

Part Second

Chapter I

Even the master-stroke of replacing the treacherous Italian forewoman by a French dressmaker, engaged direct from Paris, did not at first avail to elevate the great Grifoni establishment above the reach of minor calamities. Mademoiselle Virginie had not occupied her new situation at Pisa quite a week before she fell ill. All sorts of reports were circulated as to the cause of this illness; and the Demoiselle Grifoni even went so far as to suggest that the health of the new forewoman had fallen a sacrifice to some nefarious practices of the chemical sort, on the part of her rival in the trade. But, however the misfortune had been produced, it was a fact that Mademoiselle Virginie was certainly very ill, and another fact that the doctor insisted on her being sent to the baths of Lucca as soon as she could be moved from her bed.

Fortunately for the Demoiselle Grifoni, the Frenchwoman had succeeded in producing three specimens of her art before her health broke down. They comprised the evening-dress of yellow brocaded silk, to which she had devoted herself on the morning when she first assumed her duties at Pisa; a black cloak and hood of an entirely new shape; and an irresistibly fascinating dressing-gown, said to have been first brought into fashion by the princesses of the blood-royal of France. These articles of costume, on being exhibited in the showroom, electrified the ladies of Pisa; and orders from all sides flowed in immediately on the Grifoni establishment. They were, of course, easily executed by the inferior work-women, from the specimen designs of the French dressmaker. So that the illness of Mademoiselle Virginie, though it might cause her mistress some temporary inconvenience, was, after all, productive of no absolute loss.

Two months at the baths of Lucca restored the new forewoman to health. She returned to Pisa, and resumed her place in the private work-room. Once re-established there, she discovered that an important change had taken place during her absence. Her friend and assistant, Brigida, had resigned her situation. All inquiries made of the Demoiselle Grifoni only elicited one answer: the missing work-woman had abruptly left her place at five minutes' warning, and had departed without confiding to any one what she thought of doing, or whither she intended to turn her steps.

Months elapsed The new year came; but no explanatory letter arrived from Brigida. The spring season passed off, with all its accompaniments of dressmaking and dress-buying, but still there was no news of her. The first anniversary of Mademoiselle Virginie's engagement with the Demoiselle Grifoni came round; and then at last a note arrived, stating that Brigida had returned to Pisa, and that if the French forewoman would send an answer, mentioning where her private lodgings were, she would visit her old friend that evening after business hours. The information was gladly enough given; and, punctually to the appointed time, Brigida arrived in Mademoiselle Virginie's little sitting-room.

Advancing with her usual indolent stateliness of gait, the Italian asked after her friend's health as coolly, and sat down in the nearest chair as carelessly, as if they had not been separated for more than a few days. Mademoiselle Virginie laughed in her liveliest manner, and raised her mobile French eyebrows in sprightly astonishment.

"Well, Brigida!" she exclaimed, "they certainly did you no injustice when they nicknamed you 'Care-for-Nothing,' in old Grifoni's workroom. Where have you been? Why have you never written to me?"

"I had nothing particular to write about; and besides, I always intended to come back to Pisa and see you," answered Brigida, leaning back luxuriously in her chair.

"But where have you been for nearly a whole year past? In Italy?"

"No; at Paris. You know I can sing--not very well; but I have a voice, and most Frenchwomen (excuse the impertinence) have none. I met with a friend, and got introduced to a manager; and I have been singing at the theater--not the great parts, only the second. Your amiable countrywomen could not screech me down on the stage, but they intrigued against me successfully behind the scenes. In short, I quarreled with our principal lady, quarreled with the manager, quarreled with my friend; and here I am back at Pisa, with a little oney saved in my pocket, and no great notion what I am to do next."

"Back at Pisa? Why did you leave it?"

Brigida's eyes began to lose their indolent expression. She sat up suddenly in her chair, and set one of her hands heavily on a little table by her side.

"Why?" she repeated. "Because when I find the game going against me, I prefer giving it up at once to waiting to be beaten."

"Ah! you refer to that last year's project of yours for making your fortune among the sculptors. I should like to hear how it was you failed with the wealthy young amateur. Remember that I fell ill before you had any news to give me. Your absence when I returned from Lucca, and, almost immediately afterward, the marriage of your intended conquest to the sculptor's daughter, proved to me, of course, that you must have failed. But I never heard how. I know nothing at this moment but the bare fact that Maddalena Lomi won the prize."

