‘Good-night, Pinti! pleasant dreams to you. Good-night, Giulio!’

‘Good-night!’

The two men went down the street, and Camillo came lightly up the stairs, three or

four steps at a time, humming a popular air in his sweet tenor voice.

‘At last—at last!’ cried Bianca, meeting him at the door. ‘Quick, Lillo! there is not one moment to lose.’

‘You are here still?’ said Camillo, in great surprise. ‘It is almost midnight.’

‘Oh, heaven!’ cried Bianca, clasping her hands round her throat. ‘Arthur, tell him! I am choking—I lose time!’

Giacinto put his hands to his ears, and walked away.

‘It is safer to know nothing,’ he said to himself. ‘I need not then shrink from the most solemn oaths—it is safer.’

Arthur, in a very few short sentences, told everything to Camillo that was necessary.

Lillo looked fresh and bright and alert as if it had been early morning, and he took in the whole situation instantly.

‘It is unfortunate that I was detained by some friends who met me in the street,’ he said. ‘But I will go at once.’

‘Bring the papers here,’ said Bianca feverishly. ‘I will take them home with me.’

Camillo glanced at Arthur with a quick look of inquiry.

‘Yes, yes,’ he said, in answer to the look. ‘It will be safest so—at all events for to-night.’

‘Yes, Lillo!’ cried Bianca. ‘Who knows whose rooms may be searched next? Arthur is a foreigner; besides, have I not already had the charge of papers?’

‘She is right,’ said Arthur earnestly.

‘Very well, I will lose no time; but do not wait for me. Take her home, Arthur; make her go to bed. I shall be back in ten minutes.’

‘I cannot—I cannot! I must wait!’

He gave her a hasty kiss on both cheeks, threw his long cloak over his shoulder, and went out of the room.

Bianca followed him to the head of the stairs.

Almost as he reached the last step he turned and ran swiftly up again.

“Kiss me, Bianchina,” he said. ‘Good-bye!’

She kissed him eagerly—passionately, and he was obliged gently to unfasten her clinging fingers before she could let him go.

She stood watching until he was quite out of sight.





CHAPTER XVII.

GIUSEPPE BALDOVA'S apartments were on a story higher than those occupied by his father in the Casa Baldova, and both opened on the broad steep common staircase with private doors, giving each set of apartments the practical privacy of a separate house. The staircase, of the same width all the way, went up to the very top of the tall old house, and was dimly lighted on every alternate landing by a brass oil-lamp with hanging chains.

It was very dark as Camillo, with the important papers carefully hidden in his breast, came softly down the stairs.

The staircase ended in a vestibule with a very large door, which all day stood open, and at night was merely closed ; the staircase was as public as the streets, for each apartment had its separate door and bells.

Camillo had found Giuseppe waiting for him in great anxiety. He did not dare to venture into the street himself with the papers on him, for, as Colomba had told him that his name was known to the police, he might have met the gendarmes starting for their domiciliary visits, and would have run a great risk of being searched. But as the time drew on, and Camillo did not come, misgivings seized upon him ; and when he did appear at last, he received him with open arms.

There was not a moment to lose ; there was but time for a quick ‘ Good-night, Lillo—God be with you, *caro mio* !’ and Lillo was gone again.

Softly he came downstairs ; softly stepped into the hall. Just as he did so he saw the great heavy door slightly moving on its

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hinges, as though pushed from the outside. With a movement quick and silent as a cat's he glided against the wall; the door was pushed back upon him, and he remained behind it in deep shadow.

Camillo scarcely breathed, though he could almost hear the beating of his heart.

Two men in the full uniform of the gendarmes came in.

Would they close the door behind them? and if so, would they not see him? Giuseppe had extinguished the oil-lamp above, it was very dark inside; but a sharp line of moonlight came in with the police, and glanced like a bright shaft of steel across the hall.

With a rapid glance he calculated his chances. The two gendarmes had a closed lantern with them, and he heard them mutter something to each other about its being out of order. They opened it, and both bending down peered into it.

The door creaked, swung for a second, and then slammed heavily. Now was the moment; the men started and swore at the noise.

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They must see him—it was impossible they should not. They were close to him, looking almost in his face. But no—the glare of their lantern must be dazzling their eyes, for, unsuspecting and tranquil, they began to mount the stairs.

They were scarcely out of sight when Camillo glided out into the street, and murmured an ejaculation of thanksgiving.

They might search Giuseppe's rooms as much as they pleased; there was nothing there now that could affect him, or anyone connected with him.

It was growing late; the bells of the town rang out half-past twelve.

A sudden strange, urgent thought came quickly into Camillo's head. He would destroy those papers. It would give infinite trouble, would undo much that had been done; but something made him feel that in that course, and that only, lay safety. What was it? He did not feel over-excited in any way; he was not in a panic, only the voice within him was so strong that he felt it to be

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irresistible. His foot struck against a stone ; he bent down and took it up, and went swiftly to the parapet over the river. He did not hesitate; he wrapped the papers and the heavy stone in his handkerchief, knotted them tightly, and threw them into the river. They fell with a dull heavy thud and sank instantly ; a shower of water splashed up, flashing in the moonlight like diamonds.

Camillo raised his hat, and wiped away the moisture that stood on his forehead ; then he turned and plunged again into the dark streets.

Before he had gone very far he began to have a dim suspicion that he was being followed ; he fancied he saw a figure gliding behind him, passing from one shadow to another ; but the impression was so fleeting that he thought that it must be a delusion, and walked on.

Instead of taking the direct road to the Via Ceretani, the odd fancy that some one was watching him made Camillo suddenly resolve to take precautions to endeavour to throw

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whoever it might be off the scent. It made him turn rapidly down the Via della Vigna, intending to come out by the end of that street and double there, going back by a still narrower street, hardly more than a passage, into the Via Tornabuoni, which he had just quitted.

Camillo gave one glance up, backward and around him, ere he plunged into the shadows of the Via della Vigna, which, being narrow and overhung with very broad roofs, was quite dark.

All was as silent and still as the grave, the black shadows lying sleeping—not a breath of air was stirring.

Lillo passed by a little shrine ; a dim tiny oil-lamp burned before it ; it gave so faint a light he could do no more than distinguish the solemn outline of the crucifix. He removed his hat, made the sign of the cross, and as he went on murmured an ‘Ora pro nobis.’



CHAPTER XVIII.

‘**A**RTHUR, Arthur! will he never come?’

‘Yes, yes, my darling! he is sure to come. Do not terrify yourself like this. Lillo is very prudent; indeed, the danger is not so great as you think. Only consider, if the theatres were open, everyone would be abroad even as late as this.’

‘Ah, yes; but I am afraid, so afraid to-night! Hark! there are the bells again. It is one o’clock, and the stars are becoming brighter and brighter.’

‘No, Bianca; they are just the same. Do be patient, darling! I can assure you there can be very little danger.’

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'Ah, you do not know! if they are found upon him!'

'But, darling, try to think it over; try to be reasonable. Why should he be stopped or searched? Do you not remember? Colomba assured you that his name was not on the list of the suspected; and Colomba has proved so brave and so trustworthy, you cannot doubt her now. Sit down, my darling; try and make yourself be patient. This panic is so bad for you.'

Bianca moaned.

'Bianca, dearest, ask God to bring him home. Pray for him—trust that all will be well.'

'I do pray—I do. My heart is all one prayer.'

'Now sit down and close your eyes, and let me hold your hand. He will soon be here now.'

She obeyed him, lying back on the sofa very still, holding his hands with a clasp of steel with her slender fingers; and another hour passed by.

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Arthur, in spite of his reassuring words, had caught some of the terror that was in Bianca's soul. He could not understand why Lillo did not come; he knew well that unless something unforeseen had occurred, he would have taken every means in his power to shorten the suspense his sister must suffer. Lillo was always so wonderfully loving and thoughtful for her.

Two o'clock struck. Again Bianca moaned.

'He may have misunderstood, and thought that we had agreed to go home without waiting,' said Arthur, as cheerfully as he could, and catching at the smallest possibility of accounting for the long delay. 'Would you like me to walk to the Casa Baldova and see?'

'I wish the stars were not so bright—they are dazzling, glaring!' said Bianca. She covered her eyes with one hand.

'Shall I go?'

'Wait a little while—a little while! If it were only darker!'

