

La Strega

By Ouida (Louise de la Ramee)

La Strega, the Witch: she had been called so these many years, this old and feeble woman who was gathering simples in a meadow by the side of a stream. She had names, her baptismal name, her family name, and the name of her dead husband; dead so long ago in the days of the Fifty-Eight. But no one ever called her any of these. She was only La Strega. Even her church-name of Pià was never heard. People dreaded her, shunned her, despised her; but they sought her always after dark, when they might not be seen by others. They had faith in her magical and sinister powers. She had charms for disease, for accidents, for warts, for tumors, for snake-bites, for many other things; but what she was most famous for in the neighborhood were her imprecations and her love-charms.

When she cursed any one under a full moon it made the blood of the boldest run cold to hear her, and when she gave a lover a bean, or a berry, which she had charmed, he was sure to find favor in the sight of one who had been adamant to his prayers.

So all the hillside folks believed, and she was horrible to them; but she was honored by them, as such supernatural powers are always loathed, yet revered, in lonely places where superstition is rooted in the soil like the mandrake.

Within a stone's-throw of her a girl was lying by the edge of the stream, face downwards, among the blue bugle and ragged-robin, an empty water-barrel and a copper scoop beside her.

She was lying face downward, resting on her elbows, her hands twisted in her rich auburn hair. "To get him back! To get him back, I would give my soul to hell!" she muttered, as she twisted like a snake which has been struck a brutal blow across the spine.

She was the laughing-stock of the countryside, a few scattered farms lying hidden among woods on a hillside in the Garfagnana. She was the beauty of the district; she was proud, wilful, dominant, amorous, and she had been forsaken for another woman.

Publicly forsaken! All the world, her little world of half a hundred souls who came together from their scattered homesteads at the small church on holy-days and feast-days, knew it, for every one had known that Avellino Conti was her *damo* in the fullest, sweetest, meaning of that word.

She did not see the old woman gathering simples near; but the old woman saw her, and heard her also. Her despair was so visible, her anguish so absorbed her, that Pià, who never spoke to a human creature by daylight, ventured to draw near.

"What is the matter, my handsome wench?" she ventured to ask.

The girl looked up, her face convulsed with grief and passion. She recognized La Strega. A shudder of disgust and fear ran through her; it was as if the Evil One she had invoked had lost not a moment in replying to her. But her desperation was stronger in her than her terror.

"Give him back to me, and take my soul!" she muttered.

She clutched her hair savagely with both hands; she bit furiously at the stems of the grasses with her white, even teeth; her eyes were dry and blazed with lurid pain. No one was willing to be seen speaking with the evil woman by daylight. Whoever sought her counsels went to her, but after nightfall. But Fedalma was in that delirium of distress and passion which makes the mind it ravages dull and insensible of all except itself. She stared through blinding tears at the Strega.

"Give me back my love, and take my soul!" she repeated.

“Come to my house to-night, and we will see,” said Pià. “Tell no one aught. Bring four white pieces with you. Come an hour after moonrise.”

Fedalma was the daughter of a charcoal-burner, known in the country as Febo Nero (Black Phœbus); she had lived all her life in the chestnut woods, under the great trees, amongst the grass and the ling and the broom, seeing only the sheep and the goats and their keepers who came up to the hills of the Garfagnana in summer. Avellino came with them, a fair, lithe, bold youth, with a garment of goat-skins, and a long wand in his hand, and bare feet, and a wallet, and an accordion slung at his back, and a bit of meadow-sweet behind his ear. Their love-tale had been told there, under the big trees in the hot balmy weather, with the bees buzzing in the stillness and the flocks asleep. Neither of them heeded the green, calm, silent nature round them, or the blue sky of day, or the stars throbbing in the dark. All the book of nature, like all other books, was naught to them; they only read each other’s eyes, they only knew the instincts and appetites of their young and ardent lives, and followed them as the flocks followed theirs. But they were happy—unreasoning and but semi-conscious of happiness, also, as the flocks were. All that summer was so good—ah, heavens! so good! She tore up the strong dog’s-foot grasses in handfuls as she thought of it.

Then, with All Saints’ Day, Avellino, with the sheep and the goats, had gone away from the woods down to the plains, as shepherds always do when the first bite of winter nips the still green leaves. And he had not said to her, “Come with me;” he had only said, “Fioriranno le rose!” and laughed, meaning that their loves would flower again like the wild roses in the thickets. The charcoal-burner said to his girl, “Summer love means no marriage;” but he did not distress himself. The wench was a strong, fine, helpful girl; he was better pleased that she should stay in his hut and help carry the logs to the burning. The winter was like the ice-hell of Dante to Fedalma, but she had been sustained by the hope and the promise of spring. “A Pasquà fioriranno le rose,” she said to herself, and held her fast-beating, passionate heart in such patience as she could, working hard at the charcoal, because thus she tired herself and got a dull, heavy sleep, in which her throbbing pulses were for a while still.

With Easter the chestnuts and the early roses also did blossom, and the flocks came up the steep, winding paths into the higher woods, and Avellino came with them. But in passing he saw the white-faced girl Mercede, who sat spinning at the lattice of the old farmhouse by the weir, and had seen how white her throat was where the coral circled it. For this, therefore, Fedalma writhed like a bruised snake where she lay on the earth, and bit the tough stems of the dog-grass.

The old woman said nothing more, but went on plucking herbs when she found any which were edible, and the girl shook herself with a dreary yet passionate gesture, and began to fill her water-barrel at the stream under the flags. When it was full she raised it on to her head and strode through the grass with bare, wet feet, heedless of asp or adder.

