

# The Professor's Story of the Yellow Mask

By Wilkie Collins

## Part First

### Chapter I

About a century ago, there lived in the ancient city of Pisa a famous Italian milliner, who, by way of vindicating to all customers her familiarity with Paris fashions, adopted a French title, and called herself the Demoiselle Grifoni. She was a wizen little woman with a mischievous face, a quick tongue, a nimble foot, a talent for business, and an uncertain disposition. Rumor hinted that she was immensely rich, and scandal suggested that she would do anything for money.

The one undeniable good quality which raised Demoiselle Grifoni above all her rivals in the trade was her inexhaustible fortitude. She was never known to yield an inch under any pressure of adverse circumstances. Thus the memorable occasion of her life on which she was threatened with ruin was also the occasion on which she most triumphantly asserted the energy and decision of her character. At the height of the demoiselle's prosperity her skilled forewoman and cutter-out basely married and started in business as her rival. Such a calamity as this would have ruined an ordinary milliner; but the invincible Grifoni rose superior to it almost without an effort, and proved incontestably that it was impossible for hostile Fortune to catch her at the end of her resources. While the minor milliners were prophesying that she would shut up shop, she was quietly carrying on a private correspondence with an agent in Paris. Nobody knew what these letters were about until a few weeks had elapsed, and then circulars were received by all the ladies in Pisa, announcing that the best French forewoman who could be got for money was engaged to superintend the great Grifoni establishment. This master-stroke decided the victory. All the demoiselle's customers declined giving orders elsewhere until the forewoman from Paris had exhibited to the natives of Pisa the latest fashions from the metropolis of the world of dress.

The Frenchwoman arrived punctual to the appointed day--glib and curt, smiling and flippant, tight of face and supple of figure. Her name was Mademoiselle Virginie, and her family had inhumanly deserted her. She was set to work the moment she was inside the doors of the Grifoni establishment. A room was devoted to her own private use; magnificent materials in velvet, silk, and satin, with due accompaniment of muslins, laces, and ribbons were placed at her disposal; she was told to spare no expense, and to produce, in the shortest possible time, the finest and nearest specimen dresses for exhibition in the show-room. Mademoiselle Virginie undertook to do everything required of her, produced her portfolios of patterns and her book of colored designs, and asked for one assistant who could speak French enough to interpret her orders to the Italian girls in the work-room.

"I have the very person you want," cried Demoiselle Grifoni. "A work-woman we call Brigida here--the idlest slut in Pisa, but as sharp as a needle--has been in France, and speaks the language like a native. I'll send her to you directly."

Mademoiselle Virginie was not left long alone with her patterns and silks. A tall woman, with bold black eyes, a reckless manner, and a step as firm as a man's, stalked into the room with the

gait of a tragedy-queen crossing the stage. The instant her eyes fell on the French forewoman, she stopped, threw up her hands in astonishment, and exclaimed, "Finette!"

"Teresa!" cried the Frenchwoman, casting her scissors on the table, and advancing a few steps.

"Hush! call me Brigida."

"Hush! call me Virginie."

These two exclamations were uttered at the same moment, and then the two women scrutinized each other in silence. The swarthy cheeks of the Italian turned to a dull yellow, and the voice of the Frenchwoman trembled a little when she spoke again.

"How, in the name of Heaven, have you dropped down in the world as low as this?" she asked. "I thought you were provided for when--"

"Silence!" interrupted Brigida. "You see I was not provided for. I have had my misfortunes; and you are the last woman alive who ought to refer to them."

"Do you think I have not had my misfortunes, too, since we met?" (Brigida's face brightened maliciously at those words.) "You have had your revenge," continued Mademoiselle Virginie, coldly, turning away to the table and taking up the scissors again.

Brigida followed her, threw one arm roughly round her neck, and kissed her on the cheek. "Let us be friends again," she said. The Frenchwoman laughed. "Tell me how I have had my revenge," pursued the other, tightening her grasp. Mademoiselle Virginie signed to Brigida to stoop, and whispered rapidly in her ear. The Italian listened eagerly, with fierce, suspicious eyes fixed on the door. When the whispering ceased, she loosened her hold, and, with a sigh of relief, pushed back her heavy black hair from her temples. "Now we are friends," she said, and sat down indolently in a chair placed by the worktable.

"Friends," repeated Mademoiselle Virginie, with another laugh. "And now for business," she continued, getting a row of pins ready for use by putting them between her teeth. "I am here, I believe, for the purpose of ruining the late forewoman, who has set up in opposition to us? Good! I *will* ruin her. Spread out the yellow brocaded silk, my dear, and pin that pattern on at your end, while I pin at mine. And what are your plans, Brigida? (Mind you don't forget that Finette is dead, and that Virginie has risen from her ashes.) You can't possibly intend to stop here all your life? (Leave an inch outside the paper, all round.) You must have projects? What are they?"

"Look at my figure," said Brigida, placing herself in an attitude in the middle of the room.

"Ah," rejoined the other, "it's not what it was. There's too much of it. You want diet, walking, and a French stay-maker," muttered Mademoiselle Virginie through her chevas-defrise of pins.

"Did the goddess Minerva walk, and employ a French stay-maker? I thought she rode upon clouds, and lived at a period before waists were invented."

"What do you mean?"

"This--that my present project is to try if I can't make my fortune by sitting as a model for Minerva in the studio of the best sculptor in Pisa."

"And who is he! (Unwind me a yard or two of that black lace.)"

