The Virgins of the Rocks

by Gabriele D'Annunzio

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TRANSCRIBER'S NOTES

In the plain text version words in Italics are denoted by _underscores_ and text in bold like =this=.

A number of words in this book have both hyphenated and non-hyphenated variants. For the words with both variants present the one more used has been kept.

Obvious punctuation and other printing errors have been corrected.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE TRIUMPH OF DEATH

Uniform with this Volume.

Pall Mall Gazette.—'A masterpiece. The story holds and haunts one. Unequalled even by the great French contemporary whom, in his realism, D’Annunzio most resembles, is the account of the pilgrimage to the shrine of the Virgin by the sick, deformed, and afflicted. It is a great prose poem, that of its kind cannot be surpassed. Every detail of the scene is brought before us in a series of word-pictures of wonderful power and vivid colouring, and the ever-recurring refrain, 'Viva Maria! Maria Evviva!’ rings in our ears as we lay down the book. It is the work of a master, whose genius is beyond dispute.’

Daily Telegraph.—'The author gives us numerous delightful pictures, pictures of Italian scenery, simple sketches, too, of ordinary, commonplace, innocent lives. The range of his female portrait gallery is almost as wide and varied as that of George Meredith. His Ippolita, his Marie Ferrès, his Giuliana Hermil, live as strong and vivid presentments of real and skilfully contrasted women. The Triumph of Death ends with a tragedy, as it also begins with one. Between the two extremes are to be found many pages of poetry, of tender appreciation of nature, of rare artistic skill, of subtle and penetrative analysis.’

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words seem entangled the very breath and sunshine of Italy—its translucent moonlight skies, its incomparable horizons. It is difficult by quotation to do justice to the author's power of giving the vivid impression of a scene.'

Daily Chronicle.—'The little effects of landscape are skilfully touched in and harmonised with the emotion of the moment. The incidental pictures of peasant life are most interesting, and the terrible pandemonium at the shrine of Casalbordino is described with Zolaesque vigour.'

Scotsman.—'The imaginative and penetrative force, the eloquence and the artistic skill, are beyond question.'

Westminster Gazette.—'For a vivid and searching description of the Italian peasant on his religious side, written with knowledge and understanding, these pages could hardly be surpassed. We see their Paganism, and their poverty, and their squalor, yet also that imaginative temper which lends a certain dignity to their existence. The narrative is remorseless ... yet it is rich and full of atmosphere. M. D'Annunzio has a tender eye for natural detail; the landscape of Italy, its flowers and trees, kindle him to genuine poetry. We are left at the close of his story with a feeling that something like genius is at work. This book is one which will not yield to any simple test. It is a work of singular power, which cannot be ignored, left unread when once started, or easily banished from the mind when read.'

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D’Annunzio, at an age when the majority of novelists and poets have been groping in the dark for style and substance, are ever awe-inspiring. D’Annunzio began his career as a writer of verse; his prose is written with the delight in language, the love of words, of a poet.’

Manchester Guardian.—'Wonderfully absorbing, for it is written with a strange psychological intelligence, it is full of vivid descriptions, vehement narrative, and contains pages of rare beauty in which an ideal language really evokes the moods of the soul that it interprets. There is in the novel some lovely verse which has been rendered with rare felicity by Mr. Symons.’

Daily Graphic.—'The wonderful beauty of the descriptions, the wealth of colour, and most of all the realisation of a certain emotional pleasure which the contemplation of the beautiful produces in some natures, this is all so finely given, that if only as a study of human character the work would be interesting. But the greatest merit of the book is the poetic beauty and richness of the language, which makes it a glowing poem in prose.’

THE VICTIM

Uniform with this Volume.

The Pall Mall Gazette.—'The Victim will most certainly not lessen the enthusiasm of the English cult of D’Annunzio; it will, and should, attract new admirers. No word but genius will fit his analysis of the mental history of the faithless husband.... The genius of D’Annunzio is shown alike in the bold directness of the conception, and the perfection with which he works out every mental detail that follows therefrom, and compels every sentence to do its full share of the work without effort. It is a gloomy, saddening book, but a great one.’

The Daily Chronicle.—'The book contains many descriptive passages of rare beauty, passages which by themselves are lovely little prose lyrics. It is a story of a terrible experience told by the man who had endured it. It is therefore a self-revelation; the

revelation of the sort of self that D’Annunzio delineates with a skill and knowledge so extraordinary. The soul of the man, raw, bruised, bleeding, is always before us.’

The Daily Mail.—'The vivid imagination of D’Annunzio’s novels, their power of analysis, their grip of human emotions, and their grim truth, are beyond dispute. In The Victim there is the same quality of genius that was so readily recognisable in The Triumph of Death and in The Child of Pleasure, and in reading it one is impressed anew with the young author’s precise knowledge of life, his skill in interpretation, and his earnestness. The whole narrative is so hauntingly real, that one cannot put it aside until the end is reached.’

LONDON: WILLIAM HEINEMANN, 21 BEDFORD ST.

The Virgins of the Rocks

THE WORKS OF

Signor Gabriele D’Annunzio

I

The Romances of the Rose

The Child of Pleasure. (Il Piacere.) The Victim. (L’Innocente.) The Triumph of Death. (Il Trionfo della Morte.)

II

The Romances of the Lily

The Virgins of the Rocks. (Le Vergini delle Rocce.) The Prodigy. (La Grazia.) The Annunciation. (L’Annunziazione.)

III

The Romances of the Pomegranate

Fervour. (Il Fuoco.) The Dictator. (Il Donatore.) The Triumph of Life. (Il Trionfo della Vita.)

LONDON: WILLIAM HEINEMANN 21 Bedford Street, W.C.

The Virgins of the Rocks

Translated from the Italian of

Gabriele D’Annunzio

By Agatha Hughes

'Io farò una finzione, che significherà cose grandi.’

LEONARDO DA VINCI

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London William Heinemann 1899

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PROLOGUE

“Una cosa naturale vista in un grande specchio.”

Leonardo da Vinci.

With these mortal eyes I beheld within a brief space of time three peerless souls unfold and blossom, and then wither away and perish one by one: the most beautiful, most passionate, and most miserable souls ever embodied in the latest descendants of a haughty race.

From the scenes where their desolation, their pride, and their grace wandered every day, clear and terrible thoughts came to me, such as the most ancient ruins of illustrious cities had never suggested. In hopes of unravelling the mystery of their strange ascendency, I used to explore the depths of the vast ancestral mirrors, where, often unnoticed by themselves, their three figures were reflected bathed in a pallor like that which heralds dissolution after death; and I gazed long and earnestly at the

old, worn-out things which they touched with their chilled or fevered hands, using the same gestures perhaps as had been used by other hands long since crumbled into dust.

Was it thus, indeed, that I knew them in the tedious monotony of daily life, or are they only creations of my yearning desire and perplexity?

It was thus, indeed, that I knew them in the tedious monotony of daily life, and yet they are also creations of my yearning desire and perplexity.

That fragment of the web of my life, unconsciously woven by them, is of such priceless value to me, that I would fain embalm it in the strongest of spices to prevent it from becoming faded or destroyed in me by Time.

Therefore I now try the power of art.

Ah! but what magic could impart the coherency of tangible and durable matter to that spiritual texture which the three prisoners wove in the barren monotony of their days, and embroidered little by little with images of the noblest and most heart-rending things in which human passion has ever been hopelessly reflected?

Unlike the three ancient sisters, because victims rather than daughters of necessity, they seemed nevertheless, as they wove the richest zone of my life, to be preparing the destiny of him who was to come. Together they toiled, scarcely ever accompanying their labour with a song, but less rarely shedding visible tears—tears in which the essence of their unexhausted, cloistered souls was sublimated.

And because from the first hour that I knew them a dark cloud had overhung them, a cruel decree had struck them to the heart, and left them discouraged and gasping, and ready to die—all their attitudes and gestures and lightest words seemed to me heavy with a meaning of which they, in their profound unconsciousness, were ignorant.

Bending and breaking as they were beneath the weight of their own maturity, like autumn trees overladen with bounteous fruit, they were unable either to sound the

depth of their misery or to give voice to it. Their anguished lips revealed to me only a small portion of their secrets. But I could understand the ineffable things spoken by the blood flowing in the veins of their beautiful bare hands.

“E il ricettacolo delle virtù sarà pieno di sogni e vane speranze.”

Leonardo da Vinci.

The hour which preceded my arrival in the ancestral garden, where they awaited me, seems to me—as I see it in imagination—illuminated with a light of unaccustomed poetry.

To him who knows what slow or sudden fertilisations, what unexpected transfigurations, are possible to an intense soul communicating with other souls in the vicissitudes of this most uncertain life—to him for whom the whole dignity of existence lies in exerting or submitting to a moral force, and who approaches his kind with a secret anxiety to dominate or be dominated—to every man who is curious about the inner mystery, who is ambitious of spiritual power, or feels the need of slavery, no hour has such a charm as that in which he moves forward, with a vague anticipation, to meet the living Unknown and Infinite, a dim world which he will either conquer, or by which he will be absorbed.

I was about to enter an enclosed garden. There the three virgin princesses were awaiting the friend who had been absent so long, him to whom, as their contemporary in age, they were bound by recollections of childhood and adolescence, him who was sole heir to a name no less ancient and distinguished than their own. And thus they were awaiting the return of an equal, of a sojourner in great cities, one who should bring them a breath of that larger life which they had renounced.

And each one of them perhaps in her secret heart was awaiting the Bridegroom.

This time of waiting appears to me vehement in its anxiety when I think of the bare and gloomy solitude of the house in which, until that day, they had languished, their

beautiful hands overflowing with the treasures of youth, surrounded by a phantom pomp of existence called up by their mother's delirium to people the emptiness of the vast mirrors. There, as if in twilight pools, the raving soul of the mother was wont to be immersed. On the infinite distance of those colourless expanses, had not each one of the maidens beheld the apparition of the youthful, ardent figure of the Bridegroom who was to tear her from this obscure decay, and carry her away in a whirlwind of delight?

Thus each one waited anxiously within her enclosed garden for the coming of him who was only after all to delude her, to watch her perish without possessing her.

"Ah! which of us will be the elect?"

Never perhaps—so I think—were their beautiful dim eyes so earnestly strained as at that hour; those eyes dimmed by melancholy and weariness, the light of inquiry quenched in them by too long familiarity with never-changing objects: eyes dimmed by mutual pity, reflecting the forms of familiar things without mystery or variety, in hard outlines and lifeless colouring.

And suddenly each of them perceived in the other a new creature, armed for combat.

I know not if there be anything sadder than these lightning-like revelations made to tender hearts by the desire for happiness. The virtuous sisters breathed in the same circle of sorrow; the same destiny weighed upon them; and during the evenings, heavy with anxiety, one of them from time to time would lay her brow on the shoulder or the breast of another, while the darkness effaced the diversity of their faces, and fused their three souls in one. But when the prophesied guest—to their waiting hearts already appearing with the gestures of the lover who elects and who promises—was about to set foot on their deserted threshold, they lifted up their heads with a thrill, and loosed their clasped hands, and exchanged a look which had the violence of a sudden flash of lightning. And while from the depth of their troubled souls there welled up an unknown feeling which had none of the old

sweetness, that one look brought them consciousness at last of all their waning grace, of the contrast between their three figures coloured by the same blood, of the spirit of night lurking in the mass of hair heaped up like a load on the nape of a white neck, of the marvellous persuasion expressed by the curve of a silent mouth, of the enchantment woven like a net by the ingenuous frequency of some inimitable gesture, and of every other magic power.

And a dim instinct of strife dismayed them.

Thus do I picture to myself those who were waiting for me in that glowing hour.

The first breath of spring, faintly warm, which had touched the dry summits of the rocks, was caressing the brows of the anxious maidens. Within the great cloister, carpeted with jonquils and violets, the fountains repeated the melodious accompaniment which for centuries the waters had made to the thoughts of voluptuousness and of wisdom expressed in the leonine verses on the pediment. On certain trees and on certain bushes the delicate leaves were shining as though coated with gum or diaphanous wax. The ancient and immovable things of time which could only decay were touched with an indefinable softness, communicated to them by the things that had power to renew themselves.

“Ah, which of us will be the chosen one?”

The three sisters, who had secretly become rivals in face of this deceptive offer of apparent life, composed their attitudes according to the inward rhythm of their natural beauty, which time had already begun to threaten. Perhaps not till that day had they understood that beauty in its true sense; just as a sick person, hearing the unaccustomed sound of the blood beating in the ear which presses the pillows, for the first time understands the portentous music which sustains his feeble frame.

But perhaps in them this rhythm had no words.

Nevertheless, I can now distinctly hear the words of that rhythm within me, strengthening the pure outlines of those ideal figures.

“A boundless desire for slavery makes me suffer,” says Massimilla silently, as she sits on the stone seat, her hands, with fingers interwoven, clasped round her weary knee. “I have not the gift of communicating happiness; but my whole being, more than any other creature, more than any inanimate thing, is ready to become the perfect and perpetual possession of a master.

“A boundless desire for slavery makes me suffer. I am devoured by an unquenchable yearning to give myself up entirely, to belong to a higher and stronger being, to dissolve myself in his will, to burn like a holocaust in the fire of his great soul. I envy the frail things which lose themselves, which are swallowed up in an abyss, or carried away by a whirlwind; and I gaze often and long at the drops of water which fall into the great basin, and hardly awake the slightest smile on its surface.

“When a perfume envelopes me and vanishes, when a sound reaches me and dies out, sometimes I feel myself grow pale and almost faint away, for it seems to me that the aroma and the harmony of my life are tending to the same evanescence. And yet sometimes my little soul is straitened within me like a knot. Who shall untie it and absorb it?

“Ah me! perhaps I should not know how to console him in his sadness; but my dumb and anxious face should be always turned towards his, quick to perceive hope reviving in his secret heart. Perhaps I should not know how to let fall on his silence those rare syllables, seeds of the soul, which in a moment can generate a boundless dream; but no faith in the world should surpass the ardour of my faith as I listened, even when the things I heard were such as must remain inaccessible to my intellect.

“I am she who listens, admires, and is silent.

“From my birth I bear on my forehead between my eyebrows the sign of attention.

“I have learned from the calm and intensity of statues the immobility of harmonious attitude. I can keep my eyes open and turned upwards for a long time, because my eyelids are light.

“The shape of my lips forms the living and visible image of the word 'Amen.’”

“I suffer,” says Anatolia, “from a virtue within me which is wasting itself uselessly. My strength is the last support of a solitary ruin, whereas it might safely guide the current of a river full of all life’s abundance from its source to the sea.

“My heart is inexhaustible. All the sorrows of the world could never succeed in wearying its throbs; the fiercest violence of joy could not break it, nor can it be weakened by this long and slow grief. A vast multitude of thirsty creatures might drink of the well of its tenderness without exhausting it.

“Ah! why should fate condemn me to this narrow duty, to this slow torture? Why should she forbid me that sublime union for which my heart yearns?

“I could guide the soul of a man up to that highest sphere where the value of the act and the splendour of the dream converge to the selfsame apex; from the depths of his unconsciousness I could extract unseen energies which lie hidden like ore in the veins of rough stone.

“The most hesitating of men would feel secure by my side; he who had strayed from the light would once more see a steady beacon at the end of his path; he who had been buffeted about and maimed would become healthy and whole again. My hands know how to bind up wounds, and how to tear the bandages off heavy eyelids. When I stretch them out—my purest heart’s-blood flows magnetically to the tips of my fingers.

“I possess the two supreme gifts which enrich life, and prolong it beyond the illusion of death: I fear no suffering, and I feel the imprint of eternity on my thoughts and acts.

“And therefore I am troubled by a desire to create—to become through love her who propagates and perpetuates the ideal qualities of a race favoured by Heaven. I could nourish the superhuman within me.

“Once in a dream I kept mysterious watch a whole night long over the sleep of a

child. While with deep-drawn breaths his body lay slumbering I upheld his soul in my hands, and it was tangible like a globe of crystal, and my breast swelled with marvellous premonitions."

Violante says: "I am humbled. When I felt the mass of my hair weigh upon my brow, I fancied myself to be wearing a crown, and beneath that regal burden my thoughts wore a purple hue.

"My childhood's memories are all lit up by visions of fire and slaughter. Blood ran before my innocent eyes; my delicate nostrils breathed the odour of unburied corpses. A young and eager queen, hunted from her throne, took me in her arms before she departed into an exile from which there was no return. From that time, therefore, the splendour of great and tragic destinies hangs over my soul.

"In my dreams I have lived a thousand lives of magnificence; I have passed through all sovereignties as safely as one who retraces a well-known path; I have discovered in the aspect of the most dissimilar things secret analogies with the aspect of my own form, and by hidden arts have pointed them out for man to wonder at; and I have found out how to compel light and shade, as truly as robes and jewels, to form the divine and unforeseen adornment of my decline.

"Poets saw in me the ideal apparition in whose lineaments the highest mystery of life is expressed—that mystery of beauty which has been revealed in mortal flesh at intervals of long ages, through all the imperfection of innumerable generations. And they thought: 'This is doubtless the perfected image of that idea of which the peoples of the earth have had an intuition from the beginning, and which artists have unceasingly invoked in poems, in symphonies, on canvas, in clay. Everything in her is expressive, everything is a symbol. The lines of her form speak a language whose eternal truth would make him that could understand it like unto a god; and her slightest movements produce within the contours of her body ineffable music like the harmony of midnight skies.'

“But now I am humbled—deprived of my kingdoms. The fire in my blood is growing paler and dying out. I shall vanish away, less fortunate than the statues which testified to the joy of life on the brows of the cities of the past. For ever unknown, I shall dissolve away, whereas they will endure in the safe keeping of mould and darkness among the roots of the flowers, and some day, when unburied, they will seem to the ecstatic soul of kneeling poets as great as the gifts of earth.

“I have now dreamed every dream, and my hair weighs heavier on my brow than a hundred crowns. I have dazed myself with perfumes. I love to linger near the fountains as they go on eternally telling the same tale. Through the thick locks of hair which cover my ears I seem to hear time ebbing away on the monotonous waters.”

Thus when I evoke them do the three princesses speak within my soul, as they wait for the irrevocable hour. Thus, perhaps, believing that a messenger of life had appeared at the gates of their closed garden, did each one recognise her own charm, display her own seductiveness, revive her own hope, quicken the dream within her which had almost died away.

O Hour! lit up by grand and solemn poetry! Most brilliant Hour in which all possibilities emerged and shone on the inward heaven of the soul!

I

“Non si può avere maggior signoria che quella di sè medesimo.”

Leonardo da Vinci

“E se tu sarai solo, tu sarai tutto tuo.”

Ibid

After the inevitable tumult of early youth had been controlled, the vehemence of conflicting desires defeated, and a barrier raised against the confused and multifold

overflow of sensations, I had sought during the momentary silence that ensued on my consciousness to find out whether life might not become something different from the usual exercise of the faculties of adaptation to changing circumstances; that is to say, whether my will might not be able, by means of selection and exclusion, to build up some new and artistic work out of the elements which life had already stored up within me.

I felt assured, after some self-examination, that my consciousness had reached that arduous point when it becomes possible to appreciate this too simple axiom: The world represents the sensibility and the thought of a few superior men who created it, and in course of time have enlarged and adorned it, and who in the future will continue to enlarge and adorn it more and more. The world, as it appears to us to-day, is a magnificent gift from the few to the many, from free men to slaves, from those who think and feel to those who work. And then I recognised my own highest ambition in the desire to bring some ornament, to add some new value to this human world which is being eternally embellished with beauty and sorrow.

Face to face with my own soul, I thought again of that dream which came to Socrates several times over, each time taking a different form, but always urging him to fulfil the same mission: “O Socrates, compose and cultivate music.” Then I learned that the real duty of a man of worth is to discover in the course of his existence a series of harmonies, varied indeed, but controlled by one dominant motive, and bearing the impress of one style. And so it appeared to me that the ancient sage, who excelled in the art of raising the human soul to its utmost degree of vigour, might teach a great and efficacious lesson to our own age.

By the study of himself and his neighbours, this man discovered what inestimable benefits assiduous discipline bent always to a fixed purpose can confer upon life. His supreme wisdom seems to me most resplendent in this, that he did not place his Ideal out of the reach of daily practice, beyond the sphere of necessary realities, but

that he made it the living centre of his being, and deduced his own laws from it; and, in accordance with these laws, he developed rhythmically throughout the course of years, exercising with calm pride such rights as they permitted him, and separating—he a citizen of Athens under the tyranny of the Thirty, and under the tyranny of the plebeians—deliberately separating his moral existence from that of the city. He desired, and he was able to preserve himself for himself until death. “I will be obedient to God only,” meant, “I will be obedient only to the laws of that genius to which, in order to fulfil my conception of order and beauty, I have subjected my free nature.”

Far more subtle as an artist than Apelles or Protogenes, he was able to trace with a firm hand the complete image of himself in one continuous line. And the sublime joy of the last evening came to him, not from the hope of that other life which he had spoken of in his discourses, but rather from the vision of his own image, made one with death.

Ah, why cannot he live again on Latin soil, this Master who understood with such profound and hidden art how to awaken and stimulate all the energies of intellect and soul in those who approached to listen to him?

A strange melancholy used to fall over me in my youth when, reading the Dialogues, I tried to picture to myself that circle of eager and anxious disciples surrounding him. I used to admire the handsome ones, those dressed in the richest garments, and on whom his round and prominent eyes—those new eyes of his, in which there was a look peculiar to himself—rested oftenest. My imagination prolonged the adventures of the strangers who came to him from afar, like the Thracian Antisthenes, who travelled forty stadia a day to hear him, and like Euclides, who—the Athenians having forbidden the citizens of Megara to enter Athens, and decreed the worst of punishments for the transgressors—dressed himself in woman’s clothes, and thus clothed and veiled, left his own city towards evening, and made a

long journey in order to be present at the discourses of the Sage; then at dawn went on his way again in the same disguise, his breast filled with unquenchable enthusiasm. And I felt touched by the fate of the beautiful Elian youth Phaedo, who, after having been made a prisoner of war in his own country, and sold to the keeper of a house of ill-fame, escaped to Socrates, and by his means obtained redemption and admission to the feasts of pure thought.

It seemed to me, indeed, that this genial master surpassed the Nazarene in generosity. Perhaps the Hebrew, if his enemies had not slain him in the flower of his years, would at last have shaken off the weight of his sadness, found new savour in the ripe fruits of his Galilee, and pointed out a different ideal of good to his followers. The Greek philosopher had always loved life; he loved it, and taught men to love it. Nearly infallible as a prophet and seer, he welcomed all souls in which his penetrating glance had discovered any force, and in each one he developed and elevated that natural force, so that all those inspired by his fire revealed themselves in the power of their diversity. The highest value of his method was that very result of which his enemies accused him: that from his school—where met honest Crito and Plato, the follower of Urania, and the raving Apollodorus, and the kindly Theætetus, who is like a noiseless river of oil—there went forth also the luxurious Cyrenian, Aristippus, and Critias, the most violent of the Thirty Tyrants, and the other tyrant Charicles, and that marvellous breaker of laws, Alcibiades, who put no limit to his premeditated violence. “My heart leaps when I hear his discourses far more than at the sound of the Corybantes,” said the son of Clinia, like a graceful wild animal crowned with ivy and violets, at the close of a banquet where the guests had received from Silenus’ mouth the grand initiation of Diotima. No fairer wreath of praise was ever woven to deify any man upon earth.

Now, what were the energies stimulated in me by this master? What harmonies did he lead me to find?

At first he captivated me by his singular faculty of feeling the fascination even of evanescent beauty, of making, with a certain restraint, distinctions among ordinary pleasures, and of recognising the value which the idea of death confers upon the grace of earthly things.

Pure and austere as he was in the act of speculation, he yet possessed such exquisitely fine senses that they might almost be called the skilled artists of his sensations.

No guest at any of the banquets—according to Alcibiades, an excellent judge—knew so well how to enjoy them as he. At the beginning of the banquet of Xenophon, he, with the others, contemplates the perfect beauty of Autolycus in long silence, almost as if he recognised in it some superhuman presence. Afterwards he discourses, with subtle taste, of perfumes, dancing, and drinking, not without vivid images to adorn his discourse, as becomes a sage and a poet.

Thus, while contending with Critobulus in jest for the palm of beauty, he uttered these words: “Since my lips are thicker, thinkest thou not that my kiss must be softer than thine?” He advised the Syracusan, who gave a performance there of dancing, in which a flute-player, a marvellous dancing-girl, and a boy harpist took part, not to force the three young bodies to unnatural efforts and into dangerous postures, which give no pleasure to the spectator, but to leave it to their youthful freshness, accompanied by the sound of the flute, to fall into such attitudes as belong to the Nymphs, the Graces, or the Hours as they are commonly painted. And so to the disorder which only amazes he opposes the order which pleases, and stands revealed once again as a cultivator of music and a master of style.

That which in days gone by touched me more than anything else were his last words to a beautiful frail creature whom he loved. They touch me still, for my soul loves now and then to slacken its tension in the voluptuous sadness and passionate perplexity which the sense of continual change, continual passing away, continual

decay, is apt to produce in a life adorned by the noblest culture.

In the dialogue of the last evening I am not so much moved by the scene where Crito, charged by him who was to administer the hemlock, interrupts the condemned man’s discourse, and admonishes him not to heat himself if he wishes the poison to take rapid effect, and the brave man smiles and goes on with his inquiry; nor is the musical simile of the swan magicians and their harmonious joy so dear to me; nor am I so amazed by those last moments, when in brief actions and brief sayings this man fulfils his ideal of perfection so clearly, and, like an artist who has given the finishing touch to his work, gazes contentedly at his own image—a miracle of style—destined for ever to remain immortal upon earth; I am not touched by any of these as I am by that unexpected pause which follows the doubts opposed by Cebes and Simmias to the certainty displayed by the eloquent master.

It was a profound pause, during which all those souls were suddenly blinded and cast, as it were, into an abyss after the ray of light thrown upon the great Mystery by him who was about to enter it had suddenly died out.

The master guessed the sadness produced among his faithful followers by this sudden gloom, and the wings of his thought soon spread again. Reality appeared to him through the medium of the senses, and held him back for a while in the field of the finite and the perceptible. He felt time fly, life flow on. Perhaps his ears caught some sound from the stately city, perhaps his nostrils inhaled the perfume of the early summer just approaching as his eyes rested on Phaedo with the beautiful hair.