Once Pià smiled to herself as she bent over the herbs she was uprooting. Those silly wenches, breaking their hearts over mannerless rouges who are not worth the yellow bread they break, and who care more for a penn’orth of drink than for all the girls in creation. She knew that Avellino was a ruddy, well-built, blue-eyed lad, strong as a young steer, and as rough. There was no marriage-ring in his pocket; in his veins there was nothing but riot and license. What could that young fool hope for? When the sheep have cropped the sweetness off a patch of pasture they move on elsewhere, do they not? It is nature, thought Pià, who had once, long before, dwelt in towns and seen other suns than this which rose so late and set so early beyond these hills. She was content; she had caught a simpleton.

She had no magic except her cunning and her superior intelligence, but these sufficed to bring such credulous fools to supply her larder, and of all fools she liked best the amorous ones.

"I might have said five white pieces," she thought regretfully; "the girl would have procured them somehow or other. Five pieces make a lira."

With moonrise that white night Fedalma kept her tryst. The moon was in its third quarter and rose late, and she left the house stealthily by one of its unglazed windows, for fear her father should awake and ask what she was about, stirring at that hour; and ran with beating heart and nervous terror across the two miles of wild country which separated her hut from that of the witch.

"Here are the white pieces," she said, when the old woman opened to her.

Pià took them with a ravenous movement in her wrinkled, bony hand.

"What shall I do? What shall I do?" asked the girl, with feverish impatience.

They stood face to face on the floor of beaten mud; the elder small and frail and bent, the younger tall and straight and full of color, health, and force; but the strong was the suppliant and the weak was the disposer of fate.

A tallow wick burned in a little flat tin pan of oil and shed a fitful light on the dark brows, the tempestuous eyes, the parted, panting lips of the girl as he muttered, "What shall I do? What shall I do?"

She was ready to do anything, to give herself away to any unnameable horror, as she had given her white pieces into that hungry hand. She was horribly afraid; a nameless terror clutched at her heart and made it stand still; she believed that the place she stood in, the air she breathed here, the fingers which clutched her coins, were all bewitched, bedevilled, unspeakable in their powers of evil. But passion was stronger in her than fear.

"Tut, tut, young one; not so fast!" said Pià, with the ghost of a smile on her face. "What you would have me do will take time—"

"Time!"

Time! She had thought that some familiar, some imp, or some angel, would dart down that moonbeam which fell across the floor, and take his orders and herself straightway to where the faithless lover slept on his bed of leaves amidst his flock. Time! Was not love a lightning, like that white fire in storm which came none knew whence, and lit up all the woods, and blinded some, and perhaps slew some, and left others alone—none knew why, except that it was the wish and the whim of that messenger of heaven?

"Time? Why time?" she repeated. "He only lived by my breath such a little while ago!"

"You young fool!" thought wise Pià; but, aloud, she said, in a whisper, "Child, he has been bewitched. That is easy to see. You are fine and fair as a peach-bough in blossom, but to him now you seem as a mere rank thistle-head, for the lad is bewitched."

"By Mercede?"

"By no other."

"If I killed her?"

"That would be of no use. The spell would remain. These ills lie deeper than young things like you can dream. Tell me all—of you, of him, of her. Nay, have no fear. What is unseen about us shall not hurt you. They are under my yoke."

Fedalma shuddered; her eyes glanced, like a nervous, hunted animal's, here and there around her, from the cobweb-hung walls to the smoke-begrimed roof of the hut, from the barred wooden door to the hole in the roof through which the moonlight shone down and glistened on the white hair of the Strega as it strayed from under her coif. What demons might not be listening? What

surety had she that the old one could keep them harmless and invisible? There was a fagot of knotted and crooked sticks in one corner; to her excited fancy they were imps who grinned at her and waited—

“Speak, or get you gone,” said Pià, with authority; for she knew nothing, not even the name of the faithless lover, and she needed to know to act with any skill.

“This, then—oh, this!” said Fedalma in desperation. “Listen! My heart is within me as a charred coal, though my breast is all flame and a thousand snakes tear at my flesh. He lived but through me. We were as two cherries on one stalk. Brook-water was as wine when we drank it from each other’s lips. The sheep alone knew. They were kind. Not one of them bleated when we met in their fold in the dark, soft nights. A few months ago it was still the same with us. Oh, the blessed hours, the hot smell of the flock, the scent of the mint and the thyme—I shall have them in my nostrils for ever, when I am wretched and old like you! And now, and now it is no more—it is like the cut grass; all is over; he has no eyes but for her; it is for her that the door of the fold opens.

She screamed aloud, again and again, with her torture, as though she were a lamb of the fold brought to slaughter. Then she broke down into a tempest of sobs.

“Be quiet, and tell me more,” said the Strega. It was many moments before Fedalma even heard her; many more before she was calm enough to answer. When she could be brought to speak with any degree of composure, the old woman extracted from her all her brief history, with the skill of a superior intelligence turning a poorer one inside-out for its pleasure. She learned, too, which was what most mattered to her, that the girl was very poor, and could not anyhow be made to yield much profit. Still, one never knows; love-sick mortals are like those cripples who will rob, or steal, or do anything, under the sun to get money enough to hang up a garland or place a candle before their patron saint, who can make, if he will, the lame walk and the blind see. Passion? What was it but the most violent of all fevers? Pià had not forgotten. She, too, long, long before, had known what it was to have the heart turn to a cold cinder in a breast still full of flame. She heard in silence, her small, keen eyes under their wrinkled lids gleaming shrewdly in the fitful light from the saucer of oil.

“You have it badly, the eternal evil,” she muttered, with a touch of pity. “Well, well; what I can do I will.”

“What can you do?”

“’Tis not for the like of you to know. Those who serve me treat ill the rash and the curious, as serves such irreverent fools aright. Wear this between your breasts. Turn it every night once, twice, thrice, and say, ‘Powers, help me! Powers, help me! Powers, help me!’ as you turn it. Come again in a week and bring four pieces, some onions, and a pullet whose neck has been wrung, not cut.”

She took out of a packet worn under her skirt a black bean, and muttered over it, and spat on it, and gave it to Fedalma, whose young, strong hand shook like a leaf in a wind as she took it.