'It is dark, my darling. All shadow in

the streets, and God's stars are shining softly down ; they give so faint a light that he can easily walk along unseen. How silent everything is now !

All was silent and still. Not a breath of air, not the hum of a fly ; nothing but Bianca's long-drawn breathing to break the death-like quiet.

Giacinto now came in from the other room.

'You are still waiting,' he said. 'It is very strange that Lillo does not come ! Does he know that you are waiting for him ?'

'That is just what I was saying,' said Arthur, trying to speak lightly. 'It is possible that he may have misunderstood our plans, and gone home, thinking to find us there already.'

'It is not likely,' said the old painter. 'Lillo knew quite well you would wait. No ; I cannot understand it.' He did not notice Arthur's rapid sign to him to be careful what he said, and he went on : 'There is something altogether unaccountable in it ;

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only that in these uncomfortable days one never knows what to expect. Ha! listen!

Suddenly burst on their ears the deep voice of the Duomo bell. It sounded awful in the stillness.

Bianca leapt to her feet with a sharp cry.

‘Arthur! Arthur! the Misericordia bell! Oh, my God! what has happened?’

Arthur rushed to the window and looked out. From a doorway opposite, a man came forth, and hurried off up the street.

‘It may have nothing to do with us, Bianca—nothing. Why should you imagine that it has?’ he said, holding her tightly in his arms. ‘Now, listen to me! Do you hear me, darling? I want you to be brave. I am going to the Casa Baldova at once, and I will bring Lillo back to you here, to show you the uselessness of these terrors. Your uncle will stay with you. I will go at once. You will encourage her?’ he said, turning to Giacinto. ‘There is no reason to fear.’ It is most probable that Lillo is already at home.’

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‘Yes, yes; quite true,’ said old Giacinto, catching Arthur’s meaning. ‘It is all folly; we will wait together, Bianchina. You hear, the bell has stopped already!’

‘Arthur!’ said Bianca, holding him fast. ‘You will bring him here—you promise?’

‘I promise. Be patient, dear one. God bless you!’

He went swiftly away.

Bianca sank on the floor, pressing her hands on her eyes. She did not notice Giacinto’s presence till he spoke again.

‘What is it, Bianchina? Did you not hear your good husband’s words? He is quite right—all will be well. Why do you hide your eyes?’

‘It is the stars,’ said Bianca, looking up. ‘I cannot bear their glare.’

‘What is it, Bianca—why should you be alarmed about Lillo to-night? Where has he gone?’

‘We are going to meet each other.’

‘Well, well! sit down by me—not on the ground like that. Come here.’

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He lifted her on to the sofa ; putting his arm round her, and letting her hide her face on his breast, he softly stroked her hair.

‘So, so, my Bianchina ! patience, my sweet one, my little one ! The old uncle will take care of thee. Why so frightened ? Thine own sweet mother in heaven is kneeling before God and praying for her twins, and a mother’s prayers always fall from heaven in blessings.’

Bianca did not speak again, and Giacinto, unwilling to disturb her, sat motionless but for the soft movement of his hand upon her head.

Pré-sently the silence was broken by the sound of distant footsteps—faint and far off yet—as of many feet coming along the street.

Bianca sat upright, listening with eyes growing wild with terror. She flew to the window and went out upon the balcony, leaning over—far over.

Tramp, tramp—they were coming nearer, and the red flare of burning torches showed what it was : the figures of the Misericordia

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in their black garments carrying between them a black-covered litter.

‘Misericordia! Misericordia!’ she cried.
‘They are coming here!’

On they came; they stood still just beneath the balcony, and the torches threw their crimson light all down the street.

Bianca drew back; with swift steps she glided down the stairs, and opened the door with her own hands.

Arthur met her there; she sprang to him, speaking with dry lips.

‘He is hurt—he is wounded? Only bring him in! Let me see his wounds!—why are they so slow?’

‘Bianca, my darling! Bianca!’

She looked at him with wild questioning eyes, and suddenly the words hissed from her lips:

‘Is he dead?’

‘Bianca!’

Her wild cry was never forgotten by those who heard it, and Arthur caught her as she fell forward senseless.



CHAPTER XIX.

THROUGH the grey twilight burst forth the great white sun, springing into sudden glory and flooding the world with light.

The country people, with baskets of fruit and flowers, came busily into the town and arranged their stalls in the Mercato Vecchio ; and as time went on they wondered to themselves that the inhabitants of the painter's house in the Via Ceretani lay so late in bed this morning, for, as the hours passed on, the shutters were still unclosed and the door was shut, and there was a look as of death upon the place. This condition of things excited curiosity and gossip while the buying and selling went on.

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Now two men passed up the street—one was Avvocato Baldova, and the other a friend of his; and in low tones the avvocato told his friend what had happened the night before.

‘Imagine,’ he said, ‘the gendarmes coming to search my house! Mine! one that is so well known as even I—a Gregoriano! I, who never have had a thought of discontent in my head! Truly, such an insult is quite enough to make me turn republican in my old age. They searched my house—searched it from the attics to the cellar!’

‘And found nothing?’

‘What should they find?’

‘But your son, it is well known, is not of your opinion.’

‘It ought to be enough that he is my son, and that his wife is a Montenero, to disarm suspicion. I had no sympathy with the cause; but these things shake one’s faith in the paternal Government.’

‘*Che, che!* let it pass; this is no time to

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talk of such bagatelles. Tell me about young De Caroli.'

'Ah! the poor, handsome, noble young fellow: we all loved him so! He was Giuseppe's dearest friend. He had spent the whole day with Giuseppe—where, I know not; somewhere in the country—and they parted at my door about ten o'clock. The gendarmes, after they had left my house, pursued their ordinary patrol, and half-way down the Via della Vigna they came suddenly upon the body of Camillo de Caroli, lying there stabbed to the very heart with a long knife. They say the death must have been instantaneous.'

'It is a terrible thing! Have they no clue to the murderer?'

'The knife was of Roman manufacture, and could only have belonged to a Roman. There is a fellow who has long had a spite against him, and it used always to be said that he was just the sort of scoundrel to cherish a vendetta; but he is not to be found, and his mother swore that he left

Florence for Pisa last Sunday, to enter on a new situation. He was once even in my service, as a cook.'

'I hope he will be taken.'

'It is much to be desired. But, taken or not, his future life will be a purgatory. Camillo de Caroli was loved by all, high and low; and he will be hunted like a wolf if the people find out where he hides.'

'What did the gendarmes do?'

'They summoned the Misericordia to carry him to his uncle's house. Oh! *amico mio!* the bright, genial, happy lad! They carried him to the house there,' pointing to Giacinto's house, 'and his twin-sister, Lady St. Leger—you have seen her at my house——'

'Yes—yes.'

'She met them at the door. She is lying there now. She is delirious. Her brain is affected. They do not know whether she will live or not. Poor Bianca! the poor beautiful child! Our saintly Colomba has spent the whole night on her knees. My wife is with Bianca; but Giuseppe is heart-

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broken—he sits by Camillo. They do not move him to Santa Catarina till to-night. The poor children! Truly, this life is a very sad thing.’

The avvocato was strangely softened by what had passed that night; he brushed the moisture from his eyes, and the hand on his friend’s arm was not so steady as it usually was.

The two men walked on together.

In the afternoon Colomba Baldova mounted the stairs of Count Giacinto’s house, and knocked at the door of the studio. It was opened softly by the old painter himself.

‘Come in, dear Signora—come in!’ he exclaimed. ‘It does my heart good to see you.’

The old man looked so grey and shaken that Colomba felt a thrill of compassion; she laid her hand on his arm.

‘Tell me, Conte,’ she said, ‘how is she now? Is she sensible yet?’

‘No, no; and that, perhaps, is best for her—and yet I do not know. She thinks she

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is in England—and she is always talking English.’

‘What does Dr. Giorgi say?’

‘He is frightened. I can see that he is frightened. Oh, *Maria Santissima!* how can I lose them both!’

‘No, no; do not think of it! Bianca is young and strong, and grief does not kill. Patience, dear friend! God will restore her to our prayers.’

Colomba could not restrain her sobs.

‘You would like to see him again—would you not?’

She nodded; she could not speak.

‘Giuseppe is there: he has been there since he first helped to carry him home among the *Misericordia.*’

‘Ah, my poor Giuseppe! he loved him so!’

