After the Divorce

by Grazia Deledda

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Author: Grazia Deledda

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AFTER THE DIVORCE A ROMANCE

BY GRAZIA DELEDDA

Translated from the Italian BY MARIA HORNOR LANSDALE

And they shall scourge him, and put him to death; ... And they understood none of these things:.... —St. Luke xviii. 33, 34

colophon

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PART I

AFTER THE DIVORCE

CHAPTER I

Nineteen Hundred and Seven. In the "strangers' room" of the Porru house a woman sat crying. Crouched on the floor near the bed, her knees drawn up, her arms resting on her knees, and her forehead on her arms, she wept and sobbed continuously, shaking her head from time to time as though to indicate that there was no more hope, absolutely none at all; while her plump shoulders and straight young back rose and fell in the tightly fitting yellow bodice, like a wave of the sea.

The room was nearly in darkness; there were no windows, but through the open door which gave upon a bricked gallery, a stretch of dull grey sky could be seen, growing momentarily darker; and far, far away, against this dusky background, gleamed the yellow ray of a little, solitary star. From the courtyard below came the shrill chirping of a cricket, and the occasional stamp of horses' hoofs on the stone pavement.

A short, heavy woman, clad in the Nuorese dress, with a large, fat, old-woman face,

appeared in the doorway; she carried a four-branched iron candlestick, in one socket of which burned a wick soaked in oil.

"Giovanna Era," said she in a gruff voice, "what are you about all in the dark? Are you there? What are you doing? I believe you are crying! You must be crazy! Upon my word, that's just what you are—crazy!"

The young woman began to sob convulsively.

"Oh, oh, oh!" said the other, drawing near, and in the tone of one who is deeply shocked and amazed. "I said you were crying. What are you crying for? There's your mother waiting for you downstairs, and you up here, crying like a crazy creature!"

The young woman wept more violently than ever, whereupon the other hung the candlestick on a large nail, gazed vaguely about her, and then began hovering over her disconsolate guest, searching for words wherewith to comfort her; she could only repeat, however: "But, Giovanna, you are crazy, just crazy!"

The "strangers' room"—the name given to that apartment which every Nuorese family, according to immemorial custom, reserves for the use of friends from the country—was large, white, and bare; it had a great wooden bedstead, a table covered with a cotton cloth and adorned with little glass cups and saucers, and a quantity of small pictures hung close to the unpainted wooden ceiling. Bunches of dried grapes and yellow pears hung from the rafters, filling the room with a faint fragrance; and sacks of wool stood about on the floor.

The stout woman, who was the mistress of the house, laid hold of one of these sacks, dragged it to another part of the room, and then back again to where she had found it.

"Now then," said she, panting from her exertion, "do stop. What good does it do? And why should you give up, anyhow? What the devil, my dearie! Suppose the public prosecutor has asked for the galleys, that doesn't mean that the jury are all mad dogs like himself!"

But the other only kept on crying and shaking her head, moaning: "No, no, no!" between her sobs.

"Yes, yes, I tell you," urged the woman. "Get up now, and come to your mother," and, taking hold of her, she forced back her head.

The action revealed a charming countenance; rosy, framed in a thick mass of tumbled black hair; the big dark eyes swollen and glistening with tears, and surmounted by heavy black eyebrows that met in the middle.

"No, no," wailed Giovanna, shaking herself free. "Let me cry over my fate, Aunt Porredda."[1]

"Fate or no fate, you just get up!"

"No, I won't get up! I won't get up! They'll sentence him to thirty years at the very least! Do you hear me? Thirty years! That's what they'll give him!"

"That remains to be seen. And after all, what is thirty years? Why, you carry on like a wildcat!"

The other gave a shrill cry, and tore her hair in an access of wild despair.

"Thirty years! What is thirty years!" she shrieked. "A man's whole lifetime, Aunt Porredda! You don't know what you are talking about, Aunt Porredda! Go away, go away and leave me alone! for the love of Christ, oh, leave me to myself!"

"I'm not going away," said Aunt Porredda. "The idea! In my own house! Get up, you child of the devil! Stop this before you make yourself ill. To-morrow will be time enough to pull your hair out by the roots; your husband isn't in the galleys yet!"

Giovanna dropped her head, and began to cry again in a subdued, hopeless way, heartbreaking to listen to. "Costantino, Costantino," she moaned in the tone of one bewailing the dead, "I shall never see you again, never again! Those mad dogs have seized you and bound you fast, and they will never let you go; and our house will be empty, and the bed cold, and the family scattered. Oh, my beloved! my lamb! you

are dead for this world. May those who have done it die the same death!"

Aunt Porredda, distracted by Giovanna's grief, and unable to think of anything more to say, went out on the gallery, and began calling: "Bachissia Era! come up here; your daughter is losing her mind!"

A step was heard on the outer stair. Aunt Porredda turned back into the room, and behind her appeared a tall, tragic-looking figure all in black. The gaunt, yellow face, shaped like that of some bird of prey, was framed in the folds of a black handkerchief; two brilliant green spots indicated the eyes, deep set, overhung by fierce, heavy brows, and surrounded by livid circles. Her mere presence seemed to exercise a subduing effect upon the daughter.

"Get up!" she said in a harsh voice.

Giovanna arose. She was tall and lithe, though cast in a heavy mould and having enormous hips. Beneath the short, circular petticoat, adorned below the waist with a band of purple, and with a broad, green hem, appeared two little feet shod in elastic gaiters, and the suggestion of a pair of shapely legs.

"What are you worrying these good people for?" demanded the mother. "Have done now; come down to supper, and don't frighten the children, or throw a wet blanket over the happiness of these good people."

The "happiness of these good people" was in allusion to the arrival of the son of the house, a law student, home for the holidays.

Giovanna, recognising that her mother meant to be obeyed, quieted down without more ado. Pulling the woollen kerchief from her head, and thereby disclosing a cap of antique brocade, from whence escaped waves of coal-black hair, she turned towards a basin of water standing on a chair, and began to bathe her face.

The two women looked at one another, and Aunt Porredda, taking her lips between her right thumb and forefinger in sign of silence, noiselessly left the room.

The other, accepting this hint, said nothing more, and when Giovanna had finished bathing, and had set her hair in order, silently led the way down the outer stair.

Night had fallen; warm, still, profound. The solitary yellow star had been followed by a multitude of glittering asterisks, and the Milky Way lay like a scarf of gauze embroidered with silver spangles. The air was heavy with the penetrating odour of new-mown hay.

In the courtyard, the crickets, hidden away in the trelliswork, kept up their shrill chirping; the ruminative horse still stamped with his iron-shod hoofs upon the stones, and from afar floated the melancholy note of a song.

The kitchen opened on the courtyard, as did a ground-floor bedroom sometimes used as a dining-room. Both doors were standing open.

In the kitchen, beside the lighted stove, stood Aunt Porredda engaged in preparing the macaroni for supper. A child, clad in a loose black frock, fair, untidy, and barefooted, was quarrelling with a stout little urchin, fat and florid like his grandmother.

The girl was swearing roundly, naming every devil in turn; while the boy tried to pinch her bare legs.

"Stop it," said Aunt Porredda. "There now, will you leave off, you naughty children?"

"Mamma Porru, she's cursing me; she said: 'Go to the devil who gave you birth.'"

"Minnia! what a way to talk!"

"Well, he stole my purse, the one with the picture of the Pope, that Uncle Paolo brought me——"

"It's not so, I didn't!" shouted the boy. "You'd better not be talking about stealing, Minnia," he added with a meaning look.

The girl became suddenly quiet, as though a spell had been cast over her, but

presently her tormentor, seizing a long stick, tried to hook the curved handle around her legs. Minnia began to cry, and the grandmother faced about, ladle in hand.

"I declare, I'll beat you with this ladle, you wretched children! Just you wait a moment!" she cried, running at them. The children made a dash for the courtyard, and collided violently with Giovanna and her mother.

"What's all this? What's all this?"

"Oh, those children, they'll drive me wild! I believe the devil is in them," said Aunt Porredda from the doorway.

At this moment a slim little figure in black emerged from the main gateway leading into the street, calling excitedly: "They are coming, Grandmother; here they are now!"

"Well, let them come; you would do better, Grazia, to pay some attention to your brother and sister; they have been fighting like two cocks."

Grazia made no reply, but taking the iron candlestick from Aunt Bachissia she blew out the light, and hid it behind a bench in the kitchen, saying in a low voice: "You ought to be ashamed, Grandmother, to have such a looking candlestick, now that Uncle Paolo is here."

"Uncle Paolo! Well, I declare! Do you suppose he was brought up on gold?"

"He has been to Rome."

"To Rome! The idea! They only don't have lights like that there, because they have to buy their oil by the pennyworth. Here, we can use as much oil as we want."

"You must be green if you believe that!" said the girl; then, suddenly catching the sound of her grandfather's and uncle's voices, she flew to meet them, trembling with excitement.

"Good-evening, Giovanna; Aunt Bachissia, how goes it with you?" said the hearty voice of the student. "I? Very well, the Lord be praised! I was sorry to hear of your

misfortune. Never mind, courage! Who knows? The sentence is to-morrow, is it not?"

He led the way into the room where the supper-table was laid, followed by the two women and the children, whom their uncle's presence filled with mixed terror and delight.

He was short and limped slightly, one foot being smaller than the other, and the leg somewhat shorter; this circumstance had earned him the nickname of Dr. Pededdu,[2] a jest which he took in very good part, declaring that it was far better to have one foot smaller than the other, rather than a head smaller than those of other people.

His fresh, round, smiling face, with its little blond moustache, was surmounted by a big, tattered black hat. He proclaimed himself a Socialist. Sitting down on the side of the bed, with both legs swinging, he threw an arm around each staring, open-mouthed child, and drew it to him, giving his attention meanwhile to Aunt Bachissia's recital of their misfortunes. From time to time, however, his gaze wandered to Grazia, the angles of whose girlish, undeveloped figure were accentuated by an ill-fitting black frock much too small for her. Her own hard, light-coloured orbs never left her uncle's face.

"Listen," said Aunt Bachissia, in her harsh voice, "I will tell you the whole story. Costantino Ledda had an uncle by blood, his own father's brother. His name was Basile Ledda, but they called him 'the Vulture'—may God preserve him in glory if he's not fast in the devil's clutches already—because he was so grasping. "He was a wretch, a regular yellow vulture. God may have forgiven him, but there, they say he starved his wife to death! He was Costantino's guardian; the boy had some money of his own, his uncle spent it all, and then began to ill-use him. He beat him, and sometimes he would tie him down between two stones in the open field, so that the bees would come and sting him on the eyes. Well, one day Costantino ran away; he

was sixteen years old. For three years nothing was heard of him; he says he was working in the mines; I don't know, but anyhow, that's what he says."

"Yes, yes, he was working in the mines," interrupted Giovanna.

"I don't know," said the mother, pursing up her lips with an air of doubt, "well, anyway, the fact remains that one day, during the time that he was off, some one fired at Basile the Vulture out in the field. It is true he did have enemies. When Costantino came back he admitted that he had run away for fear he might be tempted to kill his uncle, he hated him so.

"Afterwards, though, he tried to make his peace with him, and succeeded too. But now listen to this, Paolo Porru——"

"Dr. Porru! Dr. Porreddu!" shouted the small nephew, correcting the guest. The latter, turning on the boy angrily, started to box his ears, whereupon Giovanna laughed. On beholding their heartbroken guest—she who up to that moment had been surrounded by a halo of romance and tragedy—actually laughing, the pale, lank Grazia broke into a nervous laugh as well, and then Minnia laughed, and then the boy, and then the student.

Aunt Bachissia glared about her, and, lifting one lean, yellow hand, was about to bring it down on some one—she had not quite decided whether her daughter or the boy—when Aunt Porredda appeared in the doorway, bearing a steaming dish of macaroni.

She was followed by Uncle Efes Maria Porru, a big, imposing-looking man, whose broad chest was uncomfortably contracted in a narrow blue velvet jacket. He was a peasant, but affected a literary turn; his large, colourless face resembled a mask of ancient marble; he wore a short, curling beard, and had thick lips always parted, and big, clear eyes.

"Come, sit down at once," said Aunt Porredda, planting the dish in the centre of the table. "What! laughing, are you? The little doctor is making you all laugh?"

"I was just about to give your grandson a box on the ear," said Aunt Bachissia.

"And why were you going to do that, my soul? Come now, sit down, all of you; Giovanna, here; Dr. Porreddu, over there."

The student threw himself back full-length on the bed, stretched out his arms, lifted his legs high in air, dropped them again, sat up, and jumped to his feet with a yawn.

The children and Giovanna began to laugh again.

"A little gymnastic exercise does one good. Great Lord! how I shall sleep to-night! My bones feel as though they had lost all their joints. How tall you have grown, Grazia; you look like a bean-pole."

The girl reddened and dropped her eyes; while Aunt Bachissia thrust out her lips, annoyed at the student's lack of interest, as well as at the general indifference to Costantino's fate. To be sure, Giovanna herself had apparently forgotten, and it was only when Aunt Porredda placed before her a bountiful helping of macaroni covered with fragrant red gravy, that she suddenly recollected herself; her face clouded over, and she refused to eat.

"There now! what did I tell you?" cried Aunt Porredda. "She is crazy, absolutely crazy! Why can't you eat? What has eating your supper to-night to do with the sentence to-morrow?"

"Come, come," said Aunt Bachissia crossly. "Don't be foolish, don't go to work and spoil these good people's pleasure."

"A brave heart," said Uncle Efes Maria pompously—fastening his napkin under his chin and seeing an opportunity for a learned observation—"a brave heart defies fate, as Dante Alighieri says. Come now, Giovanna, prove yourself a true flower of the mountains; more enduring than the rocks themselves. Time softens all things."

Giovanna began to eat, but with a lump in her throat that made swallowing a difficult matter.

Paolo, meanwhile, had not spoken a word, but sat bowed over his plate, which, by the time Giovanna had managed to get down her first mouthful, was entirely clean.

"Why, you are a perfect hurricane, my son!" said Aunt Porredda. "What a ravenous appetite you have, to be sure! Do you want some more—yes?—and more still—yes——?"

"Well done!" cried Uncle Efes Maria. "It looks as though you had found very little to eat in the Eternal City!"

"Eh, that is precisely what I was saying just now," said Aunt Porredda. "Beautiful streets, if you will; but—when it comes to buying anything—the pennies have to be counted down! I've been told all about it! On my word, they say that there are no provisions stored in the houses as there are here, and you all know for yourselves that with no provisions in the house it is not easy to satisfy one's appetite!"

Aunt Bachissia nodded affirmatively; she knew only too well what happens when there is nothing in a house to eat.

"Is that true or not, Dr. Porreddu?"

"True, perfectly true," said he, laughing, and eating, and waving his large, white hands with their long nails, in the air.

"It is that that makes him such a leech, a regular vampire," said Uncle Efes Maria, turning to his guests. "I'll not have a drop of blood left in my veins. Body of the devil! how the money must go in Rome!"

"Ah, if you only knew!" sighed Paolo. "Everything, every single thing is so frightfully dear. Twenty centimes for a single peach! There, I feel better now."

"Twenty centimes!" exclaimed all the company in chorus.

"Well, Aunt Bachissia, and then? After Costantino came back?" asked Paolo.

"Well, Paolo Porru—you see I go on addressing you familiarly, even though you will be a doctor soon; when you were a little chap I used to go so far as to give you a

cuff now and then——"

"I have no recollection of it, but go on with your story," said the young man, while Grazia's nostrils fairly dilated with anger.

"Well, as I said, Costantino disappeared for three years, and——"

"He was working in the mines, all right; then he came back and was reconciled to his uncle. What then?"

"He met my Giovanna here, and they fell in love with each other; but the uncle made objections because my girl was poor. Then they began to hate one another worse than ever. Costantino was working for the Vulture, and he would never let him have a centime. So, then, one day Costantino came to me and said: 'I'm a poor man; I haven't got any money to buy trinkets for the bride, or to provide a feast and all the rest for a Christian wedding; and you are poor, too. Now then, suppose we do this way: we will have the civil ceremony, and all live and work together; then, when we have saved enough, we will be married by God. A great many do it that way, why shouldn't we?' So we did; we had the civil ceremony very quietly, and afterwards we all lived together and were happy enough. But the Vulture was furious; he used to come and yell things at us even in our own street, and he tried to interfere with Costantino in every way he could. But we just kept on working. So at last, when the vintage was over last autumn, we began preparing the sweets and things for the wedding, and then Basile Ledda was found dead one day, murdered in his own house! The evening before, Costantino had been seen going in there; what he went for was to tell his uncle about the wedding, and to try to make his peace with him. Ah, poor boy! he would not run off and hide somewhere as I begged and implored him to do, so of course they arrested him."

"He would not go because he was innocent, mamma, my——"

"There you go, you simpleton, beginning to cry again! If you don't stop, I'll not say another word, so there! Well, then, Costantino was arrested, and now the trial is just

over, and the public prosecutor has asked to have him sent to the galleys; but he's a dog, that public prosecutor! They have evidence, to be sure; Costantino was seen on the night of the murder entering his uncle's house, where he lived all by himself, like the wild beast that he was; and then their relations in the past—all true enough, but there are no proofs. Costantino was very contradictory, and full of remorse about something; he kept repeating: 'It is the mortal sin'; for you must know that he is a good Christian, and he thinks that this misfortune has been sent as a punishment because he and Giovanna lived together before they were married by religious ceremony."

"But tell me one thing——"

"Just wait a moment. I should add that now they have been married by religious ceremony—in prison! Yes, my dear, in prison; fancy what a horrid thing that was! Now don't begin crying again, Giovanna; if you do, I'll throw this salt-cellar at your head. There she is, the goose! Every one told her not to do it. 'Don't be married now,' they said. 'If he's found guilty and sentenced, you can marry some one else!'"

"How contemptible!" began the young woman, with flashing eyes, but the mother merely turned a cold, penetrating look upon her, and she broke off at once.

"Did I say so?" demanded the other. "No, it was other people, and they said it for your own good."

"For my good, for my good," moaned Giovanna, burying her face in her hands; "there is no more good for me, ever again, ever again!"

"Have you children?" asked Paolo.

"Yes, one, a boy. If it were not for him—alas, alas! if Costantino is sentenced, and there were no child—then, oh, misery, misery——!" And she seized her hair by the roots, and began to drag her head violently from side to side, like an insane person.

"You mean that you would kill yourself, my beloved?" asked Aunt Bachissia ironically.

To the student there was something artificial in the action; it reminded him of a famous actress whom he had once seen in a French comedy, and this open display of grief only aroused his cynicism.

"After all," said he, "the new divorce law has been approved, and any woman whose husband is serving a sentence can regain her freedom."

Giovanna did not appear so much as to take in what he said, and continued to rock her head from side to side. Aunt Porredda, however, spoke up in a decided tone: "What an idea! as though any one but God could undo a marriage!"

"Yes, I read about that in the papers," said Uncle Efes Maria jocularly. "Those are the divorces they get on the Continent, where men and women marry over and over again without troubling themselves about priests, or magistrates either, for that matter, but here!—shame!"

"No, Daddy Porru, that's not on the Continent, it's in Turkey," said Grazia.

"Here too, here too," said Aunt Bachissia, who had eagerly followed every word.

As soon as supper was over the two Eras went off to see their lawyer.

"What room have you given them?" asked Paolo. "The 'strangers' room'?"

"Why, of course; why?"

"Because I really thought I should like to sleep there myself; it is suffocating down here. What better 'stranger' could there be than I?"

"Be patient just till to-morrow, my boy. Remember these are poor guests."

"O Lord! what barbarous customs! Will there ever be an end to them?" he exclaimed impatiently.

"That's just what I should like to know," said Uncle Efes Maria. "These women are draining my pockets. Well, what do you think of the new Ministry?"

"I don't think anything of it at all!" laughed the student, recalling a character in the Dame chez Maxim, a favourite play at the Manzoni Theatre, which he frequented.

Then he sauntered off to look at some books he had left on a shelf at the other end of the room. Minnia and the boy had run out into the courtyard; Grazia, seated at the table, with both cheeks resting on her closed fists, was still gazing at her uncle. He turned towards her:

"You read novels, don't you?"

"I? No," she answered, turning red.

"Well, I only wanted to say that if I ever catch you reading certain books—I'll rap you over the head with them."

Her under-lip began to tremble, and, not to let him see her cry, she jumped up and ran out. In the courtyard she found the two children still quarrelling over the purse with the picture of the Pope. "As for stealing," the boy was saying, "you had better keep quiet about that; you, and she there—the bean-pole—you two sold some wine to-day, and kept the money!"

"Oh, what a lie!" cried Grazia, falling upon him and dealing him a blow, but crying herself bitterly all the while.

The courtyard was filled with the chirping of the crickets and the noise of the horses' hoofs; and the warm, starlit air was heavy with the scent of the hay.

"You must not be hard on her, she is a poor orphan," said Aunt Porredda, speaking in Grazia's behalf (they were the three children of an older son of the Porrus', a well-to-do shepherd whose wife had died the year before). "And why not let her read if she wants to?"

"Yes, yes, let her read by all means," said Uncle Efes Maria pompously. "Ah! if they had only allowed me to read when I was young—I would have been an astronomer, as learned as a priest!" To Uncle Efes Maria an astronomer represented the height of learning and cultivation—a philosopher, as it were.

"Have you seen the Pope, my son?" asked Aunt Porredda, from an association of

ideas.

"No."

"What! You have never seen the Pope?"

"Oh! what do you expect? The Pope is kept shut up in a box; if you want to see him, you've got to pay well for it."

"Oh, go along!" said she. "You are an infidel," and, going out to where the children were still fighting, she made a rapid descent upon them, separated the belligerents, and sent each flying in a different direction. "On my word!" she cried, "you are just like so many cocks. The Lord have mercy on me! Here they are, the chicken-cocks! Bad children, every one of you, bad, bad children!"

And the lamentations of the youngsters arose and mingled with the noises of the summer evening.

CHAPTER II

The next morning Giovanna was the first to awaken. Through a pane of glass set in the door came a faint, roseate, sunrise glow; and the early morning silence was broken only by the chattering of the swallows. Not yet fully aroused, her first sensations were agreeable; then, all at once it was as though a terrific clap of thunder had sounded in her ear. She remembered!

This was the day that was to decide her husband's fate. She knew for a certainty that he would be condemned, and yet she persisted in hoping still. It mattered very little to her whether or no he were guilty; probably she had not at any time troubled herself much with that aspect of the case, and what wholly concerned her now were the consequences. The thought of being parted, perhaps forever, from this man, young, strong, and active as a greyhound, with his caressing hands and ardent lips, was agony; and as the full consciousness of her misery came over her, she jumped out of bed, and began drawing on her clothes, saying breathlessly: "It is late, late,

late."

Aunt Bachissia opened her little firefly eyes, and then she also got up; but she realised too clearly what that day, and the next, and the year following, and the next two, and five, and ten years would probably be like, to be in any haste to begin them. She dressed deliberately, plunged her hands into water, passed them across her face, and dried it, then carefully arranged the folds of her scarf about her head.

"It is late," repeated Giovanna. "Dear Lord, how late it is!" But her mother's calm demeanour presently quieted her. Aunt Bachissia went down to the kitchen and Giovanna followed. Aunt Bachissia prepared the café-au-lait and bread for Costantino (the two women were allowed to take food to the prisoner), placed them in a basket, and started for the jail, Giovanna still following.

The streets were deserted; the sun, just appearing above the granite peaks of Orthobene, filled the atmosphere with fine, rose-gold dust. The sky was so blue, the little birds so gay, and the air so still and fragrant, that it was like the early morning of some festal day, before the human bustle and the ringing of the church bells have disturbed the stillness and charm.

Giovanna, crossing the street that leads from the station—near which the Porrus lived—to the prison, gazed upon her own violet-coloured mountains in the distance, hemming in the wild valleys below like a setting of amethysts; she inhaled the delicious air filled with the perfume of growing things; she thought of her little slate-rock house, of her child, of her lost happiness, and it seemed as though her heart would burst.

The mother walked briskly on in front, poising the basket on her head. Presently they reached the great, round, white, desolate pile in which are the prisons. A sentry stood, mute and immovable, looking in the morning light like a statue carved out of stone. A single green shrub growing against the blank expanse of wall seemed the rather to accentuate the dreariness of the spot. A huge, green door, which from time

to time opened and shut like the mouth of a dragon, now opened and swallowed up the two women. Every one in that dismal abode had come to know them; from the florid, important-looking head-keeper, who might have been a general at the very least, down to the junior custodian, with his pale face, his straight blond moustache, and his pretensions to elegance.

The visitors were not allowed to penetrate beyond the gloomy passageway, whose fetid atmosphere, however, gave some idea of the horrors that lay beyond. The pale and elegant guard, coming forward, took their basket, and Giovanna asked in a low voice if Costantino had slept.

Yes, he had slept, but he kept dreaming all the time. He did nothing but repeat over and over again the words—"The mortal sin!"

"Ah! may he go to the devil with his mortal sin!" exclaimed Aunt Bachissia angrily; "he ought to stop it!"

"Mamma, dear, why need you swear at him? Has not fate cursed him enough as it is?" murmured Giovanna.

The women now left the building and stood outside, waiting for the prisoner to be brought forth. When Giovanna's eyes fell upon the group of carbineers who were to escort him to court, she fell to trembling violently, although on all the preceding days she had seen precisely the same thing; and her big, black eyes, stretched to their widest extent, fastened upon the great doorway with the unseeing stare of a crazy woman. Slowly the minutes lagged by, then the dragon mouth opened, and once more, surrounded by stony-faced guards with fierce black moustaches, the figure of Costantino appeared.

He was tall and as lithe as a young poplar tree; a long lock of lustrous black hair hung down on either side of a face, beardless, pallid from prison confinement, and almost feminine in its beauty. The eyes were large, and chestnut-brown in colour; the mouth small, and as innocent as a child's, and there was a little cleft in the

middle of the chin. He looked like a young Apollo.

The moment his eyes fell upon Giovanna, although he too had been waiting for that moment, he grew whiter than ever, and stopped short, resisting the guards. Giovanna rushed forward, sobbing, and seized hold of his manacled hands.

"Forward!" said one of the carbineers; then, gently, to her: "You know, my girl, it is not allowed."

Aunt Bachissia now stepped forward as well, darting rapid glances out of her little green eyes. The escort halted for an instant, and Costantino, smiling bravely, said in a voice that was almost cheerful: "Courage! Courage!"

"The lawyer is waiting for you," said Aunt Bachissia, and then the guards pushed the women gently aside.

"Stand back, good people! Out of the way!" said one, and they led the prisoner off, still smiling back at Giovanna, his gleaming white teeth showing between lips that were still round and full, albeit colourless. Thus he disappeared from view between his stony-faced conductors.

Aunt Bachissia now, in her turn, dragged off Giovanna, who wanted to follow her husband, and insisted that she should return first to the Porrus' for breakfast.

They found the courtyard bathed in sunlight. It played upon the shining leaves of the grape-vines, from which hung bunches of unripe grapes like pale-green marble; the swallows disporting in it were moved to pour forth floods of song; and it tricked out Uncle Efes Maria, preparing to set out for the country on his chestnut horse. How full of light and cheerfulness seemed that little, enclosed spot, with its low stone-wall, beyond which could be seen a broad expanse of open country, stretching away to the distant horizon! The children sat on the threshold of the kitchen door, devouring their breakfast of bread soaked in café-au-lait; Grazia had taken hers to a retired corner, possibly in order not to be seen engaged upon anything so prosaic by the student-uncle. He, meanwhile, stood in his shirt-sleeves in the middle of the

enclosure, gulping down the contents of a great bowl.

"How large is St. Peter's?" asked Aunt Porredda, who was polishing the doctor's shoes, and marvelling the while to hear of the wonderful things he had seen.

"How large? Why, as large as a tanca.[3] You can't even pray there; no one could say his prayers in a tanca. The angels are as large as that gateway—the littlest ones—those that hold the holy-water basins."

"Ah! then you have to go upstairs to reach the water?"

"No; they are on their knees, I think. Give me a little more café-au-lait, mamma; is there any?"

"Of course there is. It seems to me you have come back very hungry, my little Paolo; you're a regular shark!"

"Do you know how much this breakfast would cost in Rome? One franc! not a centime less; and then the milk is all water!"

"The Lord preserve us! Why, that is frightful!" "What do you think? I saw some dolphins at sea; the strangest-looking creatures——Oh! here are our guests; good-morning; what have you been about?"

Giovanna described the meeting with her husband, and was beginning to cry again, when Aunt Porredda took her by the hand and led her into the kitchen.

"You have need of all your strength to-day, my soul," said she, setting before her a large cup of café-au-lait. A little later the two women started out again for the Court of Assize; Paolo promising to join them there.

"Courage!" said Aunt Porredda, as she took leave of Giovanna, and the latter heard her husband's sentence in the kind hostess's tone, and went off with the look of a whipped dog.

Paolo followed her with his eyes; then, limping across the courtyard to his mother, he said a singular thing:

"Listen to me, mamma; before two years have gone by that young woman will be married to some one else!"

"What do you mean by saying such a thing, Dr. Pededdu!" cried the mother, who always addressed her son by his nickname when she was angry with him. "Upon my word, you must be crazy!"

"Oh! mamma, I have crossed the sea," he replied. "Let us hope, at all events, that she will engage me as her lawyer."

"That young man devours his food like a dog," said Giovanna to her mother, as they descended the steep little street. "May the Lord have mercy on him!"

Aunt Bachissia, walking along plunged in thought, answered through her clenched teeth, "He will make a good lawyer; he will gnaw his clients to the bone and then swallow them whole!"

Then the two walked on in silence, but a moment later Aunt Bachissia stumbled, and as she did so, for some reason that she could not fathom, it flashed into her mind that, should it ever so fall out that Giovanna were to apply for a divorce, she would ask Paolo to be their lawyer.

It was eight o'clock when they reached the Cathedral Square, and the small windows of the Court House close by were sending back dazzling reflections of the early morning sun.

The little granite-paved square was already crowded with country friends and neighbours, witnesses in the trial. Some of these immediately approached the two women, and greeted them with the inevitable commonplace: "Courage! Courage!"

"Oh! courage; yes, we have plenty of it, thank you," said Aunt Bachissia. "Now leave us in peace." And she continued on her way, as proud and erect as a race-horse. The road was only too familiar already, and she followed it straight to the fateful hall. Behind her came Giovanna, and behind her, the others: heavily bearded, roughly clad men; a handful of idlers; last of all, a near-sighted old woman

with no teeth.

The jury, most of them old and fat, were already in their places. One of them had an enormous hooked nose; two others, fierce-eyed, thickly bearded men, looked like bandits; three sat in a little group with their heads close together, laughing over something in a newspaper.

In a few moments the judge appeared, his rosy face surrounded by a straggling white beard. Then came the public prosecutor, a young man with a fair, drooping moustache, flushed and tyrannical-looking. Then the registrar, the ushers—all of these functionaries looking to Giovanna, in their black robes, like so many evil genii come to weave their fatal spells about poor Costantino.

And there he was himself! Erect in the cage, like some frightened animal held in leash by the two stony-faced carbineers. His gaze was fastened upon Giovanna, but now there was no smile; he seemed overpowered by the weight of his misery; and, as his glance fell upon those men, the arbiters of his fate, his clear, childlike eyes contracted and grew dark with terror.

Giovanna, too, seemed to feel the grip of an iron hand on her heart, and at times the sensation was so acute as to give her actual physical pain.

The lawyer for the defence, a little pink-and-yellow man, with a high-pitched, querulous voice, began his speech.

His defence had been sufficiently unfortunate from the first; now he merely repeated what had already been said; and his words seemed to fall into space like drops of water dripping into a great empty vessel. The public prosecutor, with his drooping moustaches, maintained an air of insolent indifference. A few of the jury appeared to take credit to themselves for sitting through it with patience; while the others, so far as could be observed, did not so much as pretend to listen. The only persons present, in fact, who really took any interest in the summing up of the defence were Aunt Bachissia, Giovanna, and the prisoner; and the longer their advocate talked, the

more did these feel that their case was hopelessly lost.

From time to time some new arrival would take one of the seats behind Giovanna, and whenever this happened, she would turn quickly to see if it were Paolo. For some reason she found herself ardently wishing for him; she felt as though his mere presence in the courtroom might help them in some way.

At last the lawyer ceased. Instantly, Costantino arose, and, growing very red in the face, asked if he might speak. "The—the"—said he, pointing in the direction of the advocate—"the gentleman-lawyer has spoken—he has defended me—and I thank him kindly; but he has not spoken the way I could have wished; he did not say—well, he did not say——"

He stopped, breathing hard.

"Add anything to your defence that occurs to you," said the judge.

The prisoner stood for a moment with his eyes cast down, in an attitude of deep thought. The flush died out of his face, leaving it whiter than before; presently he passed his hand across his forehead with a convulsive movement, and raised his head.

"This is it," he began in a low tone. "I—I——" but again his voice failed; then, suddenly clenching his fists, he turned towards the lawyer, and burst out in a voice of thunder: "But I am innocent! I tell you I am innocent!"

The lawyer hastily motioned with his hand to quiet him; the judge raised his eyebrows, as though to say: "And suppose he had said so a hundred times, is it our fault that we are not convinced?" And a woman's sob was heard through the courtroom.

Giovanna had broken down, and Aunt Bachissia at once dragged her towards the door, reluctant and tearful. Every one but the public prosecutor watched the struggle between the two women.

A little later the court withdrew to deliberate.

Aunt Bachissia, followed by two of the neighbours, hauled Giovanna into the square, where, instead of trying to comfort her, she fell to scolding her roundly. Was she quite mad? Did she want to be removed by force? "If you don't behave yourself," she concluded, "I declare I'll give you a good beating!"

"Mamma, oh! mamma," sobbed the other. "They are going to condemn him! They are going to take him from me, and I can do nothing, I can do nothing——!"

"What do you expect to do?" asked one of the neighbours. "As sure as I am alive there is nothing for you to do. Be patient, though, and wait a little longer——"

At this moment three figures in black appeared, one of them laughing and limping. They were Paolo Porru and two young priests, friends of his.

"There she is now," said the student. "It looks as though he had been sentenced already!"

"Upon my word," remarked one of the priests, "she is indeed a young colt! One that knows how to kick, too! She looks——"

The other one, meanwhile, was staring curiously at Giovanna, and as they all three approached the Eras, Paolo asked if the argument had closed. "It's the man who murdered his uncle, isn't it?" enquired one of the priests. The other continued to stare at Giovanna, who had begun to regain her self-control.

"He has murdered no one at all," said Aunt Bachissia haughtily. "Murderer yourself, black crows that you are!"

"Crows, are we? Well, you are a witch!" retorted the priest. Upon which the bystanders began to laugh.

Giovanna, meanwhile, at the solicitation of Paolo, had become quite calm, and she now promised not to make a scene if they would let her return to the courtroom. They all, accordingly, went in together, and found that the jury, after a brief

deliberation, were already taking their seats. A profound silence fell upon the dim, hot room. Giovanna heard an insect humming and buzzing against one of the windows; her limbs grew heavy; she felt as though her body, her arms, her legs, were strung on rods of ice-cold iron. Then the judge pronounced the sentence in a low, careless voice, while the prisoner looked at him fixedly and held his breath. Giovanna kept hearing the buzzing of the fly, and was conscious of a feeling of intense dislike for that rosy, white-bearded man, not so much on account of what he was saying, but because he said it with such an air of indifference. And this was what it was:

A sentence of twenty-seven years' imprisonment "for the homicide who, after long premeditation, had at last committed the crime upon the person of his guardian and own uncle by blood!"

Giovanna had so entirely prepared her mind to expect thirty years, that for the first moment twenty-seven seemed a respite, but it was only for a moment; then, swiftly realising that in thirty years three count for nothing, she had to bite her lips violently to keep back the shriek that rose to them. Everything grew dim before her; by a desperate effort of the will she forced herself to look at Costantino, and saw, or thought she saw, his face old and grey, his eyes, dim and vacant, wandering aimlessly about him. Ah! he was not looking at her, he was not even looking at her any more! Already he was parted from her forever. He was dead, though still among the living; they had killed him! Those fat, self-satisfied men, who sat there in perfect indifference, awaiting their next victim. She felt her reason forsaking her, and suddenly a succession of piercing shrieks rent the air; some one seized her, and she was dragged out again into the sunlit square.

"Daughter! daughter! Do you know what you are doing? You must be mad! You are howling like a wild beast!" cried Aunt Bachissia, grasping her by the arm. "And what good will it do? There is the appeal still,—the Court of Cassation,—do be

quiet, my soul!"

All this had happened in a few moments. The witnesses, the lawyer, Paolo Porru, and the others now came crowding around the women, trying to think of something to say to comfort them. Giovanna, dry-eyed and staring, was sobbing in a heartbroken way, disjointed sentences falling from her lips, expressions of passionate tenderness for Costantino, and wild threats and imprecations addressed to the jury. She begged so hard to be allowed to remain until the condemned man should be brought out, that they agreed. At last he appeared; bent, livid, sunken-eyed; grown prematurely old.

Giovanna rushed forward, and, as the carbineers made no motion to stop, she went ahead of them, walking backwards, smiling into her husband's face, telling him that it would all be set right in the Court of Cassation, and that she would sell everything, to the very clothes on her back, in order to save him. But he only stared back at her, wide-eyed, unseeing; and when the carbineers pushed her gently aside, one of them saying: "Go away, my good woman, go off now, and try to be patient," he too said: "Yes, go away, Giovanna, try to get permission to see me before I am taken away, and—bring the child, and take courage."

So Giovanna and her mother went back to the house, where Aunt Porredda embraced and wept over them; then, however, appearing to repent of such weakness, she set about to remedy it.

"Well," said she. "Twenty-seven years, what is that after all? Suppose he had been sentenced to thirty, would not that have been worse? What! You are going away? In this heat! Why, you must be crazy, both of you; upon my word, I shan't let you go."

"Yes," said Aunt Bachissia; "we must get off; the others are all going back now, and will be company for us. But if it won't be putting you out too much, Giovanna will return in a few days and bring the boy."

"Why, bless you! is not this house the same as your own?"

They sat down to dinner, but Giovanna, though now perfectly calm, would touch nothing. Two or three times Aunt Porredda attempted to talk on indifferent subjects: she asked if the boy had cut his first teeth; remarked that travelling in such heat might make them ill; and enquired about the barley-crop in their neighbourhood.

Profound peace brooded over the courtyard. The sun poured down on the grape-vines overhead, and traced delicate lacework patterns on the paving where it filtered through the leaves. The swallows flew hither and thither, singing joyously. Paolo sat reading the newspaper as he ate his dinner. Grazia and Minnia,—the boy had gone off with his grandfather,—in their sparse, tumbled little black dresses, kept falling asleep over theirs, overpowered by the noontide somnolence. Aunt Porredda's words floated dreamily out into all this sunlight and peace, into which Aunt Bachissia's tragic mien, and Giovanna's mute air of woe, seemed to strike a note of discord.

The moment the meal was ended, the visitors packed their wallet, saddled their horse, and said farewell. Paolo promised to see their lawyer about the appeal to the Court of Cassation, and as soon as they were well out of sight, began to play with Minnia, forcing her to shake off her drowsiness, and pretending that he was crazy. He would first laugh uproariously, shaking in every limb; then, suddenly become perfectly silent, staring ahead of him with wild fixed gaze; then break forth once more into peals of laughter.

The girls were highly diverted; they too fell to laughing immoderately; and the sun-bathed courtyard and tranquil house, freed at last from the gloomy presence of the guests, was filled with sunshine, and merriment, and peace.

CHAPTER III

Meanwhile, the Eras pursued their journey under the burning July sun. The road at first led downwards to the bottom of the valley; then crossed it and ascended the violet-coloured mountains that, shutting in the horizon beyond, lost themselves in

the haze that rose from the heated earth. It was a melancholy progress. The two women rode one horse, a dejected-looking beast, tractable and mild. Their travelling companions had gradually drifted away; some riding on ahead; others falling behind, but all alike were silent and depressed, overpowered by the suffocating heat, the stillness, and the sad outcome of their journey. They felt Costantino's misfortune almost as keenly as the women themselves, and out of respect for Giovanna's dumb agony, either remained silent, or, if they spoke, did so in undertones that awoke no echoes, and failed even to break the intense silence.

Thus they travelled on, and on; descending steadily towards the bed of a torrent, whose course ran through the bottom of the valley. The path, though not very steep, was rugged and at times difficult to follow as it wound its way between rocks, stretches of barren, dusty ground, and yellow stubble. At long intervals a scraggy tree would raise its solitary head; lifeless, immovable in the breathless atmosphere, like some lonely hermit of the wilderness; its shadow falling athwart the sun-baked earth, like that of a little wandering cloud, lost and frightened in the great expanse of light its presence alone seems to mar. Occasionally the shrill note of a wild bird would issue from one of these oases of shade, only to die away instantly, choked and overpowered by the weight of the all-embracing silence. Big purple thistles, pink-belled convolvuluses, and lilac mallows, rearing themselves here and there in defiance of the sun, seemed only to enhance the general air of desolation; while below and above stretched endless lines of ancient grey stone-walls, covered with dry yellow moss. Fields of uncut grain, with spears like yellow pine-cones, closed in the distance.

On, and on, they went. Giovanna's head was burning beneath her woollen kerchief upon which the sun's rays beat mercilessly; and big tears coursed silently down her cheeks. She tried to hide them from her mother, who was riding on the saddle, while she was seated on the crupper, but Aunt Bachissia heard, Aunt Bachissia saw, even out of the back of her head; and presently she could contain herself no longer.

"Look here, my soul," said she suddenly, as they traversed the bottom of the valley, between great thickets of flowering oleanders; "will you have the goodness to stop? What are you crying for, anyhow? Haven't you known it for months and months?"

Instead of stopping, however, Giovanna only burst forth into loud sobs. Aunt Bachissia glanced around; the others had all gone on ahead, and they were quite alone.

"Haven't you known all along how it would be?" she repeated, in low, even tones that seemed to Giovanna to come from an immeasurable distance and, sweeping by them, to be swallowed up in the surrounding void. "Are you such a fool, my soul, as not to have known it from the first? Did he or did he not kill that infamous Vulture? If he killed him——"

"But he never said he had done it!" interrupted Giovanna.

"Well! that was all that was needed, for him to be crazy enough to say so. My soul! just think for a moment, nothing more was wanting! For my own part, I always expected that some time or other he would crush that Vulture as one crushes a wasp that has stung him. You say Costantino is a good Christian! My soul! one would have thought that by this time you would begin to have some idea of what it means to hate! Would you, yes or no, if you had the chance, murder those men back there who condemned him? Very well, then. He murdered the Vulture, and to a certain extent I sympathise with him, because I know the human heart. But I have not forgiven him, and I never will forgive him, for taking the risks he did. No, that I will not, not for the love of God! He had a wife and a child, and if he were going to do it he should have gone about it more carefully. And now, that's enough of it. Let the whole matter drop. You are still young, Giovanna; you must think of him as of one who is dead."

"But he is not dead!" wailed Giovanna desperately.

"Very well, then," said Aunt Bachissia angrily. "Go and hang yourself. There, do

you see that tree over yonder? Well, go and hang yourself from it; but don't torment me any more. You have always been a torment. If you had married Brontu Dejas everything would have been right; but no, you must have that beggar; very well, the best thing for you to do now is to hang yourself!"

Giovanna made no reply. In the bottom of her heart she too believed Costantino to be guilty, but she had long ceased to care. In her present misery all she took note of was the central fact of his condemnation, and she could not understand why ordinary mortals should have the power so to dispose of a fellow-creature. Ah, how she hated that mysterious, invincible power! She felt towards it as she did towards those horrible spirits, unseen, but felt, which fly abroad on stormy nights!

On, and on, they went. Now they had crossed the valley and were slowly ascending the mountain on its further side. The sun began to sink towards the west, the horizon to open; the sky grew soft, and the landscape lost its look of utter desolation. The shadows of the mountain-peaks stretched down now, clear into the dim depths of the valley, where a few late dog roses still bloomed; a little breeze sprang up and filled the air with the odour of wild growing things.

Insensibly every one's spirits revived under the influence of this unlooked-for shade and coolness. One of their companions, joining the two women, began to recount an adventure a friend of his had had close to that very spot; at one point the story became so entertaining that even Giovanna smiled faintly.

On, and on. Now the sun was setting, and from the height they had attained they could make out the sea, a bluish circle, bounded by the horizon. Finally, beyond a thick-growing mass of trees and bushes so sturdy as to withstand alike the wild winter blasts and the scorching heats of summer, lying in the midst of the melancholy uplands like an island in a sea of light and solitude, they descried their own village, the eyrie of a strong, handsome, and primitive people; shepherds for the most part, or peasants occupied in raising grain and honey.

Green, rocky pastures, gay in the springtime with daffodils, and fragrant with mint and thyme, and fields of grain, hemmed in the little group of slate-stone cottages that gleamed in the sun like burnished silver. Here and there a good-sized tree cast its shadow athwart this quail's nest, hidden away, as it were, amid the billows of ripening grain. Lines of green tamarisks, and a wilderness of thyme and arbute, lay beyond. Further still were the limitless stretches of the uplands, and above all spread a sky of indescribable softness and beauty. On the right, against this sky, the lonely mountain-peaks reared themselves like a company of sphinxes, blue in the morning, lilac at noonday, and purple or bronze-coloured at evening; their rugged sides covered with forests, the home of eagles and vultures.