“I have no money,” she said woefully. “The onions I can get, and the pullet I will try and get; but the money—”

“Without the money do not come back,” said the elder woman, sharply. “If you come back without it, there is one who will leave the mark of his talons upon you; ay, and upon your face, too—your handsome face that is like a Pentecost rose.”

The girl shuddered, and cowered like a beaten animal.

“I will do what I can, mother,” she said humbly. “Is there hope? Will there be hope?”

“Ay, like enough, if you don’t anger the ones unseen. Get you gone. Your father may miss you, and will be down in another hour.”

Fedalma undid the barred door, trembling, and, once beyond its threshold, fled like a hunted hare over the turf, bearing in her breast, between her skin and her stays, the magical black bean, which seemed to her to lacerate her flesh with a thousand thorns. A thing of sorcery, a gift of the Strega—a devil, for aught she knew, shut up in that shape! What would her poor dead mother have said, who had been such a pious soul? What would the Madonna do to her for taking part with the wicked thus?

But she kept the bean in her bosom nevertheless, and went on through the woods as fast as the darkness and roughness of their paths permitted her. She had committed more than a sin; but she was ready to do worse still, only to get him back, the thankless, worthless, fickle, cruel knave!

The old woman Pià, left alone in her hut, barred her door again, put the white pieces in a bag which she kept under a stone on the hearth, ate a sorry meal of endive and hard crusts which bruised and picked her toothless gums, blew out the little light, and stretched herself on her bed of dried leaves and heather.

“Poor wench!” she thought; “she has a look of my Isola.”

It was many years since her daughter Isola had been upon the earth, many, many years, but she lived in memory to Pià; in that shrivelled, hard old heart, closed to all except the love of gain and the cunning of her trade, there was one small place still open to a tenderer thought. For sake of the girl’s likeness to the long-buried Isola, she said to herself that she would try and help this poor forsaken fool. She would rob her, because that was habit and wisdom, but she would help her if possible—not with her black arts, of which the Strega knew better than any one else the worthlessness, but with such skill as age and experience can give.

“But save me, saints in glory!” she thought, when she lay on the heather and stared up at the stars throbbing beyond the square hole in the roof. “’Twere easier to pull down those twinklers from the sky than to turn back a man’s fancy when it has had its course and fled away. A passion spent is dead as a rotting rat.”

There are many things you can mould in this world, but not a man’s amorous fancy. She knew Avellino by look and repute: a fine fellow to the sight, but nothing more; ruddy, and with bold, bright, insolent eyes, which challenged women to resist him if they dare: a youth who spoiled a girl’s life as indifferently as he wrung a bird’s neck or threw down on the wayside a lamb too young to walk, too puny to be worth the trouble of carrying.

One day in the same week the flock of Avellino was resting at noon, when the Strega came near, timidly, lamely, with an old hoe in her hand and an old creel on her back.

“May I pick up a little dung?” she said humbly.

Avellino was ill-pleased, but he was afraid to refuse her—she was the Strega. She began to rake up the damp, black droppings of the sheep. He did not prevent her. She could call down blindness on him or murrain on the sheep, he thought. It was never well to cross such people. She raked up a few of the black balls, then stopped to breathe.

“’Tis ill to be old, young man,” she said. “You’ll know that one day, if you live, comely and strong as you be now.”

Avellino laughed.

“’Tis far off me,” he said carelessly; then wondered in affright, could she, maybe, smite him into old age with a curse? “Take a snack of cheese, mother,” he said, with a tremor in his voice, as he cut off a slice of the ricotto, made from the curds of the milk of his ewes. She took it with humble thanks, and sat down on the roots of a tree and pulled a crust from her pocket.

“’Tis a heart as good as your handsome face that you have, my lad,” she said, with fervent blessings.

Avellino watched her with apprehension. She looked very old and poor and feeble; but people said she had such strength for evil that, the paler and frailer and more crooked she grew, the stronger and the wickeder grew her powers for mischief. He was horribly frightened, and the color left his cheeks; but he was fascinated; if he pleased her, propitiated her, might she not have good in her gifts as well, or, at least, only evil for others? Her renown was great on this hillside, though the hatred and terror of her were still greater. He gazed at her agape. Such a little, thin, pale, withered creature—was it possible that she had troops of devils and imps under her orders? He would have driven his flocks away, but he had three ewes in labor and no one with him.

“You make many a young heart ache for you, you rogue,” said Pià, munching the edge of the cheese.

Avellino smiled: the smile of the conquering booby, his vanity, for a moment, being superior to his fear.

“They’re mostly fools,” he said, with ungallant scorn, as he kicked a wether in the groin.

“That is a hard word, boy.”

“’Tis a true word. Say, all fools, and ’twill be truer.”

He grinned, pleased with his own wit and his own courage in exchanging speech with the Strega.

“Poor fools, indeed,” thought Pià, “to let the fresh dews of their dawn be drunk up by the fierce sun of his coarse wooing!”

But, aloud, she flattered him deftly and turned him inside-out, as was her habit. There was little to find or to note, only a handsome lout’s triumphal conceit and unkind contempt for what he had won and done with, and the obstinate bent of a new fancy growing on the ashes of those burned-out and cold. Mercede, she learned, was as yet obdurate, had not yet come to the sheep-fold at nightfall, as that impassioned simpleton, Fedalma, had done to her cost. Mercede was wise, coy, willing and not willing, aiming at the nuptial ring and the priestly blessing, things which for the errant shepherd had no savor.

“If I wed her, you know, I shall leave her,” he said candidly; “leave her when the chestnut-leaves fall, as sure as November will come round. There are others down in the vales, on the plains in the towns.”

And he grinned again and bit a spike of grass, proud of his victories as a conquering male pigeon when it struts to and fro with ruff erect and breast swollen with triumph.

“Mercede has brothers,” said Pià, significantly. “They’d follow you. Men are beaten or stabbed on the plains as easily as on the hills.”