Giacinto led the way into another room. The whole light of day was shut out, the only light coming from the row of tall wax-candles.

Camillo lay in his coffin, at his head a

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crucifix; a great purple velvet pall covering all but the face, which looked as if carved in fine white marble. There was no smile on the lips, only a great and solemn calm—a stillness which in its majesty and beauty awed the beholder and checked the gasping sobs.

Colomba sank on her knees, burying her face in her hands. The old painter wrung his hands and moaned, and looked and moaned again.

In the back of the room, Giuseppe sat with his hands clasped and his head bent down; leaning his brow on the back of a chair, and for hours he had not moved.

When Colomba rose from her knees she went forward and stood by the side of the dead, and looked down on him with one long look, the tears streaming unheeded down her cheeks; then she turned gently and went up to her husband.

‘Giuseppe,’ she whispered, ‘all is well with him, and he is beautiful as San Sebastian. Will you not come with me?’

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Poor Giuseppe rose to his feet. He did not know how to bear this grief. He went up and stood by his friend.

‘Oh! if I could have died for thee!’ he exclaimed in a low voice.

Colomba gently drew him away. One of the two nuns who were in the room came up to Colomba. She knew sorrow; she saw Giuseppe’s face.

‘Signora,’ she said, ‘we have no flowers. If this Signore would bring us some we would do him more honour.’

‘I will,’ said Giuseppe quickly.

‘Thank you, my Sister,’ said Colomba gratefully. It seemed a boon for which to be thankful to be allowed to do something—any little thing—for him.

The Sister went back to her place with her hushed steps, and Giuseppe and Colomba went out into the outer rooms.

The white daylight smote painfully on Giuseppe’s eyes. He had been sitting so long in the darkened room.

‘We will go at once about the flowers,

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Giuseppe. The air will do you good,' said Colomba.

As they passed the door of Bianca's room, Signora Baldova came hurriedly out.

'Ah, it is you, Colomba! I am thankful to see you. Go at once, I beseech you—do not lose a moment—fetch me ice—we have so little left!'

'We will go at once,' said Colomba. And she and Giuseppe went swiftly to get what was needed. Signora Baldova returned to Bianca's room, and closed the door.





CHAPTER XX.

THE Daltons were settled in London, and had plunged into the midst of a gay season. May was admired and popular, and Colonel Dalton greatly enjoyed taking her out, often relieving his wife from the hard work of chaperoning, which she was glad of, as, though strong, she could not bear the late hours very well.

Lady St. Leger was still with them. One morning she came into the drawing-room looking radiant. May was there, and she began her news at once.

‘It seems perfectly incredible, but it is nevertheless a fact, that little Jaquet has a little baby!’

‘Oh, I am so glad—so very glad!’ cried May, clapping her hands. ‘Is it a boy or a girl?’

‘A boy—the very oddest-looking little atom you ever saw, with a tremendously thick thatch of jet-black hair all over its head. As for Roger, words cannot describe him. He looks an inch taller, and the turn of his sentences is such that I should be exceedingly sorry to undertake to write down his polysyllables without a dictionary by the aid of which to spell them.’

‘Dear little wee baby!’ said May. ‘What an enchanting piece of news! I must write a long letter to Bianca, and tell her the good news; she will be dignified into being an aunt. I shall make Jaquet’s baby call me Aunt May too. It will sound more natural.’

‘Have any letters come for me, May?’ said Lady St. Leger. ‘I have not had time to look for them.’

‘Yes, auntie; and, *à propos*, there is one from Florence—it does not look like either Bianca or Arthur’s handwriting,’ she added,

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taking the letter from a writing-table, and feeling a little frightened by her own words.

Lady St. Leger sat down and opened the letter. May took a blotting-book, and began to answer two or three notes which had come for her mother.

Presently she was startled by Lady St. Leger, who suddenly rose to her feet in great agitation.

‘May, May!’ she exclaimed.

‘What is the matter, Aunt Louie? What is it? Nothing wrong with Arthur or Bianca?’

‘Everything wrong! something so dreadful has happened! What can I do to help them?’

She threw the letter to May. ‘Read it, May—do! I never heard of anything so sad!’

May was thoroughly frightened now, and at first she could scarcely steady herself enough to understand what the letter contained.

It was from Arthur, written in great misery,

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the writing itself strained, and in some places nearly illegible. The words were few enough :

‘ DEAREST MOTHER,

‘ You will, I am sure, be grieved to hear that we have met with a very great sorrow; indeed, I can hardly at this moment realize how great the actual sorrow will be to me. Bianca’s brother Lillo was killed last night; we believe that it was a deliberate murder. He was brought home to us here, and Bianca saw the litter arrive, and the shock has done her very serious harm. Dearest mother, I cannot tell you how I long for you! She lies unconscious—it is, I suppose, brain fever. The doctor is here night and day, but at present he can pronounce no opinion as to which way it will turn. She imagines herself to be back in England, and is constantly asking for Aunt Mary and May. We are not at the villa even, but at her uncle’s house. Bianca’s maid is absolutely silly, and of no use whatever. I long so for Martin;

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she has most tender nursing from Signora Baldova and a trained Sister, but as neither of these understand a word of the English she is always speaking, I do not feel as if it were safe. I know you cannot come because of Jaqueline, but I am sorely in need of help. You never saw Lillo, so it is impossible for you to understand what his loss is to me.

‘Your loving son.’

May put down the letter. ‘Oh, Aunt Louisa!’ she cried, ‘what can we do? Something must be done to help them. Arthur all alone with no one to help him, and the maid such a complete failure!’

‘I shall go at once, this very day,’ said Lady St. Leger. ‘Arthur must have help; and I have the gravest fears! Bianca is the last person who ought to have brain fever.’

‘I wonder what mamma would say; how I wish she would come in!’

‘Whatever anybody says, I shall go at once to my boy,’ said Lady St. Leger. ‘Let

me see—if I start to-night, I could get there in about ten days, I think. Oh, May, May! all will be decided by that time! I cannot be with him in the worst part of his anxiety—my poor boy!

‘There is mamma!’ cried May, as a knock at the door announced her return.

‘Mrs. Dalton came in with a bright smile on her face.

‘I have just come from Portman Square,’ she said. ‘I have seen the baby, and given Roger my congratulations. I never saw anybody so enchanted as he is. But what is the matter?’ she asked, as she suddenly perceived from the expression of their faces that something very serious must have happened.

‘Read this, mamma,’ said May, giving her the letter.

Mrs. Dalton sat down and read rapidly.

‘My dear Louisa,’ she cried, greatly shocked, ‘this is terrible! What are we to do?’

‘I must go this very day, without an hour’s delay,’ said Lady St. Leger, in the rapid de-

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cisive manner of one who anticipates opposition.

‘Dear Louie!’ said Mrs. Dalton gently: ‘I am so sorry for you, but that would be quite out of the question.’

‘I must go to my boy!’

‘But Jaqueline must be thought of also. It would never do for her to hear of this. I know it is very hard for you, but indeed you must be patient; it might actually endanger her life.’

‘But what can be done? Oh, help me, Mary! I cannot bear not to go when he wants me.’

‘I know it is dreadful for you, and you will have a difficult part to play that Jaqueline may not suspect that anything is wrong; but it is most important,’ she added earnestly. ‘Little Jaqueline has more energy and spirit than real strength, and she is so young.’

‘I know,’ said Lady St. Leger despairingly: ‘you are like my conscience, Mary,’ she said with a kind of painful smile; ‘you force me to know what I want to forget.’

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‘We must do something,’ went on Mrs. Dalton thoughtfully. ‘Arthur must have some help without the smallest delay.’

‘Oh, mamma, thank you!’ cried May, who had been standing with clasped hands looking from the one to the other during this discussion, and feeling with a sort of despair that nothing would be done.

‘Maysie, run down to your father’s sitting-room and tell him about it,’ said Mrs. Dalton. ‘Take the letter with you.’

‘Yes; John will be able to help us,’ said Lady St. Leger. She sat back in her chair with a look of such distress on her face that Mrs. Dalton was touched.

‘Are you not giving up hope very easily, dear?’ she said kindly. ‘I do not see why Bianca should not get quite well. She is young and strong, and we will see that she has good nursing. In the first place, those Sisters are often first-rate nurses, and this Signora Baldova has always been a great friend of hers; and their Italian ways will suit Bianca better than our English ones.’