It was nearly dark when the Eras at last reached the village. Mount Bellu, the colossus of that company of sphinxes, had enveloped itself in a cloak of purple mist, and stood out against the pale, grey sky. The street was already silent and deserted, and the clatter of the horse's hoofs on the rough stone paving resounded like the blows of a hammer. One after another their companions turned off, so that when they reached their own home, the two women were quite alone.

The Era cottage stood on a little flat clearing, above the level of the street. Higher up on the hillside, overlooking it, was another house, a white one. A large almond-tree, growing beside a piece of crumbling wall that extended from one corner of the cottage, overhung the street, which, beyond this point, merged into the open country.

Scattered about on the level stretch of ground between the two houses,—the grey cottage of the Eras and the white dwelling of the Dejases,—beneath the shadow of the almond-tree, lay a quantity of great boulders, convenient and comfortable resting-places; hence the spot had come to be used by the villagers as a sort of common or place of public resort. Hardly had the horse stopped before the cottage, when Giovanna slid down and, with lagging steps and hanging head, advanced towards a woman,—a relative left in charge during their absence,—who came

forward to meet them with the baby in her arms. Taking the child from her, Giovanna clasped it closely to her breast, and began to weep, burying her head on the chubby little shoulder. Her tears were now flowing quietly enough, a feeling of numbness and of utter despair crept over her, and the unhappiness of the preceding months seemed as nothing in comparison with the misery and desolation of the present moment. The baby, hardly yet five months old, had clear, violet eyes, and little, unformed features set in a stiff, red cap with fringe hanging down over the forehead. He recognised his mother, and began pulling with all his strength on the end of her kerchief, kicking both little feet, and crying: "Ah—ah—aah——"

"Malthinu, my little Malthineddu, my sole comfort in all the earth; your daddy is dead," sobbed Giovanna.

The woman, understanding that Costantino had been found guilty, began to cry as well. Suddenly Aunt Bachissia descended swiftly upon them. Pushing Giovanna into the cottage, she asked the woman to help her unload the horse.

"Are you stark mad, both of you?" she demanded in a low voice. "What need is there to carry on like that, right out here in sight of the white house? I can see the beak of that old Godmother Malthina now. Ah! she will be delighted when she hears of our bad luck."

"No," said the woman, "she has come several times to ask for news of Costantino, and she always seemed to feel very sorry. She told me she had dreamed that he was condemned to penal servitude."

"Oh, yes! that is the kind of sorrow that an ill-tempered cur feels! I know her! She's a venomous snake, and she can't forgive us. After all," she added a few minutes later, walking towards the cottage with the wallet on her back, "she's right; we can't forgive ourselves."

Aunt Martina Dejas was the owner of the white house on the hill, and the mother of that Brontu Dejas whom Giovanna had refused to marry. She was very well off, but

a miser, and Aunt Bachissia was quite mistaken in supposing that she hated them. As a fact, the refusal had affected her very little, either one way or the other.

"See here," said Aunt Bachissia, when they had finished unloading the horse. "Will you do me one favour more, Maria Chicca? Will you take back the horse and tell her that Costantino is to get twenty-seven years in prison? Then watch her face."

The woman took hold of the bridle, the animal having been hired from the Dejases, and led it towards the white house.

This house, formerly the property of a merchant who had failed, had been bought at public sale a few years before. It was large and commodious, with a portico in front that gave it an almost seignorial air, but which was used as a promenade by Aunt Martina's chickens and pigs. It was an inappropriate dwelling for rough shepherds like the Dejases, as was shown by its rude furnishings, composed mainly of high clumsy wooden bedsteads, roughly fashioned chests, and heavy chairs and stools. Aunt Martina was seated on the portico, spinning—she could spin even in the dark—when Maria Chicca approached, leading the horse. The house was entirely unlighted, Brontu and the men being off at the sheepfolds, while Aunt Martina never kept a servant. She had other sons and daughters, all married, with whom she lived in a constant state of warfare on account of her miserly habits. Whenever there was any especial stress of work, she got in some of the neighbours to help. Often Giovanna and her mother were hired in this way, being paid in stale or injured farm produce. The Eras, however, were too poor to refuse anything they could get.

"Well, what was the result?" asked the old woman, laying the spindle and a little ball of flax on the bench beside her. She had a thin, nasal voice; round, light eyes, placed close together; a delicate, aquiline nose, and lips that were still full and red. "You are crying, Maria Chicca. I saw those two poor women arrive, but I was afraid to go and ask, because I dreamed last night that he had been sentenced to penal servitude."

"Ah, no! they have given him twenty-seven years' imprisonment."

Aunt Martina appeared to be disappointed; not, indeed, that she bore Costantino any ill-will, but because she had a firm belief in the infallibility of her dreams.

She took the horse by the bridle, saying:

"I will go to the Eras' this evening, if I possibly can, but I'm not sure. There's a man coming, he who worked for Basile Ledda; he is going to hire out to us. He was one of the witnesses; but I believe he's back, isn't he?"

"Yes, I think he is," said the other. And, returning to the cottage, she began at once to relate how Aunt Martina felt very sorry; and how she had dreamed that Costantino had got penal servitude; and that Giacobbe Dejas—he was a poor relation of the other Dejases—was going to work for them. Giovanna, who was nursing the child, and gazing down at it sorrowfully, did not so much as raise her eyes. Aunt Bachissia, on the contrary, asked innumerable questions: Had she found the old Dejas alone? Was she spinning,—spinning there in the dark?—etc., etc.

"Listen," she said to Giovanna. "She may be here this evening."

Giovanna neither moved nor looked up.

"My soul! do you hear me?" cried the mother angrily. "She may come down this evening."

"Who?" asked Giovanna, in the tone of a person just awake.

"Malthina Dejas!"

"Well, let her go to the devil!"

"Who is to go to the devil?" asked a sonorous voice from the doorway. It was Isidoro Pane, an old leech-fisher related to the Eras. He had come on a visit of condolence. Tall, with blue eyes and a yellow beard, a bone rosary about his waist, and clasping a long staff with a bundle fastened to the top, Uncle Isidoro looked like a pilgrim. He was the poorest and the gentlest and the most peaceable inhabitant of Orlei. When he wanted to swear, all he said was: "May you become a leech-fisher!"

He and Costantino were great friends. Often and often had the two sung the holy lauds in church together, and the Eras had named him as a witness for the defence, because no one could testify better than he to the blameless character of the accused man. His name had, however, been rejected. What, indeed, would the testimony of a poor leech-fisher amount to when confronted with the majesty of the law!

The moment she saw him, Giovanna gave way and began to sob.

"The will of God be done!" said Isidoro, leaning his staff against the wall. "Be patient, Giovanna Era, you must not lose your trust in God."

"You know?" asked Giovanna.

"Yes, I have heard. Well, he is innocent. And I tell you that even though he has been condemned to-day, to-morrow his innocence may be proved."

"Ah! Uncle Isidoro," said Giovanna, shaking her head. "Your confidence doesn't impress me any longer. Up to yesterday I believed in you, but now I have lost faith."

"You are not a good Christian; this is Bachissia Era's doing."

Aunt Bachissia, who regarded the fisherman with scant favour, and was always afraid of his bringing vermin into the house, turned on him angrily, and was about to launch forth into abuse, when another visitor arrived. He was presently followed by others, and still others, until at last the little cottage was filled with condoling neighbours; while Giovanna, who was really tired by this time even of weeping, felt it incumbent upon her to continue to sob and lament desperately.

All the time, Aunt Bachissia kept watching for the rich neighbour, but she did not appear. Instead, there came Giacobbe Dejas, the man who was about to enter her service. He was a cheerful soul, about fifty years old; ordinary-looking, short, thin, smooth-shaven, and bald; with no eyebrows, and a decided squint; the eyes, small and cunning, were of a nondescript colour, something between yellow and green. He had worked for Basile Ledda for twenty years, and had been called as a witness for the defence. In his testimony he had alluded to the ill-treatment Costantino had

received from his uncle, but told also how the old miser had maltreated every one, his women and servants as well. Why, the very day before his death he had struck and kicked him—Giacobbe Dejas!

"Malthina Dejas is expecting you," said Aunt Bachissia. "You had better go on up there."

"The devil cut off her nose!" replied Giacobbe. "I'll go presently. What I'm afraid of is of falling out of the frying-pan into the fire! She's a worse miser than even he was."

"If she pays you what you earn, you've no right to judge her," said the ringing voice of Uncle Isidoro.

"Ah! you are there, are you?" said Giacobbe mockingly. "How are the legs? Pretty well punctured?"

Isidoro regarded his legs, which were wrapped about with bits of rag. It was his habit to stand in stagnant water until the leeches attached themselves to him.

"That need not concern you," he answered quietly. "But it is not well to curse the woman whose bread you are going to eat."

"I shall eat my own bread, not hers, and that is our affair. Come now, Giovanna, take heart! What the devil! Do you remember that story I was telling you on the road from Nuoro? Be sensible now, for this little chap's sake. Costantino is not going to die in prison, I can tell you that myself. Give me the baby," he added, stooping down to take it, but finding the little fellow asleep, he straightened himself, and, placing a finger on his lips, "Aunt Bachissia," he said (he always used the "Aunt" and "Uncle" even with people younger than himself), "do me a favour; send your daughter to bed; she has come to the end of her forces. And you, good people," he continued, turning to the company, "let us do something as well, let us take ourselves off."

One by one, accordingly, they all departed. Aunt Bachissia, seizing the stool upon which Isidoro Pane had been seated, took it outside and wiped it vigorously. When

she came in she found Giovanna fallen into a sort of a doze, and had to shake her in order to arouse her.

The young woman opened her eyes, which were red and glassy; then she got up with the child in her arms.

"Go to bed," commanded the mother.

She looked at the door, murmuring: "Never again! He will never, never come back again! For a moment I thought I was waiting for him."

"Go to bed, go to bed," said the mother, her voice harsher than ever. She gave Giovanna a push, and then, taking up the old brass candlestick, opened the door.

The cottage consisted of a kitchen, with the usual stone fireplace in the centre and the oven in one corner, and two bedrooms, furnished in the most meagre way. Giovanna's bedstead was of wood, very high, and provided with an extremely hard mattress and a red cotton counterpane.

Aunt Bachissia took the little Martino, who was whimpering in his sleep, and laid him down, cradling him between her two hands, while Giovanna got ready for bed. When she was undressed and her head bare, the beautiful hair wound around it somewhat in the fashion of the ancient Romans, the mother covered her carefully and went out.

No sooner was she left to herself, however, than she threw off the covers and began to moan and lament. She was completely worn out with sorrow and fatigue, and her eyes were heavy with sleep, yet she could not rest. Confused pictures kept crowding through her brain, and, as though her mental anguish were not already suffering enough, sharp pains shot through her teeth and temples. Every time she had one of these twinges it was as though some one had poured a jug of boiling water down her spine, and she shook with nervous terror. Altogether, the night was one long horror.

From the adjoining room, the door of which stood open, Aunt Bachissia could hear Giovanna muttering and raving; now addressing Costantino in terms of extravagant

endearment; then the jury with threats and imprecations. She herself, meanwhile, lay wide awake, her brain clear and active, going over every detail of what had taken place, and laying plans for the future. The sound of Giovanna's grief only aroused a dumb sense of resentment in her breast, and yet, after a while, she too found herself weeping.

CHAPTER IV

On the evening of the following day, a Saturday, Brontu Dejas, returning from the sheepfolds, was hardly off his horse before he began to grumble. Among themselves, the Dejases were notorious grumblers, though with outsiders they were always extremely suave. Apart from this trait he was a good-natured devil; young and handsome, very dark and thin, of medium height, with a short curling red beard. He had beautiful teeth, and, when talking to women, smiled continually in order to show them. Coming home on this particular evening, he began to grumble because he found neither light nor supper awaiting him. It must be admitted that there was some justification; for, after all, he was a working-man, and week after week he would return from six days of toil to find a house as dark and squalid as a beggar's hovel.

"Eh! eh!" he said, as he began to unharness his horse. "This might as well be Isidoro Pane's shanty! Let us have some light, at any rate, so we can see to swear. What is there for supper?"

"Bacon and eggs; there now, be patient," said Aunt Martina. "Did you know that Costantino Ledda had been sentenced to thirty years?"

"Twenty-seven. Well, are those the eggs? My dear mamma, that bacon is rancid. Why don't you give it to the chickens? the chickens, do you hear?" and he snapped his handsome teeth angrily.

"They won't eat it," answered Aunt Martina tranquilly. "Yes, twenty-seven. Ah!

twenty-seven years, that is a long time. I dreamed he had got penal servitude."

"Have you been to see the women yet? How pleased they must be now with their fine marriage! Miserable beggars!"

He had asked the question with evident curiosity, yet the moment his mother told him that she had been, and that Giovanna was tearing her hair and quite beside herself, while it was plain to see that Aunt Bachissia wished now that she had strangled her daughter before allowing her to make such a match, he turned on her furiously.

"What business had you to go near the den of those wretched beggars?"

"Ah! my son. Christian charity! You don't seem to have any idea of what that is!" Aunt Martina liked, indeed, to pretend that she was a charitable person. "Priest Elias was there too this morning; yes, he went to comfort them. Giovanna wants to take the baby to Nuoro for Costantino to see before they carry him off. I told her she was crazy to think of such a thing in this heat; but Priest Elias told her to go, and he nearly cried!"

"What does he know about children! He is barren, like all the rest of them," snarled Brontu, who hated the priests because his uncle, who had been rector in the village before Priest Elias Portolu came from Nuoro, had left all his property to a hospital. Aunt Martina had not forgiven this outrage either, but the old she-wolf knew how to disguise her feelings, and when Brontu railed against the priests she always made the sign of the cross.

"What makes you talk that way, you fool?" said she, hastily crossing herself. "You don't know where your feet may carry you! Priest Elias is a saint. If he were to hear such evil talk as that—beware! He has the Holy Books, and if he chooses to, he can curse our fields, and bring the locusts, and make the bees die!"

"A fine saint!" exclaimed Brontu. Then he insisted upon hearing all the particulars about the Eras,—how Giovanna had cried out, what that old kite, Aunt Bachissia,

had said——

"Well, Giovanna's sobs were enough to melt the very stones; and Aunt Bachissia was in despair because now, in addition to all the rest, the lawyer's fees and other expenses of the trial have stripped them of everything they possessed, even to the house."

The young man listened intently, his face beaming with satisfaction, and his white teeth gleaming. In his undisguised pleasure he was simply and purely savage.

"Listen," said Aunt Martina, when she had finished. "Giacobbe Dejas will be here presently to see you too. He wanted to begin his term of service to-morrow, but I told him to wait till Monday. To-morrow is a holiday, and there is no sense in our having him eat at our expense."

"Beautiful St. Costantino! You are close, mamma."

"Oh, you; you are just like a child! What use is there in wasting things? Life is long and it takes a great deal to live."

"And how are those two women going to live?" asked Brontu after a short silence, seating himself before the eggs and bread.

"They will catch snails, I suppose," said Aunt Martina scornfully. She had taken up her spindle again, and was spinning close to the open door. "You take a great interest in them, Brontu Dejas."

Silence. Within the room the only sounds were the rattle of the spindle and the noise of Brontu's strong teeth, as he munched the hunks of hard bread; outside, though, beyond the portico, the crickets were chirping incessantly; and from the far-away, deserted woods, through the warm, dim atmosphere of the falling night, came the melancholy cry of an owl. Brontu poured out some wine, raised the glass, and opened his mouth, but not to drink. There was something he wanted to say to his mother, but the words would not come. He drank the wine, brushed some drops off his beard with the back of his hand, and again opened his mouth, but still the words

died away.

A sound of heavy boots was heard, tramping across the open space before the house. Aunt Martina, still spinning, arose, told her son that Giacobbe Dejas was coming, and, taking the food and wine, put them away in the cupboard.

Giacobbe saw the action as he entered, and at once understood that she was hiding something in order not to have to offer it to him; but, as he himself would have put it, he was too much a "man of the world" to allow any expression of resentment to escape him.

He advanced, therefore, smiling and cheerful.

"I will wager," said he, laying one finger on his nose, "that you were talking about me."

"No, we were speaking of poor Costantino Ledda."

"Ah, yes, poor fellow!" returned Giacobbe, becoming serious at once. "And when you think that he is innocent! As innocent as the sun! No one can be more sure of it than I."

Brontu threw himself back in an easy attitude, crossed his legs, and, turning slightly around, showed his teeth as he did when talking to women. "As to that, opinions may differ," he said sharply. "There, for instance, is my mother; she dreamed that he had got the death sentence."

"Oh, no, Brontu! What are you talking about? Penal servitude!"

"Well, it amounts to the same thing. Now, we will talk business."

"Very well, let us talk business, by all means," assented Giacobbe, crossing his legs as well.

A little later the two men, having settled the matter in hand, went off together, Brontu leading the way to the tavern. He himself was not in the least close, and if he never offered a visitor a glass in his own house, it was only not to irritate Aunt

Martina. At the tavern, though, he was superb, and on this particular evening he made Giacobbe drink so much, and drank so much himself, that they both became tipsy.

Coming out at last into the silent, deserted street, filled with the odour of the dry fields, they began talking again of Costantino, and Brontu said, with brutal frankness, that he was glad of the sentence.

"Go to the devil!" shouted Giacobbe. "You have no heart!"

"All right, that's it; I have no heart."

"Just because Giovanna wouldn't have you, you are glad to hear of the death, or worse than death, of a brother."

"He's not dead, and he's not a brother; and it was I who would not have Giovanna Era. If I had wanted her to, she would have licked the soles of my shoes."

"Bum—bum—look out, or you'll have a tumble, my little spring bird. You lie like a servant-maid."

"I—I—am—not—a—a—servant-maid," stammered Brontu, furious. "If you say anything like that again, I'll take you by the crown of your head and choke you."

"Bum—I tell you, you'll fall down, little spring bird," repeated Giacobbe at the top of his lungs. Their voices rang out through the quiet street; then they suddenly ceased talking, and stillness reigned once more. In the distance, under the light of the stars which overhung the mountain crests like garlands of golden flowers, the owl still sounded his melancholy note.

All at once Brontu began to cry in a strange, drunken fashion, with neither sobs nor tears.

"Well, what is the matter now?" demanded Giacobbe in a low tone. "Are you drunk?"

"Yes, I am. Drunk with poison, you galley refuse. I only hope you will be strangled

yet!"

At this the other felt very indignant. Not only had he never been to prison, but he had never so much as been accused of any offence against the law. Yet, mingled with his resentment, there was a vague feeling of terror.

"You are going crazy!" said he in a still lower tone. "What's the matter with you? Why should you talk to me like that? Have I ever done anything to you?"

Whereupon the other became confidential, and, groaning as though he were in physical pain, he declared that he was, in truth, madly in love with Giovanna, and that he had hoped, and prayed the devil, from the beginning, that Costantino would be found guilty.

"Even if the devil were to get my soul it wouldn't matter, because, you see, I don't believe in him!" said he, breaking into a foolish, cackling laugh, more disagreeable to listen to even than his previous maudlin distress. "I intend to marry Giovanna," he presently added.

Giacobbe was greatly astonished at this, but he pretended to be still more so. "What!" said he. "You take my breath away! How—why—what on earth do you mean? How can you marry her?"

"She will get a divorce, that's all. Well, what of that? There's a law that gives a woman the right to marry again if her husband has been sent to prison for a long sentence."

Giacobbe had heard some talk of this, but no case of legal divorce, still less of remarriage, had as yet been heard of in Orlei. Nevertheless, not to appear ignorant, he said: "Oh, yes, I know; but it is a mortal sin. Giovanna Era will never do it!"

"That's just what I am worrying about, Giacobbe Dejas. Will you talk to her on the subject to-morrow?"

"Oh, yes, of course! To-morrow! You're an ass, Brontu Dejas! You may be rich, but

you are as stupid as a lizard, stupider than one! Here, when you might marry a maid,—some rich young girl, as fresh as a rose with the dew still on it,—you want instead to have that woman! Upon my word, it will give me something to laugh at for the next seven months!"

"All right, you can laugh till you split in two, like a ripe pomegranate! But I'm going to marry her!" said Brontu angrily. "There's no other woman like her, and I shall marry her; you will see!"

"Well, do marry her, my little spring bird!" cried the other, bursting into a loud laugh. Brontu joined in, and they continued on their way uproariously till they saw a tall figure with a staff silently approaching them.

"Uncle Isidoro Pane, did you have good sport?" shouted Giacobbe. "And your legs, have they plenty of punctures?"

"You had better turn leech-fisher yourself," said the other, coming up to them. "Whew! what a smell of brandy! Some one must have broken a cask near here!"

"Do you mean that you think we are drunk?" demanded Brontu in a bullying tone. "The only reason you don't get drunk yourself is because you haven't anything to do it with! Get away! get away, I tell you, or I'll crush you like a frog!"

The old man laughed softly, and walked on.

"Idiot!" said Giacobbe in an undertone. "Don't you know that he could have helped you with Giovanna? He's a friend of hers."

"Here! here!" shouted Brontu, turning around, and gesticulating with both arms. "Come back! come back, I tell you! 'Sidore Pane, che ti morsichi il cane!"[4] he laughed, delighted with his rhyme. But Isidoro did not stop.

"Do you hear me?" yelled the tipsy Brontu, stammering somewhat. "I tell you to come here! Ah! you won't do it, you little toad? I tell—you——"

But Isidoro silently pursued his way.

"Don't talk to him like that; what sort of way is this to carry on?" remonstrated Giacobbe. Brontu thereupon adopted a new method.

"Little flower, come here, come here! Come listen to what I have to say. You may tell her—that friend of yours—well, yes, Giovanna, that is who I mean. You may tell her that if she gets a divorce I'll marry her!"

This had the desired effect. The old man stopped short, and turning around, called in a distinct voice:

"Giacobbe Dejas!"

"What is it, my dear?" answered the herdsman mockingly.

"Make—him—keep—quiet!" returned Isidoro in the tone of a person who means to be obeyed.

For some unexplained reason, Giacobbe felt a sudden sense of chill as he heard the tone and those four emphatic words. Taking his new master by the arm he drew him quickly away, murmuring:

"You are a dunce! You behave as though you had no sense at all! What a way to talk!"

"Didn't you tell me to yourself?"

"I? You are dreaming! Am I crazy?"

They continued on their way, staggering along together, arm in arm. On the portico they found Aunt Martina, still spinning. She saw at once that her son was tipsy, but said nothing, knowing by experience that to irritate him when he was in that condition was only to arouse him to a state of fury. When he asked for wine, though, she said there was none.

"Ah! there is none? No wine in the Dejas' house! The richest people in the neighbourhood! What a miserly mother you are." Then he began to bluster: "I'm not going to make a scandal, but I can tell you I am going to marry Giovanna Era!"

"Yes, yes, you are going to marry her," said Aunt Martina to quiet him. "But in the meantime, go to bed, and don't make such a noise; if she hears you, she won't have you."

He quieted down, but made Giacobbe unroll a couple of rush mats and spread them on the floor; then, throwing himself down, nothing would do but the herdsman must lie down as well, and sleep beside him; and rather than have any trouble, Aunt Martina was obliged to agree.

Thus it fell out that instead of beginning his term of service on the Monday, Giacobbe entered his new place on Saturday evening.

CHAPTER V

Sunday morning, a fortnight later, found all the personages of our story assembled at Mass, with Priest Elias officiating. The country people said that when he celebrated he seemed to have wings.

Giovanna alone was absent; and this for two reasons. First, her late misfortune required the observance of a sort of mourning; she was expected not to show herself outside the house except when her work made it necessary. Apart from this, however, she had fallen into a state of lethargy, and appeared to be quite unable to move about, to go anywhere, to work, or even to pray. She had, indeed, never been much of a Christian at any time, though before the trial she had made a vow to walk barefoot to a certain church in the mountains, and, if Costantino were acquitted, to drag herself on her hands and knees from the point where the church first came into view to its doors; that is, a distance of about two kilometres.

Now, she had ceased praying, or talking, or eating, and even seemed to have lost all interest in her child. Aunt Bachissia had to feed him with bread crumbled up in milk in order to keep the poor little fellow alive. Some of the neighbours said that Giovanna was losing her mind; and indeed it did look so. She would remain for

hours at a time in a sort of stupor, crouched in a corner with her glassy eyes fixed on vacancy, and when she aroused it was only to fly into violent paroxysms, tearing her hair, and crying out wildly.

After the final interview with Costantino, when she had had the child with her, she could think of nothing else, and described the scene in the prison over and over again, with the monotonous insistence of a monomaniac:

"He was there, and he was laughing. He was livid, and yet he laughed, standing there behind the bars. Malthineddu seized hold of the bars, and he touched his little hands and then he laughed! My heart! my heart! don't laugh like that; it hurts me, because I know that that is how dead people laugh! And the guards, standing there like harpies! At first they were good to us, those guards who watch over human flesh; but afterwards, when Costantino had been condemned, they were cruel, as cruel as dogs! Malthinu was frightened when he saw them, and cried; and his father laughed! Do you understand? The baby, the little, innocent thing, cried; he understood that his father had been condemned, and he cried! Oh, my heart! my heart!"

Then Aunt Bachissia, beside herself with impatience, and unable to hold in any longer, would exclaim:

"Honestly, Giovanna, any one would take you to be two years old! That child there has more sense than you. Simpleton!" And sometimes she would threaten to beat her; but prayers, sympathy, and threats were equally unavailing.

Meanwhile, word came from Nuoro that, while waiting to hear from the appeal, Costantino had been removed to the jurisdiction of Cagliari. Then came a short, sad, little letter from the prisoner himself. The journey had gone well, but there, at Cagliari, the heat was suffocating, and certain red insects, and others of different colours, tormented him night and day. He sent a kiss to the child, and urged Giovanna to bring him up in the fear of God. He also asked to be remembered to his

friend Isidoro. On this Sunday, therefore, at the close of the Mass, Aunt Bachissia waited till the fisherman should have finished singing the sacred lauds in his ringing voice, in order to deliver Costantino's message.

Priest Elias remained kneeling on the steps of the high altar, with white ecstatic face, and Isidoro still sang on, but the people began to leave, filing past Aunt Bachissia, as she stood waiting.

Aunt Martina passed, with the fiery bearing of a blooded steed, old but indomitable still; Brontu passed, dressed in a new suit of clothes, his hair shining with oil; he railed at the priests, but on Sunday he went to Mass; and Giacobbe passed, in a pair of new linen trousers, smelling strong of the shop. Still Isidoro sang on.

The church, at last, became almost empty; the fisherman's sonorous voice resounded among the dusty, white rafters; the boards and beams of the roof; the side altars, covered with coarse cloths, adorned with paper flowers, and presided over by melancholy saints of painted wood.

When Uncle Isidoro stopped at length, there were only the priest, a boy who was extinguishing the candles, Aunt Bachissia, and an old blind man left.

Isidoro had to repeat the final response to the lauds himself; then he got up, put away the little bell used to mark the Stations of the Rosary, and moved towards Aunt Bachissia, who stood waiting for him near the door. They went out together, and she gave him Costantino's message; then she begged him to do her a favour; it was to ask Priest Elias to go to see Giovanna and try to reason her out of the condition she had allowed herself to fall into. He promised to do so, and they separated.

On the way home Aunt Bachissia was joined by Giacobbe Dejas, who had been standing on the open square before the church, looking down at the village and the yellow fields, all bathed in sunlight.

"How are you?" asked the herdsman.

"Ah, good Lord! bad enough, without being actually ill. And you, how do you like

your new place?"

"Oh! I told you how it would be. I'm out of the frying-pan into the fire! The old woman is as close as the devil; she expects me to work till I fall to pieces, and will hardly let me come in to Mass once a fortnight."

"And the master?"

"Oh! the master? Well, he's just a little beast, that's all."

"What do you mean by saying such a thing as that, Giacobbe?"

"Well, it's the simple truth, little spring bird. He growls and snarls over every trifle, and gets drunk, and lies like time. I suppose Isidoro Pane told you——" He paused, and Aunt Bachissia, fixing her small green eyes upon him, reflected that, if he talked like that about his master, he must have some object.

"Well," he resumed, "Isidoro Pane must have told you—of course he told you, about Brontu being drunk that evening; it was just here, where we are now, Brontu yelled out: 'Tell Giovanna Era that if she gets a divorce I'll marry her!' The beast, that's just what he is, a beast! He drinks brandy by the cask."

Of the last clause of this speech, however, Aunt Bachissia took in not one word. The fact that Brontu had said he would marry Giovanna if she got a divorce was all she comprehended. Her green eyes flashed as she asked haughtily: "And you wish him not to, Giacobbe?"

"I? What difference would it make to me, little spring bird? But you ought to be ashamed of yourself to think of such a thing, Aunt Kite, hardly two weeks after——"

"I'm not a kite," snapped the old woman angrily; and though the other laughed, she could see that he too was furious.

"You might, at least, wait to hear from the appeal," said he. "And then you can devour Costantino as you would a lamb without spot. Yes, devour him if you want

to, but I can tell you that Giovanna will get a brandy-bottle for a husband, and just as long as Martina Dejas is alive you will starve worse than ever."

"Ah! you bald-pate——" began Aunt Bachissia. But Giacobbe walked rapidly away, and she had only the satisfaction of hurling abuse at his retreating back. Not that she proposed to have Giovanna apply for a divorce. Heaven forbid! With poor Costantino still under appeal, and waiting there in that fiery furnace, devoured by horrible insects! No, indeed, but,—what right had that vile servant to talk of his master so? What business was it of his to meddle in his master's concerns? And Aunt Bachissia decided then and there that that "bald raven" had himself taken a fancy to Giovanna; and, filled with this new idea, she reached the cottage.

Her immediate thought was to repeat the whole story to Giovanna, but finding her, for the first time in two weeks, bathed, and tranquilly engaged in combing out her long hair, which fell down in heavy, tumbled masses, she was afraid to say a word.

CHAPTER VI

Time passed by; the autumn came, and then the winter. Costantino's appeal had, of course, been rejected, as appeals always are. One night he was fastened by a chain to another convict, whom he had never seen, and the two took their places in a long file of others, all dressed in linen, all silent; like a drove of wild beasts controlled by some invisible power. They were going—where? They did not know. They were silent—why? They could not say. Presently they were all marched down to the water's edge, put on board a long, black steamer, and shut into a cage—still like wild beasts. All about them lay the crystal sea, across whose dark, green waters the ruby and emerald reflections from the ship's lights danced and sparkled like strings of glittering jewels; while above, engirdling the great ring of water, hung the deep blue sky, like an immense, silent vale dotted over with yellow, starry flowers. At first Costantino's sensations were not altogether unhappy. True, he was going into the unknown to fulfil a cruel destiny, but down in the bottom of his heart he firmly

believed that before very long he would be liberated, and he never lost hope.

The bustle on deck, the rattle of the chains, and the first motion of the ship as it got under way, filled him with childish curiosity. He had never been to sea, but, as a boy, he had often stood scanning the horizon, and gazing at the grey stretch of the Mediterranean, sometimes dotted over with the white wings of sailing vessels. At such times, as he stood among the wild shrubs and undergrowth of his native mountains, he would dream of some day crossing that far-away sea to distant, unknown lands, and to the golden cities of the Continent. He could read and write, and had a book in which St. Peter's at Rome was depicted; and in the chapter on sacred history there was an engraving of ancient Jerusalem. Ah! Jerusalem. According to his ideas, Jerusalem must be the finest and largest city in the world; and, as he stood there dreaming among the bushes on Mount Bellu, and gazing off at the grey Mediterranean, it was to Jerusalem that he longed to go. And now, here he was crossing the sea; but how different from his dreams! Yet, so splendid was his conception of Jerusalem that if it had been thither that he was bound, even a chained and condemned prisoner on his way to expiate a crime, he would, nevertheless, have been content to go.

The pitching and rolling of the ship was accompanied by the ceaseless rush of the water from the bows. Some of the convicts chattered among themselves, laughing and cracking jokes. Costantino fell asleep and dreamed, as he always did, that he was at home again. He had been set free almost immediately,—he dreamed,—and had gone home without letting Giovanna know a word about it so as to give her the unutterable joy of the surprise. She kept saying: "But this is a dream, this is a dream——" The expenses of the trial had stripped the little house bare of everything, even the bed was gone; but nothing made any difference. All the riches in the world could not compare with the bliss of being free and of living with Giovanna and Malthineddu. But he was terribly tired, so he curled himself up in the baby's cradle; the cradle rocked, harder and harder all the time. Giovanna laughed

and called out: "Be careful not to fall out, Costantino, my dear, my lamb!" And the cradle rocked more than ever. At first he laughed as well, but all at once he found he was suffering, then he fell head foremost on the ground, and woke up.

There was a heavy sea on, and Costantino was sick. The ship struggled up to mountain-heights and then plunged swiftly into bottomless gulfs of water, the waves breaking even over the third deck.

All the convicts were ill; some still attempted to joke, while others swore, and one, with a yellow, cunning face,—he was Costantino's companion—moaned and lamented like a child.

"Oh!" he groaned, cowering down, gasping and frightened. "I was dreaming that I was at home, and now—now—oh! dear St. Francis, have pity on me!"

Notwithstanding his own misery, both physical and mental, Costantino felt sorry for him. "Patience, my brother, I was dreaming too about being at home."

"I feel," cried another, "as though my soul were melting away. What the devil is the matter with this ship! It seems to be trying to dance the Sardian dance!" Whereat some of the others still had sufficient spirit left to laugh.

The storm was increasing. At times Costantino thought he was dying, and was frightened; yet, on the other hand, he felt an unutterable weariness of life. His soul seemed to be steeped in the same bitter fluid that his stomach was casting up. Never, not even at the moment when the sentence of condemnation had been passed upon him, had he experienced anything like his present condition of hopeless misery. He too began to swear and groan, doubling his fists, and twisting his chilled toes. "May you die just as I am dying now, you murderous dogs, who brought all this on me!" he muttered, while tears as bitter as gall welled up into his eyes.

Towards dawn the wind subsided, but even when the sickness had passed, Costantino found no relief; he felt as though he had been beaten to the point of death, and he was shaking with cold, and exhaustion, and dread. The steamer

relentlessly pursued its way. Oh, if it would only stop for just one moment! A single moment of quiet, it seemed to Costantino, would suffice to restore his strength; but this continuous forging ahead, the constant rolling, the never-ceasing roar of the waves as they lashed the sides of the vessel, kept him in a state of nervous tremor. On, and on, and on; the long hours of agony dragged slowly by; night came again; and all the time his subtle-faced, yellow-visaged companion hardly ceased to sigh and lament, driving Costantino into a perfect frenzy of irritation. Sleep came at length, and then, strange to relate, he had the same dream as on the previous night, only this time it was Giovanna who was in the cradle, and the cradle was rocking quite gently.

When Costantino awoke, the boat seemed hardly to move; in the silence that precedes the dawn, he heard a voice say: "That is Procida."

He was shaking with cold, and wondered if they were to land there, where, he thought he remembered to have heard, the galleys were.

Presently his companion awoke, shivering and yawning prodigiously.

"Are we there?" asked Costantino. "How do you feel?"

"Pretty well. Are we there?"

"I don't know; we are near Procida; is that where the galleys are?"

"No; they're at Nisida," said the other. "But we are not galley-birds!" he added, with a touch of pride, and then fell to yawning again. "Oh, how I was dreaming!" he said, and then stopped, overcome by the memory of his dream.

The prisoners were landed at Naples and immediately placed in a black-and-yellow van, something like a movable sepulchre. Costantino caught a brief glimpse of a wide expanse of smooth green water, a quantity of huge steamers, and innumerable small craft filled with gaily dressed men who shouted out all manner of incomprehensible things. All around the boats, on the surface of the green water, floated weeds, scraps of paper, refuse of all kinds. Enormous buildings were

outlined against a sky of deepest blue. At Naples, the convicts were separated; Costantino was taken off to the prison at X—— and saw his yellow-visaged companion no more.

On reaching his destination, Costantino was at once consigned to a cell where he was to pass the first six months of his term in solitary confinement. This cell measured hardly two metres in length by six palms in breadth: it was furnished with a rude folding bed, which, during the day, was closed and fastened against the wall. From the tiny window nothing could be seen but a strip of sky.

Of the entire term of his imprisonment this was the dreariest period. He would sit immovable for hours with his legs crossed and his hands clasped about his knee—thinking; but strangely enough he never either lost hope or rebelled against his fate. He was persuaded that what he was enduring was in expiation of that mortal sin, as he regarded it, of having lived with a woman to whom he had not been married by religious ceremony, and he felt an absolute certainty that, this sin atoned for, his innocence would some day be established and he would be set free. At the same time, although he did not despair, he suffered acutely, and passed the days, hours, minutes in a state of nervous expectation of some change that never came, and a prey to a devouring homesickness. Thus day by day, hour by hour, moment by moment, he lived in his thoughts close to Giovanna and the child, recalling with minute precision every little unimportant detail of the cottage life, his past existence, and the happiness that had once been his. In addition, moreover, to his own misery, he suffered at the thought of what Giovanna was enduring: now and again an access of passionate tenderness, having her far more than the child for its object, would seize him and arouse him from his usual state of pensive melancholy; then, leaping to his feet, he would stride back and forth,—two, or at most three, steps bringing him to the opposite wall, where he would presently stop, and, throwing himself against it, would beat his head as though trying to dash out his brains. These were his moments of utmost desperation.

Hope always returned, however, and then he would begin to weave fantastic dreams of an immediate and romantic restoration to freedom, and the guard never entered his cell that his heart did not begin to beat violently, fancying that he was the bearer of some joyful tidings.

Sometimes he played morra with himself, and he cared so much whether he lost or won that he would laugh aloud like a child. At other times he would sit for hours looking at his outstretched palm, imagining that it was a plain divided into tancas, with walls, rivers, trees, herds of cattle, and shepherds; and weaving stories about them all, full of exciting adventures. And sometimes he prayed, counting on his fingers, and repeating the lauds aloud, trying even to improvise new verses. In this way it came about that he actually did compose a laud of four strophes, dedicated to St. Costantino, in which the saint's aid was particularly invoked in behalf of all prisoners wrongfully condemned. The refrain ran:

"Saint Costantino, we implore thee For thy condemned innocent!"

The composing of this laud completely occupied him for many days, and made him, for the time being, almost happy. When it was finished he was wild with joy, but instantly an overpowering desire to tell some one about it seized him; whom was there, though, to tell? The guard was a little Neapolitan; bald, clean-shaven, with a flat, snub nose like that of a skeleton; he talked to him sometimes, but he was not sufficiently intelligent to understand the laud; then there were the other prisoners whom he saw during the exercise hour, but to them he was not allowed to speak; finally he bethought him of the chaplain, and asked to confess in order that he might have the opportunity to repeat the laud to him. The chaplain was a Northerner, a young man, tall and lean, with quick, nervous movements, and great flashing black eyes filled with intelligence. He listened patiently while Costantino repeated his laud, and then enquired if he did not think that, in asking to confess for the purpose of reciting it, he had been guilty of the sin of vanity.

Costantino reddened and said "No," whereupon the confessor smiled indulgently, reassured him, praised his verses, and sent him off in a state of beatification.

A few days later the prisoner again asked to confess. "Well, have you written another laud?" asked the chaplain.

"No," said the other, looking down, "but I want to ask a favour."

"What is it? Let us hear."

Costantino held his breath a moment, frightened at his own temerity; then he said quickly: "Well, this is it: I want to send the laud home!"

"Ah!" said the chaplain, "I can't do that; how could you write it, anyhow?"

"Oh, I know how to write!" exclaimed the prisoner, raising his clear eyes to the other's face.

"Yes; but the trouble is, my brother, that you are not allowed to write."

"Oh, I can manage that!"

"Well, well, but I can't; I can't do it."

Costantino looked extremely dejected and all but wept; then he confessed; asked whether it might not be better to dedicate the laud to SS. Peter and Paul, since they too had been in prison, and begged to be forgiven if he had presumed too much in making such a request. The young chaplain gave the absolution and prayed for some moments aloud, the prisoner, meanwhile, praying to himself; then, laying one hand on the other's head, the priest said in a low voice: "Listen; write out your laud if you can manage it, and—keep a brave heart."

A wave of joy swept over Costantino, and from that moment he had no other thought than of how he might contrive to transcribe his verses. "I have been a student," he said one day to the guard. "But I know how to make shoes as well. Would you like to have me make you a pair? Oh, I can fit you!"

"You want something," said the man in Neapolitan. "But it's no use, I will do

nothing."

"Now, Uncle Serafino, be kind! Remember your immortal soul!"

"I remember my immortal soul well enough, and I've told you before that I'm not your uncle; you killed your uncle."

"All right; it does not signify; only in our part of the country we always call all the important people 'uncle.'"

Don Serafino, however, wanted his own title, which Costantino, for his part, could not bring himself to employ, since in Sardinia it is used only in addressing people of noble birth; so for that day nothing was accomplished.

On the following morning the prisoner returned to the charge: he recounted how he was of good family, had received an education, and fallen heir to a fortune; this, his uncle, he whom he had been accused of murdering, had spent, and had then shut him up in a dark little room, and forced him to make shoes; and once he had torn almost the entire skin off one of his feet. He even offered to show the foot, but Don Serafino declined with an expression of horror, and cursed the dead man's cruelty under his breath.

The result was that Costantino presently found himself in possession of a sheet of paper, and by means of blood and a small stick, he succeeded in writing out the laud for condemned prisoners. Thus the winter wore away.

One March day a visit of inspection was made to Costantino's cell; it was under the direction of a big man, with two round, staring, pale-blue eyes, and so little chin that what he had was completely hidden by a heavy light moustache.

"Hello! you there," he cried to the prisoner. "What can you do?" Don Serafino was with the party, and as his eye fell upon him, Costantino suddenly recalled the fancy sketch he had once given him. "I can make shoes," he replied.

"Hello!" said the big man with the staring blue eyes. "You can? Well, you murdered

your uncle."

As the remark seemed to call for no reply, Costantino merely moved his lips, as though to say: "Certainly, I murdered my uncle; may it please your mightiness!"

The party moved on, but before long Don Serafino returned and informed the prisoner that his term of solitary confinement had been shortened by more than a third, and that he would soon be released from his cell. Costantino supposed that he owed this favour to his good behaviour, but Don Serafino explained that it was because he had interceded for him with the authorities, telling them that the prisoner was of good family, that one of his feet had been flayed, and that he could make shoes.

A few days after this Costantino was taken from the cell and set to work, in company with a number of others, at making shoes; he had, moreover, the privilege of writing once every three months to Giovanna. All of these concessions made him quite happy. Then the spring came, and the convicts, who had suffered intensely from cold, became gay and cheerful, keeping up a continual flow of chaff during working hours. Two brothers from the Abruzzi, however, who had asked as a special favour to be allowed to work together, quarrelled so incessantly over the division of a piece of property that was to be settled on their release—that is to say, in ten years' time—that, after falling upon one another one day, they had to be separated and confined for two weeks in cells. Even then, the very first time they encountered each other during the exercise hour, they began fighting again.

It was during this hour of comparative freedom, when the prisoners took their exercise in the courtyard, that Costantino made the acquaintance of a compatriot, another Sardinian. This man, who had received the nickname of the King of Spades, on account of his triangular-shaped face, his big body, and spindle legs, was white and puffy, and so closely shaven as to look quite bald; he was an ex-marshal of carbineers, convicted of peculation, and, according to his own account, was related

to a Cardinal who was secretly in friendly relations with the King and Queen. This personage, he declared, might shortly be expected to procure his pardon, and not alone his but that of any among his friends whom he should recommend; those, for instance, who supplied him with cigars, money, or stamps. He had been assigned for duty in the clerk's office, and thus had many opportunities to communicate with persons outside, to arrange clandestine correspondences between the prisoners and their families, and to smuggle in money, tobacco, stamps, and liquor; all greatly to his own profit and advantage. It was not long before he asked Costantino if he did not wish to send a letter home.

"Yes," replied the young man, "but I am poor; I have nothing to give you."

"Never mind," said the other generously; "that makes no difference, we are compatriots!" and forthwith he launched into an account of his exploits as a marshal. He had, it appeared, killed ten or more bandits in the course of his career, and had received ten medals; once when he happened to be in Rome the King had invited him to his box at the theatre! He was, in short, a hero; but of his crowning exploit he never spoke, merely observing that he had been sent to prison through the machinations of powerful enemies.

At first, in spite of his equivocal appearance, Costantino believed it all, and felt deeply sympathetic; but gradually, as day by day the accounts of the marshal's adventures grew more varied and marvellous, he became sceptical, and ended by placing as little faith in what he said as did the others, though they all pretended to be greatly impressed in order to obtain favours.

Every member, indeed, of the little community, not excepting the guards, was both a liar and a hypocrite. The prisoners all tried to make out that they were something quite different from what they appeared to be, and each one had some remarkable explanation of how he happened to be there; while the very fact of their being compelled, quite against their will, to associate closely and intimately together,

destroyed every spark of mutual regard that might, under different circumstances, have sprung up among them.