"Tell me first, do she and her husband live together happily?"

"There are no stories of their disagreeing. She has dresses, horses, carriages; a negro page, the smallest lap-dog in Italy--in short, all the luxuries that a woman can want; and a child, by-the-by, into the bargain."

"A child?"

"Yes; a child, born little more than a week ago."

"Not a boy, I hope?"

"No; a girl."

"I am glad of that. Those rich people always want the first-born to be an heir. They will both be disappointed. I am glad of that."

"Mercy on us, Brigida, how fierce you look!"

"Do I? It's likely enough. I hate Fabio d'Ascoli and Maddalena Lomi--singly as man and woman, doubly as man and wife. Stop! I'll tell you what you want to know directly. Only answer me another question or two first. Have you heard anything about her health?"

"How should I hear? Dressmakers can't inquire at the doors of the nobility."

"True. Now one last question. That little simpleton, Nanina?"

"I have never seen or heard anything of her. She can't be at Pisa, or she would have called at our place for work."

"Ah! I need not have asked about her if I had thought a moment beforehand. Father Rocco would be sure to keep her out of Fabio's sight, for his niece's sake."

"What, he really loved that 'thread-paper of a girl' as you called her?"

"Better than fifty such wives as he has got now! I was in the studio the morning he was told of her departure from Pisa. A letter was privately given to him, telling him that the girl had left the place out of a feeling of honor, and had hidden herself beyond the possibility of discovery, to prevent him from compromising himself with all his friends by marrying her. Naturally enough,

he would not believe that this was her own doing; and, naturally enough also, when Father Rocco was sent for, and was not to be found, he suspected the priest of being at the bottom of the business. I never saw a man in such a fury of despair and rage before. He swore that he would have all Italy searched for the girl, that he would be the death of the priest, and that he would never enter Luca Lomi's studio again--"

"And, as to this last particular, of course, being a man, he failed to keep his word?"

"Of course. At that first visit of mine to the studio I discovered two things. The first, as I said, that Fabio was really in love with the girl--the second, that Maddalena Lomi was really in love with him. You may suppose I looked at her attentively while the disturbance was going on, and while nobody's notice was directed on me. All women are vain, I know, but vanity never blinded my eyes. I saw directly that I had but one superiority over her--my figure. She was my height, but not well made. She had hair as dark and as glossy as mine; eyes as bright and as black as mine; and the rest of her face better than mine. My nose is coarse, my lips are too thick, and my upper lip overhangs my under too far. She had none of those personal faults; and, as for capacity, she managed the young fool in his passion as well as I could have managed him in her place."

"How?"

"She stood silent, with downcast eyes and a distressed look, all the time he was raving up and down the studio. She must have hated the girl, and been rejoiced at her disappearance; but she never showed it. 'You would be an awkward rival' (I thought to myself), 'even to a handsomer woman than I am. However, I determined not to despair too soon, and made up my mind to follow my plan just as if the accident of the girl's disappearance had never occurred. I smoothed down the master-sculptor easily enough--flattering him about his reputation. assuring him that the works of Luca Lomi had been the objects of my adoration since childhood, telling him that I had heard of his difficulty in finding a model to complete his Minerva from, and offering myself (if he thought me worthy) for the honor--laying great stress on that word--for the honor of sitting to him. I don't know whether he was altogether deceived by what I told him; but he was sharp enough to see that I really could be of use, and he accepted my offer with a profusion of compliments. We parted, having arranged that I was to give him a first sitting in a week's time."

"Why put it off so long?"

"To allow our young gentleman time to cool down and return to the studio, to be sure. What was the use of my being there while he was away?"

"Yes, yes--I forgot. And how long was it before he came back?"

"I had allowed him more time than enough. When I had given my first sitting I saw him in the studio, and heard it was his second visit there since the day of the girl's disappearance. Those very violent men are always changeable and irresolute."

"Had he made no attempt, then, to discover Nanina?"