“A fig for their sticks and stilettos!” said Avellino, stoutly. “I’m a match for all three.”

“In strength, ay, ay,” said Pià. “But no one’s a match for a shot fired from behind a tree on a dark night. Mercede is like to cost you dear, my crowing cockerel.”

Avellino was ill-pleased; he was used to courtships short and fierce and sweet and soon over; the woman paid for the pleasure of it; that was how things should be, in his opinion.

“You could lay a spell on them, mother?” he said, after a time, in a tentative, frightened murmur.

“I can do many things,” replied the Strega, darkly.

“You could make their knives bend like steel and their sticks like touchwood,” said Avellino, recalling histories he had heard of her incantations. “’Twould be a good deed, for what call have they to come between their sister and me?”

Pià nodded gravely.

“They will come between.” After a pause, she added, “They are three to one.”

“The foul fiend take them!” said Avellino, and then was aghast at what he had said, for might she not resent and revenge the mention of her master?

“He will take you, more like,” said Pià, with sombre emphasis.

Avellino felt his veins grow as cold as though he were swimming in a winter flood to save his drowning flock.

“Speak him fair for me, speak him fair, mother,” he said, with terror; “you see him every sixth night, they say.” His teeth chattered as he spoke; he put his hand in the pocket of his goat-skin breeches; he had a few coppers there only; he held them out shyly.

Pià clutched them; habit was strong in her, and her ways could not change.

“’Tis nothing,” she said, as she counted them. “Get a crown,”

“A crown!” he repeated, with a gasp.

“Ay, a crown.”

“I will make you pay through your nose, you cur!” she thought. “And I will drive you to the church-altar, but not with Mercede.”

Avellino was dumb with conflicting emotions, his dread of the devil and his sense of his own impotency struggling with his poverty. He was very poor; he had scarcely anything he could call his own except an old lute and his pipe. The flock was not his, and the wage he had as shepherd was very small.

“A crown! a crown!” he muttered—the broad silver pieces of an earlier and more solid time still circulate in remote places.

“No less. Do as you like, my pretty lad,” said Pià, “and the Powers of Darkness will strengthen the hands of Mercede’s brothers.”

“I will try, mother; I will try,” muttered Avellino. The brothers of Mercede were a very real and fleshly peril, but the ghostly terrors of the Unseen were more horrible to him, for of what use against the latter would be his stout sinews and his slim knife?

Pià took up her creel with the sheeps’ droppings.

“When shall I see you again, mother?” he said timidly. “If you would like another little snack of cheese—”

“I will be at the ford where you water your sheep the day after to-morrow, at sunset,” said Pià; and the cheese went into her pocket with the bronze pieces. He would bring the silver crown, she was sure of that. Pià was pleased with her machinations as she went home over the heather-clad slopes. She thought she held her fish at the end of her line. She meant to play on his fears and his foibles until she should detach him from his new passion and drag him back to his earlier fealty. She meant to make him atone to Fedalma, whom she had not named because she took more devious and secretive paths to reach her goal, and did not show what was in her brain, lying close hid there like a hare in the heather. Meantime there was no reason why she should not wring what she could out of this heartless handsome lad.

The next night Fedalma appeared. She was trembling, and her gown was rent in several places, and her arms were scratched and bruised and bleeding.

“’Twas a thorn brake I fell into,” she said hurriedly. But that was not the truth. She had been to a hen-roost miles off and had stolen a plump pullet from its perch and wrung its neck. But in getting back over the fence she had been attacked by a watch-dog belonging to the place, and had hurt herself on the rough wood of the fence as well. But of this she said nothing, and Pià asked

no questions, but took the fowl, with the white pieces and the roots, as the saints in the churches take votive offerings, in silence.

“You have nothing to tell me?” said the girl in breathless anxiety.

“It works, it works,” said the Strega vaguely.

“You have seen him?”

“No. Why should I see him, you foolish thing? ‘Tis not with mortal ways that the Unseen Powers move and conquer.”

Fedalma shuddered.

“The stars are in your favor,” continued Pià. “I looked in the well at dead of night twenty-four hours ago. Your star shone clear; his and hers were obscured.”

“But were they *together*?” screamed the girl. In her ignorant, rustic soul something of the imperious passion of Francesca da Rimini stirred. Together even in torture. What joy!

“They were apart,” said the old woman.

A wave of ecstasy swept over Fedalma’s stormy heart, and her face burned and lightened with rapture. She dropped down on the mud floor of the hut and kissed the Strega’s feet, bound in rags and cased in dust.

“What shall I render you?” she cried, with sobs of delight.

Pià was touched, and bade her get up.

“The lad cannot be worth all that,” she said, not unkindly. “You are giving a vat of good wine for a pail of muddy water. Think twice. This youth has tired of you. Have pride—”

Fedalma shook her head. Reason said nothing to her. No argument could touch her. She was blind and deaf to everything except her passion.

“I shall be proud when he wears my clematis-flower behind his ear once more!” she cried. “I shall be proud when on his lute he sings again to his sheep in my name! I shall be proud when once again he says, ‘Dove of my soul, life of my life!’ to me—to me, and Mercede sits alone, counting the days that are dead! I shall be proud then—then only. Oh, mother! you are old, so old; but are you so old indeed that you have wholly forgotten your youth?”

“You are mad, poor wench,” said Pià; but though her words were harsh, her voice was not so. Ah, yes! The divine delirium! She remembered it. Its fires burned on the horizon of her memory across the black, dim waste of fifty years and more. And this girl was like Isola, Isola who had died from a stab between the shoulder-blades given her by her lover, a soldier from the Basilicata, one feast-day, when he was hot with wine.

“Men are all alike,” she muttered. “They are not worth a thought. If only we knew that whilst it was time! Get up, child; get up. I tell you that the stars favor you. He will be yours again, but it will take time. It will take time, and

Fedalma did not rise; she crouched upon the floor; her eyes shone and flashed in the dark; the wick in the oil had flickered and gone out slowly.