Seated on his bed, with Phaedo beside him on a low stool, he laid his hand on the head of his disciple, and caressed him and stroked the hair on his neck, for it was a habit of his thus to let his fingers stray playfully in that thick young forest. Still he did not speak, so intense was his emotion, and so chequered with delight. Through this beautiful and ephemeral living being he was communicating once more with that earthly life in which he had attained his perfection, in which he had realised his

ideal of virtue; and perhaps he felt that there was nothing beyond, that this finished existence of his was sufficient to itself, that its prolongation in eternity was only—like the halo of a star—an illusion produced by the extraordinary radiance of his humanity. Never had the locks of the young Elian been so sublimely precious to him. He was enjoying them for the last time, for he had to die; indeed, he knew that next day those locks would be cut off in sign of mourning. At last he said—and his disciples had never known such a tone in his voice before—he said: “To-morrow, oh Phaedo, thou wilt cut off these beautiful locks.” And the youth answered: “So it seems, oh Socrates.”

This sentiment—which I at once absorbed and exalted within me as I read the episode for the first time in the Platonic dialogue—became afterwards by means of analogy so complex and so familiar to my mind, that I made it the open or concealed theme of that music to which I wished to hearken.

In this way the Ancient Sage taught me the commemoration of death in a manner conformable to my nature, that I might find a rarer value and a graver significance in things near at hand. And he taught me to seek and discover in my own nature genuine virtues and genuine defects, that I might arrange both in accordance with a premeditated design, striving with patient care to give a seemly appearance to the latter, and to raise the former upwards towards the supreme perfection. And he taught me to exclude everything which was discordant with my ruling idea, everything which could alter the lines of my design, which could slacken or interrupt the rhythmical development of my thought. And he taught me to discern with sure intuition those souls over whom to exercise benevolence or mastery, or from whom to obtain some extraordinary revelation. And at last he communicated to me also his faith in the dæmon, which was none other than the mysteriously significant power of Style, inviolable by any, even by himself in his own person.

Full of this teaching and quite alone, I set to work, with the hope of succeeding, in

tracing with precise and strong outlines that effigy of myself, to whose existence so many remote causes had contributed, operating from time immemorial through an infinite number of generations. That virtue of race, which in Socrates' country was called eugeneia, came out stronger and stronger as my discipline became more severe; and my pride increased with my satisfaction as I thought how only too many other souls would have sooner or later revealed their vulgar essence under the ordeal of that fire. But sometimes from the very roots of my being—where the indestructible soul of ancestors slumbers—such positive and vehement fountains of energy would spring up, that I felt sad as I recognised their uselessness in an epoch when public life is only a miserable spectacle of meanness and dishonour. "It is marvellous indeed," the dæmon used to say to me, "that these ancient barbaric energies should have been preserved in thee with all their freshness. They are still beautiful even though they be inopportune. In another age they would assist in performing the duty worthy of such as thee; that is to say, the duty of the leader who points out a certain goal, and guides his followers towards it. As that day seems far off, do thou now attempt, by condensing these energies, to transform them into living poetry."

Very distant indeed that day appeared; for even the arrogance of the populace was not so great as the cowardice of those who tolerated and supported it. Living in Rome as I did, I was witness of the most ignominious breaches of faith, of the most obscene connections which ever dishonoured a sacred spot. Evil-doers gathered together within the fatal circle of the divine city as within the precincts of an infamous forest, and it seemed as though only some magnificent power armed with ideas more brilliant than past memories could be able nowadays to raise its head above the monstrous phantoms of empire. Like the overflow of sewers, the flood of base desires was invading the market-place and the cross-roads, a flood perpetually swelling and growing more putrid, never even illuminated by any flame of crooked but titanic ambition, never even bursting out in a flash of magnificent crime. The

lonely dome on the distant side of the Tiber, inhabited by a soul, which although senile, yet stood firm in the consciousness of its own aims, was still the most prominent landmark, contrasted as it was with another unnecessarily exalted dwelling-place, where a king of warlike race showed a wonderful example of patience in the fulfilment of the humble and fatiguing office assigned to him by the decree of the people.

One evening in September, as I stood on that acropolis of the Quirinal guarded by the twin Tindarides, while a dense crowd was commemorating with bestial howls a conquest, the frightful extent of which they could not understand (Rome was looking terrible as a crater under a conflagration of clouds), I thought to myself: “What visions might not these conflagrations of the Latin sky kindle in the great heart of a king? Such a vision that under its weight the gigantic horses of Praxiteles would bend like twigs. Ah, who will ever be able to embrace the great Mother and fertilise her with his all-powerful idea? To her alone—within her womb of stone, which for ages has been the pillow of Death—to her alone it is given to generate such abundance of life that the world may be renewed with it again.”

And behind the glittering windows of the royal balcony I saw in imagination a pale contracted brow, carved like the brow of the Corsican with the mark of a superhuman destiny.

But what signified this turbid seething of servile passions, seen through that silence which surrounds Rome with its nine circles like a river of Tartarus? I was consoled for all my disappointment by this sublime spectacle of the Campagna strewn with great dead things, where nothing ever springs up save blades of grass, germs of fever, and terrible thoughts. “Is there a new nation struggling within the walls of the city? Ere long a few ashes will be borne to me on the wind. My barrenness is made of a layer of ashes, some precious and some ignoble. And the iron for the plough which shall furrow me has not yet been drawn from the mountain.” This is what the

sepulchre of the nations signified to me.

And yet, though the sight of that voracious desert be a sinister warning to an unprofitable nation, it can inspire the solitary man with the wildest intoxication of which the soul is capable. From the crevices of that soil a feverish vapour ascends like smoke, and works like a magic philtre in the blood of some men, producing a form of madness unlike any other.

The young men of the Garibaldian troops, I thought, must have felt themselves possessed by this madness as they entered the Campagna. They were suddenly transfigured by a flame which consumed them like dry wood. And in one here and there that fever magnified his own inward vision in such a way that he ceased to form part of a compact and unanimous band, and assumed an individuality of his own, a singularly warlike aspect, consecrated to a new onward movement. Fair and noble of race like a virgin hero of the time of Ajax, the type of the old warlike ideal, strengthened by a spirit of unexampled ardour, which came to him from the soil he trod, seemed to be renewed in such an one as he fell.

I envied him that happy fate which was denied to me. Several times after these inspiring reflections, a furious desire to prove my valour consumed me, and I would put my horse at some very high piece of ruined wall, and, the useless danger overcome, I would feel that always and everywhere I should have known how to die.

I remember as one of the most intense periods in my life an autumn passed in daily communion with the Latian desert.

Over that theatre, where a drama of races unfolded itself before my mental vision, there passed a perpetual variety of clouds whose great fleeting shadows made the commentary on my inward musings. Sometimes the silence became so heavy, and the odour of death wafted up in my face from the grass so suffocating, that instinctively I clung closer to my horse, as though I wished to feel a share in his impetuous vitality. Then the fine powerful animal would spring forward with feline

agility, and the inextinguishable fire burning in his pure blood would seem to communicate itself to me. Then for a few minutes I tasted intoxication. As I followed the line in which I was carried by the impetus of the gallop and the thoughts in my mind, a line parallel to the vast skeletons of the aqueducts which crowded the horizon, I felt the birth and growth within me of an indescribable spirit of fervour—a mixture of physical impulse, of intellectual pride and of confused hopes; and my energies were stimulated and multiplied by the presence of those works of man, of those human witnesses outliving total death, of those terrible reddened arches which for centuries have risen unconquered in procession against the menaces of heaven.

Alone, without near relations, without any ordinary ties, independent of any domestic authority, absolute master of myself and of my goods, I felt most profoundly in that solitude—more than at any other time or place—the sense of my progressive and voluntary evolution towards an ideal Latin type. Day after day I felt my whole nature grow, under the rigorous discipline of meditation, selection, and exclusion; and its special characteristics, its distinct peculiarities, become more marked. The aspect of the country, precise and sober in form and colour, was a continual example and a continual stimulus to me; it had an efficacy for my intellect like that of dogmatic teaching. Each group of lines seemed indeed to be inscribed on the heavens with the pithy significance of an incisive axiom and the unvarying character of a single style.

But the marvellous virtue of this teaching was, that although it drove me to order my inner life with the exactness of a ruled design, it did not dry up the spontaneous springs of emotion and imagination, indeed it only stimulated them to greater activity. Of a sudden, some single thought would become so intense and so ardent within me that it would possess me almost to delirium, like a phantom created by an illusion; and by it my whole world would be strewn with shadows and new lights. A jet of poetry would burst from my inner being, filling my whole soul with music and

ineffable freshness, and causing desires and hopes to burn higher in a happy flame. Thus sometimes on the Campagna the autumn sunset would pour out the impalpable lava of its eruption; long sulphur-coloured streams furrowed the uneven plain; the hollows were filled with darkness like abysses just opened; the aqueducts caught fire from base to summit; the whole country seemed to have returned to its volcanic origin in the dawn of time. Thus sometimes in the morning the larks would start suddenly out of the soft sparkling grass, singing as they made their dizzy ascent, like spirits of joy rapt higher and higher from mortal sight into the purest heaven of blue, and to my wondering soul the whole dome of heaven seemed to be echoing with their intoxicating music.

And so this solitude more than any other was able to inspire the degree of enthusiasm and reasonableness necessary for an ambitious ascetic: an ascetic in the original meaning of the austere word, desiring, like the ancient antagonists, to prepare himself by rigid discipline for the struggles and the conquests of the earth.

“What pillar of fire, what burning desert, what lonely mountain top, what bottomless cave, what malarious pool, what solitary, barren, or tragic spot can be surpassed by this place, in the power of kindling the sacred spark of madness in one who believes himself destined to engrave on new tables of stone new laws for the religious guidance of the people?” Thus I used to think while presentiments of forms yet uncreated arose within me, fostered by that same silence in which so many extinct forms of our humanity were gathered together. Everything there is dead, but everything might suddenly come to life again in some spirit with enough superfluity of strength and heat to accomplish the prodigy. It is difficult to imagine the grandeur and terror of such a resurrection. He within whose consciousness it could be realised would appear to himself and others to be possessed by a mysterious and incalculable force greater far than that which used to assail the Pythia of old. Instead of the fury of a god present on the tripod, his mouth would express that very genius of the races which is the funereal guardian of innumerable destinies long ago fulfilled. His oracle

would not be merely a chink opened into a world above the senses, but the sum of all human wisdom mingled with the breath of Earth, that highest of prophetesses, according to the message of Æschylus. And once again the multitudes would bend before the divine aspect of his madness; not as at Delphi, to implore the dark utterances of the ambiguous God, but to receive the clear answer given by previous existences, that answer which the Nazarene never gave. He was too illiterate, and the desert beneath the mountains of Judea on the western bank of the Dead Sea, in which he chose to find his revelation, was too stony: a place of rocks and precipices, destitute of foot-prints, blind to all thought. The solitary youth felt no fear of famishing jackals, but he feared thought. His pale hand had power to tame savage beasts, but thoughts as fiery and masterful as those which wander over the Latian desert would have devoured him. When the bad angel drove him to the top of the mountain and showed him the fertile land below, and pointed out the position of the different countries of the world and the deep and whirling currents of human desire, he closed his eyelids: he would not see, he would not know. But the great Revealer must extend the horizon of his consciousness beyond all limits, and embrace within it days and years, centuries and millenniums. The truth he sets forth must be the outcome of the whole life lived by men up to the present hour. It must be a fire in which the ascending powers of many generations may be absorbed; so that thus harmonised and multiplied, they may move onward in greater unison and with greater certainty towards an ever purer ideal.

Sometimes, too, I was haunted by the phantom of him, whom one day believed to have created King of Rome. “There was lacking,” I used to think, “even in this most admirable inspirer of heroic feeling, in this joyful revenger of youthful blood, there was lacking the ascetic discipline of the sepulchre of the nations. Had he been able even for a time to turn aside his spirit from the things which pressed upon him and bend it towards immutable things, he might have discovered some idea greater than his own mortal person, and might have chosen it to be ruler of his actions. Then his

dream of Latin empire would have grown closer and weightier and more tenacious, so that the force of events and himself combined could not have finally dissipated and destroyed it as they did. But his idea, which was too much bound up with daily life, too human in fact, was to die with him. He never attained knowledge of the secret by which man prolongs the efficacy of his action into all time. The impulses given by the man were as vehement as they could be, but their propagation was brief and uncertain, because they originated in a centre of spontaneous powers which were not subject to any superior conception evolved from a severe order of meditation. And so his work was not higher than himself, and lasted no longer than the work of destruction. His destiny was controlled by the old oracles. The answer given by the Pythia as to the fate of Corinth might, after thousands of years, serve for him also:—An eagle has conceived by a rock, and shall give birth to a fierce lion, greedy for human flesh, which shall work great slaughter.—He did but obey the prediction, like the petty tyrant Cypselus. And the King of Rome faded away into space like a column of smoke."

Such was the colour of the thoughts awakened in me by the aspect of a place which—according to Dante's words—seemed formed by nature herself for universal empire: ad universaliter principandum. And while Dante's arguments to prove the divine right of the Roman power recurred to my memory, the summit of my intellect was occupied by that motto which the Latin races, if they wish to be born again, would do well to adopt in its exact and rigid form as the rule of their vital institutions:—Maxima nobile, maxima præesse convenit. It is meet that the noblest should also be the greatest.

And in the company of that great and tyrannical spirit I used to think: "Oh, venerable father of our language, thou hadst faith in the necessity of hierarchies and differences between men; thou didst believe in the superiority of the virtue transmitted through heredity in the blood; thou didst firmly believe in a virtue of race which can by degrees, by one selection after another, elevate man to the highest

splendour of his moral beauty. When thou didst expound the genealogy of Æneas, thou sawest a manner of divine predestination in the concourse of blood." Now, what mysterious concourse of blood, what vast experience of culture, what propitious harmony of circumstances shall give birth to the new King of Rome? Natura ordinatus ad imperandum—ordained by nature unto empire—but, unlike any other monarch, his task will not be to reconfirm or raise the value which—under the influence of various teachings—the nations have been used to set upon the things of life; it will rather be to abolish or invert them. Conscious of the whole significance of those events which compose man's history, and familiar with the essence of all the supreme wills which have directed important movements, he will be capable of the work of construction, and of throwing out towards the future that ideal bridge by which the privileged races will at last be able to cross the abyss now apparently separating them from the power of which they are ambitious.

And among all the images which the sacred soil suggested to my soul, this image of the king was the most vivid. Sometimes he almost seemed to me a created form; and I used to gaze on him eagerly, while sudden ideas of indescribable beauty flashed across my intellect and faded away, never perhaps to appear again.

Thus the Roman Campagna with its severe teaching strengthened me to follow out the perfection of my manhood, to assert my inward sovereignty, to trace with a firm hand that "line of circumference from which human beauty is generated," according to Leonardo's saying. And at the close of each day I asked myself: "By what new thoughts has my treasure been enriched? What new energies have been developed from my being? What new possibilities have I caught sight of?" And I wished that every day should bear the impress of my style, should be distinguished by some sign of vigorous art, by some proud emblem of victory. My familiarity with Thucydides set before me the example of those strategists of his, who are constantly making fine, pithy harangues to their soldiers, then fighting with all their might, and finally raising a trophy on the field.

Cui bono?—was the cry which came from far and wide out of the mouths of a twilight crowd with voices not unlike eunuchs'.—What is the meaning, what is the value of life? Why live? Why strive? All efforts are useless, all is vanity and sorrow. We ought to kill off our passions one after another, and then extirpate to the very roots the hope and desire which are the cause of life. Renunciation, complete unconsciousness, the vanishing away of dreams, absolute annihilation—that is the final liberation.

They were a miserable race stricken with leprosy reiterating their dreary complaint. The ancient Persians, as the ever-fresh Herodotus narrates, used to attribute this foul infirmity to offences committed against the Sun. And these slavish people had indeed offended against the Sun.

A certain number of them, hoping to be cleansed, had bathed in great fonts of piety, where they softened and anointed themselves with great contrition. But the sight of these was quite as repugnant.

I turned away my eyes and ears elsewhere; and my heart-strings throbbed with proud joy, because my eyes were undimmed by tears, and could perceive all lines and all colours, because my healthy, watchful ears could hear all sounds and all rhythms, because my spirit could rejoice boundlessly in fugitive appearances and know how to cultivate within itself very different forms of melancholy, how to find the sweetest value of life in the rapidity of its metamorphoses and in the denseness of its mysteries. "Oh manifold Beauty of the World," I used then to pray, "not to thee alone do my praises ascend; not to thee alone, but also to my forefathers, to those also who, remote ages ago, understood how to enjoy thee, and transmitted their fervid and rich blood to me. Praised be they now and for ever, for the beautiful wounds which they inflicted, for the beautiful fires they kindled, for the beautiful goblets they emptied, for the beautiful garments which clothed them, for the beautiful palfreys they caressed, for the beautiful women they enjoyed, for all their

slaughter, their intoxication, their magnificence, their luxury, let them be praised; because thus did they form in me those senses in which thou canst widely and deeply reflect thyself, oh Beauty of the World, as in five wide and deep seas!"

In the meantime, the poets, discouraged and erring, having exhausted their store of rhymes in evoking images of other days, in weeping over their own dead illusions, and in counting the colours of the dying leaves, were asking, some ironically, some seriously: "What can be our function now? Are we to exalt universal suffrage in senile rhymes? Are we to hasten with the breathlessness of hexameters the fall of the king, the advent of republics, the accession of the people to power? Is there no demagogue Cleophontes who manufactures lire in Rome, as in Athens of old? For a modest sum we might persuade the incredulous, on his very instruments tuned by himself, that power, right, thought, wisdom, light, are to be found in the masses...."

But not one among them, more generous and more eager than the rest, arose to answer: "Defend Beauty! That is your only function. Defend the vision that is within you. Since mortals have now ceased to bear honour and reverence to the singer scholars of the Muse that favours them, as Odysseus said, defend yourselves with all your weapons, even with jests, if such are of more use than invectives. Be careful to sharpen the point of your scorn with the bitterest poison. Let your sarcasm have such corrosive strength that it may reach to the very marrow and destroy it. Brand to the very bone the stupid brows of those who would put an exact mark on each soul, as on a household utensil, and would make human heads alike as the heads of nails under the blow of the hammer. Let your frenzied laughter rise to the very heaven, when you hear the stablemen of the Great Beast vociferating in the Assembly. For the sake of the glory of Mind proclaim and demonstrate that their sayings are not less ignoble than the groans of the flatulent peasant. Proclaim and demonstrate that their hands—to which your father Dante would give the same epithet as he gave to the nails of Thais—may be fit to gather manure, but are not worthy of being raised to sanction a law in the Assembly. Defend the Thought which they threaten, the

Beauty which they outrage! A day will come when they will attempt to burn the books, shatter the statues, rip up the canvases. Defend the ancient generous work of your masters and the future work of your disciples against the rage of these drunken slaves. Do not despair because ye are few. Ye possess the supreme knowledge and the supreme power of the world—the Word. Words may have more murderous power than a chemical formula. Oppose destruction resolutely with destruction."

And the patricians, stripped of their authority in the name of equality, and looked upon as ghosts from a world which has disappeared for ever; unfaithful, the greater part of them at least, to their lineage, and ignorant or forgetful of the art of mastery professed by their forefathers, were also asking: "What can be our function now? Are we to deceive the age and ourselves by attempting to revive some slender hope among faded memories of the past, under those vaulted roofs storied with sanguine mythology, which are too vast for our restricted breathing? Or must we recognise the great dogma of Eighty-nine, and open the porticoes of our courts to popular applause, illuminate our travertine balconies for State festivals, associate with Jewish bankers, exercise our small share of sovereignty by filling up the voting ticket with the names of men of the middle classes, of our tailors, our hatters, our bootmakers, our money-lenders, and our lawyers?"

A few among them—ill-inclined for peaceful renunciation, elegant boredom, and barren irony—answered: "Train yourselves as you train your race-horses, and wait for the opportunity. Learn the method of asserting yourselves and strengthening your own persons, as you have learned that of winning on the turf. By strength of will force all your energies, even your stormiest passions and darkest vices, into a straight line and towards a definite aim. Be assured that the essence of personality far exceeds all accessory attributes in value, and that inward sovereignty is the chief mark of the aristocrat. Believe only in force tempered by long discipline. Force is the first law of nature; it is indestructible, not to be abolished. Discipline is the supreme virtue of the freeman. The world can be based only on force, as truly in

civilised ages as in the epochs of barbarism. If all the races of the earth were destroyed by another deluge, and new generations were to arise from the stones, as in the old fable, men would begin to fight amongst themselves as soon as they had issued from their mother earth, until one of them the strongest, should succeed in mastering the others. Wait, therefore, and prepare for your opportunity. Fortunately, the State built on foundations of popular suffrage and equality, cemented by fear, is not only an ignoble, but also a precarious structure. The State ought to be nothing less than an institution perfectly adapted to promote the gradual elevation of a privileged class towards an ideal form of existence. Therefore, upon the economic and political equality to which democracy aspires, you must go on forming a new oligarchy, a new realm of force; and before long, sooner or later, you will succeed in taking the reins into your own hands again, so as to rule the multitude for your own profit. Indeed, you will have little difficulty in bringing back the common herd to its obedience. The masses always remain slaves; they have a natural impulse to stretch out their wrists to the fetters. The sense of liberty will never to the end of time exist in them. Do not be deceived by their vociferations and their hideous contortions; but always remember that the soul of the Multitude is in the power of Panic. It will be your policy, therefore, when the opportunity comes, to provide yourselves with cutting whips, to assume an imperious mien, to plan some humorous stratagem. When the cunning Ulysses was ranging the field to call in every one to the council, if he came across a noisy plebeian, he used to chastise him with his sceptre, scolding him thus: 'Silence, silence, coward, pusillanimous one, thing of naught in the council.’ The noble demagogue Alcibiades, who was more versed than any in the government of the Great Beast, began one of his orations on the expedition into Sicily thus: 'This command, oh Athenians—this command belongs to me rather than to any one else, and I hold myself worthy of this command.’ But truly there is no teaching more profound and more suitable for you than that given by Herodotus in the beginning of the book of Melpomene. Here it is: 'The Scythians, having spent

twenty-eight years away from their own country in ruling over Upper Asia, and desirous, after such a long interval, to return home, found that to do so involved hardships no less great than those they had suffered in the Median war. A great and hostile army barred their entrance. And this came to pass because the Scythian women, having been left so long without men of their own race, had given themselves to their slaves. And from the slaves and the women had sprung a generation of young men who, conscious of their origin, had set themselves against those who were returning from Media; and in order to hold the pass, had first of all made an entrenchment stretching from the mountains of Taurus to the Mæotian marsh, which is very wide. They then proceeded to repulse the attempted assault of the Scythians, defending themselves with many deeds of valour; and as, after various conflicts, the Scythians found they could make no advance by fighting, one of them began to speak thus: Oh Scythians, why do we labour thus? By fighting against our slaves we weaken ourselves by the number of our deaths, and by killing them we only reduce the number of our future subjects. Wherefore it seems to me fitting that we should put aside our spears and darts, and that each of us should be armed only with his horsewhip, and thus we should confront these slaves. Because up till now, seeing us march against them in arms, they have no doubt thought themselves our equals, and sons of equals; but when they see us coming against them wielding whips instead of arms, they will feel at once that they are our slaves, and they will not dare to resist us any longer. The Scythians followed this advice; and their adversaries, thunderstruck by the change, ceased fighting and took to flight. Thus did the Scythians win back their country.' Oh ye masters without mastery, think upon it."

Perhaps in my busy solitude—although I feared neither sickness, nor madness, nor death, having within me that tutelary flame of pride, of thought, and of faith—perhaps there lay hidden beneath my melancholy a real need for communion with some kindred spirit as yet unknown, or with some circle of minds disposed to

care sincerely and passionately for those things for which I so passionately cared. It seemed to me that this need was betrayed by a mental habit I had of casting my theory of ideas and images into a concrete oratorical or lyrical form, almost as if for an imaginary audience. Warm bursts of eloquence and poetry would suddenly flood my being, and silence was at times a burden to my overflowing soul.

Then, to comfort my solitude, I thought of giving corporeal form to that dæmon in whom, according to my first master's teaching, I believed as the infallible pledge which was to lead me to achieve the integrity of my moral being. I thought of committing to a noble, masterful mouth, red with the same blood as mine, the duty of repeating to me, "Oh thou, be what thou oughtest to be."

Among the figures of my ancestors one above all others is most dear to me, and sacred as a votive image. He is the noblest and the most brilliant flower of my race, represented by the brush of a divine artist. It is the portrait of Alessandro Cantelmo, Count of Volturara, painted by Da Vinci between the years 1493 and 1494, at Milan, where Alessandro, attracted by the unheard-of magnificence of that Sforza who wished to turn the Lombard city into a New Athens, had taken up his abode with a company of men-at-arms.

There is nothing in the world that I prize so much, nor was treasure ever guarded with more passionate jealousy. I am never weary of thanking fortune for having caused such a noble figure to brighten my life, and for having granted me the incomparable luxury of such a secret. "If thou possess a beautiful object, remember that every glance cast on it by another is a usurpation of thy possession. The joy of possession is diminished when it is divided, therefore do thou refuse to share it. They say that some one declined to enter a public museum lest his glance should be mingled with that of strangers. Now, if thou do indeed possess a beautiful object, enclose it within seven doors, and cover it with seven veils." And a veil hangs over the magnetic face; but the dream in it is so profound, the fire in it is so powerful, that

at times the woven stuff trembles with the vehemence of the breathing.

And so I gave my dæmon the form of this familiar genius, and in my solitude I felt him alive with a life far more intense than my own. Had I not before me by means of the lasting miracle of one of the world's greatest revealers—had I not before me an heroic spirit, sprung from my own stock, and constituted of all the distinctive characteristics of that lineage which I was so eagerly striving to manifest in myself, and which in him appeared in such fierce relief as to be almost terrible?

There he is still before me, always the same, yet always new! Such a body is not the prison of the soul, but its faithful semblance. All the lines of the beardless face are as precise and firm as those of a deeply-chiselled bronze; the dark pallor of the skin conceals tough muscles, wont in moments of anger and desire to stand out clearly with a fierce tremor; the straight, rigid nose, the bony, narrow chin, the curved but energetically-locked lips express the boldness of the will; and his glance is like the flash of a beautiful sword coming from beneath the shadow of thick and heavy hair, violet-black in hue like the bunches of grapes on a branch in the burning sun. He stands immovable, visible from the knees upwards; but the imagination pictures at once how the strong, flexible legs will start when the enemy appears, giving a formidable impetus to the beautiful frame. "Cave, adsum"—well does the old device apply to him. He is dressed in very light armour, evidently inlaid by a most accomplished workman, and his hands are bare; pale, sensitive hands, yet with something tyrannical, almost homicidal, about their clear outlines: the left hand is resting on the Gorgon's head on his sword-hilt, the right on the corner of a table covered with dark velvet, of which a fold is visible. Lying on the table beside the gauntlets and helmet are a statuette of Pallas and a pomegranate, whose pointed leaf and brilliant flower are growing on the same stalk as the fruit. Through the opening of a window behind his head is seen a bare landscape ending in a group of hills, over which rises a peak, standing solitary as a proud thought; and on a scroll beneath is this verse—

“Frons viridis ramo antiquo et flos igneus uno tempore (prodigium) fructus et uber inest.”