"Oh, yes! He had searched for her himself, and had set others searching for her, but to no purpose. Four days of perpetual disappointment had been enough to bring him to his senses. Luca Lomi had written him a peace-making letter, asking what harm he or his daughter had done, even supposing Father Rocco was to blame. Maddalena Lomi had met him in the street, and had looked resignedly away from him, as if she expected him to pass her. In short, they had awakened his sense of justice and his good nature (you see, I can impartially give him his due), and they had got him back. He was silent and sentimental enough at first, and shockingly sulky and savage with the priest--"

"I wonder Father Rocco ventured within his reach. "

“Father Rocco is not a man to be daunted or defeated by anybody, I can tell you. The same day on which Fabio came back to the studio, he returned to it. Beyond boldly declaring that he thought Nanina had done quite right, and had acted like a good and virtuous girl, he would say nothing about her or her disappearance. It was quite useless to ask him questions--he denied that any one had a right to put them. Threatening, entreating, flattering--all modes of appeal were thrown away on him. Ah, my dear! depend upon it, the cleverest and politest man in Pisa, the most dangerous to an enemy and the most delightful to a friend, is Father Rocco. The rest of them, when I began to play my cards a little too openly, behaved with brutal rudeness to me. Father Rocco, from first to last, treated me like a lady. Sincere or not, I don't care--he treated me like a lady when the others treated me like--”

“There! there! don't get hot about it now. Tell me instead how you made your first approaches to the young gentleman whom you talk of so contemptuously as Fabio.”

“As it turned out, in the worst possible way. First, of course, I made sure of interesting him in me by telling him that I had known Nanina. So far it was all well enough. My next object was to persuade him that she could never have gone away if she had truly loved him alone; and that he must have had some fortunate rival in her own rank of life, to whom she had sacrificed him, after gratifying her vanity for a time by bringing a young nobleman to her feet. I had, as you will easily imagine, difficulty enough in making him take this view of Nanina's flight. His pride and his love for the girl were both concerned in refusing to admit the truth of my suggestion. At last I succeeded. I brought him to that state of ruffled vanity and fretful self-assertion in which it is easiest to work on a man's feelings--in which a man's own wounded pride makes the best pitfall to catch him in. I brought him, I say, to that state, and then *she* stepped in and profited by what I had done. Is it wonderful now that I rejoice in her disappointments--that I should be glad to hear any ill thing of her that any one could tell me?”

“But how did she first get the advantage of you?”

“If I had found out, she would never have succeeded where I failed. All I know is, that she had more opportunities of seeing him than I, and that she used them cunningly enough even to deceive me. While I thought I was gaining ground with Fabio, I was actually losing it. My first suspicions were excited by a change in Luca Lomi's conduct toward me. He grew cold, neglectful--at last absolutely rude. I was resolved not to see this; but accident soon obliged me to open my eyes. One morning I heard Fabio and Maddalena talking of me when they imagined I had left the studio. I can't repeat their words, especially here. The blood flies into my head, and the cold catches me at the heart, when I only think of them. It will be enough if I tell you that he laughed at me, and that she--”

“Hush! not so loud. There are other people lodging in the house. Never mind about telling me what you heard; it only irritates you to no purpose. I can guess that they had discovered--”

“Through her--remember, all through her!”

“Yes, yes, I understand. They had discovered a great deal more than you ever intended them to know, and all through her.”

“But for the priest, Virginie, I should have been openly insulted and driven from their doors. He had insisted on their behaving with decent civility toward me. They said that he was afraid of me, and laughed at the notion of his trying to make them afraid too. That was the last thing I heard. The fury I was in, and the necessity of keeping it down, almost suffocated me. I turned round to leave the place forever, when, who should I see, standing close behind me, but Father Rocco. He must have discovered in my face that I knew all, but he took no notice of it. He only asked, in his usual quiet, polite way, if I was looking for anything I had lost, and if he could help

me. I managed to thank him, and to get to the door. He opened it for me respectfully, and bowed--he treated me like a lady to the last! It was evening when I left the studio in that way. The next morning I threw up my situation, and turned my back on Pisa. Now you know everything."

"Did you hear of the marriage? or did you only assume from what you knew that it would take place?"

"I heard of it about six months ago. A man came to sing in the chorus at our theater who had been employed some time before at the grand concert given on the occasion of the marriage. But let us drop the subject now. I am in a fever already with talking of it. You are in a bad situation here, my dear; I declare your room is almost stifling."

"Shall I open the other window?"