Costantino noted with surprise that those who were held for the more serious charges, while they were the greatest braggarts and boasters, seemed in other respects to be better than the rest. The minor delinquents were, almost without exception, cowardly, surly, and treacherous; fawning upon any one who could do them a service, and betraying their friends without hesitation, when the occasion arose.

"There is hardly a man in this place," remarked the King of Spades one day to Costantino, "but what is utterly corrupt; most of them are hardened criminals, versed in every form of vice. Why, the very air we breathe is contaminated, and a man, suddenly deprived of his liberty and cut off from society, quickly goes to decay in such a place; he loses all moral sense, becomes deceitful, cowardly, and violent, and soon grows so depraved that he cannot even realise his own depravity." And he gave some startling instances in illustration of his point. "It is my belief," he continued, "that among all who are here now, we two, the Duck-neck and the Delegate, are the only honest ones; all the others are criminals. Be very wary with them, Costantino, my dear fellow-countryman; this place is nothing but a den of bandits, of a worse class even than those whom I put an end to!"

Sometimes Costantino felt quite depressed, reflecting that if his own honesty made no better impression than that of the King of Spades there was little to be proud of.

The Duck-neck was a Sicilian student, a consumptive with white hair, a long neck, and the body of a child. Though he spent most of his time reading, was timid and shrinking, and rarely spoke, he would occasionally fly into such violent rages that he was obliged to submit to the embraces of Ermelinda, as the prisoners called the strait-jacket. In one such paroxysm he had once killed a professor.

The Delegate, who looked like a gentleman, was likewise a Southerner; he, it

appeared, had been sent to prison out of pure envy! He had a swelling chest and a noble head; his nose was large and Grecian, and there was a cleft in the middle of his lower lip; his expression was haughty and repellent, but as soon as he was approached he became extremely affable, even servile. Notwithstanding the "powerful influence" that was being exerted in his favour, certain lofty personages, a minister in particular, were persecuting him unrelentingly. The student had lent him some scientific books, and he was now bent upon writing a great scientific work himself. Being also assigned to the clerk's office, he was able secretly to devote a good deal of time to this splendid undertaking, of which the King of Spades gave glowing accounts.

"See here," said he one day to Costantino; "that man will make all our fortunes. We work every day on the book and have a set of phrases of our own, referring to it; but the utmost caution is necessary, otherwise—beware!—everything may be ruined, and it is a real scientific discovery. I will run over the main heads for you. How the atmosphere was formed—that is, the air. How the ocean was formed—that is, all bodies of water. Origin of the organic world. A rational demonstration of the existence of a primordial continent in the central tract of the Pacific Ocean. Upon this continent human life first made its appearance, passing the period of infancy in those tropical regions. Immigration into Africa and Asia. The continent disappears by reason of a great cataclysm. Identification of this cataclysm with the flood of the Bible. The other continents emerge. Then—End of atmosphere—End of oceans—End of the heavenly bodies—End of the earth!"

"And end of imprisonment?" enquired Costantino with a smile. He had understood very little of the other's discourse, only taking it for granted that, as usual, he was relating fiction. The King of Spades had to have a listener, however, so he continued tranquilly: "Just wait a moment, the other chapters are: Amplification of the accepted doctrine of evolution. Evolution of our species from the anthropomorphic apes. Causes of the inclination of the axis of the planets,—but not Saturn. Reasons

for this anomaly. Sun spots, etc.——"

"Oh, go to the devil!" said Costantino to himself, yawning prodigiously. He was staring across the bare courtyard, with its fountain playing in the middle. "And how about the magpie?" he presently asked, pointing to one that had domesticated itself in the establishment. The convicts gorged him with food, and he had become fat and somnolent. If by any chance he felt hungry, he called certain of them by name in a queer, shrill voice.

"Oh, let him burst!" said the King of Spades fretfully. "You are nothing but a child, Costantino; more interested in that silly bird than in a scientific work of the very first importance. Indirectly I can lay claim to the magnum part of the discovery, as it was I who brought the Delegate and the Duck-neck together. We have already succeeded in despatching an abstract of the work, together with a letter addressed to the King, to the Prime Minister. But remember—not a word of this to any one! One eminent scientist, on reading the abstract, exclaimed: 'This is the loftiest manifestation we have yet had of Italian genius!' Take my word for it, Costantino, my dear compatriot, the Delegate has reached a dizzy height. He has some powerful friends who are now in Rome for the express purpose of working for his pardon; but then, he has powerful enemies as well! However, he will be liberated before long on account of this book."

Costantino found all this extremely tiresome, but he pretended to listen as he was hoping soon to get an answer to his letter to Giovanna, and wanted to keep in the other's good graces. The answer did arrive, sure enough, in May, and gave him the most intense happiness. Giovanna wrote that the boy had been unwell, possibly because the anguish she had endured had affected her milk; now, however, he was entirely well again. Isidoro Pane had received the lauds to San Costantino written in blood, and had wept when he read them, and now he sang them in church, the whole congregation accompanying him. No one knew who had written the verses, but

Isidoro said an old man with a long, snowy beard, all dressed in white, had appeared one day on the river-bank, and had handed them to him. People said it was San Costantino, or perhaps Jesus Christ himself! And Giacobbe Dejas had hired himself out to his rich relatives. And the Nuoro lawyer had taken possession of the title to their house, allowing the two women to live there for a small rent. The rich Dejases often had work for Aunt Bachissia, and for her, Giovanna, as well; so they managed to get along. Pietro Punia had been ill with carbuncles, and had died. Annicca "with the silver shoulders" was married. An old shepherd had been arrested for stealing beehives. Thus the letter went on, entirely filled with such simple chronicles, which, to Costantino, however, were fraught with the most intense interest. As he read he seemed to breathe again his native air; each item set before him a picture of the rocks and bushes, the people and objects, to which he was bound by the closest ties of habit and affection. Only, it disturbed him a little to learn that Giovanna sometimes worked at the Dejases'. He knew of Brontu's passion for her, and that she had refused him, and as he read this part of the letter he experienced a first, vague sensation of alarm. Three francs were enclosed, and when he reflected that this money might probably have come from the Dejases, he hated to touch it. Two francs he offered to the King of Spades, rather expecting that his dear compatriot would refuse to take them. His dear compatriot, on the contrary, accepted them with alacrity, remarking that they would serve as part payment for the person who conducted the clandestine correspondence.

Under other circumstances this would have angered Costantino, but just then he was so anxious to write again to Giovanna, to maintain some sort of intercourse with his little, far-off world, that he would have sacrificed the half of his life to secure the good offices of the King of Spades.

He read and re-read his letter till he knew every word by heart. During the day he hid it in the sole of his shoe, ripping this open again each night. And always, as he sat silently bending over his work, his mind dwelt continuously on the people and

events in that little, distant village, and he identified himself so completely at times with the subjects of his thoughts that he lost sight of his real surroundings. He saw the old shepherd steal cautiously up to the hives, his face and hands wrapped in cloths. The spot is sunny, deserted; all about lie green fields dotted over with flowers, dog-roses, honeysuckle, sweet-peas, undulating lines of colour stretching away in all directions as far as the eye can reach. The warm air is heavy with the odour of pennyroyal and other aromatic herbs, and the brooding silence is broken only by the low hum of the bees.

Anxiously Costantino follows every movement of the old thief as he first detaches the little cork hives from the flat stones on which they stand; then, tying them all together with a stout cord, places them in a bag, and makes off. Just at this point Costantino could not quite make up his mind as to the next act in the drama, and as he was considering, a shrill voice broke in on his reflections: "Cos-tan-ti! Cos-tan-ti!" and arousing himself with an effort he saw the magpie, fat and sleek, hopping lazily about in the courtyard, and stretching its blue wings in the sun.

At night, with the precious letter safely deposited beneath his pillow, he would resume the thread of his thoughts. Now it was the sonorous voice of his friend the fisherman that he would hear, singing the lauds, and sometimes he almost wondered if Isidoro had not in truth seen—on the river-bank, among the oleander bushes bending over with their weight of fragrant pink blossoms—the figure of an old man dressed in white, with a long beard as snowy as the wool of a little newborn lamb! Ah, surely it was the Saint himself, good San Costantino, come to tell Isidoro that he had not forgotten the prisoners unjustly condemned!

Costantino readily accepted this picture of the Saint, although the statue of him in the village church represented a robust and swarthy warrior.

"Good old Saint! Good San Costantino! Soon, soon thou wilt free us all, blessed forever be thy name!"

Then the scene changes. Now it is the portico of the rich Dejas's house; every one is busy with the spun wool, dividing it into long skeins preparatory to weaving it. Giovanna comes and goes, carrying huge bunches in her hands. Brontu is there too, seated on the threshold of the kitchen door, with his legs well apart, and between them, laughing and unsteady, stands the little Malthineddu. Ah, intolerable thought! Presently, however, remembering that Brontu is never at home except on holidays, he is somewhat comforted, and then he falls asleep, his heart steeped in a mingled sensation of joy and pain.

CHAPTER VII

Summer had come again.

"How quickly the time passes," said Aunt Martina, as she sat spinning on the portico. "It seems only yesterday, Giacobbe, that you took service with us, and yet, here you are back again to renew the contract! Ah, the time does indeed pass quickly for us poor employers! You have saved thirty silver scudi at the very least, and have begun to build a house of your own, but what have we to show for it?"

"That's all very well, but how about the sweat of my brow, little spring bird? The sweat of my brow, doesn't that count for anything?" replied the herdsman, who was busily greasing a leather cord with tallow.

"But there's your keep," rejoined the old woman. "Ah, you have forgotten to allow for that!"

May the crows pick your bones! thought Giacobbe, who would have liked to say it aloud, but was afraid to. He thoroughly detested both his employers, the miserly old woman and the weak, hot-headed son, who tormented him continually with his project of marrying Giovanna if she would get a divorce. It was important, though, for him to renew the contract, so he held his tongue. He greased the thong thoroughly, rolled it up, and took it into the house; then he asked permission to go

off to attend to a piece of business of his own, and having received a grudging assent, departed.

Walking in the direction of the Era cottage, the herdsman presently descried little Malthineddu bestriding, with very unsteady seat, a spirited stick horse, the sun gilding his dirty little white frock, his stout legs and bare arms.

Stooping down with outstretched arms, Giacobbe barred the way. "Where are we off to?" he asked caressingly. "There's the sun, don't you see it? Ahi! ahi! Maria Pettina[5] will come with her fire-comb and snatch you up, and carry you off to the hobgoblins! Run back quickly to the house."

"No-o-o, no-o-o-o," shouted the child, jumping up and down on his steed.

"Well, then," said Giacobbe, lowering his voice and closing one eye as he pointed to the white house, "Aunt Martina is up there, and to save bread she eats little children; don't you see her?"

The boy seemed to be impressed, and allowed himself to be led back to the cottage, still insisting, however, upon riding his stick.

Giovanna was sewing at the door, as round and fresh and rosy as though no misfortune had ever befallen her. Above her pretty face the mass of wavy hair lay in thick, glossy coils. Seeing Giacobbe approach with the child, she raised her head and smiled. "Here he is," said the herdsman. "I am bringing him safely back to you; but I found him playing in the sun, and travelling straight towards Aunt Martina, who eats children so as to save bread."

"Oh, go away!" said Giovanna. "You ought not to tell children such things!"

"I tell them to grown people as well, for Aunt Martina eats them too. Look out, Giovanna Era, the first thing you know she will eat you, and all the more because you are like a ripe quince—no, not that either, quinces are yellow, aren't they? You are more like a—a——"

"An Indian fig!" she suggested, laughing.

"And how is Aunt Bachissia? Is it long since you heard from Costantino?"

At this Giovanna became suddenly grave, replying with an air of mystery that they had had news of the prisoner only a short time before.

"Ah!" said the man, without pressing the matter further. "Can you tell me if Isidoro Pane is anywhere about? I want to see him."

"Yes," she replied sadly, taking up her work again. "He is at home."

Giacobbe said good-bye, and walked thoughtfully away in the direction of Isidoro's house,—if house it could be called,—which stood at the other end of the village.

The fisherman, in justice to whom it should be said that he fished for trout and eels as well as leeches whenever he had the opportunity, was seated in the shadow of his hut, mending a net. This hut, which stood in the fields, a little apart from the rest of the village, was a prehistoric structure composed of rough pieces of slate dating possibly from the time when men, not yet having mastered the art of cutting stones for themselves, used such pieces as had already been detached by nature. It was roofed over with sticks and bits of tile, above which flourished a vigorous growth of vegetation.

The sun was sinking after a day of intense heat. Not a leaf stirred in the row of dusty trees along the scorched, deserted village street. Far off, the yellow uplands, furrowed by long, slanting shadows, were immersed in floods of crimson light; and beyond them rose the rugged line of purplish mountains—a row of huge red sphinxes covered with a veil of violet gauze. The all-pervading stillness was pierced by the distant note of a blackbird. Wild figs with coarse, dark foliage, and a hedge of wild robinia, among whose branches hairy nettles and the whitish-leaved henbane had wound and interlaced themselves, surrounded the hut; and from the doorway could be seen a wide expanse of country, lonely and vapourous as the sea. The atmosphere was filled with the acrid odour of stubble and dried asphodel, and the

ground was so thickly covered with dead leaves, and twigs, and bits of straw that Giacobbe had got quite close to the old fisherman before the latter perceived him.

"What are we about now?" cried the herdsman gaily.

The other raised his eyes without lifting his head, and, regarding his visitor curiously for a moment, made no reply.

Dropping cross-legged on the ground, Giacobbe watched him as he mended the net with waxed twine threaded in a huge, rusty needle.

"Well, really!" said the herdsman presently, with a laugh. "I should think the little fishes would find no difficulty in coming and going at their pleasure!"

"Then let them come and go at their pleasure, little spring bird," said the fisherman, mimicking Giacobbe's favourite mode of address. "What are you doing here? Have you left your place?"

"No; on the contrary, I have just made a new contract with those black-beetles of rich relations. But I want to speak to you about something serious, Uncle 'Sidore. First, though, tell me how your legs are? And is it long since you last saw San Costantino on the river-bank?"

The old man frowned; he disliked to hear sacred things alluded to with irreverence. "If that is what you came for," said he, "you can take yourself off at once."

"Oh, well, there is no need to get angry! Here, I'll tell you what I came for; it really is important. But, as for irreverence—if you find me turning into a heathen you must blame the little master, he is always pitching into the saints. He gets terribly frightened, though, whenever he thinks he is going to die. Just listen to this: the other night we saw a shooting star; it fell plumb down from the sky, like a streak of melted gold, and looked as though it had struck the earth. Brontu threw himself down full-length on the ground, yelling: 'If this is the last day, have mercy on us, good Lord!' And there he stayed until, I swear, I wanted to kick him!"

"And you were not frightened?"

"I? No, indeed, little spring bird; I saw the star disappear right away."

"But the very first moment that you saw it, tell the truth now, you were scared then, weren't you?"

"Oh, well, go to the devil! Perhaps I was. But see here, what I came for was to talk to you about him—the master. If he is not crazy, then no one is in the whole world. He wants you to go to Giovanna Era and to suggest to her to get a divorce and marry him!"

Isidoro dropped his work, a mist rose before his calm, honest eyes: he clasped his hands, resting his chin on them, and began shaking his head.

"And how about you?" he asked in a stern voice. "Are you not just as crazy to dare to come to me with such a proposition? Oh, yes! I understand, you are afraid of losing your place! What a poor creature you are!"

"Ho, ho!" cried the other banteringly. "So that's your idea, is it? You and your leeches!"

"Oh! you mean to be funny, do you? Well, it is time this was put a stop to! Tell your master that he has got to bring this business to an end. The whole neighbourhood has heard about it, and people are talking."

"My dear friend, we have only just begun! And here are you talking of ending it! I have had enough of it, I assure you, for morn, noon, and night, that brandy-bottle does nothing but talk to me about it! I had to promise him at last that I would see you, so here I am! But I can tell you not to talk on his side! There is only one person, Uncle Isidoro, who can really put a stop to this scandalous business, and that is Giovanna herself. You must go to her, and tell her to make that beast shut up. I can do nothing more."

Isidoro gazed at him with wide, unseeing eyes; he appeared not to be listening.

Presently he resumed his work, murmuring: "Poor Costantino! poor lamb! What have they done to you?"

"Yes, indeed, he is innocent," said Giacobbe. "And any day at all he may come back! This craze of Brontu's has got to be stopped. Then there is Aunt Bachissia as well, hovering over her like a vulture over its prey!"

"Poor Costantino! poor lamb! What have they done to you?" repeated Isidoro, paying not the smallest heed to anything that Giacobbe said. The latter became annoyed. Raising his voice until it echoed through the surrounding silence and solitude, he shouted: "What have they done to him? What are they going to do to him? Why don't you listen to what I am telling you, you old rag-heap? You must go and talk to her, right away! There she is, cheerful and rosy, and ready to fall at the first touch, like a ripe apple! At heart, though, she is not bad, and if you will predispose her against it—make her see what she ought to do—the whole thing may be prevented. Get up! get along! move! do something! Here is your chance to perform miracles, if you really are a saint, as the sinners seem to think!"

"Ah! ah! ah!" sighed the old man, rising to his feet. His tall figure, majestic even in its rags, stood out in the crimson light, against the background of dark hedge and distant, misty horizon, like that of some venerable hermit. "I will go," he said, sighing heavily. And at the words Giacobbe felt as though a great weight had been rolled from his breast.

From then on, the two men worked, steadily together in the interest of the far-away prisoner, finding themselves opposed, however, by three active and united forces, as well as by the passive resistance of Giovanna. The three forces against which they had to contend were: the brute passion of Brontu, the grasping greed of Aunt Bachissia, and Aunt Martina's self-interest, she being now wholly in favour of Brontu's scheme. Giovanna, she argued, was, though poor, both healthy and frugal, and she knew how to work like a beast of burden. A woman in good standing

coming into the house as a bride, might entail all manner of extravagance and outlay, and the wedding alone would be sure to mean a heavy expense. Whereas, in the case of Giovanna, the marriage would be conducted almost in secret, and she would steal into the house like a slave! Shrewd Aunt Martina!

Thus the months rolled over the little slate-stone village, the desolate mountains, the yellow stretch of uplands. Autumn came—soft, melancholy days, when the sea lay beneath a veil of mist on the horizon, and dark clouds, like huge crabs, travelled slowly across the pale sky, trailing long lines of vapour behind them. Sometimes, though, it would turn cold, and the atmosphere would be like a spring of limpid water, fresh, clear, and sparkling.

On such an evening as this, when a long, violet-coloured cloud hung in the eastern heavens like an island in a crystal sea, and the scent of burning thyme came from the fields which the peasants were making ready for sowing, Brontu would swallow great gulps of brandy to take off the evening chill, and then, throwing himself down in the back of the hut, would lie dreaming, as warm and happy as a cat, his eyes fixed on the violet-coloured cloud on the distant horizon. All about the cabin, in every direction, as far as the eye could reach, stretched the broad tancas of the Dejases, billowy undulations, losing themselves in the fading daylight. Here and there amid the golden-brown stubble were dark squares of newly-turned earth, swollen by the rain, and patches of fresh grass and purple, autumnal flowers sending out a damp perfume. Clouds of wild birds, and large crows as black and shining as polished metal, poured out of the clumps of assenzio, which, half-hidden among the wild roses and the clustering arbute with its shining leaves and yellow berries, looked like tumuli of ashes.

In one of the tancas two peasants, farm hands of the Dejases, were burning brush preparatory to ploughing for the wheat and barley crops. The flames crackled as the wind blew them hither and thither, pale yet, in the evening light, and transparent as

yellow glass, the smoke hanging over them in low, light clouds, like fragrant incense, then melting away. Along the tops of the hedges enclosing the sheepfolds, each bare, thorny twig seemed to stand out separately in the crystal atmosphere, like a tracery of amethyst-coloured lace. The animals had all been herded for the night, except a few horses which could be seen here and there, with noses to the ground, cropping the short grass.

From without the hut came the sound of Giacobbe's voice, then the faint tinkle of a cowbell; the prolonged, far-away howl of a dog; the harsh screaming of a crow.

Within, extended like a Bedouin on a pile of skins and warm coverings, Brontu dreamed his one, unvarying dream, while the fiery liquor, coursing through his veins, filled him with a delicious sense of warmth and comfort.

Ah, how the young proprietor did love brandy! Not so much for its penetrating odour and sharp, biting taste, as for that glowing sensation of happiness that stole over his heart after drinking it. But woe betide any one who meddled with him at such times! Instantly his mood would change, and the sweetness turn to gall. It seemed to him that dogs must feel just as he did then, when some one tramples on their tails as they lie asleep. He would arouse in a state of fury, and lose the thread of his dream.

Yes, he loved brandy; wine was good too, but not so good as brandy. His father before him had liked ardent spirits; so much so, in fact, that one day, after drinking heavily, he fell into the fire and was so badly burned that—Heaven preserve us!—he died of the effects! But there! enough of such melancholy thoughts! Nowadays people are more careful, they don't allow themselves to tumble into the fire! Moreover, to balance the passion for brandy, Brontu had his other passion, for Giovanna. Ah, brandy and Giovanna! The two most beautiful, ardent, intoxicating things in the whole world! But where Giovanna was concerned Brontu was as timid and fearful as he was reckless in the matter of brandy. He trembled merely at the

thought of approaching her—of speaking to her. On those days when he knew that she was working for his mother he fairly yearned to go home, to gaze at her, to see her working there in his own house, and yet he dared not stir from the tanca! Now, though, as time went on, he was growing weary of waiting; a devouring anxiety, moreover, had seized upon him. What if, by hesitating so long, he were to meet with another refusal! Tormented by this thought, he longed to tell her of his solicitude for her; how, in order to console her for all that had occurred, he would gladly have married her at once, immediately after Costantino's sentence! His ideas differed from those of most people, but he was made that way and could not change. At bottom, like most drunkards, he had not a bad heart, nor was he immoral: his one passion, apart from drink, had always been for Giovanna, ever since when, as a boy, he had come with his family to live in the house on the hill. She was only fifteen then, and very fresh and beautiful. Every time he looked at her, even in those days, he had flushed even to his hands, and though she had noticed it, she had not seemed to mind. He never said anything, though, and so at last, when one day he screwed up his courage to the point of persuading his mother to go to Aunt Bachissia with an offer of marriage, it was too late, the position had been filled! Giovanna, at that time, had been as spirited and passionate as a young colt, and as utterly indifferent to worldly considerations. She might have married Brontu Dejas at first for his beautiful teeth, but having once fallen in love with Costantino, she would not have thrown him over for the Viceroy himself, had Sardinia still possessed one.

The twilight deepened; the sky grew more and more crystalline, like a vast mirror; the little, violet cloud grew leaden and opaque, then long and scaly, like some monster fish; the sounds from without, rising clearer than ever in the intense stillness of the hour and place, it seemed to Brontu that he must be dreaming when the voice of Aunt Bachissia suddenly broke in upon his revery.

"Santu Juanne Battista meu!" exclaimed the harsh, melancholy voice. "If I am not mistaken, that is Giacobbe Dejas?"

"At your service," replied the herdsman, in a tone of amazement. "But what wind blows you to these parts, little spring bird?"

"Ah, I am here at last! Where is Brontu Dejas?"

Brontu rushed out of the hut, his knees shaking and his brain in such a whirl that he could hardly discern Aunt Bachissia's black-robed figure as she stood holding her shoes in one hand, and balancing a bundle on her head.

"Aunt Bachissia!" he cried, in great agitation. "Here I am! Good-evening! Come here, come right in here!"

The woman flew towards him, closely followed by the herdsman. "Ah, Brontu, my dear boy! If I am not dead to-night, it must mean that I never shall be! Three hours I have been walking! I lost my way. I must see you about something, but be patient for a moment."

Patient! With his whole being in such a state of turmoil that he could hardly keep back the tears! Taking her by the hand he led her inside the hut, while Giacobbe, seeing that he was to have no part in the interview, went around to the back and listened with all his ears, raging meanwhile, inwardly, like a wild bull. Not a word, however, reached him. The conference was extremely short, Aunt Bachissia refusing even to sit down. She said that she had lost her way looking for Brontu's sheepfolds, and that Giovanna would be getting very anxious, as she thought she had merely gone into the fields to look for greens. Yes, it was quite true, they had to depend largely upon greens for their food, so bitter was their poverty: and what had brought her now was nothing less than to ask Brontu for some money. Oh, a loan! yes, thank Heaven, only a loan! If they should not be able to repay it, then she and Giovanna would work it off. For months they had not paid any rent—rent—! for their own house—! Now, the lawyer was threatening to evict them. "And where would we go, Brontu Dejas?" concluded Aunt Bachissia, clasping her gnarled and yellow hands. "Tell me where we would go, Brontu, my soul!"

His breast heaved; he wanted to seize the old woman in his arms, and shout: "Why, to my house; that is where you would go!" But he did not dare.

As there was no money at the hut Brontu decided to go home for it at once; he wished, anyhow, to return with Aunt Bachissia. Going outside, he called to Giacobbe to saddle the horse immediately. "What has happened?" asked the man. "Is your mother dead? God rest her soul!"

"No," replied Brontu cheerfully. "Nothing has happened that in any way concerns you."

Giacobbe began saddling the horse, but he was consumed with curiosity to know why Aunt Bachissia had come, and why Brontu was going back with her. She has come to borrow some money, he reflected, and he has none; he is going home to get it for her. "Listen, Brontu!" he called, and when the other had come quite close, he said: "If she wants money, and you haven't got any here, I can let you have some."

"Yes, she does; she wants to borrow some money," said Brontu in a low tone, quivering with delight and excitement. "But I am going back with her to get it, whether you have it here or not; that makes no difference; I am going to see Giovanna this very evening, at her own house; I am going to talk to her and do for myself what not one of all you donkeys has had sense enough to do for me!"

"Man!" cried Giacobbe angrily, "you must be going mad!"

"All right; let me go mad. See here, draw the girth tighter. Ah! swelling out your sides, are you?" he added, addressing the horse. "You don't fancy night excursions? What will you say when the old woman is mounted on the crupper?"

"She too?" exclaimed Giacobbe.

"She too, yes; what business is it of yours? Isn't she my mother-in-law?"

"You go too fast, upon my word! Look out, or you will have a fall and break your neck, little spring bird. Ah! you are really in earnest? You really mean to marry that

beggar, that married woman, when you might have a flower for your wife? Well, I can tell you one thing, Costantino Ledda is innocent; some day he will come back, remember that; some day he will come back!"

"Let me alone, Giacobbe Dejas, and attend to your own affairs. There, put a bag on the crupper. Aunt Bachissia!" he called to the old woman.

Giacobbe ran quickly into the hut, and fell over Aunt Bachissia, who was just coming out.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," he said, trembling. "You are worse than any beggar! Oh, I'm going to talk to Giovanna! I am going to talk to her myself!"

"You are a fool," said the woman; then, lowering her voice, she called him by an outrageous name, and passed out.

A few moments later the two set forth.

Giacobbe watched them as they slowly moved away in the fading light, across the solitary tanca: further and further, along the winding path, beyond the thickets, beyond the clumps of bushes, beyond the smoke of the brushwood fires; until, at last, they were lost to sight. Then an access of blind fury seized him; clutching the cap from his head, he flung it from him as far as he could; then picked it up again, and fell to beating the dog. The poor beast set up a prolonged howl that filled the silent waste, and was echoed back again with a sound like the despairing cry of some wandering phantom.

Night fell. Giacobbe, throwing himself down on the paillasse which Brontu had quitted shortly before, smelled an odour of brandy; he got up, found his master's flask, and drank. Then he lay down again, and presently he too felt something bubble up in his breast, bathe his heart, scorch his eyelids, mount gurgling to his brain. His anger melted suddenly away and was replaced by a feeling of melancholy. Through the open door he could see the bright red glow of the brush fires gradually overpowering the fading twilight; as the two merged they formed a single hue of

violet, indescribably melancholy in tone. Now and again the dog gave another long howl. Oh! what misery, what misery! Why had he, Giacobbe, beaten that poor dog? What had it done to him? Nothing. He was filled with remorse, the foolish, emotional remorse of the drunkard; yet, so irritating were the sounds that he had a strong impulse to rush out and beat the unfortunate beast again.

All at once his mind recurred to Brontu and Aunt Bachissia, whom he had forgotten for the moment, and he began to tremble violently. What had happened? Had Giovanna given in? Ah! what made that dog bark like that? It was like the shriek of a dead person,—the voice of Basile Ledda, who was murdered! "Pooh, pooh, the dead cannot cry out. That is nothing but the howling of a dog." He laughed softly, drowsily, to himself; his heavy eyelids closed, shutting out the opaque, violet-coloured mist that hung like a curtain before the open door; he felt as though a sack filled with some soft but heavy substance were pressing down upon him, so that he could not move; yet the sensation was agreeable. A thousand confused images chased one another through his brain. Among other things he dreamed that he was dead, and that his soul had entered into the body of a dog, a gaunt, little yellow cur, who was running around and around Aunt Bachissia's kitchen searching for bones. Costantino was sitting by the fire; he was dressed in red, and there was a great chain lying at his feet; all at once he saw the dog, and flung the chain at it. The creature's head was caught fast, encircled in one of the iron rings, and Giacobbe, stricken with terror, forced himself to cry out, in order to make them understand it was he. He awoke, perspiring and shouting: "Little spring bird!"

Night had fallen; the deserted tanca, stretching away beneath a clear sky sparkling with big, yellow stars, glowed with the red light of the brush fires.

Giacobbe could not get to sleep again; he turned and twisted from one side to the other, but the intoxicating effects of the brandy had passed, leaving his mouth dry and feverish. He got up and drank; then he remembered that he had taken nothing to

eat that evening. For a long time he stood leaning against the door of the hut, his face lighted up by the glow of the fires. "Shall I get something to eat or not?" he asked himself, hardly conscious that he did so. Then he looked up at the stars. Almost midnight. What had that little beast—his master—accomplished? he wondered, and his anger rose again, but chiefly against Aunt Bachissia. What impudence to come all the way to this distant spot just to further the little proprietor's outrageous plans! For he knew perfectly well that the loan was merely an excuse of that old harpy to draw Brontu on, to bring him to a decision, to make him commit himself. Ah, what a low creature that woman was! Had she no conscience at all? Did she not believe in God? At this point Giacobbe grew thoughtful, and presently he threw himself down again, still debating whether or no he were hungry, and whether it were worth while to get something to eat. No, he decided; he was not hungry, nor thirsty, nor sleepy; nor could he rest; lying down, or sitting up, or standing. He yawned noisily and began talking aloud, mumbling foolish, disconnected things, in a vain effort to distract his thoughts, which, however, continued to dwell persistently upon that thing. It was horrible, horrible! Marry a woman who had another husband already! And suppose Costantino should come back? Who knows? Everything is possible in this world. And even if he were never to return, there was the boy, how about him? What would he think when he grew up and found that his mother had two husbands? What a law that was! "Ha! the men who make the laws are pretty queer!" And Giacobbe laughed mirthlessly, for, down in the bottom of his heart, his inclination was to do anything else but laugh.

Getting up, he seized the brandy-flask, saying to himself that if Brontu should display any curiosity as to who had drunk his brandy, why so much the worse for him. "I'll tell him it was the spirits! Ha, ha!" He laughed again, took a deep draught, and, throwing himself down, quickly fell into a heavy sleep, and dreamed that he was telling a sister of his all about his other dream of Costantino, and the yellow dog, and the chain.

When he awoke the sun was already above the horizon, pushing through a bank of bluish cloud. The morning was cold, with light, drifting clouds, and the thickets, bushes, stubble, every spear of grass, sparkled with dew in the slanting rays of the sun. Once more the birds bustled in and out among the bushes, burst into song, rushed together in little groups, or poised gracefully in the misty air. Now and then the chorus of chirps and twitters would swell into something so acute and piercing that it was almost like the patter of metal raindrops: sometimes a shrill whistle, or the strident note of a crow, would break into this silvery harmony; then all would die away, swallowed up in the vast silence of the uplands.

Giacobbe came out of the hut yawning and stretching. He yawned so violently that his jaws cracked, and his smooth-shaven face folded into innumerable tiny wrinkles about the round, open mouth; and his little, oblique eyes, yellow in the sunlight, watered like those of a dog. "Well," he thought, pressing both hands to his stomach, "I have cramps here. What did I do last evening?"

He threw open the folds; a ram with curved horns came out, snuffing the ground, closely followed by a yellowish bunch of sheep, all trying to tread in his tracks, and all likewise snuffing the ground; others came, and still others; the folds were empty; still Giacobbe stood close to the enclosure—motionless—buried in thought.

"Yes, last evening I had nothing to eat. I drank the little master's brandy, and then I had dreams. Yes, yes, that was it—Costantino—and the dog—and my sister Anna-Rosa. Well, damn him! Why didn't he come back, the little toad? I got drunk, just like a beast. Yes,"—he moralised, walking towards the hut,—"a drunken man is like a beast; he does not know what he is doing, and brays out everything in his mind. A dangerous thing that, Giacobbe Dejas, you bald-pate! Get that well into your head; it's dangerous. No, no, I'll never get drunk again; may the Lord punish me if I do."

A little later the young master returned. Giacobbe, intent and smiling, watched him

closely. "Ah!" said he, stepping forward solicitously, "you look like a man who has had a whipping; what has happened?"

"Nothing. Get away."

But nothing was further from the other's intention. He began to circle around his master, fawning upon him and making little bounds towards him like a dog, teasing persistently to be told what had occurred. At last Brontu, who really longed to unburden himself, yielded.

Well then, yes; Giovanna had, in fact, driven him away like an importunate beggar. She had asked him if he had forgotten that she had a son who would one day spit at her, and demand to know how it was that she had two husbands.

"My soul, I knew it!" cried Giacobbe, leaping in the air for joy.

"What did you know?"

"Why, that she had a son."

"Well, I knew that myself. She chased me out of the house; that's the whole of it. I could hear the two—the mother and daughter—from the road, quarrelling furiously together." And then Brontu went to look for his brandy-flask.

Giacobbe was so overjoyed that he could have laughed aloud for glee.

"Look here!" he called. "The spirits came last night and drank your brandy. Ha! ha! ha! but there must be some left; I am sure there is still some left."

Brontu drank eagerly without making any reply. Then he flung the flask angrily at the herdsman, who caught it in the air; and Brontu, having drunk for sorrow, Giacobbe proceeded to drink for joy.

CHAPTER VIII

One morning, about three years after his conviction, Costantino awoke in a bad humour. The heat was oppressive, and the air of the cell was heavy and sickening.

One of the prisoners was snoring and puffing like a kettle letting off steam.

Costantino had slept with Giovanna's last letter beneath his head, and a sad little letter it was; short, and depressing in the extreme. She told of her and her mother's dire poverty, and of the boy's serious illness. It never occurred to Costantino to reflect how cruel it was to write to him in this strain; he wanted to know the truth about them, however bad it might be, and he felt that to share all Giovanna's sorrows and to agonise over his inability to help her was a part of his duty. A barren duty,—alas!—merely an increase of his misery.

He had become quite deft at his trade of shoemaking, and worked rapidly, but he could make very little money; all that was left, however, after the King of Spades had been paid for his supposed good offices he sent to Giovanna.

"Upon my word," said the ex-marshal, "you are a goose. Spend it on yourself. They ought to be sending you money."

"But they are so poor."

"Poor! Not they; haven't they got the sun? What more do they want?" said the other. "If you would only eat and drink more it would be a real charity. You are nothing but a stick, my dear fellow. Look at me! I'm getting fat. My bacon may be all rind, but, all the same, I'm getting fat."

He was, in fact, as round as a ball, but his flesh hung down in yellow, flabby rolls. Costantino, on the other hand, had fallen away, his eyes were big and cavernous, and his hands transparent.

The sun! he thought to himself bitterly. Yes, they have indeed got that; but what good is the sun even, when one has nothing to eat, and is suffering every kind of privation? He was, no doubt, a great simpleton, but as he thought of these things, he sometimes cried like a child. Yet all the time he never gave up hope. The years passed by; day followed day slowly, regularly, uneventfully, like drops of water in a grotto, dripping from stone to stone. Almost every convict in the prison, especially

those whose terms were not very long, hoped for a remission, and kept close count of the days already elapsed and of those yet to come. Their accuracy was amazing; they never made a mistake of so much as a single day. Some even carried their calculations so far as to count the hours. Costantino thought it all very foolish; one might die in the mean time, or regain his liberty! It was all in the hands of God. Yet, all the same, he too counted on being freed before the appointed hour; only in his case the appointed hour was so desperately, so hopelessly far away!

This realisation was heavy upon him on that morning when he awoke and fingered the warm paper of Giovanna's last letter.

Getting up, he sighed heavily, and began to dress himself. The man on his right stopped snoring, opened one sleepy eye, regarded Costantino dully, then closed it again. "Feeling badly?" he asked, as Costantino sighed again. "Oh, yes! Your child is ill. Why don't you tell the Director?"

"Why should I tell the Director? He would clap me into a cell for receiving the letter, and that would be the whole of it."

"Except pane e pollastra" (bread and water), said an ironical voice.

There was a general laugh, and Costantino, realising bitterly the utter indifference of all those men among whom he was destined to pass his days, felt as though he were wandering alone in a burning desert, gasping for air and water.

He went to his work longing impatiently for the exercise hour, when he would be able to talk over his troubles with the King of Spades. The great, fat, yellow man whom he despised so in his heart, was, nevertheless, indispensable to him; his sole comfort, in fact. He alone in that place understood him, was sorry for him, and listened to him. He was paid for it all, to be sure, but what did that signify? He was necessary in the same way to a great many of the convicts, but to none, probably, as much as to Costantino, who already, with a somewhat selfish regret, was dreading the time when, his term expired, the King of Spades would finally depart.

On this particular day a new inmate made his appearance in the workroom. He was a Northerner; long and sinuous, with a grey, wrinkled face, and small, pale eyes. It was not easy to tell his age, but the men laughed when he announced himself as twenty-two. He began at once to complain of the heat and of the sickening smell of fish that filled the room. Ah, he was no cobbler; no, indeed! He was the only son of a wealthy wholesale shoe-dealer,—a gentleman, in fact. And thereupon he recounted his unfortunate history. He had, it appeared, been so unlucky as to kill a rival in love; there had been provocation and he had ripped him open in the back,—simply that! The woman who was the real cause of the crime had consumption, and now she was dying from grief,—dying, simply that! Moreover, there was a child in the question, a son of the prisoner's by the sick woman. If she died, the boy would be left orphaned and abandoned. Costantino trembled at this; not, indeed, that the man's story affected him particularly, but because the picture of the woman and the child reminded him of Giovanna and the sick Malthineddu.

The newcomer, who was cutting a pair of soles with considerable skill, now became silent, and bent over, intent upon his work, his under lip trembling like that of a child about to cry. Costantino, watching him, reflected that though he knew that this man must be suffering intensely he felt as indifferent as did any of the others: he too, then, had lost the power of sympathising with the sorrows of others! The thought filled him with dismay and made him more insanely anxious to get out than ever.

That day, as soon as he saw the King of Spades, he drew him over to a corner where the sun-baked wall cast a little spot of shade; but when he had got him there he could not bring himself to begin on his own troubles. Instead he repeated the story told by the new arrival. The other shrugged his shoulders and spat against the wall.

"If he wants to, even he can write," he said. "But I should advise prudence, some one is nosing about."

"How are we ever going to manage after you have gone?" said Costantino

thoughtfully.

"You would like to keep me here forever, you rascal?" demanded the other in a rallying tone.

"Heaven forbid! No, indeed; I only wish you might get out to-morrow!"

The King of Spades sighed. His enemies, he declared, were forever devising new and diabolical schemes for keeping him out of the way; he had abandoned all hope now of a pardon. In any case, however, his term would expire before long; then he would go at once to the King, and lay a plain statement of the facts before him. The King would order an instant reversal of the verdict, and he himself, his innocence finally established, would be restored to his post. Who could tell, there might even be another medal conferred, to keep the rest company! But his first care would be to obtain pardons for all his friends, especially for Costantino. "That would be a noble work," he observed, self-approvingly. Indeed, by virtue of making such assurances frequently, he had come actually to believe in them himself.

"To-morrow? Yes, indeed; a pardon might very possibly come to-morrow, and a good thing that would be for every one."

"Good, or bad," said Costantino despondently.

"After all," continued the other, "when I am gone it may be that you will no longer have any use for my services."

The moment the words were out of his mouth he regretted having spoken, but seeing that Costantino merely shook his head, evidently supposing that he alluded to a possible pardon, he regarded him compassionately.

"Are you really and truly innocent?" he asked. "By this time I should think you would be willing to talk to me quite openly. Do you remember that first time when I asked you? You said: 'May I never see my child again, if I am guilty.'"

"Yes, so I did; and now, you mean to say, I am perhaps not going to see him again?

Well, God's will be done; but I am innocent, all the same."

The King of Spades turned, and again spat upon the wall. "Patience, old fellow, patience, patience," he said; and there was a note of real warmth and feeling in his tone. He felt, in fact, quite proud of himself for recognising and esteeming honesty when he saw it in others, and it was this taste that drew him to Costantino. He saw with wonder that his fellow-countryman was so good, that his soul was so pure, and his whole nature formed of so fine a material, that even the boundless corruption of prison life could not sully him.

Now it happened that the ex-marshal allowed himself—as one of the privileges of his position of go-between—to read the letters that passed through his hands. Not long before, an anonymous letter had come for Costantino, written in a villainous hand, with great sprawling characters that looked like insects crawling over the page. Venomous creatures they proved, indeed, to be, and capable of inflicting wounds as deadly as those of any living reptile. In short, the letter announced that Giovanna, wife of the prisoner, was permitting Brontu Dejas to pay court to her, and that Aunt Bachissia was about to go to Nuoro to consult a lawyer about applying for a divorce for her daughter.

On reading this precious communication the ex-marshal became furious; his friend, the Delegate, immersed as he was in his great scientific researches, heard him snorting, and puffing out his fat, yellow cheeks. "Idiots! Fools! Sardinian asses!" he sputtered. "Why on earth tell him about it at all! What can he do, except batter out his brains against the wall?"

He did not deliver the letter, and every time he saw his friend he regarded him compassionately, feeling at the same time pleased at his own goodness of heart for caring so much.

Three days later the boy died. Costantino was notified immediately of the event. He wept silently and by stealth, trying hard to bear up with fortitude before his

companions. When Arnolfo Bellini, the man whose mistress was dying, heard of the Sardinian's misfortune, he fell into a fit of nervous weeping, emitting curious noises like an angry hen, his grey, old-young face doubling up in such grotesque contortions that one of the quarrelsome brothers from the Abruzzi burst out laughing; one of the others leaned across and punched him in the leg with an awl, whereupon the Abruzzese started, ceased laughing, and continued his work without protest.

Costantino, after staring a moment at Bellini in amazement, shook his head and turned to his bench. Silence reigned, and presently the man calmed down.

The low room was filled with the hot, reflected glare from the courtyard, and the overpowering heat drew a sickening odour from the leather and the perspiring hands and feet of the convicts. There were thirteen of them under the surveillance of a tall, red-moustached guard, who never opened his lips. The uniformity of dress, the close-cropped heads and shaven faces, and the general vacuity of expression lent them all a certain mutual resemblance; they might have been brothers, or at least nearly related to one another, and yet, never more than on that particular day, had Costantino felt himself so utterly apart, so wholly out of sympathy with his companions in misery.

He stitched and stitched, bending over the shoe, which rested between his knees in the hollow of his leather apron. From time to time he would pause, examine his work attentively, then go on again drawing the thread through with both hands with a jerk that seemed almost angry. Yes, one must work, now that the boy was dead. Had he loved him very dearly? Well, he could hardly say; perhaps not so very much. He had only seen him once during that time at Nuoro, through the iron grating of the reception-room, held fast in the arms of his weeping mother. The baby, he remembered, had a little pink face, somewhat rough and scarred, like certain kinds of apricots when they are ripe. His round, violet-coloured eyes shone like a pair of

grape seeds from beneath their long fringe of lashes. He had cried the whole time, terrified at the sight of the stern-faced, rigid guards; and grasping the iron bars convulsively with his little red hands.

This was the only memory Costantino had preserved of his son. Years had gone by since then; yet he always imagined him flushed, tearful, with little violet eyes shining out from beneath the dark lashes. But he often pictured the future, when Malthineddu, grown to be big and strong, would drive the wagon, and ride the horse, and sow, and reap, and be the comfort and support of his mother. The prisoner constantly hoped that some day or other he would be cleared, and able to return to his home, but when at times this hope seemed to be more than usually vain, then his thoughts would instantly revert to the boy, and how he would be able to take his place in a way; thus his feeling for him was more a part of his love for Giovanna than that more selfish affection which is the result, often, of habit and propinquity.

Now the boy was dead, and the dream shattered; the will of God be done. And Costantino, dwelling upon Giovanna's grief, suffered himself, acutely.

