

Winthrop's Adventure

By Vernon Lee

All the intimates at the villa S— knew Julian Winthrop to be an odd sort of creature, but I am sure no one ever expected from him such an eccentric scene as that which took place on the first Wednesday of last September.

Winthrop had been a constant visitor at the Countess S—'s villa ever since his arrival in Florence, and the better we knew, the more we liked, his fantastic character. Although quite young, he had shown very considerable talent for painting, but every one seemed to agree that this talent would never come to anything. His nature was too impressionable, too mobile, for steady work; and he cared too much for all kinds of art to devote himself exclusively to any one; above all, he had too ungovernable a fancy, and too uncontrollable a love of detail, to fix and complete any impression in an artistic shape; his ideas and fancies were constantly shifting and changing like the shapes in a kaleidoscope, and their instability and variety were the chief sources of his pleasure. All that he did and thought and said had an irresistible tendency to become arabesque, feelings and moods gliding strangely into each other, thoughts and images growing into inextricable tangles, just as when he played he passed insensibly from one fragment to another totally incongruous, and when he drew one form merged into another beneath his pencil. His head was like his sketch-book—full of delightful scraps of colour and quaint, graceful forms, none finished, one on the top of the other: leaves growing out of heads, houses astride on animals, scraps of melodies noted down across scraps of verse, gleanings from all quarters—all pleasing, and all jumbled into a fantastic, useless, but very delightful whole. In short, Winthrop's artistic talent was frittered away by his love of the picturesque, and his career was spoilt by his love of adventure; but such as he was, he was almost a work of art, a living arabesque himself.

On this particular Wednesday we were all seated out on the terrace of the villa S— at Bellosguardo, enjoying the beautiful serene yellow moonlight and the delightful coolness after an intensely hot day. The Countess S—, who was a great musician, was trying over a violin sonata with one of her friends in the drawing-room, of which the doors opened on to the terrace. Winthrop, who had been particularly gay all the evening, had cleared away the plates and cups from the tea-table, had pulled out his sketch-book and begun drawing in his drowsy, irrelevant fashion—acanthus leaves uncurling into sirens' tails, satyrs growing out of passion flowers, little Dutch manikins in tail coats and pigtailed peeping out of tulip leaves under his whimsical pencil, while he listened partly to the music within, partly to the conversation without.

When the violin sonata had been tried over, passage by passage, sufficiently often, the Countess, instead of returning to us on the terrace, addressed us from the drawing-room—

'Remain where you are,' she said; 'I want you to hear an old air which I discovered last week among a heap of rubbish in my father-in-law's lumber room. I think it quite a treasure, as good as a wrought-iron ornament found among a heap of old rusty nails, or a piece of Gubbio majolica found among cracked coffee cups. It is very beautiful to my mind. Just listen.'

The Countess was an uncommonly fine singer, without much voice, and not at all emotional, but highly delicate and refined in execution, and with a great knowledge of music. The air which she deemed beautiful could not fail to really be so; but it was so totally different from all we moderns are accustomed to, that it seemed, with its exquisitely-finished phrases, its delicate

vocal twirls and spirals, its symmetrically ordered ornaments, to take one into quite another world of musical feeling, of feeling too subdued and artistic, too subtly and cunningly balanced, to move us more than superficially—indeed, it could not move at all, for it expressed no particular state of feeling; it was difficult to say whether it was sad or cheerful; all that could be said was that it was singularly graceful and delicate.

This is how the piece affected me, and I believe, in less degree, all the rest of our party; but, turning towards Winthrop, I was surprised at seeing how very strong an impression its very first bars had made on him. He was seated at the table, his back turned towards me, but I could see that he had suddenly stopped drawing and was listening with intense eagerness. At one moment I almost fancied I saw his hand tremble as it lay on his sketch-book, as if he were breathing spasmodically. I pulled my chair near his; there could be no doubt, his whole frame was quivering.

‘Winthrop,’ I whispered.

He paid no attention to me, but continued listening intently, and his hand unconsciously crumpled up the sheet he had drawn on.

‘Winthrop,’ I repeated, touching his shoulder.

‘Be quiet,’ he answered quickly, as if shaking me off; ‘let me listen.’

There was something almost fierce in his manner; and this intense emotion caused by a piece which did not move any of the rest of us, struck me as being very odd.

He remained with his head between his hands till the end. The piece concluded with a very intricate and beautiful passage of execution, and with a curious sort of sighing fall from a high note on to a lower one, short and repeated at various intervals, with lovely effect.

‘Bravo! beautiful!’ cried every one. ‘A real treasure; so quaint and so elegant, and so admirably sung!’

I looked at Winthrop. He had turned round; his face was flushed, and he leaned against his chair as if oppressed by emotion.

The Countess returned to the terrace. ‘I am glad you like the piece,’ she said; ‘it is a graceful thing. Good heavens! Mr Winthrop!’ she suddenly interrupted herself; ‘what is the matter? are you ill?’

For ill he certainly did look.

He rose and, making an effort, answered in a husky, uncertain voice—

‘It’s nothing; I suddenly felt cold. I think I’ll go in—or rather, no, I’ll stay. What is—what is that air you have just sung?’

‘That air?’ she answered absently, for the sudden change in Winthrop’s manner put everything else out of her thoughts. ‘That air? Oh! it is by a very forgotten composer of the name of Barbella, who lived somewhere about the year 1780.’ It was evident that she considered this question as a sort of mask to his sudden emotion.

‘Would you let me see the score?’ he asked quickly.

‘Certainly. Will you come into the drawing-room? I left it on the piano.’

The piano candles were still lit; and as they stood there she watched his face with as much curiosity as myself. But Winthrop took no notice of either of us; he had eagerly snatched the score, and was looking at it in a fixed, vacant way. When he looked up his face was ashy; he handed me the score mechanically. It was an old yellow, blurred manuscript, in some now disused clef, and the initial words, written in a grand, florid style, were: ‘Sei Regina, io son pastore’. The Countess was still under the impression that Winthrop was trying to hide his

agitation by pretending great interest in the song; but I, having seen his extraordinary emotion during its performance, could not doubt of the connection between them.

‘You say the piece is very rare,’ said Winthrop; ‘do you—do you then think that no one besides yourself is acquainted with it at present?’

‘Of course I can’t affirm that,’ answered the Countess, ‘but this much I know, that Professor C—, who is one of the most learned of musical authorities, and to whom I showed the piece, had heard neither of it nor of its composer, and that he positively says it exists in no musical archives in Italy or in Paris.’

‘Then how,’ I asked, ‘do you know that it is of about the year 1780?’

‘By the style; Professor C— compared it at my request with some compositions of that day, and the style perfectly coincides.’

‘You think, then,’ continued Winthrop slowly, but eagerly—‘you think, then, that no one else sings it at present?’

‘I should say not; at least it seems highly unlikely.’

Winthrop was silent, and continued looking at the score, but, as it seemed to me, mechanically.

Some of the rest of the party had meanwhile entered the drawing-room.

‘Did you notice Mr Winthrop’s extraordinary behaviour?’ whispered a lady to the Countess. ‘What *has* happened to him?’

‘I can’t conceive. He is excessively impressionable, but I don’t see how that piece could impress him at all; it is a sweet thing, but so unemotional,’ I answered.

‘That piece!’ replied the Countess: ‘you don’t suppose that piece has anything to do with it?’

‘Indeed I do; it has everything to do with it. In short, I noticed that from the very first notes it violently affected him.’

‘Then all these inquiries about it?’

‘Are perfectly genuine.’

‘It cannot be the piece itself which has moved him, and he can scarcely have heard it before. It’s very odd. There certainly is something the matter with him.’

There certainly was; Winthrop was excessively pale and agitated, all the more so as he perceived that he had become an object of universal curiosity. He evidently wished to make his escape, but was afraid of doing so too suddenly. He was standing behind the piano, looking mechanically at the old score.

‘Have you ever heard that piece before, Mr Winthrop?’ asked the Countess, unable to restrain her curiosity.

He looked up, much discomposed, and answered after a moment’s hesitation: ‘How can I have heard it, since you are the sole possessor of it?’

‘The sole possessor? Oh! I never said that. I thought it unlikely, but perhaps there is some other. Tell me, is there another? Where did you hear that piece before?’

‘I did not say I had heard it before,’ he rejoined hurriedly. ‘But have you, or have you not?’ persisted the Countess.

‘I never have,’ he answered decidedly, but immediately reddened as if conscious of prevarication. ‘Don’t ask me any questions,’ he added quickly; ‘it worries me,’ and in a minute he was off.