"No; let us go out and get a breath of air by the river-side. Come! take your hood and fan--it is getting dark--nobody will see us, and we can come back here, if you like, in half an hour."

Mademoiselle Virginie acceded to her friend's wish rather reluctantly. They walked toward the river. The sun was down, and the sudden night of Italy was gathering fast. Although Brigida did not say another word on the subject of Fabio or his wife, she led the way to the bank of the Arno, on which the young nobleman's palace stood.

Just as they got near the great door of entrance, a sedan-chair, approaching in the opposite direction, was set down before it; and a footman, after a moment's conference with a lady inside the chair, advanced to the porter's lodge in the courtyard. Leaving her friend to go on, Brigida slipped in after the servant by the open wicket, and concealed herself in the shadow cast by the great closed gates.

"The Marchesa Melani, to inquire how the Countess d'Ascoli and the infant are this evening," said the footman.

"My mistress has not changed at all for the better since the morning," answered the porter. "The child is doing quite well."

The footman went back to the sedan-chair; then returned to the porter's lodge.

"The marchesa desires me to ask if fresh medical advice has been sent for," he said.

"Another doctor has arrived from Florence today," replied the porter.

Mademoiselle Virginie, missing her friend suddenly, turned back toward the palace to look after her, and was rather surprised to see Brigida slip out of the wicket-gate. There were two oil lamps burning on pillars outside the doorway, and their light glancing on the Italian's face, as she passed under them, showed that she was smiling.

Chapter II

While the Marchesa Melani was making inquiries at the gate of the palace, Fabio was sitting alone in the apartment which his wife usually occupied when she was in health. It was her favorite room, and had been prettily decorated, by her own desire, with hangings in yellow satin and furniture of the same color. Fabio was now waiting in it, to hear the report of the doctors after their evening visit.

Although Maddalena Lomi had not been his first love, and although he had married her under circumstances which are generally and rightly considered to afford few chances of lasting happiness in wedded life, still they had lived together through the one year of their union tranquilly, if not fondly. She had molded herself wisely to his peculiar humors, had made the most of his easy disposition; and, when her quick temper had got the better of her, had seldom hesitated in her cooler moments to acknowledge that she had been wrong. She had been extravagant, it is true, and had irritated him by fits of unreasonable jealousy; but these were faults not to be thought of now. He could only remember that she was the mother of his child, and that she lay ill but two rooms away from him--dangerously ill, as the doctors had unwillingly confessed on that very day.

The darkness was closing in upon him, and he took up the handbell to ring for lights. When the servant entered there was genuine sorrow in his face, genuine anxiety in his voice, as he inquired for news from the sick-room. The man only answered that his mistress was still asleep, and then withdrew, after first leaving a sealed letter on the table by his master's side. Fabio summoned him back into the room, and asked when the letter had arrived. He replied that it had been delivered at the palace two days since, and that he had observed it lying unopened on a desk in his master's study.

Left alone again, Fabio remembered that the letter had arrived at a time when the first dangerous symptoms of his wife's illness had declared themselves, and that he had thrown it aside, after observing the address to be in a handwriting unknown to him. In his present state of suspense, any occupation was better than sitting idle. So he took up the letter with a sigh, broke the seal, and turned inquiringly to the name signed at the end.

It was "NANINA."

He started, and changed color. "A letter from her," he whispered to himself. "Why does it come at such a time as this?"

His face grew paler, and the letter trembled in his fingers. Those superstitious feelings which he had ascribed to the nursery influences of his childhood, when Father Rocco charged him with them in the studio, seemed to be overcoming him now. He hesitated, and listened anxiously in the direction of his wife's room, before reading the letter. Was its arrival ominous of good or evil? That was the thought in his heart as he drew the lamp near to him, and looked at the first lines.

"Am I wrong in writing to you?" (the letter began abruptly). "If I am, you have but to throw this little leaf of paper into the fire, and to think no more of it after it is burned up and gone. I can never reproach you for treating my letter in that way; for we are never likely to meet again.

"Why did I go away? Only to save you from the consequences of marrying a poor girl who was not fit to become your wife. It almost broke my heart to leave you; for I had nothing to keep up my courage but the remembrance that I was going away for your sake. I had to think of that, morning and night--to think of it always, or I am afraid I should have faltered in my resolution, and have gone back to Pisa. I longed so much at first to see you once more, only to tell you that

Nanina was not heartless and ungrateful, and that you might pity her and think kindly of her, though you might love her no longer.