When the King of Spades, accordingly, met his friend that day in the shadow of the sun-baked wall, he at once perceived that the other's grief was far more for his wife than for the loss of the child; nevertheless, his method of imparting comfort was to say banteringly: "Why, my dear fellow, if, as you say, the Lord has taken the innocent little soul back to himself, why do you take it so much to heart? It must be for his own good!"

"Why must it?" said Costantino, his head drooping, and both arms hanging down with limp, open palms. "Why must he be better off? Simply because he was poor!"

The King of Spades happened to be in a philosophising mood. He explained, therefore, that poverty was not always a misfortune; nothing of the sort; it might at times be looked upon as a blessing, even an unqualified one!

"There are many worse things than poverty," said he. "Reflect for a moment; your

wife will become reconciled."

"Oh! of course; she has the sun," said Costantino, clenching his hands. "This burning sun, and just how is it going to help her?"

"Pff! pff! pff!" puffed the other, inflating his big, yellow cheeks. Then he grew thoughtful, and fell to examining the little finger of his right hand with minute attention.

"Suppose," he said suddenly, "your wife were to marry again?"

Costantino did not quite take in what he meant, but his arms stiffened instinctively.

"I hardly should have thought," said he in a hurt tone, "that you would say such a thing as that."

"Pff! pff! pff!" The ex-marshal swelled and puffed meditatively. Then, after a short pause, he began again:

"But listen, my dear fellow, you don't understand. I don't for a moment mean to say that your wife is not a perfectly honest woman; what I do mean is—suppose she were actually to marry some one else? And still you don't understand? Upon my word, this Christian is extraordinarily slow at taking an idea! One would suppose you were free, you are so innocent. Perhaps, though," he added, "you don't know that people can get divorces nowadays. Any woman whose husband has been sentenced for more than ten years, can be divorced and marry some one else."

Costantino threw his head up for a moment, and his sunken eyes opened round and wide; then the lids dropped again.

"Giovanna would never do it," he said simply.

There was another brief interval of silence.

"Giovanna would not do it," he repeated; yet, even as he pronounced the words, he had a strange sensation, as though a frozen steel were slashing his heart in twain; one part was convulsed with agony, while the other shrieked again and again: "She

would never do it! she would never do it!" And neither part gave a single thought to the little, dead child.

"She would not do it, she would not do it," reiterated one half of his heart with loud insistence, until, at last, the other was convinced, and they came together again, but only to find that both were now devoured by that torturing pain.

"See here," said the King of Spades, "I don't believe she would either. But tell me one thing; now that the child is dead, and now that the mother has nothing more to hope for, from either him or you, would it not, after all, be the very best thing she could do, supposing she had the opportunity? For my own part, I think that if a chance came along for her to marry again, she would be very foolish not to take it."

"Brontu Dejas!" said Costantino to himself. But he only repeated: "No, she would not do it."

"But you are a Christian, my friend; if she were to do it, would she not be in the right?"

"But I am going back some day."

"How is she to know that?"

"Why, I have told her so all along, and I shall never cease telling her so."

The King of Spades had a strong inclination to laugh, but he restrained himself, feeling quite ashamed of the impulse. Presently he murmured, as though in answer to some inward question: "It is all utter foolishness."

"Yes, of course," said Costantino. But all the time, he was thinking of Brontu Dejas, of his house with the portico, of his tancas and his flocks; and then of Giovanna's poverty. Alas! the knife was cutting deep into his heart now.

That very night he wrote a long letter to Giovanna, comforting her, and assuring her of his unshaken faith in the divine mercy. "It may be," he wrote, in the simple goodness of his heart, "that God wishes to prove us still further, and so has taken

from us the offspring that we conceived in sin; may his will be done! But now, a presentiment tells me that the hour of my restoration to liberty is at hand." He considered long whether or no to tell her of the dreadful thing hinted at by the ex-marshal, and thought himself quite shrewd and cunning when he decided it would be better to let her think that he did not so much as know of the existence of that infernal law.

His letter despatched, he felt more tranquil. But a little worm had begun to gnaw and gnaw in his brain. The ex-marshal, moreover, from that day on, with a pity that was heartless in its operations, never ceased to instil the subtle poison into his veins. He must become accustomed to the idea, thought this diplomatist to himself, else the poor, simple soul will die of heartbreak. There were times, however, when he thought that it might be better, after all, to let him die, and have done with it. Then, remembering all his promises about obtaining a pardon, he would pretend to himself that he was really going to do this, and continue the torture so that his victim might survive the shock when news of the divorce actually came. He had no doubt that his friend's wife was seriously contemplating the step, and it made him angry to hear Costantino speak affectionately of her.

"My dear fellow," said he one October day, puffing as usual, "you don't know women. Empty jugs, that's what they are; nothing but empty jugs! I was once engaged to be married myself. You can hardly believe it? Well, I can hardly believe it either. What then? Nothing, except that she betrayed me before I had even married her, and—that you irritate me beyond measure. Here is your wife in an altogether different situation; she is young and poor, and has blood in her veins—she has blood in her veins, I suppose, hasn't she? Well, if this Dejas fellow wants her to marry him, I say she would be a great goose not to do it."

"Dejas! Why—what—who told you?" stammered Costantino in amazement.

"Oh! didn't you tell me yourself?"

Costantino thought he most certainly had not, but then his mind had been in such a confused state for some time back—but merciful God! Dear San Costantino! How had he ever come to do such a thing? What had made him utter that man's name?

"Well, then," he burst out; "yes, I am afraid of him! He courted her before we were married; he wanted her himself. Ugh! he's a drunkard, and as weak as mud. No, no; she could never do anything so horrible! For pity's sake, let's talk of something else."

So they did talk of something else, still in the Sardinian dialect, so as not to be understood by the other prisoners. They talked of the consumptive student, who was drawing visibly nearer to the door of the other world; of Arnolfo Bellini, who began to sob whenever his eye fell on the dying man; of the Delegate, whom they could see pacing back and forth by the fountain; of the magpie, who was growing feeble, and losing all his feathers, from old age.

Gossip, envy, hatred, identical interests, cowardice, raillery, fear—such were the bonds which united or kept apart the different members of the little community—prisoners, guards, and officials alike. To Costantino they were all equally objects of indifference; he, the Delegate, and the student seeming to live apart in a little world of their own, with the ex-marshal—the pivot about which every detail in the prisoners' lives seemed to revolve; he, meanwhile, appearing to be as superior as he was necessary to them all.

Many envied the friendly intercourse existing between Costantino and him, and frequently the former would be implored to use his influence with the King of Spades to procure some favour. He merely shrugged his shoulders on such occasions, though, when they offered him money, as sometimes happened, he was sorely tempted to take it, so intense was his longing to be able to support Giovanna; he had no other idea. The King of Spades, with his eternal insinuations that cut like knives, was becoming more and more hateful to him. One day they actually quarrelled, and for some time did not speak to one another. But Costantino could not

stand it; he felt as though he should suffocate, as though he had been shut up in a cell, and cut off from all communication with the outer world. He soon apologised and begged for a reconciliation.

The autumn drew on; the air grew cool, and the sky became a delicate, velvety blue, distant, unreal, dreamlike. Sometimes the breeze would waft a perfume of ripening fruit into the prison enclosure.

Costantino was less acutely miserable, but he had sunk into a state of settled melancholy; he grew thinner and thinner, and deprived himself continually of things which he stood in need of in order to have more money to send to Giovanna. The other prisoners all received presents of some sort from their friends and relatives; he alone denied himself even the little pittance he was able to earn.

"I don't understand it," said the ex-marshal to him one day. "Your complexion is pink and you look younger than you did when you came, and yet you are almost transparent."

Sometimes Costantino would flush violently, and the blood would rush to his head; then he would be utterly prostrated, and in his weakness he would suffer more from homesickness than he had done even in the first year of his imprisonment. He would see before him the boundless sweep of the uplands, sleeping in the autumnal haze, glowing and yellow beneath the crystal sky; he would get the breath of the vineyards, the scent of such late-maturing fruits as flourish in that land of flocks and beehives; images would rise before him of the foxes and hares, the wild birds and cattle, the hedges thick with blackberries, all the hundred and one natural objects which had constituted the sole element of enjoyment in his otherwise miserable and barren childhood. Then his thoughts would turn to his uncle, the cruel old Vulture who, having tormented him in his lifetime, seemed able to torment him still. An impulse of bitter hatred would rise up in his heart, only to be repressed, on remembering that he was dead, and succeeded by a prayer for the murdered man's

soul.

There was no one else whom he was even tempted to hate, no one at all; not even the real murderer, or Brontu Dejas—who, in fact, had as yet given him no cause for complaint—or the King of Spades, though he subjected him to this continual martyrdom. Indeed, it hardly seemed as though he had sufficient strength effectually to hate any one. A feeling of gentle melancholy pervaded him, a sort of numbness like that of a person about to fall asleep; his only sensation was one of tender, pitiful, passionless love; as tranquil, as mild and all-embracing as an autumnal sky, and having for its one object—Giovanna. She was a part of the love itself, and waking or sleeping, he thought only of her, only of her, only of her.

As time went on this love became more and more engrossing; she came to represent the far-off home, family, liberty—life itself. All, all, was comprehended in her: hope, faith, endurance, peace, the very love of life! She became his soul.

When the inexorable King of Spades threatened him with that horrible thing, he did not know it, but it was the death of his soul that he was holding over him. For the certainty of not losing Giovanna, Costantino would gladly have agreed to pass forty years in prison; and, at the same time, he panted for his freedom precisely in order that he might not lose her.

During the winter that followed, he suffered intensely from cold; his face and nails were livid, and during the exercise hour, even when he stood in the sun, his teeth chattered like those of an old man. He asked often to confess, and confided all his troubles to the young chaplain.

"Who puts such ideas as these into your head, my son?" asked the confessor, his dark eyes flashing.

"A fellow-countryman of mine, the ex-marshal—Burrai. The King of Spades they call him."

"May God bless and protect you!" said the other, becoming thoughtful; he knew the

King of Spades well. Then he administered what comfort he could, and asked what Giovanna had written herself, and when.

Alas! she wrote but seldom now and never more than a few lines at a time. It seemed almost as if, after the child's death, she had nothing to write about. In her last letter she had told him that the weather was bitterly cold; there had been two snow-storms, in one of which a man, while attempting to cross the mountains, had been frozen to death. And then she had added that they were having a famine.

These accounts, of course, preyed upon Costantino's mind. He would dream constantly that he had been taken to Nuoro and given his liberty; from thence he would set forth on foot for home; it was cold, bitterly cold; he could go no further—he was dying, dying—then he would wake up shivering, and with a heavy weight on his heart.

"You are so weak, my brother," said the confessor. "It is bodily weakness that makes you imagine all these things. Your wife is a good Christian; she would never wrong you in the world. Come, put all such ideas out of your head. You should try to get back your strength; you must eat more, and drink something now and then. Are you earning anything?"

"A little; but I send it all to my wife, she is so terribly poor. Oh! I eat plenty, and I don't like to take anything to drink; it gives me nausea."

"Well, take heart. I will talk to Burrai; he shall not bother you any more."

He did, in fact, have an interview with the King of Spades, and took him severely to task for putting such wicked ideas into Ledda's head. "The poor fellow is far from strong as it is," said he. "If you don't let him alone, he will be ill."

Burrai regarded the priest calmly out of his shrewd little pig-eyes, then he gave a puff and shook his head.

"I only do it for his own good," he said confidently.

"But what good, what possible good? You——"

"I tell you, my dear fellow—I beg your pardon—but here it is, for the present—as long as the cold weather lasts—there is very little to be feared, so far as the young woman is concerned; that is, I fancy that now it is only the old one, Costantino's mother-in-law, who is at work, advising and tormenting her daughter not to let her chance slip by. But when the spring comes—then you'll see; that's all."

The chaplain's face fell; he was disturbed and puzzled. The other, watching him out of his sharp, little eyes, concluded that the present would be a good time to explain himself more fully, and accordingly began to enlarge upon the mother-in-law's grasping disposition, the youth of her daughter, the dangers of the spring season, and so forth. The chaplain now became really angry.

"This is too much!" he exclaimed, as he strode up and down, striking the palms of his hands together, and his eyes flashing. "How dare you imagine all this string of things that may possibly happen, and then repeat them to that poor creature as though they were actual occurrences? Because the young woman once had another suitor, you mean to say——"

"My dear friend, there is no need to get so angry," said the other. "Here, look at this," and he showed him the anonymous letter.

The chaplain saw at once that the matter was more serious than he had supposed; he read the letter, and then asked if Ledda paid him money.

"Of course, a trifle now and then. Perhaps you think it wrong? Well, don't I take the risk of being put in a cell in order to serve him?"

"And you consider that you are doing right when you act in this manner?"

"What is doing right? If it is helping your neighbour, then I most certainly think that I am."

The chaplain re-read the letter attentively.

"Yes," pursued the other. "I certainly am. And what is more, if, when I get out of here, they don't reinstate me in my position, I intend to arrange a system of correspondence for all the prisons in Italy. It will be a sort of agency——"

"I see, my friend, that it will not be long before we have you back again."

"Eh! eh! I shall know how to manage the thing; a secret agency, and——"

"Pardons too!" said the priest, folding the letter and returning it. "How can you have the heart to fool those poor creatures so?"

"Yes, pardons too," replied Burrai calmly. "Well, and suppose they are fooled; if it gives them any comfort to hope, is not that an act of kindness in itself? What is there for any of us, but hope?"

"Well," said the other more mildly, "at least do me the favour to leave that poor fellow alone. Allow him to enjoy the pleasures of hope, otherwise he will certainly fall ill."

The ex-marshal promised, though with bad grace. It seemed to him a poor method.

"He will die of heartstroke, I verily believe," he said to himself. "Wait till the spring; then we will see whether a man of the world knows what he is about or no." And he laid one hand on his breast.

When they next met, Costantino asked with a smile if he had seen Su Preideru, as they called the chaplain between themselves, and what he had said to him.

The ex-marshal was leaning against the damp and dingy wall, softly cursing some individual unknown, in the Sardinian dialect.

"Balla chi trapasset sa busacca, brasciai!" (I wish a ball would hit him in the pouch, the he-wolf!) he murmured, as Costantino approached. "What is it? Who?"

"Oh! nothing."

"You want to know if I have seen the priest? Yes, and he scolded me like a child. What a child it is! A little pig, really and truly, a little pig! But the lard is yellow and

rancid. Do you know, I read somewhere that in Russia they think very highly of rancid lard?"

"But tell me what he said."

"What he said? Let me see, what did he say? I don't remember; oh! yes, he told me that I had imagined all that—what we have been talking about. Yes, that was it, my dear fellow; I have, it seems, a vivid imagination, and your wife will never wrong you in the world! Never, as surely as we are standing here!"

Costantino looked at him eagerly. No, the man was not chaffing; he was perfectly serious, and evidently meant what he said.

"Ah, ha! he scolded you, did he? Good enough!" he cried.

"This wall," said the King of Spades, straightening himself, and regarding his hands, which were red and scarred from contact with the rough stones, "this wall looks as though it were made of chocolate; it is warm and damp. Ah! if it only were, there would be two advantages: we could eat it, and then escape! Have you ever eaten any chocolate?"

"Why, of course, and Giovanna too; she is very fond of it, but it is fearfully dear. Well, and what then?"

"What then?" exclaimed the other impatiently. "My dear fellow, you drive me crazy. Oh! she will wait for you twenty-three years—never fear!"

"No, not that long; I shall be out of here long before that," replied Costantino confidently. "Then too," he added with a gleam of humour, "there is the pardon; you were to see the King, you know, about a pardon for me."

"Precisely," said the other. "I was to see the King. You don't believe me? I shall, however, go to him at once; he receives every official, and what am I if not an official? He is fond of the army; he is young; I hear he is getting fat. Ah! not as fat as I, though"—and he laughed.

From then on, whenever Costantino tried to bring the conversation around to the old subject, the other contrived to head him off; but at all events he was no longer tormented.

One day about this time, Costantino was informed that five francs had been paid in to his account. "He did it!" he exclaimed. "I am sure it was the priest. What a kind man he is! But I don't need it; no, indeed, I don't need the money at all."

"You stupid," said the King of Spades. "Take it; if you don't he will be offended. 'I don't want it!' A pretty way that to acknowledge a present!"

"But I should be ashamed to take it. And what could I do with it, anyhow?"

"Why, eat, drink—you have need to, I can assure you. You would like to send it home, I suppose? The devil take you! If you do such an idiotic thing as that I will spit in your face! Why, see here, she doesn't even write to you any more; she——"

"What is there for her to write about?" said Costantino, trying vainly to think of some excuse. "Besides," he added, "she will be working now, the winter is nearly over."

"Yes, it is nearly over, and then the spring will come," said the other in a tone that had almost a menace in it. "It will come."

"Why, of course, it will come!"

"When does the warm weather begin with you? We have it in March."

"Oh, with us, not till June. But then it is so beautiful. The grass grows—oh! as tall as that, and they clip the sheep, and the bees are making honey!"

"An idyl, truly! You don't know what an idyl is? Well, I'll tell you. It is—sometimes it is—infidelity. Wait till June. How long is it since you've been to confession?"

"Oh, I've not been for a fortnight."

"A long time, I declare! What a good Christian you are, my friend. For my own part, I've never been at all. My conscience is as clear and unsullied as a mirror. Now

there," said he, pointing to the pasty-faced student, whose hair was so white that it looked as though it had been powdered, "there is one who had better confess without delay; he is knocking now at the door of eternity."

Sure enough, only a few days later the student was removed to the infirmary, and at the end of March he died.

Bellini, the man whose mistress was dying of the same disease, asked after him anxiously every day, and when he died cried for hours in a weak, childish fashion. It was not from any grief he felt at parting from the sick man, but at the thought of what might happen to his mistress. His grief subsided at length, and then, as he no longer had the reminder of the student before his eyes, he gradually came to think less and less about his own sorrow.

The death of the student had a totally different effect upon the King of Spades; he became quite melancholy, took to philosophising about life and death, and would engage in lengthy discussions with the Delegate, who rolled his eyes about and expounded his views in a deep bass voice.

When talking with Costantino, the ex-marshal was apt to drop into rather homesick reminiscences about the distant land of their birth.

"Yes," said he one day, "I was once quite close to your home, or its neighbourhood. I can't tell you precisely, but I know there was a wood, all arbute, and cork-trees, and rock-roses; it looked as though there had been a rain of blood all over them. And there was a smell—oh! the queerest kind of smell, it was something like tobacco. Then there was a cross on a stone, and you could see the water far away in the distance."

"Why, of course!" cried Costantino. "That was the forest of Cherbomine (Stagman). I should say I did know it. Once a hunter saw a stag there with golden horns. He fired, and shot it dead, but as the stag fell it gave a cry like a human being, and said: 'The penance is completed!' They say it was some human soul that had been forced

to expiate a terrible sin of some sort. The cross was erected afterwards."

"And how about the horns?"

"They say that as the hunter drew near the horns turned black."

"Pff! pff! how superstitious you all are, you peasants! Ah! here is the spring coming at last," he continued, staring up at the sky. "For my own part, the spring gets on my nerves. If I could but go hunting once. There was one time when I was hunting in the marshes near Cagliari: ah! those marshes, they look just like ever so many pieces of looking-glass thrown down from somewhere above; and all around there were quantities of purple lilies. A long line of flamingoes were flying in single file; they stood out against the sky which was so bright you could hardly raise your eyes to it. Pum! pum! one of the flamingoes fell, the others flew on without making a sound. I rushed right into the middle of the marsh to get the one I had shot. I was as quick and agile as a fish in those days; I was only eighteen years old."

"What are flamingoes good for?"

"Nothing; they stuff them; they have great, long legs like velvet. Have you ever been in that part of the country? Oh! yes, I remember, when you worked in the mines, you passed through Cagliari. I shall go back there some day, to die in blessed peace!"

"You are melancholy nowadays."

"What would you have, my friend? It is the spring; it is so depressing to have to pass Easter in prison. I shall take the Easter Instruction this year."

"I have taken it already."

"Ah! you have taken it already?" And the two prisoners fell into a thoughtful silence.

Thus April passed by, and May, and June. The dreary prison walls turned into ovens; unpleasant insects came to life, and once more preyed upon the unfortunate inmates; again the air was filled with sickening odours, and in the workroom, presided over by the same red-faced, taciturn guard, perspiration, fish, and leather

fought for pre-eminence in the fetid atmosphere.

Costantino, weaker than ever, suffered tortures from the insects. In former years he had slept so profoundly that nothing could disturb him, but now it was different, and a sudden sting would arouse him with a bound, and leave him trembling all over. Then insomnia set in, and periods of semi-consciousness that were worse than actual sleeplessness, haunted, as they sometimes were, with nightmare. Sharp twinges, not always from insects, shot through his entire body, and he would toss from side to side, gasping and sighing.

Sometimes the torture became almost unendurable, and often the orange glow of sunrise would shine through the window before he had been able to close an eye; then, overpowered by exhaustion, he would fall into a heavy slumber just as it was time to get up!

Giovanna had now entirely ceased writing. Once only, towards the end of May, a letter had come, begging him not to send her any more money, as she now earned enough to live on, with care. After that there was nothing more.

And yet he maintained his tranquil faith in her loyalty. Even this last letter he took as a fresh proof of her affection for him.

Every day the King of Spades, waiting for his friend in the exercise hour, would betray a certain anxiety.

"Well," he would say uneasily, his sharp little demon-eyes snapping from out of the big, clean-shaven, yellow face. "Well, what news?" And when Costantino would seem to be surprised at the question, he too would look surprised, though he never would say at what.

"It is warm weather," he would observe.

"Yes, very warm."

"The spring is over."

"I should say that it was!"

"Have they finished harvesting where you come from?"

"Of course they have. My wife says there is no need to send her anything more now."

"Ah! I knew that already, my dear fellow."

The ex-marshal hardly knew what to think; he was almost annoyed to find that his forebodings were not being verified.

One day, however, Costantino failed to put in an appearance at the "exercise," and when the ex-marshal was told that his friend had been taken to the infirmary, he felt a strange tightening at the heart. Presently the old magpie came fluttering about, and, settling down with a shake of its half-bald, rumpled head, croaked out dismally: "Cos-tan-ti, Cos-tan-ti."

"'Costanti' has had a stroke, my friend," said the King of Spades. The other convicts began to crowd around him curiously. But he waved them all off. "I know nothing about it," he said. "Let me alone." Up to nine o'clock, Bellini told them, Costantino had been at work with the rest as usual. Then a guard had said that he was wanted, no one knew what for; he had gotten quickly up, and gone off with him, as white as a sheet, and his eyes starting out of their sockets; he had not returned.

To the last day of his life Costantino never forgot that morning. It was hot and overcast; the shadows of the clouds seemed to hang over the workroom, throwing half of it into deep gloom. The convicts all looked livid by this light, the leather aprons exhaled a strong and very disagreeable odour, and every one was out of humour. A man who was afraid of ghosts had been telling how in his part of the country, long, white, flowing forms could be seen on dark nights, floating on the surface of the river; he asked Bellini if he had ever seen them.

"I? No; I don't believe in such foolishness."

"Ah! you think it's foolishness, do you?" said the other in a dull, monotonous tone, and staring into the shoe he was at work on.

"Calf!" murmured another, without looking up from his work.

The believer in ghosts thereupon raised his head with an angry movement, and was about to reply in kind, when the first broke in, protestingly: "Oh, really," said he, "can't I talk to myself? If I choose to say—calf,—or ram,—or sheep,—or dog,—what business is it of yours? Can't I say things to my shoe, I'd like to know?"

It was at this point that the guard had come, and called Costantino away, and the latter, who had passed a sleepless night, had opened his drowsy eyes, turned pale, and leaped to his feet. "Who wants me?" he had asked, and then he had followed the guard.

He was taken to a dingy room, filled with shelves of dusty papers. The dirty windows were closed; beyond them, through a red grating, could be seen the sky—dull and grey, as though it too were dirty. A man was seated writing, at a tall, dusty desk, piled so high with papers that between the papers and the dust the man himself could hardly be seen. As the prisoner entered he raised a flushed face, the small chin completely hidden by a heavy, blond moustache. He fixed a pair of big, round, dull-blue eyes upon Costantino, but apparently without seeing him, for he dropped them again immediately, and went on writing.

Costantino, who had seen this man before, stood waiting, his heart thumping in his breast. Mechanically his thoughts dwelt upon the description of the water-phantoms he had just been listening to, and the voice saying: "calf"; he wondered vaguely if one would be justified in feeling angry at that. Not a sound broke the stillness of the room, except the scratch, scratch, of the pen, as it travelled over the coarse paper. Again the pale blue eyes were fixed upon the prisoner, and again lowered to the sheet. Costantino, trembling and unnerved, gazed desperately around the room. Still the man wrote on. The prisoner could feel his heart beating furiously; a thousand

dark fancies, hideous, terrifying, rushed through his brain, like clouds driven before an angry tempest. And still the man wrote on, and on. Suddenly, without warning, all the dark fancies vanished,—dispersed and swallowed up, as it were, in a single glorious flood of light. A thought, so dazzling and beautiful as almost to be painful, shot into his mind. "They have discovered that I am innocent!"

The idea did not remain for long, but it left behind it a vague, tremulous light.

The man was still writing, and did not stop as he presently said in a loud, hard voice: "You are named——?"

"Costantino Ledda."

"Where from?"

"Orlei, in Sardinia, Province of Sassari."

"Very good."

Silence. The man wrote a little while longer; then suddenly he dug his pen into the paper, raised his red face, and fastened his round, expressionless eyes upon the man standing before him. Costantino's own eyes dropped.

"Very good. Have you a wife?"

"Yes."

"Any children?"

"We had one, but he died."

"Are you fond of your wife?"

"Yes," replied Costantino, and raised his terrified eyes as far as the fat, red hand resting on the desk, with a ring on one finger having a purple stone; and between the thumb and forefinger, the stiff, black point of the pen. Not knowing where to fix his perplexed gaze, Costantino followed the movements of this pen, conscious all the while only of a feeling of supreme agony, as when one dreams that he is about to be swallowed up in a cataclysm.

The hard voice was speaking again, in a low, measured tone.

"You know, of course, that your wife's whole life has been ruined by your fault. Young, handsome, and blameless, the rest of her days must be spent in struggle and privation. The world holds out no promise of happiness for her, and yet she has never done any harm at all. As long as your child lived she endured her lot patiently, her hopes were fixed upon him. But now that he is dead what has she left? When you return to her,—if, indeed, God should be so merciful as to allow you to do so,—you will be old, broken-down, useless, and she will be the same. She sees stretching before her a terrible future—nothing but sorrow, shame, poverty, and a miserable old age. No resource but to beg; thus her life is a worse punishment even than yours——"

Costantino, as white as death, panting, agonising, tried to protest, to say that he would surely be liberated before long, but the words died away on his lips; the other, meanwhile, gave him no chance, but pursued his theme in smooth, even tones, his dull eyes never leaving the prisoner's face.

"Her life is thus a worse punishment even than yours. You should think of these things, and, abandoning all hope, repent doubly of your crime." He cleared his throat, and then continued in a different tone: "Now, however, the law has provided a means by which this great injustice can be rectified. You of course know very well that an act of divorce has gone into effect which enables a woman whose husband is guilty of a certain class of crime, to marry again. Should your wife—sit down, keep quiet—should your wife apply for such a divorce, it would be your duty to grant it at once. I know that you are, or pretend to be, after all, a good Christian——"

Costantino, who was leaning on the table, shaking in every limb, but making a heroic effort to control himself, now broke in. "Has she applied for it?" he demanded.

"Sit down, sit down there," said the other, motioning with his pen; he wanted to

continue his harangue, but Costantino again spoke, in a clear, firm voice that contrasted strangely with the trembling of his limbs. "I know my duty perfectly," he said, "and I shall never give my consent. I shall undoubtedly be freed before very long, and then my wife would bitterly repent of her mistake."

Two deep wrinkles furrowed the red cheeks of the lecturer, and an ugly smile shone from his dull eyes.

"Indeed!" he said. "Well, the consent of the prisoner is asked merely as a formality. It is, of course, his duty to give it, and his good-will counts for something in his favour. But it all comes to the same thing, whether he gives it or no—Eh, there! what—why—what is the matter?" For Costantino had given a sudden lurch, and collapsed on the floor like a bundle of limp rags.

PART II

CHAPTER IX

Nineteen Hundred and Ten. In the "strangers' room" of the Porru house, Giovanna was looking over some purchases made that day in Nuoro. She was stouter than ever, and had lost something of her girlish look, but, nevertheless, she was both fresh and handsome still. She examined the pieces of linen and woollen stuff attentively, turning them over and over and feeling them with a preoccupied air, as though not altogether satisfied with the selection; then, folding them carefully, she wrapped them in newspaper and laid them away in her bag.

These things were the materials for her wedding outfit, for, having at last obtained her divorce, she was shortly to marry Dejas. She and her mother had come to Nuoro for the express purpose of making the purchases. The money had been borrowed with the utmost secrecy from Aunt Anna-Rosa Dejas, Giacobbe's sister, who had always taken a particular interest in Giovanna because of having been for a short

time her foster-mother. It was the dead of winter, but the two women had courageously defied the fatigues and discomforts of the journey in order to lay in a supply of linen, cotton, kerchiefs, and woollen stuffs. The ceremony, a purely civil one, was to be conducted in the strictest privacy, more so, even, than on the occasion of a widow's marriage. But this made no difference to Aunt Bachissia, who was determined that her daughter should enter her new home fitted out in every respect like a youthful bride of good family.

The country-side was still wondering and gossipping over the scandalous affair, and it was rumoured that another couple contemplated applying for a divorce—by mutual consent. A great many people already looked askance at the Eras, and some said that Brontu had evil designs upon Giovanna. Giacobbe Dejas, Isidoro Pane, and a number of other friends had stopped going to the house after making final scenes that were almost violent. Giacobbe had snarled like a dog, and had used prayers and even threats in a last, vain effort to dissuade Giovanna from the step, until Aunt Bachissia had, at length, driven him out. Even Aunt Porredda at Nuoro, although it was her son who had obtained the divorce for Giovanna, had received her friends with marked coolness. The "Doctor," as she called her son, was, on the contrary, most cordial and attentive in his manner towards their guests.

So Giovanna was folding up her possessions in a thoughtful mood, her preoccupation having, however, to do solely with those bits of stuff. The linen, it appeared, was somewhat tumbled; the fringe of the black Thibet kerchief, with its big crimson roses, was too short; one piece of ribbon had a spot on it,—worrying matters, all of them.

Night was falling—like that other time—but the surroundings, and the weather, and—her heart, were all, quite, quite different. The "strangers' room" now had a fine window, through whose panes shone the clear, cold light of a winter evening. The furniture, all entirely new, exhaled a powerful smell of varnished wood, while its

surface glistened like hoarfrost. The door opened on the same covered gallery, but new granite steps now led down to the courtyard. The "Doctor's" practice was growing, and the entire house had been done over. He now had an office in the busiest part of the town, and was much in demand both for civil and penal processes. The most desperate cases, the worst offenders, all that class of clients who have the least to hope from the law, entrusted their affairs to him.

Giovanna folded, wrapped, and packed her possessions, and then, the bag being somewhat over-full, she shook it vigorously to make the contents settle down; this accomplished, she turned with knitted brows, and slowly descended the outer stair, both hands thrust deep in the pockets always to be found just below the waist in the skirt of a Sardinian costume.

It was an evening in January, clear but extremely cold. Some silver stars, set in the cloudless blue of the sky, seemed to tremble in the frosty atmosphere. Crossing the courtyard Giovanna could see, through the window of the lighted dining-room, Grazia's pale face and great, eager eyes as she sat turning over the leaves of a fashion paper. The child had developed into a tall and pretty girl; she was dressed in the latest fashion, with great lace wings extending from the shoulders behind the arms; they obliged their wearers to walk sideways through any narrow aperture, but made them look, by way of compensation, like so many angels before the fall.

Grazia, seeing the guest, smiled at her without getting up, and the latter entered the kitchen.

Here, too, everything was new; the white walls, the stove of glistening bricks, the petroleum lamp hanging from the ceiling. It was all so gorgeous that Aunt Bachissia could not refrain from gazing about her the whole time, her shining, little, green beads of eyes, snapping and sparkling in the sallow, hawklike face, set in the folds of a black scarf. She at least, was unchanged—the old witch! She was seated beside the servant-maid, a dirty, dishevelled young person, whose loud and frequent laugh

displayed a set of protruding teeth. Aunt Porredda was cooking, and scolding the maid for this annoying habit of hers. Only fancy! Here was the mistress doing the cooking, while the servant sat by the stove and—laughed! What kind of way to do was that? And, moreover, the good woman could never have one single moment's peace, and she the mother of a famous lawyer!

Giovanna seated herself at some little distance from the stove, stooping over with her hands still buried in the pockets of her skirt.

"Just look!" exclaimed Aunt Bachissia in a tone of envy. "This kitchen might be a parlour! You must do your kitchen up like this, Giovanna."

"Yes," said the young woman absent-mindedly.

"Yes? Well, upon my soul, I should say so! Godmother Malthina is close, but you have got to make her understand that money is meant to spend. A kitchen like this—why, it is heaven—upon my soul! This is living."

"What do you always say 'upon my soul' for?" asked the giggling servant-maid.

"If she doesn't choose to spend her money, how am I to make her?" said Giovanna with a sigh.

The servant was still laughing, but Aunt Porredda, who wanted to keep out of her guests' conversation, turned on her, and sharply ordered her to grate some cheese for the macaroni. The girl obeyed.

"What is the matter with you?" asked Aunt Bachissia as Giovanna sighed again.

"She remembers!" said Aunt Porredda to herself. "After all, she is a Christian, not an animal, and she can't help herself!"

But Giovanna spoke up crossly:

"Well, it's just this; they've cheated us. That is not good linen, and the ribbon is spotted. Oh! it is too much."

"Upon my soul!" said the maid, mimicking Aunt Bachissia's voice and accent, and

grating away vigorously on the cheese.

Aunt Porredda thereupon let out upon her all the vials of wrath she would fain have emptied upon her guests, calling her by all the names which, in her secret heart, she was applying to Giovanna—"shameless," "vile," "ungrateful," "despicable," and so on, and threatening to strike her over the head with the ladle. In her terror, the girl grated the skin off one finger, and she was in the act of displaying it with the blood streaming down when the lawyer-son limped briskly into the room. He was enveloped in a long, black overcoat, so full that it looked like a cloak with sleeves. His smooth, fresh-coloured little face beamed with the self-satisfied expression of a nursing child. Asking immediately what there was to eat, he dropped into a seat beside Aunt Bachissia, and sat there chatting until supper was ready. After him the little Minnia came running in, rosy, breathless, and dishevelled, and threw herself down by the servant-maid. The boy had died three years earlier. The little girl's dress, of black and red flannel, was pretty enough, but her shoes were torn and her hands dirty. She had spent the entire day tearing around in a neighbouring truck-garden, and began to pour out confidences to the servant in an eager undertone.

"Upon my soul!" repeated the servant, in the same tone as before.

Next Uncle Efes Maria's big face, with its thick, wide-open lips, appeared in the door, wanting to know why they could not have supper right away.

The dining-room was now furnished with two tall, shining cupboards of varnished wood, and the whole apartment had quite an air of elegance—strips of carpet on the stone floor, a stove, and so on. Poor Aunt Porredda, with her big feet and hobnailed shoes, never felt really at home there; while Uncle Efes Maria had not yet cured himself of the habit of staring proudly around him. Grazia, tall and elegant, always withdrew into herself when her relations came into this room, where she passed most of her time eagerly devouring the Unique Mode, the Petite Parisienne, and the

fashion articles of a family journal,—sufficiently immoral in its tone, since it fomented such unhealthy dreams in her foolish head. Ah, those low-cut gowns, covered with embroidery; those scarfs worked in gold; those bodices with their great wings of silver lace, the rainbow hues, the spangles glittering like frost! Ah, those hats covered with artificial fruits, and the long flower boas, and petticoats trimmed with lace at thirty lire a yard, and the painted gloves, and fans made of human skin! How beautiful it all was,—horribly, terrifyingly beautiful! Merely to read about these things gave her a sort of spasm, they were so beautiful, so beautiful, so beautiful. And afterwards, how ugly and common and flat everything seemed,—the simple old grandmother, with her fat, wrinkled face; and the dull grandfather, gazing about him with such ignorant satisfaction and pride! It was all simply stultifying.

Just as on that other, far-away evening, Aunt Porredda came in, bearing triumphantly the steaming dish of macaroni, and all the members of the party seated themselves around the table. Aunt Bachissia, finding herself in the shadow, so to speak, of Grazia's wings, forthwith broke anew into loud exclamations of wonder and admiration, this time à propos of those glorious objects:

"No, we have never seen anything like that in our neighbourhood, but then, we have no ladies there. Here they all look like angels, the ladies."

"Or bats," said Uncle Efes Maria. "Eh, it's the fashion, my dears. Why, I remember when I was a child the ladies were all big and round; they looked like cupolas. There hardly were any ladies in those days,—the Superintendent's wife, the family——"

"And then that thing behind," interrupted Aunt Porredda. "Oh! I remember that, it looked like a saddle. Well, if you'll believe me, upon my word and honour, I remember one time some one sat down on one of them."

"The last time we were here," said Aunt Bachissia, "those wings were little things; now they are growing, growing."

Grazia sat eating her supper as though she did not hear a word of what the others

were saying. The "Doctor" eat his too—like a gristmill—staring at his niece all the while with the look of a pleased child. "Growing, growing," said he. "The next thing we know they'll all take flight."

Grazia shrugged her shoulders, or rather her wings, and neither spoke nor looked up. She frequently found her uncle,—that hero of her first, young dream,—very trying, and worse than trying—foolish! It was the common talk of the town that the uncle and niece were going to marry, and he, when interrogated on the subject, would answer neither yes nor no.

The conversation continued for some time on impersonal topics. Every now and then Aunt Porredda would get up and pass in and out of the room, and occasionally the talk would die away, and long pauses ensue that were almost embarrassing. Like that other time every one instinctively avoided the subject uppermost in the minds of the guests; who, on the whole, were just as well pleased to have it so. But, just as before, it was Aunt Bachissia, this time without intending to, who introduced the unwelcome topic. She asked if the report that the "Doctor" was to marry his niece were true or no.

The Porrus looked at one another, and Grazia, bending her head still lower over her plate, laughed softly to herself.

Paolo glanced at the girl, and, with an irony that seemed a little forced, replied:

"Eh, no! She is going to marry the Very Right Honourable Sub-Prefect!"

Grazia raised her head with a sudden movement and opened her lips, then as quickly lowered it, the blood meanwhile rushing up to her forehead.

"Oh! he's old," said Minnia. "I know him; he's always walking about the station. Ugh! he has a long, red beard, and a high hat."

"A high hat too?"

"Yes, a high hat—a widower."

"The high hat is a widower?"

"You shut up!" said the child sharply, turning on her sister.

"No, I'm not going to shut up. He's a Freemason; he won't have his children baptised, or be married in church. That's the way of it; he'll not marry in church."

"The young lady is well informed," said Uncle Efes Maria, polished as usual.

Thereupon Aunt Porredda, who had almost shrieked aloud at the word "Freemason," waved both arms in the air, and burst out:

"Yes, a Freemason! One of those people who pray to the devil. Upon my word, I believe my granddaughter there would just as leave have him! We are all on the road to perdition here, and why not? There's Grazia, forever reading bad books, and those infernal papers, till now she doesn't want to go to confession any more! Ah, those prohibited books! I lie awake all night thinking of them. But now, this is what I want to say: Grazia reads bad books; Paolo,—you see him, that one over there, Doctor Pededdu,—well, he studied on the Continent where they don't believe in God any more; now that's all right, at least, it isn't, it's all wrong, but you can understand a little why those two poor creatures have stopped believing in God. But the rest of us, who don't know anything about books and who have never in our lives ridden on a rail-road,—that devil's horse,—why should we cease to believe in God, in our kind Saviour, who died for us on the cross? Why? why? tell me why. You there, Giovanna Era, tell me why you should be willing to marry a man by civil ceremony when you already have a husband living?"

The final clause of Aunt Porredda's oration fell with startling effect upon her audience. Grazia, who, with a smile upon her lips, had been busily engaged in rolling pieces of bread into little pellets, raised her head quickly, and the smile died away; Paolo, who, likewise smiling, had been fitting the blade of a knife in and out of the prongs of his fork, straightened himself with a brusque movement; and Uncle Efes Maria turned his dull, round face towards Giovanna, and fixed her with an

impassive stare.

Giovanna herself, the object of this wholly unlooked-for attack, though she flushed crimson, replied with cynical indifference:

"I haven't any husband, my dear Aunt Porredda. Ask your son over there."

"My son!" exclaimed the other angrily. "I have no son. He's a child of the devil!"

It almost seemed as though Giovanna had succeeded in throwing the responsibility of her act upon Paolo, because he had won her case for her!

Every one laughed at Aunt Porredda's outbreak, even Minnia, and the servant who entered the room at that moment, carrying the cheese. Notwithstanding her wrath, Aunt Porredda took the dish and handed it politely to her guests.

"Upon my soul," said Aunt Bachissia, carefully cutting herself a slice, and speaking in a tone of gentle melancholy, "you are as good as gold, there is no doubt about that, but—you live at your ease, you have a house like a church, and a husband like a strong tower [Uncle Efes Maria coughed], and you have a circle of stars about you—motioning towards them—so it is easy enough to talk like that. Ah! if you knew once what it meant to be in want, and to look forward to having to beg your bread in your old age! Do you understand? In your old age!"

"Bravo!" cried Paolo. "But I would like to have a clean knife."

"What difference does that make, Bachissia Era?" answered Aunt Porredda. "You are afraid to trust in Divine Providence, and that means that you have lost your faith in God! How do you know whether you will be poor or rich when you are old? Is not Costantino Ledda coming back some day?"

"Yes, to be a beggar too," said Aunt Bachissia coldly.

"And God alone knows whether he ever will come back," observed the young lawyer brutally, taking the knife which the servant held out to him, blade foremost.

They had all heard that Costantino was ill, and there was a report that his lungs were

affected.

In order to appear agitated,—and possibly she really was so to some extent,—Giovanna now hid her face in her hands and said brokenly:

"Besides—if it is only to be a civil ceremony—it is—it is because——" Then she stopped.

"Well, why don't you go on?" cried Paolo. "You are to be married by civil ceremony because the priests won't give you any other! They don't understand, and they never will understand; just as you will never understand, Mamma Porredda. What is marriage, after all? It is a contract made between men, and binding only in the sight of men. The religious ceremony really means nothing at all——"

"It is a sacrament!" cried Aunt Porredda, beside herself.

"Means nothing at all," continued Paolo. "Just as some day the civil ceremony will mean nothing at all. Men and women should be at liberty to enter spontaneously into unions with one another and to dissolve them when they cease to be in harmony. The man——"

"Ah, you are no better than a beast!" exclaimed Aunt Porredda, though it was, in fact, not the first time that she had heard her son express these views. "It is the end of the world. God has grown weary; and who can wonder? He is punishing us; this is the deluge. I have heard that there have been terrible earthquakes already!"

"There have always been earthquakes," observed Uncle Efes Maria, who did not know whether to side with his wife or his son. Probably, in the bottom of his heart his sympathies were with the former, but he did not want to say so openly for fear of being looked down upon by the gifted Paolo.

The latter made no reply. Already he regretted having said so much, being too truly attached to his mother to wish to give her needless pain. Giovanna now took her hands from her face, and spoke in a tone of gentle humility:

"Listen," said she. "When I was married before—to that unfortunate—I had only the civil ceremony, and if he had not been arrested, who knows when we ever would have had the religious marriage! And yet, were we not just as much man and wife? No one ever said a word, and God, who knows all, was not offended——"

"But he punished you," said Aunt Porredda quickly.

"That remains to be seen!" shouted Aunt Bachissia, whose bile was beginning to rise. "Was the punishment for that, or for Basile Ledda's murder?"

"If it had been for the murder, only Costantino would have been punished."

"Well," said the old witch, her green eyes glittering with triumph, "is not that just what I am saying? My Giovanna here is not to be punished any longer for his fault, since God has given her the opportunity to marry a young man who is fond of her, and who will make her forget all her sufferings!"

"And who is also rich," remarked Uncle Efes Maria, and no one could tell whether he spoke ingenuously or no.

Giovanna, who had quite lost the thread of her discourse, was, nevertheless, determined to continue her rôle of patient martyr. "Ah, my dear Aunt Porredda," said she, "you don't know all, but God, who alone can see into our hearts, he will forgive me even if I live in mortal sin, because he will know that the fault is not with me. I would gladly have the religious ceremony, but it cannot be."

"Yes, because you are married already to some one else, you child of the devil!"

"But that other one is as good as dead! Just tell me now, can he help me to earn a living? And if the lawyers, who are educated and learned, and who know what life really is, can dissolve civil marriages, why can't the priests dissolve religious ones? Perhaps they don't understand about it. There is that priest whom we have—Elias Portolu—the one who is so good, you know him? he talks like a saint, and never gets angry with any one. Well, even he can't say anything but 'No, no, no; marriage can only be dissolved by death—and go and be blessed, if you don't know what is

right!' Does a body have to live? Yes, or no? And when you can't live, when you are as poor as Job, and can't get work, and have nothing, nothing, nothing! And just tell me, you, Aunt Porredda, suppose I had been some other woman, and suppose there had been no divorce, what would have happened? Why, mortal sin, that is what would have happened, mortal sin!"