Where and by what chance did Alessandro first meet with the Florentine master, who was at that time attaining the supreme splendour of his manhood? Perhaps at one of Ludovico’s feasts, full of the marvels created by the occult arts of the Magician? Or perhaps rather at the palace of Cecilia Gallerani, where military men discussed the science of war, musicians sang, architects and painters drew, philosophers argued about natural science, and poets recited compositions of their own and of others “in the presence of this heroine,” as Bandello relates. It is here that I like to imagine their first meeting, about the time when the favourite of the Moor was already beginning to love Alessandro secretly.

What a fire of audacious intelligence and of masterful will must have been apparent in the youth, for Leonardo to be so taken with him from that very day! Perhaps Alessandro discussed with him, apart from the others, “the methods of destroying any rock or fortress not founded on stone,” and grew eager to know the formidable secrets of this fascinating creator of Madonnas, who surpassed all masters and makers of instruments of war in the novelty of his ideas. Perhaps in the course of the argument Leonardo may have uttered one of those deep sayings of his about the art of life; and looking into the eyes of the youth on whom silence had fallen, recognised in him a spirit determined to take everything that can be got out of life, an ambitious man disposed, instead of following his fate blindly, to attain the mastery for himself with the help of that science which multiplies the energies of him who possesses it and concentrates them on the attainment of his aim. And perhaps the man who was a few years later to become Cæsar Borgia’s military architect, who was invoking and waiting for some magnanimous prince to offer him unlimited means of carrying out his innumerable designs, may have perceived in this curly-headed patrician the future founder of a royal dynasty, and loved him and placed his proudest hopes in him.

I like to think that a brief entry in the commentaries of Da Vinci (who was then busy with studies for the equestrian statue of Francesco Sforza) refers to the evening of this first meeting: “The penultimate day of April 1492. Messer Alessandro Cantelmo’s fine jennet: has a good neck and a very beautiful head.”

After leaving Cecilia’s palace together, they both paused for awhile in the street, still arguing; and when Leonardo noticed the jennet, he went up to look at it. As he stroked the beautiful neck, some involuntary expression escaped him regarding the terrible labour his insatiable spirit underwent in researches for the monument which the Moor desired to erect in honour of the fame of his father, the conqueror of the duchy and the vanquisher of Genoa. With a wide sweep the creative hand of the artist traced the outline of the Colossus in the air, making it visible to the youth’s inner vision. The day was sinking; the hour of spring twilight was trembling on the pinnacles of the glorious city; a company of musicians passed by singing; and the horse neighed with impatience. Then the soul of Alessandro swelled with an heroic sentiment which made him seem like a phantom of the great captain. “Ah, to set out on my conquests!” he thought, as he vaulted into the saddle. And then seeing that in reality he was only setting out on some common affair of daily life, he said suddenly, with a bitter impulse: “Seemeth it to you, Master Leonardo, that life can be of any worth to a man of my station?” And Leonardo, who did not marvel at these unexpected words: “It is everything that the eagle should take his first flight.” And perhaps the beardless horseman riding away among his men-at-arms may have seemed to him destined to be a king, “like him who in the bee-hive is born leader of the bees.”

The following morning a servant brought the jennet to the sculptor as a gift, with compliments from his master.

Thus do I imagine the beginning of their mutual liberality. The master rewarded his disciple with the true riches, since “that cannot be called riches which it is possible

to lose." Like Socrates, he preferred to have for his disciples those who had beautiful hair and were richly clothed. Like Socrates, he excelled in the art of elevating the human soul to its supreme degree of vigour. Certainly Alessandro was for a time the chosen one in that Academia Leonardo Vincii, where a noble spiritual lineage was developed little by little under teaching which drew its warmth from the central truth as from a sun which cannot be darkened. "Nothing can be loved or hated, unless first there be knowledge of that thing. The love of anything is child to the knowledge of it. The more certain the knowledge, the more fervent the love."

Here and there in Leonardo's interrupted memoirs one comes across signs of the passionate curiosity with which the indefatigable experimentalist used to watch over the precious soul of his young friend. He had no secrets from him, for he desired to contribute by all the means in his power towards increasing the accumulated forces of his soul so as to render its future action in a wider field more efficacious. He noted down for remembrance: "Speak to Volturara about a certain way of shooting a dart." And again: "Show Volturara ways of raising and letting down bridges, ways of burning and destroying those of the enemy, and the ways of placing mortar pieces by day and by night." Or: "Messer Alessandro wishes to give me Valturio's De re militari, and the Décades, and Lucretius' Delle cose naturali."

He used to be struck by the terse, proud sayings of the young man, and noted down some of them: "Messer Alessandro says one must grasp fortune firmly from the front, since behind she is bald." And again: "As I was working at the book on dividing rivers into numerous branches, and making them fordable, Volturara said boldly: Truly, Cyrus son of Cambyses understood all that when he chastised a river in that very way for carrying away a white horse of his."

One day—so I imagine—they had both been invited to the magnificent house of Cecilia Gallerani; and Leonardo had transported the souls of all present by his performance on a new lyre of his own manufacture, made almost entirely of silver,

in the shape of a horse's skull. During the pause which followed the applause, the second Sappho ordered a beautiful little casket, richly inlaid with enamel and gems, the Duke's gift, to be brought to her; and she showed it to those present, and asked them what object was, in their opinion, sufficiently precious to deserve to be kept in it. Every one expressed a different opinion. "And you, Messer Alessandro?" asked Madonna Cecilia, with a soft glance. And he replied audaciously: "Alexander of old chose the most precious casket among all the treasures of Darius, that which was richer than aught that eyes had ever beheld, as a shrine for Homer's Iliad."

Da Vinci immediately noted down this answer in his memoirs, and added: "One can see that he feeds on the marrow and nerves of lions."

Another day they had both been invited by the same hostess to her garden; and Alessandro, after an argument with some of those "famous spirits," drew apart, to follow out some new thought which the heat of the discussion had generated in that pregnant intellect. The beautiful Bergamese Countess called him several times, but it was long ere he turned round, for it was long ere he heard the call. Met by a gracious reproof, or perhaps a stinging remark, he answered, smiling: "He who is fixed to a star does not look round."

In the evening Da Vinci noted down this answer also in his memoirs, and to it added his prophecy: "Soon he will take his first flight, fill the universe with wonder, fill all writings with his renown, and confer eternal glory on the place of his birth."

Perhaps it was that very evening, as he meditated on the intensity and versatility of that youthful temperament, that his mind, ever inclined to the mysterious significations of emblems and allegories, hit upon that beautiful symbol of the pomegranate, including and bearing upon one stalk the fruit, the pointed leaf, and the flaming flower.

But on the 9th of July in the year 1495, three days after the battle of Fornovo, he noted down: "Volturara died on the field, as was meet for one like him. Never did

blind steel cut off a brighter hope for the world."

Thus lived and died the young hero in whom the purest essence of my warlike race had seemed to be concentrated. Thus fully was he revealed to me in the faithful likeness handed down to his distant heir by an artist who might be called Prometheus.

"O thou," he seemed to say to me, as with his magnetic glance he took possession of my soul, "be what thou oughtest to be."

"For thy sake," I used to say to him, "for thy sake I will be what I ought to be; because I love thee, O brilliant flower of my race; because I desire to place all my pride in obeying thy law, O master. Thou didst bear within thyself strength sufficient to subjugate the earth, but thy royal destiny was not to be fulfilled in the age wherein thou didst first appear. In that age thou wast but the herald and forerunner of thyself, for thou wast destined to reappear higher up thy ancient stem in the maturity of future ages, on the threshold of a world not explored by the warriors, but promised by the wise men: to reappear as the messenger, the interpreter, and the lord of a new life. Therefore didst thou suddenly disappear like a demi-god by the banks of a swollen river, amid the roar of battle and storm, just as the sun was entering the sign of the Lion. Death did not cut off thy great promise, but fate willed to alter its marvellous fulfilment. Thy virtue, which could not then be manifested to the earth by triumphant actions, must necessarily revive some day in thy still surviving lineage. And may it be to-morrow! May thy equal be begotten by me! I invoke and await and prepare the renewal of thy genius with unfailing faith, the while adoring thy living image, O conqueror and sage, thou who didst lay the blade of thy beautiful naked sword as a mark in the books of wisdom."

Thus I used to address him. And under his glance and inspired by him, not only were my actual energies multiplied, but my task lay clear before me in definite outlines. "Thou, therefore, shalt labour to carry out thy own destiny and that of thy race. Thou

shalt have before thy eyes at the same time the premeditated plan of thy existence and the vision of an existence superior to thine own. Thou shalt live in the idea that each life being the sumtotal of past lives is the condition of future lives. Thou shalt not, therefore, look upon thyself only as the beginning, aim, and end of thy own destiny, but thou shalt feel the whole value and the whole weight of the inheritance received from thy ancestors, which thou must transmit to thy descendant countersigned with the stamp of thy most vigorous characteristics. Let the supreme conception of thy dignity be founded on the certainty, so sure in thee, that thou art the preserving link of a multifold energy which to-morrow, or after the lapse of a century, or at some indefinite time, may reassert itself in a sublime manifestation. But hope that it may be to-morrow! Triple, therefore, is thy task, for thou dost possess the gift of poetry, and must study to acquire the science of words. Triple is thy task:—by direct methods to conduct thy being to attain the perfect integrity of the Latin type; to concentrate the purest essence of thy spirit, and to reproduce in a single and supreme work of art thy deepest vision of the universe; to preserve the ideal riches of thy race and thine own individual conquests in a son, who, under paternal instruction, shall recognise and co-ordinate them in himself, and shall thus feel worthy of aspiring to the realisation of ever higher possibilities."

Then, with the tables of my laws thus clearly set before me, there came over me not only the sadness of doubt, but an anxiety akin to fear—a new and horrible anxiety. "If some blind, unforeseen violence from exterior forces were to shake, or deform, or crush my work! If I should have to bend and submit to some brutal injury of chance. If one of those destructive gusts which burst suddenly out of the darkness should cause the fall of my edifice before its completion." This fear came over me during a strange hour of agitation and depression, and I felt my faith failing me. But soon after I felt ashamed when my monitor said to me: "Judging from the quality of thy thoughts, thou seemest to me like one contaminated by the crowd, or in the power of a woman. See, even passing through the crowd which was gazing at thee

has lessened thee in thine own eyes. Seest thou not that those men who frequent it become unfruitful as mules? The gaze of the crowd is worse than a splash of mud; the breath of it is poisonous. Go afar off while the sewer discharges itself. Go afar off and ponder on that which thou hast gathered up. Thy hour will come. What fearest thou? Of what worth would be all this discipline, did it not make thee stronger than circumstances? Even by this it is sometimes possible to create by force of will. Therefore go afar off while the sewer discharges itself. Delay not; let not thyself be contaminated by the crowd, or fall into the power of a woman. It is true thou wilt have to form an alliance in order to accomplish one part of the task thou hast assigned to thyself. But better is it for thee to wait and remain alone; better even to slay thy hope than to submit body and spirit to unworthy fetters. If the thing loved is contemptible, the lover is contemptible. Thou must never forget this saying of thy Leonardo, that, like Castruccio, thou mayest always be able proudly to reply: 'I have chosen her; she did not choose me.'"

Justly did this admonition come to me at that time. And without delay I made ready to depart from the tainted city.

It was a time when the active zeal of destroyers and builders was raging feverishly over the soil of Rome. With the clouds of dust a species of madness for lucre seemed to spread like a poisonous whirlwind, taking hold not only of the men of the labouring classes, the familiar spirits of lime and bricks, but also of the proudest heirs of papal families, who till then had looked scornfully at all intruders from the windows of travertine palaces, which stood obdurately firm under the crust of ages. One by one these magnificent families—founded, carried on, strengthened by nepotism and civil wars—sank lower, slid down into the new mire, went under and disappeared. Famous fortunes accumulated by centuries of successful rapine and Mæcenatic luxury were exposed to the risks of the Stock Exchange.

The laurels and roses of the Villa Sciarra, whose praises had been sung by the

nightingales for such a long succession of nights, were being cut down to the ground, or survived in a humble position inside the gates of little gardens surrounding new villas built for grocers. The gigantic Ludovisi cypresses, those of the Aurora, the very same which had once spread the solemnity of their ancient mystery over the Olympian head of Goethe, lay on the ground (I see them always in imagination as my eyes saw them one November afternoon) side by side in a row, with the smoke from their naked roots rising up to the pale heaven above, with their black roots all laid bare, and seeming still to hold prisoner within their vast intricacies the phantom of omnipotent life. And those lordly meadows all round, where only one spring ago violets more numerous than the blades of grass were springing up for the last time, were now ghastly with white lime-pits, red heaps of bricks, the creaking of cart-wheels loaded with stones; while the shouts of the master builders alternated with the hoarse cries of the carters, and the brutal work which was to occupy places so long sacred to Beauty and Visions went on rapidly.

It seemed as though a blast of barbarism were blowing over Rome, and threatening to tear away that radiant crown of patrician villas, incomparable in the world of memories and poetry. The menace of the barbarians hung over the very box-trees of the Villa Albani, though they had seemed as immortal as the Caryatids and the solitude.

The contagion was spreading rapidly everywhere. In the midst of the incessant current of business, of the ferocious fury of appetites and passions, of the disordered and exclusive exercise of utilitarian activity, all sense of decorum had been lost, all respect for the Past laid aside. The battle for gain was being fought with unbridled, implacable violence. The arms used were the pickaxe, the trowel, and bad faith. And from week to week, with almost chimerical rapidity, enormous empty cages, pierced with rectangular holes, their artificial cornices coated with shameful stucco, were rising on foundations filled with heaps of ruins. A species of huge whitish tumour was rising out of the side of the ancient city and sucking away its life.

And then day after day at sunset—as the quarrelsome bands of workmen were dispersing to fill the taverns of the Via Salaria and Via Nomentana—down the princely avenues of the Villa Borghese they drove in shining carriages, these new favourites of fortune, the stamp of whose ignoble origin neither hairdresser, nor tailor, nor bootmaker had been able to remove. One saw them passing to and fro, to the resounding trot of their bay or their black horses, easily recognisable by the insolent awkwardness of their attitudes, the embarrassed look of their rapacious hands imprisoned in gloves always either too large or too small for them. And they seemed to be saying: “We are the new masters of Rome. Bow down to us!”

Such, indeed, were the masters of that Rome which seers and prophets, drunk with the burning fumes of all the Latin blood that has been shed, have compared to the bow of Ulysses—“One must bend it or die.” But these very seers, who for so long had shone as stars in the heroic heaven of their country, before her liberation, had now become “sordid charcoal, only fit to trace an ugly figure or an unseemly word upon the wall,” according to the atrocious simile of an indignant rhetorician. They, too, gave themselves up to selling and bartering, to legal quibbling and setting of snares, and no one alluded any more to the destroying bow. And there seemed in truth no prospect of the cry suddenly arising to terrify them: “O suitors, devourers of other men’s substance, beware! Ulysses is at hand in Ithaca!”

The best thing to do was to withdraw from the scene for a while. And I left with my horses and my household gods without taking farewell of anybody.

For my dwelling-place I had chosen Rebursa, my favourite among my hereditary estates, as it had been my father’s favourite before me; it was a suitable retreat for a healthy soul, a country with a rocky backbone, peculiarly sober in outline and vigorous in style; fit to welcome and nurse the lordly dream of my ambition, as it had welcomed and nursed my father’s lofty melancholy after the fall of his king, and the death of him who, when living, had seemed to be the light of our house, our

surest possession.

Besides, not far from there—at Trigento—I had friends, not forgotten although not seen for many years, friends to whom I was bound by grateful memories of childhood and youth. And the thought of seeing them again cheered my spirit.

At Trigento, in the old baronial palace, surrounded by a garden almost as vast as a park, lived the Capea Montaga, one of the most illustrious and magnificent families in the two Sicilies, a family ruined by ten years' devotion to the fortunes of their exiled king, and obliged now to live a retired life on the only estate left to them, in the heart of the silent province. The old Prince of Castromitrano—who had enjoyed the highest honours at the Courts of Ferdinand and Francis, and who had faithfully followed the exile to Rome and across the Alps without ever renouncing the pomp of happier times—had been dreaming in the shade for years, and for years waiting in vain for the Restoration; he was now sinking into the grave with premature old age, while his children were fading away in the lifeless monotony of their existence. The madness of the Princess Aldoina alone disturbed this long agony by throwing over it gleams of the fantastic splendour of the Past. And nothing could equal the desolation of the contrast between the miserable reality and the pompous phantoms which issued from the brain of the mad woman.

This great and dying race added a kind of funereal beauty to the rocky country for my soul, which was already seeking to absorb all the soul enclosed within that stony cloister. Already a mysterious presentiment had arisen from the depths of my being that my destiny was approaching and mingling with that lonely destiny. And the names of the three maiden princesses resounded in my memory with a faint magical music: Massimilla, Anatolia, Violante—names in which there seemed to me to be something vaguely visible, like a pale portrait behind a clouded glass; names expressive as faces full of light and shade, in which an infinity of grace, passion, and sorrow was already apparent to me.

II

“Grandissima grazia d’ombre e di lumi s’aggiunge ai visi di quelli che seggono sulle porte di quelle abitazioni che sono oscure....”

Leonardo da Vinci.

I was sincerely glad when I recognised on the road to Rebursa, Oddo and Antonello Montaga, who had found out the hour of my arrival and had come to meet me. Both of them embraced me with effusion, delivered messages of welcome from Trigento, and asked me a thousand questions at the same moment; they seemed delighted to see me, and still more delighted when I spoke of my intention of remaining some time in the country.

“You are going to stay with us!” exclaimed Antonello, as he pressed my hand almost beside himself with joy. “Then you are sent by God....” “You must come this very day to Trigento,” said Oddo, interrupting his brother. “They are all expecting you there. You must come to-day....”

They both seemed to me overcome by a strange, almost feverish agitation; their gestures were wild and convulsive, their speech rapid and anxious; they were like two feeble prisoners just set free from an imprisonment which seems like a terrible dream, whom the first contact with outward life has disturbed and confused, making them almost dizzy. The more I looked at them, the more clearly I noticed these strange signs about their persons; and I began to feel anxious and distressed about them.

“I don’t know,” I replied, “I don’t know if I can come to-day. I am weary after so many hours of travelling. But to-morrow....”

I felt a vague desire to be alone, to collect myself, to taste the quality of the strange melancholy that had suddenly fallen upon me. A flood of memories rolled towards me from the things around, and the presence of those two unfortunate beings

prevented my receiving it.

“Then,” said Oddo, “you will come to luncheon with us to-morrow. Do you consent?”

“Yes, I will come.”

“You cannot imagine how eagerly they are expecting you over there.”

“Then you had not forgotten me?”

“Oh, no! It is you who had forgotten us.”

“You had forgotten us,” repeated Antonello with a somewhat distorted smile. “You were right. We are buried.”

The tone of his voice struck me more than his words. His tones, gestures, looks, and all his actions had a singular intensity, like those of a man stricken by a mysterious disease or tormented by a continual hallucination, living in the midst of apparitions invisible to the eyes of others. It did not escape my notice that he was making an effort to break through some atmosphere that surrounded him, and to communicate more directly with me. This effort imparted a contracted and convulsed look to his whole person. My anxiety and distress grew greater.

“You will see our house,” he added with the same smile.

Involuntarily I asked—

“How is Donna Aldoina?”

Both the brothers hung their heads and did not answer.

They were like each other; in fact, they were twins. Both were tall and thin, and a little bent. They had the same light-coloured eyes, the same small silky beards, the same pale, restless, nervous hands, the hands of hysterical subjects. But in Antonello these marks of weakness and disorder were deeper and more irreparable. He was doomed.

During the pause that followed, I vainly sought for words to express myself. I was in

bondage to a kind of melancholy stupor; it seemed as if the whole weight of my weary body had fallen on my soul. The road skirted a line of cliffs, and the horses' trot as it resounded on the hard ground awoke echoes in the lonely hollows. At a turn of the road the river came in sight in the valley, its innumerable windings shining in the sun. A mass of white ruins was visible, enclosed like an island within one of these curves.

"Is not that Linturno over there?" I asked, as I recognised the dead city.

"Yes, that is Linturno," replied Oddo. "Do you remember? We once went there together...."

"I remember."

"What a long time ago it is!"

"What a long time!"

"Now there is not much difference between Linturno and Trigento," said Antonello, stroking his beard hesitatingly with slender fingers, while his eyes seemed to have lost consciousness of outward things. "You will see to-morrow."

"You are disheartening him!" interrupted Oddo with some irritation. "He won't come to-morrow."

"Yes, yes, I will come," I assured them, but I had to force myself to smile and shake off my own overpowering melancholy. "I will come, and shall find some way of cheering you up. You seem to me a little ill from loneliness, a little depressed."

Antonello, who was sitting opposite me, laid his hand on my knee and leant forward to look into my eyes with an indefinable expression of fear and anxiety written in his face, as though he had perceived some terrible meaning in my words, and wished to question me about it. And once more his white face close to my own seemed even in the daylight to belong to a different world, where it existed alone; and brought to my mind those emaciated, spiritual faces that stand out from the mysterious

backgrounds of sacred pictures darkened by time and the smoke of candles.

It was only for a moment. He drew back again without speaking.

“I have brought my horses with me,” I added, controlling my agitation; “we shall go for long rides every day. You must take exercise and shake off the idleness and ennui. How do you pass the hours?”

“In counting them,” said Oddo.

“And your sisters?”

“Oh, poor things!” murmured Oddo with tremulous tenderness in his voice. “Massimilla prays; Violante stifles herself with the perfumes sent her by the Queen; Anatolia—Anatolia is the one who keeps us alive, she is our soul, she lives entirely for us.”

“And the prince?”

“He has aged very much; he is quite white now.”

“And Don Ottavio?”

“He hardly ever leaves his rooms. We have almost forgotten the sound of his voice.”

“And Donna Aldoina?” I was just going to ask again, but I restrained myself and was silent.

We were now in the undulating valley of the Saurgo, in a warm hollow. “How early the spring is here!” I exclaimed, with a desire to console these wretched beings and myself as well. “In February the first flowers come out. Is not that in itself a privilege? You do not know how to enjoy the things life offers you. You convert a garden into a prison and torture yourselves within it.”

“Where are the flowers?” asked Antonello with his painful smile.

We all three began to look out for flowers. The ground was tawny and rugged as a lion’s skin; it seemed made to nourish this dry and harassed but in reality fruitful vegetation. “There they are!” I cried with a keen feeling of pleasure, as I pointed out

a row of almond trees on a long billowy-looking mound.

“They are on your property,” said Oddo.

We had indeed reached the neighbourhood of Rebursa. The rocky chain of hills with its broken outlines and sharp peaks, and the winding Saurgo lapping at its foot, stretched out on the right, and rose step by step up to the highest summit, Mount Corace, which glittered in the sun like a helmet. To the left of the road the ground sloped away in undulations, like a wide stretch of sandy shore, and further away it rose into brown lumpy hills like the humps of camels in the desert.

“Look! look! There are some more up there!” I cried as I noticed another pale silvery cloud of blossom. “Don’t you see, Antonello?”

He looked less at the almond blossom than at me, a timorous smile of amazement hovering on his lips, wondering perhaps at the childish joy which the sight of the early flowers had awaked in me. “But what fairer welcome could the land beloved of my father have given me? What brighter festal decorations could this hardy country with its backbone of rock have worn?”

“If Anatolia, Violante, and Massimilla were only here!” exclaimed Oddo, who began to share my unexpected enthusiasm. “Ah, if they were only here!” and regret was expressed in his voice.

“We must bring them here among the flowers,” said Antonello softly.

“See what a quantity!” I continued, giving myself up to the novel pleasure with the more confidence that I felt able to transfer some share of it to these poor pent-up souls. “I am glad they belong to me, Oddo.”

“We must bring them here among the flowers,” repeated Antonello softly, as if in a dream.

It seemed to me that his feverish eyes were refreshed by the sight of these pure blossoms, and that in his gentle words they were fused with the vague outlines of his

three sisters: “Massimilla prays; Violante stifles herself with perfumes; Anatolia is our life and soul.”

“Stop!” I rose and said to the coachman, for a sudden idea had struck me, and filled me with singular delight. “Let us get out; let us go into the fields. I want you to carry home some branches. It will be a treat for them down there.”

Oddo and Antonello looked at each other with rather a puzzled air, half smiling, half shy, as if the idea were something unforeseen and strange which at once scared them and gave them a delicious sensation. They had shown me their malady, they had revealed to me their sorrow, they had spoken to me of the gloomy prison from which they had come, and were now about to enter again; and here was I, on the high road, asking them to acknowledge and celebrate the feast of spring: of that spring which they had forgotten, and which they appeared to be seeing for the first time after long years, gazing on it with mingled fear and joy as if it were a miracle.

“Let us get out!”

I was tired no longer, for I felt within me the abundance of life, and that exaltation which spontaneous acts of generosity give to the spirit. I was liberal of myself to these two needy souls; I warmed them at my fire, I slaked their thirst with my wine. I read in their eyes (and they were continually looking at me) a kind of submission and faithful surrender. Already they both belonged to me; so I could exert my benevolence and my power over them without fear of failure. “What are you waiting for? Won’t you get out?” I asked Antonello, who was standing with his foot on the step, hesitating as if some danger threatened him.

The contracted smile was still on his face. He was making a visible effort as he put his foot to the ground; he staggered as though he had miscalculated the height, and his first steps were jerky and uncertain. I helped him up the path. As he felt the soft earth sink under his footsteps he paused; and with face turned towards the blossoming trees, he breathed hard, drank in the beautiful sight with his pale eyes,

and appeared to be almost dazzled.

I touched his arm and said—

“You didn’t remember these things.”

Oddo, who had already entered the orchard, exclaimed in a kind of intoxication—

“Ah! if Violante were only here! This perfume is worth far more than the essences sent her by Maria Sophia.”

Antonello repeated softly—

“We must bring them here among the flowers.”

It seemed as though the sound of these words had fascinated his ear from the first, like a musical cadence. His voice kept the same inflections as he repeated them. And as I heard the words again I felt strangely disturbed, almost as if he had addressed them to me. Again the desire to cut some of the branches arose within me. It had died out at the sight of so much living beauty. And vaguely I pictured to myself the great gift of spring arriving at the gloomy palace in the twilight.

“Is there no one about?” I asked impatiently. A peasant came running up. Breathlessly he bent his head, and began to kiss my hand passionately.

“Cut some of the finest branches,” I ordered him.

He was a magnificent example of his species, a worthy inhabitant of this rugged flint-strewn land. He seemed to me like a survivor of Deucalion’s ancient race, sprung from the pebbles. He brandished his bill-hook, and with clean, rapid strokes began to mutilate the joyous vegetable creation. Each stroke sent down a shower of loose petals, which lay like snow on the ground.