“Only to tell you that! If I had been a lady I might have told it to you in a letter; but I had never learned to write, and I could not prevail on myself to get others to take the pen for me. All I could do was to learn secretly how to write with my own hand. It was long, long work; but the uppermost thought in my heart was always the thought of justifying myself to you, and that made me patient and persevering. I learned, at last, to write so as not to be ashamed of myself, or to make you ashamed of me. I began a letter--my first letter to you--but I heard of your marriage before it was done, and then I had to tear the paper up, and put the pen down again.

“I had no right to come between you and your wife, even with so little a thing as a letter; I had no right to do anything but hope and pray for your happiness. Are you happy? I am sure you ought to be; for how can your wife help loving you?”

“It is very hard for me to explain why I have ventured on writing now, and yet I can’t think that I am doing wrong. I heard a few days ago (for I have a friend at Pisa who keeps me informed, by my own desire, of all the pleasant changes in your life)--I heard of your child being born; and I thought myself, after that, justified at last in writing to you. No letter from me, at such a time as this, can rob your child’s mother of so much as a thought of yours that is due to her. Thus, at least, it seems to me. I wish so well to your child, that I cannot surely be doing wrong in writing these lines.

“I have said already what I wanted to say--what I have been longing to say for a whole year past. I have told you why I left Pisa; and have, perhaps, persuaded you that I have gone through some suffering, and borne some heart-aches for your sake. Have I more to write? Only a word or two, to tell you that I am earning my bread, as I always wished to earn it, quietly at home--at least, at what I must call home now. I am living with reputable people, and I want for nothing. La Biondella has grown very much; she would hardly be obliged to get on your knee to kiss you now; and she can plait her dinner-mats faster and more neatly than ever. Our old dog is with us, and has learned two new tricks; but you can’t be expected to remember him, although you were the only stranger I ever saw him take kindly to at first.

“It is time I finished. If you have read this letter through to the end, I am sure you will excuse me if I have written it badly. There is no date to it, because I feel that it is safest and best for both of us that you should know nothing of where I am living. I bless you and pray for you, and bid you affectionately farewell. If you can think of me as a sister, think of me sometimes still.”

Fabio sighed bitterly while he read the letter. “Why,” he whispered to himself, “why does it come at such a time as this, when I cannot dare not think of her?” As he slowly folded the letter up the tears came into his eyes, and he half raised the paper to his lips. At the same moment, some one knocked at the door of the room. He started, and felt himself changing color guiltily as one of his servants entered.

“My mistress is awake,” the man said, with a very grave face, and a very constrained manner; “and the gentlemen in attendance desire me to say--”

He was interrupted, before he could give his message, by one of the medical men, who had followed him into the room.

“I wish I had better news to communicate,” began the doctor, gently.

“She is worse, then?” said Fabio, sinking back into the chair from which he had risen the moment before.

“She has awakened weaker instead of stronger after her sleep,” returned the doctor, evasively. “I never like to give up all hope till the very last, but--”

“It is cruel not to be candid with him,” interposed another voice--the voice of the doctor from Florence, who had just entered the room. “Strengthen yourself to bear the worst,” he continued, addressing himself to Fabio. “She is dying. Can you compose yourself enough to go to her bedside?”

Pale and speechless, Fabio rose from his chair, and made a sign in the affirmative. He trembled so that the doctor who had first spoken was obliged to lead him out of the room.

“Your mistress has some near relations in Pisa, has she not?” said the doctor from Florence, appealing to the servant who waited near him.

“Her father, sir, Signor Luca Lomi; and her uncle, Father Rocco,” answered the man. “They were here all through the day, until my mistress fell asleep.”

“Do you know where to find them now?”

“Signor Luca told me he should be at his studio, and Father Rocco said I might find him at his lodgings.”

“Send for them both directly. Stay, who is your mistress’s confessor? He ought to be summoned without loss of time.”

“My mistress’s confessor is Father Rocco, sir.”

“Very well--send, or go yourself, at once. Even minutes may be of importance now.” Saying this, the doctor turned away, and sat down to wait for any last demands on his services, in the chair which Fabio had just left.