"And in your old age—want," said Aunt Bachissia.

The servant brought in the fruit: bunches of black, shining, dried grapes, and wrinkled pears, as yellow as autumn leaves.

The old hostess handed the dish to her old guest, with an indescribable look of compassion. Her anger, and disdain, and indignation had suddenly melted away as she realised the sordid natures of the mother and daughter. "Good San Francisco, forgive them," she prayed inwardly. "Because they are so ignorant, and blind, and hard!" Then she said mildly: "You and I, Bachissia Era, are old women, and you, Giovanna, will be old some day. Now tell me one thing: what is it that comes after old age?"

"Why, death."

"Death; yes, death comes after. And after death what is there?"

"Eternity?" said Paolo, laughing softly to himself as he devoured his grapes like a greedy child, holding the bunch close to his mouth, and detaching the seeds with his sharp little teeth.

"Eternity, precisely; eternity comes after—where are you going, Minnia? Stay where you are." But the child, tired of the conversation, slipped out of the room. "What do you say, Giovanna Era, does eternity follow? yes, or no? Bachissia Era—yes, or no?"

"Yes," said the guests.

"Yes? and yet you never think of it?"

"Oh! what is the use of thinking of it?" said Paolo, getting up, and wiping his mouth with his napkin; he felt that it was high time for him to be off; he had already wasted too much time on these women, who, after all, were interesting solely from the fact that they had not yet paid him. "There are some people waiting to see me at the office—several people, in fact," he said. "I will see you again; you are not leaving yet awhile?"

"To-morrow morning at daybreak."

"Not really? Oh! you had better stay longer," he said indifferently, as he struggled into his huge overcoat. When it was on, Aunt Bachissia—watching him out of her sharp green eyes—thought that the little Doctor looked like a magia, that is, one of those grotesque and frightening figures whom wizards evoke by their arts.

He departed, and immediately afterwards Miss Grazia, who had hardly spoken throughout the entire meal, arose and left the room as well. Uncle Efes Maria settled himself back in his chair, and began to read the New Sardinia. Bursts of laughter came from the two girls in the kitchen, and the women sat, each eating a pear, in perfect silence. A weight hung over them; upon Aunt Porredda as well as upon the others, for she was realising in her simple untutored mind that the disease that had attacked the souls of her ignorant guests was one and the same as that from which her sophisticated son and granddaughter were suffering.

CHAPTER X

The next morning, just as on that day so long before, Giovanna was the first to stir, while Aunt Bachissia, who like most elderly people usually lay awake until late into the night, still slept, though lightly and with laboured breath.

The light of the early winter morning, cold but clear, shone through the curtained window-panes. Giovanna had fallen asleep the night before feeling sad,—though Aunt Porredda's outbreak had annoyed rather than distressed her,—but now, as she

looked out and saw the promise of a bright day for the journey, she felt a sensation of joyous anticipation.

Yes, she had felt quite melancholy on the previous evening before falling asleep, thinking of Costantino, and eternity, and her dead child, and all sorts of depressing things. "I have not a bad heart," she had reflected. "And God looks into our hearts and judges more by our intentions than by our actions. I have considered everything, everything. I was very fond of Costantino, and I cried just as long as I had any tears to shed. Now I have no more; I don't believe he will ever come back, and if he does it will not be until we are both old; I can't go on crying forever. Why should it be my fault if I can't cry now when I think of him? And then, after all, I am just a creature of flesh and blood, like every one else; I am poor and exposed to sin and temptation, and in order to save myself from these I am taking the position which God has provided for me. Yes, my dear Aunt Porredda, I do remember eternity, and it is to save my soul that I am doing what I am doing—no, I am not bad; I have not a bad heart." And so she very nearly persuaded herself that her heart not only was not bad, but that it was quite good and noble; at least, if this was not the conviction of that innermost depth of conscience, that depth which refused to lie, and from whence had issued the disturbing veil of sadness that hung over her, it was of her outer and more practical mind, and at last, quite comforted, she fell asleep.

And now the frosty daybreak was striking with its diaphanous wings—cold and pure as hoarfrost—against the window-panes of the "strangers' room," and Giovanna thought of the sun and her spirits rose. The older woman presently awoke as well, and she too turned at once to the window.

"Ah!" she exclaimed in a tone of satisfaction. "It is going to be fine." They dressed and went down. Aunt Porredda, polite and attentive as usual, was already in the kitchen. She served her guests with coffee, and helped them to saddle the horse. To all appearances she had quite forgotten the discussion of the previous evening, but

no sooner had the two women passed out the door than she made the sign of the cross, as though to exorcise the mortal sin as well. "Very good," she said to herself, closing the door after them. "A pleasant journey to you, and may the Lord have mercy on your souls!"

Through the crystalline stillness of the morning came the sound of shrill cock-crowing—close at hand, further away, and further still; but the little town still slept beneath its canopy of china-blue.

This time the Eras were to make the journey alone. They had to descend into the valley, cross it, and then climb the mountain-range which they could see beyond, showing grey in the early light, its snowcapped peaks standing out boldly against the horizon.

It was very cold; there was no wind, but the air cut keenly. As they descended into the wild valley the intense stillness seemed only to be intensified by the monotonous murmur of a mountain stream. The short winter grass, bright green in colour, and shining with hoarfrost, showed here and there in vivid patches along the edges of the winding path. From the rocks came a smell of damp moss, and the green copses sparkled with a glittering layer of frost. The whole valley was radiantly fresh and sweet and wild, but here and there gnarled outlines of solitary trees stood out like hermits penitentially exposing their bent and naked forms to the cold brilliance of the winter's morning.

In the fields the earth showed black and damp; and long lines of dilapidated wall, climbing the hillsides and descending into the hollows, looked, with their coating of green moss, like huge green worms. On, and on, and on, journeyed the two women, their hands and feet and faces numb and stiff with cold. They crossed the stream at a ford where the water ran broad and shallow and quiet, then they reascended the valley and began to climb the mountain at its further end. The sun, now well above the horizon, was shining with a cold, clear radiance, and the mountains of the distant

coast-range showed blue against the gold of the sky. The wind had risen as well, and, laden with the odour of damp rocks and earth, was stirring among the shrubs and bushes. The two women proceeded silently on their way, each buried in her own thoughts. In the middle of a small defile, overhung by rocks, and shadowed by the lofty snowcapped summits of the mountains, they met a man of Bitti journeying on foot: the travellers exchanged greetings, although unknown to one another, and passed on their respective ways. As the women mounted higher and higher, the sun enveloped and warmed them more and more; and they thought of the half of the journey already accomplished, of the purchases they were carrying back in the wallet, of what they would do when they got home; and Aunt Bachissia thought of Aunt Martina's amazement when she should see Giovanna's outfit, while Giovanna thought of Brontu and of the queer things he would sometimes say when he was drunk. Preoccupied as they were, however, when they caught sight of the white walls of the church of San Francisco glistening among the green bushes half-way up the mountain side, each thought of Costantino, and said an Ave Maria for him.

Shortly after midday they reached home. Orlei, set in its circle of damp fields, and blown upon by the frozen breath of the mighty sphinxes whose heads were now wreathed in bands of snow, was far colder than Nuoro, and the sun could barely warm life into the scanty herbage in its narrow, melancholy streets. The roofs were covered with rust and mildew, some of them overgrown with dog-grass; the walls were black with damp; the trees, nude and brown. Here and there a thin line of smoke could be seen curling upwards into the limitless space above; but, as usual, the village appeared to be utterly silent and deserted. In the crevices of the walls the little purple and green cups of the Venus's looking-glass bloomed chillily; speckled lizards crawled into the sun, and snails and shining beetles mounted patiently from stone to stone.

Aunt Martina, seated on her portico, spinning in the sun, saw the arrival of the travellers, and was instantly devoured by curiosity to know what they had in their

wallet; she controlled herself, however, and returned their greeting with courteous composure.

Towards evening Brontu arrived; he visited his betrothed every three days, and this evening his mother decided to accompany him, in order to see the purchases made by her neighbours in Nuoro.

A sparse little fire of juniper-wood was burning on Aunt Bachissia's hearth, throwing out fitful gleams of light across the paved flooring, and lighting up the earthen walls of the kitchen with a faint, rosy glow. Giovanna wanted to bring a candle, but the visitors prevented her, Aunt Martina from an instinct of economy, and Brontu because in the dim firelight he felt freer to gaze at his betrothed.

The attitude of the latter towards her future mother-in-law and towards Brontu himself was quite perfect. She had a gentle, subdued manner, and spoke in childlike tones, albeit expressing sentiments of profound wisdom. She gave shy glances from beneath her long, thick lashes, and might have been a girl of fifteen so guileless and innocent was her bearing. She was not, in truth, consciously acting a part; what she did was purely instinctive.

Brontu was madly in love with her, and now, when he had been drinking, he would run to her, and, throwing himself on his knees, repeat certain puerile prayers learned in infancy. Then he would begin to cry because he realised that he was tipsy, and would swear that never, never again would he touch a drop.

This evening, however, he was entirely himself, and sat talking quietly, enfolding Giovanna all the while in a passionate gaze, and smiling and displaying his teeth, which gleamed in the firelight.

Aunt Bachissia began to tell about their trip; she spoke of the greatcoat worn by the young lawyer, and of the "wings" in fashion among the Nuorese ladies; then she described the Porrus' kitchen, and told of their meeting a man on the road; but of the discussion started by Aunt Porredda at the supper-table, and of the purchases she

and Giovanna had made, she said never a word. She knew, however, very well that Aunt Martina could hardly wait to see the new possessions, and was herself no less anxious to display them.

"And what have you to say about it all, Giovanna?" said Brontu, stirring the fire with the end of his stick. "You are very quiet to-night. What is the matter?"

"I am tired," she replied, and then suddenly asked about Giacobbe Dejas.

"That crazy man? He torments the life out of me; I shall end some day by kicking him out. He does not need to work now for a living, anyhow."

"I don't know how it is," said Aunt Bachissia. "He used to be such a cheerful soul, and now, when he has a house and cattle, and they even say he is going to be married, his temper is something——! You knew, didn't you, that he threatened to beat us?"

"Did he ever come back?"

"No; never since that time."

"Nor Isidoro Pane either," said Giovanna in a dull voice.

"I thought I saw him go by here yesterday evening," said Aunt Martina.

Giovanna raised her head quickly, but she did not speak, and Brontu laughingly remarked that he supposed she did not stand in any particular need of leeches just at present.

"Well," said Aunt Martina at length, "didn't you bring me anything from Nuoro? You keep one a long time in suspense!" They had, in fact, brought her an apron, but Aunt Bachissia feigned surprise and mortification. "Of course," said she, "we had forgotten for the moment——" And she gave a shrill laugh, but sobered down instantly on observing that Giovanna took no part in these pleasantries, and seemed unable to shake off her melancholy.

"No, no; we never thought about it, but Giovanna will show you a few trifles that we

bought——"

Giovanna got up, lighted a candle, and went into the adjoining room, Brontu's ardent gaze following her. Aunt Martina sat waiting for her present. Several moments passed and Giovanna did not return.

"What is she doing in there?" asked Brontu.

"Who knows?"

Another minute elapsed.

"I am going to see," he said, jumping up and walking towards the door.

"No, no; what are you thinking of?" said Aunt Bachissia, but so faint-heartedly that Aunt Martina—scandalised—called to her son to come back with energetic: "Zss—zss——"

Brontu, however, paying no attention, tiptoed to the door. Giovanna was standing before an open drawer, re-reading a letter which she had found slipped underneath the door when they got home that day. It was a heartbroken appeal from Costantino. In his round, unformed characters he implored her for the last time not to do this thing that she was about to do. He reminded her of the far-away time of their early love; he promised to come back; he assured her solemnly of his innocence. "If you have no pity for me," the letter concluded, "at least have some for yourself, for your own soul. Remember the mortal sin: remember eternity!"

Ah, the same words that Aunt Porredda had used; the very same, the very same! Uncle Isidoro must have slipped the letter in while they were away. How long it had been since they had had any direct news of the prisoner! The tears rushed to her eyes, but what moved her were probably more the memories of the past than any thoughts of that eternal future.

Suddenly she heard the door being pushed softly open, and some one stealing in behind her. Leaning quickly over, she began to rummage in the drawer, with

trembling hands and misty eyes.

Brontu stood directly behind her with outstretched arms, he clasped her around the shoulders, and she, pretending to be frightened, began to tremble.

"What is it? What are you doing?" he asked in a low, broken voice.

"Oh! I am looking—looking—the apron we got for your mother—I don't know what I have done with it. Let me go, let me go," she said, trying to free herself from his embrace. Close to her face she saw his white teeth gleaming between the full, smiling lips, as red and lustrous as two ripe cherries; then, suddenly, she felt his hand behind her head, and those two burning lips were pressed close to her own in a kiss that was like the blast from a fiery furnace.

"Ah!" she panted. "We have forgotten eternity!"

A little later she was seated once more in her place by the fire, laughing with all the abandonment of a happy child; while Brontu regarded her with the same look in his eyes that he had when he had been drinking.

The winter passed by. Costantino's friends never abandoned their efforts to break off the accursed match, but in vain. The Dejases and Eras were like people bewitched, and remained deaf alike to prayers, threats, and innuendoes. The syndic, even the syndic, a pale and haughty personage who resembled Napoleon I., was against this "devil's marriage," and when Brontu and Giovanna came to him in great secrecy to have it published, he treated them with the utmost contempt, spitting on the ground all the time they were there.

When the question of the divorce had first been mooted, people talked and wondered, but nothing more; then, when it was said that Brontu and Giovanna were in love with each other, there was general disapproval, yet at bottom the community was not ill-pleased to have such a fruitful theme to gossip about; but when there was talk of a marriage!—then every one said it was simply and purely an impossibility. The neighbours laughed, and rather hoped that Brontu was amusing himself at the

expense of the Eras. After that, had the young people merely lived together in "mortal sin" probably nothing more would have been said, and people would have ceased to laugh and thought no more about it. It would not have been the first time that such a thing had occurred, nor was it likely to be the last; and Giovanna could cite her youth and poverty by way of excuse. But—marry a woman who already had a husband! marry her! That was a thing not to be stood! What would you have? People are made that way. And then the disgrace and scandal of it! Why, it was a sin, a horrible sin, and it was feared that God might punish the entire community for the fault of these two. There were even threats of making a demonstration on the marriage day—whistling, stone-throwing, and beating the bride and bridegroom. When rumours of these things reached their ears Brontu became very angry. Aunt Bachissia said: "Leave them to me!" and Aunt Martina threw up her head with the movement of a war-horse when it scents the smell of the first volley.

Ah! she would rather like to fight and—win. She was beginning to feel old, she was tired of work, and well pleased at the prospect of having a strong servant in the house without wages. Moreover, she liked Giovanna, and Brontu wanted her, and so people might burst with envy if they chose.

On the evening of the day when the marriage was published, Uncle Isidoro Pane was working hard in his miserable hut by the brilliant, ruddy light of a large fire. This was the one luxury which Uncle Isidoro was able to allow himself—a good fire—since he collected his wood from the fields, the river-banks, and the forests. During the winter his chief occupation was weaving cord out of horsehair; he knew, in fact, how to do a little of almost everything,—spin, sew, cook (when there was anything to cook), patch shoes,—and yet he had never been able to escape from dire poverty.

Suddenly the door was thrown open; there was a momentary glimpse of the March sky—not stormy, but overcast—and Giacobbe Dejas silently seated himself beside

the fire.

The fisherman's kitchen looked like one of those pictures of Flemish interiors, where the figures are thrown out in a ruddy glow against a dark background. By the uncertain light, a grey spider-web could be dimly discerned, with the spider in the middle; in the corner near the hearth, a glass jug filled to the brim with water in which black leeches swam about; a yellow basket against the wall; and finally the figures of the two men and the black hair cord, its loose ends held between the bony, red fingers of the old fisherman.

"And how goes it now?" asked Giacobbe.

"How goes it now? How does it go now?" repeated the old man. "I don't know."

"Well, it's been published," said Giacobbe more as though he were talking to himself. "The thing is actually done! The drunkard never even came near the pastures to-day, so I just took myself off as well. They may steal his sheep if they want to; I don't care; here I am, and something has got to be done, Isidoro Pane! Hi! Isidoro Pane! leave that cord alone and listen to me. Some—thing—has—got—to—be—done——Do you hear me?"

"Yes, I hear you; but what is there to do? We have done all we can—implored, expostulated, threatened——The syndic has interfered, the clerk. Priest Elias——"

"Oh, Priest Elias! What did he do? Talked to them with sugar in his mouth! He should have threatened them; he should have said: 'I'll take the Holy Books and I'll curse you! I'll excommunicate you; you shall never be able to satisfy your hunger, nor to quench your thirst, nor to have any peace; you shall live in a hell upon earth!' Ah, then you would have seen some result! But no, he is a dunce—a warm-milk priest; and he has not done his duty. Don't speak of him to me, it makes me angry."

Isidoro laid down the cord: "It's of no use to get angry," said he. "Priest Elias has no business with threats, and he has not used them; but never fear, excommunication will fall on that house all the same!"

"Well, I am going to leave them; yes, I am going away. I'll eat no more of their accursed bread!" said Giacobbe with a look expressive of his loathing and disgust. "But before going, I should like to have the pleasure of administering a sound thrashing to those favourites of the devil."

"You are crazy, little spring bird," said Isidoro with a melancholy smile, imitating Giacobbe.

"Yes, I am, I'm crazy; but even so, what do you care? You haven't done anything either to stop this sacrilege. Oh, it's disgraceful! I've lost all my good spirits——"

"It has made me ten years older."

"All my good spirits, and I keep thinking all the time of what Costantino will say to us for not being able to put a stop to it. Is it true that he is ill?"

"Not now; he was ill, but now he is only desperate," said Uncle Isidoro, shaking his head. Then he picked up the cord and began plaiting it again, murmuring below his breath: "Excommunicate—excommunicate——"

"I get so furious that I foam at the mouth—the way a dog does," said Giacobbe, raising his voice. "Just exactly like a dog. No, after all, I don't think I'll quit that house; I'll stay there if I burst, and see them when the blast of excommunication strikes them. Yes, if there is one thing that is sure, it is that God punishes both in this life and the other too, and I want to be on hand when it comes. What is that that you are making, Uncle 'Sidoro?"

"A horsehair cord."

There was a short silence; Giacobbe sat staring at the cord, his eyes dim with grief and anger.

"What are you going to do with it when it is done?"

"Sell it, over in Nuoro; I sell them here too sometimes; the peasants use them to tie their cows. What makes you look at it like that? You are not thinking of hanging

yourself, are you?"

"No, little spring bird, you can do that for yourself, if it is God's will. Yes," he continued, again raising his voice. "They have actually published the notice."

Another silence; then Isidoro said: "Who knows? I can't help hoping yet that that marriage may never come off. I have faith in God, and I believe that San Costantino may still perform some miracle to stop it."

"Why, certainly; why not? A miracle by all means!" said Giacobbe scornfully.

"Yes; why not?" replied Isidoro calmly. "The real murderer of Basilio Ledda might die now, for instance, and confess. In that case the divorce could not hold good."

"Of course, die just at this precise time!" said the other in the same tone as before. "You are as innocent as a three-year-old child, Isidoro, with your Christian faith!"

"Well, who knows? Or he might be found out."

"Why, to be sure, he might be found out! Just in the nick of time! Only what has any one ever known about it? And who is to find him out?"

"Who? Why, you—I—any one."

"There you go again! Just like a three-year-old child! Or, rather, a snail before it's out of the shell. And how, pray, are we to find him out? Are we even certain that Costantino did not do it himself?"

"Yes, we are certain, entirely so," said Isidoro. "It might have been any one of us, but never him. I might have done it, or you——"

Giacobbe got up. "Well, what can you suggest to do? If there is anything to be done, tell me."

"Any one but him," repeated Uncle Isidoro, without raising his head. "Yes, there is one thing to do,—commit ourselves into the hands of God."

"Oh, you make me so angry!" cried the other, stamping about the forlorn little room like an imprisoned bull. "I ask if there are any steps to be taken, and you answer like

a fool. I'll go and choke Bachissia Era; that will really be something to do!" And he marched off as he had come, without greeting or salutation of any kind, angry this time in earnest.

Uncle Isidoro, likewise, did not so much as raise his head, but, noticing presently that his visitor had left the door open, he got up to close it, and stood for some moments looking out.

It was a mild March night, moonlit but overcast. Already one got faint, damp whiffs, suggestive of the first stirrings of vegetation. All about the old man's hovel the hedges and wild shrubs seemed to lie sleeping in the faint, mysterious light of the veiled moon.

Far away, just above the horizon, a streak of clear sky wound and zigzagged its way among the vapourous clouds like a deep blue river, on whose banks a fire burned.

Isidoro shut the door, and with a heavy sigh resumed his work.

CHAPTER XI

It was the vigil of the Assumption, a hot, cloudy Wednesday. Aunt Martina sat on the portico spinning, while Giovanna, who was pregnant, sifted grain near by. Usually two women perform this task, but Giovanna was doing it alone. First she stirred the grain around in the sieve and extracted all bits of stone, then she sifted it carefully into a piece of cloth placed in a large basket that stood before her. She was seated on the ground, and beside her was another basket heaped with grain that looked as though it were piled with gold dust.

Instead of growing fat the "wife with two husbands," as she was called in the neighbourhood, had become much thinner; her nose was red and somewhat puffed; there were dark circles around her eyes, and her lower lip was drawn down with an expression of discontent.

Some dishevelled-looking roosters, which now and again fell to fighting and strewed

the floor with feathers, were laying siege to the basket; from time to time one of them would succeed in thrusting his bill inside; then Giovanna, with loud cries and threats, would drive him off, but only to stand watchful and alert, ready to return to the charge the moment her attention wandered.

Her attention wandered frequently. Her expression was sad, or rather, indifferent—that of a self-centred person dwelling continually on her individual woes. The skies might fall, but she would consider only how the event might be expected to affect her personally. She was barefoot and quite dirty, as Aunt Martina hated to have her soap used.

The two women worked on in silence, but the older one watched her companion out of the corner of her eye, and whenever she was slack about driving off the chickens, she screamed at them herself.

At length one, bolder than the rest, jumped on the edge of the basket and began greedily pecking within.

"Ah—h—ah, a—a—ah!" shrieked Aunt Martina. Giovanna turned with a sudden movement, and the rooster, spreading its wings, flew off, leaving a trail of yellow grains behind it, which, in dread lest her mother-in-law should scold her (she was always in dread of that), she hastily began to gather up.

"What a nuisance they are!" she exclaimed peevishly.

"Ah, I should say they were, a downright nuisance," said the other mildly. "No, don't lean over like that, my daughter, you'll hurt yourself; let me do it," and leaving her spindle she stooped down and began to pick up the grains one at a time, while a hen seized the opportunity to pull at the bunch of flax on her distaff.

"Ah! ah, you! I'll wring your neck for you!" shrieked Aunt Martina, suddenly turning and espying it, and as she drove it off, the others all instantly fell to gobbling up the grain.

The younger woman went on with her task, bending over the sieve, silent and

abstracted.

From the portico could be seen the deserted common, Aunt Bachissia's bare little cottage in the sultry noontide glare, a burning stretch of road, yellow, deserted fields, and a horizon like metal.

The clouds, banked high one upon another, seemed to rain heat, and the stillness was almost oppressive. A tall, barefooted boy passed by, leading a couple of small black cows; then came a young woman, likewise barefoot, who stared at Giovanna with two round eyes, then a fat white dog with its nose to the ground; but that was all; no other incident broke the monotony of the sultry noontide.

Giovanna sifted and stirred ever more and more languidly. She was weary; she was hungry, but not for food; she was thirsty, but not for drink; through her whole physical nature she was conscious of a need of something hopelessly lost.

Her task finished, she leaned over and began pouring the grain back from one basket to another.

"Let it be, let it be," said Aunt Martina solicitously. "You will do yourself some harm."

Giovanna, starting presently to carry the grain to the "mill" (a grind-stone turned by a small donkey, which grinds a hundred litres of grain in four days), her mother-in-law prevented her and took it herself. Left alone, Giovanna went into the kitchen, looked cautiously around, and then began to search through the cupboards. Nothing anywhere; not a piece of fruit, no wine, not so much as a drop of liquor wherewith to quench the intolerable thirst that tormented her. She did, at last, find a little coffee, which she heated, and sweetened with a bit of sugar from her pocket, carefully re-covering the fire when she had done.

The mouthful of warm liquid seemed, however, the rather to augment her thirst. Giovanna felt that what she wanted was some soft, delicious drink, something that she had never tasted in all her life and—never would. A dull anger took possession

of her, and her eyes grew bitter. Walking over to the door of the storeroom, she shook it, although knowing perfectly well that it was locked; her lips grew white, and she murmured a curse below her breath. Then, barefoot as she was, she went out, noiselessly crossed the common, and called her mother.

"Come in," answered the latter from the kitchen.

"I can't; there's no one in the house."

Aunt Bachissia came and stood in the doorway; glancing up at the sky, she remarked that it looked threatening, and that there would probably be a storm that night.

"Well, I don't care," said Giovanna sullenly. "It may rain every bolt out of heaven!" Then she added more gently: "But may that which I bear be saved from harm."

"Upon my soul, you are in a bad humour. What has become of the old witch? I saw you sifting grain."

"She has taken it to the 'mill.' She was afraid to let me go for fear I might steal some."

"Patience, my daughter; it will not always be like this."

"But it is like this, and like this, and I can't stand it any longer. What sort of a life is it? She has honey on her lips and a goad in her hand. 'Work, work, work.' She drives me like a beast of burden, and gives me barley-bread, and water, and no light at night, and bare feet. Oh, as much of all that as ever I want!"

Aunt Bachissia listened, unable to offer any consolation. She was, indeed, accustomed to hear these plaints poured into her ears daily. Oh, Aunt Bachissia had been fooled as well! and had to work harder than ever before, though for that she cared little; it was Giovanna's really wretched condition that gave her the most concern.

"Patience, patience; better times are coming; no one can rob you of the future."

"Bah, what does that amount to? I shall be an old woman by that time,—if I haven't

died already of rage! What good will it do to be well off when you're old? You can't enjoy anything then."

"Eh! yes, you can, upon my soul," said the other, her green eyes gleaming like a couple of fireflies. "I could enjoy a great many things well enough! Eh, eh! To have nothing to do all day long, and roast meat to eat, and soft bread, and trout, and eels, and to drink white wine, and rosolis, and chocolate——"

"Stop!" cried Giovanna, with a groan; and she told how she had been unable to find anything wherewith to quench her burning thirst.

"You must have patience," repeated the mother. "That comes from your condition. If you had the most delicious things in the world to choose from—liquors from the King's own table—you would still be thirsty."

Giovanna kept gazing up at the house with the portico, her eyes weary and hopeless, and her mouth drawn down sullenly.

"Yes, we will have rain to-night," said the other again.

"It can rain as much as it wants to."

"Is Brontu coming home?"

"Yes, he is, and I am going to tell him about everything to-night; yes, I shall speak to him about it this very night."

"My soul, you are? And what is it that you are going to speak to him about?"

"Why, I am going to tell him that I can't stand it any longer, and if he only wanted me so as to have a servant and nothing else, he will find that he has made a mistake, and—and——"

"You will tell him nothing of the sort!" said the old woman energetically. "Let him alone; doesn't he have to work and live like a servant himself? What is the use of bothering him? He might send you packing, and marry some one else—in church."

Giovanna began to tremble violently, her expression softened, and her eyes filled.

"He's not bad," she said. "But he gets tipsy all the time, and smells as strong of brandy as a still; it makes me sick sometimes. Then he gets so angry about nothing at all. Ugh, he's unbearable! It was better—it was far, far better——"

"Well," demanded Aunt Bachissia coldly, "what was better?"

"Nothing."

This was the kind of thing that went on all the time. Giovanna did nothing but brood over memories of Costantino; how good he had been, how handsome, and clean, and gentle. A deep melancholy possessed her, far more bitter than any sorrow one feels for the dead; while her approaching maternity, instead of bringing consolation, the rather increased her despair.

The afternoon wore on, grey and leaden; not a breath of air relieved the suffocating stillness. Giovanna established herself on the tumble-down wall, beneath the almond-tree, and her mother came and sat beside her. For a while neither of them spoke; then Giovanna said, as though continuing a conversation that had been interrupted:

"Yes, it is just the way it used to be at first, after the sentence; I dream every night that he has come back, and it is curious, but do you know, I am never frightened,—though Giacobbe Dejas declares that if Costantino ever did come back he would kill me. I don't know, but I somehow feel in my heart that he is coming back; I never used to think so, but I do now. Oh! there is no use in looking at me like that. Am I reproaching you for anything? I should say not. You would have a better right to reproach me. What good has it all done you? None at all; you can't even come to see me any more—up there——" She thrust out her lip in the direction of the white house. "My mother-in-law is afraid you might carry some dust off on your feet! And I can't give you anything, not a thing; do you understand? Not even my work. Everything is kept locked up, and I am treated exactly like a servant."

"But I don't want anything, my heart. Don't make yourself miserable over such

trifles. I am not in need of anything," said Aunt Bachissia very gently. "You must not worry about me; all I care about is that money I borrowed from Anna Dejas. I don't see how I am ever to pay her, but she will wait."

Giovanna reddened angrily, and wrung her hands, exclaiming in a high-pitched voice: "Well, anyhow, I shall certainly speak to him about that to-night, the nasty beast; I am going to tell him that at least he might pay for the rags I have on my back. Pay for them! Pay for them! May you be shot!"

"Don't speak so loud; don't get so excited, my soul. There is no use, I tell you, in losing your temper. What good will getting angry do you? Suppose he were to turn you out."

"Well, he may if he wants to; it would be better if he did. At least, I could work for myself then, instead of slaving for those accursed people. Ah, there she is, coming back," she added in a lower tone as the black-robed figure of Aunt Martina appeared in the open glare of the common. "Now, I'll get a scolding for leaving the house empty; she's afraid some one will steal her money. She has heaps of it, and she doesn't even know about it; she can't tell one note from another, nor the coins either. She has ten thousand lire,—yes, a thousand scudi——"

"No, my soul, two thousand."

"Well, two thousand, hidden away. And I am not allowed a drop of anything to refresh me, or to slake this burning thirst inside me!"

"It will all be yours," said Aunt Bachissia, "if you will only be patient and bide your time. When the angels come some day and carry her off to Paradise, it will all belong to you."

Giovanna cleared her throat, and rubbed it with one hand; then she resumed hotly: "They may drive me out if they want to, it makes no difference to me. Listen: the communal clerk says I am Brontu's wife, but it seems to me as though I were just living with him in mortal sin. Do you remember what sort of a marriage it was?

Done secretly, in the dark almost; without as much as a dog present; no confections—nothing. And then Giacobbe Dejas—choke him!—laughing and yelling out: 'Here he comes, the beauty!' and then the 'beauty' came."

"Now you listen to me," said Aunt Bachissia in a low penetrating voice. "You are simply a fool. Upon my word, you always were, and you always will be. Why do you give up so? and for such trifles too? I tell you every poor daughter-in-law has got to live just as you are living. Your harvest-time will come; only be patient and obedient, and you will see it will all come out right. Moreover, just as soon as the baby is born I believe you will find that things are very different."

"No, nothing will be different. And then—if there were no children—they will only chain me faster to that stone that is dragging me down and trampling on me. Would you like to know something? Well, my real husband is Costantino Ledda, and——"

"And I'll stop your mouth! You are beside yourself, my soul; be quiet!"

"—and if he comes back," Giovanna went on, "I'll not be able to return to him on account of having children."

"I will stop your mouth," repeated Aunt Bachissia, trembling and rising to her feet with a movement as though she were about to put her threat into execution. There was no need, however, for Giovanna saw her mother-in-law coming across the common and broke off.

Aunt Martina, spinning as she walked, slowly approached the two women. "Taking the air?" she enquired, without raising her eyes from the whirling spindle.

"Fine air! The heat is suffocating. Ah, to-night we may get some rain," replied Aunt Bachissia.

"It undoubtedly is going to rain; let us hope there will be no thunder, I am so afraid of thunder. The devil empties out his bag of nuts then. I hope and trust Brontu will be in before evening. What shall we have for supper, Giovanna?"

"Whatever you like."

"Are you going to stay out here? Don't run any risks; it might be bad for you."

"What will be bad for me?"

"Why, the evening air; it is always a little damp. It is safer to stay inside; and you might be getting supper ready. There are some eggs, my daughter; eggs and tomatoes; prepare them for yourself and your husband; I am not hungry. Really, do you know," she continued, turning to Aunt Bachissia: "I have no appetite at all these days. Perhaps it is the weather."

"Perhaps it is the devil perched on your croup, and your own stinginess!" thought the other. Giovanna neither spoke nor moved; she seemed completely immersed in her own dismal thoughts.

"The 'panegyric' is to be at eleven to-morrow, such an inconvenient hour! Shall you go, Giovanna? It has always been at ten o'clock in other years."

"No; I shall not go," replied Giovanna in a dull tone. She was ashamed now to be seen in church.

"Yes, at that time it is apt to be warm; it is just as well that you should not go. But it seems to be raining," she added, holding out her hand. A big drop fell and spread among the hairs on its back. Tic, tic, tic,—other great drops came splashing down, on the motionless almond-tree, and on the ground, boring little holes in the sand of the common. At the same time the sky appeared to be lightening; there was a vivid gleam, and a great, yellow cloud, with markings of a darker shade, sailed slowly across the bronze background of the sky.

The women took refuge in their houses, and immediately afterwards the rain began to fall in earnest; a heavy, steady downpour, with neither wind nor thunder, but almost frightening in its violence. In ten minutes it was all over, but enough had fallen to soak the ground.

"God! Oh, God! Oh, San Costantino! Oh, Holy Assumption!" moaned Aunt Martina. "If Brontu is out in this he'll be like a drowned chicken," and she studied the heavens anxiously, though never for a moment ceasing to spin, while Giovanna began to prepare the supper. Listening to the clatter of the rain, she, too, felt a vague uneasiness; not, indeed, on her husband's account, but in dread of some unknown, indefinable evil.

All at once the yellow light that had accompanied the downpour melted in the west into a clear, pale blue sky; the rain stopped suddenly, the clouds opened and parted, skurrying off,—under one another, on top of one another—like a great crowd of people dispersing after a reunion. The light was sea-green; the air was fresh and reviving, filled with the odour of damp earth and of dried grass that has had a thorough soaking, and with the sound of shrill, foolish crowings of roosters mistaking this pale, clear twilight for the dawn. Then,—silence. Aunt Martina's black figure, eternally spinning on the portico, made a dark splotch against the green sky. Giovanna was lighting the fire, bending over the hearth, when a long, tremulous neigh broke on her ears; the tremor in the sound seemed to communicate itself to her, and she straightened herself up, trembling as well, and looked out. Brontu was arriving, and she was frightened—what about——? About everything and nothing at all.

A tiny gleam flashed out from Aunt Bachissia's cottage; by its light the old woman was endeavouring, with the aid of a rough broom, to sweep out the water that had poured over her threshold. The sky, beyond the yellow fields, looked like a stretch of still, green water; and in the foreground the almond-tree, glossy and dripping, dominated everything around it. Beneath the almond-tree, in the last gleam of daylight, Brontu appeared on horse-back; horse and rider alike black and steaming, and lagging along as though sodden and weighted by the deluge that had poured over them.

The two women came running out to meet him, uttering many expressions of horror, possibly a trifle exaggerated in tone, but he paid no attention to them.

"The devil! the devil! the devil!" he muttered, drawing his feet heavily out of the stirrups, and lifting first one and then the other. "Go to the devil who sent you!—My shoes are water-logged! Why don't you get to work?" he added crossly, marching off to the kitchen.

The two women began at once to unload the horse, and when Giovanna followed him a little later, he at once demanded something to drink, "to dry him." "Change your clothes," she told him.

But no, he did not want to change his clothes; he only wanted something to drink,—"to dry him"—he repeated, and grew angry when Giovanna would not get it for him. He ended, however, by doing precisely as she said,—changed his clothes, took nothing to drink, and, while waiting for supper, sat carefully rubbing his wet hair on a towel, and combing it out.

"What a deluge! what a deluge!" he said. "A regular sea pouring straight out of heaven. Ah, I got my crust well softened this time!" He gave a little laugh. "How are you, Giovanna? All right, eh? Giacobbe Dejas sent all kinds of messages. You act like smoke in his eyes."

"You ought to stop his tongue," said Aunt Martina. "He's only a dirty serving-man; if you didn't let him take such liberties he would respect you more."

"I stopped more than his tongue; he wanted me to let him come in to-night. 'No,' I said; 'you'll stay where you are, and split.' He's coming in to-morrow, though."

"To-morrow? and why to-morrow? Ah, my son, you let yourself be robbed quite openly; you don't amount to anything!"

"Well, after all, to-morrow is the Assumption," said he, raising his voice, and putting the finishing touches to his hairdressing. "And Giacobbe is a relation, so let it rest. There, Giovanna, see how handsome I am!" He smiled at her, showing his splendid

teeth.

He did, in truth, look so handsome, and clean, and radiant, with his shining locks and fresh colour, that Giovanna felt a momentary softening. Presently he began to hum a foolish little song that children sing when it rains:

"'Rain! rain! rain Ripe grapes, and figs——'"

And so, they all sat down to the evening meal in high good humour and contentment. Aunt Martina, excusing herself on the plea of having no appetite, ate nothing but bread, onions, and cheese; articles of diet, however, of which she happened to be particularly fond,—but this in no wise interfered with the general harmony of the supper. After they had finished Brontu asked Giovanna to go out with him for a little walk; just to ramble about with no particular object, among the paths and deserted lanes of the village.

The sky had completely cleared, a few flickering stars glimmered faintly from out its pellucid depths; and the air was full of the odour of dead grass and wet stones. Quantities of sand and mud had been washed over the paths, but Giovanna wore her skirts very short, and such heavily nailed shoes that they struck against the stones with a sound like metal. Brontu took hold of her arm and began to invent wonderful pieces of news, as his custom was when he wanted to interest her.

"Zanchine," said he, naming one of the men, "has found something. What do you suppose it is? A baby."

"When?"

"Why, to-day, I think. Zanchine was digging up a lentisk when he heard a 'wow, wow'; he looked, and there was a baby, only a few days old. Well, that wasn't so wonderful; but now comes the queer part. A little cloud suddenly came flying through the air, and swooped down on Zanchine and seized the baby. It was an eagle who had evidently stolen the baby somewhere and hidden it among the bushes, and when he saw Zanchine looking at it, he shot down and——"

"Get out!" said Giovanna. "I don't believe a single word you say."

"Make me rich, if it's not true."

"Get out, get out!" said Giovanna again impatiently, and Brontu, seeing that instead of being amused, she was out of humour, asked her if she had had a bad dream. She remembered the one she had told her mother of, and made no reply.

In this way they came to the other side of the village; that is, to the part where Isidoro Pane lived. A spectacle of indescribable loveliness lay spread before them. The moon, like a great golden face, gazed down from the silver-blue west; and the black earth, the wet trees, the slate-stone houses, the clumps of bushes, and the wild stretch of upland—everything, as far as the eye could reach, to the very utmost confines of the horizon, seemed bathed in a tender, half-tearful smile. The two young people passed close by the fisherman's hut; they could hear him singing. Brontu stopped.

"Come on," said Giovanna, dragging him by the arm.

"Wait a moment; I want to knock on the thing he calls his door."

"No," she said, trembling. "Come away, come on, I tell you; if you don't come, I'll leave you by yourself."

"Oh! yes, that's true; you and he have had a quarrel; I haven't, though; I'm going to knock on his door."

"I'm going on, then."

"He was singing the lauds of San Costantino," said Brontu, as he rejoined her a few moments later. "The one the saint gave him on the river-bank that time. That old man is stark mad."

CHAPTER XII

On the following morning at about eleven o'clock, the religious services began in the church. They were set for this late hour so as to allow for the arrival of a young

priest from Nuoro, a friend of Priest Elias's, who was to give a "panegyric" gratis to the people of Orlei. This panegyric was a great event, and in consequence, by ten o'clock the church overflowed with a gaily dressed throng of persons.

The building itself was painted in the most vivid colours—pink walls relieved by stripes of bright blue; a yellow wooden pulpit; and rows of lusty saints with red cheeks and blond hair, simpering from their pink niches like so many Teutonic worthies. San Costantino, however, the Patron Saint, was clad in armour, and his face looked dark and stern. This ancient statue was believed to perform miracles, and, according to local tradition, had been carved by San Nicodemus himself.

Through the wide-open door came a flood of sunshine, which, pouring over the congregation, enveloped them in a cloud of golden dust. At the other end of the church, where the altar stood, it seemed quite dark, notwithstanding the large M of lighted tapers, looking, with their motionless flames, like so many arrowheads stuck on shafts of white wood.

Priest Elias was celebrating Mass; and close by stood his friend, wearing a lace alb, and with a small, dark face like that of a shrewd child; he was singing away at the top of his voice, and all wondered to hear the little priest sing so loud, knowing that he was to preach as well. Most of the people had, indeed, come expressly to hear this sermon, and were paying scant attention to the Mass, being taken up with whispering and staring about them. True, the heat was suffocating, and clouds of insects made devotion difficult, even for the most pious. At last Priest Elias, having finished chanting the gospel, turned his pale, ascetic face towards the people, and his lips were seen to move. Just then the figure of Giacobbe Dejas appeared in the doorway, silhouetted against the vivid, blue background of the sky. His usual mocking expression was changed to one of self-satisfaction. Aware that the priest was speaking, he paused on the threshold to listen, holding his long black cap in his hand; then, finding that he could distinguish nothing, he stepped inside and

whispered to an old man with a long yellow beard, who stood near the door, to know what had been said.

"I don't know; I couldn't hear him; they make as much racket as if they were out in the square," said the old man querulously.

A tall, fresh-complexioned youth, with black hair and an aquiline nose, turned and stared at Giacobbe. Noting his unusual cleanliness, his new clothes, and general air of complacency, he grinned ill-naturedly.

"I think," said he, "that Priest Elias said the other priest was going to begin the panegyric now."

"Did you hear him say it?" asked the old man crossly.

"I didn't hear him say anything at all," replied the youth.

Giacobbe worked his way towards the front of the church, pushing in and out among the men, who turned to look at him as he pressed against them. Suddenly a silence fell on the crowd. The men all drew back against the walls, and the women sat down on the floor. In the centre of the church, where a stream of sunshine fell, was a sort of wooden bedstead, painted blue, and watched over by four little pink-cheeked cherubs, whose green, outstretched wings gave them the appearance of four emerald butterflies. On the bed, reposing with closed eyes upon brocade cushions, was a tiny Madonna. She was dressed entirely in white, with rings, necklaces, and earrings of gold—it was the Assumption. The dark, shrewd face of the little priest now appeared above the edge of the pulpit. Giacobbe regarded him fixedly for a moment, and then turned his right ear towards him so as to hear better.

"People of Orlei, brothers, sisters——" said the priest in a clear, childish treble—"asked to preach you a little sermon on this solemn day——" Giacobbe liked the opening, but finding that he could hear very well without paying strict attention, he turned and began to observe the people, talking all the while to himself, though without losing any of the discourse.

"There's Isidoro Pane, the devil take him! if he hasn't got on new clothes too; I wonder if he is also thinking of getting married. Eh, eh! That fresh-looking fellow down there by the door was laughing at me; he saw how happy and prosperous I looked, and thought of course that I must be going to get married. Well, and what if I am? Is it any business of yours, you puppy? Can't I get married if I want to? I have a house of my own, and cattle too.[6]

"Eh, eh! my sister will die without heirs—God bless her!—there she is, looking like a pink, shiny, little wax doll. Who would ever suppose that she is older than I? She wants me to get a wife. Well, I am perfectly willing, but whom shall I get? I am not so easy to please, and then I'm afraid—I'm afraid—I'm afraid. With this new law—the devil roast all the lawyers—who in the world is one ever to trust? There's that precious young master of mine; there he is at this very minute, with the stamp of mortal sin on him. What is he doing here? Why don't they horsewhip him? Why don't they drive him out like a dog? And his old bird-of-prey mother too? The old jade, there she is! Why don't they drive both of them out?" "Ah," he thought presently, "that is true, though; if they turned every one out who did wrong, the church would soon be empty. But those two people, I hate them; I'd like to flog them till the blood came. I'm not bad, though; didn't I stay up at the folds only to-day, working to repair the damage made by yesterday's storm? Then, when I came down, there was Giovanna getting dinner all by herself. She was dirty, and ill, and unhappy. No holiday for her! The mother and son go off together, and she, the maid-servant, stays at home and does the work. Well, it serves her right—a bad woman! And yet, I do feel sorry for her sometimes. There, God help me, I do feel sorry for her. When I said something ugly to her just now, she never answered a word. After all, when you come to think of it, she's the mistress, and I'm the servant. But is it my fault if I can't help pitching into you sometimes, little spring bird? I can't bear the sight of you, and all the same I'm sorry for you, and that's the way it is. Now, we must listen to what the priest has to tell us. He's just like a sparrow; that's

it, a sparrow singing in its nest."