We looked at each other in mute astonishment. This astonishing behaviour, this mixture of concealment and rudeness, above all, the violent excitement in which Winthrop had evidently been, and his unaccountable eagerness respecting the piece which the Countess had sung, all this entirely baffled our efforts at discovery.

‘There is some mystery at the bottom of it,’ we said, and further we could not get.

Next evening, as we were seated once more in the Countess’s drawing-room, we of course reverted to Winthrop’s extraordinary behaviour.

‘Do you think he will return soon?’ asked one of us.

‘I should think he would rather let the matter blow over, and wait till we had forgotten his absurdity,’ answered the Countess.

At that moment the door opened, and Winthrop entered.

He seemed confused and at a loss what to say; he did not answer our trivial remarks, but suddenly burst out, as if with a great effort:

‘I have come to beg you to forgive my last night’s behaviour. Forgive my rudeness and my want of openness; but I could not have explained anything then: that piece, you must know, had given me a great shock.’

‘A great shock? And how could it give you a shock?’ we all exclaimed.

‘You surely don’t mean that so prim a piece as that could have affected you?’ asked the Countess’s sister.

‘If it did,’ added the Countess, ‘it is the greatest miracle music ever worked.’

‘It is difficult to explain the matter,’ hesitated Winthrop; ‘but—in short—that piece gave me a shock because as soon as I heard the first bars I recognised it.’

‘And you told me you had never heard it before!’ exclaimed the Countess indignantly.

‘I know I did; it was not true, but neither was it quite false. All I can say is that I knew the piece; whether I had heard it before, or not, I knew it—in fact,’ he dashed out, ‘you will think me mad, but I had long doubted whether the piece existed at all, and I was so moved just because your performance proved that it *did* exist. Look here,’ and pulling a sketchbook from his pocket he was just about to open it when he stopped—‘Have you got the notes of that piece?’ he asked hurriedly.

‘Here they are,’ and the Countess handed him the old roll of music.

He did not look at it, but turned over the leaves of his sketch-book.

‘See,’ he said after a minute; ‘look at this,’ and he pushed the open sketch-book across the table to us. On it, among a lot of sketches, were some roughly ruled lines, with some notes scrawled in pencil, and the words ‘Sei Regina, io Pastor sono’.

‘Why, this is the beginning of the very air!’ exclaimed the Countess. ‘How did you get this?’

We compared the notes in the sketch-book with those on the score; they were the same, but in another clef and tone.

Winthrop sat opposite, looking doggedly at us. After a moment he remarked—

‘They are the same notes, are they not? Well, this pencil scrawl was done in July of last year, while the ink of this score has been dry ninety years; yet when I wrote down these notes, I swear I did not know that any such score existed, and until yesterday I disbelieved it.’

‘Then,’ remarked one of the party, ‘there are only two explanations: either you composed this melody yourself, not knowing that some one else had done so ninety years ago; or, you heard that piece without knowing what it was.’

‘Explanation!’ cried Winthrop contemptuously; ‘why, don’t you see, that it is just what needs explaining! Of course, I either composed it myself or heard it, but which of the two was it?’

We remained much humbled and silenced.

‘This is a very astonishing puzzle,’ remarked the Countess, ‘and I think it useless to rack our brains about it since Mr Winthrop is the only person who can explain it. We don’t and can’t

understand; he can and must explain it himself. I don't know,' she added, 'whether there is any reason for not explaining the mystery to us; but if not, I wish you would.'

'There is no reason,' he answered, 'except that you would set me down as a maniac. The story is so absurd a one—you will never believe me—and yet . . .'

'Then there is a story at the bottom of it!' exclaimed the Countess. 'What is it? Can't you tell it us?'

Winthrop gave a sort of deprecatory shrug, and trifled with the paper cutters and dogseared the books on the table. 'Well,' he said at last, 'if you really wish to know—why—perhaps I might as well tell it you; only don't tell me afterwards that I am mad. Nothing can alter the fact of the real existence of that piece; and, as long as you continue to regard it as unique, I cannot but regard my adventure as being true.'

We were afraid lest he might slip away through all these deprecatory premisings, and that after all we might hear no story whatever; so we summoned him to begin at once, and he, keeping his head well in the shadow of the lampshade, and scribbling as usual on his sketch-book, began his narrative, at first slowly and hesitatingly, with plentiful interruptions, but, as he grew more interested in it, becoming extremely rapid and dramatic, and exceedingly minute in details.

II

You must know (said Winthrop), that about a year and a half ago I spent the autumn with some cousins of mine, rambling about Lombardy. In poking into all sorts of odd nooks and corners, we made the acquaintance at M— of a highly learned and highly snuffy old gentleman (I believe he was a count or a marchese), who went by the nickname of Maestro Fa Diesis (Master F-Sharp), and who possessed a very fine collection of things musical, a perfect museum. He had a handsome old palace, which was literally tumbling to pieces, and of which the whole first floor was taken up by his collections. His old MSS., his precious missals, his papyri, his autographs, his black-letter books, his prints and pictures, his innumerable ivory inlaid harpsichords and ebony fretted lutes and viols, lived in fine, spacious rooms, with carved oaken ceilings and painted window frames, while he lived in some miserable little garret to the back, on what I can't say, but I should judge, by the spectral appearance of his old woman servant and of a half-imbecile boy who served him, on nothing more substantial than bean husks and warm water. They seemed to suffer from this diet; but I suspect that their master must have absorbed some mysterious vivifying fluid from his MSS. and old instruments, for he seemed to be made of steel, and was the most provokingly active old fellow, keeping one's nerves in perpetual irritation by his friskiness and volubility. He cared for nothing in the wide world save his collections; he had cut down tree after tree, he had sold field after field and farm after farm; he had sold his furniture, his tapestries, his plate, his family papers, his own clothes. He would have taken the tiles off his roof and the glass out of his windows to buy some score of the sixteenth century, some illuminated mass book or some Cremonese fiddle. For music itself I firmly believe he cared not a jot, and regarded it as useful only inasmuch as it had produced the objects of his passion, the things which he could spend all his life in dusting, labelling, counting, and cataloguing, for not a chord, not a note was ever heard in his house, and he would have died rather than spend a soldino on going to the opera.

My cousin, who is music mad after a fashion, quickly secured the old gentleman's good will by accepting a hundred commissions for the obtaining of catalogues and the attending of sales, and we were consequently permitted daily to enter that strange, silent house full of musical things,

and to examine its contents at our leisure, always, however, under old Fa Diesis's vigilant supervision. The house, its contents, and proprietor formed a grotesque whole, which had a certain charm for me. I used often to fancy that the silence could be only apparent; that, as soon as the master had drawn his bolts and gone off to bed, all this slumbering music would awake, that the pictures of dead musicians would slip out of their frames, the glass cases fly open, the big paunched inlaid lutes turn into stately Flemish burghers, with brocaded doublets; the yellow, faded sides of the Cremonese bass viols expand into the stiff satin hoops of powdered ladies; and the little ribbed mandolins put forth a parti-coloured leg and a bushy-haired head, and hop about as Provençal Court dwarfs or Renaissance pages, while the Egyptian sistrum and fife players would slip from off the hieroglyphics of the papyrus, and all the parchment palimpsests of Greek musicians turn into chlamys-robed auletes, and citharædi; then the kettledrums and tamtams would strike up, the organ tubes would suddenly be filled with sound, the old gilded harpsichords would jingle like fury, the old chapel-master yonder, in his peruke and furred robe, would beat time on his picture frame, and the whole motley company set to dancing; until all of a sudden old Fa Diesis, awakened by the noise, and suspecting thieves, would rush in wildly in his dressing-gown, a three-wicked kitchen lamp in one hand and his great-grandfather's court sword in the other, when all the dancers and players would start and slide back into their frames and cases. I should not, however, have gone so often to the old gentleman's museum had not my cousin extorted from me the promise of a water-colour sketch of a picture of Palestrina, which, for some reason or other, she (for the cousin was a lady, which explains my docility) chose to consider as particularly authentic. It was a monster, a daub, which I shuddered at, and my admiration for Palestrina would have rather induced me to bum the hideous, blear-eyed, shoulderless thing; but musical folk have their whims, and hers was to hang a copy of this monstrosity over her grand piano. So I acceded, took my drawing block and easel, and set off for Fa Diesis's palace. This palace was a queer old place, full of ups and downs and twistings and turnings, and in going to the only tolerably lighted room of the house, whither the delightful subject for my brush had been transported for my convenience, we had to pass through a narrow and wriggling corridor somewhere in the heart of the building. In doing so we passed by a door up some steps.