Chapter III.

Before the servant could get to the priest's lodgings a visitor had applied there for admission, and had been immediately received by Father Rocco himself. This favored guest was a little man, very sprucely and neatly dressed, and oppressively polite in his manner. He bowed when he first sat down, he bowed when he answered the usual inquiries about his health, and he bowed, for the third time, when Father Rocco asked what had brought him from Florence.

"Rather an awkward business," replied the little man, recovering himself uneasily after his third bow. "The dressmaker, named Nanina, whom you placed under my wife's protection about a year ago--"

"What of her?" inquired the priest eagerly.

"I regret to say she has left us, with her child-sister, and their very disagreeable dog, that growls at everybody."

"When did they go?"

"Only yesterday. I came here at once to tell you, as you were so very particular in recommending us to take care of her. It is not our fault that she has gone. My wife was kindness itself to her, and I always treated her like a duchess. I bought dinner-mats of her sister; I even put up with the thieving and growling of the disagreeable dog--"

"Where have they gone to? Have you found out that?"

"I have found out, by application at the passport-office, that they have not left Florence--but what particular part of the city they have removed to, I have not yet had time to discover."

"And pray why did they leave you, in the first place? Nanina is not a girl to do anything without a reason. She must have had some cause for going away. What was it?"

The little man hesitated, and made a fourth bow.

"You remember your private instructions to my wife and myself, when you first brought Nanina to our house?" he said, looking away rather uneasily while he spoke.

"Yes; you were to watch her, but to take care that she did not suspect you. It was just possible, at that time, that she might try to get back to Pisa without my knowing it; and everything depended on her remaining at Florence. I think, now, that I did wrong to distrust her; but it was of the last importance to provide against all possibilities, and to abstain from putting too much faith in my own good opinion of the girl. For these reasons, I certainly did instruct you to watch her privately. So far you are quite right; and I have nothing to complain of. Go on."

"You remember," resumed the little man, "that the first consequence of our following your instructions was a discovery (which we immediately communicated to you) that she was secretly learning to write?"

"Yes; and I also remember sending you word not to show that you knew what she was doing; but to wait and see if she turned her knowledge of writing to account, and took or sent any letters to the post. You informed me, in your regular monthly report, that she nearer did anything of the kind." "Never, until three days ago; and then she was traced from her room in my house to the post-office with a letter, which she dropped into the box."

"And the address of which you discovered before she took it from your house?"

"Unfortunately I did not," answered the little man, reddening and looking askance at the priest, as if he expected to receive a severe reprimand.

But Father Rocco said nothing. He was thinking. Who could she have written to? If to Fabio, why should she have waited for months and months, after she had learned how to use her pen, before sending him a letter? If not to Fabio, to what other person could she have written?

"I regret not discovering the address--regret it most deeply," said the little man, with a low bow of apology.

"It is too late for regret," said Father Rocco, coldly. "Tell me how she came to leave your house; I have not heard that yet. Be as brief as you can. I expect to be called every moment to the bedside of a near and dear relation, who is suffering from severe illness. You shall have all my attention; but you must ask it for as short a time as possible."

"I will be briefness itself. In the first place, you must know that I have--or rather had--an idle, unscrupulous rascal of an apprentice in my business."

The priest pursed up his mouth contemptuously.

"In the second place, this same good-for-nothing fellow had the impertinence to fall in love with Nanina."

Father Rocco started, and listened eagerly.

"But I must do the girl the justice to say that she never gave him the slightest encouragement; and that, whenever he ventured to speak to her, she always quietly but very decidedly repelled him."

"A good girl!" said Father Rocco. "I always said she was a good girl. It was a mistake on my part ever to have distrusted her."

"Among the other offenses," continued the little man, "of which I now find my scoundrel of an apprentice to have been guilty, was the enormity of picking the lock of my desk, and prying into my private papers."

"You ought not to have had any. Private papers should always be burned papers."

"They shall be for the future; I will take good care of that."

"Were any of my letters to you about Nanina among these private papers?"

"Unfortunately they were. Pray, pray excuse my want of caution this time. It shall never happen again."

"Go on. Such imprudence as yours can never be excused; it can only be provided against for the future. I suppose the apprentice showed my letters to the girl?"