“Look,” I said to Antonello, showing him a branch; “did you ever see anything so delicate and so fresh?”

He raised his weak, effeminate hand and touched a flower with the tips of his fingers. It was the gesture of the invalid or convalescent, who touches a living thing

with the dim notion that the contact will leave some small part of its vitality with him, just as butterflies leave behind the ephemeral dust of their wings. He turned to his brother with almost tender melancholy in his painful smile.

“Do you see, Oddo? We had forgotten, we did not know ...”

“But don’t you live in a garden?” I asked, marvelling at the amazement and emotion caused by a simple branch of almond blossom, as though it were an unheard-of novelty. “Don’t you pass your whole time among leaves and flowers?”

“Yes, that is true,” answered Antonello; “but somehow I had ceased to notice them. Besides, these are, or seem to me, quite different. I can’t explain the impression they make on me. You would not understand.”

The ringing sound of the bill-hook went on, and he turned towards the almond tree, which was trembling under the blows. The man was sitting up in the tree, with the trunk in the grip of his muscular legs, and above his head, which was dark as a mulatto’s, hung the fresh silvery cloud, quivering at the glitter of the hooked steel.

“Tell him to stop,” begged Antonello. “We shall not be able to carry all those branches.”

“The carriage shall take you to Trigento with your burden.”

And I lingered on, picturing the arrival of the springlike gift at the gates of the park where the three sisters were waiting. Their faces came before me indistinctly, yet with some trace of the features associated with memories of childhood and youth. And the desire to see them again, to hear their voices, to recall those memories in their presence, to know their troubles, and to take part in their unknown life, grew stronger and stronger within me, till it began to take the acuteness of anxiety.

Following out my own line of thought and feeling (the carriage had already begun to roll towards Rebursa), I said—

“Long ago the park of Trigento used to be full of jonquils and violets.”

“So it is still,” said Oddo.

“There were great hedges of box.”

“So there are still.”

“I remember so well the year you came back from Monaco. Massimilla was very ill. I used to come over to Trigento nearly every day with my mother ...”

We were immersed in spring. The carriage was crammed with almond blossom; it was piled behind our backs and on our knees. Antonello’s white face looked more wasted than ever in the midst of that fragrant whiteness, and the melancholy of his feverish eyes, contrasted with that living expression of youth eternally renewed, went to my heart.

“What a pity you are not coming to Trigento to-day!” said Oddo, with deep regret in his voice. “I don’t like leaving you.”

“Yes, indeed,” added Antonello. “We have seen you to-day for the first time after years and years of silence and oblivion, and now it seems impossible to do without you.”

They spoke these affectionate words with that simplicity and candour which belong to solitary men, not accustomed to the affectations of ordinary life. I felt already that they cared for me and I for them; that the great gap made by the years was already bridged over; and that their fate was about to be bound up irrevocably with mine. Why did my soul incline so specially towards these two prostrate beings? why did it yearn with such infinite desire over graces and sorrows of which it had only caught a glimpse? why was it so impatient to pour out its riches over this poverty? Was it true, then, that the long and hard discipline I had undergone had not dried up the springs of emotion and imagination, but had made them deeper and more fervent? On that February afternoon, warmed by the breath of early spring, a vapour of poetry rose around me. The babbling flow of the Saurgo at the foot of rocks fashioned by fire; the dead city in the marshy river; the peak of Corace, glittering

like a helmet on a threatening brow; the brown fields, strewn with flints full of dormant life; the vines and olives, contorted with the huge effort of producing such rich fruit from such meagre limbs; the whole aspect of the country around was symbolical of the power of thoughts nourished in secret, of the tragic mystery of destinies fulfilled, of painful energy, tyrannical constraint, proud passion, of every harsh and rigid virtue peculiar to lonely scenery or lonely man. And yet the softest of spring airs breathed over the austere land; silver almond blossom crowned the hills, as foam crowns the waves; under the slanting rays the slopes here and there wore the look of soft velvet; the rocky peaks were turned to rosy gold against a sky fading into delicate green. And so the influence of the season and the magic of the hour were able to soften the severe genius of the place, clothe its harshness with tenderness, temper its violence, and throw a gentle enchantment over that rocky basin, fashioned by fire at the terrible bidding of an ancient volcano; afterwards continually invaded and corroded by the greed, or enriched by the liberality, of an ancient river.

“We shall see each other very often,” I said, after a pause, in reply to their kind words. “From Rebursa to Trigento is a short distance; and I know that in you I have found two brothers——”

They both started as a mountain keeper passed us at a gallop, discharging his carbine in the air to give the signal for the salute of welcome and joy. Rebursa rose before me with its four towers of stone, still strong and fair, still bearing intact the impress of its former pride, casting the shadow of its power over a vigorous race, among whom obedience and fidelity were transmitted from father to son as a portion of their inheritance.

But anguish such as I had not felt for long came over my soul as I set foot on the threshold, strewn with myrtle and laurel, where there was no beloved voice to bid me welcome and call me by name. The figures of my dead appeared to me at the

foot of the staircase, and fixed their colourless eyes on me without a movement, without a sign, without a smile.

A little later I followed the carriage with my eyes for a long, long way on the road to Trigento, as it bore away the two sad invalids, nearly buried under flowers. And my soul was there before them at the park gates, where the three sisters were waiting—Anatolia, Violante, Massimilla!—and I caught a glimpse of them as they received the fresh gift of spring in their outstretched arms; and I tried to recognise their noble faces through the fragrant thicket, and to discern the brow of her whom my soul would have elected for the desired union. The gathering twilight heightened this strange and sudden agitation caused by the desire for love. Blue shadows filled the valley of the Saurgo, hid the dead city, crept slowly up the steep terraces of rock; and when stars began to twinkle in the sky, down below festal bonfires were lit; they flared up, multiplied, formed large wreaths. Lonely and lofty, far apart from these signs of life below, the pinnacles of rock still shone, withdrawn almost into the remoteness of a myth, into the sphere of a supernatural atmosphere. And all of a sudden they blazed like fireworks with an extraordinary light, which only lasted a few moments; then they grew paler, turned violet, faded away, and went out. The lofty peak of Corace was the last to remain aflame; its point clove the sky sharply, like the cry of hopeless passion; then, with the rapidity of a lightning flash, it faded away also, and entered the universal night.

“If the severity of thy discipline should have no other reward than the divine emotion that has overwhelmed thee since yesterday, thou mightest still rejoice over the result of thy efforts,” said the dæmon to me, as we rode slowly towards the walled garden. “Now at last thou hast reached maturity! Until yesterday thou knewest not what a degree of maturity and completeness thy soul had attained. The happy revelation comes to thee from the desire thou hast suddenly felt to pour out thy riches, to spread them, to spend them without stint. Thou dost feel thyself inexhaustible, capable of nourishing a thousand lives. This is indeed the prize of thy

diligent efforts; thou possessest now the ready fertility of deeply cultivated land. Therefore enjoy thy spring; leave thyself open to all influences; welcome the unknown and unforeseen, and anything else that fate may bring thee; abolish all prohibitions. The first part of thy task is completed. Thou hast given integrity and intensity to thy nature; let it now be sacred to thee. Respect the slightest motions of thy thought and sentiment, because thy nature alone produces them. Since this nature is entirely thy own, thou mayest yield to it and enjoy it without limits. From henceforth everything is permitted to thee, even that which thou didst hate and despise in others, because everything becomes ennobled after passing through the ordeal of fire. Fear not to be merciful, thou who art strong and able to dominate and chastise. Be not ashamed of thy perplexity and thy languor, thou who hast made thyself a will tempered as hard as beaten swords. Repel not the tenderness which overwhelms thee, the illusion which enfolds thee, the melancholy which attracts thee, all the new indefinable feelings which now approach thy astonished soul. They are but the dim shapes of vapour which escape from the life fermenting in the depths of thy fertile nature. Therefore welcome them without suspicion, for they are not foreign to thee, nor will they diminish or corrupt thy nature. Perhaps on the morrow they will appear to thee as heralds of that new birth which is thy desire."

Never since then have I passed an hour at once so delicious and so painful. I know not if the trees laden with blossom had as keen a sense of their vital power as I had of mine on that clear morning; but they certainly could not feel my vast bewildering perplexity, innumerable feelings, and innumerable thoughts. In order to prolong both pain and delight, I kept my horse at a walk, and lingered on the way, as if that hour were to close for ever a phase of my intimate life, and on my arrival at the fated spot a new and unforeseen phase were to open, the dim presentiment of which was to be found in my increasing uneasiness. From time to time the breath of spring, with its whispering warmth around me, seemed to waft me up into an ether of dreams, to efface in me for a few seconds the consciousness of real personality, and to breathe

into me the virgin ardent soul of one of those hero lovers in fairy tales who ride to find Sleeping Beauties in the Wood. Was not I riding towards the maiden princesses imprisoned in a walled garden? And was not each one of them perhaps in her secret heart expecting the Bridegroom?

Already they appeared before me as pictured by my desire, and already my desire met its first perplexity in the triple image. I asked myself: “Which will be the chosen one?” for within my soul I felt at the same moment the nuptial joy of the one, and the sepulchral sadness of the other two; I felt all the germs of future trouble, and already perceived regret hidden under hope. And again that fear crossed my spirit which once before had disturbed me in the midst of my voluntary discipline: the fear of those blind forces of fate against which the strongest will may struggle in vain; the fear of that sudden whirlwind which in a second may seize the boldest and most tenacious of men, and carry him far away from the promised goal.

I drew up my horse. The road at that point was quite deserted; the groom was following me at a distance. Over the grand, lonely scenery reigned the deepest silence, only broken at intervals by the whispering olives; a steady light shone equally over everything; and in the light and the silence, all things from small leaves to gigantic rocks appeared with a clearness of outline that was almost crude. I felt more strongly than ever the ambiguous something which had entered into me. And I thought: “Was not my soul till yesterday filled with the same clear daylight which now reveals every line of scenery to my attentive sight? And does not this new uncertainty cover some great peril? What if a dangerously large store of poetry has accumulated within me during my solitude, and now requires unlimited expansion? But if I give myself up to the rushing torrent, where will it carry me? Perhaps watchful guard against extraneous life may yet avail; perhaps it may yet avail to refuse to enter the circle which is suddenly opening before me, and will enclose me like a magic ring.” And the dæmon repeated with unhesitating voice: “Fear not! Welcome the unknown and unforeseen and whatever else fate may bring thee;

abolish all prohibitions; go onwards safe and free; have no anxiety save to live. Thy fate can only be fulfilled in the abundance of life."

I urged my horse into a trot, vehemently, as if at that point a great act had been resolved upon. And Trigento appeared on the slope of the hill with its stone houses clustering against the parent rock. At the summit appeared the ancient palace with its walled garden stretching down the opposite slope to the plain. It produced the effect of a great cloister full of forgotten or dead things.

As I dismounted at the gate I heard the voice of Oddo, who was looking out for me.

"Welcome, Claudio!"

He ran to meet me with outstretched arms, as much delighted as the first time.

"I thought you would have come earlier," he said in a reproachful tone; "I have been waiting for you here for the last two hours."

"I lingered on the way," I answered. "I wanted to renew acquaintance with every tree and stone."

With one of those strange sudden movements of his, in which curiosity and timidity were mingled, he went up to my horse and stroked his neck.

"How beautiful he is!" he murmured, and the animal's sensitive neck quivered under the touch of his slender white hand.

"You can ride him whenever you like," I said to him, "either this one or another."

"I hardly think I could sit in the saddle now," he answered; "I believe I should be nervous.... But come! Come! You are expected."

And he led me up a path enclosed within walls of box-wood, feeble with age, and broken here and there by deep gaps, from which a fresh scent of invisible violets seemed to issue, strange as the breath of youth out of a decrepit mouth.

"Yesterday evening," said Oddo rather uneasily, "yesterday evening we brought back joy with your almond blossom. You don't know what we felt, alone in that

carriage, buried under the flowers! Antonello was like a child. I never saw him like that before."

At intervals the green walls opened out into archways, and I caught sight of grassy glades where some long slanting ray of sun pierced the shadow with a sharp outline.

"I never saw him like that before; I never heard him talk so much nonsense."

Stone vases deep and round alternated with statues almost clothed with lichen, maimed or headless statues whose attitudes seemed eloquent to me. And a few daffodils were flowering round their pedestals.

"When we arrived here, we could not get out for the branches. The sisters came to set us free. How happy they were! They went away laden. We heard them laughing up the stairs. All such things are new to us, Claudio."

A whispered splash reached my ear; the vague sound of a hidden fountain. An indefinable anxiety weighed upon my heart.

"We talked about you the whole evening, and remembered many things of long ago, and perhaps made some air-castles for the future. Who would ever have thought of your coming back? But none of us can believe yet that you will stay.... We feel as if after a few days you would escape us. It is not easy to bear this life of ours. Massimilla, you see, prefers a convent.... Did you not know that Massimilla is just going to leave us?"

As I walked up the path, brushing against the walls of vegetation, a strong, bitter odour reached my nostrils from the little, fresh box leaves which shone like beryls among the thick green.

"Ah! here is Violante!" exclaimed Oddo, touching my arm.

At the sudden apparition my heart gave a great bound, and I felt the colour rise in my face.

She was sitting under a lofty arch of box, with her feet upon the grass; a strip of

meadow seen through the opening lay behind her, streaked with gold.

She smiled without rising, waiting till we came near; and she seemed to be offering her whole beauty to my astonished gaze in that calm attitude, as she sat on the green sward where perhaps her fingers had gathered the numerous violets ornamenting her girdle. As she stretched out her hand to me, she looked me full in the face, and said in a voice which was the perfect musical expression of the form it came from—

“You are welcome. We were expecting you yesterday. Oddo and Antonello brought us your gift instead, and it was no less acceptable.”

I said: “After many years I am once again entering your grounds, where I used long ago to accompany my mother, and already I begin to regret having stayed so long away. On leaving Rome I knew that I should find an empty house at Rebursa, but I did not know how richly Trigento would compensate for it. I owe you much gratitude.”

“We shall owe you gratitude,” she interrupted, “if you do not find our society wearisome. You know that this place is destitute of joy.”

“Even sadness has its benefit for him who understands how to taste it, has it not?”

“Perhaps.”

“Besides, I assure you, since I passed the gate I have experienced none but exquisite sensations here. This great garden seems to me delicious. It is impossible not to feel the poetry of its antiquity! Yesterday when I saw Oddo and Antonello in raptures over that almond blossom, as if they had never seen a flowering tree before, I thought everything here must be withered and dead. Instead of which I find within your gates a more enchanting display of spring than that which I left outside. Aren’t you tired with gathering violets in the grass? Your girdle is full of them.”

She smiled and looked down towards her waist, and with her bare fingers caressed the violets which adorned it.

“You come from the city,” she said. Her voice was musical but rather veiled, and the richness of its tone was a little exhausted, as if very slightly cracked; “you come from the city, and the country is offering you her firstfruits.”

“I don’t know how it is, but certain things always seem new.”

“We see these things no longer, and love them no longer,” said Oddo, with some melancholy. “Probably Violante cannot smell the scent of the flowers she picks.”

“Is that true?” I asked, turning to her. My eyes were struck by the profile of marble under her abundant hair and the motionless attitude, which reminded one of immortal statues.

“What were you saying?” she asked, like one returning from far off; she had not heard her brother’s words.

“Oddo says you cannot smell the scent of the flowers you pick. Is it true?”

A faint touch of red coloured her cheeks.

“Oh, no!” she answered, with a vivacity quite in contrast with the slow rhythm to which her life seemed set. “Don’t believe Oddo. He says that because I am fond of strong scents; but I can smell the faintest also, even those of the stones.”

“Of the stones?” said Oddo, laughing.

“What do you know about it, Oddo? Be quiet.”

We were walking up the great flight of steps covered with trellises leading in symmetrical order to the palace; she went up slowly between us, step by step. The stairs were very wide, and she made a step forward on each, and then each time paused an instant before putting her foot on the next, and this movement caused her always to lift the same foot. Wearied by the frequent repetition of the movement, she sometimes relaxed her body a little as she stood with bended knee and slackened the proud will which kept her figure as erect as a perfect stalk. An unexpected softness then came over her superb form; a new rhythm revealed what I should call the docile

graces, the pliant qualities of love. So strong was the power emanating from this beautiful being, that I could not take my eyes off her movements; and I lingered behind so that my entire gaze should encircle her. She seemed to drive my spirit back into the marvellous epoch when artists drew from dormant matter those perfect forms which men regarded as the only truths worthy of worship on earth. And I thought as I looked at her and ascended behind her: “It is right she should remain untouched. Only by a god could she be possessed without shame.” And as her queenly head passed onwards in the light—her native element—I felt that her beauty was on the verge of its perfect maturity, of its highest effort, and I thanked fortune for having permitted me such a sight. “Ah, I shall worship her, but I shall not dare to love her; I shall not dare to look into her soul and surprise its secrets. Yet her every movement reveals that she was made for love; but it was for barren love, not for the love that creates. Her body will never bear the disfiguring burden; the flood of milk will never mar the pure outline of her bosom.”

She stopped, impatient at the effort, and a little out of breath, and said—

“How tiring these stairs are! Let us take a rest here, if you don’t mind.”

“Here are Antonello and Anatolia coming down,” remarked Oddo, who had seen the two, through the open bars of the trellises, descending the first flight of steps. “Let us wait for them.”

Moving towards us came she who had been represented to me as the giver of strength, the beneficent powerful maiden, the rich and generous soul. She appeared from the first as a support, for Antonello was leaning on her arm, and setting his hesitating steps to the measure of her firm ones.

“Which of us,” asked Violante suddenly, but so lightly as to remove all indiscretion from the question, “which of us do you remember least indistinctly?”

“I really don’t know,” I answered vaguely, for my ears were listening to the rustle of Anatolia’s dress.

“But certainly the figures I remember have hardly anything in common with the present reality. Since the day I went away we have passed through that period of life when transformations are most rapid and most deep.”

The two others had come up. Anatolia also put out her hand, saying—

“You are welcome.”

Her actions had a kind of manly frankness, and the contact of her hand gave me an impression of generous strength and genuine kindness; it seemed to inspire me suddenly with brotherly confidence.

It was a hand unadorned with rings, not too white nor too slim, but robust in its pure shape, ready to clasp and to give support, flexible and firm at the same time. There was an impress of pride on its surface, varied as it was by the low relief of the joints and the intricacy of the veins, and there were lines of softness in the hollow warmth of the palm, where a radiant fire of feeling seemed to glow.

“You are welcome,” said the warm, cordial voice. “You have brought us spring and sunshine from Rome——”

“Oh no!” I interrupted. “I found them both here. In Rome I left nothing but mist and other gloomy things. I have just been saying how much I regret having stayed away from here so long.”

“You must make amends to us for your forgetfulness,” said Antonello with his painful smile.

“What do you think of Trigento?” asked Anatolia. “It is hardly changed at all, is it? You used to come here with your mother. You remember, don’t you? We have never forgotten her, nor ever shall. Among the things which have remained unchanged here, you will find the memory of that saintly soul and her wonderful kindness.”

A grave silence followed these words of recollection. For a few moments the sense of death which fell upon my filial heart threw an aspect of unreality on all the

persons and things present. For a few moments everything seemed to become as far away and empty as the sky whose fading colour I could see through the bare vine branches of the trellis as if through a ragged net. But as the brief illusion vanished, I felt myself nearer to her who had produced it, and I could not waste time again in idle words. I wanted to penetrate into the heart of their sadness.

“And Donna Aldoina?” I asked in a low voice, turning to Anatolia, and speaking now to her alone.

Was she not probably the real guardian of the gloomy dwelling? By calling up the memory of death had she not herself raised the image of the lunatic?

“She is still just the same,” she replied, also in a low voice. “It is better you should not see her, to-day at least. It would be too painful for you. And imagine what it is for us! It is a daily torture, a torture that has lasted for years without pause, to the wearing of our souls....” Her eyes cast a momentary furtive look towards Antonello, and I read in them the secret terror that she felt for the poor invalid who was trembling on the precipice.

“We have never had the courage to separate her from us, to send her away,” she added, “for she is not violent; in fact, she is quite gentle. Sometimes she seems cured; we almost believe that a miracle has come to pass; she calls us by our names, remembers some little thing that happened long ago, and smiles calmly. Although we know that it is all an illusion, every time we tremble with hope, every time we choke with anxiety. You understand....”

Her voice lost its tone in her sorrow, like a loose musical string.

“It is impossible to confine her to her rooms, to keep her shut up; it is impossible. And we have not the heart to avoid her when she appears, when she comes to meet us, when she speaks to us. So she is continually at our side; she is mingled with our existence....”

“Some days,” interrupted Antonello suddenly, with a kind of impetuosity, as if

driven on by uncontrollable excitement, “some days the whole house is full of her. We breathe her madness. One or other of us stays by her for hours and hours while she talks on; sits opposite her with hands imprisoned in those trembling hands of hers. Do you understand?”

A new and still more oppressive silence fell upon us all. And every one of us was suffering, as he acknowledged in his soul the reality of the sorrow which the slender blue shadows of the trellis, mingled with the gentle gold of the sun, seemed to wrap in a veil of dreams. Through the silence the sound of a light footfall was heard coming up the lower flight of steps. At regular intervals came a faint bubbling sound as if a fountain was overflowing its basin. A mysterious quiver seemed to shake the lonely garden below. And I understood how a gloomy and feeble mind might construct an unreal life out of these phantoms, and nourish it till overcome by it.

Thus the torture to which destiny had condemned these last survivors of a fallen race was suddenly revealed to me in all its horrors; and the vision called up by the words of one who was certainly to become a victim appeared to me magnified by a tragic light. In imagination I could see the mad old princess sitting in the shadow of her distant apartment, and one of her children leaning over her, with hands imprisoned in hers. The attitude of this mournful enchantress seemed to me fatal and inexorable. I felt as if she were unconsciously drawing all the children of her blood one after the other into the circle of her madness, and as if not one of them would be able to escape that blind and cruel force. Like an ancestral Erinnys, she was presiding over the dissolution of her race.

Then through the bare branches of the trellis I gazed up at the silent palace, which till that day had harboured in its grim depths such desperate anguish, and hidden so many useless tears—tears falling from pure and eager eyes, worthy of reflecting the most glorious sights of the world, and of pouring joy into the soul of poets and rulers.

“Eyes of Beauty!” I thought, gazing again at the motionless Violante. “What earthly misery can veil the splendour of the truth that shines forth from you? What afflicted soul can fail to acknowledge the consoling power that flows from you?” The pain I had been feeling ceased suddenly, as if balm had been applied; the troublous images faded away like a mournful vapour.

She was seated motionless on a stone plinth which had once supported an urn. Her elbow rested on her knee, her chin in her hand; in this simple attitude her whole figure expressed that succession of mute harmonies which is the secret of supreme art. She seemed to be present with us, and yet apart. Upon her low forehead was visible the reflection of the ideal crown that she wore upon her thoughts; and her hair, gathered up in a great knot on her neck, seemed to have obeyed the same rhythm which regulates the repose of the sea.

“Massimilla,” said Oddo, introducing the third sister.

I turned, and found she was already close to us. She was ascending the last steps with her light tread. Her face and her whole person bore traces of the dream in which she had been plunged, of the intimate poetry of the hour just past, spent with a faithful book in the solitude of the nook known to her alone.

“Where have you been?” asked Oddo before she reached us.

She smiled shyly, and a faint colour tinged her thin cheeks.

“Down there,” she answered, “reading.”

Her voice sounded liquid and silvery as it came through the delicate lips. There was a blade of grass as a marker in the pages of her book.

As I bowed she gave me her hand, still with the same shy smile. And something of the tender compassion I used to feel long ago for the little invalid my mother visited awoke again in my soul; for her hand was so slight and soft, that it reminded me of those slender flowers called day lilies, which bloom for one day only in the hot sand.

She did not speak, and neither could I find words delicate enough to be appropriate to her timid grace.

“Shall we go up?” said Anatolia, turning to me, her clear voice at once breaking through the kind of spell which the unutterable melancholy of our thoughts had cast over us as we sat in the warmth under the trellis.

“Our father wants so much to see you again,” and we all began to ascend the steps towards the palace.

The three sisters went first, a little apart from each other, Anatolia first, Massimilla last. They said a few words now and then in turn, for the silence of things around demanded the sound of their voices, and perhaps they hoped to chase away the sadness of that silence from over the head of their guest. Those short sonorous cadences flowing from unseen lips grew fainter as I advanced; and I ascended with the voices and the shadows of the maidens round me, feeling as amazed and perplexed as if I were in enchantment. But though the three rhythms alternated in my ear, to my sight they appeared simultaneous and continuous, so that from time to time my spirit would listen attentively to seize the difference, or would take a concave form, so to speak, that therein they might melt into one deep harmony. And like those episodes which in a fugue fill up the silence of the theme, the aspect of the things we passed, or the peculiarities of the forms, entered into me, and enriched my musical sense without ruffling it. Marks of decay and neglect were strewn over the ancient steps, here and there still encumbered with the spoils of the previous autumn. There was the statue of a recumbent nymph, with the head bent in a painful position, for the moss-stained brow was deprived of the support of the arm. In a long vase of reddish clay, like a sarcophagus, common grass was growing, and in the midst of this hostile invasion a single plant of daffodils was flowering feebly and tremulously. Under a bit of broken parapet thrown down by the penetrating roots of the ivy appeared an inner channel like a broken artery; and one saw the sparkle and

heard the murmur of the water as it flowed to fill the heart of the weeping fountain. Marks of decay and neglect were strewn on our path. The statue, the flower, and the water spoke to me of the same truth. And Violante, and Massimilla, and Anatolia were transfigured in my mind by means of mysterious analogies.

“Oh, beautiful souls,” I thought, as I measured the rhythm of their visible existence, “is not the perfection of human love perhaps to be found in your trinity? You are the triple form which appeared to my desire in the hour of the great harmony. In you all the highest needs of my flesh and spirit might be satisfied; and you might become the miraculous instruments of my will and of my fate in the fulfilment of the work I have to do. Are you not such as I myself would have created to adorn with sublime beauty and sorrow, the mysterious world of which I am the creator? To-day, I know nothing of you beyond the outward appearance and a few passing words; but I feel that ere long each one of you in her entire being will correspond to the image which breathes and throbs within me.”

Thus did the three sisters ascend in my aspirations and my prayers, each one obedient to the secret music that was guiding her life towards an unknown end. And their figures threw great shadows on the stone.

When I set foot on the threshold, the fantastic image of the mad woman took hold of my mind so vividly and fiercely that I gave a secret shudder. The whole place seemed to me to be under her sinister sway, saddened and cast down by her perpetual presence. I thought I read the same uneasiness in the faces of her children. And I felt as if we should find her awaiting us at the top of the stairs.