'By the way,' exclaimed old Fa Diesis, 'have I shown you this?' 'Tis of no great value, but still, as a painter, it may interest you.' He mounted the steps, pushed open the door, which was ajar, and ushered me into a small, bleak, whitewashed lumber-room, peopled with broken bookshelves, crazy music desks, and unsteady chairs and tables, the whole covered by a goodly layer of dust. On the walls were a few time-stained portraits in corslets and bobwigs, the senatorial ancestors of Fa Diesis, who had had to make room for the bookshelves and instrument-cases filling the state rooms. The old gentleman opened a shutter, and threw the full light upon another old picture, from whose cracked surface he deliberately swept away the dust with the rusty sleeve of his fur-lined coat.

I approached it. 'This is not a bad picture,' I said at once; 'by no means a bad picture.'

'Indeed,' exclaimed Fa Diesis. 'Oh, then, perhaps, I may sell it. What do you think? Is it worth much?'

I smiled, 'Well, it is not a Raphael,' I answered; 'but, considering its date and the way people then smeared, it is quite creditable.'

'Ah!' sighed the old fellow, much disappointed.

It was a half-length, life-size portrait of a man in the costume of the latter part of the last century—a pale lilac silk coat, a pale pea-green satin waistcoat, both extremely delicate in tint,

and a deep warm-tinted amber cloak; the voluminous cravat was loosened, the large collar flapped back, the body slightly turned, and the head somewhat looking over the shoulder, Cenci fashion.

The painting was uncommonly good for an Italian portrait of the eighteenth century, and had much that reminded me, though of course vastly inferior technically, of Greuze—a painter I detest, and who yet fascinates me. The features were irregular and small, with intensely red lips and a crimson flush beneath the transparent bronzed skin; the eyes were slightly upturned and looking sideways, in harmony with the turn of the head and the parted lips, and they were beautiful, brown, soft, like those of some animals, with a vague, wistful depth of look. The whole had the clear greyness, the hazy, downy touch of Greuze, and left that strange mixed impression which all the portraits of his school do. The face was not beautiful; it had something at once sullen and effeminate, something odd and not entirely agreeable; yet it attracted and riveted your attention with its dark, warm colour, rendered all the more striking for the light, pearly, powdered locks, and the general lightness and haziness of touch.

‘It is a very good portrait in its way,’ I said, ‘though not of the sort that people buy. There are faults of drawing here and there, but the colour and touch are good. By whom is it?’

Old Fa Diesis, whose vision of heaps of banknotes to be obtained in exchange for the picture had been rudely cut short, seemed rather sulky.

‘I don’t know by whom it is,’ he grumbled. ‘If it’s bad it’s bad, and may remain here.’

‘And whom does it represent?’

‘A singer. You see he has got a score in his hand. A certain Rinaldi, who lived about a hundred years ago.’

Fa Diesis had rather a contempt for singers, regarding them as poor creatures, who were of no good, since they left nothing behind them that could be collected, except indeed in the case of Madame Banti, one of whose lungs he possessed in spirits of wine.

We went out of the room, and I set about my copy of that abominable old portrait of Palestrina. At dinner that day I mentioned the portrait of the singer to my cousins, and somehow or other I caught myself using expressions about it which I should not have used in the morning. In trying to describe the picture my recollection of it seemed to differ from the original impression. It returned to my mind as something strange and striking. My cousin wished to see it, so the next morning she accompanied me to old Fa Diesis’s palace. How it affected her I don’t know; but for me it had a queer sort of interest, quite apart from that in the technical execution. There was something peculiar and unaccountable in the look of that face, a yearning, half-pained look, which I could not well define to myself. I became gradually aware that the portrait was, so to speak, haunting me. Those strange red lips and wistful eyes rose up in my mind. I instinctively and without well knowing why reverted to it in our conversation.

‘I wonder who he was,’ I said, as we sat in the square behind the cathedral apse, eating our ices in the cool autumn evening.

‘Who?’ asked my cousin.

‘Why, the original of that portrait at old Fa Diesis’s; such a weird face. I wonder who he was?’

My cousins paid no attention to my speech, for they did not share that vague, unaccountable feeling with which the picture had inspired me, but as we walked along the silent porticoed streets, where only the illuminated sign of an inn or the chestnut-roasting brazier of a fruit stall flickered in the gloom, and crossed the vast desolate square, surrounded by Oriental-like cupolas and minarets, where the green bronze condottiere rode on his green bronze charger—during our

evening ramble through the quaint Lombard city my thoughts kept reverting to the picture, with its hazy, downy colour and curious, unfathomed expression.

The next day was the last of our stay at M—, and I went to Fa Diesis's palace to finish my sketch, to take leave, present thanks for his civility towards us, and inquire whether we could execute any commission for him. In going to the room where I had left my easel and painting things, I passed through the dark, wriggling lobby and by the door up the three steps. The door was ajar, and I entered the room where the portrait was. I approached and examined it carefully. The man was apparently singing, or rather about to sing, for the red, well-cut lips were parted; and in his hand a beautiful plump, white, blue-veined hand, strangely out of keeping with the brown, irregular face—he held an open roll of notes. The notes were mere unintelligible blotches, but I made out, written on the score, the name—Ferdinando Rinaldi, 1782; and above, the words—‘Sei Regina, io pastor sono’. The face had a beauty, a curious, irregular beauty, and in those deep, soft eyes there was something like a magnetic power, which I felt, and which others must have felt before me. I finished my sketch, strapped up my easel and paint-box, gave a parting snarl at the horrible blear-eyed, shoulderless Palestrina, and prepared to leave. Fa Diesis, who, in his snuffy fur-lined coat, the tassel of his tarnished blue skull-cap bobbing over his formidable nose, was seated at a desk hard by, rose also, and politely escorted me through the passage.

‘By the way,’ I asked, ‘do you know an air called, “Sei Regina, io Pastor sono?”’

‘“Sei Regina, io Pastor sono?” No, such an air doesn't exist.’ All airs not in his library had no business to exist, even if they did.

‘It must exist,’ I persisted; ‘those words are written on the score held by the singer on that picture of yours.’

‘That's no proof,’ he cried peevishly; ‘it may be merely some fancy title, or else—or else it may be some rubbishy *trunk air* (aria di baule).’

‘What is a *trunk air*?’ I asked in amazement.

‘A *trunk air*,’ he explained, ‘was a wretched air—merely a few trumpery notes and lots of pauses, on to which great singers used formerly to make their own variations. They used to insert them in every opera they sang in, and drag them all over the world; that was why they were called trunk airs. They had no merit of their own—no one ever cared to sing them except the singer to whom they belonged—no one ever kept such rubbish as that! It all went to wrap up sausages or make curl-papers.’ And old Fa Diesis laughed his grim little cackling laugh.

He then dropped the subject, and said—

‘If I had an opportunity, or one of my illustrious family, of obtaining any catalogues of musical curiosities or attending any sales’—he was still searching for the first printed copy of Guido of Arezzo's ‘Micrologus’—he had copies of all the other editions, a unique collection; there was also one specimen wanting to complete his set of Amati's fiddles, one with *fleurs-de-lys* on the sounding board, constructed for Charles IX of France—alas! he had spent years looking for that instrument—he would pay—yes, he, as I saw him there, he standing before me, would pay five hundred golden *marenghi*¹ for that violin with the *fleurs-de-lys* . . .

‘Pardon me,’ I interrupted rather rudely; ‘may I see this picture again?’ We had come to the door up the three steps.

‘Certainly,’ he answered, and continued his speech about the Amati violin with the *fleurs-de-lys*, getting more and more frisky and skippery every moment.

¹ A Lombard coin struck by Napoleon after the battle of Marengo, and by which elderly people still occasionally count.

That strange face with its weird, yearning look! I remained motionless before it while the old fellow jabbered and gesticulated like a maniac. What a deep incomprehensible look in those eyes!

‘Was he a very famous singer?’ I asked, by way of saying something.

‘He? *Eli altro*’ I should think so! Do you think perhaps the singers of that day were like ours? Pooh! Look at all they did in that day. Their paper made of linen rag, no tearing that; and how they built their violins! Oh, what times those were!’

‘Do you know anything about this man?’ I asked.

‘About this singer, this Rinaldi? Oh, yes; he was a very great singer, but he ended badly.’

‘Badly? in what way?’

‘Why—you know what such people are, and then youth! we have all been young, all young!’ and old Fa Diesis shrugged his shrivelled person.

‘What happened to him?’ I persisted, continuing to look at the portrait; it seemed as if there were life in those soft, velvety eyes, and as if those red lips were parting in a sigh—a long, weary sigh.