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'It is what Arthur must be suffering that breaks my heart,' said Lady St. Leger. 'If I could but go to him!'

'Something shall be done. There is John's step; he is coming upstairs.'

Colonel Dalton and May came in together. He looked grave and anxious.

'This is bad news, Louisa,' he said. 'But we must go out to them at once. There is nothing else to be done.'

'I thought that you would say so,' said Mrs. Dalton calmly. 'We can start to-day.'

'But do you really mean it?' cried Lady St. Leger. 'You will really go?' She started to her feet, trembling.

'Of course,' said Colonel Dalton cheerily. 'And I have not the smallest doubt that by the time we get there we shall find Bianca on the high-road to recovery.'

'I do not know how to thank you! You are the best, the dearest friends that ever lived on earth!' cried Lady St. Leger. 'I shall feel quite happy, quite confident now that all will go well.'

The difference in her face greatly relieved Mrs. Dalton, who had felt a pang of fear that her friend would enter Jaqueline's room with the stricken agonized look she had worn before, and perhaps do irremediable harm. But her impulsive nature had veered round like a weathercock, and now she was all hope instead of all terrors.

'Shall we leave May with Louisa?' asked Mrs. Dalton slowly.

May said nothing, but she clasped her hands and looked at her mother. She read the piteous little entreaty aright.

'No, no!' she added quickly.

'I cannot spare my May-flower,' said Colonel Dalton. 'But, Mary, there is no time to lose; I am off to the office to try and get a courier, and to get our passports. And you had better be thinking about packing—Martin will want all the time she can get.'

'Martin is never taken by surprise,' said Mrs. Dalton. 'She is quite invaluable, and has so much experience in illness that she is as useful as a trained nurse.'

‘Oh, how I wish I were going with you!’ cried Lady St. Leger.

‘You shall hear from us as often as it is possible to write. And above all, dear, don’t despond ; you know that there is every hope of Bianca’s complete recovery. She will have everything in her favour ; and, please God, our reports will be hopeful from the very beginning.’

‘How shall I account for your not coming to see Jaqueline?’

‘Give her my dearest love, and say that her uncle was obliged to go out of London. That will be quite sufficient until she is well enough to hear all about it ; and then I hope that you will have only good to tell her—that Bianca is getting well.’

‘And tell her how I longed to see her,’ said May. ‘And give the little baby a kiss from me.’

‘The little baby to hold in your arms will be your best comfort, my poor Louie!’ said Mrs. Dalton, kissing her friend lovingly before she hurried away to go on with her preparations for their immediate departure.



CHAPTER XXI.

ARTHUR ST. LEGER met the travellers at the door of the house in the Via Ceretani as their big vetturino carriage drove up. May was looking out of the window, and first caught sight of him.

‘We have arrived, mamma,’ she said. ‘There is Arthur waiting. No! I can see his face—it cannot be—yet it must be Arthur! Oh, mother! mother! he is so changed!’ And May drew in her head, unable to check her tears.

Colonel Dalton put his arm affectionately round her; but Mrs. Dalton said:

‘Don’t let poor Arthur see you in trouble,

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May darling. Remember we are come to help him, and bright faces will do that best.'

The carriage drew up heavily. Prepared as Mrs. Dalton was by May's words, she could hardly suppress a start when Arthur opened the door and eagerly put out both hands in welcome. She put her arms round his neck and gave him a mother's kiss.

'How is she, Arthur?'

'Conscious to-day, for the first time,' he answered, with a look that went to her heart.

His young face was haggard and thin, the eyes dimmed and sunken; the hand which held Mrs. Dalton's clingingly burnt like fire.

'Never mind the luggage,' said Mrs. Dalton. 'The courier is there, and Martin. What arrangements have you made for us?'

'I do not know whether they will do,' said Arthur hesitatingly. 'Rooms at the villa are ready for Uncle John and May. I

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thought—I did not know—that perhaps you would stay with us here for a few days, Aunt Mary; but if you do not like it, then——’

‘My dear boy, that is exactly what I should wish; nothing could be better.’

‘And if Uncle John does not mind, he will find old Count Giacinto there. I thought you would be kind to him, May; he could not bear the sound of Bianca’s voice, and it was a great thing to get him away. Will you, May?’

May’s voice would not answer; but she nodded her head.

‘Then you see, Aunt Mary,’ went on Arthur, in a kind of matter-of-fact way in which he had spoken all the time, ‘I can put Martin into his room. But you must be tired; you had better not come to-day,’ he said suddenly.

‘No; both Martin and I are quite fresh. We have come quite a short stage to-day on purpose.’

‘My carriage is here,’ said Arthur. ‘It is

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open, and will go much faster than this one with all the luggage.'

'Very well; then your uncle and May can drive at once to the villa, and after Martin has chosen the boxes that she and I will want, the vetturino shall follow.'

'Yes,' added Colonel Dalton; 'and when we are settled, I will walk down and see how you are getting on.'

'You will find dinner ready,' said Arthur; 'and if you want anything, tell the maestro di casa—Binda is his name. Count Giacinto will explain; and you will find Bianca's maid there—I sent her back. I hope,' he said wistfully, 'I do hope you will be comfortable. Binda is very attentive. You will not find poor Count Giacinto much in your way. I wish I could have gone with you.'

'No, no; they will do very well,' said Mrs. Dalton. 'The courier will follow you, John, directly he has taken off my box; and you, my May, make yourself busy, and unpack and settle down quite comfortably,

so as to be ready when Bianca is well enough to be moved home. Good-bye.'

They entered Arthur's carriage, and drove away.

Arthur led the way into the house; he held Mrs. Dalton's hand tightly.

'Oh, the relief of having you!' he said. 'You can never know what it is.'

'And now tell me who is with her.'

'Sister Rosa is with her at this moment: she and Signora Baldova have been sitting up with her alternate nights, and Colomba Baldova comes generally for some hours in the day.'

'And you, Arthur?'

'You see they do not understand English, and I have always been so afraid that when she recovered consciousness she would go on speaking English, and they would not understand, and so——'

'You have never left her? I thought so, my poor boy!'

'There is a large armchair in the room; I have dozed there. But it is all right to-day;

she knew us all, and spoke in Italian as usual. But oh ! to think of your being here !

Mrs. Dalton was aghast at the noise and rattle of the busy street.

‘It must have been very noisy for her,’ she said.

‘It is quiet enough in her rooms,’ replied Arthur ; ‘they all look out to the back : it is both quiet and cool. I ordered some dinner for you. Come.’

He led the way upstairs. Mariuccia was waiting, looking very thin and old, as if a blight had passed over her.

‘Is dinner ready, Mariuccia ?’ he asked.

‘Yes, Signore, on the table. Dr. Giorgi is just gone in. Sister Rosa told me to tell you, and to ask you to eat a mouthful before you returned. Will you sit down, Eccellenza ?’ she said, kissing Mrs. Dalton’s hand as a welcome, and taking her travelling-cloak.

Mrs. Dalton sat down at the table.

‘Come, Arthur,’ she said, ‘let us eat at once, for I want to see the doctor before he goes ;’ and she began to help the soup.

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‘I really feel as if it were good, now that you are come,’ he said, looking at her gratefully.

Arthur attacked the soup rather eagerly, but after a few spoonfuls put it away. Mrs. Dalton did not press him ; she saw that his whole frame was actually sinking with fatigue, and that until he had slept he could do nothing more.

She finished eating rapidly, then asked to see her room, where she took off her bonnet and got rid of the dust of the journey.

When she returned, looking as much at home as if the barely furnished room had been her own room at home, she found Arthur sitting where she had left him, his head sunk on his breast, already asleep. He stood up dizzily.

‘Shall we go now to her rooms?’

‘Yes, I will go,’ said Mrs. Dalton ; ‘but I will do nothing, Arthur, till you are actually in bed—not sleeping in a chair. Where is your room?’

He pointed it out.

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‘Well, go there and undress. I will take charge of everything.’

‘It is such rest!’ said Arthur.

‘Then do as I tell you. I will come and see you in bed in ten minutes.’

She watched him go into his room, actually staggering with fatigue. After about ten minutes she knocked, and receiving no answer went in. Arthur had obeyed her; he was in bed, and already in a sleep so profound that she bent suddenly over him to assure herself that he breathed. With quiet movements she closed the green shutters and stole away.