Anatolia guessed my thoughts, and softly said to reassure me—

“Don’t be afraid.... You won’t see her.... I have arranged that you should not see her, just now at any rate.... Try not to think of her, so that our hospitality may not seem too gloomy.”

Antonello was looking up through the glass of the loggia which surrounded the

court, and watching with those anxious eyes and trembling eyelids of his.

“Do you see the grass?” exclaimed Oddo, pointing out to me the long blades of green growing along the walls and in the interstices of the paving-stones.

“It is the token and augury of peace,” I said, trying to shake off the oppression and be cheerful. “I was sorry not to find it yesterday in my own courtyard. They had taken it away, but I should have preferred it to all the festive leaves of myrtle and laurel. Grass ought to be allowed to grow, especially in very large houses. It is a living thing the more.”

The courtyard resounded like the nave of a church, and the echoes were quick to catch up even the words spoken lowest. As I looked at the silent fountain, I thought of the mysterious music with which the water might have invited those attentive and favourable echoes.

“Why is the fountain dumb?” I asked, wishing to take every opportunity of supporting the cause of life in that cloister filled with forgotten or dead things. “Further down on the steps, I heard the sound of water.”

“You must apply to Antonello,” said Violante. “It is he who imposed silence on it.”

The face of the unfortunate invalid coloured slightly, and his eyes grew troubled, as though he were going to yield to an impulse of anger. It seemed almost as if Violante’s harmless accusation had made him ashamed and sorrowful, or as if a dispute already closed had been reopened. He contained himself, but annoyance altered his voice.

“Fancy, Claudio, my rooms are up there,” he said, pointing to one side of the loggia, “and from there one can hear the fountain roaring like a waterfall. Just think! The noise is distracting, something incredible. Don’t you hear what an echo the voice has here? And in the daytime too!”

His whole tall, thin body quivered with aversion to noise, with the nervous horror, the uncontrollable abhorrence of which he had shown signs the day before when he

started at the shots from the carbine and the shouts of the men.

“But I wish you could hear it at night,” he continued excitedly. “I wish you could hear it! The water is water no longer; it is a lost soul, howling, laughing, sobbing, stammering, jeering, calling, commanding. It is something incredible! Sometimes as I have lain awake listening, I have forgotten that it was water; and I have not been able to remember.... Do you understand?”

He stopped suddenly, evidently trying to control himself, and he looked distractedly at Anatolia. The pain in her face disappeared under that look; it was hidden and controlled. And she, as if to disperse the uneasiness we all felt, said almost gaily: “Indeed, Antonello is not exaggerating. Shall we call up the lost soul? Nothing is easier.”

We were all there round the dry fountain. The unexpected halt, the words and the look of the unhappy man, the solemnity of the enclosed court, the silvery coldness of the light that rained down from above, and the approaching metamorphosis, seemed to confer something of the mystery of a work of magic on that ancient, lifeless thing. The mass of marble—a pompous composition of Neptune’s horses, tritons, dolphins, and shells in triple order—rose before our eyes, covered with a greyish crust of dried-up lichens, glittering white here and there like an aspen stem; and all the human and animal mouths seemed still in their silence to preserve the same attitudes in which but lately liquid voices had flowed from their lips.

“Stand back,” added Anatolia, as she stooped down over a bronze disc that covered a round aperture in the pavement near the edge of the lower basin. “I am going to turn on the water.”

And she put her finger through the ring in the middle of the disc, and tried to lift its weight; but she could not, and rose up with her face scarlet from the exertion. I came to her assistance, and when it was open, she stooped again and found the secret spring with her hand. We both stood back in mutual agreement, and now the

bubbling water was to be heard rising in the veins of the empty fountain.

And there was a moment of anxious expectation, as if the mouths of the monsters were about to give answer. Involuntarily I pictured the joy of the stone as the fresh liquid life invaded it, and imagined to myself the impossible shudders it must feel.

The tritons were blowing their trumpets, the dolphins' throats were gurgling. From the top a jet of water sprang up hissing, clear and quick as a sword-thrust sent into the blue; it broke, retired, hesitated, rose again straighter and stronger than ever; it hung in the air, turned adamant, shot up like a stalk, and seemed to burst into flower. First a short, sharp sound like the crack of a whip echoed through the court, then came something like a burst of Homeric laughter, then a thunder of applause, then a shower of rain. Every mouth sent out a jet of water, and each jet curved into an arch to fill the shell beneath. Here and there the stone was sprinkled with dark stains, and the smooth parts shone, and the rivulets grew more and more numerous; at last every part of it rejoiced at the touch of the water; it seemed to open all its pores to the countless drops, and revive like a tree refreshed by a cloud. Rapidly the slightest hollows filled up, overflowed, and took the shape of silver crowns, continually destroyed and as continually renewed. Every instant as the play was multiplied by the variety of the sculpture, the continuous sounds grew louder and formed a deeper and deeper music in the great echo of the walls. Above the voluble symphony of water falling into water rose the mighty bubbling and gushing of the central jet, as it dashed the marvellous flowers that came out from moment to moment at the top of its stalk against the necks of the Tritons.

"Do you hear?" exclaimed Antonello, as he looked at this triumph with eyes of enmity. "Do you think this racket would be tolerable for long?"

"Ah, I could stay here for hours and days listening to it," I thought I heard Violante saying, in a voice more veiled than ever. "There is no music I love so well."

She had stayed so near the fountain that she was sprinkled all over with drops, and

her hair was strewn with sparkling dust. The power of her beauty again excluded any other thought, any discordant image from my mind. Again she seemed to me isolated and unapproachable, outside of the sphere of ordinary life, more like a vision of art than a creature of our own species. Everything round her acknowledged the sovereignty of her presence, for everything referred to, and submitted to, and harmonised with, her beauty. Like the great arch of green that bent over her when first she appeared to me, like the ancient plinth on which she had rested, this musical fountain open to the sky seemed created for her alone; it seemed to correspond perfectly with that ideal harmony expressed in her simple attitude. Secret and inexplicable affinities united the most diverse things to her being, and brought back all surrounding mysteries to the mystery of herself. Since nature in this human form had revealed one of her supreme ideas of perfection, it seemed to me that all other ideas in all other mortal shapes should by nature serve to lead the spirit of the beholder to contemplate that one supreme idea.

And so it came about, that as I watched the maiden by the fountain I discovered and treasured up a pure truth: “When Beauty reveals herself, all the elements of life converge towards her as towards a centre, and so she has for her tribute the entire Universe.”

“One of our troubles,” said Oddo, as we walked up the wide balustraded staircase, upon whose silent walls the sixteenth century decorations of streamers and clouds imitated the fury of a tempest, “one of our troubles is the vastness of the house; it gives us a feeling of being astray, a humiliating feeling of our own littleness.”

The building was, in fact, a great deal too spacious and too empty. It had been restored in the seventeenth century, and transformed from a feudal fortress into a country villa, and all the formidable hugeness of its walls and vaults remained, although successive epochs had left the impress of art and of luxury, sometimes on their surface, and sometimes in contrast to them. The enormous number of mirrors

with which whole walls were covered multiplied the space into infinity. And nothing was more mournful than those pale, delusive abysses, which seemed to open into a supernatural world, and to promise at every moment to show the living beholder visions of the dead.

“Claudio, my boy!” exclaimed Prince Luzio in a voice full of emotion, coming forward as soon as he saw me. “Dear, dear boy!”

I felt his old worn body tremble as he embraced me and kissed me on the forehead in a fatherly way. With his hand still on my shoulder, he gazed long into my face as if in a dream, while a wave of memories, sorrows, and complaints passed across the ashy blue of his feeble eyes.

“How like you are to your father!” he added, in a still more affectionate voice, and his emotion took possession of me also. “It is a marvellous likeness. I feel as though I beheld Massenzio again in his youth, when we were companions in the Life Guards.... He seems to have come to life again. How like him you are, my boy!”

He took me by the hand and led me to the window, as if he wished to withdraw with me into the contemplation of long past things.

“How like him you are!” he repeated when he saw my face in the full light. “Oh, if that blessed soul were only living still. He ought not to have died, my God, he ought not to have died.”

He shook his head in token of regret over the phantom of that beautiful life so early cut off. And the sincerity of his affection was so great, that I was touched to the bottom of my soul, and I could no longer feel a stranger in that house where the memory of my dead was kept so reverently fresh. “Look,” added the Prince, stroking the point of his white beard, and smiling a smile in which I caught glimpses of Anatolia’s noble sweetness; “look how old I have grown!”

His whole figure betrayed a painful feebleness, but the radiance of his premature white hair gave his head a look of venerable majesty, and his brow still bore the

hereditary stamp of his lordly race. His hands had escaped almost by a miracle from any injury by sickness and old age; there was no aged deformity about them. They were still strong and fair as if embalmed; those liberal hands of the munificent noble who had lavished his riches on the path of the exile, only that the eyes of his king might shine awhile longer with the reflection of fallen royalty. And as a kind of memorial of the treasures so prodigally spent there shone a cameo in his signet ring.

Those hands with their slow movements seemed, as the sluggish blood revived with the heat of memories, to be drawing some remnant of a vanished world out of a sphere of shadow, and this faculty gave them a singular meaning in my eyes. When the old man sat down and laid his hands on the arms of the chair, they seemed to me like relics, and I looked at them with a strange feeling of almost superstitious respect. They made me feel, very strongly, as if I were living at that moment in my own world of poetry, and not in the world of fact.

Seeing my eyes fixed on the carved gem, the prince smiled and said: “It is Violante’s portrait.”

He took off the ring and handed it to me.

The delicate work was by some ancient artist not unworthy of Pirgotelus or Dioscuridas; but the divine features of the Medusa, relieved against the blood-red background of sardonyx, corresponded so perfectly to the likeness of the proud creature, that I thought: “Truly then did she illuminate the art of bygone days, and from time immemorial bestowed upon durable matter the privilege of perpetuating the Idea of which she is to-day the Incarnation.”

“Her mother used to wear this ring just before she was born,” added the prince with the same gentle smile, “and she was always looking at it.”

In such a manner, and at every moment, the conformity of things raised my spirit into an ideal state, which resembled a state of reverie and second-sight without actually attaining to it, and this same conformity furnished harmonious material to

my sensibility and imagination. And I watched the continuous generation of a higher life within myself, which transfigured everything as if by the virtue of a magic glass.

The three elect beings seemed mutually to throw light and shade on each other, and the lights and shades had the significance of a language which I was already able to interpret as clearly as if it had been familiar to me for long. And so I stood not only bewildered by the reflection of the rock, but struck by the lightning flashes of my thoughts, when Violante went up to an open window, pointed out a view which she seemed to have called up with a wave of her hand, and said—

“Look.”

It was a window facing north, on the opposite side of the palace from the garden, and it looked out over a precipice. As I leant out an impetuous shudder ran through me, and raised me suddenly to a sentiment of appreciation of this silent and terrible grandeur.

“Is this your secret?” I asked the enchantress, but I did not put my question into words, for at her side silence itself seemed eloquent. The rock descended abruptly from the massive buttresses which supported the northern wall, till at the bottom it ended in a hard white river bed, whose very dryness seemed ominous of the ruinous anger of a torrent. With that same atrocious, desperate violence which the lava streams have as they rush down to the Sicilian Sea, and rebound and rise up and twist themselves into black and red masses, screaming, roaring, hissing at the first contact with the water; with that same violence the rock at the bottom of the river-bed rose and flung itself heavenwards, and towered opposite the great wall built by man, with a kind of dumb fury animating its gigantic mass. All the wildest convulsions and contortions of bodies possessed by demoniac power or deadly spasms seemed petrified for ever in that terrible form, terrible as the cliff whence Dante caught sight of fresh horrors on his way to the river of blood guarded by the Centaurs. All the shapes of which pliable metal and scoriæ are capable were there

contrasted with the hard stone; ringlets of rebellious hair, coils of angry serpents, intricacies of roots laid bare, sheaves of muscles, circles of the whirlpool, folds of draperies, twists of rope. This vision of frenzied turbulence rose perfectly motionless in the blaze of the midday sun, without a line of shadow. The throbbing of a high fever seemed hidden beneath the lifeless crust.

“Is this your secret?” I repeated to the enchantress, still without words, for my inward agitation would not allow me to select or control the accents of my voice.

She stood beside me, silent also; and I did not look at her, nor did she look at me. But as we leant out towards the many shaped rock, we were united to each other by the same fascination which draws together those who read out of the same book. We were both reading out of the same fascinating, dangerous book.

She said, as she raised her head with a slight start—

“Do you hear the hawks?”

And we both searched the summits with dazzled eyes.

“Listen.”

The rock rose to heaven bristling with points and stained a reddish colour like rust or clotted blood; and the screams of the birds of prey heightened the impression of its savage pride.

Then a sudden giddiness overwhelmed me—a sort of horror of too vast ambitions and desires. Perhaps in the very depths of my being the primitive feelings of early forefathers awoke; for my indescribable agitation took the form of a lightning-like succession of flashing visions, in which I saw men like myself pouring into vanquished cities, leaping over heaps of corpses and ruins, with untiring gestures, thrusting their swords into men’s bodies, carrying half-naked women on their saddle-bows through the innumerable flames of a conflagration, while their horses, lithe cruel animals like leopards, waded up to their bellies in blood.

“Ah, I should have known how to possess thee in the midst of slaughter under a canopy of fire, overshadowed by the wing of death!” said the soul of my ancestors to her who stood by my side. “My will would have urged my body to the performance of prodigies of valour; and though I had had to clamber up the smooth sides of this wall, defended by a thousand bowmen, yet I should have borne thee away alive.”

Filled with the glow from this magnificent and tremendous desolation reaching to the heavens, my eyes fell on the maiden’s face, and saw it so strongly lit up by the reflection, that an almost painful joy swept over me. And I felt a mad desire to take that head in my hands, turn it back, bring it close to my lips, gaze on it more closely, impress every line of it in my thought—a feeling not unlike his who finds under the barren soil some sublime fragment which will reveal to the world the glory of an idea for long nearly extinct.

She was like a statue placed in full view of the rising sun; her perfection did not fear the light. In her bodily form I saw the impress of the eternal type, and at the same moment I recognised the fragility of the flesh, which bore no immunity from human fate. She was like a delicious fruit at the highest point of its maturity, beyond which point corruption sets in. The skin of her face had the wonderful transparency of the blossom which to-morrow will fade.

“Who shall deliver thee from the sacrilege of Time the destroyer? Who shall slay thee with a mortal dart at the summit of thy perfection when the miserable signs of decay begin to appear?” The dark saying of her brother came back to my mind: “Violante is killing herself with perfumes.” ... And silently I worshipped her, with a religious desire to praise her in her every movement. “Oh sovereign being, feeling thou art perfect, thou dost also feel the necessity of death; thou dost know that only death can preserve thee from all base injury; and since everything in thee is noble, thou dost purpose to offer to that solemn custody a body royally embalmed in perfumes.”

After such draughts of balmy wine, how could the meal to which we sat down have any savour?

Yet the vague and colourless things that surrounded my musings composed themselves into a kind of quiet harmony, which little by little soothed the passion that had been kindled in my soul by the volcanic rock.

The walls were covered with mirrors, symmetrically divided all round into compartments by little gilt pillars, while the surface of each compartment was painted with festoons and clusters of roses alternately, and the mirrors were tarnished and green as the waters of lonely pools, and the little pillars were delicately twisted like the fair locks of girls, and the roses were faint and languid as the garlands which crown the waxen martyrs in sanctuaries. But in honour perhaps of the guest who was the donor, the long branches of almond blossom had been ingeniously wreathed among the sconces of the candelabra. They spread their still fresh and living blossoms over the ancient mirrors, and multiplied reflections in the green pallor seemed to create the semblance of a far-off watery springtime.

There was a kind of quiet charm about all these things which seemed to descend and mingle with Massimilla's grace; so much so, that I felt as if the maiden already promised to Jesus shared their nature. She seemed already to wear the appearance of a being "who has departed from this present age," like Beatrice in the vision of the Vita Nuova, as if, with her meek air, she were saying also: "I am about to behold the beginning of peace."

She sat opposite me, and I looked at her, till this fancy of mine grew so strong that I began to imagine her absent and her place empty for a few moments. And immediately the empty space was filled with a deep shadow resembling the mouth of a pit into which all the kindred were to be cast, one after another. And thus I was able to attain a unique and tragic vision of all these living beings, in the extraordinarily clear relief afforded by that background of shadow.

They were eating a meal round the accustomed table; they made the ordinary movements demanded by natural necessity; from time to time they said a few simple words. But their tones and actions seemed accompanied by a mystery which at times endowed them with an almost terrible significance or again at times made them almost as laughable as the play of automatons. One contrast was cruelly clear, that between the manner of vital functions they were fulfilling and the signs of inevitable destruction which were being fulfilled in them. Seated on the right of Massimilla, Antonello displayed in his whole behaviour a sort of repressed impatience, as if he were compelled to use his hands to feed, not himself, but a stranger. And as I gazed at him, an intuition flashed through me of the horror that strangled him as he realised the presence of a stranger within him, a presence dimly felt as yet, but still certain. And my eyes, passing instinctively to Oddo, who sat on Massimilla's left, noticed in his attitude something like a feeble reflection of his brother's discomfort. Nothing seemed to me sweeter than that virginal figure sitting calm amidst their restlessness, like a statue of prayer.

A strange odour of honey from the almond blossom filled the warm air. Sometimes a petal, rosier than the others, dropped down the mirror and fell as into silent water. And I remembered our stay in the orchard.

Ah, indeed, how could those wretched eyes, tormented by phantoms, perceive pure and beautiful things? What was I doing there myself except holding a commemoration of the dead? Everything round me grew dim like the walls, and seemed to recede into a distant past; everything assumed an antiquated and faded look, and appeared to be covered with dust. The two servants moved slowly and dreamily about in their blue liveries and long white stockings; they looked as if they had come out of an old wardrobe of the last century;—melancholy ruins of former luxury. When they withdrew they seemed to vanish like shadows into the delusive distance of the mirrors, and to re-enter their inanimate world.

But the spell was broken by the voice of the prince, a voice which called up old memories. Every one kept a respectful silence while he was speaking; and no sound was heard but that of his deep aged voice, which at times became hoarse with repressed anger, or trembled with heartfelt sorrow and regret.

It chanced to be a disastrous day for the old man; it was the anniversary of the king's flight to Gaeta; it completed the twenty-first year of exile.

"Well," he said, as he turned to me with a glance kindling with faith, looking, with his white beard, almost like one of the ancient prophets, "well, Claudio, when a king falls as Francis of Bourbon fell at Gaeta, that is to say, like a martyr and a hero, it is impossible not to believe that God will raise him up again and restore his kingdom. Mark my words, son of Massenzio Cantelmo, and do not forget them. And God grant that this come to pass before my eyes are closed! That is my only desire."

He was preparing an apotheosis of fire and blood on the ruins of the strong city for the pale ghost of royalty.

"Wonderful faith!" I thought, as I saw what sparks could still glow in the ashy blue of those feeble eyes. "Wonderful and vain faith! The power of the Bourbons slumbers at San Dionigi." And as the old man's words called up the gleaming vision of the Bavarian heroine, my contempt increased for that king of twenty-three, on whom Fortune had bestowed the very horse which carried Henry of Navarre to Paris, and who was cowardly enough, like the miserable Philip V., to have no ambition to ride anything more substantial than the imaginary horses of the tapestries that lined his walls.

"What a magnificent enterprise lay before that Bourbon prince when he departed from the palace at Caserta, where the doctors were busy embalming the corpse of his murdered father as it lay pierced with innumerable wounds!" I thought, in the eager spirit which the warlike images evoked by the venerable old man had kindled in me. "Nothing was wanting to incite him, not even the corruption and odour of corpses,

which are powerful to inspire thoughts of greatness. In very truth, everything was his: the lordly power of an ancient name, youth, which attracts and carries men away, kingship over three fair seas accustomed to tyranny, a rich kingdom in sight of a curved bay sonorous as a lyre, a passionate companion, who seemed to draw in through her delicate nostrils the atmosphere of heroic ambitions, a temperament capable of trembling with the voluptuousness of power, and full of the electric current which directs the hurricane. All these were his to enjoy and to defend; and still, as exiled husband on the farthest shore of another sea, his ear was filled with the clamour of his faithful people, although another kind of clamour reached him also; and the opportunity was offered to him of a splendid struggle beyond the limits of his dominions, on fields already watered with blood, and smoking with the strength of their fermentation—fields open to the strongest thought, the noblest word, the swiftest sword. In very truth, everything was his, save the lion's nature. Why was it Fortune's will to heap the burden of such favours upon a feeble, lamb-like nature? Never did blood so cowardly flow in youthful veins, never was there a more torpid sensuality. The very beauty of his lawful kingdom, the divine outlines of the shore, the balmy air, the mystery of the nights, all the enchantments of the dying summer, ought at least to have touched the senses of the youth, to have awaked in him the deep desire for possession, to have communicated to him the savage rage for living. Ah, that last evening in the almost deserted palace, forsaken by the courtiers, with the strong breath of the sea wind blowing through the empty halls, and bringing with it September perfumes, and the supreme sweetness of the gulf, while the closed curtains waved mysteriously and spread a vague terror, while the lights flickered and went out on the tables, still strewn with the shameful letters announcing the flight of those the prince had counted as most devoted. And the desolation of that departure in the twilight, in the small ship commanded by a man of the people, one of the few who remained faithful; and the silent encounter with the warships, already gone over to the enemy, and full of treachery; and the long,

sleepless night passed on deck in vain regrets, while the weary queen slept under the stars, exposed to the chill night air; and at last, at sunrise, the rock of Gaeta, the final refuge, fated to be the final ruin, where the royal dignity was to be forced to come to terms with a bragging soldier!”

“Treason was everywhere, like the smoke and smell of gunpowder,” continued the prince. He grew more and more troubled by these sanguinary recollections, and from time to time a gesture from the white hand on which the cameo gleamed gave animation to his words. “The most terrible day of the siege was the fifth of February; and the powder magazine of the Sant’ Antonio battery was blown up by treachery.”

“Ah! what an atrocious thing it was!” exclaimed Violante, with a shudder and an instinctive movement as if to cover her ears with her hands. “How terrible!”

“You can still remember it,” her father said, looking at her with softer eyes.

“I always shall.”

“Violante was with us at Gaeta,” he added, turning to me. “She was scarcely five years old, and was a great pet of the queen’s. The others had started for Civita Vecchia on the Volcano with the Contessa di Trapani. We were staying in the artillery quarters beneath the shore batteries....”

“I can remember it all!” interrupted Violante, seized by a sudden emotion, which seemed to sweep over her from that great purple light which lit up her far-off infancy. “Everything—everything seems as distinct as if it had happened yesterday! The room was divided by two partitions, made of flags sewn together. I can see the colours quite clearly; they were signalling flags, blue, yellow, and red. It was three or four in the afternoon when the explosion happened. Nina Rizzo, the queen’s lady-in-waiting, had just gone out. I was holding in my hand a cup of milk which the sisters at the hospital had sent me....”

She spoke on thus, in short sentences, in a somewhat muffled voice, with a fixed look, describing all these little details, one after the other, as if she were seeing them

in a series of flashes. And the scenes called up by her words, as she sat looking into the past, stood out with an extraordinary force against the confused background of the actual scene.

The old man and the maiden, as each in turn they commemorated the ruin and slaughter of other days, seemed to annihilate all the vague, colourless surroundings, and create a kind of fiery atmosphere, in which my soul for a moment gasped painfully. The siege went on with all its horrors, in the city crowded with soldiers, horses, and mules, short of provisions and money, badly or insufficiently armed, scourged with typhus and villainy. Rain came down in torrents, filling the streets with black mire, in the midst of which the starving horses wandering about sank down and perished. The iron hailstones riddled the city, dismantled it, laid it low, set fire to it, and grew ever thicker and noisier, never ceasing save for the brief intervals appointed for the burial of the decaying corpses. In the churches divine service was celebrated, the Invincible Patroness was invoked, and all the while the stones were being torn from the walls, the windows were crashing in, and out of the distance came the groans of the wounded as they were carried away on stretchers. The sick men in the hospital raised themselves in their beds when a shell pierced through the passage walls, and expecting death, cried as the shell burst, “Long live the King!” All on a sudden a powder magazine exploded, shaking the city to its very foundations, and leaving it suffocated with smoke and with terror, while in the open cavity bastions, cannons, palisades, batteries, houses, and hundreds and hundreds of men were engulfed. But from time to time, on very sunny days, a kind of heroic madness seized the besieged, a kind of intoxication of death drove them into danger, and made them seek out the batteries where the fire was fiercest. In sight of the enemy the artillerymen sang and danced in a kind of frenzy to the sound of the bugles. A great shout of joy and affection greeted the queen’s appearance under the hail of bullets on the esplanades. She moved with a bold step, in the easy grace of her nineteen years, dressed in a shining bodice like a breastplate, her face smiling

under the plumes of her felt hat. Without moving an eyelash as the bullets whistled by, she turned her encouraging eyes on the soldiers; they inspired them like the waving of banners, and beneath that gaze pride seemed to magnify its wounds, while those who were unscathed seemed to long for the glory of a crimson stain. From time to time men with eyes burning fiercely in blackened faces, with their clothes torn to tatters, as though the jaws of a wild beast had rent them—men covered with blood and powder rushed up to her from the cannons, called her by name, and kissed the hem of her skirt.

“Ah, how beautiful she was, and how worthy of her throne!” exclaimed the prince, and his voice assumed its manliest tones to celebrate her prowess. “Her presence had a magnetic power over the soldiers. When she was there, they all fought like lions. The twenty-second of January was the most glorious day of the siege, because she remained on the batteries till nightfall.”

A pause followed, a moment of meditation, in which each of us seemed to be contemplating the ideal figure of the heroine on a field of ruin and corpses.

“Tears were strange to her eyes!” said Violante slowly, absorbed in her far-away memories. “When at the last hour I saw her weep, I was overcome with terror and surprise, as if some unexpected and almost incredible thing had occurred. As she kissed me, she watered my face with her tears.” After another pause, she added—

“She wore a little green feather in her hat.”

She added again—

“She had a great emerald at her throat.”

She was sitting at my side, and a new emotion swept over me as with an involuntary movement I leant slightly towards her, and breathed the perfume which I thought was growing stronger, and overpowering the honeyed fragrance of the flowers. A sudden aversion for all the people and things present came over me; they gave me a feeling of impatience and annoyance that was almost an aversion; they seemed at

that moment to be weighing on me and oppressing me in quite a peculiar way. I looked across with instinctive hostility at the prince's cousin, Ottavio Montaga, who sat at one end of the table, a taciturn individual with something of the sinister look of a mask, the symbol of a mysterious prohibition not to be transgressed. I felt all the health, strength, and passion in me rise in hatred against the sickness, the sadness, against the mortal dulness by which this wonderful creature was being consumed without a chance of escape. The uneasiness which had troubled my spirit after the successive apparitions of the three different figures was now subdued, and I believed myself to have set my choice on her whom all the glory and solemnity of the past seemed uniting to ennoble. Once more, it was she alone who stirred my being as she had stirred it before when she lifted her head at the cry of the hawk.