"I infer as much; though why he should do so--"

"Simpleton! Did you not say that he was in love with her (as you term it), and that he got no encouragement?"

"Yes; I said that--and I know it to be true."

"Well! Was it not his interest, being unable to make any impression on the girl's fancy, to establish some claim to her gratitude; and try if he could not win her that way? By showing her my letters, he would make her indebted to him for knowing that she was watched in your house. But this is not the matter in question now. You say you infer that she had seen my letters. On what grounds?"

"On the strength of this bit of paper," answered the little man, ruefully producing a note from his pocket. "She must have had your letters shown to her soon after putting her own letter into the post. For, on the evening of the same day, when I went up into her room, I found that she and her sister and the disagreeable dog had all gone, and observed this note laid on the table."

Father Rocco took the note, and read these lines:

"I have just discovered that I have been watched and suspected ever since my stay under your roof. It is impossible that I can remain another night in the house of a spy. I go with my sister. We owe you nothing, and we are free to live honestly where we please. If you see Father Rocco, tell him that I can forgive his distrust of me, but that I can never forget it. I, who had full faith in him, had a right to expect that he should have full faith in me. It was always an encouragement to

me to think of him as a father and a friend. I have lost that encouragement forever--and it was the last I had left to me!

"NANINA."

The priest rose from his seat as he handed the note back, and the visitor immediately followed his example.

"We must remedy this misfortune as we best may," he said, with a sigh. "Are you ready to go back to Florence to-morrow?"

The little man bowed again.

"Find out where she is, and ascertain if she wants for anything, and if she is living in a safe place. Say nothing about me, and make no attempt to induce her to return to your house. Simply let me know what you discover. The poor child has a spirit that no ordinary people would suspect in her. She must be soothed and treated tenderly, and we shall manage her yet. No mistakes, mind, this time! Do just what I tell you, and do no more. Have you anything else to say to me?"

The little man shook his head and shrugged his shoulders.

"Good-night, then," said the priest.

"Good-night," said the little man, slipping through the door that was held open for him with the politest alacrity.

"This is vexatious," said Father Rocco, taking a turn or two in the study after his visitor had gone. "It was bad to have done the child an injustice--it is worse to have been found out. There is nothing for it now but to wait till I know where she is. I like her, and I like that note she left behind her. It is bravely, delicately, and honestly written--a good girl--a very good girl, indeed!"

He walked to the window, breathed the fresh air for a few moments, and quietly dismissed the subject from his mind. When he returned to his table he had no thoughts for any one but his sick niece.

"It seems strange," he said, "that I have had no message about her yet. Perhaps Luca has heard something. It may be well if I go to the studio at once to find out."

He took up his hat and went to the door. Just as he opened it, Fabio's servant confronted him on the thresh old.

"I am sent to summon you to the palace," said the man. "The doctors have given up all hope."

Father Rocco turned deadly pale, and drew back a step. "Have you told my brother of this?" he asked.

"I was just on my way to the studio," answered the servant.

"I will go there instead of you, and break the bad news to him," said the priest.

They descended the stairs in silence. Just as they were about to separate at the street door, Father Rocco stopped the servant.

"How is the child?" he asked, with such sudden eagerness and impatience, that the man looked quite startled as he answered that the child was perfectly well.

"There is some consolation in that," said Father Rocco, walking away, and speaking partly to the servant, partly to himself. "My caution has misled me," he continued, pausing thoughtfully when he was left alone in the roadway. "I should have risked using the mother's influence sooner to procure the righteous restitution. All hope of compassing it now rests on the life of the child. Infant as she is, her father's ill-gotten wealth may yet be gathered back to the Church by her hands."

He proceeded rapidly on his way to the studio, until he reached the river-side and drew close to the bridge which it was necessary to cross in order to get to his brother's house. Here he stopped abruptly, as if struck by a sudden idea. The moon had just risen, and her light, streaming across

the river, fell full upon his face as he stood by the parapet wall that led up to the bridge. He was so lost in thought that he did not hear the conversation of two ladies who were advancing along the pathway close behind him. As they brushed by him, the taller of the two turned round and looked back at his face.

“Father Rocco!” exclaimed the lady, stopping.