Mrs. Dalton went into the studio, a little uncertain how next to proceed. She had not been there five minutes before Dr. Giorgi came to her. He spoke French well, to her great relief, as she had been afraid that her imperfect knowledge of Italian might prove misleading.

In answer to her questions, he told her that he considered that Bianca’s life still hung upon a thread; that, though the

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delirium had disappeared, the weakness was terrible. The nurses were all worn out, and he welcomed the arrival of fresh help eagerly, especially when he heard that she was the aunt of his young patient.

‘Her aunt? that is almost her mother,’ he said; and there was no time to lose: *il povero giovinotto*, as he called Arthur, was so exhausted that he began to feel almost as anxious about him as about his young wife.

When Mrs. Dalton told him what she had already done with Arthur, a smile of pleasure beamed on his kindly old face, and he nodded approval vehemently.

‘And now we must think of our good Sister Rosa,’ he said.

He went to Bianca’s door and gave a very soft little tap; it was opened at once, and the Sister came out—an active, business-like, middle-aged woman. The doctor explained in a few words.

Sister Rosa nodded and shook hands with Mrs. Dalton.

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Dr. Giorgi gave a few directions to Mrs. Dalton, as to all that was to be done for Bianca, and then went his way.

Sister Rosa put on her black cloak, and told her that she was going home for a good night's rest, and that she would return in the early morning. She showed Mrs. Dalton where everything was, then with a glance at the bed where her patient lay, she smiled and nodded, wished her a quiet night, and went away.

Mrs. Dalton went up to the bed, and looked down. Bianca lay on the white pillows, her magnificent hair had been all cut off, and only short fair locks lay on the waxen brow. She moved a little, opened her eyes, but she gave no start when she saw Mrs. Dalton.

'Aunt Mary,' she said, in a voice so low that it seemed the very ghost of a whisper.

'Yes, my darling ; lie still—do not move.'

'Is May here ?'

'Yes ; she will come when you have had some sleep.'

Presently Bianca moved again. Mrs. Dalton bent down to hear.

‘Auntie—Arthur!’

‘Arthur is here, darling; he is very tired; he has gone to sleep. Arthur is close by.’

She seemed satisfied, and did not speak again, and presently seemed to fall into a kind of doze.

Colonel Dalton came late in the evening. Martin met him, and explained how everything stood. He would not go upstairs, but returned to the villa, thankful to have so good an account to take to poor Giacinto.

Martin arranged a couch for herself in the anteroom, and slept there the first part of the night, starting up at the slightest summons from Mrs. Dalton for anything that might be wanted.

The night passed in wonderful stillness; at the first dawn of day Bianca’s strength seemed to be waning, but the constant use of restoratives brought it back again, and when the sun rose she was in a more natural sleep than she had yet had.

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Arthur slept on all the next day : he did not open his eyes until about four o'clock in the afternoon. When he awoke, he started up with the guilty feeling of a sentry who has slept at his post. He dressed quickly, and came into the studio. He found Martin there with a tray, on which his luncheon was prepared, and her kind face was like a breath of home—so comforting and familiar.

‘We are getting on extremely well, Sir Arthur,’ she said. ‘Mrs. Dalton told me to let you have your luncheon at once when you awoke, and afterwards that you might go in. The Italian lady is there now, and her ladyship has been asking for you.’

‘Where is my aunt, Martin?’ he asked.

‘Gone for a drive with Colonel Dalton and Miss May, Sir Arthur. Sister Rosa is going to sit up to-night, and the Italian lady is in charge now : we are doing extremely well.’

Arthur went into his wife’s room. She moved her arms as though, if she had had

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the strength, she would have held them out to him.

‘You are better, my darling?’ he said softly, and sat still holding her hand.

She did not answer in words, but a gentle smile seemed to pass over her face.

He sat with her for an hour; then a message called him from the room. Signora Baldova followed him to the door.

‘Do not hasten to come back,’ she said kindly. ‘Bianca is inclined to sleep; she is better quite quiet.’

The message was from Mrs. Dalton, in the carriage; she wanted him to come and drive with them for half an hour.

He did not look like the same man who had met them at the door on the day before. May’s heart bounded; she had almost dreaded to look at him, feeling such an aching sense of sympathy for the suffering she had seen in his face.

He got into the carriage and leant back, saying nothing, but feeling a strange dreaminess, a sense of unreality that was almost

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oppressive. The familiar home-voices, the sound of his native language, the sweet fresh air blowing all round him after the many days during which he had never left the house, all was alike delicious and bewildering.

‘You have not asked for any home news, Arthur,’ said Colonel Dalton presently. Arthur gave quite a little start, to throw off the dreaminess.

‘It is so strange to see you and hear you, Uncle John, that I am still not sure whether I am awake or asleep, even after committing the absurdity of sleeping from six o’clock one evening to four o’clock of the following afternoon. Have you heard from my mother?’

‘Yes—a letter quite full of the charms of her grandson; one would think that such a baby had never been seen or heard of, to judge from the way Roger and Jaqueline and your mother wrote.’

‘Did little Jaquet write herself?’

‘Yes, to me,’ said May, ‘to ask me to be the baby’s godmother; a proud position to which I have never yet attained. She says

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they spend hours consulting over what its name is to be. Aunt Louisa sent the letter, for Jaquet thinks that we are only in the country, and has no idea of where we are ; at least she had not then—by this time, perhaps, she knows.'

'How beautiful and charming it all is!' exclaimed Mrs. Dalton, as they drove round the walls and towards home again. 'When Bianca is able to be moved to the villa, we must have a great many exploring expeditions.'

The confident tone was marvellously soothing to Arthur, after the hopelessness of the last days ; he gave himself up to the feeling of quiet enjoyment it inspired.

'Will you tell me about Giacinto, May?' he said presently. 'Poor old fellow, I feel as if I had neglected him ; but I could not help it. I am so glad to think that you will be good to him.'

'He has been sitting close by me all the morning,' said May ; 'and since mamma's message came this morning to say that dear

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Bianca was better, he has been able to talk to me ; before that, he was too miserable and restless.'

'Yes,' said Colonel Dalton ; 'the poor old fellow kept walking backwards and forwards, up and down stairs, in the most pitiable, aimless way, now and then muttering to himself ; but after the message came he talked to May a long time about poor Camillo.'

Colonel Dalton saw the sudden quiver of Arthur's lips, and the abrupt movement of his hand raised as if to ward off a blow, and he stopped himself ; he had not before realized how strong was the tie of affection between the brothers-in-law, and he did not quite understand it now. May with gentle tact took up his words.

'Yes ; how devoted he is to Bianca ! He is a dear old man ; I am sure that I could grow very fond of him. What a lovely place your villa is, Arthur ! I had no idea that it was such a Paradise. I am longing to show it to mamma.'

'It is lovely,' said Arthur ; 'I only hope

that Binda makes you comfortable ; he is not at all a bad servant, and has fallen into our ways easily. Here we are at the door. Are you very tired, Aunt Mary ?' he asked affectionately.

' No, dear ; not in the least too tired. And I am not going to sit up to-night—Sister Rosa and Martin will do it to-night, and I and Signora Baldova will have a good rest.'

' I hope so. What a delicious evening it has been ! Good-bye, Uncle John ; good-bye, dear May. By-the-bye, you know my sitting-room ?'

' The big north room, where we found Count Giacinto sitting ?'

' Yes ; will you look into the left-hand drawer of the bureau for cigars, and tell Giacinto from me, to smoke as many of them as he likes. That will please him, I know.'

' I will, thanks. Good-bye.'

Arthur and Mrs. Dalton went upstairs together.

While she turned to her room, he went, with the soft hushed step now habitual to all of

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them, into Bianca's room. She was lying in a gentle sleep, her breathing soft and regular. Signora Baldova was seated by her side ; she withdrew to let him take her place, and as she did so she gave him a little nod of congratulation, and her lips framed, without uttering the words : ' She is better, she is doing well.'

Arthur put his hand on the bedcover for one moment to touch Bianca's, fearing that it might be cold. The movement did not rouse her in the smallest degree, but she moved her thin little hand, and clasped it softly round his. He sat so for two hours, not moving until they were roused by Signora Baldova's return to give her the nourishment so necessary to sustain her strength.





CHAPTER XXII.