‘Well,’ answered Fa Diesis, ‘this Ferdinando Rinaldi was a very great singer. About the year 1780 he took service with the Court of Parma. There, it is said, he obtained too great notice from a lady in high favour at Court, and was consequently dismissed. Instead of going to a distance, he kept hanging about the frontier of Parma, now here, now there, for he had many friends among the nobility. Whether he was suspected of attempting to return to Parma, or whether he spoke with less reserve than he should, I don’t know. *Basta!* one fine morning he was found lying on the staircase landing of our Senator Negri’s house, stabbed.’

Old Fa Diesis pulled out his horn snuff-box.

‘Who had done it, no one ever knew or cared to know. A packet of letters, which his valet said he always carried on his person, was all that was found missing. The lady left Parma and entered the Convent of the Clarisse here; she was my father’s aunt, and this portrait belonged to her. A common story, a common story in those days.’

And the old gentleman rammed his long nose with snuff.

‘You really don’t think I could sell the picture?’ he asked.

‘No!’ I answered very decidedly, for I felt a sort of shudder. I took leave, and that evening we set off for Rome.

Winthrop paused, and asked for a cup of tea. He was flushed and seemed excited, but at the same time anxious to end his story. When he had taken his tea, he pushed back his irregular hair with both hands, gave a little sigh of recollection, and began again as follows:—

III

I returned to M— the next year, on my way to Venice, and stopped a couple of days in the old place, having to bargain for certain Renaissance carved work, which a friend wished to buy. It was midsummer; the fields which I had left planted with cabbages and covered with white frost were tawny with ripe corn, and the vine garlands drooped down to kiss the tall, compact green hemp; the dark streets were reeking with heat, the people were all sprawling about under colonnade and awning; it was the end of June in Lombardy, God’s own orchard on earth. I went to old Fa Diesis’s palace to ask whether he had any commissions for Venice; he might, indeed, be in the country, but the picture, *the* portrait was at his palace, and that was enough for me. I

had often thought of it in the winter, and I wondered whether now, with the sun blazing through every chink, I should still be impressed by it as I had been in the gloomy autumn. Fa Diesis was at home, and overjoyed to see me; he jumped and frisked about like a figure in the Dance of Death, in intense excitement about certain MSS. he had lately seen. He narrated, or rather acted, for it was all in the present tense and accompanied by appropriate gestures, a journey he had recently made to Guastalla to see a psaltery at a monastery; how he had bargained for a post-chaise; how the post-chaise had upset half-way; how he had sworn at the driver; how he had rung—drling, drling—at the monastery door; how he cunningly pretended to be in quest of an old, valueless crucifix; how the monks had had the impudence to ask a hundred and fifty francs for it. How he had hummed and hah'd, and, pretending suddenly to notice the psaltery, had asked what it was, etc., as if he did not know; and finally struck the bargain for both crucifix and psaltery for a hundred and fifty francs—a psaltery of the year 1310 for a hundred and fifty francs! And those idiots of monks were quite overjoyed! They thought they had cheated me—cheated me! And he frisked about in an ecstasy of pride and triumph. We had got to the well-known door; it was open; I could see the portrait. The sun streamed brightly on the brown face and light powdered locks. I know not how; I felt a momentary giddiness and sickness, as if of long desired, unexpected pleasure; it lasted but an instant, and I was ashamed of myself.

Fa Diesis was in splendid spirits.

'Do you see that?' he said, forgetting all he had previously told me—'that is a certain Ferdinando Rinaldi, a singer, who was assassinated for making love to my great-aunt'; and he stalked about in great glee, thinking of the psaltery at Guastalla, and fanning himself complacently with a large green fan.

A thought suddenly struck me—'It happened here at M—, did it not?'

'To be sure.'

And Fa Diesis continued shuffling to and fro in his old red and blue dressing-gown, with parrots and cherry branches on it.

'Did you never know anyone who had seen him—heard him?'

'I? Never. How could I? He was killed ninety-four years ago.'

Ninety-four years ago! I looked up at the portrait; ninety-four years ago! and yet—the eyes seemed to me to have a strange, fixed, intent look.

'And where—' I hesitated despite myself, 'where did it happen?'

'That few people know; no one, probably, except me, nowadays,' he answered with satisfaction. 'But my father pointed out the house to me when I was little; it had belonged to a Marchese Negri, but somehow or other, after that affair, no one would live there any longer, and it was left to rot; already, when I was a child, it was all deserted and falling to pieces. A fine house, though! A fine house! and one which ought to have been worth something. I saw it again some years ago—I rarely go outside the gates now—outside Porta San Vitale—about a mile.'

'Outside Porta San Vitale? the house where this Rinaldi was—it is still there?'

Fa Diesis looked at me with intense contempt.

'*Bagatella!*' (fiddlestick) he exclaimed. 'Do you think a villa flies away like that?'

'You are sure?'

'*Per Bacco!* as sure as that I see you—outside Porta San Vitale, an old tumbledown place with obelisks and vases, and that sort of thing.'

We had come to the head of the staircase. 'Good-bye', I said; 'I'll return tomorrow for your parcels for Venice,' and I ran down the stair. 'Outside Porta San Vitale!' I said to myself; 'outside Porta San Vitale!' It was six in the afternoon and the heat still intense; I hailed a crazy

old cab, a sky-blue carriage of the year '20, with a cracked hood and emblazoned panels. '*Dove commanda?*' (whither do you command?) asked the sleepy driver. 'Outside Porta San Vitale,' I cried. He touched his bony, long-maned white horse, and off we jolted over the uneven pavement, past the red Lombard cathedral and baptistery, through the long, dark Via San Vitale, with its grand old palaces; under the red gate with the old word 'Libertas still on it, along a dusty road bordered by acacias out into the rich Lombard plain. On we rattled through the fields of corn, hemp, and glossy dark maize, ripening under the rich evening sun. In the distance the purple walls and belfries and shining cupolas gleaming in the light; beyond, the vast blue and gold and hazy plain, bounded by the far-off Alps. The air was warm and serene, everything quiet and solemn. But I was excited. I sought out every large country house; I went wherever a tall belvedere tower peeped from behind the elms and poplars; I crossed and recrossed the plain, taking one lane after another, as far as where the road branched off to Crevalcuore; passed villa after villa, but found none with vases and obelisks, none crumbling and falling, none that could have been *the* villa. What wonder, indeed? Fa Diesis had seen it, but Fa Diesis was seventy, and that—that had happened ninety-four years ago! Still I might be mistaken; I might have gone too far or not far enough—there was lane within lane and road within road. Perhaps the house was screened by trees, or perhaps it lay towards the next gate. So I went again, through the cyclamen-lined lanes, overhung by gnarled mulberries and oaks; I looked up at one house after another: all were old, many dilapidated, some seeming old churches with walled-up colonnades, others built up against old watch-towers; but of what old Fa Diesis had described I could see nothing. I asked the driver, and the driver asked the old women and the fair-haired children who crowded out of the little farms. Did anyone know of a large deserted house with obelisks and vases—a house that had once belonged to a Marchese Negri? Not in that neighbourhood; there was the Villa Montecasinoli with the tower and the sundial, which was dilapidated enough, and the Casino Fava crumbling in yonder cabbage-field, but neither had vases nor obelisks, neither had ever belonged to a Marchese Negri.

At last I gave it up in despair. Ninety-four years ago! The house no longer existed; so I returned to my inn, where the three jolly mediaeval pilgrims swung over the door lamp; took my supper and tried to forget the whole matter.

Next day I went and finally settled with the owner of the carved work I had been commissioned to buy, and then I sauntered lazily about the old town. The day after there was to be a great fair, and preparations were being made for it; baskets and hampers being unloaded, and stalls put up everywhere in the great square; festoons of tinware and garlands of onions were slung across the Gothic arches of the Town Hall and to its massive bronze torch-holders; there was a quack already holding forth on the top of his stage coach, with a skull and many bottles before him, and a little bespangled page handing about his bills; there was a puppet-show at a corner, with a circle of empty chairs round it, just under the stone pulpit where the monks of the Middle Ages has once exhorted the Montagus and Capulets of M— to make peace and embrace. I sauntered about among the crockery and glassware, picking my way among the packing-cases and hay, and among the vociferating peasants and townsfolk. I looked at the figs and cherries and red peppers in the baskets, at the old ironwork, rusty keys, nails, chains, bits of ornament on the stalls; at the vast blue and green glazed umbrellas, at the old prints and images of saints tied against the church bench, at the whole moving, quarrelling, gesticulating crowd. I bought an old silver death's-head trinket at the table of a perambulating watch-maker, and some fresh sweet peas and roses from a peasant woman selling fowls and turkeys; then I turned into the maze of quaint little paved streets, protected by chains from carts and carriages, and named after medæval

hostelries and labelled on little slabs, 'Scimmia' (monkey), 'Alemagna' (Germany), 'Venetia', and, most singular of all, 'Brocca in dosso' (Jug on the Back). Behind the great, red, time-stained, castle-like Town Hall were a number of tinkers' dens; and beneath its arches hung caldrons, pitchers, saucepans, and immense pudding moulds with the imperial eagle of Austria on them, capacious and ancient enough to have contained the puddings of generations of German Cæsars. Then I poked into some of those wondrous curiosity-shops of M—, little black dens, where oaken presses contain heaps and heaps of brocaded dresses and embroidered waistcoats, and yards of lace, and splendid chasubles, the spoils of centuries of magnificence. I walked down the main street and saw a crowd collected round a man with an immense white crested owl; the creature was such a splendid one, I determined to buy him and keep him in my studio at Venice, but when I approached him he flew at me, shaking his wings and screeching so that I beat an ignominious retreat. At length I returned to the square and sat down beneath an awning, where two bare-legged urchins served me excellent snow and lemon juice, at the price of a sou the glass. In short, I enjoyed my last day at M— amazingly; and, in this bright, sunny square, with all the bustle about me, I wondered whether the person who the previous evening had scoured the country in search of a crazy villa where a man had been assassinated ninety-four years ago, could really and truly have been myself.