"The master-sculptor, Luca Lomi--an old family, once noble, but down in the world now. The master is obliged to make statues to get a living for his daughter and himself."

"More of the lace--double it over the bosom of the dress. And how is sitting to this needy sculptor to make your fortune?"

"Wait a minute. There are other sculptors besides him in the studio. There is, first, his brother, the priest--Father Rocco, who passes all his spare time with the master. He is a good sculptor in his way--has cast statues and made a font for his church--a holy man, who devotes all his work in the studio to the cause of piety."

“Ah, bah! we should think him a droll priest in France. (More pins.) You don’t expect *him* to put money in your pocket, surely?”

“Wait, I say again. There is a third sculptor in the studio--actually a nobleman! His name is Fabio d’Ascoli. He is rich, young, handsome, an only child, and little better than a fool. Fancy his working at sculpture, as if he had his bread to get by it--and thinking that an amusement! Imagine a man belonging to one of the best families in Pisa mad enough to want to make a reputation as an artist! Wait! wait! the best is to come. His father and mother are dead--he has no near relations in the world to exercise authority over him--he is a bachelor, and his fortune is all at his own disposal; going a-begging, my friend; absolutely going a-begging for want of a clever woman to hold out her hand and take it from him.”

“Yes, yes--now I understand. The goddess Minerva is a clever woman, and she will hold out her hand and take his fortune from him with the utmost docility.”

“The first thing is to get him to offer it. I must tell you that I am not going to sit to him, but to his master, Luca Lomi, who is doing the statue of Minerva. The face is modeled from his daughter; and now he wants somebody to sit for the bust and arms. Maddalena Lomi and I are as nearly as possible the same height, I hear--the difference between us being that I have a good figure and she has a bad one. I have offered to sit, through a friend who is employed in the studio. If the master accepts, I am sure of an introduction to our rich young gentleman; and then leave it to my good looks, my various accomplishments, and my ready tongue, to do the rest.”

“Stop! I won’t have the lace doubled, on second thoughts. I’ll have it single, and running all round the dress in curves--so. Well, and who is this friend of yours employed in the studio? A fourth sculptor?”

“No, no; the strangest, simplest little creature--”

Just then a faint tap was audible at the door of the room.

Brigida laid her finger on her lips, and called impatiently to the person outside to come in.

The door opened gently, and a young girl, poorly but very neatly dressed, entered the room. She was rather thin and under the average height; but her head and figure were in perfect proportion. Her hair was of that gorgeous auburn color, her eyes of that deep violet-blue, which the portraits of Giorgione and Titian have made famous as the type of Venetian beauty. Her features possessed the definiteness and regularity, the “good modeling” (to use an artist’s term), which is the rarest of all womanly charms, in Italy as elsewhere. The one serious defect of her face was its paleness. Her cheeks, wanting nothing in form, wanted everything in color. That look of health, which is the essential crowning-point of beauty, was the one attraction which her face did not possess.

She came into the room with a sad and weary expression in her eyes, which changed, however, the moment she observed the magnificently-dressed French forewoman, into a look of astonishment, and almost of awe. Her manner became shy and embarrassed; and after an instant of hesitation, she turned back silently to the door.

“Stop, stop, Nanina,” said Brigida, in Italian. “Don’t be afraid of that lady. She is our new forewoman; and she has it in her power to do all sorts of kind things for you. Look up, and tell us what you want. You were sixteen last birthday, Nanina, and you behave like a baby of two years old!”

“I only came to know if there was any work for me to-day,” said the girl, in a very sweet voice, that trembled a little as she tried to face the fashionable French forewoman again.

“No work, child, that is easy enough for you to do,” said Brigida. “Are you going to the studio to-day?”

Some of the color that Nanina's cheeks wanted began to steal over them as she answered "Yes."

"Don't forget my message, darling. And if Master Luca Lomi asks where I live, answer that you are ready to deliver a letter to me; but that you are forbidden to enter into any particulars at first about who I am, or where I live."

"Why am I forbidden?" inquired Nanina, innocently.

"Don't ask questions, baby! Do as you are told. Bring me back a nice note or message tomorrow from the studio, and I will intercede with this lady to get you some work. You are a foolish child to want it, when you might make more money here and at Florence, by sitting to painters and sculptors; though what they can see to paint or model in you I never could understand."

"I like working at home better than going abroad to sit," said Nanina, looking very much abashed as she faltered out the answer, and escaping from the room with a terrified farewell obeisance, which was an eccentric compound of a start, a bow, and a courtesy.

"That awkward child would be pretty," said Mademoiselle Virginie, making rapid progress with the cutting-out of her dress, "if she knew how to give herself a complexion, and had a presentable gown on her back. Who is she?"

"The friend who is to get me into Master Luca Lomi's studio," replied Brigida, laughing. "Rather a curious ally for me to take up with, isn't she?"

"Where did you meet with her?"