THE days passed on, and Bianca improved and gained strength, but very very slowly, so slowly that those who watched her were obliged to look back from week to week—not from day to day—to see that she had made any progress at all. The thing that kept her back so much seemed to be a constant recurrence of feverish symptoms day after day in the late afternoon, leaving her faint and exhausted when the fever left her.

‘There must be something to account for this,’ said Dr. Giorgi to Arthur one day. ‘Has she ever had low fever, ague or malaria of any sort?’

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Arthur did not know, he had never heard her speak of it; but he walked up to the villa to consult Count Giacinto, and to find out from him whether it had ever been so with his knowledge.

Count Giacinto remembered perfectly that when the twins were about twelve years old, their mother had brought them to Florence from Rome, where they had stayed too late into the summer, and that both the children, he believed, had had the Roman fever very severely.

‘They were both taken ill on the same day, and with both the fever ran the same course,’ said Giacinto. ‘And then it was that Bianca’s mother used to say that she thought their lives were intertwined so closely with each other that neither would survive the other long. Of course the idea of an accidental death like Lillo’s never entered her head,’ added the old man hastily. ‘Lillo had fever again for a few days during his first campaign, Giuseppe tells me.’

‘I must tell Dr. Giorgi about it,’ said Arthur

thoughtfully. 'It is possible that it may alter his mode of treatment.'

'Arthur,' said Count Giacinto, lowering his voice, 'has Bianca spoken of Lillo yet, or asked for him?'

'No,' said Arthur. 'We do not know; sometimes we think that the shock has effaced everything from her mind, and that the time will come in which she will ask for him, and we shall have to tell her. Please God she may be spared that,' he added, shivering. 'I should dread it more than I can say.'

'We need not think of evils before they arrive,' said Count Giacinto.

'Tell me,' went on Arthur presently, 'are you happy here? What do you do with yourself all day? I feel quite guilty in turning you out of your own house, and your work at the studio for such a long time. I fear you must have missed it all a great deal.'

Giacinto opened his thin long hands, and clasped and unclasped them several times, looking at them with a sort of sad curiosity.

'I suppose it is because I am old,' he said.

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'I was a great deal older than their father, you know, doubtless. But my hand has taken to trembling very much, so that I cannot paint now. I think,' he said, with a sigh, 'that that classical piece in my studio is the last picture I shall ever paint, and I am not sorry. It is, I think, my best. So you see, I do not miss my studio; it is sorrowful to take up the brush and try to give a delicate touch, and find that it shakes about all over the canvas. I am as happy here as I can be anywhere without my children; the world can never again be what it was. This young girl here, May, is a very angel. I do not wonder at the love Bianca has always felt for her. She has blue eyes like the Santa Madonna, and she is so good to me, so very good to me; but,' he added, a little shyly, 'those cigars. You tempted me too much; you will regret your offer when you see the box.'

'No, no; they are yours. You shall always have as many of them as you wish. I will order them for you.'

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'With those,' said Giacinto, looking up at Arthur standing in front of him—'with those it becomes possible to forget that I am going downhill, that the light of my eyes has been taken from me, and that I can no longer paint.'

'I am glad,' said Arthur huskily.

'And May lets me talk to her of Lillo. I can tell her so many things, and she likes to know—she likes to know.'

'I am sure she does,' said Arthur, 'even though she did not know him and love him as we did.'

When Arthur passed May as he went out, he said :

'I cannot tell you how much obliged I am to you for all your kindness to poor old Giacinto. He is very fond of you, and likens you to an angel.'

'Poor old man! I do so want to be a comfort to him; he feels his loss terribly. There must have been something wonderfully winning about Lillo.' She saw the quivering of Arthur's lips which he could not suppress

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when he was mentioned, and she went on gently : ' I know that you must all have loved him dearly. I wish I had seen him.'

' You cannot even imagine what he was to me during this last year—help, comfort——'

His voice choked, and he hurriedly said good-bye, and went away. But the few words were a revelation to May—the only words that in all his life Arthur ever uttered that betrayed what he had gone through. May kept the unconscious confidence sacred, locked in her own breast.

Arthur went to Dr. Giorgi's house when he reached Florence. He found him at home, and told him what Count Giacinto had said about the Roman fever.

Dr. Giorgi thought of it all that day. The next morning, when he had paid his usual visit to his patient, he took Arthur aside and said :

' The English Signora tells me that the fever came back as usual yesterday, and now I want to try a bold experiment, with your permission. It is becoming very hot ; it will

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already be midsummer soon. I want to move your wife up to the villa. She is very weak—it will be a risk ; but she is now making no advance, and it is possible that a complete change may give the little weight to turn the scale.'

Arthur was quite delighted at the idea ; it seemed a revival of hope.

'How soon can we do it?' he said.

'In the morning, before the heat of the day, is best ; to-morrow, if she has a good night. I will come to see her moved.'

'How shall we do it?' said Arthur doubtfully. 'Could she bear the motion of the carriage?'

'No, no ; she must be carried. Why, of course the Misericordia will do it best.'

Arthur could not prevent a sharp shudder.

The old doctor looked at him kindly.

'You also are still suffering from the shock,' he said. 'But we must not think of such things ; she will be much better carried like that, by those who understand it, and I will see to it myself.'

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‘Will it not give her a shock also?’

‘Let her choose herself; she is not like you, she has been used to the Misericordia all her life.’

Arthur saw the wisdom of his words; he went to Bianca presently and said to her :

‘My darling, Dr. Giorgi thinks that you may be moved up to the villa to-morrow.’

‘Ah, I shall like that!’ she said softly.

‘You will like it? I am so glad. The sweet fresh air there will do you so much good, and May is longing to have you with her.’

She smiled and lay quite still for a moment; then she said :

‘Arthur, if you do not mind, I should like the Misericordia to carry me.’

‘My darling, yes; it will be far the most comfortable way,’ he said, forcing himself to speak in the most commonplace way. ‘I will see about it for you.’

This suggestion of Bianca’s made Arthur feel almost certain that all recollection of what had happened had vanished from her

mind. The thought that she would miss and ask for her brother soon, hung over him like a terrible nightmare.

Arthur went up to the villa to see May, and make preparations for the move.

‘It is quite time that your mother should also have a change, May,’ he said. ‘I thought she looked very tired yesterday. Don’t you think she will enjoy this place?’

‘I am sure she will,’ said May brightly. ‘But now to business.’

Bianca was to have her own large room upstairs, out of which two other rooms opened right and left, one of which May proposed to turn into a sitting-room.

‘Bianca and I wanted to make the rooms more comfortable, May,’ said Arthur; ‘but we did not know how to set a bout it. What is wanting?’

‘It is marvellous what a few table-covers, and a vase or two, and some little low chairs would do,’ said May, smiling. ‘Great big marble tables look cold—don’t they?’

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‘Shall we go down to Florence and see what we can get? Bianca will like it.’

‘Let us,’ said May. ‘There is nothing papa intends to do this evening, and he also will like it very much.’

They made themselves busy arranging the house. Bianca’s room was made quite charming: it had very large windows opening like doors, and the view from them was magnificent.

May, enchanted at having something besides washhand basins in which to arrange flowers, filled the house with them.

Arthur remembered that Bianca did not care for Majolica, and he and May, after much searching, found two lovely old glasses of crimson Bohemian glass, mounted in silver, with silver chains, which he bought for her room, and they filled them with scentless flowers and ferns.

On the following morning the little Misericordia procession came to the door, and Bianca was carried downstairs on her bed and put on to the litter.

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Arthur helped to carry her down, but when his task was done, and he saw the black-veiled figures take up their light burden, he suddenly became so deadly white and faint that Colonel Dalton brought him indoors again, and forced him to swallow some brandy.

‘It is very foolish,’ he said. ‘There, I am all right now.’

And he mastered the feeling, and walked on in front of the litter, to be present when they arrived.

The little journey was accomplished safely, and though Bianca fainted when they arrived, she revived sufficiently in the cool of the evening to reassure all her anxious nurses that no harm had been done.

She did not speak at first of the alterations in her room, but her eyes wandered all round it, resting on each new unfamiliar object, and then she smiled and whispered :

‘Arthur, I want May.’

May came in, and sat by her. Bianca’s eyes rested on her with a loving gentle

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expression in them; then she said in English :

‘ It is all so pretty, but you are the prettiest of all, May. Kiss me !’