So I spent the morning; and the afternoon I passed indoors, packing up the delicate carved work with my own hands, although the perspiration ran down my face, and I gasped for air. At length, when evening and coolness were approaching, I took my hat and went once more to Fa Diesis's palace.

I found the old fellow in his many-coloured dressing-gown, seated in his cool, dusky room, among his inlaid lutes and Cremonese viols, carefully mending the torn pages of an illuminated missal, while his old, witchlike housekeeper was cutting out and pasting labels on to a heap of manuscript scores on the table. Fa Diesis got up, jumped about ecstatically, made magnificent speeches, and said that since I insisted on being of use to him, he had prepared half a dozen letters, which I might kindly leave on various correspondents of his at Venice, in order to save the twopenny stamp for each. The grim, lank, old fellow, with his astounding dressing-gown and cap, his lantern-jawed housekeeper, his old, morose grey cat, and his splendid harpsichords and lutes and missals, amused me more than usual. I sat with him for some time while he patched away at his missal. Mechanically I turned over the yellow pages of a music book that lay, waiting for a label, under my hand, and mechanically my eye fell on the words, in faded, yellow ink, at the top of one of the pieces, the indication of its performer:—

Rondò di Cajo Gracco, 'Mule pene mio tesoro', per il Signor Ferdinando Rinaldi. Parma, 1782.

I positively started, for somehow that whole business had gone out of my mind. 'What have you got there?' asked Fa Diesis, perhaps a little suspiciously, and leaning across the table, he twitched the notes towards him—

'Oh, only that old opera of Cimarosa's—Ah, by the way, *per Bacco*, how could I have made such a mistake yesterday? Didn't I tell you that Rinaldi had been stabbed in a villa outside Porta San Vitale?'

'Yes,' I cried eagerly. 'Why?'

'Why, I can't conceive how, but I must have been thinking about that blessed psaltery at San Vitale, at Guastalla. The villa where Rinaldi was killed is outside Porta San Zaccaria, in the direction of the river, near that old monastery where there are those frescoes by—I forget the fellow's name, that all the foreigners go to see. Don't you know?'

‘Ah,’ I exclaimed, ‘I understand.’ And I did understand, for Porta San Zaccaria happens to be at exactly the opposite end of the town to Porta San Vitale, and here was the explanation of my unsuccessful search of the previous evening. So after all the house might still be standing; and the desire to see it again seized hold of me. I rose, took the letters, which I strongly suspected contained other letters whose postage was to be saved in the same way, by being delivered by the original correspondent, and prepared to depart.

‘Good-bye, good-bye,’ said old Fa Diesis, with effusion, as we passed through the dark passage in order to get to the staircase. ‘Continue, my dear friend, in those paths of wisdom and culture which the youth of our days has so miserably abandoned, in order that the sweet promise of your happy silver youth be worthily accomplished in your riper—Ah, by the way,’ he interrupted himself, ‘I have forgotten to give you a little pamphlet of mine on the manufacture of violin strings which I wish to send as an act of reverence to my old friend the Commander of the garrison of Venice’; and off he scudded. I was near the door up the three steps and could not resist the temptation of seeing the picture once more. I pushed open the door and entered; a long ray of declining sunlight, reflected from the neighbouring red church tower, fell across the face of the portrait, playing in the light, powdered hair and on the downy, well-cut lips, and ending in a tremulous crimson stain on the boarded floor. I went close up to the picture; there was the name ‘Ferdinando Rinaldi, 1782’, on the roll of music he was holding; but the notes themselves were mere imitative, meaningless smears and blotches, although the title of the piece stood distinct and legible—‘Sei Regina, io Pastor sono’.

‘Why, where is he?’ cried Fa Diesis’s shrill voice in the passage. ‘Ah, here you are’; and he handed me the pamphlet, pompously addressed to the illustrious General S—, at Venice. I put it in my pocket.

‘You won’t forget to deliver it?’ he asked, and then went on with the speech he had before begun: ‘Let the promise of your happy silver youth be fulfilled in a golden manhood, in order that the world may mark down your name *albo lapillo*. Ah,’ he continued, ‘perhaps we shall never meet again. I am old, my dear friend, I am old!’ and he smacked his lips. ‘Perhaps, when you return to M—, I may have gone to rest with my immortal ancestors, who, as you know, intermarried with the Ducal family of Sforza, A.D. 1490!’

The last time! This might be the last time I saw the picture! What would become of it after old Fa Diesis’s death? I turned once more towards it, in leaving the room; the last flicker of light fell on the dark, yearning face, and it seemed, in the trembling sunbeam, as if the head turned and looked towards me. I never saw the portrait again.

I walked along quickly through the darkening streets, on through the crowd of loiterers and pleasure seekers, on towards Porta San Zaccaria. It was late, but if I hastened, I might still have an hour of twilight; and next morning I had to leave M—. This was my last opportunity, I could not relinquish it; so on I went, heedless of the ominous puffs of warm, damp air, and of the rapidly clouding sky.

It was St John’s Eve, and bonfires began to appear on the little hills round the town; fire-balloons were sent up, and the great bell of the cathedral boomed out in honour of the coming holiday. I threaded my way through the dusty streets and out by Porta San Zaccaria. I walked smartly along the avenues of poplars along the walls, and then cut across into the fields by a lane leading towards the river. Behind me were the city walls, all crenellated and jagged; in front the tall belfry and cypresses of the Carthusian monastery; above, the starless, moonless sky, overhung by heavy clouds. The air was mild and relaxing; every now and then there came a gust of hot, damp wind, making a shudder run across the silver poplars and trailed vines; a few heavy

drops fell, admonishing me of the coming storm, and every moment some of the light faded away. But I was determined; was not this my last opportunity? So on I stumbled through the rough lane, on through the fields of corn and sweet, fresh-scented hemp, the fireflies dancing in fantastic spirals before me. Something dark wriggled across my path; I caught it on my stick: it was a long, slimy snake which slipped quickly off. The frogs roared for rain, the crickets sawed with ominous loudness, the fireflies crossed and recrossed before me; yet on I went, quicker and quicker in the fast increasing darkness. A broad sheet of pink lightning and a distant rumble: more drops fell; the frogs roared louder, the crickets sawed faster and faster, the air got heavier and the sky yellow and lurid where the sun had set; yet on I went towards the river. Suddenly down came a tremendous stream of rain, as if the heavens had opened, and with it down came the darkness, complete though sudden; the storm had changed evening into the deepest night. What should I do? Return? How? I saw a light glimmering behind a dark mass of trees; I would go on; there must be a house out there, where I could take shelter till the storm was over; I was too far to get back to the town. So on I went in the pelting rain. The lane made a sudden bend, and I found myself in an open space in the midst of the fields, before an iron gate, behind which, surrounded by trees, rose a dark, vast mass; a rent in the clouds permitted me to distinguish a gaunt, grey villa, with broken obelisks on its triangular front. My heart gave a great thump; I stopped, the rain continuing to stream down. A dog began to bark furiously from a little peasant's house on the other side of road, whence issued the light I had perceived. The door opened and a man appeared holding a lamp.

'Who's there?' he cried.

I went up to him. He held up the light and surveyed me.

'Ah!' he said immediately, 'a stranger—a foreigner. Pray enter, *illustrissimo*.' My dress and my sketch-book had immediately revealed what I was; he took me for an artist, one of the many who visited the neighbouring Carthusian Abbey, who had lost his way in the maze of little lanes.