"Brothers, sisters, beloved——" cried the little preacher in the soft Loguedorese dialect, which sounds almost like Spanish, and waving his small white hands in the air—"the faith of Our Lady is the most ideal, the most sublime of all faiths. She, the gentle woman, daughter, wife, and Mother of Our Lord, mounted to heaven all radiant and fragrant as a chaplet of roses, and took her seat in glory amongst the angels and seraphim——"

"There's Priest Elias," thought Giacobbe, turning his little squint-eyes, which shone like metal in the bright light, towards the altar. "Yes, with his hands folded together, a boiled-milk priest, who can't preach anything except goodness and forgiveness, and all the time he has the Holy Books, and could strike right and left among the people if he chose to. Ah, if he had only threatened Giovanna Era——! He always looks as if he were in a dream, anyhow."

"No one," continued the little preacher, standing erect in the yellow pulpit, "no one has ever been able to say that he failed to get anything he asked in true faith from Our Most Holy Lady. She, the Lily of the Valley, the Mystical Rose of Jericho——"

But the audience was growing weary. The women, seated on the floor like beds of ranunculuses and poppies, were beginning to stir uneasily, and had ceased to listen. The young priest understood, and brought his discourse to a close, with a general benediction, which included the entire gathering of persons who, while ostensibly listening to the word of God, were, for the most part, wholly taken up with their own and their neighbours' affairs.

Priest Elias, arousing from his dream, resumed the celebration of the Mass. He alone, with possibly Isidoro Pane, had listened to the sermon, and the latter, so soon as the Mass was concluded, began to sing the lauds, his clear, sweet voice flowing out like a stream of limpid water rippling among rocks and flowering moss.

The young stranger listened with ecstasy to those liquid tones; the old fisherman's

venerable figure, his long, flowing beard, and gentle eyes, and the bone rosary clasped between his knotted fingers, recalling certain pilgrims he had seen in Rome.

He wanted to meet the old man, and Priest Elias, accordingly, stopped him at the church door. Giacobbe, who was watching, was almost consumed with envy at the sight of the fisherman standing in friendly conversation with the two priests.

"What the thunder were they saying to you?" he demanded as the other came up.

"They wanted me to dine with them," said Isidoro, with some show of importance.

"Oh! they wanted you to dine with them, did they? So, my little spring bird, you are getting to be somebody, it seems. Well, you come along with me."

"To the Dejases'? Not I!" exclaimed Isidoro in a tone of horror.

"No, no; I'm not going to eat with those children of the devil to-day. I'm going home, so come along."

It was past midday as the two men set off for Aunt Anna-Rosa's house. The sun, pouring down on the narrow streets, had dried the mud, and the moisture on the trees. In all directions people could be seen dispersing to their homes, and the heavy tread of the shepherds resounded on the stone pavements. Children, dressed in their Sunday-best, peeped from over tumble-down walls, and through open doors glimpses could be caught of dark interiors, with here and there a copper saucepan shining from a wall like some huge medal suspended there. Thin curls of smoke floated up through the clear atmosphere, and the music of a mouth-organ, issuing from a usually deserted courtyard, sounded as though it were coming from the bowels of the earth, where some melancholy old Fate was solacing herself.

The entire village wore an unaccustomed air of gaiety, and yet this very festal look, the wide-open doors, the wreaths of smoke, the children, so ill at ease at their holiday attire, the sound of the mouth-organ, the bare, unshaded houses exposed to the full glare of the noontide sun—all combined to produce an effect of profound melancholy. Giacobbe led the way to his sister's house, and they all three dined

together. The little woman, herself widowed and childless, adored her brother, and still referred to him as "my little brother." But then she loved all her kind, without distinction, and her eyes, slightly crossed, of no colour in particular, and as pure and liquid as two tiny lakes illuminated by the moon, were as innocent as the eyes of a nursing child. She knew that evil existed, but was frightened merely at the thought of men committing sin. One of the great sorrows of her life had been Giovanna's divorce and re-marriage—her own foster-child, as it were! And to think that she had actually lent them the money for the wedding outfit——!

Giacobbe dearly loved to tease her.

"Here's our friend Isidoro," he cried, as the party seated themselves at table. "He is thinking of getting married, and has come to consult you."

"Bless me, Isidoro Pane, and are you really going to be married?"

"Oh! go along, go along," said the fisherman good-humouredly.

"So you don't care about marrying?" cried Giacobbe, holding a piece of roast meat in both hands, and tearing it apart with teeth that were still sound and strong. "Well, you are a dirty beast. Do you know, sister, he has lovers, all the same."

"I don't believe that."

"It's true, though; take me to heaven if it's not. Yes, he has lovers who suck his blood."

The others laughed like two children at this humourous allusion to Isidoro's leeches. Giacobbe began to cut his meat with a sharp knife, holding it between his teeth and left hand, and muttering that it was as tough as the devil's ear, while his sister and the guest, having once begun, were ready to laugh at everything. Giacobbe's mood, however, suddenly changed, and for some reason which he himself was at a loss to explain, his good spirits of a few hours before deserted him.

"When we have finished, I'll take you to see my 'palace,'" he said. "It will be done in

a few days now, and if I wanted to I could rent it right away, but I don't want to; I intend to live in it myself."

"Then you are not going to hire out any more?"

"No, not after a little while; I have worked enough. I have been working for forty years; do you take that in? Yes, it's forty years. No one can say I stole the money I have laid away for my old age."

"And you are going to marry?"

"Poh! Who is there to marry me? I should despise any young woman who was willing to, and I won't have an old one, not I. Take something more to drink, Isidoro Pane."

"You must want to make me tipsy!—well, as it's a holiday—here's to the bride and groom!"

"What bride and groom?"

"Giacobbe Dejas and Bachissia Era!" said the fisherman, who was waxing merry.

Giacobbe made a quick movement as though to throw himself upon him.

"I'll knock out your brains!" he cried, his eyes flashing with anger.

"Ah, you murderer!" laughed the other.

"Hush, hush! One should not say such things," said Aunt Anna-Rosa.

Giacobbe drank off a couple of glasses of wine, and then laughed in rather a forced way, looking sideways at his sister and the fisherman. "See here," he said suddenly; "why don't you two get married? Isidoro Pane, my sister is rich, and you see how fresh she is, just like the hip of a wild rose. You'd think she had found some magic herb and made an ointment to preserve her skin."

"God bless you! How queer you are sometimes!" exclaimed the little woman.

"Yes; you two had better marry; I wish it. My sister is rich; all my property will go to her, because I am going to die first. Somehow, I don't quite know why, but I feel

as though I were going to die soon; I feel as though I were going to be killed——"

"Oh, nonsense! If it happens to-day, it will come from drinking too much."

"Dear little brother, what on earth are you talking about? In the name of the wretched souls in purgatory, don't say such things," said his sister, greatly distressed.

"You have no enemies," said Isidoro. "And besides, only those perish by the sword who have used the sword."

"Well, I have slaughtered many and many an innocent, unoffending fellow-creature," replied Giacobbe seriously, burying his mouth in a slice of watermelon. "You don't believe me? Sheep and lambs without number!" and he lifted his face, streaming with the pink juice, and laughed.

Dinner over, the two men went off to look at the new house.

Its two stories—the ground-floor and one above it—were divided into four large bedrooms, a kitchen, and a stable; these accommodations being deemed sufficient to earn for it the title of "palace," not alone from Giacobbe, but from the entire neighbourhood as well.

"Do you see this? Have you noticed that?" Giacobbe kept calling out, drawing attention to every detail and corner of his property; his clean-shaven face, devoid even of eyebrows, growing, meanwhile, almost youthful in its enthusiasm.

"You had better marry my sister," he said presently. "This house will be hers some day."

"You are making fun of me," replied the other. "Because I am poor, you think you can laugh at me as much as you like."

The wooden floors filled the simple soul with awe, and he hardly dared to walk on them. Giacobbe, on the contrary, seemed to enjoy stamping about in his great hobnailed boots, and making as much noise as he could in the big, empty rooms, all redolent of fresh plaster.

The two men paused for a moment at an open window, whose stone sill, baked by the sun, felt hot to the touch. The house stood high, and below them, in black shadow, lay the village, looking like a heap of charcoal beneath the green veil of trees. All about stretched the yellow plain, and, beyond, the great violet-grey sphinxes reared themselves against a cloudless sky. The bell of the little church, clamouring insistently, broke in on the noontide heat and stillness, and the sound was like metal striking against stone, as though far off, in the rocky heart of those huge sphinxes, a drowsy giant were wielding his pick. "Why don't you want to marry my sister?" said Giacobbe again. "This house will belong to her, and this will be her bedroom; here at this very window you could smoke your pipe——"

"I never smoke; do let me be," said the fisherman impatiently. The other's talk began to annoy him.

"I'm not joking, you old lizard," retorted Giacobbe. "Only you are such a dull beggar that you can't even tell that I'm not."

"Listen," said Isidoro. "You have given me my dinner to-day, and so you think you have a right to make game of me. Now, I tell you this, if you want me to be grateful for it, you had better leave me alone."

Giacobbe stared at him for a moment; then he burst into a loud laugh.

"Come on," he cried; "let's have something to drink."

They went out, and Giacobbe led the way to the tavern, but the other refused to enter, saying that it was time for him to be getting back to the church.

In the tavern Giacobbe found Brontu and a number of others playing morra, their arms flung out in tense attitudes, and all shouting the numbers at the tops of their lungs.

Before five o'clock, the hour set for the procession, they were all quite tipsy, Giacobbe more so than any one: notwithstanding which fact he insisted upon grasping his master by the arm, being firmly under the impression that without his

aid, the other would not be able to walk. He then invited the whole company to adjourn to his "palace" to view the procession. A little later, accordingly, the big, empty rooms echoed to the sound of hoarse voices, bursts of aimless laughter, and uncertain footsteps. The windows were all thrown wide open, and quickly filled with wild, bearded faces.

Giacobbe and Brontu were standing at the same window where the old fisherman had been shortly before. By this time the sun had left it, but the sill was still warm, while below them and beyond, the village, and the plain, and the mountains were striped with long bars of ever lengthening shadows.

"Cu, cu!" shouted Brontu, staring out with round eyes. This was so intensely humourous that the others all began imitating him, each one making as much noise as possible. The house resounded with the uproar; a crowd gathered in the street below, and presently the drunkards within and those without began to exchange abusive epithets, followed by spitting and stone-throwing.

On a sudden, however, complete silence fell; a sound of low, mournful chanting was heard approaching, and immediately after a double line of white, phantom-like figures appeared at the end of the street, preceded by a silver cross held aloft against the blue background of the sky. The men in the street fell back against the walls, the heads at the windows were lowered, and every one uncovered.

One of the white-robed brotherhood, boys for the most part who, when the ceremonies were over, would receive three soldi each and a slice of watermelon, knocked at the door of the new house as he passed, and the others followed his example.

"Curse you!" yelled Giacobbe furiously, leaning far out of the window. "Boors! walking in the procession, are you?" and he was about to spit on them, but Brontu prevented him, telling him it would not do.

Now came the green brocade standard, with its hundred variegated ribbons and

gilded staff; and next the Madonna of the Assumption, extended with closed eyes on her portable couch, covered with necklaces and rings that looked like relics of the bronze age, and watched over by the four green cherubs.

On each of the four sides, walking beside the bearers, was a man wearing a white tunic and carrying in his arms a child dressed as an angel. They were charming little creatures, two blond and two brunette, and they chattered gaily with one another, shouting to make themselves heard. One of them, tickled under the knee by the man who carried him, squirmed and wriggled, one wing hanging limply down.

The sight of these children touched some finer emotion in Brontu, Giacobbe, and the others, and bending their knees, they crossed themselves devoutly. The children, for their part, gazed up at the windows, and one of them, recognising an uncle in the group, flung a red confetto at him, which, missing fire, fell back into the road.

Priest Elias and the little stranger from Nuoro came next, wearing brocade and lace robes, pale and handsome in their bravery. They walked with clasped hands and rapt faces, chanting in Latin.

"The devil!" exclaimed Giacobbe suddenly. "If there isn't that dirty old Isidoro Pane! You'd suppose he was running the whole procession; I'm going to spit on him."

"No, you're not," commanded Brontu.

Giacobbe coughed to attract the fisherman's attention, but the other did not so much as raise his eyes, continuing to intone the prayers to which the people responded as with a single voice.

The surging, vari-coloured crowd had flowed together behind the procession, and above the sea of heads could still be seen the swaying silver cross. The men had all uncovered,—bald heads, shining with perspiration, mops of thick black hair, rough, curly pates,—and then the gay head-kerchiefs of the women, some with black grounds and yellow squares, others striped with red, or covered with green spots,—all surmounting flushed faces, flashing eyes, white bodices crossed on the

breast, red, gesticulating hands. Gradually the crowd thinned; an old cripple came limping along, then a woman with two children hanging to her skirts, then three old women—a child with a yellow flower in its mouth—the street grew empty and silent; the noise, and movement, and colour receding in waves, and growing ever fainter as the low, melancholy cadence of the chanted invocations died away in the distance.

As the last sounds ceased, two cat's paws appeared on the wall opposite Giacobbe's house, followed by a little, white face, with wide startled eyes, then the animal leaped on the wall, and sat staring intently down into the street.

"Too late!" cried Brontu, waving a salute.

The others shouted with laughter, and when Giacobbe presently told them it was time to be off, they refused to go. The host, thereupon, seizing a lath covered with plaster, tried to drive them out, and the entire troop of rough, bearded men began to run from room to room, pushing one another by the shoulders, yelling, tumbling over each other, and shrieking with laughter like so many schoolboys. Driven forth at length, they continued their horseplay in the street, until Giacobbe, having locked the door and put the key in his pocket, led the way back to the tavern. At dusk Brontu and the herdsman, supporting one another, appeared at the white house.

Aunt Martina was sitting on the portico with her hands beneath her apron, reciting the rosary. When her eyes fell on the two men she remained perfectly still and silent, but her lips tightened, and she shook her head ever so slightly, as though to say: "Truly, a fine sight!"

"Where is Giovanna?" demanded Brontu.

"She went to her mother's."

"Oh! she went to her mother's, the old harpy's? Well, she's always going there, curse her."

"Don't shout so, my son."

"I will; I'll shout as much as I like; I'm in my own house," and turning towards the common, he began to call at the top of his voice:

"Giovanna! Giovanna!"

Giovanna appeared at the door of the cottage, and started to cross the common hastily with an alarmed air; as she drew near, however, her expression changed to one of annoyance and disgust. Pausing in front of the two men, she regarded them with a look of undisguised scorn. Giacobbe laughed, but Brontu reddened to the tips of his ears with anger.

"Well," she demanded; "what is the matter? Have you got the colic?"

"He would have got it pretty soon if you hadn't come," said Giacobbe.

Brontu opened his mouth and his lips moved, but no sounds came forth, and his anger presently died away as senselessly as it had come.

"Well——" he stammered. "I wanted you. We have hardly seen each other all day. What were you doing at your mother's? Who was there?"

"Who was there?" she repeated, in a tone of intense bitterness. "Why, no one. Who would you expect to find at our house?"

"Why, San Costantino might come—t—o—o—gi—i—i—ve you—u a po—em——" sang Giacobbe thickly. "Have you ever seen San Costantino? Well, there's Isidoro Pane—he's perfectly crazy—he doesn't like you; no, indeed, he doesn't, and—and——"

"Shut up; hold your tongue!" said Aunt Martina. "And the sheepfolds left all this time to take care of themselves! That's the way you attend to your master's business! You're all alike, accursed thieves!"

Giacobbe sprang forward, erect and livid; and Giovanna, fearing that he was really going to strike the old woman, stepped quickly between them. He turned, however, without saying a word, and sat down, but with so lowering an expression that

Giovanna remained near her mother-in-law in an attitude of protection.

Brontu, on the contrary, was struck with the idea that his mother deserved a rebuke.

"What sort of manners are these?" he demanded in a tone that was intended to be severe. "Why, you treat people as though—as though—as though they were beasts—everybody! To-day—to-day—no, yesterday was a holiday. If he chose to get drunk, what business was that of yours?"

"I got drunk on poison," remarked Giacobbe.

"Yes, poison," agreed Brontu. "And I did too. And there's another thing. I'm tired of all this, mother and wife—and the whole business. So there! I'm going away. I'm going to spend the night with him in his palace. After all, we are relations, and—and——"

"Say it right out!" shouted Giacobbe. "You may be my heir; that's what you mean! Ha, ha, ha!"

He laughed boisterously, emitting sounds that were more like the howls of a wild beast than human laughter. Brontu, trying to imitate him, only succeeded in producing a noise like the cry of some happy animal in the springtime.

Giovanna felt herself grow sick with dread; she was afraid of the rapidly approaching darkness, of the solitude that enwrapped the common, of the presence of these two men whom wine had turned into quarrelsome beasts. "The excommunication," she thought, "has fallen on us all: on this servant, who dares to defy his master; on the son, who upbraids his mother; on me, Giovanna, who loathe and despise them one and all!"

Aunt Martina arose, went into the kitchen, and lit the candle. Giovanna followed her and set about preparing the supper. When it was ready they all sat down together, and for a little while everything went well. Presently Brontu began to tell of how they had watched the procession from the windows of Giacobbe's "palace," his account of their foolish doings bringing a smile to his mother's lips. Then he tried to

put his arm around his wife, but Giovanna's heart was full of gall. For her the holiday had been, if anything, sadder than an ordinary day; she had worked hard, she had not been to church, she had not so much as changed her dress; and yet, the moment she had allowed herself to go for a little recreation to the cottage,—the scene alike of her greatest misery and of her most intense happiness,—she had been ordered back as peremptorily as a dog is told to return to its kennel. Consequently, she was in no mood for endearments, and repulsed Brontu's proffered caress, telling him he was drunk.

Giacobbe, thereupon, laughed delightedly, which irritated Giovanna as much as it angered Brontu.

"What are you laughing at, you mangy cur?" demanded the latter.

"I might say I am not as mangy as you are yourself. But then, I—I want to say that—that—well, I'm laughing because I choose to."

"Eh! I can laugh too."

"Fools!" said Giovanna scornfully. "You make me sick, both of you."

At this Brontu, quite beside himself, suddenly turned on her:

"What is the matter with you, anyhow?" he demanded in a hard voice. "One would really like to know. Here you are, living on me, and when I offer to kiss you you fly out at me. You ought to be thankful to kiss the very ground under my feet; do you hear me?"

Giovanna grew livid. "What!" she hissed. "Am I treated any better than a servant in this house?"

"Well, a servant; all right, you can just stay one. What else should you be, woman?"

Giacobbe's squint-eyes sparkled at this, but Giovanna, rising to her feet, proceeded to pour out all the concentrated bitterness of the past months. Addressing her husband and mother-in-law, she called them slave-drivers and tyrants; threatened to

go away, to kill herself; cursed the hour she had entered that house, and, in the transport of her rage, even revealed the debt to Giacobbe's sister.

At this, the herdsman fell to laughing softly to himself, murmuring words of half-mocking reproach addressed to Aunt Anna-Rosa. On a sudden, however, his face grew black; the sombre figure of Aunt Bachissia appeared in the doorway; she had heard her daughter's angry voice resounding through the stillness of the evening, and had come at once.

"Here," said Aunt Martina, perfectly unmoved, "is your daughter, gone mad to all appearances."

Brontu, completely sobered, was signing urgently to his mother-in-law to come forward and try to calm the furious woman, and Aunt Bachissia was about to do so when Giacobbe suddenly leaped to his feet and threw himself in front of her with an ugly scowl.

"Get out of here!" he ordered, pointing to the door.

"And are you the master?" asked Aunt Bachissia ironically.

"Get out, I tell you," he repeated, and, as she continued to advance, he laid hold of her.

She shook him off, and he went out himself instead, and, sitting down on the portico, tried to laugh; but, odd to relate, instead of laughter, he presently found himself shaking all over with dry, convulsive sobs.

CHAPTER XIII

Time passed on. The sky and weather changed with the changing seasons, but among the inhabitants of the little village all remained much as usual. In the course of the winter Giovanna gave birth to a weak, puling girl-baby, which did nothing but cry. Doctor Porra, or Pededda, as he still continued to be called, came all the way from Nuoro expressly to stand for the poor little creature. He arrived in a carriage,

bundled up like a bale of clothing, his rosy face beaming as usual. Quite a number of persons had assembled to see him, and he distributed smiles and greetings indiscriminately to all who would have them, assuring a group of Brontu's friends who had gone to meet him, that he remembered perfectly seeing all of them at Nuoro. This gratified them immensely, all but one, that is, who said he had never been to Nuoro. "It is of no consequence," said the lawyer cheerfully, "I am sure to see you there some day." This was a somewhat equivocal assurance, as it seldom happened that any of them went to Nuoro except on law business; however, the man was highly pleased.

Aunt Bachissia, watching the new arrival divest himself of his greatcoat, shawl, and various other wraps, thought that he looked more than ever like a magia.

"You seem to have grown stouter," she said, looking at the layers of clothing.

"Oh! this is a mere nothing," he replied. At which they all laughed delightedly.

The baptism was to be conducted with great pomp, and Aunt Martina, probably for the first time in her life, slackened the strings of her purse, and sent to Nuoro for wines and sweets of the best quality. She could not sleep the night before, however, and passed a wretched day, tormented by the fear that some of the delicacies might be spirited away. On the morning of the ceremony Giovanna got up early and helped her mother-in-law to prepare the macaroni for dinner; then she went back to bed, where she remained in a sitting posture, propped up by pillows, and with the bedclothes drawn up about her waist. Above that she wore her blouse and bodice, and she had on her wedding coif and bridal kerchief. She looked somewhat pale, but very handsome, her great eyes seeming larger even than usual.

The table was set in the bedchamber, and covered with a linen cloth, which Aunt Martina now took out from her chest for the first time since it had been bought.

The ceremony was to take place at about eleven o'clock of a very cold morning. From the pale sky a thick, white vapour fell, enveloping the village and all the

surrounding country in a misty veil. The narrow streets were deserted, and here and there frozen puddles lay like pieces of broken, dirty glass. An absolute silence reigned in the open space before the Dejases' house, opposite which the almond tree stretched its bare, black limbs against the misty background.

All at once the common was invaded by a troop of urchins, bundled up in ragged garments and odds and ends of fur; with fringed, red caps on their heads, and wearing old boots, some of them almost as large as the little persons who wore them. Groups of people stood about, principally shivering women, coughing and sneezing and smelling of soot and smoke. Then the baptismal procession appeared. First came two children looking solemn and important, and carrying candles from which red ribbons fluttered; these were followed by the woman with the infant wrapped in shawls, and covered with a piece of greenish brocade, like the standard of San Costantino.

Then the godfather appeared, his round little face rosy and smiling as ever, emerging from the folds of his big coat and black-and-white shawl. With him walked the godmother, one of Aunt Martina's daughters, a lank young woman with a long, narrow face, who reminded one of a shadow seen at sunset. She had to lean down in order to reach her companion's ear. With the godparents came Brontu, freshly shaven and gay, and behind them followed a group of friends and relatives, marching along in step, with a noise like the tramp of horses' hoofs. Last of all came the godmother's servant-maid, a shivering creature blue with cold; she carried a small basin under one arm, and kept both hands buried in the pockets of her gown. From time to time she thrust out her tongue to catch the drops that kept running down from her nose. The boys trotted alongside, forming two wings to the procession, their eyes eagerly fixed upon the godfather, who returned their gaze with an amused stare and hailed them jocosely:

"Why, hello! you here? What are you looking for, little hedgehogs?"

"He's lame," said one.

"Hush, keep quiet, or he won't give us anything!"

The procession passed on; the faces of the urchins fell; some of them were angry, and others seemed on the verge of tears.

"Crippl——" one began to call, but stopped suddenly. The godfather had pitched a handful of copper coins into the air, and the whole troop flung themselves after them, yelling, tumbling over one another, pushing, fighting, struggling, rolling over and over, almost upsetting the maid-servant, who instantly began to deal out blows and curses in greater proportion even than the coins themselves. Fresh handfuls of money and renewed scuffling by an ever-increasing crowd of ragamuffins continued to the very doors of the church, where Priest Elias stood awaiting the party and listening to something the red-robed sacristan was urging upon him. The sacristan was, in fact, afraid that Priest Elias, with his usual kindly indulgence, might be persuaded to return to the house with the baptismal party, whereas it was the custom of the neighbourhood for the priest to do that only in cases where the parents had been united by religious ceremony: he was, therefore, exhorting the other to practise severity with Brontu, with the godparents, with the whole company in fact. "Your Honour," said he, "will surely not return to the house with this infant? Why, it is almost illegitimate! On no account should such respect be paid to it."

"Go and see if they are coming," said the priest.

"They are not in sight yet. No, your Honour will not go."

"And how about you? Shall you not go?" enquired the priest with a slight smile.

"Oh! with me it is an altogether different matter; I go on account of the sweetmeats, not to do honour to that rabble."

At this moment the company came in sight, and the ceremony presently began. No sooner had the baby's bald little red head been uncovered than it began to emit sounds like the bleating of a hoarse kid. The godfather stood by smiling, with a

lighted taper in his hand, doing his best to remember the creed, Giovanna having implored him to recite it conscientiously, so that the baptism might be valid.

Almost the entire crowd of urchins had followed the party inside the church, and there was a pattering like rats running about, as the sacristan would chase them all out, only presently to come stealing back.

The woman who had carried the baby, and the maid-servant with the basin, seated themselves on the steps of a side altar, where they anxiously awaited the godfather's present. At last the service was over, the tips had been given, the baby wrapped up again, and Brontu and his friends stood waiting awkwardly for the priest, who had gone into the sacristy to remove his robes. Would he come back or not? Was he going to the house with the newly baptised infant or no? There was an uncomfortable pause, and then, as he did not appear, the procession set out somewhat mournfully on the return journey, followed by the triumphant sacristan, to whom Brontu would dearly have liked to administer blows in place of the expected sweets.

All along the route the people came out to see them go by, and many faces, especially those of the women, lighted up with ill-natured smiles as they perceived that the priest was not there. Poh! It was like the baptism of a bastard!

Giovanna, albeit not really expecting the priest, grew a shade paler when the company invaded her chamber without him. She kissed the little purple creature sadly, feeling as though the outlook for the poor child was very dark indeed.

"I remembered every word of the creed from beginning to end," announced the godfather. "Happy mother, your child will be a wonder, as tall as its godmother and as gay as its godfather!"

"If only it may be as prosperous as its godfather," murmured Giovanna.

"And now," cried the young man, joyously clapping his hands, "come to dinner. What a pleasant custom it is! Upon my honour, it is a charming custom!" And he

clapped his hands again, as though calling a crowd of children.

They all took their places at table, where the macaroni, which had already been served, was to be followed by a beautiful roast pig exhaling an odour of rosemary.

It was only a few days after the baptism that a strange though not unprecedented event occurred in Orlei.

Near Isidoro Pane's hut was an ancient dungheap, abandoned for so long that it had become almost petrified. It was covered with a growth of sickly-looking vegetation, and emitted no odour, looking like some sort of artificial mound.

One evening at about dusk, while the fisherman was preparing his supper, he heard sounds in the direction of this mound, and went to the door to see what they were. The weather was cold, and in the clear, greenish twilight he saw a group of black figures, chiefly women, advancing, singing to the accompaniment of some instrument.

Isidoro understood what it was and went to meet them. The women, about twenty in all, old and young, were chanting in a melancholy monotone, with sudden breaks and changes, a weird song or exorcism against the bite of a tarantula; while a blind beggar, a pallid young man, miserably clad in soiled and ragged woman's clothing, accompanied them on a primitive instrument called a serraia—a sort of cithern, made out of a dried sow's bladder.

There were only three other men in the party, and in one of these, with a flushed, feverish face, and one hand bound up, the fisherman recognised Giacobbe Dejas.

Isidoro advanced, and joining the party laid one finger on the bandaged hand, Giacobbe, meanwhile, gazing at him wildly, his eyes transfixed with terror.

"Are you afraid you are going to die from a tarantula bite? No, no," said Isidoro, smiling.

The women continued their chant. There were seven widows, seven wives, and

seven maids. One of the widows was Giacobbe's sister. She walked at his side, fresh and pink as ever, notwithstanding her wild state of alarm and anxiety; and her shrill little voice, like the note of a lively cricket, trilled and trembled high above all the others.

"He is suffering," said one of the men to Isidoro in a low tone.

"Ah?" said the fisherman gravely.

The words chanted by the women ran as follows:

"Saint Peter he walked down to the sea And into the water his keys dropped he. Then the Lord unto him did say: 'My Peter, what is it ails thee to-day?' 'Of deadly bites I bear the smart In my two feet, and my back, and my heart.' 'Peter, take of the sad thorn-tree[7] Pounded as fine as fine may be; Take it three days for thy wound. So shall Peter be made sound.' Tarantula, with the painted belly, You have a daughter straitly born, Straitly is your daughter born. One for the mountain I leave forlorn; One for the mountain, and one for the valley. You have killed me, and I will kill you."

Meanwhile the group had stopped in front of the mound. The two men, who were provided with spades, began to dig, and Isidoro stood waiting with Giacobbe, the chanting women, and the blind man still playing on his strange instrument. Giacobbe silently watched the operations of his two friends, and Isidoro watched him, puzzled by the transformation he had undergone; he seemed, indeed, like an altogether different person; his face was inflamed, and drawn with fright, and the little eyes, which usually twinkled so shrewdly from beneath their bald brows, were dim with a childish terror of death. When they had come to the end of the chant, the women began again at the first line, the instrument continuing the accompaniment on the same monotonous key as before. It sounded like the humming of a swarm of bees in flight. Puffs of icy wind blew from the west, cutting the faces of the group gathered about the mound, like knives. The purple-blue of the sky was fading into a greenish

tint, like the face of a lake when the sun has left it; and over the entire scene there hung a pall of indescribable melancholy—the dull, cold twilight, the darkening uplands, the black village, the shadowy group of people, performing a superstitious rite with all the faith of heathen idolaters.[8] The two men dug with friendly zeal, throwing up spadefuls of black earth mixed with rags, egg-shells, and refuse of all kinds. As it covered their feet and legs, they would mount higher, bending to their task, panting and sweating, while the women continued their chant, and the blind man his monotonous accompaniment.

A hole of sufficient depth having at last been dug, Aunt Anna-Rosa, never ceasing for an instant to emit the same shrill, mournful sounds, helped Giacobbe to remove his coat, and then, taking him by the hand, they led him to the edge of the excavation. He jumped in at a bound, and the two men, pushing him down with their hands, hastily piled on the earth, until he was buried up to the neck.

The performance that then took place was even more extraordinary. The head, looking as though it had been severed from the body and stuck in the centre of this heap of refuse, was surrounded by sparse vegetation, which trembled in the breeze as though affrighted; while overhead hung the melancholy sky. Hardly had the two men completed their task, and stood,—the one wiping the perspiration from his forehead with his sleeve, and the other knocking off the dirt that was sticking to his hands,—when the women closed in a circle around the head, and began to dance to the sound of their own chanting voices and the instrument still played by the blind man, who stood with his sightless balls and pale, impassive face turned towards the distant horizon. This continued for some time; then the dancing ceased, the circle broke, but the chanting still went on. Isidoro and the other men threw themselves on the mound, and with spades and hands, had soon disinterred Giacobbe. He was perspiring profusely when he emerged, covered with dirt, and his face and neck were purple. He said he had felt as though he would suffocate; then he shook himself and thrust first one arm and then the other into the sleeves of the coat which

his sister held ready.

"Well, so you are not going to die after all, little spring bird?" said Isidoro jokingly. The other, however, made no reply; the cold wind struck his perspiring body with an icy chill, his face grew pallid, and his teeth chattered.

They walked off in the direction of Aunt Anna-Rosa's house, Isidoro, who by this time had lost all interest in his supper, accompanying them.

"Did you kill it?" he enquired of the sick man, remembering to have heard that if one kills a tarantula with his ring finger he acquires the power to cure the bite with a simple touch of the same finger.

"No," said Giacobbe; and then, while the weird chanting still continued, he gave an account of his misfortune.

"I was asleep; suddenly I felt something like the sting of a wasp. I woke up all in a perspiration. Ah, it had stung me! It had stung me! The horrible tarantula! I saw it as plain as I see you, but it was some distance off, on the wall. Ah, the devil take you, accursed creature! So I came right home. Do you know, I am afraid to die; I've been afraid for ever so long."

"But we all have to die some time, whenever the hour comes," said Isidoro seriously.

"Yes, that is true; we all have to some time," agreed one of the men; "but that is poor consolation for Giacobbe Dejas."

"My legs feel as though they had been broken," he groaned. "And oh, my spine! it is just as though some one had struck it with an axe! I am going to die; I know I am going to die——"

As they passed along, the people came out of their houses to watch them go by, but it was like a funeral procession; no one spoke, nor did any one follow them. Giacobbe's eyes grew dim, and presently he stumbled and clutched hold of Isidoro for support.

The women were moving along on a trot, like a herd of colts; their voices rose, fell, rose again, and seemed to die away into the chill night air, overpowered at last by the even, strident notes of the cithern, like the gasps of some wounded animal left to die alone in the forest.

At last they reached the little widow's house. A fire was burning in the slate-stone fireplace in the centre of the kitchen, laid on a little heap of live coals which had just been taken out of the oven. This last, a huge, round affair having a hole in the top to allow the smoke to escape, occupied one corner, its square door being quite large enough to allow of the passage of a man's body. Into its still hot interior Giacobbe accordingly now crept, the soles of his heavy shoes appearing in the opening, their worn nails shining in the firelight.

Placing themselves around the oven and the fireplace, the women continued their exorcism with renewed vigour, the red and purple lights from the fire falling upon their white blouses and yellow bodices. Aunt Anna-Rosa's round, open mouth looked like a black hole in the middle of her pink, shining face. The blind man, conscious of the fire, felt his way towards it little by little, though without ceasing to play. Reaching the edge of the fireplace, he put one of his bare feet upon the hot stone. "Zs-s——" whispered Uncle Isidoro warningly. "Look out, boy, or you'll have a surprise."

The words were not out of his mouth when the youth gave a sudden bound backwards, shaking his burned foot in the air. For a moment he stopped playing, but the women never faltered. Standing there, erect and immovable around the huge oven, they might have been intoning a funeral dirge over some prehistoric sepulchre.

"He is coming out!" cried Aunt Anna-Rosa suddenly, and Giacobbe's great feet could be seen issuing from the oven. At the same instant the house-door was thrown violently open, and the black-robed figure of Priest Elias appeared. On hearing what had occurred he had at once hastened to the house, hoping to arrive in time at least

to prevent the ordeal of the oven. He was flushed and breathless, and his eyes flashed. On catching sight of him one of the women gave a scream and others stopped chanting, while the rest motioned to them to continue. Giacobbe, meanwhile, had got out of the oven.

"Be quiet!" commanded the priest, panting. "Aren't you ashamed of yourselves? No?"

They all became silent.

"Go," he said, opening the door and holding it with one hand, while with the other he almost pushed the women out. When the last had gone he became aware for the first time of the presence of Isidoro, and his face fell. "You too?" he said reproachfully. "Extraordinary, most extraordinary! Don't you see what you have done among you to that poor man?" Then changing his tone, "Quick," he said, "go at once for the doctor as fast as you can. And as for you," turning to Giacobbe, "get to bed at once."

The sick man asked for nothing better; he was burning with fever, his head was shaking, and he could hardly see. Isidoro went off in search of the doctor, somewhat mortified and yet, in spite of his usually hard common sense, his intelligence, and his deeply religious nature, quite unable to see what harm there could be in trying to cure a tarantula sting with the rites, chants, and incantations employed by one's forebears from the days when giants inhabited the Nuraghes.

The women had scattered into groups along the street and were discussing the occurrence, some of them a little ashamed, while others were inclined to blame the priest. One irrepressible young girl was beating her hands in time and singing the lament which should have been chanted in chorus around Giacobbe's bed had not the priest's arrival prevented:

"'Oh, mother of the spider! A stroke has fallen on me.'"

Some of the women would have stopped Isidoro, but he strode quickly on, buried in

thought. At last they all dispersed, and the cold, still evening settled down on the little widow's house, while overhead the stars looked like golden eyes veiled in tears.

CHAPTER XIV

The room where Giacobbe lay was extremely lofty, and so large that the oil light did not penetrate the corners. The furniture appeared to have been built expressly with a view to its ample proportions; a huge, red, wooden wardrobe which stood against the end wall, reaching clear to the ceiling. The bed, the lower part of which was draped with yellow curtains, was as high and massive as a mountain. Seen thus, in the dim, flickering light, with its black corners and great lofty white ceiling like a cloudy sky, the room had a mysterious, uncanny look. Little Aunt Anna-Rosa seemed almost in danger of losing her way as she moved about among the bulky furniture, and her shoulders hardly reached above the counterpane when she came and stood beside the bed where her brother lay in the uneasy grip of the fever.

He seemed to himself still to be in the mound, only the two friends who had interred him, kept on piling the earth higher and higher about his head. He was suffocating, the torture was almost unendurable, and yet he dared not stop them, fearing the cure might not be efficacious unless his head were buried as well; and his head seemed to be Priest Elias, on whose breast the tail of a tarantula could be seen wriggling about.

In his dream Giacobbe was conscious of an almost insane fear of death. It had occurred to him when he was in the oven that hell, perhaps, was a huge heated oven where the damned would sprawl throughout eternity.

Now, in his dream, precisely the same feeling was reproduced. He was in the mound, the earth reached higher and higher about him; he shut his mouth tight to keep from swallowing it, and there, opposite him, he suddenly saw a lighted furnace. It was the infernal regions. Such a feeling of terror seized upon him that even in his dream, in his feverish semi-consciousness, he was aware of an overmastering desire to prove to himself that this horror was an illusion of the senses. In the effort he

awoke, but even awake he had something of the same sensation that stones, were they endowed with feeling, would have in a burning building, growing all the while hotter and hotter, and yet unable to stir an inch. Giacobbe felt like a burning brick himself, or a piece of live coal, a part of the infernal fires; and waking, his terror was even more acute than in his dream. He emitted a groan and the noise gave him comfort; it had an earthly, human sound, breaking in on all those diabolical sensations.

Isidoro, who had stayed in case the little widow might have need of him, heard the groan from where he sat dozing in the adjoining kitchen, and bounded to his feet in terror; he thought that Giacobbe had died. Approaching the bed, he found the sick man lying flat on his back, his face drawn, his eyes, which looked almost black, wet with tears.

"Are you awake?" asked the fisherman in a low voice. "Do you want anything?" He felt his pulse, and even laid his ear against it as though trying to hear the throbs.

At the same instant Giacobbe observed the round little visage of his sister appear above the other edge of the bed, enveloped in the folds of a large white kerchief.

Then a curious thing happened: the face of the sick man contracted, his mouth opened, his eyes closed, and a deep sob broke the stillness of the room. Instantly memory carried the woman back to a far-distant day when her brother, a tiny lad, had sat weeping on this very bed; and opening her arms just as she had done then, she took him to her kind bosom, murmuring words of loving remonstrance.

"In the name of the holy souls in purgatory! What is it? What is the matter, little brother?"

Isidoro, quite at a loss, continued to feel his friend's pulse, trying now one vein, and now another, and muttering to himself: "How strange, how very strange!"

"Well, what is it? Won't you tell me what it is? You, Isidoro Pane, what happened?"

"Why, nothing happened. He called out, and that was all. May be he had a bad

dream. We'll give him a drink of water. There now, here's a little fresh water. That's it, he wants it—see how he is drinking! You were thirsty, weren't you? It's the fever, you see; that's what ails him!"

Giacobbe sat up in bed, and after drinking the water calmed down. He had on an old white knitted cotton shirt, through which could be seen the outline of his small wiry body, the thick growth of black hair on his chest contrasting oddly with the perfectly smooth face and bald head above it. He remained in a sitting posture, leaning forward, and thoughtfully passing his well hand up and down the injured arm.

"Yes," he remarked suddenly in the panting, querulous tone of a person with fever. "Yes; I had a bad dream. Whew! but it was hot! Holy San Costantino, how hot it was! I was dreaming of hell."

"Dear me, dear me, what an idea!" said his sister reprovingly; and Uncle Isidoro said playfully: "And so it was hot, little spring bird?"

The sick man seemed to be annoyed.

"Don't joke, and don't say 'little spring bird.' I don't like it; I shall never say it again, and I shall never laugh at any one again.

"Listen to me," he said, bending forward and continuing to rub his arm. "Hell is a dreadful place. I've got to die, and I've got to tell you something first. Now listen, but don't get frightened, Anna-Rosa, because I am certainly going to die; and Uncle Isidoro, you know it already, so I can tell you. Well, this is it. It was I who killed Basile Ledda."

Aunt Anna-Rosa's eyes and mouth flew wide open; she leaned against the side of the bed, and began to shake convulsively.

"I knew it already?" exclaimed Isidoro. "Why, I knew nothing at all!"

Giacobbe raised a terrified face, and began to tremble as well.

"Don't have me arrested," he implored. "I'm going to die, anyhow; you can tell them

then. I thought you knew. What is the matter, Anna-Ro? Don't be frightened; don't have me arrested."

"It's not that," she said, raising herself. Her first sensation of having received a blow on the head was passing away, but now, in its place, there came a singular feeling of some change that was taking place within her; her own spirit seemed to have fled in dismay, and in its place had come something that regarded the world, life, heaven, earth—God himself—from a totally different standpoint; and everything viewed in the light of this new spirit was full of horror, misery, chaos.

"I will not tell any one. No, no! But how could you ever suppose that I knew about it?" protested Isidoro. He felt no especial horror of Giacobbe, only profound pity; but at the same time he thought it would be better, now, for him to die.

Then, simultaneously, their thoughts all flew to Costantino, and hardly left him again.

"Lie down," said Isidoro, smoothing out the pillow. But the other only shook his head and began to talk again in the same querulous, laboured voice, now beseeching, now almost angry:

"I thought you must know about it; and so, you never did, after all? Well, that's so; how could you? But I was afraid of you all the same. I had an idea that I could read it in your eyes. Do you remember that night at your house, when you said: 'It might be you who killed him'? I was frightened that night. Then, there was that other time—Assumption Day—here in this very house, you called me 'murderer.' I knew it was a joke, but it frightened me because I was afraid of you, anyhow. So then, when I said that about you and my sister getting married, I meant it. I thought it might give me a sort of hold on you."

"Oh, Christ! Oh, holy little Jesus!" sobbed the widow.

Giacobbe looked at her for a moment.

"You are scared, eh? You wonder what made me do it? Well, I'll tell you. I hated

that man; he had flogged me, and he owed me money. But I thought it would kill me when they condemned Costantino Ledda. Why didn't I confess then? Is that what you want to say? Ah, it sounds all very easy now, but you can't do it. Costantino is a strong young man, I thought to myself; I shall die long before he does, and then I'll confess the whole thing. And I can tell you that that thing that Giovanna Era did made me a hundred years older. What is Costantino going to say when he comes back? What is he going to say?" he repeated softly to himself.

"What ought we to do?" said Aunt Anna-Rosa, burying her face in the bedclothes and groaning. She felt as though it must all be some frightful dream; yet, not for a single instant did she contemplate concealing her brother's crime. And afterwards?—One of two equally horrible things must happen. Either Giacobbe would die, or he would be sent to prison. She could not tell which of the two she dreaded most.

"Now we must lie down and rest; to-morrow will be time enough to talk of what is the best thing to do," said Isidoro, again smoothing out the pillow. Giacobbe turned over and laid himself down; then, raising his left hand, he began to count off on his fingers: "Priest Elias, one; the magistrate, two; then—what's his name?—Brontu Dejas; yes, I want him particularly. They must all come here, and I will make a confession."

"Brontu Dejas!" repeated Isidoro with stupefaction.

"Yes; they will take his word sooner than any one's. But first, you've all got to swear on the crucifix that you'll let me die in peace. I'm frightened. You'll let me die in peace, won't you?"

"Why, of course; don't worry now. And you, little godmother, go back to bed; get as much rest and sleep as you can," said the fisherman, quietly drawing the clothes up about Giacobbe, who kept throwing them off, turning restlessly, and shaking his head.

"I'm hot," said he. "I tell you I'm hot. Let me alone. Why aren't you more surprised. Uncle 'Sidoro? I went on hiring out to keep people from suspecting anything; but you knew all along; oh, yes! you knew well enough!"

"I tell you I knew nothing at all, child of grace."

"Then why aren't you surprised?"

"Because," replied the old man in a grave voice, "such strange things are always happening; it is the way of the world. Now keep the covers over you, and try to go to sleep."

The widow, who appeared not to have been listening to what the two men were saying, now raised her face. Poor, little, fresh face! It had suddenly grown yellow and wrinkled; all the years that had passed over it without being able to leave any trace, had, in the last five minutes, taken their revenge!

"Giacobbe," said the little woman, "what need is there of calling in witnesses? Why should we have any one else? Won't I do?" She straightened herself and looked at Isidoro, who, in turn, looked at the sick man.