May kissed her.

From that time Bianca was always asking for her, and was never so happy as when she was sitting in the room, her eyes following her movements, and the gentle flow of her white gown.

May would not wear the mourning she and her mother had adopted for Camillo in his sister’s presence, so she always wore white.

Bianca, after a few days, gained strength enough for Arthur to carry her into her new sitting-room next door, and she lay there close to the window, saying very little, but often smiling, and always watching May.

‘ Aunt Mary, do you think she knows ?’ asked Arthur, one day. ‘ What would I not give to know !’

‘ We must be patient, Arthur,’ answered Mrs. Dalton. ‘ We must not disturb her ;’

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Nature is softly healing the wound. It is the hand of God!

‘I do not think that I am wanting in patience,’ said Arthur, smiling.

There was something so pathetic in his smile that Mrs. Dalton turned hastily to hide the starting tears.





CHAPTER XXIII.

THERE was no longer any possibility of evading the truth: delusion must fade away. Bianca was not getting better. On the contrary, every evening the persistent fever came back, bringing with it a strange, false strength; and every night, after it had passed away, the exhaustion seemed greater. In the early morning she would sleep best, but nothing seemed to have any effect in breaking the daily return of the same symptoms.

The days grew hotter and hotter; the orange and lemon trees were in full fruit, and the warm air was laden with their fragrance. The shutters and windows were kept closed

all day, and a great block of ice stood always in Bianca's room, giving out a cool freshness in the darkness.

The rooms were so large and lofty that no one suffered much from the heat, and they adopted Italian habits, going out very early and very late in the day.

One day Bianca called Arthur to her bedside, and said in her weak voice: 'Arthur, I want you to take me into my sitting-room this evening, and let me lie there; and I want to see Colomba and Signora Balдова—may I?'

'Anything you wish, my darling; but are you strong enough?'

'Yes; but they must not stay too long.'

Arthur went down to let them know, and in the afternoon he carried her into the next room; she seemed such a light weight now in his strong arms.

May came in with a great bowl of roses in her hands, and placed them by her; then she arranged the soft white lace that covered

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Bianca's feet, and smoothed back the short fair hair.

'Your hair is beginning to grow, darling,' she said; 'it waves back quite on to your neck again.'

'Does it?' said Bianca, smiling. 'Sit there, May, till they come. I do not want to talk, but for you to read.'

May opened her book, and read on to herself; presently she looked up, and saw Bianca's eyes still fixed upon her with that same wistful look they so often wore.

Arthur brought Signora Baldova and Colomba upstairs, and then he and May went away and left them.

Bianca held out a hand to each, and kissed both lovingly; she lay for a moment without speaking, then she said:

'Colomba, I have a very great favour to ask of you; and of you, dear Signora.'

'There is nothing I would not do for you, my Bianchina,' said Signora Baldova earnestly.

'It is this: I want you to take Uncle

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Giacinto into the Casa Baldova by-and-by.' They looked at each other anxiously, hardly liking to believe what her words implied. Bianca went on: 'Not as a stranger, dear friends, but as one of your own family. He is not without means. Let him pay his apartments and his board, that will be happier; but you, Colomba——' she paused to take breath; 'you, will you be to him what I have been, and help him to bear it?'

'I will try; I will indeed try,' faltered Colomba, struggling with her tears. 'But it can never be the same.'

'You will consent, Signora?' said Bianca, putting her slender fingers together.

'He shall be as a brother; the Avvocato loves him well.'

'Then that is done,' said Bianca. 'I have found him a home. He could not live in England, you know, or they would take him when they all go home. Thank you. God is very good.'

Presently she spoke again:

'Colomba.'

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‘Dearest.’

‘If some day God sends you a little child, will you call it Camillo?’

‘Yes, yes! Giuseppe would not have it otherwise.’

‘Give my love to Giuseppe and to Louisa. Tell her—tell her——’

But she was exhausted, and could say no more. Signora Baldova rose to go. ‘She has spoken long enough,’ she said. ‘Good-bye, my darling; we will come again soon. You are tired now—we will go.’

‘Good-bye—you will not forget?’

‘No, no; good-bye, Bianchina.’

May and Arthur were waiting outside, and they came in.

Bianca was worse that night. The fever came back with cruel strength; she wandered much, and in all her wanderings she kept on calling to Arthur, in Italian, to come to her, to save her from something, they knew not what; and the exhaustion that followed was so death-like that no one dared to go to bed, and hardly to move in the sick-room, lest a

breath of air should put out the waning flame.

With the early morning again came nature's sweet restorer, and she slept.

When she awoke, they all saw that the end was approaching.

'Arthur,' she said, 'I have had such a dream! It is all right. Lillo is waiting for me. I shall not be alone.'

'Then you know, my Bianca? You have known all this time?'

'Known what?' a troubled look for a moment passed over her brow, as if she strove to understand.

'You have known that Lillo has gone on before?'

The look of distress passed away, and a smile shone on her face. 'Why not? He is waiting for me—he wants me. I am very sorry, Arthur,' she said slowly, 'but you knew I could not stay without Lillo. Will you give me any message for him?'

'Tell him,' said Arthur, in a stifled voice—
'tell him how I also loved him.'

‘He knows it,’ said Bianca softly. They hardly knew whether she were completely conscious or not; the words she uttered and her looks gave the impression of so close a communion with the dead.

As the day advanced Bianca asked to receive the Holy Communion; it was clear to all now that she knew that she was dying. All came kneeling round her; she followed the holy service with a wonderful strength, it seemed. And when it was all over she held out her hand, and said faintly:

‘Uncle John—auntie, kiss me. Let me say good-bye now!’

They kissed her gently—solemnly. Then she said:

‘I want to see May. May, will you stay with me?’

Arthur was moving away with the others, but she called him back, so faintly that May was obliged to follow him and summon him to return. He knelt down by her bed, and she laid her hand on his hair, softly touching each little lock.

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Then she began to speak in a very soft solemn way, pausing for breath at times, but neither of them interrupted her.

‘Arthur,’ she said, ‘it is all at an end now—the sorrow and the sacrifice; and I want to tell you, I do not think I ever can make you know all my gratitude. You have been so good—oh, so good to me. But—I have not been to you what I should have been. Oh, Arthur! forgive me——’

He could not speak; he pressed his lips upon her hand.

‘Darling,’ she went on, ‘I know you do forgive it all, for I—I have so badly repaid the greatest gift that you could give to me—your love! Aunt Maria was right,’ she added very slowly; ‘I thought it would come some day. I shall know the meaning there! Arthur, I want to tell you. I wish I had been a better wife. Arthur! Arthur!’

The great tears suddenly, pitiably rolled down her white cheeks.

He could not bear it; he put out his arms and took her into them, and held her fast;

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and with her fair head resting on his breast she began to speak again, but with great difficulty.

‘May, do not go away! May, give me your hand! I want you to make me a promise—I want to leave you something to do for me.’

‘Anything!’ said May, leaning forward and taking Bianca’s groping hand. ‘Anything you wish, darling!’

‘It is—oh, May! I want you to comfort him, to make him happy, as I never could have done! May——’

Then the fair head fell back; Bianca had fainted. May went away to fetch restoratives. Bianca did not speak again.

In the early dawn, when the lamp of life burns at the lowest ebb, the Angel of Death came in, and with the fair young human soul passed heavenwards in the first light of the rising sun.



CHAPTER XXIV.

THREE years had passed away, carrying with them troubles, sorrows, joys and hopes, down the broad current of the river of Life.

Again it was the springtide, when everything that has life in it renews itself. Nature breaks out into leaf and flower, and the lambs are in the meadows, and the mother-bird exulting over her featherless children, and a new spring of freshness and hope seems to well up even in the most weary human heart.

Dalton was all full of gaiety and hospitality again, as it used to be in the old times, and the scattered cousins were to meet there

www.libtool.com.cn once more. Osternleigh had been shut up for these three long years : the young master wandering all over the world.

From time to time Arthur St. Leger returned to London, spent some weeks with his mother there, and then recommenced his travels ; he had been to America, to India, —even to China, and had travelled much in Europe also ; but his travels were over now, and he had written to announce that he was coming home.