The prince said to me—

"It is singular, is it not, Claudio, that Violante should be able to remember that time so clearly? Don't you think it very strange?"

Then, smiling with his previous gentle smile—

"Maria Sophia has never ceased to show partiality for her. Knowing that she is passionately fond of scent, she sends her quantities of essences every year for her birthday. And she has never missed once, all the time we have been here!"

He turned tenderly to his daughter—

"And now you could not get on without them, could you?"

And to me he said, with a shade of sadness—

"She lives on them. You see, Claudio, how white she is!"

I fancied that Anatolia whispered—

"She is dying of them."

When we rose from table, Anatolia proposed going down to the garden.

"Let us go and bask in the sun a little more!" she suggested, pointing to a shaft of

sunbeams which shot down from the highest pane of a window where the faded curtains were not drawn. “Who will come?”

By the movement her hand was lit up, turned golden down to her wrist, and the rays slid through her fingers like docile hair. “We will all come,” I replied.

Don Ottavio begged to be excused, and retired (he seemed like an intruder among us); but the prince laid his arm in Anatolia’s, as Antonello had done before on the steps, and said—

“I will come down to the quadrangle with you.”

As we passed through the vast reception hall, now reduced to a disused anteroom, I noticed an old sedan chair with the two poles still in it, as if a lady had just descended from it, or was about to enter.

“Who uses the sedan chair?” I asked, as I stopped to look at it.

“None of us,” answered Anatolia after a moment’s hesitation, during which a shade of agitation passed over every face.

“It is of the time of Charles III.,” said the prince, concealing his melancholy thoughts under a smile. “It belonged to the Duchess of Cublana, Donna Raimondetta Montaga, who was the most beautiful lady of the court, and was praised as the greatest beauty of the kingdom.”

“The design is excellent,” I remarked, approaching it, for I was attracted by this piece of antiquity, which seemed hardly yet dead, and to which the memory of Donna Raimondetta gave a tender interest and grace, so that I almost imagined as I looked that she was alive again within it. “It is an exquisite work of art, and wonderfully preserved.”

But I noticed a strange feeling of uneasiness among my hosts, and that this uneasiness was caused by the object I was looking at. And by virtue of this mystery, I felt more strongly than before the imaginary life dwelling within the precious

wood.

“Perhaps the soul of Donna Raimondetta lives inside,” I said lightly, and I could not resist the desire to open the pane of glass. “It could not have a more delicate casket. Let us see.”

As I opened it, a subtle odour reached my nostrils, and I put my head inside, so as to breathe it better.

“What a scent!” I exclaimed, delighted with the unexpected sensation. “Is it the Duchess of Cublana’s perfume?”

And for a few seconds my imagination hovered in the soft atmosphere created by the enchantment of the ancient dame, picturing a little round mouth like a strawberry, a powdered head-dress, and a brocade dress stiffened by a hoop.

The sedan chair was scented like a bridal chest; it was lined inside with willow-green velvet, and decorated with a little oval mirror on each side; without, it was all gilded and painted in the most refined taste, the ceiling and jointings were enriched with delicate carving, all the more harmonious and pleasing to the eye from the veil thrown over them by the hand of time; the whole was the work of a graceful imagination and a skilled hand.

“Or perhaps it is you, Donna Violante,” I added, “who have poured out one of your phials on this soft velvet, as a homage to your famous ancestress?”

“No, it is not I,” she said, almost indifferently, as if she had fallen back into her usual apathy, and was again far away.

“Let us go now,” begged Anatolia, drawing on her father, whose arm still rested in hers. “It is always so cold in this room.”

“Let us go,” repeated Antonello, shivering.

From the top of the staircase we could already hear the sound of the water; at first it sounded hoarse, then gradually clearer and louder.

“Has the fountain been turned on?” asked the prince.

“We turned it on just now,” said Anatolia, “in honour of our guest.”

“Did you notice the play of the echo in the quadrangle, Claudio?” Don Luzio inquired. “It is extraordinary.”

“Truly extraordinary,” I replied. “It is a wonderful effect of sound. It is like a musician’s trick. I think an attentive harmonist might discover the secret of unknown chords and discords in it. It would be an incomparable training for a delicate ear. Is it not true, Donna Violante? You are on the fountain’s side, against Antonello.”

“Yes,” she said simply, “I love and understand water.”

“Laudato si, mi Signore, per sor acqua.” (Praised be Thou, O Lord, for sister water.) “Do you remember the canticle of St. Francis, Donna Massimilla?”

“Certainly,” replied the betrothed of Christ, with her faint smile, colouring slightly. “I belong to the Poor Clares.”

Her father’s look was a melancholy caress.

“Suor Acqua” (Sister Water), Anatolia called her, caressing the soft bands of hair on her forehead with her fingers. “Take that name.”

“It would be presumptuous,” replied the Poor Clare with laughing humility.

She recalled to me with only a slight variation the saying of the saint: Symphonialis est aqua.

We were all there close to the rushing fountain. Each of the mouths was pouring out its voice through a glass pipe like a curved flute. The lower shell was quite full already, and the four sea-horses were up to their bellies in water.

“The design is by Algardi, the Bolognese,” said the prince, “the architect of Innocent X.; but the sculpture was done by the Neapolitan Domenico Guidi, the same who executed the greater part of the relief of Attila at St. Peter’s.”

Violante had drawn near the edge of the basin again, and I gazed at the reflection of her figure in the liquid element, whose continual tremor melted the features as it rippled away round the horses' hoofs.

"There is a tragic story in connection with this fountain," added the prince, "a story which has become the source of some superstitious ideas. Don't you know it?"

"No, I don't," I replied, "but tell it me, if you will."

And I looked at Antonello, thinking of the lost soul which tormented and terrified him at night. He also was now looking intently at Violante's reflection as it trembled in the depths of the water.

"Here in this fountain Pantea Montaga was drowned," began Don Luzio. "In the time of the Viceroy Peter of Aragon——"

But he interrupted himself—

"I will tell you the story another time."

I saw that he shrank from calling up these memories in presence of his daughters, and I did not press him.

But shortly after, in the outer portico, as we paced slowly up and down with his arm in mine, he returned to the story; and all the time the sun blazed on the series of terraces from which the tall white statues of the Seasons looked over the tawny valley of the Saurgo.

It was a mysterious secret drama of passion and death, worthy of the weird stone cloister which had fostered and exalted its violence in rapid alternation. To me it signified the power which the genius of places can exercise over the responsive soul, a power by which every genuine feeling of the soul must concentrate itself to the utmost degree of intensity possible to human nature, in order to express its whole force in a definite act with a certain result.

As I listened to the prince's imperfect account, I mentally reconstructed that hour of

intense life which produced the death of Pantea; and the midnight crime appeared to me clothed in a beauty which was the harbinger of profound thoughts.

At the close of the story Prince Luzio took leave of me, saying: “I hope from this day you will treat this house as your own. Whenever you like to come, you will be welcome, dear boy. So do not stay away too long.”

It made me sad to see him enter the desolate palace alone, so I went back a little way with him, talking affectionately. We stopped again before the fountain; and he made a motion of his hand towards the basin, and in the chill, clear water I saw the fatal beauty of Pantea and her curved white hands floating in the water, like two magnolia petals, and her soft hair fluttering under the horses’ hoofs.

“A legend grew up years afterwards,” said the prince, smiling. “On moonless nights Pantea’s soul sings on the summit of the fountain, while that of her lover groans within the jaws of the stone beasts until the dawn breaks.”

The troublous joy of spring rose up in our faces as we leant over the balustrade towards the sloping garden. A kind of quivering atmosphere enveloped us with the swiftness of a fever poison, and the sensation was so strong as to paralyse the nerves. The pupils of our eyes became fixed, our eyelids were lowered as if sleep were gliding over us. My soul within me was heavy like a cloud.

Anatolia remarked upon our mutual silence—

“Happiness is passing by.”

These sudden words of hers revealed to us the secret of the anguish within us; she had expressed the spirit of intense melancholy which pervaded the earth awaiting the renewal of spring. “Happiness is passing by!”

“Whose hands may arrest her?” I asked myself sharply, in the blind agitation of my longing for love, in the confused revolt of my deepest instincts.

The three sisters were leaning their elbows on the stone parapet, their bare hands

without rings stretched out in the sun as in a golden bath: Massimilla with fingers interlaced; Anatolia with one hand crossed in the other so that her thumbs were uppermost; Violante, pressing in hers some of the fading violets out of her belt, and then letting them fall into space.

“Whose hands may arrest her?”

Anatolia’s looked the strongest and the most sensitive. The firm outlines of the muscles and tendons supporting the thumbs were clearly visible beneath the skin. The tips of the thumbs wore rosy nails for gems, with a half moon of white at the root like a double onyx.

Had they not communicated a sense of their generous power and practical kindness when first I touched them? Had I not already felt a reviving warmth in the hollow of her palm?

But Massimilla’s hands were like uncreated things, like dream-shapes rather, so slender were they; and so white, that the golden sunbeams failed to gild them; and so symbolically familiar, that in the broad daylight I could see again the dim shadows of the dusky apse where first they appeared to me, and see them hovering around the altar, last relics of a form sunk back again into mystery, and yet fitted—they alone—to enchant and caress souls. Now with the interlacing of the clasped fingers they symbolised the fetters of voluntary slavery. “Here am I, thine own, bound by a tie stronger than any chain. I will open my arms only when it shall be thy good pleasure to release me. Mine be it only to worship and obey, to obey and worship,” was the confession which by these tokens the devout maiden made to her ideal lord. And I imagined her hands loosed and long scrolls of living silence floating from them; just as from the hands of the angels painted above and around altars there float long streamers eloquently inscribed with verses, and containing history within the mystic sense of the written words. “Thus, oh Worshipper, mayest thou encircle my wandering spirit within the living silence of thy love! And I shall become unfaithful

to earth's solitudes, to the solemn mountains, the musical woods, the peaceful rivers, even to the starry skies; for no sight on earth can elevate a man's spirit like the presence of a beautiful and submissive soul. It is this which gives to the walls of a narrow room the feeling of boundless space, like the votive lamp which only increases the vast darkness of a cathedral. And for this, I should desire to have thee with me, sweet slave. He who meditates, surrounded by silent adoration, feels the divinity of his own thoughts and the creative power of a god."

But the sublime hands of Violante, as they pressed the essence out of the tender flowers and let them fall crushed to the ground, were fulfilling an act which corresponded most perfectly, as a symbol, to the characteristics of my ideal style: they extracted the supreme flavour of life out of things, took from them the utmost they could give, and then left them exhausted. Was not this one of the most important elements in my art of living?

And so Violante appeared to me as a divine and incomparable instrument of my art. "Relation with her is necessary to me that I may know and exhaust the innumerable things which lie hidden in the depths of the human senses, those things of which eternal desire is the only revelation. The tangible body encloses infinite mysteries which only the touch of another body can reveal to him that is gifted by Nature to understand them and religiously celebrate them. And has not her body the sanctity and magnificence of a temple? Does not her beauty promise the highest revelations to my senses?"

Thus as before, when we ascended the steps, I felt within me the attraction of the three complete types, which promised to all my energies the joy of manifesting themselves and of satisfying themselves to the uttermost in perfect harmony. One of them—in my dream—watched, her pure brow radiant with prophecy, over the son of my soul and my body; another, like the salamander in the alchemist's furnace, lived within the fiery circle of my thoughts; and the third called me back to the devout

worship of the body and invited me to learn in mysterious ceremonies how to live again the life of the ancient gods. They all three seemed born to serve my ideal of perfection on earth. And the duty of separating one from the other was as distasteful to me as destroying some symmetry; it irritated me, it seemed an injustice done by prejudice and habit. “Why may I not take them all to my home on a single day and adorn my solitude with their threefold grace? My love and my art should weave a different spell round each, build a throne for each, and offer to each the sceptre of an ideal kingdom peopled with shadows, where she would find her immortal characteristics transfigured in their different aspects. And since brevity is the most fitting attribute of ambitious dreams and beautiful life, my love and my art will be able to bring to these blessed ones (but not to thee, Anatolia, who art fated to watch for a long time) a harmonious death at the seasonable hour——”

These thoughts of mine, burning like a soft delirium in the early heat of the spring sun, were raining down without ceasing on the hands of the maidens, when Violante let the last of her crushed flowers fall, and leant over to catch hold of the tips of the long creepers which grew from the terrace below up to the balustrade, and wreathed themselves round it. She managed to break off a twig, and examined its fibres to see if the spring sap had reached it yet.

“They are still asleep,” she said.

And so we bent over the sleep transparent already of those pale sheaths, in which one of the greatest of earth’s miracles was about to be worked, called up before us by a word.

“You will see in a few months,” said Anatolia to me, “they will all be covered with a green mantle; all the trellises will throw shade.”

These plants were not the mothers of the grape, but a kind of leafy vine with innumerable flying tendrils, which spread like a piece of netting over the wide surface of the wall and the trellises down the steps. They looked more like worn-out

ropes than plants, torn as they were by the rain, shrivelled by the sun, fragile as gossamer to behold. And yet the approaching change made them appear as mystical as the huge trunks of mountain forest trees. Myriads of young leaves were about to burst miraculously from the fibres of that lifeless rope.

“In autumn,” said Violante, “everything turns red, a glorious red, and sometimes on sunny October days the walls and steps seem to be hung with purple. Then, indeed, the garden has its hour of beauty. If you are here then, you will see——”

“He won’t be here,” interrupted Antonello, shaking his head.

“Why do you always say that?” I asked him with gentle reproof; “who knows?”

“No one ever knows anything,” murmured Oddo in that muffled voice of his, which I could only distinguish from his brother’s by the movement of the lips. “Who knows what may happen to us between this and the autumn? Massimilla is the only one who is safe; she has found her refuge.”

Perhaps there was a tiny drop of bitterness in the last words.

“Massimilla is going to pray for us,” said Anatolia gravely.

The novice bent her head over her clasped hands, and we were silent for a space, while a flood of vague but overpowering feeling swept over us.

The clearness of the early spring afternoon paled before that illuminating vision of the autumn purple as we went down the steps, where a few hours before the three princesses had appeared, as at the beginning of a fairy tale, with a new-born smile on their lips after a night of interminable anguish. That morning hour already seemed as far away as the autumn was near, to which—a dim presentiment told me—a fate was leading me swift as lightning. And when I pictured the purple foliage on the bare branches, I also foresaw a shadow of deep mourning fall on the faces of the three sisters.

And once more the sentiment of death impassioned and elevated my soul till all

things were reflected in it transfigured by poetry. And in the splendour of the spring air these frail beings seemed to me “marvellously sad,” like the women in the vision of the Vita Nuova, which Massimilla had recalled to my memory among the almond blossom and the ancient mirrors. And I felt as if the ardent spirit possessed me that burns in the pages of that book, where the youthful Dante shows how his soul could be shaken to its very foundations, and exalted to the height of sorrowful madness by imagining the death of Beatrice, and gazing on her face through the funeral shroud. “Weeping,” I said within myself. “Certainly it must sometime come to pass that the very gentle Beatrice will die.... And a great fear fell upon me, and I imagined that some friend should come to me and say: 'Dost thou not know? Thy marvellous lady has departed from this world....’ Then my heart that was so full of love said unto me: 'It is true that our lady lieth dead’ ... and so strong was this idle imagining that it made me to behold my lady in death....” Did not the force of this ineffable inner beauty come to me from a similar fancy?

A splendid nobility flowed from every action of these maidens, doomed to die. It lit up the outward things among which they moved. And never again perhaps did I see them in so much light and shade.

When we had reached the foot of the steps, and entered a glade surrounded by the green ruins of a box-wood bower, Anatolia paused and asked me—

“Would you like to see the whole garden? Perhaps you might find some memories in it.”

As if she wanted to proclaim her power, Violante said—

“As you enjoy the music of the water, I will take you to see my seven fountains.”

And Massimilla, with her shy gentleness—

“In return for the almond blossom, I will show you a white hawthorn which came out last night over there.”

I felt as though they were speaking of their most intimate possessions, and, like the

virgin of Fontebranda, intended to say: “We are ourselves a garden.”

As I could not express what I felt, I said only empty words.

“Show me the way, then,” I said; “I am sure to come across some memories, at any rate of my early reading, which used to be fairy tales.”

“Poor fairies without wands!” observed Oddo, taking Anatolia’s hand with a caressing gesture.

And in the eyes of the maidens were smiles full of despair.

Then Violante led us through a labyrinth.

We walked among evergreens, among ancient box-trees, laurels, myrtles, whose wild old age had forgotten its early discipline. In a few places here and there there was some trace of the symmetrical shapes carved once upon a time by the gardener’s shears; and with a melancholy not unlike his who searches on marble tombstones for the effigies of the forgotten dead, I noted carefully among the silent plants those traces of humanity not altogether obliterated. A bitter-sweet odour hung round our path, and from time to time one of us, as if wishing to weave afresh an unravelled web, would reconstruct some memory of our far-off childhood. And now the shadow of my mother rose pure and clear before me, and seemed to feed upon all the things which our hearts exhaled in the broken silences, and she never left Anatolia’s side, thus showing me her preference. And a bitter-sweet odour hung over our melancholy.

Violante stopped and asked me, almost with the same look and in the same tone as when she spoke to me at the window—

“Do you hear?”

“Now we are in your kingdom,” I said to her, “because you are the queen of the fountains.”

The hoarse song of the water came to us through a high myrtle hedge as we stood in

a little meadow strewn with daffodils, and guarded by a statue of Pan green with moss. A delicious softness seemed to spring in my veins from the soft turf my feet pressed, and once again the sudden joy of living took away my breath. At the same time, the presence of the two brothers oppressed me, and pity for them grew stronger. “Ah, how I could stir your sealed-up souls to the very depths!” I thought, as I looked at the three prisoners. “How I could quicken into anguish the troubled feelings within you!” And I pictured the delight of enjoying these fresh souls full of the sap of life, rare fruits which had slowly ripened in the garden of self-knowledge, and were here still intact to slake my thirst. And my regret was the greater, because I knew that never again could I renew that unique charm of first acquaintance between beings whose destinies are fated to be united; that unique and fleeting charm, in which are mingled marvel, and expectation, and presentiment, and hope, and a thousand indefinable things which partake of the nature of dreams, vain things indeed, yet issuing from the most sacred depths of life.

Everything looked soft and rich through the transparency of the amber air, and everywhere thoughts of beauty worthy of being gathered sprang into flower, and the noblest flowered at the feet of the desolate princesses, where I imagined myself stooping to gather them. And I imagined the delight of caressing and troubling those souls while wandering through the cloistered garden, over whom the phantoms of the ancient seasons seemed to be weaving a veil of poetry—a veil into which were woven with almost invisible threads strange figures of unknown beings laughing and weeping in the alternations of joy and sorrow.

In every one of these fountains was there not a Pantea singing, the pure victim of a wicked and sublime passion? Certainly an extraordinary feeling came over me when Violante led me beyond the myrtles into the long alley enclosed between the shrubbery and the eastern wall. Here reigned that mysterious spirit which fills such lonely spots as tradition tells us were wont to be the meeting-place of lovers, celebrated for the tragic splendour of their fate. The statues, the pillars, the very

trunks of the trees wore the aspect of things which have been witnesses and accomplices of a great human passion, and perpetuate the memory of it to all time. The deep injuries of devouring time and the inclement seasons had given to the outlines of the stone that expression, I might almost say that eloquence, which ruins alone possess. Noble thoughts seem to rise from the broken lines.

And I imagined the delight of disclosing my magnificent dream here to the three blessed ones who alone could transform it into living harmony; I imagined the delight of talking of love in that very place where the virtue of so many symbols united to raise the soul above the common griefs of humanity and expand it in the supreme heaven of beauty.

We were walking slowly, pausing from time to time, and speaking to hide the uneasiness which troubled us; Oddo and Antonello seemed tired, they lingered a few steps behind and were gloomily silent. And I felt as though the shadows of sickness and death were behind me.

My fervour had cooled. I felt the crudeness of the contrast between my impetuous eagerness and the miserable necessity which clung fast to my side, and was around me everywhere in that great cloister full of forgotten and perishing things. I felt that each one of those beings who in that very same hour had been so often illuminated by my intellect and transfigured by my passion, still kept her secret intact, and that the language of her form could not reveal it to me. As I looked at them, I saw each far away from the other, each a stranger to the other, each with an unfathomed thought between her brows, each with an unfathomed sentiment in her heart. I was about to go away and return to my solitude; our day was near its end. What new things had that first intercourse aroused in their souls, weary with the long monotony of sorrow, which had ceased perhaps to be brightened by any ray of hope in the unforeseen? Under what aspect had I appeared to each? Had their longing for love and happiness yearned towards me with an uncontrollable impulse, or did a

suspicious incredulity like that of their two brothers hinder them from trusting me?

They were walking thoughtfully by my side, and even when they spoke they seemed so deeply absorbed, that more than once I was on the point of asking: “What are you thinking about?” And a violent desire arose in me to extort from them the secret they were holding so close; and the bold words which can suddenly unlock a closed heart, and surprise the most secret pain and force it to confession, rose to my lips. But at the same time a pitiful tenderness moved me almost to ask their pardon for the pain they might be suffering at my hand, and for a sharper pain which they were to suffer in the future. The necessity of choice presented itself to me as a cruel trial, a cause of sorrow and inevitable sacrifices. Did I not feel a vehement anxiety filling up the pauses in our restless conversation?

“Oh, when summer comes!” sighed Violante, lifting up her eyes to the spreading umbrella pines. “In summer I spend the whole day here alone with my fountains. And it is the time of the tuberoses!”

Gigantic pines with straight round stems like the masts of a vessel grew at equal distances in a row along the wall of the cloister and protected it with their thick cupolas. Between stem and stem, like the spaces between columns, were niches hollowed in the wall and inhabited by nude statues or robed figures in calm attitudes, their blind divinity calling up visions of the past. At equal distances the seven fountains projected in the shape of little temples; each one composed of a wide basin in which deities sitting on the brink or leaning on the urn of water gazed at their own reflection framed between the two pairs of columns which supported a pediment carved with a couplet. Opposite them rose the great myrtle hedge, a mass of green only broken by the white pensive statues. And the damp ground was almost entirely covered with moss as soft as velvet, which rendered our steps noiseless and heightened the sweetness of the mystery.

“Can you read the verses?” asked Violante, as she saw me intent on deciphering the

letters cut in the stone, and effaced here and there by mould and cracks. “I once knew what they meant.”

They said: “Hasten, hasten! Weave garlands of fair roses to girdle the passing hours.”

PRÆCIPITATE MORAS, VOLUCRES CINGATIS UT HORAS NECTITE FORMOSAS, MOLLIA SERTA, ROSAS.

It was only the ancient precept, sweetened by rhyme, which for centuries has incited men to enjoy the pleasures of our brief life, has kindled the kisses on lovers’ lips, and multiplied the number of goblets at the banquet. It was the old voluptuous melody, modulated on the new instrument which an industrious monk had fashioned in the shape of a dove’s wing out of the various reeds left in the forsaken garden of Pan, and bound together with the wax of votive lights and the threads of old altar linen.

“The fountain gleams and babbles; and saith to thee in its splendour: 'Rejoice!’ and in its murmur speaks of Love.”

FONS LUCET, PLAUDE, ELOQUITUR FONS LUMINE: GAUDE. FONS SONAT, ADCLAMA, MURMURE DICIT: AMA.

The rugged rhymes with their eternal commentary of running water threw a vague spell over my spirit. I could hear in those echoes the veiled accents of the melancholy which adds an indefinable grace to pleasure, and by troubling it gives it greater depth. No less soft and sad were the divine youthful figures that stretched their bare limbs over the margin in curves as graceful as those of the mirror into which they had so long been gazing.

“Weep here, ye lovers who come to slake your thirst. Too sweet is the water. Season it with the salt of your tears.”

FLETE HIC OPTANTES, NIMIS EST AQUA DULCIS, AMANTES SALSUS, UT APTA VEHAM, TEMPERET HUMOR EAM.

Thus the gentle fountain, envying the savour of tears, pointed out to the joyous the subtle art of imparting a touch of bitterness to the fullest enjoyment. “It is well to mix among the roses some dewy flower of the deadly hellebore, scarcely distinguishable from the rest of the garland, so that thus redeemed the head may from time to time be bent.” It seemed as if step by step, on that long Way of Love, enjoyment became more collected, wiser, and yet more passionate. The liquid mirrors invited lovers to lay down heads heavy with dreams, and to gaze at their own reflections, until, having at last attained to perceiving in them only symbols of unknown beings risen into the light from an inaccessible world, they may better realise the presence of the unspeakably strange and remote in their own lives. “Lean over to your reflections that your kisses may be doubled by the mirror.”

OSCULA JUCUNDA UT DUPLICENTUR IMAGINE IN UNDA VULTUS HIC VERO CERNITE FONTE MERO.

Was not that simple action a token revealing a hidden thing? The two lovers bending over the reflection of their caress unconsciously figured the mystic power of voluptuous enjoyment, which consists in banishing for a few moments from our souls the unknown man whom we all carry hidden within us, and thus rendering him as remote and strange as a phantom. Does not the dim vagueness of such a sentiment perhaps increase the delirium and produce the terror of lovers who in the mirrors of deep alcoves admire the reflection of their mutual caresses repeated by figures in their own likeness, yet immeasurably unlike and remote in their supernatural silence? With a confused consciousness of the extraordinary alienation taking place within them, they think they have found an enlightening symbol of it in those outward images, which analogy leads them no longer to consider as visible objects, but as inexplicable forms of life, and finally as visions of death.

This was the vision called up by the last of the musical fountains, as Violante’s face bent over it and the shadow of the pines fell slowly like a dark blue veil. “Here did

Pleasure and Death admire their united reflection, and their two faces were fused into one."

SPECTARUNT NUPTAS HIC SE MORS ATQUE VOLUPTAS UNUS [FAMA FERAT] QUUM DUO, VULTUS ERAT.

A soft white cloud passed by and veiled the sun, and the air became softer still; it was like transparent milk into which some perfume had been emptied. And the cadence of the Latin couplets rang in my ears as we walked through enclosed meadows yellow with daffodils, where one could imagine the scenes of a pastoral fête held under tents wreathed with garlands. On the base of a statue of a nymph who had lost both her arms was carved the emblem of the Arcadian Academy: the fountain with seven pipes within a laurel wreath.

"Were you not here this morning?" I said to Violante, as I recognised her close by the box-wood arch under which she had first appeared to me.