"Here, to be sure; she hangs about this place for any plain work she can get to do, and takes it home to the oddest little room in a street near the Campo Santo. I had the curiosity to follow her one day, and knocked at her door soon after she had gone in, as if I was a visitor. She answered my knock in a great flurry and fright, as you may imagine. I made myself agreeable, affected immense interest in her affairs, and so got into her room. Such a place! A mere corner of it curtained off to make a bedroom. One chair, one stool, one saucepan on the fire. Before the hearth the most grotesquely hideous unshaven poodle-dog you ever saw; and on the stool a fair little girl plaiting dinner-mats. Such was the household--furniture and all included. 'Where is your father?' I asked. 'He ran away and left us years ago,' answers my awkward little friend who has just left the room, speaking in that simple way of hers, with all the composure in the world. 'And your mother?'--'Dead.' She went up to the little mat-plaiting girl as she gave that answer, and began playing with her long flaxen hair. 'Your sister, I suppose,' said I. 'What is her name?'--'They call me La Biondella,' says the child, looking up from her mat (La Biondella, Virginie, means The Fair). 'And why do you let that great, shaggy, ill-looking brute lie before your fireplace?' I asked. 'Oh!' cried the little mat-plaiter, 'that is our dear old dog, Scaramuccia. He takes care of the house when Nanina is not at home. He dances on his hind legs, and jumps through a hoop, and tumbles down dead when I cry Bang! Scaramuccia followed us home one night, years ago, and he has lived with us ever since. He goes out every day by himself, we can't tell where, and generally returns licking his chops, which makes us afraid that he is a thief; but nobody finds him out, because he is the cleverest dog that ever lived!' The child ran on in this way about the great beast by the fireplace, till I was obliged to stop her; while that simpleton Nanina stood by, laughing and encouraging her. I asked them a few more questions, which produced some strange answers. They did not seem to know of any relations of theirs in the world. The neighbors in the house had helped them, after their father ran away, until they were old enough to help themselves; and they did not seem to think there was anything in the least wretched or pitiable in their way of living. The last thing I heard, when I left

them that day, was La Biondella crying ‘Bang!’--then a bark, a thump on the floor, and a scream of laughter. If it was not for their dog, I should go and see them oftener. But the ill-conditioned beast has taken a dislike to me, and growls and shows his teeth whenever I come near him.”

“The girl looked sickly when she came in here. Is she always like that?”

“No. She has altered within the last month. I suspect our interesting young nobleman has produced an impression. The oftener the girl has sat to him lately, the paler and more out of spirits she has become.”

“Oh! she has sat to him, has she?”

“She is sitting to him now. He is doing a bust of some Pagan nymph or other, and prevailed on Nanina to let him copy from her head and face. According to her own account the little fool was frightened at first, and gave him all the trouble in the world before she would consent.”

“And now she has consented, don’t you think it likely she may turn out rather a dangerous rival? Men are such fools, and take such fancies into their heads--”

“Ridiculous! A thread-paper of a girl like that, who has no manner, no talk, no intelligence; who has nothing to recommend her but an awkward, babyish prettiness! Dangerous to me? No, no! If there is danger at all, I have to dread it from the sculptor’s daughter. I don’t mind confessing that I am anxious to see Maddalena Lomi. But as for Nanina, she will simply be of use to me. All I know already about the studio and the artists in it, I know through her. She will deliver my message, and procure me my introduction; and when we have got so far, I shall give her an old gown and a shake of the hand; and then, good-by to our little innocent!”

“Well, well, for your sake I hope you are the wiser of the two in this matter. For my part, I always distrust innocence. Wait one moment, and I shall have the body and sleeves of this dress ready for the needle-women. There, ring the bell, and order them up; for I have directions to give, and you must interpret for me.”

While Brigida went to the bell, the energetic Frenchwoman began planning out the skirt of the new dress. She laughed as she measured off yard after yard of the silk.

“What are you laughing about?” asked Brigida, opening the door and ringing a hand-bell in the passage.

“I can’t help fancying, dear, in spite of her innocent face and her artless ways, that your young friend is a hypocrite.”

“And I am quite certain, love, that she is only a simpleton.”

## Chapter II.

The studio of the master-sculptor, Luca Lomi, was composed of two large rooms unequally divided by a wooden partition, with an arched doorway cut in the middle of it.

While the milliners of the Grifoni establishment were industriously shaping dresses, the sculptors in Luca Lomi's workshop were, in their way, quite as hard at work shaping marble and clay. In the smaller of the two rooms the young nobleman (only addressed in the studio by his Christian name of Fabio) was busily engaged on his bust, with Nanina sitting before him as a model. His was not one of those traditional Italian faces from which subtlety and suspicion are always supposed to look out darkly on the world at large. Both countenance and expression proclaimed his character frankly and freely to all who saw him. Quick intelligence looked brightly from his eyes; and easy good humor laughed out pleasantly in the rather quaint curve of his lips. For the rest, his face expressed the defects as well as the merits of his character, showing that he wanted resolution and perseverance just as plainly as it showed also that he possessed amiability and intelligence.

At the end of the large room, nearest to the street door, Luca Lomi was standing by his life-size statue of Minerva; and was issuing directions, from time to time, to some of his workmen, who were roughly chiseling the drapery of another figure. At the opposite side of the room, nearest to the partition, his brother, Father Rocco, was taking a cast from a statuette of the Madonna; while Maddalena Lomi, the sculptor's daughter, released from sitting for Minerva's face, walked about the two rooms, and watched what was going on in them.

There was a strong family likeness of a certain kind between father, brother and daughter. All three were tall, handsome, dark-haired, and dark-eyed; nevertheless, they differed in expression, strikingly as they resembled one another in feature. Maddalena Lomi's face betrayed strong passions, but not an ungenerous nature. Her father, with the same indications of a violent temper, had some sinister lines about his mouth and forehead which suggested anything rather than an open disposition. Father Rocco's countenance, on the other hand, looked like the personification of absolute calmness and invincible moderation; and his manner, which, in a very firm way, was singularly quiet and deliberate, assisted in carrying out the impression produced by his face. The daughter seemed as if she could fly into a passion at a moment's notice, and forgive also at a moment's notice. The father, appearing to be just as irritable, had something in his face which said, as plainly as if in words, "Anger me, and I never pardon." The priest looked as if he need never be called on either to ask forgiveness or to grant it, for the double reason that he could irritate nobody else, and that nobody else could irritate him.