“You will be true to me, mother?” she muttered. “You will be true, for pity’s sake?”

“I will do all I can,” said Pià, and she was sincere. “I have others beside you to think of. There is Black Maria, who is afraid of her delivery; and there is Giana Leonilda, whose lame child must be charmed straighter; and there is the sick cow of Annibale to be cured; but I will do more for you than for any. Does the amulet I gave you turn of itself sometimes?”

“I don’t know,” answered the girl in a frightened voice. “Yes, I think so. Is that a good sign?”

“Surely. As it turns so will your lad turn to you in his dreams, and from dreaming to doing ‘tis but a step. Go away now, child, and come back in three days. Bring what you can. I will pray the Powers to be content.”

“I have nothing. Father has nothing. I had to steal the pullet—”

“Well, well; bring what you can.”

That was as much generosity in the ways of her life as the avarice of her habits could reach. She let the girl go without exacting from her any especial fee, the girl who had Isola's eyes and Isola's cheeks like apricots.

She pulled Fedalma up off the floor and shoved her to the door; she herself was so little and so fleshless and so aged, but she had a strength of steel in her wrists. She had heard a tap at the wooden shutter of the aperture which served as a window. She expected Annibale to come to her about his cow, and she never chose that two of her clients should meet. She had the charm for the cow ready—a little bit of wood with some signs burned on it with a red-hot skewer and some powdered mandrake root tied to it, wrapped in a small bag. Annibale was to pay well for this.

“I will make him go to church with her,” she thought when she was alone, and the man Annibale had gone away carrying his charm with reverence and fear, and warned to tie it round the cow's neck when the moon first showed herself, and as he did so to say, “Guai, guai, guai, a chi me fa patai!” a rough rhyme which he went saying to himself for fear he should forget it all the four miles over the hills which parted his homestead from the Strega's hut; it was to be tied on with hemp; tied on with anything else but hemp the spell would be broken.

“I will make him go to church with her,” thought Pià again, as she looked at the pullet. It was a fat, fine bird; its poor head hung down by its broken neck; it was scarcely cold. She did not dream of eating it; she had never eaten such a thing in her life. She could get a couple of lire or a lira and a half for it from the wife of a forest-guard who was marrying a daughter that week and would be making feast. Something more perhaps even that woman would give, for she had come to the Strega not long before to get a charm, and was afraid her husband should know it, since he held that all doings with the devil or the devil's agents should take whoever played with such hell-fire straight down into the fire itself. She would make the shepherd lad atone to Fedalma; the girl was worth a score such as he. Fedalma would be wretched perhaps; she would have a hard life and a faithless spouse; she would bear children unpitied, more untended than the ewes; she would tramp along the roads autumn and spring, to and fro, from hill to plain and plain to hill, with the flocks; she would have to pasture them and water them and fold them, for Avellino would surely put all his toil on her shoulders. She would be miserable, but, then, she would have had her own way and wish, and won her own man, and what can a woman hope for more?

So she was true to her word for Fedalma's sake, and went at sunset two days later to the ford. The ford was where a mountain-stream coming down through the woods became in summer-time, at a level place, quiet enough and shallow enough for sheep to drink there without danger from the impetuosity of the water. In autumn and winter and early spring it was in flood and drowned man or beast at its pleasure; but now, when midsummer was past, it was shallow, and the flock drank fearlessly.

Pià followed the course of the stream through the myrtles and oleanders which fringed it, and saw the place where, broad and shallow and interspersed with dry patches of sand and stone, the stream was quiet. The flock was there, slaking its thirst, and the shepherd was sitting, swinging his legs, above his sheep on a fallen tree. The light was warm on the water and the hills were deep in color as the old woman took the crown from Avellino, whose fingers released it unwillingly and whose eyes gleamed with suspicion and curiosity and a dim, angry sense that he was being duped. He, like Fedalma, had stolen the offering to the Unseen Powers; he had stolen it out of his employer's canvas bag, of which he knew the hiding-place; a fine, broad, sparkling

silver scudo, which had been for years secreted with other pieces of the good old Ducal times. And having run the risk and done the sin for her, he had taken one for himself also.

“What will you do for it, mother?” he muttered.

“You want a spell laid on your Mercede’s brothers?”

“Ay, any you like that will make them blind or keep them harmless!”

Pià nodded.

“They shall be limp as linen in the water,” she said mysteriously. “They shall be sightless as the pups born yesterday, as the worm that tunnels the earth. Never fear, lad; they shall kiss you on both cheeks if you wish.”

“No, no,” said the youth, uneasily. “If they let me alone ‘twill be enough. Shut their eyes; that is best.”

He was afraid of those three men.

“Of Mercede you are sure?”

“Whew!” said Avellino, tossing his head back saucily and snapping his fingers in the air.

“What is it you see in her so fine? That wench of Febo’s that you’ve broken the heart of is twice as good to look at as such a little flimsy thing.”

Avellino’s smile broadened. He had few words at command, but his face was very eloquent. He snapped his fingers in the air again.

“She’s the stone of an eaten peach,” he said, with much contempt.

“You beast!” thought Pià; and if she had really possessed the powers she assumed, she would have had him flung into the deep pool which the stream made amongst the rocks below—a pool deep as a grave even in summer heats.

“Say, rather, she’s the young peach-tree itself. She’d bear fine fruit if the sun reached her.”

Avellino scowled and lit his pipe.

“I didn’t give you the crown to talk of that fool.”

“Take your crown,” said Pià, “and deal with Mercede’s brothers on a dark night, unhelped, as best you may.”

She threw the crown down between them. It cut her to the heart to risk its loss; but she knew the craven temper of the lad—there was not much fear of losing it.