"Why, that's true!" they exclaimed together.

A sudden atmosphere of relief fell on the dimly lighted room. The patient, with a sigh, stretched himself quietly out, remained still for a few moments, and finally fell asleep. The little widow, likewise following Isidoro's advice, went back to bed. The ponderous front of the great red wardrobe seemed to be brooding over the scene; and the shadowy ceiling to overhang it like the sky above a deserted hamlet. All those inanimate objects seemed to repeat gravely to one another the old fisherman's words: "It is the way of the world!"

The Orlei physician, Dr. Puddu, was a coarse, fat beast of a man. Once upon a time he, too, had had his high ideals; but Fate having cast him into this out-of-the-way corner of the world where the people were rarely, if ever, ill, he had taken to drink; at first, because, being from the South, he felt the cold; and afterwards because he

found that wine and liquor were very much to his taste. In these days, in addition to his intemperate habits, he had become a Free Thinker, so that even the villagers had lost all respect for him. Giacobbe had complained of a pain in his side, and Doctor Puddu, after cauterising the tarantula bite, had said roughly:

"You fool, people don't die of these things. If you do die, it will only be because you are an ass." And Aunt Anna-Rosa had looked at him angrily, and muttered something under her breath.

Poor little Aunt Anna-Rosa! It did not take much to anger her in these days; she quarrelled, indeed, with every one except the patient. And how old she looked! After that night her face had remained yellow and drawn; she looked like a different person, and her brother's revelation had worked a singular change in her both physically and morally. She was constantly tormented by the question as to how Giacobbe ever could have brought himself to kill any one. He, who was always as merry and gentle as a lamb! How in the name of the holy souls in purgatory had he ever done it? And our father, he was no thief, not he! He was a God-fearing man, and always so kind and gay that when any of the neighbours were in trouble they invariably came to him to be cheered up.

The little woman's heart swelled as she thought of her old father long since dead, but suddenly a mist seemed to rise in her brain, and her face contracted with the horror of a terrible thought.

"Perhaps he, too, the kindly, good old man had committed some crime! Why not? No one could be trusted any more, living or dead, old or young." And then she fell to crying, beating her breast with her tiny fists, and bitterly repenting of her wicked doubts.

When, approaching the bedside, she would find the patient's face drawn with suffering, his wide, terror-stricken eyes, meanwhile, seeming to implore death to spare him, an infinite tide of pity would well up within her, a rush of maternal

tenderness, a sorrow beyond words. More than ever was he her little brother, her boy, curled up on the great bed; so frightened, so shrunken with suffering! And while everything else, every one else, even the sacred dead, even innocent children, aroused hateful suspicions, he alone, he of them all, called for pity, tenderness, a passionate and consuming love, that was like melting wax within her. Yet she must see him, and she was seeing him,—die. More than that, she must wish for his death. All the while that she was nursing him with tenderest care, she must hope that her watchfulness, the medicines, everything, would fail. Moreover, death, that awful thing which she must ardently desire for the "little brother" whom she loved, when it came would bring, not only the deep, natural sorrow of her loss, but that other horror, the announcement of his guilt.

Of all the burdens that pressed upon her, however, the hardest to bear was the fact that the sick man was perfectly conscious of her attitude towards him.

On the third day of his illness, Isidoro had brought, with great secrecy and mystery, a medicine obtained from the sacristan. It was a concoction made of olive-oil, into which had been plunged three scorpions, a centipede, a tarantula, a spider, and a poisonous fungus; it was considered a cure for any kind of sting. Aunt Anna-Rosa applied it at once to the patient's puffed and swollen hand, he allowing her to do it, and watching the operation intently. Then he said:

"Why do you take all this trouble for me, Anna-Ro? Don't you want me to die?"

Her heart sank, while he continued quietly, addressing Isidoro: "And you? You brought me this, but just suppose it were to cure me, what would you do then?"

"God will look after that; leave it to him," said the fisherman.

Giacobbe lay quiet for a few moments; then he said:

"Shall you two go together to the magistrate's?"

"Where?"

"To the magistrate's; it's cold, though, now, and it's a long way to go; you must not go on horse-back, Anna-Rosa, do you hear? You will have to have a carriage to drive to Nuoro."

"What for?" she faltered distressedly, pretending not to understand.

"Why, to see the magistrate, of course."

She scolded him, and then went into the kitchen and wept bitterly.

"Here is your oil," she said presently, as Isidoro came out and prepared to leave. "You could not do anything but bring it, of course. When is Priest Elias coming?"

"This evening."

"Yes, he ought to; Giacobbe must confess. Time is flying, and he is very ill; last night he didn't close an eye. Ah!" she added suddenly, "he seems to me just like some wounded bird."

"Have the Dejases been here?"

"Oh, yes! They've been here, both of them, mother and son. Brontu has been here twice. Oh, they all come!" she said desperately, "but what good does it do? They can't cure him; they can't give him either life or death."

"Either one would be equally a blessing or a curse to him," said Isidoro, carefully wrapping his red handkerchief around the vial of oil.

"As they are for most of us!" said the woman.

Soon after, the doctor arrived in a shrunken overcoat, with the collar turned up. He had been drinking already, and smelled strong of spirits; his lips were white, and he puffed, and spat about, sometimes over himself. He seemed somewhat startled, however, when he saw his patient's condition.

"What the devil's the matter with you?" he demanded roughly. "Your side? your side? You've got the devil in your side. Let's have a look." He threw back the covers, exposing Giacobbe's hairy chest; passing his hand up and down his side, he listened

with his ear close to the patient's back. "It's all nonsense," he said. "You've worked yourself up like some old woman." Then he replaced the covers carelessly, and went out. At the door, however, he turned and fixed Aunt Anna-Rosa with his eye.

"Woman," he said, "let him see the priest at once; he has pneumonia."

At dusk Giacobbe confessed; then he called his sister. "Anna-Ro," he said, "Priest Elias is going to Nuoro with you too. You must be sure to have a carriage on account of the cold."

It was, in fact, snowing then, and the big room was filled with the white reflected light.

Priest Elias looked attentively at Aunt Anna-Rosa, for whom he had an especially tender feeling on account of a fancied resemblance to his mother. The poor little black-robed figure seemed to him to have shrunken in the past few days, and now she was hanging her head in a pitiful, shamefaced way; bowed with mortification at her "little brother's" disgrace.

Instinctively the priest understood the heroic part that quivering soul had been called upon to play in this tragedy, and he breathed an inward benediction upon her.

CHAPTER XV

It was the month of May, and the wild valley of the Isalle, usually so forbidding and rugged, lay smiling in the sun, adorned with tall grass and clumps of flowering shrubs and fields of barley, which rippled in the breeze like cloths of greenish gold. It was as though some old pagan, drunk with sunlight and sweet scents, had decked himself out in branches and garlands.

The clear, liquid note of a wild bird would occasionally pierce the silence of the valley, then die away, drowned in the fragrance of the narcissuses and flowering broom, which gleamed like nuggets of molten gold on the very edges of the loftiest cliffs, as though peeping over to see what lay in the ravine below.

A spendthrift fay had passed along, scattering flowers, colours, scents, with a reckless hand. Some meadows in the distance, pranked with ranunculuses, looked like stretches of green water reflecting a starry sky. Here and there a group of trees nodded and whispered together in the breeze. The sun had but just sunk and the west was still glowing like the cheek of a ripe peach; while in the east the mountains lay like a huge parure of precious stones set in a case of lilac satin.

Costantino Ledda, liberated only a few hours before at Nuoro, was returning to his native village on foot, descending leisurely into the valley, his small canvas pack slung on his back. Now and then he would stop and look around him curiously.

"Ha! the valley seems smaller, perhaps because I have seen the sea," he murmured.

He looked older; his face was clean-shaven and intensely white; but otherwise he had none of the tragic air which would have been appropriate under the circumstances. He was coming back in this manner,—alone and on foot,—because he had not been able to say precisely what day he would be freed; otherwise some one, relative or friend, would certainly have gone to meet him. Besides, his impatience to reach home would brook no delay. Down and down the mountain-side he went; he was almost gay, possibly because of some wine he had drunk at Nuoro, where he had also provided himself with more for the journey. As he continued to descend his legs would occasionally double up under him, but he cared little for so trifling an inconvenience as that.

"Why," he said to himself, "when I am tired I have only to lie down and go to sleep. I have plenty of bread and wine in my bag; what more could any one want? I'm as free as the birds of the air. Yes, that's true; I am free; I'm a bachelor now; that's a funny thing; once I was a married man with a wife, and now I'm a bachelor." He thought that he found this idea amusing.

Down and down, now watching the sandy path, winding between high grass on either side, now gazing at the birds to whom he had compared himself, as they flew

hither and thither, at times almost skimming the ground, then darting into the bushes where they would find a roosting-place for the night. He thought of the prison magpie, and felt a sudden tightening at his heart. Yes; it was true he had been sorry, when the time came to leave that place of torment—the companions whom he disliked so heartily, the horrible, enclosing walls, the strip of sky that for all those years had seemed to overhang the prison courtyard like a metal lid.

After the death of the real culprit days and months had elapsed before Justice had completed its leisurely formalities and the innocent man could be liberated. During these months Costantino, informed of the event, had been wild with impatience, and the days had seemed like years; yet, when the moment of departure actually came, he nearly wept.

This emotion, however, which was apparently the outcome of pity and sympathy for the beings whom he was leaving behind, was, in reality, for the things he was leaving behind; for all those inanimate objects that had engulfed and swallowed up his life—both his past and his future. Now this sorrow was done with, everything was done with; even that horrible torture that followed Giovanna's act was all so much a thing of the past that he really fancied that he could laugh at it.

Down, and down; he reached the bottom of the valley and began to skirt the edge of the Isalle. The sunset sky was still bright, and here and there the water shone between the oleanders and rushes, or reflected the rose and yellow lights in the sky. The delicate lace umbrellas of the elder-flower, and the brilliant coral blossoms of the oleanders stood out in the clear atmosphere as though from a setting of silver. Costantino, by this time very tired, began to think that perhaps the valley was not, after all, so small as it had seemed at first.

"I can sleep out of doors perfectly well," he thought, "but it would have been so amusing to walk up to Isidoro's door—Bang, bang—'Who's there?' 'I'—'Who's I?' 'Why, Costantino Ledda!' How astonished old Isidoro would look! Perhaps he would

be singing the lauds; may be those lauds, who knows? Why, let's see! I wrote a set of lauds once! How extraordinary that seems!"

He wondered over many incidents of the past as a boy will sometimes be astonished to think of things he did as a child. But the present held many surprises as well. The glory of the springtide amazed him, as did the length of time it took to cross a valley that appeared to be so small. But most of all he wondered to think that he was crossing it on his way back to his own village.

He was walking now between two fields of grain above which the slanting light threw a veil of golden haze, and its surface, rippled by the breeze, seemed stroked by an invisible hand.

He went on picturing his arrival, Isidoro having written to ask him to come straight to his house: "'Come in,' he will say, and then, 'Giacobbe Dejas is dead; it was he who did it!'—'I know that already. The devil! Is that all you have to tell me?' 'Well, then, your wife has married some one else.' 'I know that too.' 'Then why don't you cry?' 'Why on earth should I? I have cried enough; I don't want to any more now. I've crossed the sea; I've seen the world. I'm not a boy any longer; nothing makes much difference to me any more.'" But at the very moment when he was boasting to himself of his indifference and worldly cynicism, an icy grip closed about his heart.

Oh! to be going back to find the little house, Giovanna, his child, his past!

"There is nothing left," he said aloud. "The storm has swept over it and carried everything away, everything, everything——"

He threw himself down on the edge of the field of grain in an agony of grief. It was often this way; the great tempest of sorrow had broken over him long before and seemingly passed on; but instead of that it had only hidden itself for a time; it was there now, stealing along, keeping pace with him; for long distances he would not see its evil shape; then suddenly it would leap forth, bursting through the ground at his very feet and whirling around its victim, clutch him by the throat, beat him to the

ground, suffocate him—then leave him spent, exhausted.

After a while Costantino sat up, unfastened his wallet, and drew out a dried gourd filled with wine, throwing his head back, he took a deep draught; then he put it away, and sat looking around him at the sea of grain on whose golden-green surface floated splotches of crimson poppies. Somewhat revived he presently resumed his journey, but all the eagerness and spring with which he had set out had died away. What did it matter whether he got home this day or the next, since there was no one to expect him? And so he plodded on till the first shadows of approaching night overtook him just as he reached the end of the valley. The crickets had turned out like a tribe of mowers with their tiny silver sickles, the scent of the shrubs and flowers hung heavy in the warm air; the breeze had died away, and the birds were silent; but the black triangles of the bats circled swiftly in the luminous grey dusk.

Oh, that divine melancholy of a spring evening! Felt even by happy souls, may it not be an inherited homesickness, transmitted through all the ages? A longing for the flowers, and perfumes, and joys of that eternal, albeit earthly, paradise which our first parents lost for us forever.

Costantino tramped on and on: he had passed long years under a brutal oppression, between infected walls, amid corrupt companions in an environment whose very air was confined, and now—he was walking in the open, treading grass and stones under foot! As he ascended the mountain from the valley below, every step brought more of the horizon into view and a wider expanse of soft, overhanging sky as boundless as liberty itself. And yet,—and yet,—never in all those years of imprisonment had he experienced a sense of such utter hopelessness as that with which he now saw the shadows fall from those free skies. He was pressing on, but whither? and why? He had set forth eager, elated, as one hastening to a place where pleasant things await him. Now he wondered at himself. In the uncertain twilight he seemed to have lost his way; his journey had turned out to be vain, abortive. He was

trudging on aimlessly; he had no country, nor home, nor family; he would never reach any destination; he had gone astray, and was wandering about in a boundless, desert tract, as grey and cheerless as the sky above him, where the stars were like camp-fires lighted by solitary travellers who, unknown to one another, wandered, lost like himself, in the unwished-for and oppressive liberty of the trackless wilderness.

And yet it was not the actual thought of Giovanna herself that weighed him down, nor yet his lost happiness, nor the misery that a wholly undeserved fate had forced upon him; all these things had long ago so eaten into his soul that they had come to form a part of his very nature, and he had grown almost to forget them, as one forgets the shirt he has on his back. Now his grief fastened upon memories of certain specific objects which had passed out of the setting of his life, and which he could never recover.

His mind dwelt, for instance, persistently on the little common in front of Giovanna's cottage, the stones in the old wall where they used to sit together on summer evenings, and above all on the great, wide bed, where he would lay himself down beside her after the hard day's work was over. He felt now as though he might be going home at the close of one of those long, toilsome days. But now—now—where was he to turn for rest and ease? Thus, up through the load of unhappiness that bore him down, all-pervading and indefinable as the fragrance of the wild growth about him, a sense of physical discomfort forced itself; he was conscious of hunger and weariness.

Reaching the top of a knoll, he sat down and opened his wallet. Night had fallen, but the atmosphere was clear and bright; the mountains which hid the sea on the east were bathed in moonlight, and the Milky Way spanned the heavens like a white, deserted causeway; in the west a pale, uncertain reflection hung over the distant sea; a magical aurora encircled the mountains. The path stood out distinctly, and the

round, compact clumps of bushes might have been a scattered flock of black sheep. No sound broke the stillness but the mournful hoot of an owl.

Costantino ate and drank; then, stretching himself out on the ground, he allowed his gaze to wander for a moment along that vast white roadway that traversed the heavens; then he shut his eyes, and the sense of bodily comfort, the repose for his tired limbs, and the effect of the food and drink were such that he became almost cheerful again. Hardly, however, had his lids closed, when all his prison companions began to troop before his vision, and he seemed to be seated at work at his shoemaker's bench. The thought of all the wonderful things he would have to tell his friends at Orlei then came into his mind, and filled him with such childish pride that he had an impulse to get up at once and push on so as to get there without delay.

"Yes, I must get up and go on," he said, and then, "No, I won't; I shall stay here and go to sleep; I am very sleepy; no, I must get on,"—the words came confusedly this time. "Isidoro Pane expects me. I shall say, 'What a lot of people I have met! I have seen the sea; I know a man who is a marshal, Burrai is his name; he's going to get me a position of shoemaker in the king's household.' Now I am going to get up and start—start—star——" But he did not. Confused visions flitted across his brain. The King of Spades, astride of a donkey, came riding down that great white road that stretched across the sky; all at once he heard him cry out,—once,—twice,—three times. He was calling Costantino, who, opening his sleepy eyes, shut them again, and then opened them wide: "Idiot," he muttered; "it's the owl; yes, I'm going directly; I'm going——" And he fell fast asleep.

When he awoke, the great, shining face of the moon was still high in the heavens; with its flood of steely light there came a fall of dew. Enormous shadows, like vast black veils, hung over certain parts of the mountains, but every crag, every thicket and flower even, stood clearly out wherever the moonlight fell. The owl still gave his penetrating cry, sharp and metallic, cutting through the silence like a blade of

steel. Costantino shivered; he was wet with dew, and getting up, he yawned loudly; the prolonged "Ah—ah-h-h" fairly resounded in the intense stillness. He scrutinised the heavens to find out the hour. The Star, that is to say, Diana, had not yet lifted her emerald-gold face above the sea; dawn therefore was still a long way off, and Costantino resumed his journey, hoping to reach the village before the people should be about. He did not want to meet the gaze of the curious, and above all else he dreaded being seen by Giovanna or her mother. He had made up his mind to avoid them, if possible not even to see them or pass by their cottage; what good would it do? Everything was over between them.

So he trudged on, and on; now up, now down; along the moonlit mountain-side. The heaps of slate-stone, the asphodels heavy with dew, the very rocks themselves, gave out a damp, penetrating odour, and here and there a rill of water stole in and out between fragrant beds of pennyroyal. As far away as the eye could reach, blue, vapoury skies overhung blue, misty mountains, until, in the extreme distance, they met and melted into one shimmering sea of silver. The man walked on, and on; his brain yet only half awake, but his body refreshed and active. Now and then he would take a short-cut, leaping from rock to rock, then pausing breathless, with straining heart and pulses. In the moon's rays his limpid eyes showed flecks of silver light.

The further he went the more familiar the way became; now he was inhaling the wild fragrance of his native soil; he recognised the melancholy salti sown with barley, the grain not yet turned; the beds of lentisks, the sparse trees whispering in some passing breath of wind, like old people murmuring in their sleep; and there, far off, the range of mighty sphinxes blue in the moonlight; and further still, the flash of the sea, that sea that he was so proud to have crossed in no matter what fashion. On reaching the little church of San Francisco he paused, and, cap in hand, said a prayer, a perfectly honest and sincere one, for at that moment his freedom gave him a sense of happiness such as he had not as yet experienced at any time since leaving the prison.

Day had hardly begun to break when Isidoro heard a tapping at his door. For fifteen—twenty days, for four months, in fact, he had been waiting for that sound, and he was on his feet before his old heart had started its mad beating against his breast.

He opened the door; in the dim light he saw, or half saw, a tall figure not dressed in the costume of the country, but wearing a fustian coat as hard and stiff as leather, out of which emerged a long, pallid face. He did not know who it was.

Costantino burst into a harsh laugh, and the fisherman, with a pang, recognised his friend. Yes, at last; it was Costantino come back, but in that very first moment he knew it was not the Costantino of other days. He threw his arms around him, but without kissing him, and his heart melted into tears.

"Well, you didn't know me, after all," said Costantino, unstrapping his wallet. "I knew you wouldn't."

Even his voice and accent were strange; and now, after his first sensations, first of chill and then of pity, Isidoro felt a sort of diffidence. "What are you dressed that way for?" he asked. "If you had let me know I would have brought you your clothes to Nuoro, and a horse too. Did you come all the way on foot?"

"No; San Francisco lent me a horse. What are you about, Uncle Isidoro? I don't want any coffee. Have you got any brandy?"

The fisherman, who had begun to uncover the fire, got up from his knees, embarrassed and mortified at having nothing better to offer his guest than a little coffee.

"I didn't know," he stammered, spreading out his hands, "but just wait a moment, I'll go right off—you see I expected you, and I didn't expect you——" And he started for the door.

"Stop; where are you going?" cried the other, seizing hold of him. "I don't want anything at all. I only said it for a joke. Sit down here."

Isidoro seated himself, and began to look furtively at Costantino; little by little he grew more at ease with him, and presently passing his hand over his trousers he asked if he intended to go on dressing that way. In the early morning light streaming through the open door, Costantino's face looked worn and grey.

"Yes," he said, with another of those disagreeable laughs, "I am going on dressing this way. I am going away soon."

"Going away soon! Where to?"

"Oh! I have met so many people," began Costantino, in the tone of one reciting a lesson. "And I have friends who will help me. What is there for me to do here, anyhow?"

"Why, shoemaking! Didn't you write to me that that was what you wanted to do?"

"I know a marshal named Burrai," continued Costantino, who always thought of the King of Spades as still holding office. "He lives in Rome now, and he's written me a letter; he's going to get me a position in the King's household to be shoemaker."

Isidoro looked at him pitifully. "Ah, the poor fellow, he was altogether different. What made him talk like that, and tell all those foolish little things when there were such heartrending topics to discuss." Thus Uncle Isidoro to his own heart.

Pretty soon, however, he began to suspect that Costantino was putting all this on, and that his apparent indifference was assumed. But why? If he could not be open and natural with him, with whom could he be? "Come," said he, "let us talk of other things now; we can discuss all that later. Really, though, won't you have a little coffee? It would do you good."

"What do you want to talk about?" asked Costantino drearily. "I knew you would think it strange that I don't cry, but I've cried until I haven't the wish to any more. And I am going away; one can't stay in this place after having crossed the sea—who is that going by?" he asked suddenly, as the sound of footsteps was heard outside. "I don't want any one to see me," and he jumped up and shut the door.

When he turned, his whole expression had changed and his features were working.

"I walked by there," he said, his voice sinking lower and lower, "on my way here. I didn't want to, but somehow I found myself there before I knew it. How can I—how can I stay here? Tell me—you——"

He clasped both hands to his forehead and shook his head violently; then, throwing himself at full length on the ground, he writhed and twisted in an agony of sobs, his whole body shaking with the vehemence of his grief. He was like a young bull caught and held fast in the leash, and made to submit to the red-hot iron.

The old fisherman turned deathly white, but made no attempt whatever to calm him. At last, at last, he recognised his friend.

CHAPTER XVI

No sooner had news of Costantino's return got abroad than visitors began to stream to Isidoro's hut. Throughout the entire day there was an incessant coming and going of friends and relatives, and even of persons who had never in their lives so much as interchanged a word with the late prisoner, but who now hastened with open arms to invite him to make his home with them. The women wept over him, called him "my son," and gazed at him compassionately; one neighbour sent him a present of bread and sausages. All these kindly demonstrations seemed, however, only to annoy their object.

"Why on earth should they be sorry for me?" he said to Isidoro. "For Heaven's sake, send them about their business, and let's get away into the country."

"Yes, yes, we will go, all in good time, child of the Lord, only have a little patience," said the other, bending over the fireplace, where he was cooking the sausage. "How naughty you are, I declare!"

Since witnessing that paroxysm of grief in the morning, Uncle Isidoro had felt much more at ease with his guest, and even took little liberties with him, scolding him as

though he had been a child. During the short intervals when they found themselves alone, he told him the facts. Costantino listened eagerly, and was annoyed when the arrival of fresh visitors interrupted the narrative. Among these visitors came the syndic, he who was a herdsman, and looked like Napoleon I. His call was especially trying.

"We will give you sheep and cows," he began, wiping his nose on the back of his hand. "Yes, every herdsman will give you a pecus,[9] and if there is anything you need, just say so; are we not all brothers and sisters in this world, and especially in a small community like this?"

Costantino, thinking of the treatment he had received at the hands of his "brothers and sisters" of this particular small community, shook his head.

"Yes," he said; "my brothers have treated me as Cain treated Abel; it would take a good deal more than sheep and cows to make it up to me."

"Oh, well! that has nothing to do with it," replied the syndic, absorbed in his idea. "You have travelled; tell me now, have you never stood on the top of some high mountain, and looked down on the villages scattered about in the plain below? Well, didn't they seem to you like so many houses, each with its little family living inside?" Costantino, who was tired of the conversation, merely replied that all he wanted was to leave this village and never come back to it again.

"Oh, no! You mustn't do that!" urged the other. "Where would you go? No, no; you must stay here, where we are all brothers."

The next to arrive was Doctor Puddu, carrying a large, dirty, grey umbrella. He at once peered into the earthenware saucepan to see what was cooking.

"You are all degenerates, every one of you," he announced in his harsh voice, rapping the saucepan with his umbrella. "And I'll tell you the reason: it's because you will eat pork."

"Don't break the saucepan, please," said Uncle Isidoro. "And I beg your pardon, but

that is not pork; it's beans, and bacon, and sausage."

"Well, isn't bacon pork? You're all pigs. Well——," turning to Costantino. "And so, good sheep, you've come back? I saw him die—what's his name?—Giacobbe Dejas. He died a miserable death, as he deserved to. You had better take a purgative to-morrow; it's absolutely necessary after a sea voyage."

Costantino looked at him without speaking.

"You think I'm crazy?" shouted the doctor, going close to him, and shaking his umbrella. "A purgative! do you understand? A purgative!"

"I heard you," said Costantino.

"Oh, so much the better! Well, I've heard that you say you want to go away. Go-o-o——! Go, by all means. Go to the devil. But first of all, go to the cemetery, go to that dunghill you call a cem-e-te-ry; and dig and scratch like a dog, and tear up Giacobbe Dejas's bones, and gnaw them."

He ground his teeth as though he were crunching bones; it was both grotesque and horrible, and Costantino could do nothing but stare at him in utter amazement.

"What are you looking at me like that for? You've always been a fool, my dear fellow—my dear donkey! Just look at you now! calm and amiable as a pope! They've robbed you of everything you possessed, betrayed you, murdered you, knocked you about among them as though you had been a dried skeleton, and there you sit, bland and stupid as ever! Why don't you do something? Why don't you go to that vile woman, and take her, and her mother, and her mother-in-law by the hair of their heads, and tie them to the tails of the cows they offer to give you as a charity, and set fire to their petticoats, and turn them loose in the fields so that they may spread destruction in every direction? Do you understand? I say, do you understand, idiot?"

He flung the words in the other's face, his breath heavy with absinthe, his eyes bloodshot.

Costantino recoiled, trembling, but the doctor turned to go. On the threshold he paused again and shook his umbrella.

"You make me long to break your neck!" he cried. "Men such as you deserve precisely the treatment they get! Well, take a purgative, anyhow, stupid."

"Yes, I'll do that," said Costantino, with a laugh, but at the same time the doctor's words made a deep impression on him. There were times, indeed, when he felt utterly desperate. He said over and over again that he meant to go away, but, as a fact, he did not know where to go. Nor, on the other hand, could he see what was to become of him should he decide to remain on in the village. He said to himself: "I have no home, and there is no one belonging to me; for this one day every one rushes to see me out of curiosity, but by to-morrow they will all have forgotten my very existence. I am like a bird that has lost its nest. What is there for me to do?"

All the time, though, those words of the doctor's kept ringing in his head. Yes, truly, that would be something for him to do. Go there, fall suddenly upon them like a bolt out of heaven, and utterly destroy all those people who had destroyed his life!

"No, Costantino," resumed Uncle Isidoro, as they sat at table, eating the neighbour's white bread and sausage. "No; she is not happy. I have never looked her full in the face since, and it gives me a queer feeling to meet her, as though I were meeting the devil! And yet, do you know, I can't help feeling sorry for her. She has a little girl that they tell me is like a young bean, it is so thin and puny. How could a child born in mortal sin be pretty? It was baptised just like a bastard, the priest wouldn't go back to the house, and the people were sneering all along the street."

"Ah, do you remember my child?" asked Costantino, cutting off a slice of fat, yellow bacon. "He was not like a bean, not he! Ah, if he had only lived!"

"It may be better so," said the fisherman, beginning to moralise. "Life is full of suffering; better to die innocent, to go—to fly—up there, above the blue sky, to the paradise that lies beyond the clouds, beyond the storms, beyond all the miseries of

human life. Drink something, Costantino; this wine is not very good, but there is still some left.—Well, I remember last year on Assumption Day, Giacobbe Dejas asked me to take dinner with him. He was afraid of me; he thought I knew, and he wanted his sister and me to get married. Oh! if you could just see that little woman you wouldn't laugh. She went with the priest and me to Nuoro. May the Lord desert me in the hour of death, if ever I saw a more courageous woman in all my life! She hardly seemed to touch the ground! Well, she's gone all shrunken and shrivelled now, don't you know—like a piece of fruit that dries up on the tree before it is ripe. I go all the time to see her, and just to amuse her I say: 'Well, little barley-grain! Shall we two get married? She smiles and I smile, but we feel more like crying! Who could ever have imagined such a thing?—I mean, here was Giacobbe Dejas, seemingly happy and contented; he was getting rich, and he talked of being married. And then—all of a sudden—pum!—down he comes, like a rotten pear! Such is life! Bachissia Era sold her daughter, thinking to improve her condition, and now she is hungrier than ever. Giovanna Era did what she did, imagining that she was going to have a heaven upon earth, and instead of that, she's like a frog with a stick run through it!"

"But does he beat her?" asked Costantino heavily.

"No, he doesn't do that; but there are worse things than beating. She's treated just like a servant, or, rather, like a slave. You know how they used to treat their slaves in the old times? Well, that's the way she's treated in that house."

"Well, let her burst! Here's to her damnation!" cried Costantino, raising his glass to his lips. It gave him a cruel pleasure to hear of Giovanna's misery, such pleasure as a child will sometimes feel at seeing an unpopular playmate receive a whipping.

Dinner over the two men went out and stretched themselves at full length beneath the wild fig-tree. It was a hot, breathless noontide; the air, smelling of poppies and filled with grey haze, was like that of a summer midday, and there were bees flying

about, sounding their little trombones. Costantino, completely worn out by this time, fell asleep almost immediately. The fisherman, on the contrary, could not close an eye. A green grasshopper was skipping about among the blades of grass, giving its sharp "tic, tic." Isidoro, stretching out one hand, tried to catch it, his thoughts dwelling all the while on Costantino. "I know why he wants to go away," he ruminated. "He still cares for her, poor boy; and if he stays here he will just suffer the way San Lorenzo did on his gridiron. There he lies, poor fellow, like a sick child! Ah, what have they done to him? Torn him to pieces—Ah-ha! I have you now!" but just as he was about to pull the grasshopper apart, it occurred to him that possibly it too, like Costantino, had had its trials, and he let it go.

A shadow fell across the foot of the path; Uncle Isidoro, recognising Priest Elias, sprang to his feet, went to meet him, and drew him into the hut, so as not to awaken Costantino. The latter, however, was a light sleeper, and, aroused presently by the sound of their voices, he too got up. As he approached the hut he realised that he was being talked about.

"It is far better that he should go," the priest was saying in a serious tone. "Far, far better."

Costantino could not tell why, but at the sound of these words his heart sank within him like lead.

However, he did not go.

The days followed one another and people soon ceased to trouble the returned exile; before long he was able to go about the village as much as he chose without being stared at, even by the gossips and ragamuffins. With the savings laid up in prison he purchased a stock of leather, soles, and thread, but he never began to work. Every day he bought a supply of meat and fruit and wine, eating and drinking freely himself, and urging Isidoro to do the same. He was in great dread lest the villagers might think that he was living on the old man's charity, and wanted to let them see

that he had money and was openhanded, not only with him, but with every one else; so he would conduct parties of his acquaintances to the tavern where he would make them all tipsy and get so himself at times, and then the tales he would relate of his prison experiences were marvellous indeed to hear.

In this way his little store of money melted rapidly away, and when Isidoro scolded him, all he would say was: "Well, I have no children nor any one else to consider, so let me alone." He was counting, moreover, on the inheritance left by his murdered uncle, which the other heirs had agreed to resign without forcing him to have recourse to the law. "Then," said he, "I shall take myself off. I am going to give you a hundred scudi. Uncle Isidoro."

But poor old Isidoro did not want his scudi nor anything else except to see him restored to the Costantino of other days—good, industrious, and frank. Frank he certainly was not at present, and when, occasionally, the fisherman surprised him with tears in his eyes, his sore, old heart leaped for joy.

"What is it, child of grace?" he would ask. But Costantino would merely laugh, even when the tears were actually running down his cheeks. It was heartrending.

Sometimes the two would go off together to fish for leeches; that is, Isidoro would stand patiently knee-deep in the yellow, stagnant water, while Costantino, stretched on his back among the rushes, would spin yarns about his former fellow-prisoners, gazing off, meanwhile, towards the horizon with an unaccountable feeling of homesickness.

Go away? go away? Did he not long to go away? Did he not, up there, beneath that fateful sky, in the deathly solitude of the uplands, under the eternal surveillance of those colossal sphinxes, feel as though an iron circle were pressing upon him? Every object, from the blades of grass along the roadside to the very mountain-peaks, reminded him of the past. Each night he prowled around Giovanna's house like some stealthy animal, and one evening he saw her tall figure issue forth, and move down

in the direction of their cottage. This was the first time that he had seen her, and he recognised her instantly, notwithstanding that it was by the fading light of a damp, overcast evening. His heart beat violently, and each throb gave him an added pang, a fresh memory, a new impulse of despair. His instinct was to throw himself upon her then and there, clasp her in a close embrace,—kill her. Before long, however, he was no longer satisfied to catch only furtive glances, secretly and in the dark; he became possessed with the desire to see her and to be seen of her in broad daylight; but she never left the house, and he dared not go by there in the daytime. On another evening, a Saturday, he heard Brontu's laugh ring out from the portico, and he fancied that hers mingled with it. His eyes filled, and he had much the same sensation of nausea as on that first morning of the sea voyage when he woke up ill.

All this time he continued to feign the utmost indifference, without quite knowing why he did so. The Orlei people had, however, become almost hateful to him, even Uncle Isidoro. Sometimes he asked himself in wonder why he had ever come back.

"I am going away," he said one day to the fisherman, gazing across the interminable stretch of uplands to the blue and crimson sky beyond, against which the thickets of arbute seemed to float like green clouds. "I have written to a friend of mine—Burrai—he can do anything, you know; he could have gotten me a pardon, even if I had really been guilty."

"You have told me all that before; I am tired of hearing it," said Isidoro. "All the same, I notice that he has never even answered your letter."

"He is going to get me a position; yes, I really mean to go. But tell me why is it that the priest is so anxious for it? Is he afraid that I will kill Brontu Dejas?"

"Yes, he is. He's afraid of just that."

"No, he's not; that's not it. I said to him: 'Priest Elias, you must know perfectly well that if I had wanted to kill any one, I would have done it right off.' And all he said was: 'Go away, go away! It would be far better.' What do you think about it, Uncle

Fisherman; shall I go or not?"

"I don't think anything about it," answered the other in a tone of strong disapproval. "What I do think is that you are an idle dog. Why aren't you at work, tell me that? It's because you do nothing but think all the time of your good-for-nothing Burrai, who, however, never gives you a thought."

"Oh! he doesn't give me a thought?" said Costantino, piqued. "Well, I'll just let you see whether he does or not. Look here!"

He drew a letter from the inside pocket of his coat, and proceeded to read it aloud. It was from Burrai, written at Rome, where the ex-marshal had opened a little shop for the sale of Sardinian wines. Naturally, being himself, he had improved upon the facts, and announced that he was the proprietor of a large and flourishing establishment; he invited Costantino to pay him a visit, and reproached him for not having come at once to Rome, where, he said, he could find him a position without difficulty.

The fisherman's blue eyes grew round with innocent wonder.

"To think, only to think!" he exclaimed. "And you never told me a word about it! What made you hide the letter? How much does it cost to go to Rome?"

"Oh! only about fifty lire."

"And have you got that much?"

"Why, of course I have!"

"Then go, go by all means!" exclaimed the old man, stretching his arms out towards the horizon.

They were both silent for a moment. The fisherman, bending his head, gazed at the pebbles lying at his feet, while Costantino stared absently ahead of him. Beyond the brook, the tall, yellow, meadow-grass was bowing in the wind, and the long stems of the golden oats rippled against the blue background of the sky.

Uncle Isidoro made up his mind that the moment had come to tell Costantino plainly why all his friends wanted him to leave the village.

"Giovanna," he began quietly, "does not love her husband; you and she might meet——"

"She and I might meet? Well, and if we did, what then?"

"Nothing; you might, that's all."

"Oh, nothing!" cried Costantino, and his voice rang out scornfully in the profound stillness; "nothing! I tell you that I despise that low woman. I don't want her."

"You don't want her, and yet you hang about her house all the time, like a fly about the honey-pot."

"Ah, you know about that?" said Costantino, somewhat crestfallen. "It's not true, though,—well—yes; perhaps it is. But suppose I do hang about her house, what business is it of yours?"

"Oh! none at all, but—you had better go away."

"I am going. I suppose the truth is you are getting tired of having me on your hands!"

"Costantino, Costantino!" exclaimed the old man in a hurt voice.

Costantino pulled up a tuft of rushes, threw it from him, and gazed again into the distance. His face was working as it had done on the morning of his return, after he had closed the door of Isidoro's hut; his brain swam, once or twice he gulped down the bitter saliva that rose in his throat; then he spoke:

"Well, after all, why does the priest insist so on my going? Am I not actually her husband? Suppose even that she were to come back to me? Wouldn't it be coming back to her own husband?"

"If she were to come back to you, my dear fellow, it would be Brontu Dejas either killing you or having you arrested."

"Well, you needn't be afraid; I don't want her. She's a fallen woman, as far as I am concerned. I shall go off somewhere, to a distance, and marry some one else."

"Oh, no! You would never do that," murmured Isidoro appealingly. "You are too good a Christian."

"No; I would never do that," repeated Costantino mechanically.

"Never in the world; you are far too good a Christian." The old man said it again, but without conviction. The experience of a long life was battling with the tenets of his simple faith.

"If he does not do it," he sighed to himself, "it will not be merely because he is a good Christian."

CHAPTER XVII

The July evening fell softly, tranquilly, like a bluish veil. Costantino, seated on the stone bench outside the fisherman's hut, was thoughtfully counting on his fingers.

Yes; it had been sixty-four days since his return. Six-ty-four days! It seemed like yesterday, and—it seemed like a century! The exile's fustian coat had grown worn and shabby; his face, dark and gloomy; and his heart—yes, his heart as well, had worn away from day to day, from hour to hour. Eaten into by misery, by rage and passion, it, too, had turned black, like a thing on the verge of decay.

A habit of dissembling, a result of prison life, had clung to him; so that now he found it impossible to be really open with any one, much as he sometimes longed to unburden his heart; while the constant effort to conceal his feelings harassed him and added to his general misery. A frozen void seemed to surround him, like a great sea, calm, but boundless, stretching away in all directions from a shipwrecked mariner. For two months now he had been swimming in this sea, and he was wearied out; his forces were spent. Scan the horizon as he would, his soul could espy no friendly shore across that bleak and desolate expanse; no prospect of an end

to the unequal struggle; the icy water and the measureless void were slowly swallowing him up.

Every day he would talk of going away, but nothing more. It was a pretence, like all else that he did; in his heart he knew perfectly well that now he would never go. Why should he? On this side of the water, or on that, life would always be the same. He cared for no one; he hated no one, and he felt that he had become as base and self-centred as his late comrades in prison. Even Uncle Isidoro, who had meant so much to him at a distance, now, in the close companionship of daily intercourse, had become an object of indifference, at times almost of dislike.

When the old man went off on his fishing expeditions, or on the circuits which he made from time to time through the country to dispose of his wares, Costantino felt as though a weight had been lifted from him; the semi-paternal oversight which the other exercised over him having, in fact, come to both frighten and irritate him.

On this particular evening the fisherman was away, and Costantino was sensible of this feeling of freedom from an irksome restraint. Now he could do whatever came into his head, without any one to preach, or that disagreeable sensation of being watched, which, possibly as a result of the long years spent in prison, the mere presence of the old man was sufficient to excite. Moreover, he was expecting a visitor. Although he professed, now, to despise all women, and did, in fact, usually avoid them as much as possible, he had allowed himself to be drawn into relations with a strange creature—a half-witted girl—who lived near Giovanna. She had surprised him one night prowling about the Dejas house and had persuaded him to go home with her.

From this individual he got all the gossip of the white house, and he took refuge with her whenever he thought he had been seen crossing the common. He was waiting for her now at Isidoro's hut, in the owner's absence, but he looked down on her, and her foolish talk jarred on him. Presently she arrived, and Costantino told her

to sit down out there on the stone bench beside him.

"It's hot inside, and there are fleas, and spiders, and—devils. Stay here in the fresh air," he said, without looking at her.

"But we'll be seen," she objected, in a deep, rough voice.

"All right; suppose we are! It makes no difference to me, why should it to you?"

"But, as it happens, it does make a difference to me."

"Why?" he said, raising his voice. "Men cannot matter, since they are all sinners as well; and as for God, he can see us just as well inside as out."

"Oh, go away!" she said, but without any show of anger. "You've been drinking." Then she turned away and went into the hut. Striking a light, she looked into the cupboard where the food was usually kept, and, as Costantino still did not come, she returned to the door and called to him: "If you don't come at once I shall go away; but you had better be careful; I have something to tell you."

He jumped up, and, going inside, took her in his arms. The girl broke into a wild laugh.

"Ah-ha! you come quick enough now. That brought my little shorn lamb, eh?"

She was tall and stout, with a small head and a dark, diminutive face, red lips, and greenish eyes—not ugly, exactly—but rather repellent. Though she never drank anything herself, she gave an impression of being always a little tipsy, and was very prone to think that other people were so, in fact. Still laughing, she went again to the cupboard.

"It's empty," she said. "Nothing there at all; and, do you know, I am hungry!"

"If you'll wait a moment I'll go and buy something; but first, you must tell me—"

She turned abruptly, laid one hand on his breast, and with the other began to rain blows that were anything but playful.

"Ah, you want to know—crocodile. You want to know, do you? That's what brought

you in, is it? Go back—enjoy the air, poor, dear little lamb! You want me to tell you? You think it is something about Giovanna Era, eh? And you came in for that, and not to see me?"

"Let go," he said, seizing her hands. "You hit hard; the devil take you! Yes, that's what I came in for—well?"

"I shan't tell you a word, so there!"

"Now, Mattea," he said gently, "don't make me angry; you are not ill-natured. See now, I am going off to buy you whatever you want. What shall it be? What would you like to have?"

He was like a child promising to be good if only it can have what it wants. And, in fact, at that moment he did want something; he wanted it badly, and not a nice thing, either. What he wanted was to be told that Brontu had beaten his wife, or that she had met with an accident, or that overwhelming disaster of one sort or another had engulfed the house of Dejas, root and branch. It was, therefore, somewhat disappointing when Mattea, closing one eye, announced that some cattle had been stolen, and that Aunt Martina, on hearing the news, had rushed off like a crazy thing to ascertain the exact extent of the loss. "She will be up at the folds all night, and your wife is all alone—do you understand—alone?"

"Well, what difference does that make to me?"

"Stupid! You can go to see her.—You won't go? Why, that's what I came expressly to tell you! Of course you'll go; I want you to. I'm sorry for you. After all, you are her husband."

"I'm not. I'm not any one's husband," he said, with a shrug. "I thought you would have something very different to tell me. Now—what shall I get you? Beans—milk—bacon—cheese?"

"If you're not any one's husband, then marry me," she said, in a low, unsteady voice, like a person who has been drinking.

Costantino coughed, and spat on the ground.

Instantly a gleam of intelligence shot into her usually dull, expressionless eyes.

"Why do you do that?" she asked sharply. "You think, perhaps, that she is better than I?"

He flushed, and then a heartsick feeling came over him.

"Yes," he said; "you are worse, or—better than she."

"What do you say?"

"If you are not lying at this moment, and didn't come here to lay a trap for me, with this story of her being alone—well, then you are better than she."

"Why should I lay a trap for you? I'm sorry for you, that's all. I swear by the memory of my dead, that if you go there this evening you'll run no risk whatever."

"Who can believe you, woman, when you don't respect even the dead?"

Mattea, angry and offended, started to leave the hut; but he held her back.

"A low dog," she said scornfully. "I take pity on you, and you speak to me like that! What have you to reproach me with? What, I say?" She threw her head back with a certain pride, knitting her brows, and turning upon Costantino a look that was altogether new. He stared back at her for a moment, amazed that a woman of her class should speak in that tone, should hold up her head, and dare to look at him with such an expression. Then he began to laugh.

"I'm off now," he said, "but I'll be back in a moment. I'll get some wine too, even though you don't drink it. Wait for me here—wait, I say," he repeated roughly, as she followed him to the door. "Don't bother me." She stood still, and he went out, but before he had gone a dozen steps he heard her deep voice calling him back.

Returning, he saw the tip of her nose through the crack of the door, and one eye, regarding him with its habitual look of dull stolidity.

"What do you want, squint-eyed goat?"

"If you are going to her, there is no use in making me wait here."

"Go to the devil whom you came from!" exclaimed Costantino. "I would as soon think of going to her house as you would of going to church. I say you are to wait!" and he made as if to tweak her nose, but she quickly drew back and shut the door.