"Rocco," said Luca, looking at the face of his Minerva, which was now finished, "this statue of mine will make a sensation."

"I am glad to hear it," rejoined the priest, dryly

"It is a new thing in art," continued Luca, enthusiastically. "Other sculptors, with a classical subject like mine, limit themselves to the ideal classical face, and never think of aiming at individual character. Now I do precisely the reverse of that. I get my handsome daughter, Maddalena, to sit for Minerva, and I make an exact likeness of her. I may lose in ideal beauty, but I gain in individual character. People may accuse me of disregarding established rules; but my answer is, that I make my own rules. My daughter looks like a Minerva, and there she is exactly as she looks."

"It is certainly a wonderful likeness," said Father Rocco, approaching the statue.

"It the girl herself," cried the other. "Exactly her expression, and exactly her features. Measure Maddalena, and measure Minerva, and from forehead to chin, you won't find a hairbreadth of difference between them."

"But how about the bust and arms of the figure, now the face is done?" asked the priest, returning, as he spoke, to his own work.

"I may have the very model I want for them to-morrow. Little Nanina has just given me the strangest message. What do you think of a mysterious lady admirer who offers to sit for the bust and arms of my Minerva?"

"Are you going to accept the offer?" inquired the priest.

"I am going to receive her to-morrow; and if I really find that she is the same height as Maddalena, and has a bust and arms worth modeling, of course I shall accept her offer; for she will be the very sitter I have been looking after for weeks past. Who can she be? That's the mystery I want to find out. Which do you say, Rocco--an enthusiast or an adventuress?"

"I do not presume to say, for I have no means of knowing."

"Ah, there you are with your moderation again. Now, I do presume to assert that she must be either one or the other--or she would not have forbidden Nanina to say anything about her in answer to all my first natural inquiries. Where is Maddalena? I thought she was here a minute ago."

"She is in Fabio's room," answered Father Rocco, softly. "Shall I call her?"

"No, no!" returned Luca. He stopped, looked round at the workmen, who were chipping away mechanically at their bit of drapery; then advanced close to the priest, with a cunning smile, and continued in a whisper, "If Maddalena can only get from Fabio's room here to Fabio's palace over the way, on the Arno--come, come, Rocco! don't shake your head. If I brought her up to your church door one of these days, as Fabio d'Ascoli's betrothed, you would be glad enough to take the rest of the business off my hands, and make her Fabio d'Ascoli's wife. You are a very holy man, Rocco, but you know the difference between the clink of the money-bag and the clink of the chisel for all that!"

"I am sorry to find, Luca," returned the priest, coldly, "that you allow yourself to talk of the most delicate subjects in the coarsest way. This is one of the minor sins of the tongue which is growing on you. When we are alone in the studio, I will endeavor to lead you into speaking of the young man in the room there, and of your daughter, in terms more becoming to you, to me, and to them. Until that time, allow me to go on with my work."

Luca shrugged his shoulders, and went back to his statue. Father Rocco, who had been engaged during the last ten minutes in mixing wet plaster to the right consistency for taking a cast, suspended his occupation; and crossing the room to a corner next the partition, removed from it a cheval-glass which stood there. He lifted it away gently, while his brother's back was turned, carried it close to the table at which he had been at work, and then resumed his employment of mixing the plaster. Having at last prepared the composition for use, he laid it over the exposed half of the statuette with a neatness and dexterity which showed him to be a practiced hand at cast-taking. Just as he had covered the necessary extent of surface, Luca turned round from his statue.

"How are you getting on with the cast?" he asked. "Do you want any help?"

"None, brother, I thank you," answered the priest. "Pray do not disturb either yourself or your workmen on my account."

Luca turned again to the statue; and, at the same moment, Father Rocco softly moved the cheval-glass toward the open doorway between the two rooms, placing it at such an angle as to

make it reflect the figures of the persons in the smaller studio. He did this with significant quickness and precision. It was evidently not the first time he had used the glass for purposes of secret observation.

Mechanically stirring the wet plaster round and round for the second casting, the priest looked into the glass, and saw, as in a picture, all that was going forward in the inner room. Maddalena Lomi was standing behind the young nobleman, watching the progress he made with his bust. Occasionally she took the modeling tool out of his hand, and showed him, with her sweetest smile, that she, too, as a sculptor's daughter, understood something of the sculptor's art; and now and then, in the pauses of the conversation, when her interest was especially intense in Fabio's work, she suffered her hand to drop absently on his shoulder, or stooped forward so close to him that her hair mingled for a moment with his. Moving the glass an inch or two, so as to bring Nanina well under his eye, Father Rocco found that he could trace each repetition of these little acts of familiarity by the immediate effect which they produced on the girl's face and manner. Whenever Maddalena so much as touched the young nobleman--no matter whether she did so by premeditation, or really by accident--Nanina's features contracted, her pale cheeks grew paler, she fidgeted on her chair, and her fingers nervously twisted and untwisted the loose ends of the ribbon fastened round her waist.

"Jealous," thought Father Rocco; "I suspected it weeks ago."

He turned away, and gave his whole attention for a few minutes to the mixing of the plaster. When he looked back again at the glass, he was just in time to witness a little accident which suddenly changed the relative positions of the three persons in the inner room.