He was instantly alarmed, remembered that she was not the feeble crone she looked, sat sheepish on the tree-stump for a moment, doubting, fearing, hesitating, longing to pick up the silver piece, fearing his foes and the devil. Then he said entreatingly—

“I did but jest. Nay, I know ’tis bad to joke with wise women like you. Take the crown and keep it, good mother. I meant no affront. Take it, take it; and keep them off me, the men and the devils both.”

He picked up the scudo and tendered it to her timidly.

She took it with an air of condescension and reluctance.

“’Tis not me you offend,” she said sternly. “’Tis all those around you in the air, who can cleave your tongue in twain, make your eyes balls of blood, palsy your limbs, and cause your teeth to fall out, if they choose.”

His ruddy skin grew white. He believed her. He fancied his sight was failing him; he felt his teeth with his hand.

“Respect that of which you cannot judge,” said Pià, sternly. “Be humble as you are daft.”

He hung his head, abashed, like a chidden child. This little, gray, shrivelled woman was invested with all the majesty of the unutterable and inconceivable terrors which were associated with her.

What a small thing was a bit of the root of the meadow-coltsfoot, and yet it could kill a sheep in three minutes; he knew it, for he had seen it do so. This dreadful little old creature was, amongst men and women, what the colts-foot was amongst other grasses. He was helpless before her as the sheep under the poison. If she left him his life and took his good looks, what would life be to him?—he who was as vain of his curly locks and his ruddy cheeks and his lusty limbs as was of hers any village beauty who stuck gold pins in her hair and carnations in her bodice as he passed under her window or by her threshold as he went through hamlet and township in April and November. Often and often when he was watering the flock did he lean down and look, like Narcissus, at his own image in the water between the flags. His beauty was the May-fly with which he won his fish.

“Don’t disfigure me, don’t deform me!” he muttered in terror. “I will get you more of those pieces if you will only make them leave me alone!”

“It is not alone silver pieces that they will have.”

“What then?”

His voice and his face were scared. If she wanted gold, he could not get it. There was no gold in the canvas bag, nor anywhere in the province that he knew. He had heard of gold, but he had never seen it.

“They will have obedience,” said Pià.

Obedience!

The priests talked of obedience, but who gave it them? Were the unclean spirits stronger than the saints? Yes, no doubt; the coltsfoot was stronger than the meadow grasses, stronger, a vast deal stronger, than the dews which came down from heaven. Then he remembered horrible stories told, as lads and lasses sat stripping the maize and shelling the walnuts round the brazier on farmhouse hearths, of gruesome errands ordered by the evil ones, of midnight rides behind witches, of commands to cut out living hearts from cradled children or tear fangs from venomous wood-snakes. What use was it having stolen the crown if he got no more in return than this, and became the slave of the Strega? He struggled to say this, to free himself, to laugh at the old crone, and tell her to go to her master, the devil; but the words died in his throat, his tongue clave to the roof of his mouth. Fear paralyzed him.

“I can spend no more time with you,” said Pià, sternly. “Look to yourself, and don’t blame me when you lie gasping in a thicket with the blood gurgling out of you where Mercede’s brothers shall have let daylight into your belly.”

Then she turned her back on him and went, as it seemed to him, with incredible swiftness through the bushes that grew by the line of the water.

“Stop, mother, stop!” he said with a gasp, squeezing his throat with his hand to push his voice out of it.

But Pià would not stop. She knew how to deal with male creatures.

Of course, he could have overtaken her with a stride or two; of course, he could have clutched and killed her, if he had wished, in a moment—that is, he could have done so if she had been an ordinary woman, and if the virus of terror had not been corroding his veins. As it was, he stood motionless, as if rooted to the soil. She knew that he would come and implore her aid that night or the next. She did not even look back, but hurried on, her black shawl over her head, the gnats stinging her naked feet. She was sure that she held the rogue fast. She would drive him through his terrors to marry Fedalma. The broken vase should be mended; if in the future it would only hold thistle-seeds and thorns, she could not help that. Who breaks pays. It is a fair saying, but seldom a true one. She meant to make it true in this instance.

She took his crown as she took the girl's pullet, but she was loyal in her double-faced, secretive way to them both. When Fedalma came on the next evening to her, she said mysteriously—

“All goes well. The Unseen favor you.”

The girl quivered with rapture.

“They will make Mercede unlovely and undesirable in his sight. More I do not know yet,” said Pià. “That is much, eh?”

“Ay, indeed!”

Fedalma laughed and sobbed in the hysteria of a passionate hope.

“The bean turned of itself three times last night,” she murmured under her breath.

“Surely,” said Pià, with the calmness of one to whom such miracles in nature are familiar.

“I am so frightened when it moves,” said the girl, still laughing and weeping; “I can hardly hold myself from plucking it off me. I feel such terror of it; it pricks sometimes, and one knows 'tis alive—more than alive.”

“Surely,” said Pià, nodding her head with significance. “Mind you don't ever anger it. 'Twould burn your reed roof over your head.”

Fedalma shuddered. It requires some courage to keep what you firmly believe to be the devil between your skin and your shift.

“But they do meet still?” she said, with jealousy and misgiving. “I am sure 'twas they I saw down by the cane-brake by Silvio's mill. I was far off, but I am sure.”

“You mistake,” said Pià. “The spirits who are against you make you see those false visions. Believe naught that you see or hear; only believe what I tell you.”

Fedalma was only too willing to doubt the evidence of her own senses in such a matter. She went humbly and happily away, borne up by the wings of faith and of hope, leaving four more white pieces and some fresh onions with the Strega; how she had got them Pià did not ask.

She was on her bed for the night, for she was tired and footsore from the long walk to the ford, when she heard a scratch at the door.

“Who's there?” she asked.

“Avellino,” said the young shepherd's voice. Pià got up; she never undressed from one year's end to the other. She only undid her black shawl and hung it on a nail for the night. After satisfying herself that it was really Avellino, she let him enter, and eagerly eyed what he had brought. He had brought a lamb. It had died of disease and cost him nothing. He had cut its throat and skinned it.