“Donna Brigida!” cried the priest, looking surprised at first, but recovering himself directly and bowing with his usual quiet politeness. “Pardon me if I thank you for honoring me by renewing our acquaintance, and then pass on to my brother’s studio. A heavy affliction is likely to befall us, and I go to prepare him for it.”

“You refer to the dangerous illness of your niece?” said Brigida. “I heard of it this evening. Let us hope that your fears are exaggerated, and that we may yet meet under less distressing circumstances. I have no present intention of leaving Pisa for some time, and I shall always be glad to thank Father Rocco for the politeness and consideration which he showed to me, under delicate circumstances, a year ago.”

With these words she courtesied deferentially, and moved away to rejoin her friend. The priest observed that Mademoiselle Virginie lingered rather near, as if anxious to catch a few words of the conversation between Brigida and himself. Seeing this, he, in his turn, listened as the two women slowly walked away together, and heard the Italian say to her companion: “Virginie, I will lay you the price of a new dress that Fabio d’Ascoli marries again.”

Father Rocco started when she said those words, as if he had trodden on fire.

“My thought!” he whispered nervously to himself. “My thought at the moment when she spoke to me! Marry again? Another wife, over whom I should have no influence! Other children, whose education would not be confided to me! What would become, then, of the restitution that I have hoped for, wrought for, prayed for?”

He stopped, and looked fixedly at the sky above him. The bridge was deserted. His black figure rose up erect, motionless, and spectral, with the white still light falling solemnly all around it. Standing so for some minutes, his first movement was to drop his hand angrily on the parapet of the bridge. He then turned round slowly in the direction by which the two women had walked away.

“Donna Brigida,” he said, “I will lay you the price of fifty new dresses that Fabio d’Ascoli never marries again!”

He set his face once more toward the studio, and walked on without stopping until he arrived at the master-sculptor’s door.

“Marry again?” he thought to himself, as he rang the bell. “Donna Brigida, was your first failure not enough for you? Are you going to try a second time?”

Luca Lomi himself opened the door. He drew Father Rocco hurriedly into the studio toward a single lamp burning on a stand near the partition between the two rooms.

“Have you heard anything of our poor child?” he asked. “Tell me the truth! tell me the truth at once!”

“Hush! compose yourself. I have heard,” said Father Rocco, in low, mournful tones.

Luca tightened his hold on the priest’s arm, and looked into his face with breathless, speechless eagerness.

“Compose yourself,” repeated Father Rocco. “Compose yourself to hear the worst. My poor Luca, the doctors have given up all hope.”

Luca dropped his brother’s arm with a groan of despair. “Oh, Maddalena! my child--my only child!”

Reiterating these words again and again, he leaned his head against the partition and burst into tears. Sordid and coarse as his nature was, he really loved his daughter. All the heart he had was in his statues and in her.

After the first burst of his grief was exhausted, he was recalled to himself by a sensation as if some change had taken place in the lighting of the studio. He looked up directly, and dimly discerned the priest standing far down at the end of the room nearest the door, with the lamp in his hand, eagerly looking at something.

“Rocco!” he exclaimed, “Rocco, why have you taken the lamp away? What are you doing there?”

There was no movement and no answer. Luca advanced a step or two, and called again. “Rocco, what are you doing there?”

The priest heard this time, and came suddenly toward his brother, with the lamp in his hand- so suddenly that Luca started.

“What is it?” he asked, in astonishment. “Gracious God, Rocco, how pale you are!”

Still the priest never said a word. He put the lamp down on the nearest table. Luca observed that his hand shook. He had never seen his brother violently agitated before. When Rocco had announced, but a few minutes ago, that Maddalena’s life was despaired of, it was in a voice which, though sorrowful, was perfectly calm. What was the meaning of this sudden panic--this strange, silent terror?”

The priest observed that his brother was looking at him earnestly. “Come!” he said in a faint whisper, “come to her bedside: we have no time to lose. Get your hat, and leave it to me to put out the lamp.”

He hurriedly extinguished the light while he spoke. They went down the studio side by side toward the door. The moonlight streamed through the window full on the place where the priest had been standing alone with the lamp in his hand. As they passed it, Luca felt his brother tremble, and saw him turn away his head.

Two hours later, Fabio d’Ascoli and his wife were separated in this world forever; and the servants of the palace were anticipating in whispers the order of their mistress’s funeral procession to the burial-ground of the Campo Santo.