He saw Maddalena take up a modeling tool which lay on a table near her, and begin to help Fabio in altering the arrangement of the hair in his bust. The young man watched what she was doing earnestly enough for a few moments; then his attention wandered away to Nanina. She looked at him reproachfully, and he answered by a sign which brought a smile to her face directly. Maddalena surprised her at the instant of the change; and, following the direction of her eyes, easily discovered at whom the smile was directed. She darted a glance of contempt at Nanina, threw down the modeling tool, and turned indignantly to the young sculptor, who was affecting to be hard at work again.

"Signor Fabio," she said, "the next time you forget what is due to your rank and yourself, warn me of it, if you please, beforehand, and I will take care to leave the room." While speaking the last words, she passed through the doorway. Father Rocco, bending abstractedly over his plaster mixture, heard her continue to herself in a whisper, as she went by him, "If I have any influence at all with my father, that impudent beggar-girl shall be forbidden the studio."

"Jealousy on the other side," thought the priest. "Something must be done at once, or this will end badly."

He looked again at the glass, and saw Fabio, after an instant of hesitation, beckon to Nanina to approach him. She left her seat, advanced half-way to his, then stopped. He stepped forward to meet her, and, taking her by the hand, whispered earnestly in her ear. When he had done, before dropping her hand, he touched her cheek with his lips, and then helped her on with the little white mantilla which covered her head and shoulders out-of-doors. The girl trembled violently, and drew the linen close to her face as Fabio walked into the larger studio, and, addressing Father Rocco, said:

"I am afraid I am more idle, or more stupid, than ever to-day. I can't get on with the bust at all to my satisfaction, so I have cut short the sitting, and given Nanina a half-holiday."

At the first sound of his voice, Maddalena, who was speaking to her father, stopped, and, with another look of scorn at Nanina standing trembling in the doorway, left the room. Luca Lomi called Fabio to him as she went away, and Father Rocco, turning to the statuette, looked to see how the plaster was hardening on it. Seeing them thus engaged, Nanina attempted to escape from the studio without being noticed; but the priest stopped her just as she was hurrying by him.

“My child,” said he, in his gentle, quiet way, “are you going home?”

Nanina’s heart beat too fast for her to reply in words; she could only answer by bowing her head.

“Take this for your little sister,” pursued Father Rocco, putting a few silver coins in her hand; “I have got some customers for those mats she plaits so nicely. You need not bring them to my rooms; I will come and see you this evening, when I am going my rounds among my parishioners, and will take the mats away with me. You are a good girl, Nanina--you have always been a good girl--and as long as I am alive, my child, you shall never want a friend and an adviser.”

Nanina’s eyes filled with tears. She drew the mantilla closer than ever round her face, as she tried to thank the priest. Father Rocco nodded to her kindly, and laid his hand lightly on her head for a moment, then turned round again to his cast.

“Don’t forget my message to the lady who is to sit to me tomorrow,” said Luca to Nanina, as she passed him on her way out of the studio.

After she had gone, Fabio returned to the priest, who was still busy over his cast.

“I hope you will get on better with the bust to-morrow,” said Father Rocco, politely; “I am sure you cannot complain of your model.”

“Complain of her!” cried the young man, warmly; “she has the most beautiful head I ever saw. If I were twenty times the sculptor that I am, I should despair of being able to do her justice.”

He walked into the inner room to look at his bust again--lingered before it for a little while--and then turned to retrace his steps to the larger studio. Between him and the doorway stood three chairs. As he went by them, he absently touched the backs of the first two, and passed the third; but just as he was entering the larger room, stopped, as if struck by a sudden recollection, returned hastily, and touched the third chair. Raising his eyes, as he approached the large studio again after doing this, he met the eyes of the priest fixed on him in unconcealed astonishment.

“Signor Fabio!” exclaimed Father Rocco, with a sarcastic smile, “who would ever have imagined that you were superstitious?”

“My nurse was,” returned the young man, reddening, and laughing rather uneasily. “She taught me some bad habits that I have not got over yet.” With those words he nodded and hastily went out.

“Superstitious,” said Father Rocco softly to himself. He smiled again, reflected for a moment, and then, going to the window, looked into the street. The way to the left led to Fabio’s palace, and the way to the right to the Campo Santo, in the neighborhood of which Nanina lived. The priest was just in time to see the young sculptor take the way to the right.

After another half-hour had elapsed, the two workmen quitted the studio to go to dinner, and Luca and his brother were left alone.

“We may return now,” said Father Rocco, “to that conversation which was suspended between us earlier in the day.”

“I have nothing more to say,” rejoined Luca, sulkily.

“Then you can listen to me, brother, with the greater attention,” pursued the priest. “I objected to the coarseness of your tone in talking of our young pupil and your daughter; I object still more

strongly to your insinuation that my desire to see them married (provided always that they are sincerely attached to each other) springs from a mercenary motive.”

“You are trying to snare me, Rocco, in a mesh of fine phrases; but I am not to be caught. I know what my own motive is for hoping that Maddalena may get an offer of marriage from this wealthy young gentleman--she will have his money, and we shall all profit by it. That is coarse and mercenary, if you please; but it is the true reason why I want to see Maddalena married to Fabio. You want to see it, too--and for what reason, I should like to know, if not for mine?”

“Of what use would wealthy relations be to me? What are people with money--what is money itself--to a man who follows my calling?”

“Money is something to everybody.”