I shook the rain off me and entered the low room, whose whitewashed walls were lit yellow by the kitchen fire. A picturesque group of peasants stood out in black outline on the luminous background: an old woman was spinning on her classic distaff, a young one was unravelling skeins of thread on a sort of rotating star; another was cracking pea pods; an old, close-shaven man sat smoking with his elbows on the table, and opposite to him sat a portly priest in three-cornered hat, knee-breeches, and short coat. They rose and looked at me, and welcomed me with the familiar courtesy of their class; the priest offered me his seat, the girl took my soaking coat and hat, and hung them over the fire, the young man brought an immense hempen towel, and proceeded to dry me, much to the general hilarity. They had been reading their usual stories of Charlemagne in their well-thumbed 'Reali di Francia', that encyclopædia of Italian peasants; but they put by their books on my entrance and began talking, questioning me on every possible and impossible subject. Was it true that it always rained in England? (at that rate, remarked the old man shrewdly, how could the English grow grapes; and if they did not make wine, what could they live on?) Was it true that one could pick up lumps of gold somewhere in England? Was there any town as large as M— in that country? etc., etc. The priest thought these questions foolish, and inquired with much gravity after the health of Milord Vellington, who, he understood, had been seriously unwell of late. I scarcely listened; I was absent and preoccupied. I gave the women my sketch-book to look over; they were delighted with its contents; mistook all the horses for oxen and all the men for women, and exclaimed and tittered with much glee. The priest, who prided himself on superior education, gave me the blandest encouragement; asked me whether I had been to the picture gallery, whether I had been to the neighbouring Bologna (he

was very proud of having been there last St Petronius's day); informed me that the city was the mother of all art, and that the Caracci especially were her most glorious sons, etc., etc. Meanwhile, the rain continued coming down in a steady pour.

'I don't think I shall be able to get home tonight,' said the priest, looking through the window into the darkness. 'My donkey is the most wonderful donkey in the world—quite a human being. When you say "Leone, Leone" to him, he kicks up his heels and stands on his hind legs like an acrobat; indeed he does, upon my honour; but I don't believe even he could find his way through this darkness, and the wheels of my gig would infallibly stick in some rut, and where should I be then? I must stay here overnight, no help for that; but I'm sorry for the Signore here, who will find these very poor quarters.'

'Indeed,' I said, 'I shall be but too happy to stay, if I be sure that I shall be in no one's way.'

'In our way! What a notion!' they all cried.

'That's it,' said the priest, particularly proud of the little vehicle he drove, after the droll fashion of Lombard clergymen. 'And I'll drive the Signore into town tomorrow morning, and you can bring your cart with the vegetables for the fair.'

I paid but little attention to all this; I felt sure I had at length found the object of my search; there, over the way, was the villa; but I seemed almost as far from it as ever, seated in this bright, whitewashed kitchen, among these country folk. The young man asked me timidly, and as a special favour, to make a picture of the girl who was his bride, and very pretty, with laughing, irregular features, and curly crisp golden hair. I took out my pencil and began, I fear not as conscientiously as these good people deserved; but they were enchanted, and stood in a circle round me, exchanging whispered remarks, while the girl sat all giggling and restless on the large wooden settle.

'What a night!' exclaimed the old man. 'What a bad night, and St John's Eve too!'

'What has that to do with it?' I asked.

'Why,' he answered, 'they say that on St John's night they permit dead people to walk about.'

'What rubbish!' cried the priest indignantly; 'who ever told you that? What is there about ghosts in the mass book, or in the Archbishop's pastorals, or in the Holy Fathers of the Church?' and he raised his voice to inquisitorial dignity.

'You may say what you like,' answered the old man doggedly; 'it's true none the less. I've never seen anything myself, and perhaps the Archbishop hasn't either, but I know people who have.'

The priest was about to fall upon him with a deluge of arguments in dialect, when I interrupted.

'To whom does that large house over the way belong?' I waited with anxiety for an answer.

'It belongs to the Avvocato Bargellini,' said the woman with great deference, and they proceeded to inform me that they were his tenants, his *contadini* having charge of all the property belonging to the house; that the Avvocato Bargellini was immensely rich and immensely learned.

'An encyclopædic man!' burst out the priest; 'he knows everything, law, art, geography, mathematics, numismatics, gymnastics!' And he waved his hand between each branch of knowledge. I was disappointed.

'Is it inhabited?' I asked.

'No,' they answered, 'no one has ever lived in it. The Avvocato bought it twenty years ago from the heir of a certain Marchese Negri who died very poor.'

'A Marchese Negri?' I exclaimed; then, after all, I was right.

'But why is it not inhabited, and since when?'

‘Oh, since—since always—no one has ever lived in it since the Marchese Negri’s grandfather. It is all going to pieces; we keep our garden tools and a few sacks there, but there is no living there—there are no windows or shutters.’

‘But why doesn’t the Avvocato patch it up?’ I persisted. ‘It seems a very fine house.’

The old man was going to answer, but the priest glanced at him and answered quickly—

‘The position in these fields is unhealthy.’

‘Unhealthy!’ cried the old man angrily, much annoyed at the priest’s interference. ‘Unhealthy! why, haven’t I lived here these sixty years, and not one of us has had a headache? Unhealthy, indeed! No, the house is a bad house to live in, that’s what it is!’

‘This is very odd,’ I said, ‘surely there must be ghosts?’ and I tried to laugh.

The word *ghosts* acted like magic; like all Italian peasants, they loudly disclaimed such a thing when questioned, although they would accidentally refer to it themselves.

‘Ghosts! Ghosts!’ they cried, ‘surely the Signore does not believe in such trash? Rats there are and in plenty. Do ghosts gnaw the chestnuts, and steal the Indian corn?’

Even the old man, who had seemed inclined to be ghostly from rebellion to the priest, was now thoroughly on his guard, and not a word on the subject could be extracted from him. They did not wish to talk about ghosts, and I for my part did not want to hear about them; for in my present highly wrought, imaginative mood, an apparition in a winding sheet, a clanking of chains, and all the authorised ghostly manifestations seemed in the highest degree disgusting; my mind was too much haunted to be intruded on by vulgar spectres, and as I mechanically sketched the giggling, blushing little peasant girl, and looked up in her healthy, rosy, sunburnt face, peeping from beneath a gaudy silk kerchief, my mental eyes were fixed on a very different face, which I saw as distinctly as hers—that dark yearning face with the strange red lips and the lightly powdered locks. The peasants and the priest went on chattering gaily, running from one topic to another—the harvest, the vines, the next day’s fair; politics the most fantastic, scraps of historical lore even more astounding, rattling on unceasingly, with much good humour, the most astonishing ignorance of facts, infantile absurdity, perfect seriousness, and much shrewd sceptical humour. I did my best to Join in this conversation, and laughed and joked to the best of my power. The fact is I felt quite happy and serene, for I had little by little made up my mind to an absurd step, either babyish in the extreme or foolhardy to the utmost, but which I contemplated with perfect coolness and assurance, as one sometimes does hazardous or foolish courses which gratify a momentary whim. I had at length found the house; I would pass the night there.

I must have been in violent mental excitement, but the excitement was so uniform and unimpeded as to seem almost regular; I felt as if it were quite natural to live in an atmosphere of weirdness and adventure, and I was firm in my purpose. At length came the moment for action: the women put by their work, the old man shook the ashes out of his pipe; they looked at each other as if not knowing how to begin. The priest, who had just re-entered from giving his wondrous donkey some hay, made himself their spokesman

‘Ahem’ he cleared his throat; ‘the Signore must excuse the extreme simplicity of these uneducated rustics, and bear in mind that as they are unaccustomed to the luxuries of cities, and have, moreover, to be up by daybreak in order to attend to their agricultural—’

‘Yes, yes,’ I answered, smiling; ‘I understand. They want to go to bed, and they are quite right. I must beg you all to forgive my having thoughtlessly kept you up so late.’ How was I now to proceed? I scarcely understood.

‘Keep them up late? Oh, not at all; they had been but too much honoured,’ they cried.

‘Well,’ said the priest, who was growing sleepy, ‘of course there is no returning through this rain; the lanes are too unsafe; besides, the city gates are locked. Come, what can we do for the Signore? Can we make him up a bed here? I will go and sleep with our old Maso,’ and he tapped the young man’s shoulder.

The women were already starting off for pillows, and mattresses, and what not; but I stopped them.

‘On no account,’ I said. ‘I will not encroach upon your hospitality. I can sleep quite comfortably over the way—in the large house.’

‘Over the way? In the big house?’ they cried, all together. ‘The Signore sleep in the big house? Oh, never, never! Impossible.’