She smiled, and I thought a momentary flash of colour passed over her cheeks. Only a few hours had passed, and I was amazed to find how the exact notion of time had escaped me. That short interval seemed full of confused events which gave it, to my consciousness, a deceptive length without any fixed limits. I was not yet able to sound the gravity of the life I had lived since the moment I had put foot in the cloister; but I felt that some dim change, fraught with incalculable results, was being worked within me quite apart from my own will; and I thought that, after all, the presentiment of the morning on the lonely road had not been vain.

"Why shouldn't we sit down?" asked Antonello almost entreatingly. "Are you not tired yet?"

"Yes, let us sit down," assented Anatolia, with her usual gentle condescension. "I am a little tired too. It is the spring air.... What a smell of violets!"

"But where is your white hawthorn?" I exclaimed, turning to Massimilla to show her that I had not forgotten her offer.

“It is a long way off still,” she replied.

“Where?”

“Down there.”

“Massimilla has her hiding-places,” said Anatolia, laughing. “When she hides no one can find her.”

“Like a little ferret,” I added.

“And then,” she continued playfully, “she alludes every now and then to some small wonder known to herself alone, but she does it cautiously, keeping her secret to herself, without giving in the least bit to our curiosity. To-day with her white hawthorn she has made you the object of special favour.”

The novice kept her eyes turned downwards, but laughter quivered on her eyelashes and lit up her whole face.

“Some day,” the kind sister went on, pleased to have called up the unwonted ray, “some day I will tell you the story of the hedgehog and the four little blind hedgehogs.”

Then Massimilla burst into such clear youthful laughter, which clothed her in such unusual freshness, that I stood amazed as if a miracle of grace had taken place.

“Ah, don’t listen to Anatolia!” she said, without looking at me. “She is laughing at me.”

“The story of the hedgehog and the four little blind hedgehogs!” I said, drinking in with delight this sudden vein of gaiety which crossed our melancholy. “But you are a very pattern of Franciscan perfection! We must add another little flower to the Fioretti: 'How Sister Water tamed the wild hedgehog and gave it a nest that it might multiply, according to the command of our Creator!’ Tell me, tell me the story.”

The Clare laughed with her dear Anatolia, and the subtle feeling of joy spread to Violante also and to the two brothers, and for the first time that day we were

conscious of our youth.

What words can express the sweet strangeness of sudden laughter unlocking the lips and shining in the eyes of the sorrow-stricken? The first amazement of it lingered in my soul and seemed to cover all the rest with a veil. The unusual emotion which had stirred Massimilla's slender breast took possession of me and disturbed the outlines of previous impressions or melted them away altogether. The half-closed mouth of the ecstatic saint was suddenly filled with a silvery rush of sound, just as she was about to let scrolls of silence fall from the motionless palms of her hands.

Nothing save the sound of that laughter could have conveyed to me the depth of the unapproachable mystery which each of the virgins bore within herself. Was it not a chance sign of that instinctive life lying dormant like a heaped-up treasure in the very roots of their physical existence? And did not that hidden tenacious life, weighed down and yet not crushed by the knowledge of so much sorrow, contain within it the germs of numberless energies? As a spring pours on the dry rock the tokens of secret moisture underground, even so the beautiful sudden laugh seemed to rise from that fount of natural joy which the most miserable being still preserves in the depths of his own unconsciousness. And thus above my emotion rose a proud and loving thought: "I could make thee a creature of joy."

And then my eyes armed themselves with new curiosity; and I was assailed by an anxious desire to look, to gaze at, and observe the three princesses more attentively, as if I had not seen them truly before. And once more it struck me what a complicated enigma of lines every feminine form is, and how difficult it is to see, not only the soul but the body. Those hands, for instance, on whose long, slender fingers I had placed my subtlest dreams like invisible rings, already seemed different to me, and appeared as the receptacles of infinite nameless forces from which marvellous generations of new things might arise. And some strange analogy led me to imagine the anxiety and horror which filled that young prince, who, imprisoned in

a dark place and obliged to choose his own destiny at the hands of silent messengers, passed the whole night in feeling the fatal hands which were stretched out to him in the darkness. Hands in the darkness—what more fearful image of mystery can there be?

The bare hands of the three princesses rested in the light; and looking at them, I thought of the infinite number of uncreated gestures contained in them, and of the myriads of leaves bursting out in the garden.

Anatolia smiled as she saw my intent look.

“Why are you looking so attentively at our hands? Are you a palmist?”

“Yes, I am a palmist,” I answered in jest.

“Then tell us our fortunes.”

“Show me your left hand.”

She held out her palm, and her sisters did the same. And I bent over them, pretending to explore the lines of life, of fate, and of happiness in each. “What are your fortunes?” I thought meanwhile as I looked at these three fair hands stretched out as if to receive or offer, and in the pause my trouble was fed by the thousand unexpressed and inexplicable things generated by the silence. “Possibly even the iron magnet of fate may be subject to those sudden changes which affect the pointing of the magnetic needle in the compass. Possibly all the energies of will that I feel within me, both clear and confused, are already exercising their transforming power; and the deviating fortunes may be tending towards a final event which shall work out my good. But possibly also I may be the sport of an illusion born of my pride and confidence, and my present state may be only that of a prisoner among prisoners.”

Great was the silence during this pause; it was such that the perception of the immensity of the voiceless things embraced by it terrified me. The sun was still under a veil. Suddenly Antonello started and turned quickly towards the palace as if

some one had called him. We all looked at him anxiously, and he looked at us with a wandering gaze. The sisters laid down their hands.

“Well?” Anatolia asked me, with a shadow of preoccupation on her brow. “What have you read?”

“I have read,” I replied, “but I cannot reveal.”

“Why?” she said, recovering her smile. “Is what you know so terrible?”

“It is not terrible,” I said; “indeed, it is joyful.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“For all of us or only for one?”

I hesitated an instant. Did she not penetrate into my perplexity with her question and remind me of the necessary choice.

“You won’t answer!” she added.

“For all of you,” I replied.

“Even for me?” asked Massimilla dreamily.

“Even for you. Are you not going to take the veil by your own choice? And are you not sure of attaining the blessedness which compensates for total renunciation?”

As I looked straight into her eyes, she flushed with colour that seemed almost violent contrasted with her pallor.

“'Be thou, be thou that fragrant flower which thou oughtest to be, spreading its fragrance abroad in the sweet presence of God!’ Saint Catherine wrote that for you.”

“You know Saint Catherine!” said the little novice, her eyes shining with wonder through her blushes.

“She is my favourite saint,” I added, glad to see her astonishment, and tempted by the pleasure of disturbing and dazzling her soul, which seemed to me to be eager and

easily shaken. “I love her for her purple hue. In the Garden of self-knowledge she is like a rose of fire.”

The betrothed of Jesus looked at me almost incredulously; but the desire of questioning and listening was painted in her face, and the line of attention cast already a faint shadow on her brow.

“The book I had with me this morning,” she said, with a little tremble in her voice as if she were revealing some intimate confidence, “was a volume of her letters.”

“I noticed that like a good Franciscan you put a blade of grass in your page for a mark. But that book contains another mark. The grass in it burns on the edge of a furnace. The essence of her soul is all in those words of hers: 'Fire and blood united by love!’ Do you remember them?”

“Oh, Massimilla,” interrupted Oddo, laughing, “you may dismiss your spiritual father. Now you have found the true guide to the way of perfection!”

We were sitting on the edge of an empty tank which had no doubt been an ancient fish-pond; now it was almost entirely filled with soil, and taken possession of by wild plants, among which violets were hidden—in great numbers, to judge by their great fragrance. Close by was the broken-down wall of box-wood, breathing out the same aroma from its depths as had met me on my first entrance into the garden. I could see the deserted alley with its mutilated statues and widowed urns through the thin parts of the shrubs and through the arches.

“Is the day yet fixed for you to enter the convent?” I asked Massimilla.

“Not yet,” she replied, “but it is almost sure to be before Easter.”

“Very soon then. Too soon!”

Antonello got up, suddenly seized by unbearable agitation. We all turned towards him. He looked at Anatolia with vague terror in his pale eyes. Then he sat down again. An indefinable anxiety crept over us; it seemed as if Antonello had imparted

some of his distress to us.

“This time yesterday we were in the orchard among the almond blossom,” said Oddo, with a shade of regret for a past pleasure in his voice.

Antonello’s words rose spontaneously in my mind: “We must bring them here among the flowers.”

“We must all go back there some day,” I broke out cheerfully, to destroy that strange atmosphere of fear and anxiety which, for some unknown cause, was increasing over our minds. “We must make the most of this beautiful springtime. In a week the whole valley will be in flower. I propose to go all over it, up to Corace, to visit Scultro, Secli, Linturno.... How happy I should be if I might have your company! Would you not like to come? Won’t you set a good example, Donna Anatolia?”

“Certainly,” she said. “You offer us just what we wish.”

“And you too, Donna Massimilla, will be allowed the recreation. Saint Francis, as you know, composed the canticle of the Sun in the cell of boughs which Saint Clara had made for him in the monastery garden. According to the ancient rule, the woods, the rivers, the mountains, and the hills must be your brothers and sisters. Travelling among them is like making a votive pilgrimage.... And then in the deserted city at Linturno there is the nave of a church still standing; and a great Madonna in mosaic, standing solitary under the canopy of the apse.... I always remember it. It is a thing one cannot forget. Do you remember it, Antonello?”

Antonello started at the sound of his name.

“What did you say?” he stammered in a confused voice.

And his poor drawn face expressed such suffering that I could not speak.

“Yes, yes, let us go, let us go,” he added, pretending to have heard; and he rose, a prey to evident agitation. He had the air of a maniac, he was so pale and tottering. “Let us go away from here! Anatolia, get up....”

He spoke quite low, as if he feared to be overheard by some one in the neighbourhood. His tone filled us with dread.

“Get up, Claudio. Let us go.”

Anatolia ran to him and took his hands.

“Here she is, here she comes!” he stammered, quite beside himself, turning his pale eyes, diluted by the hallucination, towards the alley. “Here she is! Do you hear?”

Perplexed and troubled as I was, I thought at first that he was terrified by some phantom called up by his madness. But the sound of approaching steps reached my ears also; and all at once I understood as I saw the sedan chair appear between the walls of box.

There we stood, dumb, motionless, holding our breath as the strange convoy passed along. In the icy silence which had fallen on us, like that surrounding a bier, one could distinctly hear the poles carried by the two servants creaking slightly in their places.

Then through the open window of the chair, against the background of green velvet, I saw the face of the mad princess; it was unrecognisable, disfigured, and swollen and bloodless, like a mask of snow; the hair was piled on her brow like a diadem. Her great black eyes blazed out of the opaque whiteness of her skin from beneath the commanding arched eyebrows, their extraordinary splendour maintained perhaps by the continual hallucination of fantastic pomp and luxury. Her double chin hung down over the necklace round her throat. And this pale inert mass suggested to my imagination the dream-figure of some Byzantine empress of the time of a Nicephorus or a Basil, lying in her golden litter.

“There, she sees us; she is stopping, she is getting out, and coming towards us,” I fancied with growing uneasiness, half expecting some proof of the reality of what seemed to me an unreal apparition on the point of vanishing and of entering the void again like a dream when one wakes. “There, she is calling some one, speaking to

them, asking who I am, questioning me....” In the silence I heard in imagination the sound of her voice, the dialogue between the children doomed to an inhuman sacrifice, and the mother whose madness had transported her into another world; a world into which she was inevitably drawing them all, one after the other. And in my horror I understood the deep shudder of instinctive repugnance that had passed over Antonello as she approached, something like the shudder which runs through the folded flock at the approach of the wild beast who is going to devour them.

But she passed by without noticing us, without moving an eyelid, and vanished among the ancient box-trees. Two maids, dressed in grey like Béguines, pale with weariness, silent and sad, walked close behind the sedan chair; their arms hung at their sides, and swung at every step like the rosaries hanging from their waists, cold and inanimate.

As I rode back to Rebursa alone, I could see before me the pale swollen face of the Princess Aldoina, and the gloomy fatigue of the servants, and the two grey shadows following the chair, and all the details of the strange procession. Some essential part of me had been left behind in the great cloister, but still I felt in my inmost being the joy of being alone again.

I recalled once more to my mind the gestures of farewell at the gate, the marvellous depth in the eyes of the prisoners, and the dreamlike view of the garden vanishing away behind the three beautiful forms. And at the same time all the other phantoms of the intense life I had lived in those few hours crowded into my soul like a store of varied and disordered riches, gathered up that they might be rearranged for the adornment of my secret kingdom.

“What opulence!” said the Dæmon, appearing to me, not without joy and pride. “What magnificence in a single day! Thou couldest not have better served thine end, which is to give life to everything, to extract life from the most barren things. Now, dost thou acknowledge the wisdom of my morning admonition? Dost thou not bless

the sternness of thy long restraint, since it now yields thee this intoxicating fruit? Thy power of poetry, like thy will, has no limit. Everything that is born and exists around thee is born and exists by reason of the breath of thy will and thy poetry. And thou art nevertheless living in a very real order of things, because nothing is more true in the world than the things of poetry."

The day was sinking over the undulating valley of the Saurgo, and the slanting rays turned the brown fields into gold, while the light clouds sat in a circle on peaks of rock resembling the highest seats in an amphitheatre. They sat there in feminine attitudes, waiting for the evening to robe them with purple.

"Now, thou couldest make even salt bear fruit," said the Dæmon to me. "Wherever thy spirit turns, abundance springs up. But thou hast with thee also the favour of fortune; thou hast entered the unknown and unforeseen not as one feeling his way and exploring with hesitation, but as one who is expected and called to gather in the harvest on a field where the richest fruit awaits him—fruit still intact, and ready to fall into his hands whenever in sunshine or in shadow he pleases to stretch them out. Thou hast entered a cloistered garden, delicious and terrifying as the garden of the Hesperides. Happiness has smiled to thee in three shapes, standing between madness and death, like statues of pure white marble between two black columns. Is there not some meaning for thee in that symbol?"

"Oh despot," I replied, "there is surely some hidden meaning in the symbol thou declarest to me, and I shall discover it. But since the perfection of that trinity attracts me, and since it is necessary for my purpose that I should choose, I am perplexed in spirit, and not without fear of being deluded like a common mortal."

And the Dæmon: "Not thy fears of the morning alone, but those of the evening also are vain! Nor is that thy only error; for before now, in the presence of the blessed ones, after having composed beautiful music out of the beauty of their bare hands thou didst regret that thou couldest not carry them all away at once to thy home;

thou didst rebel against the injuries of prejudice and custom. Now, in thus doing, thou didst humble thyself, not only to own the power of the laws of others, but also to disown the power of thy own ideal, which alone is sacred. Why dost thou aspire to the legitimate possession of the body when the ideal figures already adorn the house of thy dreams with their triple grace? Thou couldest not remove the three prisoners from their dungeon without breaking the enchantment which transfigures them. Countless mysterious waves of affinity flow between the depths of those lives and the silent places where they have suffered and awaited thee. Their grace, their desolation, and their pride draw the fascination which enthralled thee from the hidden virtue of innumerable elements. Even so, noble plants, with their long roots subdivided into myriads of fibres, absorb from the very bosom of the earth those immortal energies which are pressed towards the light by the rising force in the stalk, and are crowned in the miracle of the flower and the perfume. Canst thou, oh Poet, imagine Eglae, Arethusa, or Iperthusa chased from their garden? When Heracles, clothed with stars, penetrated into the western paradise to rob its golden apples, he forbore to carry away the daughters of Night, for even his brutal soul felt that he would have defaced, and perhaps destroyed, the heavenly mystery of their beauty."

"Oh despot," I said then, "I am thinking of Him who is to come."

And the Dæmon: "It is well that this should be always the sum of thy thoughts. But once before, the necessity of choice appeared to thee as a cruel trial, a source of sorrow and inevitable sacrifice, and thy heart shrank from it. Reflect that there is no goddess so worthy of being called upon to preside at a birth as Sorrow. Nothing in the world is lost, and wonderful things may sometimes be born of tears. Reflect that the highest power of will does not manifest itself in the readiness to choose from many things offered, nor in the firmness which resists various impulses, but rather in the art of giving the clearness and dignity of acknowledged and directed powers to the instinctive motions of nature. Reflect that there is always some way of being

equal to the event in all the chances of this most uncertain life. There was once a man who, beside a tyrant able by one sign of his hand to condemn him to death, wore such a look, that bystanders doubted which of the two was the master. Be thou like unto him, and handle the events of life in a royal spirit."

The dome of heaven was tinged with pale hyacinthine blue, and the olive-trees reflected its calm on their silver locks, which concealed the painful contortions of their black trunks. The clouds on the rocky peaks were not yet clothed in purple, but in robes of more delicate hue, making them droop; yet one here and there raised a proud head among her companions and aspired to a crown of stars.

"In the meantime compose thy music," pursued the Dæmon, "out of the wonderful things which are born of affinity, and of the relations between three perfect forms contemplated sincerely. In their unison and surroundings there is a wonderful language which is already as comprehensible to thee as if thou hadst created it. Out of any one of their outlines thou canst make the axis of a world. They seem to impart to thee the joy of continual creation and continual discovery, to help thee to complete thy harmony with a part of thyself unexpectedly revealed. They seem to pour into thee again the life which ages ago they received from thee. Hadst thou not enjoyed them even before they smiled on thee? As thou stoodest in silence beside them, was not thy soul within thee heavy as a cloud?"

"Oh despot," I said, and felt my soul yearn with infinite desire towards the garden from which the harmonious twilight was bearing me away. "Oh despot, it is true; as I stood in silence beside them, I felt stronger emotion than if I had loosed their hair, or pressed my lips on their beautiful necks, and I am still full of it. Yet, as the shadows fall, I would fain return there secretly; and invisible to the eye, I would lean my head on those virginal bosoms and tarry there a long while, because I think that from those bosoms there would flow over me in the cool shadow a great sweetness and a great sorrow which I shall never know."

III

“... A sedere, con le dita delle mani insieme tessute, tenendovi dentro il ginocchio stanco.”

Leonardo da Vinci

“Dov è più sentimento, li è più martirio.”

Ibid

And I led them among the flowers.

They listened with visible emotion to the infinite melodies of springtime, bending or turning sometimes towards their own shadows, which preceded or followed them like blue figures prostrated to kiss the earth. A confused feeling of the joy of liberty and hope shone at times in their dazzled eyes; a voiceless word at times unclosed their lips, and likened them to the brims of overflowing goblets. And when they paused, I thought with inward intoxication of the fulness of life which was suffocating them.

The things that we said to each other from time to time must have seemed futile to them also; but they were enough to make us feel the depth of our true life. A passing glance, a bend of the head, a short pause, sufficed to stir to their depths those abysses which the faint light of ordinary consciousness rarely penetrates, while that which we were saying seemed as far away to us as the deepest roots of trees are far from the murmur of the uppermost branches.

Nothing could have equalled the strange beauty of that stern country in full blossom. On the tawny ground, shaggy as a lion’s mane, the pink-and-white flowers suggested pictures of maidens lying trembling on the vast hairy bosoms of legendary giants. The rays of the sun played round the transparent petals and gave them the dancing splendour of precious stones. Here and there the polished ploughshares with which the land had been turned up glittered in dual radiance.

We realised the depth of our real life. And little by little, by common consent, we forbore to utter those empty words which had only served to break the solemnity of the silence, and to disperse the heavy cloud of dreams and thoughts which hung over us. We were united by a clearer and more intimate communion; an atmosphere of divination such as the mystics breathe sprang up around us, and without speaking we exchanged the profoundest secrets. Sometimes we were so steeped in delight that it surged from our eyes in a glance, and our slightest gestures expressed, without actual contact, all that is conveyed by the most lingering caress. The petals which fell at our feet from the almost motionless boughs, moved us strangely, like a confession of languor on the part of the trees, and of a delight in relieving themselves. The vines, all ready to bud, bending over the earth in contorted, struggling shapes, stimulated us with the example of a painful effort about to be changed into an intoxicating gift. And in the frail petal and slight tendril we felt the ideal virtue of the fragrant almond-oil and the flame of oblivion given by the grape.

A sudden agitation seized me one day when I saw a drop of blood on Violante's hand, which had been pricked by a thorn among the flowers of a snowy hedge. Smiling, she withdrew the beautiful hand on which the drop was rising; and as we chanced to be at some distance from her sisters, and perhaps unobserved, I felt a wild desire to press my lips upon the blood and taste its sweetness. And the effort I made to restrain myself was so great that I trembled.

"Do you dislike the sight of blood?" she asked me in a voice which dissimulation was not able to steady or to make playful.

And as her eyes looked into mine I felt myself turning pale, for I had an indefinable feeling within me which can only be vaguely compared to an immense wheel revolving with lightning-like speed and suddenly brought to a standstill. Something great was being resolved upon in that moment by each of us; and although we preserved a composed attitude with regard to each other, our inward attitude was one

of extreme tension preceding an irrepressible outburst. Our two lives yearned towards each other with their whole force.

Ah, shall I ever forget that burning silence trembling with the invisible flight of a messenger bearing the unspoken word? What power of oblivion will ever be able to efface from my memory that hand beaded with blood, and that hill slope covered with blossom?

Anatolia’s voice called to us in the distance, and we moved on side by side. A sudden bodily weariness and sadness had fallen upon us, as if we had just passed from a long night of pleasure.

But there were moments also when my soul inclined rather towards her who had called us, and towards her who was about to depart. I rejoiced in these changes of love, which did not dissipate my energies, but stimulated them as wind fans the flame. I seemed to have discovered a new set of perceptions; the strangest and most diverse ones seemed to combine spontaneously within me. Sometimes they gave birth to such novel and beautiful music that I felt on the point of being transfigured, and I thought that my desire to become like unto the gods was about to be realised.

I thought: “If ever there was a god who loved to sit in the springtime beneath the flowering trees and entice the hamadryads from their hiding-places to caress them in his arms, he certainly never experienced greater enjoyment than I feel in gathering up the essential beauty of these delicious beings, and mingling it together with the same ease with which he might weave the diverse obedient locks of his tree nymphs into a golden harmony.”

Thus at times I felt as though I were living in a myth which the youth of the human soul created under the skies of Hellas. The ancient spirit of deity was abroad upon the earth, as it was when the daughter of Rhea gave to Triptolemus the gift of ears of corn that he might sow them in the furrows, and that all men by him might enjoy the divine benefit. The immortal energies which flowed through visible things seemed

always conscious of the old transfiguring spirit that used to convert them into great symbols of beauty for the enjoyment of men. Three in number, like the Graces, the Gorgons, and the Fates, were the maidens who moved with me through this mysterious springtime. And I loved to compare myself to the youth pictured on the vase of Ruvo, who is enticing a winged genius across the threshold of a myrtle grove. Over his head is written the name Happiness, and three maidens surround him; one bears in her hands a dish heaped up with fruit, another is wrapped in a starry mantle, and the third has the thread of Lachesis in her nimble fingers.

One day we came by chance on a piece of enclosed ground, which the peasant cultivators had, according to the old heathen custom, dedicated to an oak-tree struck by lightning.

“What a beautiful death!” exclaimed Violante, as she leant over the oblong wooden fence which protected it.

The lonely place was full of almost terrible solemnity. The aspect of the altar which the Latin priests consecrated with the sacrifice of a white lamb must have been something like this.

“You are committing sacrilege,” I said to Violante. “This sacred enclosure cannot be touched without profanation. Heaven punishes the transgressor with madness....”

“With madness?...” she said, and drew away with a kind of instinctive superstition; her action gave an unexpected seriousness to my allusion to the pagan belief.

In one flash I saw the pale, swollen face of her mad mother, and Antonello’s wandering eyes, and I heard again the tragic cry: “We are breathing her madness”; and an icy sensation of fatality ran through me.

“No, no, don’t be afraid!” I said involuntarily, only deepening the shadow, perhaps, by thus clearly expressing my regret for the remark which must have seemed like a gloomy omen or a cruel presentiment.

“I am not afraid,” she replied, without smiling, as she leant over the fence again.

Thus from an idle word was born a great shadow.

The stricken tree rose before us, hard and black as basalt, its stony trunk torn open to the roots by a rent which testified to the awfulness of vindictive force. Its torn side was bare of branches, but there were a few left at the top of the other side, flinging the implacable despair of their gestures up to the sun. At each corner of the enclosure was fixed a ram's skull with curved horns, bleached by the sun and rain of numberless seasons. Everything was motionless, dead, and sacred, and primeval in appearance.

From time to time the cries of the hawks pierced the blue sky.

The days passed by rapidly; they were days of farewell to her who was about to depart.

"Gaze at the springtime with the whole strength of your eyes," I used to say to her, "for you will never see it again, never again!"

I said also to her—

"Warm your hands in the sun, bathe them in the sun, poor hands, for soon you will have to keep them crossed on your breast, or hidden in the shade under the brown woollen habit." I would say as I showed her a flower—

"Here is a miracle for which you ought to thank Heaven. Think of the thousand legends contained in the silver network of this blossom, of the hidden relation between the number of petals and stamens, of the slender threads which support the lobes of the pistils, of this transparent robe, this web, these valves and membranes covered with almost invisible down, which enclose the mysterious agitation of the seed vessels. Think of all the divine art revealed in the structure of this living creation, gifted in its fragility with infinite powers of love and fertility. See the moving tracery of shadow which the trembling leaves cast on the earth, and the same tracery painted on the wall, to cheer your melancholy, in rays now blue and now golden; and the little, white fingers at the tips of the pine branches; and the

drops of dew hanging from the beard of the oats; and the delicate veins in the wings of the bee; and the dazzling green of the dragon-fly; and the iridescent colours on the dove's neck; and the strange shapes of lichen stains; and the holes in tree-trunks; and the composition of crystals.... Store away all these marvels under those eyelids of yours, which will have to be lowered for so long before Christ crucified. I don't think there are any gardens in the old monastery of Queen Sancia, only stone cloisters."

"Why do you tempt me?" she used to ask. "Why do you enjoy disturbing my weak will? Have you been sent by God to try me?"

"I don't wish to disturb your will," I replied, "but only to give you brotherly advice, which may help you to suffer less. I think that after you are buried, when you cannot look out of the grated windows without hurting your cheek against the bars—I think that you who have grown up in a garden will have to pass through a few weeks of furious impatience, when all the visions of the open air will pass before your memory. Then it will be inexpressible torture to you if you cannot recall the exact details of the tiny black and yellow speckles on the lizard's back, or the tender downy leaf which buds on the branch of an apple-tree. I know the madness of such belated curiosity. Once I was passionately fond of a great Scotch deerhound my father had given me. He was a magnificent beast, very graceful, and extraordinarily well bred. When he died I was in the greatest misery; and it used to torment me strangely that I could not exactly recall the precise shape of the specks of gold in his brown eyes, and the grey marks in his beautiful rosy mouth when one caught a glimpse of it in a yawn or a bark. We ought, therefore, to look with attentive eyes at everything, especially at the creatures we love. Do you not love the things I was speaking to you about just now? and are you not about to leave them? Are you not about to place a kind of death between them and you?"