“Is it? When have you found that I have taken any account of it? Give me money enough to buy my daily bread, and to pay for my lodging and my coarse cassock, and though I may want much for the poor, for myself I want no more. Then have you found me mercenary? Do I not help you in this studio, for love of you and of the art, without exacting so much as journeyman’s wages? Have I ever asked you for more than a few crowns to give away on feast-days among my parishioners? Money! money for a man who may be summoned to Rome tomorrow, who may be told to go at half an hour’s notice on a foreign mission that may take him to the ends of the earth, and who would be ready to go the moment when he was called on! Money to a man who has no wife, no children, no interests outside the sacred circle of the Church! Brother, do you see the dust and dirt and shapeless marble chips lying around your statue there? Cover that floor instead with gold, and, though the litter may have changed in color and form, in my eyes it would be litter still.”

“A very noble sentiment, I dare say, Rocco, but I can’t echo it. Granting that you care nothing for money, will you explain to me why you are so anxious that Maddalena should marry Fabio? She has had offers from poorer men--you knew of them--but you have never taken the least interest in her accepting or rejecting a proposal before.”

“I hinted the reason to you, months ago, when Fabio first entered the studio.”

“It was rather a vague hint, brother; can’t you be plainer to-day?”

“I think I can. In the first place, let me begin by assuring you that I have no objection to the young man himself. He may be a little capricious and undecided, but he has no incorrigible faults that I have discovered.”

“That is rather a cool way of praising him, Rocco.”

“I should speak of him warmly enough, if he were not the representative of an intolerable corruption, and a monstrous wrong. Whenever I think of him I think of an injury which his present existence perpetuates; and if I do speak of him coldly, it is only for that reason.”

Luca looked away quickly from his brother, and began kicking absently at the marble chips which were scattered over the floor around him.

“I now remember,” he said, “what that hint of yours pointed at. I know what you mean.”

“Then you know,” answered the priest, “that while part of the wealth which Fabio d’Ascoli possesses is honestly and incontestably his own; part, also, has been inherited by him from the spoilers and robbers of the Church--”

“Blame his ancestors for that; don’t blame him.”

“I blame him as long as the spoil is not restored.”

“How do you know that it was spoil, after all?”

“I have examined more carefully than most men the records of the civil wars in Italy; and I know that the ancestors of Fabio d’Ascoli wrung from the Church, in her hour of weakness,

property which they dared to claim as their right. I know of titles to lands signed away, in those stormy times, under the influence of fear, or through false representations of which the law takes no account. I call the money thus obtained spoil, and I say that it ought to be restored, and shall be restored, to the Church from which it was taken.”

“And what does Fabio answer to that, brother?”

“I have not spoken to him on the subject.”

“Why not?”

“Because I have, as yet, no influence over him. When he is married, his wife will have influence over him, and she shall speak.”

“Maddalena, I suppose? How do you know that she will speak?”

“Have I not educated her? Does she not understand what her duties are toward the Church, in whose bosom she has been reared?”

Luca hesitated uneasily, and walked away a step or two before he spoke again.

“Does this spoil, as you call it, amount to a large sum of money?” he asked, in an anxious whisper.

“I may answer that question, Luca, at some future time,” said the priest. “For the present, let it be enough that you are acquainted with all I undertook to inform you of when we began our conversation. You now know that if I am anxious for this marriage to take place, it is from motives entirely unconnected with self-interest. If all the property which Fabio’s ancestors wrongfully obtained from the Church were restored to the Church to-morrow, not one paulo of it would go into my pocket. I am a poor priest now, and to the end of my days shall remain so. You soldiers of the world, brother, fight for your pay; I am a soldier of the Church, and I fight for my cause.”

Saying these words, he returned abruptly to the statuette; and refused to speak, or leave his employment again, until he had taken the mold off, and had carefully put away the various fragments of which it consisted. This done, he drew a writing-desk from the drawer of his working-table, and taking out a slip of paper wrote these lines:

“Come down to the studio to-morrow. Fabio will be with us, but Nanina will return no more.”

Without signing what he had written, he sealed it up, and directed it to “Donna Maddalena”; then took his hat, and handed the note to his brother.

“Oblige me by giving that to my niece,” he said.

“Tell me, Rocco,” said Luca, turning the note round and round perplexedly between his finger and thumb; “do you think Maddalena will be lucky enough to get married to Fabio?”

“Still coarse in your expressions, brother!”

“Never mind my expressions. Is it likely?”

“Yes, Luca, I think it is likely.”

With those words he waved his hand pleasantly to his brother, and went out.

### Chapter III

From the studio Father Rocco went straight to his own rooms, hard by the church to which he was attached. Opening a cabinet in his study, he took from one of its drawers a handful of small silver money, consulted for a minute or so a slate on which several names and addresses were written, provided himself with a portable inkhorn and some strips of paper, and again went out.

He directed his steps to the poorest part of the neighborhood; and entering some very wretched houses, was greeted by the inhabitants with great respect and affection. The women, especially, kissed his hands with more reverence than they would have shown to the highest crowned head in Europe. In return, he talked to them as easily and unconstrainedly as if they were his equals; sat down cheerfully on dirty bedsides and rickety benches; and distributed his little gifts of money with the air of a man who was paying debts rather than bestowing charity. Where he encountered cases of illness, he pulled out his inkhorn and slips of paper, and wrote simple prescriptions to be made up from the medicine-chest of a neighboring convent, which served the same merciful purpose then that is answered by dispensaries in our days. When he had exhausted his money, and had got through his visits, he was escorted out of the poor quarter by a perfect train of enthusiastic followers. The women kissed his hand again, and the men uncovered as he turned, and, with a friendly sign, bade them all farewell.