‘Rather than that, I’ll harness my donkey and drive the Signore through the mud and rain and darkness; that I will, *corpo di Bacco*,’ cried the little, red-faced priest.

‘But why not?’ I answered, determined not to be balked. ‘I can get a splendid night’s rest over the way. Why shouldn’t I?’

‘Never, never!’ they answered in a chorus of expostulation.

‘But since there are no ghosts there,’ I protested, trying to laugh, ‘what reason is there against it?’

‘Oh, as to ghosts,’ put in the priest, ‘I promise you there are none. I snap my fingers at ghosts!’

‘Well,’ I persisted, ‘you won’t tell me that the rats will mistake me for a sack of chestnuts and eat me up, will you? Come, give me the key.’ I was beginning to believe in the use of a little violence. ‘Which is it?’ I asked, seeing a bunch hanging on a nail; ‘is it this one?—or this one? *Via!* tell me which it is.’

The old man seized hold of the keys. ‘You must not sleep there,’ he said, very positively. ‘It’s no use trying to hide it. That house is no house for a Christian to sleep in. A bad thing happened there once—some one was murdered; that is why no one will live in it. It’s no use to say *No, Abate*,’ and he turned contemptuously towards the priest. ‘There are evil things in that house.’

‘Ghosts?’ I cried, laughing, and trying to force the keys from him.

‘Not exactly ghosts,’ he answered; ‘but—the devil is sometimes in that house.’

‘Indeed!’ I exclaimed, quite desperate. ‘That is just what I want. I have to paint a picture of him fighting with a saint of ours who once pulled his nose with a pair of tongs, and I am overjoyed to do his portrait from the life.’

They did not well understand; they suspected I was mad, and so, truly, I was.

‘Let him have his way,’ grumbled the old man; ‘he is a headstrong boy—let him go and see and hear all he will.’

‘For heaven’s sake, Signore!’ entreated the women.

‘Is it possible, Signore Forestiere, that you can be serious?’ protested the priest, with his hand on my arm.

‘Indeed I am,’ I answered; ‘you shall hear all I have seen tomorrow morning. I’ll throw my black paint at the devil if he won’t sit still while I paint him.’

‘Paint the devil! is he mad?’ whispered the women, aghast.

I had got hold of the keys. ‘Is this it?’ I asked, pointed to a heavy, handsomely-wrought, but very rusty key.

The old man nodded.

I took it off the ring. The women, although extremely terrified by my daring, were secretly delighted at the prospect of a good story the next morning. One of them gave me a large, two-

wicked kitchen lamp, with snuffers and tweezers chained to its tall stand; another brought an immense rose-coloured umbrella; the young man produced a large mantle lined with green and a thick horsecloth; they would have brought a mattress and blankets if I had let them.

‘You insist on going?’ asked the priest. ‘Think how wretchedly cold and damp it must be over there!’

‘Do, pray, reflect, Signore!’ entreated the young woman.

‘Haven’t I told you I am engaged to paint the devil’s portrait?’ I answered, and, drawing the bolt, and opening the umbrella, I dashed out of the cottage.

‘*Gesù Maria!*’ cried the women; ‘to go there on such a night as this!’

‘To sleep on the floor!’ exclaimed the priest; ‘what a man, what a man!’

‘*È matto, è matto!* he is mad!’ they all joined, and shut the door.

I dashed across the flood before the door, unlocked the iron gate, walked quickly through the dark and went up the avenue of moaning poplars. A sudden flash of lightning, broad, pink, and enduring, permitted me to see the house, like an immense stranded ship or huge grim skeleton, looming in the darkness.

I ran up the steps, unlocked the door, and gave it a violent shake.

IV

I gave a vigorous push to the old, rotten door; it opened, creaking, and I entered a vast, lofty hall, the entrance saloon of the noble old villa. As I stepped forward cautiously, I heard a cutting, hissing sound, and something soft and velvety brushed against my cheek. I stepped backwards and held up the lamp: it was only an owl whom the light had scared; it hooted dismally as it regained its perch. The rain fell sullen and monotonous; the only other sound was that of my footsteps waking the echoes of the huge room. I looked about as much as the uncertain light of my two-wicked lamp permitted; the shiny marble pavement was visible only in a few places; dust had formed a thick crust over it, and everywhere yellow maize seed was strewn about. In the middle were some broken chairs—tall, gaunt chairs, with remains of gilding and brocade, and some small wooden ones with their ragged straw half pushed out. Against a large oaken table rested some sacks of corn; in the corners were heaps of chestnuts and of green and yellow silkworm cocoons, hoes, spades, and other garden implements; roots and bulbs strewed the floor; the whole place was full of a vague, musty smell of decaying wood and plaster, of earth, of drying fruit and silkworms. I looked up; the rain battered in through the unglazed windows and poured in a stream over some remains of tracery and fresco; I looked higher, at the bare mouldering rafters. Thus I stood while the rain fell heavy and sullen, and the water splashed down outside from the roof; there I stood in the desolate room, in a stupid, unthinking condition. All this solemn, silent decay impressed me deeply, far more than I had expected; all my excitement seemed over, all my whims seemed to have fled.

I almost forgot why I had wished to be here; indeed, why had I? That mad infatuation seemed wholly aimless and inexplicable; this strange, solemn scene was enough in itself. I felt at a loss what to do, or even how to feel; I had the object of my wish, all was over. I was in the house; further I neither ventured to go nor dared to think of; all the dare-devil courting of the picturesque and the supernatural which had hitherto filled me was gone; I felt like an intruder, timid and humble—an intruder on solitude and ruin.

I spread the horsecloth on the floor, placed the lamp by my side, wrapped myself in the peasant’s cloak, leaned my head on a broken chair and looked up listlessly at the bare rafters,

listening to the dull falling rain and to the water splashing from the roof, thoughts or feelings I appeared to have none.

How long I remained thus I cannot tell; the minutes seemed hours in this vigil, with nothing but the spluttering and flickering of the lamp within, the monotonous splash without; lying all alone, awake but vacant, in the vast crumbling hall.

I can scarcely tell whether suddenly or gradually I began to perceive, or thought I perceived, faint and confused sounds issuing I knew not whence. What they were I could not distinguish; all I knew was that they were distinct from the drop and splash of the rain. I raised myself on my elbow and listened; I took out my watch and pressed the repeater to assure myself I was awake: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve tremulous ticks. I sat up and listened more intently, trying to separate the sounds from those of the rain outside. The sounds—silvery, sharp, but faint—seemed to become more distinct. Were they approaching, or was I awaking? I rose and listened, holding my breath. I trembled; I took up the lamp and stepped forward; I waited a moment, listening again. There could be no doubt the light, metallic sounds proceeded from the interior of the house; they were notes, the notes of some instrument. I went on cautiously. At the end of the hall was a crazy, gilded, battered door up some steps; I hesitated before opening it, for I had a vague, horrible fear of what might be behind it. I pushed it open gently and by degrees, and stood on the threshold, trembling and breathless. There was nothing save a dark, empty room, and then another; they had the cold, damp feeling and smell of a crypt. I passed through them slowly, startling the bats with my light; and the sounds, the sharp, metallic chords became more and more distinct; and as they did so, the vague, numbing terror seemed to gain more and more hold on me. I came to a broad spiral staircase, of which the top was lost in the darkness, my lamp shedding a flickering light on the lower steps. The sounds were now quite distinct, the light, sharp, silvery sounds of a harpsichord or spinet; they fell clear and vibrating into the silence of the crypt-like house. A cold perspiration covered my forehead; I seized hold of the banisters of the stairs, and little by little dragged myself up them like an inert mass. There came a chord, and delicately, insensibly there glided into the modulations of the instrument the notes of a strange, exquisite voice. It was of a wondrous sweet, thick, downy quality, neither limpid nor penetrating, but with a vague, drowsy charm, that seemed to steep the soul in enervating bliss; but, together with this charm, a terrible cold seemed to sink into my heart. I crept up the stairs, listening and panting. On the broad landing was a folding, gilded door, through whose interstices issued a faint glimmer of light, and from behind it proceeded the sounds. By the side of the door, but higher up, was one of those oval, ornamental windows called in French *œil de bœuf*; an old broken table stood beneath it. I summoned up my courage and, clambering on to the unsteady table, raised myself on tiptoe to the level of the window and, trembling, peeped through its dust-dimmed glass. I saw into a large, lofty room, the greater part of which was hidden in darkness, so that I could distinguish only the outline of the heavily-curtained windows, and of a screen, and of one or two ponderous chairs. In the middle was a small, inlaid harpsichord, on which stood two wax lights, shedding a bright reflection on the shining marble floor, and forming a pale, yellowish mass of light in the dark room. At the harpsichord, turned slightly away from me, sat a figure in the dress of the end of the last century—a long, pale lilac coat, and pale green waistcoat, and lightly-powdered hair gathered into a black silk bag; a deep amber-coloured silk cloak was thrown over the chairback. He was singing intently, and accompanying himself on the harpsichord, his back turned towards the window at which I was. I stood spellbound, incapable of moving, as if all my blood were frozen and my limbs paralysed, almost insensible, save that I saw and I heard, saw and heard him alone.