Roger Fitzroy wished to resign his seat ; he had been pressed to stand for his own county town, and determined that if Arthur would return and take his place, that he would accept the invitation. His letter to Arthur came at the right moment : his courage and spirits had returned, and with them all the former eager anticipations of political life, and a strong wish to resume duties that he felt he had neglected too long. He wrote at once that he would be in his place as quickly as he could get home.

Lady St. Leger was staying at Dalton

when his letter came, and she persuaded them to invite Arthur to come there first.

‘It will be so much more of a coming-home,’ she said, ‘than it would be if he were to go straight to his big empty house.’

Mrs. Dalton not only agreed, but invited Roger and Jaqueline to come and meet him, so that all might be assembled in a happy family party to welcome him.

May was at the hall-door to welcome the Fitzroys on their arrival, and received the youngest baby in her arms before Jaqueline could disencumber herself from her innumerable wraps, bags, and dressing-cases, and get out.

‘Here, Johnnie! May, lift him out; that’s right. Baby is so tired; we have had such a long journey.’

‘Dear Jaquet, how nice to have you! and how the babies are grown! I am so enchanted to see you!’

‘Darling May, do give up baby! I want to talk to you.’

‘No; not till I have shown him to

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mamma. How very pretty he has grown ! but where did he get his fair hair and blue eyes ?’

‘ Oh, he is exactly like mamma’s miniature of Arthur ! May, you really can have him afterwards. Do attend to me now !’

May reluctantly resigned the baby to its nurse, and saw them go off together upstairs, the little, sedate, black-haired Johnnie holding demurely to her skirts.

May and Jaqueline turned and kissed each other with a great hug before they went into the drawing-room, where their mothers were waiting for them.

‘ Do tell me, mamma,’ said Jaqueline eagerly, after the first greetings, ‘ when did you last hear from Arthur, and what day do you really expect him ?’

‘ I heard from him from Florence ; he had gone there to see Count Giacinto for one night, and we expect him this very evening by the last train. There was a great wish in the place to give him a grand reception, which your uncle John stopped. It would

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not do the first time—but another time, perhaps.’

‘What does he say of Count Giacinto?’ said Roger.

‘He says he is very happy with the Baldovas, who are devoted to him, especially Colomba; and his greatest comfort and pleasure is in Giuseppe and Colomba’s child—a little girl whom they have called Camilla. I think going there has been a good thing for Arthur. I can hardly believe that he is so near now.’

‘We have not seen him for three long years,’ said Mrs. Dalton. ‘Your uncle John has gone to Ostern on election business, and he is going to lunch with Aunt Maria, and meet the five o’clock train; he wanted to have the pleasure of driving him here himself. His return will make a great difference to John,’ she added, turning to Lady St. Leger; ‘no words can say how he has missed him!’

‘How is Aunt Maria?’ said Jaqueline.

‘She is as well as she ever is now,

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answered May, rather sadly. 'But she suffers often a good deal. She dwells very much on old days. I go there as often as I can, and she is most anxious to see you and your little boys.'

'And how is Dumps?'

'Poor Dumps! Well, I suppose he is very old; but all of a sudden the little basket-carriage became much too heavy for him, and there was nothing for it but to pension him off. He has every comfort, and does nothing; and the coachman and I have been improvising panniers for the benefit of Johnnie and the baby, which Dumps rather likes.'

'I suppose he is still surefooted?' said Roger, with some anxiety.

'You had better see the coachman tomorrow,' said May. 'He proposes to lead them himself, and undertakes the whole responsibility.'

'And now, May,' cried Jaqueline, 'I feel an insane longing to do as one always did on arriving when one was a child. Do come with me—I want to rush all over the house.'

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May's spirits rose.

'I should like it of all things,' she answered. And they went off together.

'Aunt Mary's boudoir just the same,' said Jaqueline. 'That is the very chair in which she sat when she compelled me to listen to Roger's proposal, a grudge I shall owe her to the end of my life. Yes; and there it was that I tore my lace frock on the day of your birthday-party, May.'

She ran gaily on to the old schoolroom.

'Oh! how many many times we have baked apples and made buttered toast here!' she cried. 'May, do you remember how Arthur used to neglect me, and Annie and Mary, and burn his face to cinders making your apple turn on a string? And oh! do you remember when he set his hair on fire, and you put it out with your hands, while I, believing myself to be acting with infinite presence of mind, rushed forward and emptied the milk-jug over you both? And oh, how angry mamma was at the loss of what I used to call his cockatoo curl!

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‘I remember,’ said May, laughing. ‘How frightened we all were!’

‘Oh, May! there is the very same old box where we kept our caterpillars, with the holes in it that Arthur bored with your scissors made red-hot, because I had broken his gimlet. I see now why the caterpillars always got out and could never be found—the holes were much too big. Have you got the stuffed owl?’

‘Yes,’ said May, opening a cupboard. ‘There is poor old Galileo. What fun we had with him!’

‘Do you remember when Arthur got him out of the nest, how he screamed and bit, and how the blood poured from his hand? Though he was tame enough, we never quite liked him as a pet, did we?’

‘No; the feeding him was too horrible, until Arthur bethought him of employing a small stable-boy to do it.’

‘By-the-bye, May,’ said Jaqueline suddenly, ‘have you ever heard anything more of poor Mike Winnawa?’

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'Yes,' said May, 'he is dead. I had a letter from a clergyman somewhere in Lancashire giving a very good account of the useful, industrious life he had led, and describing his illness and death. Just before he died, he asked this gentleman to write and tell me that he had kept his promise, and remained quite steady. Poor Mike!'

'You must have been glad?'

'I was, very glad.'

'Now, let us go up to the nursery and see my chicks,' said Jaqueline, winding her arm round May's waist and leading her upstairs 'May, my thoughts are all flying back such a long way to-day. I think the ties of bread-and-butterhood are stronger than any later ones after all.'

'You have certainly revived them this evening,' said May, laughing. 'But now to devote ourselves to the new generation. It is very odd that you should be an affectionate mother. I never saw anyone so ruthlessly unkind to dolls.'

'I never could abide them,' said Jaqueline.

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'But I was pestered with beauties, and my unmitigated aversion to them dated from a conversation I overheard between mamma and my governess. Mamma was wringing her hands as usual over something I had either broken, or spilt, or torn, or otherwise ruined, and Miss Cameron said, "Don't punish her, Lady St. Leger, but try the effect of a really beautiful doll; I have known it do wonders." What a spirit of perversity I had! I was quite determined not to have wonders done to me by a doll, so I melted its wax nose ten minutes after it arrived, and would not confess how bitterly I repented it afterwards, when I saw your rapture over the twin mamma gave you.'

'I remember,' said May; 'and how hard you tried to persuade me that if they were to go on being twins, I must melt my doll's nose also.'

They found the two baby boys in the full glory of white frocks and blue sashes, and they sat down on the floor, and played with them merrily until the hour for the little ones

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to go to bed came, and the bell rang to warn them to dress for dinner.

‘Do you dress before Arthur comes?’ said Jaqueline.

‘Yes,’ answered May, the colour coming and going in her face. ‘I always dress early so as to be down in time to receive anyone who is expected by the five o’clock train, so we had better go at once.’

They went to their rooms, Jaqueline to make the elaborate toilette she always made to please Roger.

May put on a white soft gown, with delicate little golden fringes, and a bunch of narcissus in her sunny hair. She was the first to appear in the drawing-room, and she went to the window and leant against the crimson velvet curtains, looking out into the dark blueness of the gathering twilight.

Her heart was beating so fast that she felt as if she could scarcely breathe. Only now—now at last did she allow herself to feel that she was expecting home the one to whom the whole love of her young life was given

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beyond recall. How should they meet? What would he say? Would it never be over?

There was a sound of rapid wheels on the gravel, of horses pulled up, doors thrown open, hurrying of many feet. Then she heard her father's voice ringing out: 'Go into the drawing-room, Arthur; you will find some of them there. I will follow you in one moment.'

Then the door opened quickly, and some one came in.

She could only give one little step forward, and hold out both her hands; she could not speak, or utter the welcome she had planned.

He held her hands in his, and she looked up at him with wistful eyes, and met his gaze.

'May!' he said—'my May!' and then he bent forward and kissed her.

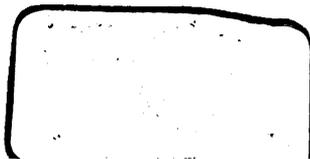
THE END.

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