Ten minutes later Costantino returned, but his strange guest had disappeared. Thinking that she might be hiding somewhere outside, he looked for her, calling in a low voice and telling her that he had bread and meat and fruit, but in vain; she had taken herself off.

An intense stillness reigned all about the hut. Through the night, now completely fallen, came only the sound of the fig-leaves rustling mysteriously, as though an invisible hand were shaking a piece of stiff silk. Nothing else could be heard, and nothing could be seen, except the stars shining brilliantly in the warm sky.

Costantino felt much aggrieved by Mattea's defection. As lonely as an outcast dog, what on earth was there for him to do throughout that interminable evening? He was not sleepy, having, in fact, taken a long nap in the afternoon, and he had nowhere to go. He began to eat and drink, talking aloud from time to time in a querulous voice.

"If she imagines that I am coming to see her, she's green,"—silence—"as green as a rose in springtime. She's crazy." Another silence. Then—"Coming to see her! Not I; neither her nor the other one. Mattea is sickening; she seems to be a sort of animal, and that's all there is about it."

He swore, and then gave a light, purposeless laugh, such as people give when they are alone. All the while he kept swallowing great gulps of wine, and each time that he emptied his glass he would thrust out his lips and exclaim: "Ah—ah—ah!" rubbing his chest up and down to express the delicious sensation caused by the wine as it flowed down his throat. Soon he began to feel more cheerful.

"She may go to the devil—or to hell, if she wants to!" he exclaimed, thinking of Mattea and her sudden disappearance. But all the while he knew perfectly well that

he was forcing himself to dwell despitefully upon her, in order to keep from thinking of the other. At last he went out, and, stretching himself upon the stone bench, allowed his thoughts to take their own course.

"She is alone," he reflected. "Well, what do I care? I loathe her and I wouldn't go there, not if she were to give me a chest full of gold! What should I do with gold, anyway?" He put the question to himself in profound dejection, but immediately began to hum a gay little song, having got into a way of trying to fool himself as well as other people:

"'Little heart, dear heart, I await thee day by day, But, when thou seest me, Hovereth near the bird of prey.'"

For a time the sound of his own voice—low, monotonous,—arrested his attention; then his thoughts once more asserted themselves.

"If I were to go there—well, what would happen? Sin, perhaps. But am I not her husband? I have not the remotest idea of going there, though; I should think not! Uncle Isidoro makes me laugh—old idiot! 'Go away, go away,' [imitating Uncle Isidoro's voice], 'if you don't go away, something dreadful is sure to happen! Brontu Dejas will kill you, or have you arrested!' Well, if he does, what then?"

He began to sing again, the sharp rustle of the fig-leaves, almost like the clash of metal blades, accompanying the subdued murmur of his voice:

"'When you see life Bloom in January, When you see a swineherd Making cheese of pork——'"

He shifted his position and his heavy eyelids closed, his head, supported on one hand, rolling from side to side.

"Well, what then?" he repeated, then opened his eyes, as though startled by the sound of his own voice. They closed again presently, and he went on talking to himself:

"No; I would never have her again for my wife. For me she is just an abandoned woman. She has been living with another man, and, as long as she has gone to live with him, she might come back and live with me, and then go and live with some one else! She's no better than Mattea, and I spit upon them both!"

He opened his eyes and spat on the ground. At the moment he had a genuine scorn of Giovanna, and yet, at the very same time, tender, distant memories surged up in his breast. He remembered a kiss he had once given her as she lay asleep, and how she had opened her eyes with a startled look, exclaiming: "Oh, I thought it was some one else!" Well, what manner of foolishness was this for him to be thinking of now? He was a simpleton, neither more nor less than a simpleton! Moreover, how could he know, supposing for a moment that he were to go, whether Giovanna would receive him or drive him away? The man's mind was neither trained nor developed, yet, at that moment, he was reasoning as a much more complex nature might have done. He hoped that she would not receive him; he knew that for himself there was nothing for it but to go on living and suffering; yet he felt that, should he go to her and be repulsed, at least a ray of light would penetrate the cold, dreary void that encircled him. But he wanted her, he longed for her still. From the day he had lost her his whole being had suffered like a crushed and twisted limb that still goes on living. Yet, mingled with this sense of longing there was a spiritual breath as well, the instinct of the immortal soul which never wholly dies out, even in the most degraded.

He dreamed of Giovanna an honest woman, lost forever in this world, but restored to him in eternity. Now, if she were to betray her second husband, even for the sake of her first, she would not—could not—be an honest woman! So thought Costantino, and yet——

It was, perhaps, ten o'clock, and he had been lying for half an hour or more on the stone bench, when a mournful strain broke in upon the stillness. It was the blind

man, singing and accompanying himself upon his rude instrument. His voice, clear enough, but sad and monotonous, vibrated through the night air with a sobbing suggestion of homesickness that was hardly human, as though it were the wail of a lost soul, recalling the few hours of happiness spent upon earth.

The music seemed to be a cry for light, happiness, the joy of living, all those things whose existence the blind youth half understood, but could never hope to realise—which the dead have lost, and can never hope to repossess. Costantino shivered and got up; the voice and the accompaniment began to die away, growing gradually fainter and fainter, and ceasing at last altogether. He felt a great wave of agony and tenderness surge up in his breast. In the darkness, the silence, the unutterable loneliness that surrounded him, he, too, felt an overmastering longing, like the blind man's, for light; an agonising homesickness, like the dead recalling their brief experience of life. He turned and began to walk in the direction of the village.

At first he seemed to be in a dream, although he heard beneath his feet the rustle of the dead leaves and stubble blown by the wind about Isidoro's hut. He rubbed his eyelids and little violet-coloured electric circles seemed to flash and swim in the air. Soon though, his eyes becoming used to the darkness, he discerned clearly the light line of the road, the black cottages, the great, empty void above, where the stars hung like drops of gold, ready to fall. He walked steadily on, knowing perfectly whither he was bound, and never wavering for a single instant. Here and there, on the thresholds of cottages whose owners were too poor to indulge in the luxury of a light, little groups of people sat, enjoying the freshness of the night air.

Occasionally the high-pitched voice of a woman would float across the road, recounting some piece of gossip, or trifling incident of domestic life. In a lonely angle Costantino espied a pair of lovers; the man, hearing his footsteps approach, tried to hide his companion, who quickly turned her face to the wall. Costantino

walked on, but presently he stopped and half turned, thinking he would give the two young people a fright by calling out: "I am going to tell your father right away!" But the fear of attracting attention, and being himself discovered, deterred him, and he went on.

When he discerned the black mass of the almond-tree, rearing itself from beside the path beyond Aunt Bachissia's cottage, his heart gave a sudden bound, and then stood still; it was so like a great head with rough, shaggy locks, thrusting itself out, intently watching for him to appear. He had fully determined to pass the tree, cross the common, enter the Dejas house, and speak to Giovanna; it all seemed perfectly simple and plain, and he was prepared to do it; yet he was frightened, more than frightened—terrified. A flexible, girlish voice floated out into the night: "No matter how often you may say it, it's not true!"

He looked all about him; no one was to be seen, and he went on, his nervousness increasing with every step. Crossing the common, he examined Aunt Bachissia's cottage; then the white house; then Mattea's hovel; from the last a faint light shone; the two others were in total darkness. Again the idea crossed his mind that Mattea might be playing him a trick; or, perhaps, Aunt Bachissia was with Giovanna, or the latter might already have gone to bed, and would decline to open the door! Nevertheless, he walked steadily on, and up on the portico.

Instantly the figure of Giovanna became apparent, seated on the doorstep. At the same moment she recognised him and leaped to her feet, rigid with terror. His voice, low, agitated, at once reassured her.

"Don't be frightened. Are you alone?"

"Yes."

A second later they were in each other's arms.

EPILOGUE

A year elapsed.

One night, when Brontu was away from home, Aunt Martina heard, or thought she heard, a low murmur of voices in Giovanna's room. Had Brontu come back? the old woman wondered, and if so, why? Could anything have happened at the sheepfolds?

Tormented by the thought, she finally got up. The door was open, and she listened a moment. Yes, undoubtedly some one was talking in Giovanna's room. Not wishing to strike a light, she attempted to cross the room that separated her own chamber from Giovanna's, in the dark. She made a misstep, however, and, trying to recover herself, overthrew a chair. "Holy Mary!" she muttered, setting it right again. Then she groped her way to the door, felt for the handle, and tried to open it. It was locked.

"What do you want?" demanded Giovanna's voice instantly.

"Has Brontu got back?"

"No; why?"

"I thought I heard some one talking. Why have you got the door locked?"

"Is it locked? I must have done it without thinking," said Giovanna innocently. "I'll open it right away; just wait a moment. I was talking to the baby; she wouldn't go to sleep."

"Mariedda!" called the grandmother. But there was no response.

"Is she asleep now?"

"She is just falling asleep."

In the pause that ensued a painful drama was enacted in the breasts of the two women.

"I will get up now and open the door," said Giovanna presently in a strained voice. But the old woman made no reply. Motionless, a cold chill creeping through her, she felt the horrible truth flash into her mind like a sudden glare of blinding light.

Giovanna must have a lover, and that lover could be none other than Costantino Ledda. In that moment of searching illumination a thousand little incidents to which she had paid no heed at the time, a thousand little unconsidered trifles, rose up to confront her, and she trembled from head to foot, in a paroxysm of grief and rage. Yet, when Giovanna repeated: "I will open the door right away," she was able to control herself, and answer quietly:

"It's not worth while; stay where you are."

Then she turned, and, crossing the room again in the dark, said to herself with a sort of calm fury: "Now is the time to show them that old Martina is no fool!"

Her first impulse was to hurry downstairs and look out to see if any one had climbed from Giovanna's window to the roof below, which, in turn, gave on another and still lower roof. But she restrained herself, reflecting very sensibly that if Giovanna saw that she was suspected she would instantly be on her guard. "No, no; this is a time to dissemble, old Martina; to pretend, spy, listen, watch—and then?" What was to happen afterwards? The afterwards suggested such a multitude of wretched possibilities that the old woman threw herself on her bed in a torment of agonised conjecture.

What would Brontu do if he knew? Poor Brontu! With all his violent temper he was such a good fellow at bottom, and so tremendously in love with Giovanna! But there it was; he was so much in love with Giovanna that he would be perfectly capable of committing some crime should he suspect her constancy. Then, what would become of him? thought Aunt Martina. "Ah, it will be far better for him to know nothing of all this trouble. I will implore Giovanna to be loyal, and not to betray her poor husband. And then—suppose, after all, I should be mistaken! Suppose she really was talking to the baby! Eh, no, no! Some one else was there, and it could have been no one but Costantino. Oh, wretched creature! accursed beggar! Is this your gratitude towards those who have fed and clothed and nourished you? But never

mind, we will pay you back! We will drive you out of this house with a whip, naked as when you came into it!" And thus, torn by successive impulses of hatred, pity, fury, and despair. Aunt Martina dragged through the weary night.

One significant circumstance she did recall—that Costantino was said to be on good terms with Aunt Bachissia, Giovanna's mother. Some time previously he had set to work in earnest; had rented a little shop, and was making a good deal of money by his trade of shoemaking. A repulsive thought came into the old woman's head. What if Aunt Bachissia knew and encouraged her daughter's intimacy with her first husband! "The old harpy detests us," said Brontu's mother to herself. "Perhaps Costantino makes her presents!"

Daybreak found her still wide-eyed and sleepless. Getting up, she went out to examine the wall above which rose the roofs leading to Giovanna's window. Not a trace was to be found of any one having been on it. The dawn was exquisitely tranquil and beautiful; the village was still asleep, and the fields lay bathed in soft grey haze beneath a silver sky. Aunt Martina drew a deep breath; she felt as though she had awakened from a horrible dream; the utter peace and serenity of the early morning seemed to communicate itself to her distracted spirit. Then, on a sudden, happening to raise her eyes to Giovanna's window, she saw the young woman watching her. Instantly the conviction flashed across her that she too had lain awake the entire night; that she too was looking now to see if any tell-tale traces remained to betray the fact that she had had a visitor, and more than that, that she now was fully aware of Aunt Martina's suspicions. Across the space that divided them, the two women exchanged a look of mutual fear and hatred. War was declared!

The battle opened in ominous calm, each side marshalling its forces in silence and secrecy. Aunt Martina's efforts were directed to allaying Giovanna's suspicions in the hope that she might some day surprise her and her lover together. Giovanna, perfectly awake to her mother-in-law's tactics, pretended not to notice anything, but

at the same time proceeded with great caution in her relations with Costantino.

He had entirely altered his mode of life; he now worked regularly, and was doing very well; but underneath everything was a sense of unutterable melancholy, which he was never able wholly to throw off.

"I am doing everything I can to provoke Brontu to break with me," said Giovanna one day. "I want him to apply for a divorce, so as to be rid of me; then I will go back to you, beloved, and nothing shall ever part us again. I will be your servant, your slave—and make you forget all your past sorrows."

But Costantino only smiled wearily. It was true that he still loved Giovanna, but it was a very different kind of love from that which she had formerly inspired in him. Now, there was more of passion, perhaps, but it did not go so deep, and he knew, though he could not tell her so, that even were she free to return to him as his wife, he could never be happy again as in the old days. She was not the woman to whom he had given his heart, but another and a very different person. One who, having been false to both husbands in succession, was now, perhaps, deceiving them simultaneously.

Often Costantino was seized with an access of rage against the entire human race, Giovanna included. He would have liked to murder some one—Brontu, or Aunt Bachissia, or even Giovanna, in order to avenge himself for what he had been made to suffer. And yet, all the time, he knew himself to be quite incapable of doing anything brutal or violent, and raged and fumed the more at his own weakness. His heart seemed to have sunk into a state of torpor, and to have lost the power to enjoy acutely.

Uncle Isidoro was now constantly urging him to marry again, much as such an act would be contrary to his own principles.

"I have one wife already," Costantino would reply. "What could I do with another? Have her betray me too? All women are exactly alike."

Then Uncle Isidoro would sigh, and remain silent. He was in constant dread lest some new tragedy should befall. He was aware, partly from intuition and partly because Costantino himself allowed him to have an inkling of the truth, that the young man was holding secret intercourse with his former wife, and his daily fear was of some explosion. Thus, he argued to himself that if Costantino could only be induced to marry some gentle, affectionate young woman, who would bear him children, he would come in time to forget the other one, and find rest and peace. To these suggestions, however, Costantino only gave the same weary smile that had now become habitual.

"Are you afraid that I will murder some one?" he asked, divining the old man's nervous terrors. "No, no; there is no need to feel alarmed now; matters are going too much to my taste just at present for me to do anything to disturb the current."

The current was, however, in a fair way to be disturbed after that night on which Aunt Martina made her discovery.

On the following day Costantino went, as his frequent custom now was, to Aunt Bachissia's cottage.

He had no liking for the old woman who had been chiefly instrumental in bringing about Giovanna's divorce; there were even moments when the thought of strangling his ex-mother-in-law got into his blood, filling his veins with a sensation of almost voluptuous joy. But he went there, nevertheless, mainly because he took a dreary pleasure in living over the past in that little cottage where he had once been so happy. Moreover, he enjoyed listening to Aunt Bachissia's never-ending abuse of everything connected with the house of Dejas.

Did the old woman know of her daughter's renewed relations with Costantino? Neither of them had said a word to her on the subject; yet, like Isidoro, she suspected how matters stood, though, unlike him, she made no effort to interfere. Costantino had made her a present of a pair of shoes, and from time to time he

performed other little services for her. Had he asked her to allow him to meet Giovanna in her house, it is quite possible that she would have offered no objection; but up to the present time he had neither told nor asked her anything.

On this day, however, he arrived visibly anxious and perturbed, and Aunt Bachissia, who was sitting by the door spinning, laid down her spindle and gave him a steady look out of her sharp little eyes.

Night was falling, and Costantino, who had worked hard all day, was tired, sad, unhappy. The soft brilliance of the summer night, the silence of the little house, the peaceful solitude of the common, the warm, sweet breath of the evening, all combined to create a flood of homesickness for the past, and an acute sense of present misery that was well-nigh unbearable. He threw himself down on a stool and rested his elbows on his knees and his forehead on his interlocked hands. For a few moments neither of them spoke; the man was thinking of Malthineddu, of his little dead child; he seemed to see him then, playing before the door, and hot tears trembled in his eyes.

"Do you know," said Aunt Bachissia suddenly, "the old colt is going crazy?"

"Who?" asked Costantino.

"Who? Why, the old miser, Martina Dejas. She got up out of her bed last night, and went and banged on my Giovanna's door. She said she heard some one talking to her. Upon my soul, fancy such a thing! She has gone entirely mad; she always was half so."

"Ah!" was all that Costantino said.

"Listen, my soul," said Aunt Bachissia, lowering her voice. "Giovanna tells me that the old colt suspects——"

"What?" asked Costantino, raising his head quickly.

"Suspects that you and Giovanna—you understand? She has not said a word, the old

maniac, but Giovanna has guessed that she has some idea in her head, and on that account——"

"I understand," said Costantino.

He did understand. Evidently Giovanna had taken this method of warning him that they would have to be prudent.

"And so, my soul," Aunt Bachissia went on, "for the present it will be as well for you to stop coming here—just so as not to arouse suspicions. I will go every once in a while to see you—for a chat, you know. Ah!" she gave a weary sigh, "you—yes, you are a man! Look at you, standing there now, as tall and handsome as a banner! When I think of that little freak of nature—Brontu Dejas—I declare, I wonder what on earth Giovanna could have been thinking of to—forget you. Ah, if she had only listened to me!"

Costantino, who had risen and was standing in the doorway, crimsoned with anger when he heard these outrageous lies being calmly offered for his acceptance.

"Hold your tongue," he began in a hoarse voice. But Aunt Bachissia was not listening; she was looking intently up at the white house; presently she whispered: "Look, my soul, we are being watched now. Giovanna is right. Do you see the old harpy peering at us? Oh! I could tear out her eyes!"

Sure enough the figure of Aunt Martina could be seen lurking in the shadow of the portico. For the moment Costantino, who had never really borne any especial ill-will towards Brontu's mother, felt all the anger, and sorrow, and rebelliousness in his nature concentrate into one bitter longing to do the old woman some bodily harm. He would dearly have liked to make a wild dash across the common, fall upon her without warning, and tear her eyes out, as Aunt Bachissia had said.

"Never mind, let her alone," said the latter. "Giovanna has told me that she is doing everything she can to make them ill-use her and drive her out of the house. Then we will apply for another divorce—you, my soul, all you have to do is to be careful

and—wait."

"What have I to wait for?" he asked roughly. "Nothing can happen now that I want."

She said something more, but he was not listening. Standing erect and motionless on the threshold of the door that had once been his door, he stared across at the portico of the Dejas house, feeling even more desolate and forlorn than usual. So, then, his one remaining consolation, that of holding intercourse with Giovanna, was about to be torn from him, and by the same people who had stolen from him everything else that made life pleasant; moreover they might deprive him even of life itself should he continue his relations with her who really was his own wife!

Ah, Dejas! accursed race! Yes, now the old mother as well was included in his hatred of that house, and the longing to cross the common, fling himself on the portico, and make the still summer evening resound with her shrill screams of agony, at last overmastered him. With a sudden movement, right in the middle of one of Aunt Bachissia's sentences, he stepped out into the twilight, and with rapid strides began to cross the common. When he had gone about half-way, he stopped, stood motionless for a moment, and then, altering his direction, walked away. Aunt Bachissia watched his figure as it was slowly swallowed up by the shadows; and the silence and languor of the dusk deepened into night.

After that evening Costantino visited her cottage no more.

One day, towards the end of October, Uncle Isidoro Pane had an unexpected visitor. The old fisherman, seated before his fireplace, was getting supper ready for himself and Costantino, who still made his home with him. Outside, the air felt almost cold, the wind was rising, and long, violet-coloured clouds were flying across the clear, greenish, western sky. Uncle Isidoro was thinking sadly of that evening when, amid the chanting of the women, they had interred Giacobbe Dejas in the dungheap. The earthen pot bubbled on the fire, and from without came the melancholy rustling of the fig-tree and the bushes, shaken by the wind. All at once a low knock came on the

door.

"Who is there?" asked Uncle Isidoro.

"Ave Maria!" The salutation came from Aunt Martina Dejas, who now, after satisfying herself that the old man was entirely alone, entered and cautiously closed the door behind her.

"Oh, Martina! razia plena!" responded the fisherman, astonished to see who his visitor was.

Her head and shoulders were completely enveloped in a petticoat worn in lieu of a shawl; her features were paler and more gaunt even than ordinary, and to Isidoro she seemed to have aged greatly.

"Sit down, Martina Dejas," said he politely, offering her a stool. "What good wind blows you here?"

"It's an ill wind," she replied. Then, looking all around her, she said: "I want to talk to you privately; can any one hear us? Where is he?"

"Still at the shop; he does not get back till later."

"Listen," said the old woman, seating herself; "you can probably guess what it is that brings me here?"

"No, I cannot guess, Martina Dejas," declared the other, though all the time he knew very well. "But why didn't you send for me? I would have gone to your house."

"At my house there is some one who has the ears of a hare; she can hear through a stone wall. Now, listen—I don't suppose I have to make you promise not to tell any one? You wouldn't betray my confidence, would you?"

"I will not betray you."

"You are a man of the Lord, Isidoro Pane; a very dreadful thing has happened; will you help me to set it right?"

"If I can," he said, spreading out his arms and hands. "Tell me about it!"

The old woman sighed.

"Tell you about it! Yes," she said, "that is what I am going to do, Isidoro; but what I have to say burns my lips, and you are the only human being I would breathe it to. A terrible misfortune has overtaken my house. Do you see how old I have grown? For months I have not been able to close my eyes. Giovanna, my daughter-in-law, has a lover—Costantino Ledda. You don't seem surprised!" she added quickly, seeing that the other remained unmoved. "You knew it already! Some one has known about it! Perhaps there are others too—perhaps every one knows the disgrace of my house!"

"Easy, easy; don't be frightened. I did not know it, and I don't think any one else does. It may not be true, either, but if it were, and people knew about it—no one would be surprised."

"No one would be surprised!"

"Certainly not, Martina Dejas; no one at all. Every one knows perfectly well—pardon me if I speak frankly—that Giovanna married your son entirely from motives of self-interest. Now Costantino has come back; they were in love with one another before, and now they are in love with one another after; it is perfectly natural."

"It is perfectly natural! How can you say such things, Isidoro Pane? Is it perfectly natural for a woman to be unfaithful? For a beggar taken in out of the streets to betray her benefactors? Is it perfectly natural that my son, Brontu Dejas, who had the courage to do what not another soul would have dreamed of doing—is it natural that he should be deceived?"

"Yes, it is all natural."

"Ah," exclaimed Aunt Martina, getting up, her eyes flashing with anger, "then it was quite useless for me to come here!"

"Easy, easy!" said the old man again. "Just sit down, Martina, and tell me quietly what brought you. Let us put all these questions aside—they are of no use now,

anyhow—and discuss the situation as it is. I think I can guess what it is you want me to do; you want me to use my influence with Costantino to get him to leave your family in peace——?"

The old woman sat down again, and opened her heart. Yes, that was what she wanted, that Isidoro should do all he could to induce Costantino to give Giovanna up.

"This misery will kill me," she said in conclusion, her voice trembling; "but at least my Brontu will have been spared. Ah, if he should ever find out about it, he is lost! He is sure to kill some one, either Giovanna or Costantino. I am continually haunted by the most horrible presentiments; I keep seeing a smear of blood before my eyes. You will see, Isidoro; you will see! If we don't find some way to stop this shameful thing, some horrible tragedy will occur——!"

As she talked, Aunt Martina had been growing steadily paler, until she was now quite livid; her lips trembled, and her eyes gleamed partly with anger, partly with unshed tears.

"You alarm me, and you make me feel very sorry for you as well," said Uncle Isidoro gravely. "But see here, whose fault is it all? I remember—this visit of yours brings it all back to me—another visit I once had; it was from Giacobbe Dejas, poor soul. Well, he sat there, just where you are sitting now, and he said almost the same words: 'We must find some way to stop this thing; if we don't, some terrible misfortune will surely happen!' And so we did; we tried our best to stop that shameful thing, but without avail. You and your son, and all the rest of you, were determined to bring about your own ruin. You fell into mortal sin; you broke the laws of God, and now your punishment has come!"

"We! only we!" exclaimed the old woman haughtily. "No; the fault belongs to them as well. To Bachissia Era, for her avarice and wickedness in throwing her daughter at Brontu; and to Giovanna, for abandoning her first husband when she loved him,

and marrying another out of self-interest! The blame belongs equally to all, or, rather, it does not; it is theirs alone, for we did nothing but what was good. It is theirs, theirs, and I hate every one of them—vile, low-born beggars—traitors. And I can tell you, if Costantino does not give this thing up, he'll bitterly regret it. Beg, implore, adjure him! Tell him not to bring ruin on a respectable house, and then,—if he will not listen——"

"Hush, Martina," begged the fisherman, seeing that she was working herself into a fury. "Don't talk foolishness. But tell me, are you really certain that Giovanna and Costantino are meeting each other?"

"Absolutely certain. For three months now, as I told you, I have hardly closed my eyes. One night I heard some one talking to Giovanna. She saw right away that I had noticed something, and for a while she was on her guard. But now—now she has thrown aside all prudence. The other day they met at Bachissia Era's cottage; I saw them plainly; and not only that, I heard them; I listened at the door. Then, last night he was with her again; do you understand? actually in my house, beneath my roof! And I—I was trembling so with rage I hardly knew what I was about; but I waited for him below; I was going to speak to him, and then I was going to stab him—kill him, if I could—I had a knife ready in my hand. But do you know, I could not stir a limb! I could not even open my lips when he crept down as stealthily as a thief, first on to the roof, and then the ground, and away! Ah, I am nothing but a poor old woman; I can't do a thing. I was just frightened, and I hid. Giovanna knows that I care more for Brontu than for anything else in the world, and that I would sacrifice everything to spare him, even the honour of our name. And so the ungrateful creature is taking advantage of the tenderest feeling that I have. She is counting on my being afraid to tell him for fear that he will commit murder, and so be ruined forever, and that is why she dares to carry it on. But I—I—Isidoro, I will be capable of doing almost anything if Costantino does not break this off. Tell him so."

"But why don't you speak to Giovanna?" asked the fisherman.

"Because—well, I'm afraid of her. She follows me about and watches me all the time like a tigress ready to spring. She hates me, just as I hate her at times; and at the very first word she would fly at me and choke me to death. I don't dare to open my mouth. Oh, it is all so horrible! You don't know what days I pass! Death would be far less bitter than the life I am leading."

As she spoke these words, Aunt Martina buried her face in her hands and began to sob.

A feeling of intense pity rose in the old fisherman's heart. In the days of his most grinding poverty he had never been reduced to tears, and to think of the rich, proud Martina Dejas being actually more wretched than an old pauper like himself!

"I will do my very best," he said. "Now go, and try not to worry. You had better get off at once, though; it is time for him to be coming back." She got up, wrapped the petticoat carefully around her head and shoulders, and when Isidoro had looked out to make sure that no one was about who might recognise her, walked slowly away.

The air was sharp; the wind was blowing in gusts, tearing the first dead leaves from the trees. Aunt Martina, struggling against it, felt more anxious and depressed even than when she came. It seemed as though that chill, autumn wind that shook and lashed and tore her, were tearing and lashing her spirit as well. The presentiments of evil that she had spoken of as haunting her, were stronger than ever. Passing a certain wretched little hovel, more forlorn and poverty-stricken than any of the others, she shot a keen glance at it, and then quickly lowered her eyes, as though in dread lest some invisible being should read the dark thought of her soul. The owner of this hovel, a poor peasant, had come to her some time before, and had asked her to lend him some money. "Lend it to you!" she had exclaimed derisively. "And how do you propose to repay it?" "If I can't pay you back in money," the man had replied, "there may be some other way of showing my gratitude. You could require any

service at all of me."

She understood what he meant. He was ready to undertake anything, even the commission of a crime, in order to get the money he needed. But she had not wanted anything, and so had sent him off. Now, passing the forlorn little house, rapidly falling into ruins, through the darkness and wind, and melancholy of the night, she saw again before her the gaunt, resolute figure of this man; his hollow, sunken eyes; his lips, white from hunger; his dark, bony hands, ready for any act by which he might hope to snatch a little ease and comfort out of life; and the horrible schemes of vengeance that were tearing at her selfish old heart began to take a fearful and well-defined shape.

Thus she passed on. A dark, forbidding form, enveloped in her black tunic, swept by the wind past that wretched hovel like a shadowy portent of evil.

That same evening Uncle Isidoro reasoned with Costantino at length, urging him by every argument at his command to avert what otherwise must inevitably result in a catastrophe for himself, for Giovanna, and for every one concerned.

Costantino regarded the old man steadily with his usual melancholy smile. "What," he demanded, "could happen? You admit yourself that the old harpy will never talk to her son. And—isn't she my wife, Giovanna? Haven't I a perfect right to be with her whenever I choose?"

"Ah, child of the Lord," sighed Uncle Isidoro, clasping his hands and shaking his head, "you will be made to suffer for it in some way; you had better look out: Martina Dejas is capable of anything where her son is concerned."

A look of hatred came into Costantino's eyes.

"Listen," he said; "my heart is like a vessel full of deadly poison; a single drop more and it will overflow. Let them look out who have brought all this on themselves." Then he got up and went out into the night. For hours he wandered aimlessly about, like one who had lost his way, in the wind-swept solitude. Then, about midnight, he

found himself, almost without knowing how he got there, as on that first evening, beneath Giovanna's window. He climbed on the shed and tapped.

Aunt Martina, lying wakeful and alert, heard everything; heard Costantino approach, heard his knock, heard Giovanna open to him; and then she knew it was hopeless. Without doubt Isidoro had faithfully reported his conversation with her, and this was Costantino's reply: he had come directly and defiantly to Giovanna. "No doubt," thought the old woman bitterly, "he argues that since old Martina lacks the courage to make her son unhappy by telling him the truth, he may as well profit by her weakness. Yes; no doubt that is what he thinks. But, he has forgotten to take account of what the poor old mother may be stirred up to do in order to protect her boy! Now, Costantino Ledda, it is between us two!"

One night as Costantino slid down from the shed beneath Giovanna's window, he felt something cold and sharp enter his side; in the darkness he made out the figure of a man, his face covered with a black cloth. He threw himself upon him, and after a brief struggle, breathless, silent, determined, he succeeded in throwing him down and disarming him. Then he let him go without so much as attempting to identify him. What did it signify who the assassin was? Behind that black mask he knew only too well that Aunt Martina's gaunt features looked out, and that it was her hand that had directed the murderous stroke.

He made his way back to Isidoro's hut, and, the fisherman being absent on one of his journeys, dressed the wound himself, hiding away like a stricken animal, and concealing what had happened from every one. He did not even undress, but for three days and nights lay stretched on his pallet, a prey to the bitterest reflections.

The weather had become cold; outside, the wind whistled among the dry hedges, and, forcing its way into the hut, made the long threads of cobweb swing back and forth, and brought down clouds of dust from the roof. Through the window Costantino could see processions of pale blue clouds scudding across the cold,

bright background of the sky; and he said to himself that he wanted to die.

Death, death, what else remained for him? The world—his world—was now only a cold and empty void.

His feeling for Giovanna could never be what it once had been; he had, indeed, resumed his relations with her, but she could never mean the same thing to him again after having deserted him in his hour of need. The very pleasure which he felt in their clandestine intercourse was due in part to his hatred of the Dejases. The Dejases! The mere thought of the joy which his death would afford them, even now, aroused him and put new life into his veins!

"They have stolen everything else of mine," he thought, "and now they want to take my life as well. But they shan't have it; I will kill one of them first." He recalled a trial at which he had once been present, where the accused had proved that he had been attacked, and had struck back in order to defend himself; the jury had acquitted him. "Well, they will acquit me; I shall be striking in self-defence. And if they don't acquit me——!" There arose before him the faces of his fellow-convicts. The King of Spades smiled at him lugubriously, and behind him he could see the gloomy walls of the prison courtyard. At least, though, they had been friendly; they might have been murderers, but they had never tried to assassinate him.

On the third day of his seclusion in Uncle Isidore's hut a storm came up. Nothing could exceed the comfortless desolation of the poor little abode. The black clouds travelling overhead seemed to break directly against the small, bare window; presently some big drops fell from the roof; one leak in especial, directly over the black, cold fireplace was so persistent that at last, seeing that the water was forming into a thin stream, the young man reached out and shoved Uncle Isidoro's earthenware saucepan beneath it. Drip, drip, drip, the sound was like the monotonous and melancholy ticking of a clock. Night descended, if anything colder and more dreary than before; the rain came down steadily, and the drops fell into the

saucepan with the regularity of a machine. Costantino did not move; he had neither wood wherewith to build a fire, nor any more food, and it did not occur to him to get up, to bestir himself, to go out, to live. Perhaps Uncle Isidoro was stalled in some neighbouring village by the storm, and would not get back.

During the night fever set in, and Costantino was racked by hideous dreams, painful memories of the past, tempests of anger, mingled with physical suffering. How long he lay in this condition he could never remember, only he recollected hearing the steady drip, drip of the water as it fell into the saucepan, the beating of the rain on the roof, and the long sob of the wind as it swept about the deserted house. In the intervals of the fever, when he would arouse from the lethargy that weighed him down, he was conscious of sharp, shooting pains through all his limbs, similar to those he had felt in prison on awaking after a feverish night; and also of a savage, animal desire to do some harm, to fling himself on some one or some thing, and bite, and tear, and destroy. Another day and night went by. The rain was falling more heavily than ever, and that steady, inexorable drip, drip had at last filled and overflowed the saucepan. Between cold and starvation Costantino had almost come to the end of his forces. Once he was visited by a horrid illusion. He thought that a mad dog had thrown him down and bitten him in the stomach. He awoke shaking, and could not throw the idea off; perhaps he had been bitten by a mad dog, and this was hydrophobia! Towards evening the storm died down, though the rain did not cease entirely. Then, suddenly, he felt that he was dying; he had no sense of rebellion now; all that was over; he seemed to have lost even the power to care. To die, to die—Why should he want to go on living? Everything both within him and about him was black and void. Through all his fever-ridden dreams one idea had remained persistently by him—that he was about to commit a crime. Now it was Aunt Martina whom he was on the point of stabbing; then some one else; but in the intervals of consciousness he realised that should he live, should he once more find himself burdened with the dolorous gift of existence, while he would not even

attempt to resist the secret force that was urging him on, it would matter little against whom his fury expended itself; it might be Aunt Martina, or Brontu, or some one else. But then—then—deep down in his soul he could never rid himself of a sense of terror of what would happen afterwards. Yes; he wanted to die, so as to suffer no more and to be saved from becoming a murderer.

At last the rain was ceasing; it still fell steadily, but more, now, like a gentle shower, while the wind had died down completely. It was cold, though, and the damp, chill atmosphere hung over the cabin like a heavy wet cloth. So unutterably dreary were the weather and the surroundings that Costantino, recalling the periods of his most acute misery, could never remember being so utterly and hopelessly wretched as now. Not even on the day of the sentence, not even on the day when they had told him of the divorce, nor on that other day of his return: for on every one of those occasions, desperate as the outlook had been, there always remained the hope of better things in the life to come. Then his conscience had been pure; but now, should he go on living, he believed that he would surely forfeit all hope in the life to come. At times, goaded by this horror, he would cry aloud, imploring death to come and save him, as a terrified child cries for its mother.

Thus the hours wore on; he had dropped into a feverish sleep, but awoke suddenly, trembling with terror at he could not tell what. The rain was over at last, but in the profound stillness that enwrapped him, Costantino fancied that he still heard it beating on the roof, and the drip, drip from the leak over the fireplace; only now the sounds seemed to come from far, far away, from a world that was already remote. He thought that he was already dead, or lingering on the extremest confines of life, in a place of shadows, of silence, of mystery. What would he find there—just beyond? The light of eternity, or—the darkness of eternity? He was afraid to open his eyes; he tried to cry out, but could not utter a sound. Then—a knock came on the door. The sound dragged him back from that vague tide on which he was floating; he opened his eyes without moving, conscious both of relief and regret at finding

himself still alive.

The knocking was repeated louder than before. Who could it be? Not Uncle Isidoro; he would have called out.

Costantino neither stirred nor spoke. Possibly he had not the strength to get up, but in any case he had no wish to. Why must they come to disturb him? dragging him back from those mysterious shores on which he had almost set foot.

Meanwhile the knocking continued still more vigorously, but after a little it ceased, and everything became perfectly still. A short time elapsed; then some one again approached the hut; presently the end of a stout stick was thrust under the door, serving as a lever; the frail barrier, secured only by a metal hasp, quickly yielded, and the figure of a woman, with a skirt thrown over her head and shoulders, appeared for a moment in the opening; stepping inside, she turned and replaced the rickety door before Costantino was able to recognise her. There was a moment of breathless silence, during which he could hear his visitor groping her way about, in the pitchy darkness, on the other side of the hut; then she spoke, and he recognised the voice of Aunt Bachissia.

"Costantino! Are you there? Where are you? Are you dead or alive? Why don't you answer? Some one said you had not been seen for three days, and that Isidoro Pane was away. I came once before and knocked and knocked, but you wouldn't answer. What's the matter? are you sick?"

Still he made no reply, burying his face like a sulky child.

"My soul!" moaned the woman, "he must be ill as well."

As well! Then some one else was ill! Who, he wondered. Perhaps Giovanna. He listened intently, still keeping his face covered.

"He has no fire and no light!" she muttered. "What does it all mean? Wait, I'll strike a light. Where are my matches?"

The pale, blue flame of a sulphur match shot up for a moment, and then suddenly died away.

Costantino could see nothing, but he heard Aunt Bachissia stumbling her way towards him, moaning: "Costantino, Costantino!"

A wave of anger swept over him; he tried to cry out, to rise and fling himself upon her, choke her—but he was powerless. A cold sweat broke out all over him, and he knew that if he attempted so much as to speak, he would burst into tears. How hatefully weak he was!

Aunt Bachissia struck another match, and began searching for a light of some sort, but all she could find was a rude iron lamp hanging on a nail, with neither wick nor oil. Then she groped her way to the fireplace, and, stooping down, held out her hand with the lighted match between her fingers. There were the saucepan full of water, the heap of wet ashes, the soaked hearthstone, and beyond, half in the circle of light, the figure of Costantino extended motionless on the pallet. The match flared up and then went out, and all became again perfectly dark and silent.

For a moment Aunt Bachissia did not stir; she hardly seemed to breathe; then a long, choking sob broke from her.

Of what had she been thinking in that moment of silence and darkness? Did that vision of Costantino lying apparently dead before her awaken a sudden, agonising sense of what she had done; of her iniquitous responsibility in the ruin that had been wrought in Giovanna's and Costantino's lives, and in the lives of every one concerned in the melancholy drama? Throwing herself on the floor beside the pallet, she passed her hands tremblingly over his body and face, sobbing in the darkness and silence: "Costantino, Costantino! are you alive? Answer me——Yes," she murmured presently, "he is alive, but ill, ill—you are ill, aren't you?" she went on coaxingly. "Is it a wound? Ah, God! If you only knew what terrible things have happened! Giovanna sent me; she was frightened, you know; she thought you might

have been hurt, that some one might have been lying in wait for you; she's more dead than alive herself—Costantino——!"

At last Costantino gave a moan; something hard in his breast seemed to melt; he was moved—affected. Then he was not forgotten, after all; Giovanna had been anxious; she had sent to find out about him; she was frightened, unhappy. Then, in his changed mood, Aunt Bachissia's words of a moment before came back to him with fresh meaning. "He is ill as well," she had said. Who was this other person who was ill? Again he thought of Giovanna, and his heart sank.

"Is it a wound?" she repeated.

"Yes," murmured Costantino.

"Who did it?"

"I don't know; some one hired by Aunt Martina Dejas."

"Ah!" cried Aunt Bachissia, her voice thick with anger; then, in a changed tone, she said: "The saying goes that God does not pay on Saturday—well,—Brontu Dejas is dying—poor wretch!"

Costantino felt as though an electric shock had gone through him; he started to his feet, swayed, and fell back on his knees. In the darkness his hands encountered those of Aunt Bachissia, and she felt that they were scorching hot and trembling.

"Costantino! my soul!" she cried, alarmed lest in his weak and exhausted condition the shock of her news had been too great for him. "Costantino, what is it? You are shaking all over like a little kid! Yes; Brontu is very ill. He came back yesterday; it was a holiday, you know, and he came home so drunk that he was like something crazy. It seems that he has been drinking all the time lately, even up at the sheepfolds. So then yesterday when he came in he was horribly drunk, and he began quarrelling with his mother and Giovanna, and tried to beat them; they were so frightened that they ran up and locked themselves in their rooms. Brontu stayed down in the kitchen, and he must have stretched himself out alongside the fire. After

some time they heard him crying out, but they thought it was just some drunken foolishness, and did not go down to see what it was. After a while, though, when he had become quiet, Aunt Martina went and found him lying there unconscious and frightfully burned. He had evidently fallen asleep and had put his legs right over the fire,[10] and then his clothing caught. There was an empty brandy bottle lying beside him. He hasn't come to since, and the doctor says he can't live through the night. Poor Brontu; he wasn't bad; he was weak, but not really bad—Costantino! Costantino!—what on earth is it? What are you doing?" For in the darkness Aunt Bachissia, who had told her story with moans and sighs of sympathy, partly for Costantino, partly for Brontu, heard what she at first took to be a burst of insane laughter. The young man's hands became rigid, his limbs contracted, and for one wild moment she thought he had lost his reason. Then the truth broke upon her; he was crying, weeping bitterly, half from weakness and reaction, but half, too, from horror and sympathy at the awful ending of a man whom, but a short while before, he had thought that he hated so much that he was in danger of killing him.

That same night Brontu died, and some time later Giovanna and Costantino were reunited. Old Aunt Martina, absorbed in her grief and completely shattered by it, like an oak-tree that has been struck by lightning, offered no objection, but neither did she forgive the young people, and she demanded that the little Mariedda should be left under her care. Thus the two, the old woman and the child, lived on in the white house, while Giovanna and Costantino returned to the little grey cottage. There, after a time, another child was born to them—Malthineddu.

It is a soft spring day. Overhead the sky is a tender blue, and all around the village the fields of grain sway like the waves of a green, encircling sea. Aunt Martina sits on the portico, spinning, and praying silently; a white, tragic figure, spiritualised by sorrow.

Aunt Bachissia sits spinning likewise, before the door of the cottage. Giovanna is

sewing, and hard by Costantino works at his bench. No one speaks, but the thoughts of all are turned on the past.

In the middle of the common Mariedda and Malthineddu are playing together with gurgles and shouts of joyous laughter, as happy and unconcerned as the birds on the neighbouring hedges.

Hither and thither they go, trotting from Aunt Martina to Costantino, from Aunt Bachissia to Giovanna, from Giovanna to Aunt Martina. And each in turn, even the desolate, heartbroken old grandmother, looks up to receive them with a smile of tender indulgence. They are the invisible woof of peace and mutual forgiveness.

THE END

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Henry Holt and Company Publishers (I, '05) New York

FOOTNOTES:

Porredda, female diminutive for Porru.

[1]

Piedino,—little foot.

[2]

An enclosed pasture, but of vast extent.

[3]

Che ti morsichi il cane,—"May the dog bite you."

[4]

A summer goblin, invoked in Sardinia to frighten children out of the sun.

[5]

In Sardinia, farm labourers often own cattle which are either turned out with their master's herds (whose partners they thus, in a manner, become), or are confided to some other shepherd, who receives half the profits in return for looking after them.

[6]

Ispana trista or santa, from which, according to tradition, the crown of thorns was made. The people use the leaves of this tree for medicinal purposes.

[7]

The custom of burying a person bitten by a tarantula in a dunghill, and putting him in an oven, is not so unreasonable as it at first appears, the effect of the poison being neutralised if the sufferer can be made to perspire freely; while the sickening odours of the dunghill induce nausea, also supposed to be very beneficial. Now, however, the people completely ignoring these practical results, the ceremony has come to be an act of pure superstition. The account given above describes such scenes as they have actually been known to occur.

[8]

Head of cattle.

[9]

In Sardinia the fireplaces almost always consist of four stones placed so as to form a square in the centre of the kitchen. They have no chimneys.

[10]

Transcriber's Notes:

A heading "ADVERTISEMENTS" has been inserted to divide the text from the advertisements which follow it. A page of advertisements at the front of the book has been moved to the end.

There were two headings before the epilogue; one of these has been removed.

On p. 138, the letter "n" in "no further" was not printed and is conjectural.

The following are inconsistently hyphenated in the text:

almond tree and almond-tree brandy bottle and brandy-bottle dog roses and dog-roses mountain side and mountain-side under lip and under-lip mean-time and meantime re-marriage and remarriage

The following errors have been corrected:

p. 135 "homesicknness" changed to "homesickness" p. 168 "responsibilty" changed to "responsibility" p. 247 "if Isidoro," changed to "of Isidoro,"

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK AFTER THE DIVORCE: A ROMANCE ***

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