The wonderful sweet, downy voice glided lightly and dexterously through the complicated mazes of the song; it rounded off ornament after ornament, it swelled imperceptibly into glorious, hazy magnitude, and diminished, dying gently away from a high note to a lower one, like a weird, mysterious sigh; then it leaped into a high, clear, triumphant note, and burst out into a rapid, luminous shake.

For a moment he took his hands off the keys, and turned partially round. My eyes caught his: they were the deep, soft, yearning eyes of the portrait at Fa Diesis's.

At that moment a shadow was interposed between me and the lights, and instantly, by whom or how I know not, they were extinguished, and the room left in complete darkness; at the same instant the modulation was broken off unfinished; the last notes of the piece changed into a long, shrill, quivering cry; there was a sound of scuffling and suppressed voices, the heavy dead thud of a falling body, a tremendous crash, and another long, vibrating, terrible cry. The spell was broken, I started up, leaped from the table, and rushed to the closed door of the room; I shook its gilded panels twice and thrice in vain; I wrenched them asunder with a tremendous effort, and entered.

The moonlight fell in a broad, white sheet through a hole in the broken roof, filling the desolate room with a vague, greenish light. It was empty. Heaps of broken tiles and plaster lay on the floor; the water trickled down the stained wall and stagnated on the pavement; a broken fallen beam lay across the middle; and there, solitary and abandoned in the midst of the room, stood an open harpsichord, its cover encrusted with dust and split from end to end, its strings rusty and broken, its yellow keyboard thick with cobweb; the greenish-white light falling straight upon it.

I was seized with an irresistible panic; I rushed out, caught up the lamp which I had left on the landing, and dashed down the staircase, never daring to look behind me, nor to the right or the left, as if something horrible and undefinable were pursuing me, that long, agonised cry continually ringing in my ears. I rushed on through the empty, echoing rooms and tore open the door of the large entrance hall—there, at least, I might be safe—when, just as I entered it, I slipped, my lamp fell and was extinguished, and I fell down, down, I knew not where, and lost consciousness.

When I came to my senses, gradually and vaguely, I was lying at the extremity of the vast entrance hall of the crumbling villa, at the foot of some steps, the fallen lamp by my side. I looked round all dazed and astonished; the white morning light was streaming into the hall. How had I come there? what had happened to me? Little by little I recollected, and as the recollection returned, so also returned my fear, and I rose quickly. I pressed my hand to my aching head, and drew it back stained with a little blood. I must, in my panic, have forgotten the steps and fallen, so that my head had struck against the sharp base of a column. I wiped off the blood, took the lamp and the cloak and horsecloth, which lay where I had left them, spread on the dust-encrusted marble floor, amidst the sacks of flour and the heaps of chestnuts, and staggered through the room, not well aware whether I was really awake. At the doorway I paused and looked back once more on the great bare hall, with its mouldering rafters and decaying frescoes, the heaps of rubbish and garden implements, its sad, solemn ruin. I opened the door and went out on to the long flight of steps before the house, and looked wonderingly at the serenely lovely scene. The storm had passed away, leaving only a few hazy white clouds in the blue sky; the soaking earth steamed beneath the already strong sun; the yellow corn was beaten down and drenched, the maize and vine leaves sparkled with rain drops, the tall green hemp gave out its sweet, fresh scent. Before me lay the broken-up garden, with its overgrown box hedges, its immense decorated lemon vases, its spread out silkworm mats, its tangle of weeds and vegetables and

flowers; further, the waving green plain with its avenues of tall poplars stretching in all directions, and from its midst rose the purple and grey walls and roofs and towers of the old town; hens were cackling about in search of worms in the soft moist earth, and the deep, clear sounds of the great cathedral bell floated across the fields. Looking down on all this fresh, lovely scene, it struck me, more vividly than ever before, how terrible it must be to be cut off for ever from all this, to lie blind and deaf and motionless mouldering underground. The idea made me shudder and shrink from the decaying house; I ran down to the road; the peasants were there, dressed in their gayest clothes, red, blue, cinnamon, and pea-green, busy piling vegetables into a light cart, painted with vine wreaths and souls in the flames of purgatory. A little further, at the door of the white, arcaded farmhouse, with its sundial and vine trellis, the jolly little priest was buckling the harness of his wonderful donkey, while one of the girls, mounted on a chair, was placing a fresh wreath of berries and a fresh dripping nosegay before the little faded Madonna shrine. When they saw me, they all cried out and came eagerly to meet me.

‘Well!’ asked the priest, ‘did you see any ghosts?’

‘Did you do the devil’s picture?’ laughed the girl.

I shook my head with a forced smile.

‘Why!’ exclaimed the lad, ‘the Signore has hurt his forehead. How could that have happened?’

‘The lamp went out and I stumbled against a sharp corner,’ I answered hastily.

They noticed that I seemed pale and ill, and attributed it to my fall. One of the women ran into the house and returned with a tiny, bulb-shaped glass bottle, filled with some greenish fluid.

‘Rub some of this into the cut,’ she directed; ‘this is infallible, it will cure any wound. It is some holy oil more than a hundred years old, left us by our grandmother.’

I shook my head, but obeyed and rubbed some of the queer smelling green stuff on to the cut, without noticing any particularly miraculous effect.

They were going to the fair; when the cart was well stocked, they all mounted on to its benches, till it tilted upwards with the weight; the lad touched the shaggy old horse and off they rattled, waving their hats and handkerchiefs at me. The priest courteously offered me a seat beside him in his gig; I accepted mechanically, and off we went, behind the jingling cart of the peasants, through the muddy lanes, where the wet boughs bent over us, and we brushed the drops off the green hedges. The priest was highly talkative, but I scarcely heard what he said, for my head ached and reeled. I looked back at the deserted villa, a huge dark mass in the shining green fields of hemp and maize, and shuddered.

‘You are unwell,’ said the priest; ‘you must have taken cold in that confounded damp old hole.’

We entered the town, crowded with carts and peasants, passed through the market place, with its grand old buildings all festooned with tin ware and onions and coloured stuffs, and what not; and he set me down at my inn, where the sign of the three pilgrims swings over the door.

‘Good-bye, good-bye!’ a *rivederci!* to our next meeting!’ he cried.

‘A *rivederci!*’ I answered faintly. I felt numb and sick; I paid my bill and sent off my luggage at once. I longed to be out of M—; I knew instinctively that I was on the eve of a bad illness, and my only thought was to reach Venice while I yet could.

I proved right; the day after my arrival at Venice the fever seized me and kept fast hold of me many a week.

‘That’s what comes of remaining in Rome until July!’ cried all my friends, and I let them continue in their opinion.

Winthrop paused, and remained for a moment with his head between his hands; none of us made any remark, for we were at a loss what to say.

‘That air—the one I had heard that night,’ he added after a moment, ‘and its opening words, those on the portrait, “Sei Regina, io Pastor sono”, remained deep in my memory. I took every opportunity of discovering whether such an air really existed; I asked lots of people, and ransacked half a dozen musical archives. I did find an air, even more than one, with those words, which appear to have been set by several composers; but on trying them over at the piano they proved totally different from the one in my mind. The consequence naturally was that, as the impression of the adventure grew fainter, I began to doubt whether it had not been all a delusion, a nightmare phantasm, due to over-excitement and fever, due to the morbid, vague desire for something strange and supernatural. Little by little I settled down in this idea, regarding the whole story as an hallucination. As to the air, I couldn’t explain that, I shuffled it off half unexplained and tried to forget it. But now, on suddenly hearing that very same air from you—on being assured of its existence outside my imagination—the whole scene has returned to me in all its vividness, and I feel compelled to believe. Can I do otherwise? Tell me! Is it reality or fiction? At any rate,’ he added, rising and taking his hat, and trying to speak more lightly, ‘will you forgive my begging you never to let me hear that piece again?’

‘Be assured you shall not,’ answered the Countess, pressing his hand; ‘it makes even me feel a little uncomfortable now; besides, the comparison would be too much to my disadvantage. Ah! my dear Mr Winthrop, do you know, I think I would almost spend a night in the Villa Negri in order to hear a song of Cimarosa’s time sung by a singer of the last century.’

‘I knew you wouldn’t believe a word of it,’ was Winthrop’s only reply.