As soon as he was alone again, he walked toward the Campo Santo, and, passing the house in which Nanina lived, sauntered up and down the street thoughtfully for some minutes. When he at length ascended the steep staircase that led to the room occupied by the sisters, he found the door ajar. Pushing it open gently, he saw La Biondella sitting with her pretty, fair profile turned toward him, eating her evening meal of bread and grapes. At the opposite end of the room, Scarammuccia was perched up on his hindquarters in a corner, with his mouth wide open to catch the morsel of bread which he evidently expected the child to throw to him. What the elder sister was doing, the priest had not time to see; for the dog barked the moment he presented himself, and Nanina hastened to the door to ascertain who the intruder might be. All that he could observe was that she was too confused, on catching sight of him, to be able to utter a word. La Biondella was the first to speak.

“Thank you, Father Rocco,” said the child, jumping up, with her bread in one hand and her grapes in the other--“thank you for giving me so much money for my dinner-mats. There they are, tied up together in one little parcel, in the corner. Nanina said she was ashamed to think of your carrying them; and I said I knew where you lived, and I should like to ask you to let me take them home!”

“Do you think you can carry them all the way, my dear?” asked the priest.

“Look, Father Rocco, see if I can’t carry them!” cried La Biondella, cramming her bread into one of the pockets of her little apron, holding her bunch of grapes by the stalk in her mouth, and hoisting the packet of dinner-mats on her head in a moment. “See, I am strong enough to carry double,” said the child, looking up proudly into the priest’s face.

“Can you trust her to take them home for me?” asked Father Rocco, turning to Nanina. “I want to speak to you alone, and her absence will give me the opportunity. Can you trust her out by herself?”

“Yes, Father Rocco, she often goes out alone.” Nanina gave this answer in low, trembling tones, and looked down confusedly on the ground.

“Go then, my dear,” said Father Rocco, patting the child on the shoulder; “and come back here to your sister, as soon as you have left the mats.”

La Biondella went out directly in great triumph, with Scarammuccia walking by her side, and keeping his muzzle suspiciously close to the pocket in which she had put her bread. Father Rocco closed the door after them, and then, taking the one chair which the room possessed, motioned to Nanina to sit by him on the stool.

“Do you believe that I am your friend, my child, and that I have always meant well toward you?” he began.

“The best and kindest of friends,” answered Nanina.

“Then you will hear what I have to say patiently, and you will believe that I am speaking for your good, even if my words should distress you?” (Nanina turned away her head.) “Now, tell me; should I be wrong, to begin with, if I said that my brother’s pupil, the young nobleman whom we call ‘Signor Fabio,’ had been here to see you today?” (Nanina started up affrightedly from her stool.) “Sit down again, my child; I am not going to blame you. I am only going to tell you what you must do for the future.”

He took her hand; it was cold, and it trembled violently in his.

“I will not ask what he has been saying to you,” continued the priest; “for it might distress you to answer, and I have, moreover, had means of knowing that your youth and beauty have made a strong impression on him. I will pass over, then, all reference to the words he may have been speaking to you; and I will come at once to what I have now to say, in my turn. Nanina, my child, arm yourself with all your courage, and promise me, before we part tonight, that you will see Signor Fabio no more.”

Nanina turned round suddenly, and fixed her eyes on him, with an expression of terrified incredulity. “No more?”

“You are very young and very innocent,” said Father Rocco; “but surely you must have thought before now of the difference between Signor Fabio and you. Surely you must have often remembered that you are low down among the ranks of the poor, and that he is high up among the rich and the nobly born?”

Nanina’s hands dropped on the priest’s knees. She bent her head down on them, and began to weep bitterly.

“Surely you must have thought of that?” reiterated Father Rocco.

“Oh, I have often, often thought of it!” murmured the girl “I have mourned over it, and cried about it in secret for many nights past. He said I looked pale, and ill, and out of spirits today, and I told him it was with thinking of that!”

“And what did he say in return?”

There was no answer. Father Rocco looked down. Nanina raised her head directly from his knees, and tried to turn it away again. He took her hand and stopped her.

“Come!” he said; “speak frankly to me. Say what you ought to say to your father and your friend. What was his answer, my child, when you reminded him of the difference between you?”

“He said I was born to be a lady,” faltered the girl, still struggling to turn her face away, “and that I might make myself one if I would learn and be patient. He said that if he had all the noble ladies in Pisa to choose from on one side, and only little Nanina on the other, he would hold out his hand to me, and tell them, ‘This shall be my wife.’ He said love knew no difference of rank; and that if he was a nobleman and rich, it was all the more reason why he should please himself. He was so kind, that I thought my heart would burst while he was speaking; and my little sister liked him so, that she got upon his knee and kissed him. Even our dog, who growls at other strangers, stole to his side and licked his hand. Oh, Father Rocco! Father Rocco!” The tears burst out afresh, and the lovely head dropped once more, wearily, on the priest’s knee.

Father Rocco smiled to himself, and waited to speak again till she was calmer.

“Supposing,” he resumed, after some minutes of silence, “supposing Signor Fabio really meant all he said to you--”

Nanina started up, and confronted the priest boldly for the first time since he had entered the room.