Pià smelt it and guessed its end.

“'Tis carrion,” she said, with a shrewd smile.

“Thank you for naught. I have a mind to send your flock the foot-rot.”

“She is a witch indeed!” thought her visitor. Who else could have known the creature's end when he had cut its throat and skinned it?

He swore that it had been sucking its dam when he had killed it.

“You are a fool to lie to me,” said Pià. Nevertheless she took the poor little carcass and hung it up beside her black shawl.

“What do you come here for?” she said sternly. “I have done with you. You were down by Silvio's mill last eve with your new wench. Do you think nobody has eyes?”

“We were in the canes where they're so thick and tall,” stammered the youth, sorely disquieted.

“They may be thick and tall. They are not so thick and not so tall that steel and shot would not pierce them.”

Avellino trembled like a leaf.

“How d’ you know, mother?”

“There is naught I do not know,” said Pià, darkly. “What is proof against shot and steel cannot hold against me—or against those I serve,” she added in a tone which chilled his blood to ice.

He left her presence more certain than ever that she could dispose of him here and hereafter as she chose. He had been for an instant sorely moved to strangle her and put her body under her own hearthstone, but he had not courage. That small wizen face of hers, looking smaller than ever and more than ever wizen with the wisps of her white hair uncovered, was so plainly the face of one not human and not mortal. She had told him he must obey or perish of murrain with his whole flock. And obey in what? In nothing less than in marriage with the girl he had forsaken. All the good cheese and the silver crown and the dead lamb thrown away only to hear such an order from the foul fiends as this! He groaned aloud as he went through the heather. He knew that sooner or later he would have to do what the Powers of Evil told him.

The magic which Pià did exercise was the potency of suggestion; she knew nothing of the meaning of her gift, but she had an almost illimitable power over these uninstructed minds, so dim, so timorous, so credulous. She steered them as the fisherman of the lagoon steers his rowing-boat, netting what he will. Her life had been for more years than she could count lonely and miserable; but two things in it were dear to her: the pot full of bronze and white money, of which nobody divined the existence, and her arbitrary exercise of her power over others. He was a fool; and Pià, who was a clever if unlettered woman, had no pity for fools. He was a selfish brute, too; and she had suffered from just such a fair-faced rascal in her own early years—years which across the gulf of half a century could still stretch out their sting and touch her with many sharp pains.

Three weeks passed, and turn by turn she saw her young people, and terrified the one and consoled the other, and moulded and shaped their thoughts to her liking, and got, now from the one now from the other, such offerings as by sacrifice or theft they could bring to her: poor presents, indeed, but to her precious. The girl grew more impatient as she grew more sanguine; the youth became more docile as he became more cowed.

The fruit was growing ripe for the plucking, she thought; she must not, she knew, dawdle on too long; their passions were lighted tow; they must be fanned or put out without wavering, or the flames might run amuck through fresh fields over which she would have no control.

So one night when the girl came to her hut she said to her—

“Child, you wish for a bed of thorns because you think it a bed of roses. Well, you shall have it and lie on it. Your fellow will marry you. When once he is wed then you will keep him, if you are not a fool; but I fear you are a fool,” she said to Fedalma.

Fedalma smiled, the defiant, radiant sunrise-smile of assured happiness.

“Oh, mother! dear mother!” she cried in ecstasy, “what can I give you for all you give me? I was a fool; yes. I was afraid of the bean in my breast.”

For Pià had brought Avellino to that point; by threats, by coaxings, by insinuation, by the dominant force of superior intelligence, she had kneaded his foolish and fearsome brains until she had made them ductile to take the shape she wished. He had consented to all she suggested; he went meek, if sullen, on the road along which she drove him. He submitted to what she ordered, and the priest was spoken with—the one who was nearest, who said Mass once a month at a little gray church amongst the pine woods. The religious marriage is still often the only one

that peasants in remote places think needful: the law counts for little with them. The matter was kept hushed and quiet. Pià wished it to be so; she was afraid if the light of day was let in on her work it might be undone; she worked best in the dark, as the bats do. She wanted no one to know her share in the lovers' reconciliation. Mercede might move; her brothers might also; silence and secrecy were safest.

And one night, in her little hut, she brought about their meeting, and pushed the reluctant faithless swain into the arms of the woman who loved him with such unmerited persistence and passion.

"What can I render you, oh you wondrous one?" cried Fedalma to her, when the young shepherd, sorely discomfited and scarcely concealing his discomfiture, had kissed her and promised the church, and gone out into the night air, which was blowing hot and sullen under a sirocco wind. "What shall I render you? how shall I labor for you? Nothing in all my life long that I can do will I refuse."

She meant every word she said; her cheeks were once more like Pentecost roses, her great eyes shone with rapture and pride; he was hers once more; she would get him and keep him from pale Mercede and from every other female thing born of woman; he was responseless as a cold bar of black iron, it was true, but within her was the flame which would make the iron, however stubborn, grow red-hot and bend.

"He'll ill-treat you," muttered Pià, wishing her work undone.

Fedalma laughed with vain, rapturous incredulity.

"Nay, nay, not he," she said proudly. "My arm is strong and my heart is hot; I shall hold him so close he shall never see that another woman is living. I may die on the stony road in childbirth, like one of his ewes, and maybe I shall; but I'll never cease to bless you, mother, for what you've done for me."

"Well, well," said Pià, touched more than she chose to show; "you're a crazy wench, my poor girl, but you've a grateful soul. That's more than be said of most."

The thing was done.

The false wooer was dragged back and tied to his destiny with charmed ropes which he did not dare to break. Fedalma drank the waters of Paradise.

She had nothing of her own with which to show her gratitude. She stole a pair of ducklings at sore risk, and brought them to the Strega, and she walked ten miles to a chapel famous for its miracles, and prayed to the Madonna to pardon her if she had done wrong in stealing the birds, and still more wrong in using black arts.

"Do not be angry with me or with the old one," she said passionately to the Holy Mary in whom she believed. "If the saints would only hear a little quicker we should not turn to the devil."

And then she prayed to have mercy shown to Pià, and prayed that the aged soul might be cleansed and accepted before death; "for if she have helped us with unholy ways, yet she has done a holy thing," she said as she lay prostrate before the shrine, not knowing very clearly what she meant, but striving with all the might of her gratitude to have the witch who had aided her assoiled and pardoned; for happiness did not make her, as it makes many wiser than she, selfish in her joy. The priests would have told her that she committed an inexcusable sin in praying for the soul of a sorceress, for the soul of a daughter and wife of the fiend; that even to breathe such a name in a consecrated place was heresy, blasphemy, damnation eternal.

But she did pray, though she prayed in trembling; for had she not still the enchanted bean in her bosom?

“She has done so much for me, something I must risk for her,” she thought, as she kissed the waxen foot of the Madonna; it was the same thought as when she had stolen the ducks. The — very ignorant know not what they feel nor why they act; they are incapable alike of analysis or synthesis; but sometimes their spontaneous and almost unconscious acts are beautiful.

With her heart beating high in her breast, she went down from the mountain sanctuary to which she had climbed as the day drew near its close. She had to walk ten miles and more back to her father’s cabin in the woods, but the descent was easy. The autumnal weather was radiant, and the whole hillside and the woods below were bathed in golden light. She was so happy, so fearless, she could have kissed the bewitched bean in her bosom!

She sang aloud in her gladness of spirit one of the amorous invocations of the province. Her clear loud notes rang through the solitude; a whitethroat in a pine-tree answered her as she passed.

She was so happy! Her idol might be sullen for awhile, resentful, reluctant; but he would be hers. Surely she would know, as she had said to Pià, how to heat and to bend the iron. He had loved her so ardently only a few months before, it would be strange indeed if she could not fan that flame into fury once more.

“He will be mine—mine—mine!” she sang, as if it were the burden of a ballad, as she went, erect and glorious in the pride of her strength and her triumph, over the fallen fir-needles which strewed the path.

When she entered into the lower woods, the woods of chestnut and beech, it was evening; the little brown owls were flying through the trees. Up above, where the sanctuary stood, the mountains had still the light of the sun, but here on the lower hills it was already almost dark. In the gloom before her father’s hut there was a little group of men. She approached them, unsuspecting, scarcely noting them, full of her own emotions, singing still.

They broke away from each other at sight of her, and stood apart like persons afraid. Her father, Febo Nero, alone ran towards her, gesticulating wildly without a word. Her heart stood still with a prescience of ill.

“What is it?” she asked.

Febo clutched her arm.

“Did you lie when you said you were to wed with your *damo*? Come, say!”

“I am to wed with him,” she answered. “Who dares say not?”

Febo broke into a rude, harsh laugh: he was an unkind man.

“You double fool!” he said savagely. “Was it not enough to let him fool you once? He’s gone, and Mercede of Cecco too; and the sheep left unguarded and unfed, and his master here crazy with rage. And he’s gone to the sea-coast, they say, and he’ll sail for Brazil straight away. Mercede took her dower out of the pitcher under the walnut-tree; she knew where ‘twas kept, and ‘tis gone with her. Ay, you fool—you double and triple fool! I’ve a mind to stone you till you’re dead, as one stones a toad.”

She swept him aside with a gesture superb in its authority, and went to where the employer of Avellino stood, an old, shrewd, weather-beaten man.

“Is it true?” she said in her throat.

“Ay, for certain ‘tis true,” he answered; “and my flock left alone, unwatered, unfed, unwatched—a miracle they’re not stolen. Lord, lass, how you look! You’re better without the scoundrel. Let him go to the Americas, and be damned!”

But she did not pause to hear his rough consolation; she put her head down, as a cow, enraged and bereaved, lowers hers to attack, and tore along the path of the wood in the gloaming, and soon was lost to sight.

The men looked at one another, unkindly diverted, yet vaguely afraid. Febo cursed her with savage heartiness. Swift as the wind, lightning-footed as Nemesis, she rushed through the familiar glades, breaking bracken and bramble in her headlong flight. She never paused, but flew over the rough stones, the long grass, the rivulets, the wild sage and thyme, until she reached the place where the Strega dwelt. It was now quite dark.

She flung herself against the door. Its wooden bar was fastened within, but the wood was old and yielded to her violent impetus. She entered. Pià was on her knees beside the cold hearth counting the money which she kept in a hole under the stones. As she rose, startled at the crash of the door forced open, Fedalma threw herself upon her, clutched the old, wrinkled throat, and crushed it between her hands.

“You deceived me, you spawn of hell!” she screamed, as the old woman writhed in her grasp.

In vain did the Strega struggle to get herself free; the fingers of Fedalma were more cruel than a tiger’s fangs.

“You deceived me!” she hissed again and again.

“No—no—no!” said the old woman, as, in one supreme effort, she wrenched herself free for a moment from that strangling grasp.

“You deceived me!” cried the girl. Her face was black with passion, her lips were drawn back from her clenched teeth: she was mad with agony and rage. She held the throat of the Strega with her left hand alone, and with her right hand plucked from her bosom the black bean.

“Eat your devil and die!” she cried, with a hideous laugh, as she forced the jaws of Pià open, and thrust the bean into her tonsils, down, down, deep down, till it choked the gullet; and with her left hand she meanwhile squeezed harder and harder the muscles of the quivering throat.

In another moment Pià could no longer struggle, and in a few seconds more her face grew livid, then purple, then livid again; she ceased to gasp; she ceased to breathe; her feet kicked the air convulsively for an instant; then she was dead.

With all her might Fedalma raised the body high above her head, shook it as though it were an empty sack, and dashed it on the stones. It fell heavily and never moved. She had her vengeance.