“Supposing!” she exclaimed, her cheeks beginning to redden, and her dark blue eyes flashing suddenly through her tears “Supposing! Father Rocco, Fabio would never deceive me. I would die here at your feet, rather than doubt the least word he said to me!”

The priest signed to her quietly to return to the stool. “I never suspected the child had so much spirit in her,” he thought to himself.

“I would die,” repeated Nanina, in a voice that began to falter now. “I would die rather than doubt him.”

“I will not ask you to doubt him,” said Father Rocco, gently; “and I will believe in him myself as firmly as you do. Let us suppose, my child, that you have learned patiently all the many things of which you are now ignorant, and which it is necessary for a lady to know. Let us suppose that Signor Fabio has really violated all the laws that govern people in his high station, and has taken you to him publicly as his wife. You would be happy then, Nanina; but would he? He has no father or mother to control him, it is true; but he has friends--many friends and intimates in his own rank--proud, heartless people, who know nothing of your worth and goodness; who, hearing of your low birth, would look on you, and on your husband too, my child, with contempt. He has not your patience and fortitude. Think how bitter it would be for him to bear that contempt--to see you shunned by proud women, and carelessly pitied or patronized by insolent men. Yet all this, and more, he would have to endure, or else to quit the world he has lived in from his boyhood--the world he was born to live in. You love him, I know--”

Nanina’s tears burst out afresh. “Oh, how dearly--how dearly!” she murmured.

“Yes, you love him dearly,” continued the priest; “but would all your love compensate him for everything else that he must lose? It might, at first; but there would come a time when the world would assert its influence over him again; when he would feel a want which you could not supply--a weariness which you could not solace. Think of his life then, and of yours. Think of the first day when the first secret doubt whether he had done rightly in marrying you would steal into his mind. We are not masters of all our impulses. The lightest spirits have their moments of irresistible depression; the bravest hearts are not always superior to doubt. My child, my child, the world is strong, the pride of rank is rooted deep, and the human will is frail at best! Be warned! For your own sake and for Fabio’s, be warned in time.” Nanina stretched out her hands toward the priest in despair.

“Oh, Father Rocco! Father Rocco!” she cried, “why did you not tell me this before?”

“Because, my child, I only knew of the necessity for telling you today. But it is not too late; it is never too late to do a good action. You love Fabio, Nanina? Will you prove that love by making a great sacrifice for his good?”

“I would die for his good!”

“Will you nobly cure him of a passion which will be his ruin, if not yours, by leaving Pisa tomorrow?”

“Leave Pisa!” exclaimed Nanina. Her face grew deadly pale; she rose and moved back a step or two from the priest.

"Listen to me," pursued Father Rocco; "I have heard you complain that you could not get regular employment at needle-work. You shall have that employment, if you will go with me--you and your little sister too, of course--to Florence to-morrow."

"I promised Fabio to go to the studio," began Nanina, affrightedly. "I promised to go at ten o'clock. How can I--"

She stopped suddenly, as if her breath were failing her.

"I myself will take you and your sister to Florence," said Father Rocco, without noticing the interruption. "I will place you under the care of a lady who will be as kind as a mother to you both. I will answer for your getting such work to do as will enable you to keep yourself honestly and independently; and I will undertake, if you do not like your life at Florence, to bring you back to Pisa after a lapse of three months only. Three months, Nanina. It is not a long exile."

"Fabio! Fabio!" cried the girl, sinking again on the seat, and hiding her face.

"It is for his good," said Father Rocco, calmly: "for Fabio's good, remember."

"What would he think of me if I went away? Oh, if I had but learned to write! If I could only write Fabio a letter!"

"Am I not to be depended on to explain to him all that he ought to know?"

"How can I go away from him! Oh! Father Rocco, how can you ask me to go away from him?"

"I will ask you to do nothing hastily. I will leave you till to-morrow morning to decide. At nine o'clock I shall be in the street; and I will not even so much as enter this house, unless I know beforehand that you have resolved to follow my advice. Give me a sign from your window. If I see you wave your white mantilla out of it, I shall know that you have taken the noble resolution to save Fabio and to save yourself. I will say no more, my child; for, unless I am grievously mistaken in you, I have already said enough." He went out, leaving her still weeping bitterly. Not far from the house, he met La Biondella and the dog on their way back. The little girl stopped to report to him the safe delivery of her dinner-mats; but he passed on quickly with a nod and a smile. His interview with Nanina had left some influence behind it, which unfitted him just then for the occupation of talking to a child.

Nearly half an hour before nine o'clock on the following morning, Father Rocco set forth for the street in which Nanina lived. On his way thither he overtook a dog walking lazily a few paces ahead in the roadway; and saw, at the same time, an elegantly-dressed lady advancing toward him. The dog stopped suspiciously as she approached, and growled and showed his teeth when she passed him. The lady, on her side, uttered an exclamation of disgust, but did not seem to be either astonished or frightened by the animal's threatening attitude. Father Rocco looked after her with some curiosity as she walked by him. She was a handsome woman, and he admired her courage. "I know that growling brute well enough," he said to himself, "but who can the lady be?"

The dog was Scammuccia, returning from one of his marauding expeditions. The lady was Brigida, on her way to Luca Lomi's studio.

Some minutes before nine o'clock the priest took his post in the street, opposite Nanina's window. It was open; but neither she nor her little sister appeared at it. He looked up anxiously as the church-clocks struck the hour; but there was no sign for a minute or so after they were all silent. "Is she hesitating still?" said Father Rocco to himself.

Just as the words passed his lips, the white mantilla was waved out of the window.