She sat, the fingers of her hands clasped together, holding within them the weary

knee. Her delicate grace was a little disturbed by the trouble she felt at the ambiguity of my words, half serious and half playful, half deceptive and half sincere. And speaking in this way gave me the same pleasure as I should have felt in ruffling the smooth bands of that hair over which the silver scissors of the tonsure were hanging. “Tondeantur in rotundum....” Still clear in my memory was the fresh ring of the youthful laugh rippling from her mouth at the closing hour of that first day, and filling me with wonder. And it pleased my fancy to group the pictures of all these slight, many-coloured things around the novice, who, in that already far-away February afternoon, had showed me as a secret miracle the nightly blossoming of her white hawthorn.

I used to seek her as one seeks some good thing which one knows to be ephemeral. She attracted me like a pure figure of youth, turning to me with a tearful smile on the threshold of a gloomy door, through which she was about to pass, and be lost to sight. I should like to have said to her sisters: “Let me love her as long as she is of this world; let me pour spices over her little feet!” During my long visits it often happened that I was alone with her, and could enter into spiritual converse with her docile soul, ever anxious to obey. From time to time Anatolia would disappear, when one or other of the two grey maids came to summon her with a look. There were some days when Violante scarcely appeared at all. She seemed to avoid my society, to look upon me with indifference, to have fallen back into her usual apathy. The two brothers could not stand the full light of the open air for very long, and so I often found myself alone with the little novice, sitting on a marble seat beneath the statue of Summer in the outer court, or in the shadow of the already verdant trellises over the steps, or on the edge of the dried-up fish pond. I would say to her—

“Perhaps you may have deceived yourself in the choice of your Bridegroom, sweet sister. When you hear the bishop saying, 'Ecce sponsus venit,’ you will tremble in your secret heart, and will expect a fair, strong hand to be stretched out to you, and to gather you up entirely, like water in the hollow of a palm; for this is the sweet,

powerful attitude which you expect of your conqueror, and which is best suited to your flexibility, sweet sister. But perhaps you may be deluded at the very foot of the altar. And if you dare to lift your eyes, you will see, amid the burning candles, the promised Bridegroom motionless, with His pierced hands, and His head crowned with thorns. You will feel obliged, sweet sister, to draw out those cruel nails, driven in so deep. And terrible strength will seem to be required to fulfil such an action. And then the wounds will have to be dressed with infinite patience, and with balsams made of herbs only to be gathered on certain giddy heights, where the air is too rarefied to breathe. And the wounds once closed, the blood bursting from the veins will have to be forced back into its proper channels. And after the toilsome work has been completed, perhaps the newly-healed hands will withdraw altogether. To very few brides is it granted to see them perfectly restored again; and even among the elect there is scarcely one to whom on some mystic evening is vouchsafed the supreme joy of feeling herself altogether possessed, altogether folded within the constraining clasp, as you desire to be....”

The submissive maiden murmured—

“God grant that I may be that one!”

“Ah, sweet sister,” I said to her, “only think what immense strength that one must possess to revive a dead hand and to draw it so ardently to herself!”

“I have not any strength, but I will ask it of the Lord.”

“The Lord can only give you back the strength you have given to Him, Massimilla.”

“Be silent, please!” she implored. “I am afraid your words are impious.”

“They are not impious; you need not fear listening to them. Do you not remember the first lines of the Commentary of St. Theresa? She speaks there of a God imprisoned. Think what power is required to enchain the Lord! You see, Sister Water, what unceasing acts of strength are required of the Bride who is sung in the Antiphons and Responses. That is why, as I have a brotherly anxiety for you, I want

at least to prepare your soul for the bitterness of disillusion. Do not lull it too much with the promises of the Psalms! There is, I think, some magnificent joyous promise in the verses you have learned, 'Veni, Electa mea....' 'Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away. For lo! the winter is past ... the voice of the turtle is heard in our land ... the vines with the tender grapes give a good smell.' Ah, the Latin of the Psalms is incomparable in producing a picture of the intoxication of love sinking under suffocating wealth. Some of the verses seem to drop with fragrant oil like the hair of slaves, or to be heavy and glittering as nuggets of gold. When the bishop places the crown of virginal merit on your head, your lips will have to pronounce wonderful words—words in which I see and feel some mysterious weight and splendour. 'Et immensis monilibus ornavit me.' Wonderful words! Are they not?"

She was looking at me now with such passion that all her little soul trembled like a tear on her eyelashes, and by merely bending forward I could have drunk it.

"Perhaps I may be hurting you a little," I went on. "But I see such dreams burning in the depths of your eyes that I am afraid for you, sweet sister; for the life for which you are preparing yourself cannot be in accordance with your dreams or with your nature. What is awaiting you is a monotonous life, always the same, almost torpid, all mapped out by the unchangeable Rule, in the old convent of Queen Sancia, which has been the grave of more than one Montaga, and of more than one Cantelma. There is a picture in my memory of those Poor Clares one Ash Wednesday. When I was in Naples, the Angevin Church of Santa Chiara had an attraction for me, not only because some of my ancestors lie there, not only because there one may envy the Duke of Rodi his sleep in the pagan sarcophagus of Protesilaus and Laodamia, but also because there with closed eyes one can absorb the poetry diffused by the beautiful names of dead women. There is Maria, Duchess of Durazzo and Empress of Constantinople, there is the Princess Clemenza, there is Isotta d'Altamura, and Isabella di Soleto, and Beatrice di Caserta, and that delicious Antonia Gaudino, who is very like you, as she softly sleeps in marble under a veil

which Giovanni da Nola must have borrowed from the youngest of the Graces. I have a picture in my memory of the Poor Clares on Ash Wednesday. Behind the high altar there is a great black grating, all covered with spikes, enclosing the convent choir; and through it one can see the rows of stalls where the sisters sit, while on this side of the barrier the bishop, served by a Capuchin, is seated with a silver basin full of ashes in his hands. A shutter is opened in the grating, and one by one the Clares come and kneel at it. The bishop thrusts his feeble arm through the hole and marks their foreheads one by one with the sign of the cross. As each has been signed she rises and returns to her stall like a ghost, brushing the pavement with silent feet shod in felt. It all goes on in silence, and it is all icy like the ashes. Ah, sweet sister, when you too have been frozen like that, who will there be to warm your little soul?"

"Who warmed the soul of St. Clara and made it glow?" objected the novice, rousing herself to escape defeat, while the colour rose in her cheeks.

"A man: St. Francis of Assisi. You cannot think of the Sister of St. Damian except on her knees at the feet of Francis. A religious painter has pictured her in the act of exchanging a kiss with the seraphic father. And think of the long idyll woven between the hermitage of St. Damian and the Portiuncula; think of that week of passion, sorrow, and pity passed in the convent garden, under the shadow of the olives, during a summer of great drought, when Clara used to drink the tears from the almost blind eyes of Francis; think of the converse between the two mystical lovers which preceded that ecstasy whence the Song of the Creatures burst like a flash of light. You have the Fioretti beside you. Very well, read over the chapter in which it tells 'How St. Clara ate with St. Francis.' Never was wedding banquet lit up by more radiant torches of love. Here it is: 'The men of Assisi and Beltona, and of all the country round about, saw that Santa Maria degli Angeli, and the whole place, and the forest round about it, were burning brightly, and it seemed as if a great fire were devouring the church and the place and the forest together; whereupon the men

of Assisi ran thither with great haste to put out the fire, believing that in very truth everything was burning. But when they reached the place and found no fire at all, they entered in and found St. Francis with St. Clara.' You see now, sweet sister, how the patroness of your order was able to take shelter from the frost. You must admit that between the sunny hermitage of St. Damian and the gloom of your Angevin convent the difference is great. There will be no fire there, only a uniform grey shadow where humility is powerless. What sort of humility is yours, Massimilla? I think your desire for slavery is a very lofty one."

She sat in silence, discouraged and gasping; and she was so sweet and so miserable in her distress, that I should like to have taken her on my knees.

"When you appeared to me the first day on the steps, you reminded me directly of an ermine. Well, somehow it seems as if in our imagination the whiteness of ermine could not be separated from the pride of the purple, so much accustomed are we to see them together on royal mantles. Perhaps you wear your mantle inside out, Massimilla, so that the purple is invisible underneath. That is often the way with a Montaga."

"I don't know," she answered vaguely. "It seems as if everything you say must be true."

It was as if she was making a confession—

"I will be what you wish me to be."

"If I were your husband, Massimilla," I added, to soothe her little trembling soul, "I would give you a house where the light should enter through slabs of honey-coloured alabaster, or through windows painted with legends; you should be served by ladies-in-waiting and mutes shod with felt and dressed in quiet colours, who would pass by you like great night-moths; and some of the rooms should have crystal walls looking over immense pools of water, hidden from sight by curtains which your hand could easily draw back whenever you felt the desire of a dream

voyage with open eyes over an ocean valley full of strange rich forms of life; and round the house I would make you a garden of trees which should strew flowers and weep spices, and it should be peopled with gentle, graceful animals, such as gazelles, doves, swans, peacocks. And there in harmony with everything around you, you should live for me alone. And every day, after satisfying my desire of rulership over men by some worthy act, I would come and breathe the rarefied air of your silent love, I would come and live by your side the pure life of my thoughts. And sometimes I would inspire you with a vehement fever; and sometimes I would make you weep inexplicable tears; and sometimes I would make you die and come to life again, so that I might appear more than man in your eyes."

Was she in the meantime preparing herself for departure, or was she lingering, impatiently expecting that which for her henceforth was not to be?

As I walked up the alley of old box-trees where Violante had first appeared to me under the great archway, she came to meet me almost at the same place, smiling a new smile.

"You look like an angel bringing good tidings to-day," I said. "The whole spirit of April is in you."

She gave me her hand, which I took and held for a moment in my own.

"What have you got to tell me?" I asked, for I read in her eyes the presence of something new which transfigured her.

My look embarrassed her; and once more her colour rose, seeming almost violent in contrast to her pallor.

"Nothing," she said.

"And yet," I said, "your whole figure seems to express annunciation. You shall tell me about it without speaking, if you will allow me to walk beside you for a little. I have never felt your harmony so perfect, Massimilla, as just now."

She certainly thought I was speaking to her of love, she was so confused. And there shone from her whole figure such a bright spirit of gentleness, that I thought once more of those gentle ladies assembled in the imagination of young Dante; from whose lips from time to time fell words mingled with sighs, as falls “water mingled with beautiful snow.” And because I loved her in a superhuman way, some of those ancient words came back to my memory: “To what purpose dost thou love thus? Tell us, for certain it is that the purpose of such love must be quite new.”

We had left the central alley, and were now penetrating into the grassy labyrinth. The bird guests of the cloister were singing, bright insects buzzed around; but my ear was listening to the rustle of the hem of her skirt as it bent down the heads of the long grass. At last Massimilla confessed, in a shy voice—

“My departure has been put off.”

She added, as if to justify herself—

“So I shall be able to keep the last Easter with my own people.”

But to me it seemed as if she had suddenly fallen into my arms, and as if her cheek were clinging to my breast so closely that to unclasp her from me would be to hurt her.

Nevertheless I exclaimed—

“That is good news!”

And I said nothing else, for my emotion at the contact with that throbbing life was so fierce that it prevented any pitiful feigning. It was clear that she expected words of love and joy from me; that I should take her hand and ask: “Will you renounce your vows for ever and be mine entirely?” That was what she expected. And feeling her anguish so close to me, feeling her longing to surrender herself and be happy fanning my face almost like a flame, a shudder ran through me, such as a man would feel if he were suddenly shown a great wound where the most hidden intricacies of the living flesh were laid bare. There was something of that horror in my suffering.

Up to that time I had played with the gentle soul, treating it like soft locks of hair through which it was sweet to run one's fingers with the knowledge that next day it would be cut off. And now this soul was clinging to mine with its whole anguish.

"I could make thee a creature of joy!" It was like a promise, it was almost passion. Both promise and passion too had rung in my last words; and indeed at that very hour my attentive ear had been able at times, as I bent over that sweet soul, to discern some trace of the hidden vein whence the beautiful sudden laughter had sprung one day. Ah, why was I doomed to deceive such sorrowful hope, and to renounce crowning my powers with that silent adoration?

We were alone, and it was a strange solitude in which I could almost feel the emptiness of the airy space that the two other figures would have occupied had they been beside us. And the restlessness which their absence produced in my spirit was as painful as the stress of waiting.

"Where were Anatolia and Violante, what were they doing just then? Were they also in the garden?" I saw them appearing at the turn of every path, and imagined the expression of their first look as they met us. And I thought of the strangeness of the behaviour of both during the past few days, and sought to discover its true meaning. Anatolia rose before me with her kind, heroic, martyr's smile, resigned to pour out her heart's strength to the last drop that she might soothe incurable ills; she rose before me with those pure eyes of hers, which at times flashed invitingly like the waters of legendary lakes when a sudden glitter reveals the existence of hidden treasures. Wrapped in her apathy and disdain, Violante rose before me in an enigmatic attitude which might almost be hostile, and inspired me with a kind of discomfort such as gloomy presentiments are wont to produce; for behind her in my imagination was her fatal rock, and the mystery of her distant apartments clouded with deadly perfumes.

I should like to have asked her who was at my side: "Is there any change in your

beloved sisters' voices when they speak to you or to each other? Is there anything that hurts you sometimes in their voices and their looks? And at times when you are sitting side by side breathing the same air, does a heavy silence fall upon you, like the silence before a storm? And then do you feel all your tenderness dry up, and a bitterness like venom rise within you? And, tell me, do your sisters weep apart? Or does it sometimes happen that you all weep together?"

Thus would I fain have questioned the silent maiden, and with her have suffered the pain of loving.

I looked at her. She was suffering and rejoicing. "You always carry a book," I said, for the sake of breaking the charm, "like a sibyl."

She showed me the volume.

"It is the book I had that first day," she said, with the indefinable tone in her voice which betrays the moisture of tears.

"And the blade of grass?"

"Is burnt up."

"Put in a red rose instead."

But there was such humble grace in her emotion, she let her inward ardour appear so ingenuously, that I could not leave her, nor resist the sweetness of seeing her melt little by little.

"Let us sit down," I said. "Let us read a few pages together. Do you like this place?"

It was a little mound in the meadow, starred with anemones, and peaceful; some pointed yew-trees near gave it something of the look of a cemetery. In the centre, a caryatid, bent double so that her breast touched her knees, supported the marble slab of a sundial. And there, like seats at a table, were two benches for a couple of lovers who might wish as they looked on the shadow of the dial to experience the melancholy delight of perishing slowly and harmoniously together. Carved in the

marble under the figures of the hours, this legend was still traceable—

ME LUMEN, VOS UMBRA REGIT.

“Let us sit down here,” I said. “It is a delicious place to enjoy the April sunshine and feel life flowing on.”

A green lizard lying on the slab looked at us out of its small glittering eyes quite fearlessly like a familiar spirit. When we sat down, it disappeared. Then I laid my hand on the marble, which was very hot.

“It is almost burning. Feel!”

Massimilla laid both her hands on it, white upon white, and kept them there. The point of the shadow reached the tip of her ring-finger, and the number of the hour was covered by her palm.

“See how the hand points to you as the hour of beatitude,” I said, for I profoundly enjoyed the harmonious grace of her action, and I loved her thus.

She half closed her eyes, and once more her little soul trembled on her eyelashes like a tear, and I could have drunk it by merely bending forward.

“The saint,” I added, touching the book, “has a divine verse for you in the waves of her prose, a verse supremely sweet, sweeter than those which rose in Dante’s mind before his exile. 'Stava quasi beata dolorosa!’”

She felt surrounded by light and love, as perhaps she may have felt before in her secret dreams; and she drank from my words and my presence, and from her own illusions and the fresh springtime, an intoxication of which the memory would perhaps fill her whole life. She did not speak, she sat motionless in the attitude I had praised; but I understood the ineffable things spoken by the eloquent blood in the veins of her beautiful bare hands.

“Let me love her as long as she is of this world!” I repeated to her sisters, while their sad eyes seemed to gaze at me through the branches of the yew-trees. “Let me gather

these anemones and strew them on the hair which is so soon to be shaven!”

She sat there almost beatified, and her unconsciousness touched me, for I loved her, and was saying to her: “I love thee, but on condition that to-morrow thou diest. I give thee this flame that thou mayest carry it with thee into thy grave. Such is the necessity which compels us.”

She sat up and pressed her hands over her face, and murmured—

“This sun is stupefying.”

“Would you like to go?” I asked.

“No,” she replied, with a faint smile. “According to your advice, I ought to bathe myself in sunshine. Let us stay here a little longer. You said you wanted to read a few pages.”

She seemed as exhausted as if she had just come out of a swoon.

“Read, there!” she begged, pushing the book towards me.

I took it, opened it, and turned over the leaves here and there, running my eyes over a few lines. The flying shadow of a swallow passed over the pages, and we heard the rustle of wings close by.

“How astonished I was,” she added, “when you repeated St. Catherine’s exhortation to me that day! I was still full of her spirit, and you were magician enough to speak to me of her.”

There was such perfect confidence and abandonment in her voice, that she could not have signified to me more plainly: “Here am I, I am thine; I belong entirely to thee as no other living creature can, as no inanimate thing can belong to thee. I am thy slave and thy chattel.”

She really seemed to possess a supernatural quality, to abolish in herself that law in love which denies to man the privilege of being the giver and the perpetual and perfect possession of the other. She really seemed in the full sunlight to be

transfigured by my imagination into some crystal fluid, to become a liquid essence for me to absorb, and bathe myself in like a perfume.

“I think,” I said, “that sometimes when you read this book you must feel your soul evaporate like a drop of water on burning iron. Do you not? 'Fire and abyss of charity dissolve for ever the cloud of my body!’ cries the Saint. And you have marked these words in the margin. You have a continual aspiration to fade away.”

Her pale face smiled at me in the sunshine, looking almost transparent against the whiteness of the marble.

“Here is another place marked: 'Soul intoxicated, tormented, and burning with love.’ And here is another: 'Be thou a tree of love, grafted into the tree of life.’ What eloquence of passion the virgin has! She fascinates all the silent, because she speaks and cries aloud for them. But that which makes the book precious to whoever loves life is the abundance of life-blood flowing through it, for ever boiling and flaming like a sacrificial altar on the day of great sacrifices. This Dominican nun seems to have had a crimson view of the world. She sees everything through a veil of burning blood. 'The memory is filled with blood,’ she says. 'I shall find the blood and the living creatures, and I shall drink their love and affection in blood.’ A kind of ruddy madness assails her at times. 'Drown yourselves in blood,’ she cries; 'bathe yourselves in blood, intoxicate yourselves in blood, clothe yourselves in blood, mourn for yourselves in blood, rejoice in blood, grow and strengthen yourselves in blood!’ She knows the full value of that sweet and terrible liquid, for she sees it not only in the chalice, but bursting from the veins of mankind, she who has been caught in the whirlwind of life, who has worn her veil in the midst of the fierce hatred and violent passions which have made her century beautiful. Here is that marvellous letter of hers to Brother Raimondo of Capua. Have you ever been able to read it without trembling to your very marrow? 'And his head lay on my breast. Then I felt a great joy within me, and the odour of his blood rose up.’ What I perceive here is

not only the eucharistic ecstasy, but also real voluptuousness. I can almost see the young woman’s delicate nostrils tremble and dilate. Hers too is that sentence I admire so much: 'Arming oneself with one’s own sensuality.’ Her senses must have been very acute, for her whole writings glow with lively images, strong in colour and movement, and almost Dantesque in their vigour and audacity. Ah, sweet sister, she is not the guide to lead you peacefully to the door of the cloister! Her Dominican robe is full not only of the odour of blood, but of all the odours of the proud life through which she moved unconquered. A vast multitude clothed in sackcloth and in purple, in iron and in gold, have swept her away like a whirlwind, with 'the fire of anger and hatred,’ which burns just as fiercely as the fire of love. Friars, nuns, hermits, light women, soldiers of fortune, princes, cardinals, queens, popes, all the different temperaments of a hard and magnificent century she deals with by her indefatigable will. She is powerful in contemplation and in action. She calls Alberico of Balbiano her 'beloved brother,’ and the knights of the company of St. George her 'beloved sons.’ And she dares to write to Queen Joanna of Naples: 'Alas, one must weep over you as over one dead!’ And to Gregory XI.: 'Be a brave man and not a coward.’ And to the King of France she says: 'I will.’ That is why I admire her, Massimilla, and also because she possesses a Garden, a House, and a Cell of self-knowledge; and because this saying is hers: 'To eat and taste souls’; and lastly, because it was she who wrote, before da Vinci: 'The intellect nourishes the affections. Who knows most, loves most; and loving most, enjoys most.’ Lofty words, which are the rule of all beautiful inward life.”

As I was speaking, I could follow in Massimilla’s wide open, steady eyes the slow rhythm of a wave which seemed to have some mysterious musical relation with the sound of my voice; and this sensation was so new and strange to me, that I prolonged what I was saying for fear of interrupting it.

Indeed, hardly had I ceased speaking, when she bowed her head, and in silence let two rivers of tears flow from her limpid eyes.

I did not ask her why she wept; but I took her hands, which were like soft leaves burning with the midday heat. And under that glowing April sky, beside that dazzling marble on which the shadow of the hand of the dial seemed to have lain motionless for an indefinite time, amidst those funereal yews and wreaths of anemones, I tasted a few moments of unspeakable exultation. I saw a spirit, not my own, suddenly reach that part of life—and for a few seconds rest there—beyond which, according to Dante's words, none can pass with intent to return.

And it seemed to me that afterwards the rest of love and life could not have any value for that spirit.

After this the blessed maiden seemed to resume the aspect of a figure of Prayer, in which she had appeared to me the first day, as she sat between her two brothers. Lifting her veil to look into the depth of her eyes, I had seen a swift miracle worked under my gaze. The memory of it dazzled me still, but the veil had fallen again, and for ever.

Once more she seemed to me like one who has "departed from this present age."

So much so, that when Oddo, one day, told me the pitiful story of her engagement broken off by death, I listened as one listens to a legend of ancient times, and felt then how strong and genuine my intellectual detachment was.

She had been loved and asked in marriage by Simonetto Belprato two years before; and, like Iphanea, had lost her betrothed almost on the eve of the wedding.

"Già vicino alle sue nozze, beata Le ghirlande apprestava; e le fu spento."

Oddo recalled to my mind the faint memory of Simonetto, and described to me the gentle youthful figure of the student, last heir of a noble family of Trigento, living a retired life with his widowed mother in the country, where he studied botany and died.

"Poor Simonetto!" said Oddo with brotherly regret, "I can see him still in his botanising dress, his tin case slung over one shoulder, his iron-shod stick and his

green morocco pocket-book. He used to spend almost his whole time botanising, or preparing and drying the plants he had collected. His house was full of herbariums, and he might well stamp his floreated coat-of-arms as an emblem on their covers. You know what the Belprato arms are?—a shield divided by a bar of gold, the upper half red with a silver lily, the lower green, strewn with red flowers and golden leaves. Is it not a strange coincidence, Claudio? That the last of the Belprato should be a botanist! I used to prophesy to Massimilla in fun: 'You will end between two leaves of grey paper.' They were betrothed to each other in the garden over his collecting, and they seemed made for each other. We were pleased too, for Massimilla would have entered a good family, and would not have lived very far away from us. (The Belprato, as you know, are of very ancient nobility, though during the last few centuries they have decayed. They came over from Spain to Naples with Alphonso of Aragon.) Everything was ready for the wedding. I remember so well the day that the wedding-dress, the kind gift of our aunt Sabrano, arrived from Naples with its wreath of orange blossom. Massimilla tried it on; it was delicious. Antonello and I wanted Anatolia and Violante to try it on for luck; poor dear creatures! The wreath, I remember, got twisted among Violante's hair in such a strange way that it was impossible to take it off without tearing out a few hairs clinging to the flowers. One of the servants muttered that it was a bad omen. She was right. Simonetto was, indeed, to fall a victim to his mania. It was autumn, and he used often to go to Linturno to gather the water plants on the stagnant river. There it was that he contracted the germs of the poisonous fever which carried him off in two days. We had a funeral instead of a wedding. Our usual bad fortune!"

We were in Antonello's rooms; the blinds were drawn, and the place was half dark, for outside the day was clouding over. I could not see the sky out of the windows, yet I could feel the sensation of the gentle, rather enervating, heat outside, and I felt sure that out of doors a few drops of rain had begun to fall, some of those warm tears that are so soft when they fall on face or hands. Antonello was lying motionless

on his bed without speaking. Every now and then a swallow could be heard chattering.

“Perhaps,” I asked Oddo, “that is why Massimilla is going into the convent?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t think so,” he replied. “It is a long time ago now. But certainly life in this house must be more wearisome for her than for the others. I always think she must feel as dried up and extinguished as the plants in the herbariums Simonetto left her in his will. Ah, that wedding-dress laid by in a cupboard like a relic! Think of it! That white robe which by this time must be full of the odour of dried plants! Think of it! Do you think that death can have any museum in the world sadder than that of which Massimilla is the guardian? Sometimes I am unjust; sometimes I cannot conceal the bitterness that rises in my heart when I think that Massimilla is going away, is going to forsake us. I feel as if her departure would bring about the final dissolution. I feel as though a whirlwind would come to scatter and destroy us all, like a heap of useless rags. And she in the meantime is seeking to save herself. But I am unjust. She is perhaps the most unhappy of all us here. What I used to say to her in jest has come true. She believes herself to have become like the leaves and flowers in a herbarium. To revive herself, to call up the illusion of living, she forces herself into contact with living things. Have you not seen her plunge her hands in the grass and hold them there, so as to feel the caterpillars and insects among it run over her skin? Don’t you know the hours and hours she spends in the garden looking for animals, and making friends with them? In all this she is, as you said, a pattern of Franciscan perfection. But what would you say if you knew that it is really nothing but an anxious desire to realise life? I understand it; I am perhaps the only one who understands....”

He said the last words in a low voice, almost as if he were talking to himself; then he paused, possibly to contemplate within himself the creation of his disturbed fancy. Was it only the dream of a sick man? Or did the living Massimilla really correspond

to this forsaken guardian of dead plants? I did not linger over such doubts; for I wished to absorb all the poetry which the strange fancies diffused through the shadow of the room, where now the faint patter of the rain reached us, and awakened in my nostrils the desire to inspire the savour of the moist earth. I rose and opened the nearest window a little; the smell of the earth floated in.

“During the first few months after Simonetto’s death,” Oddo resumed, “she took great care of the herbariums. She used to pass long hours in the room where they were kept, examining the plants and reading the labels. And I used often to keep her company, for I was very sorry for her. One day, I remember, I came upon her opening the cupboard in the same room where her wedding-dress was kept. Another day, I remember, in the springtime I saw her quite agitated because one of the narcissus bulbs had flowered.... It was strange, wasn’t it, Claudio? I saw that bulb come up again last spring. And this year? I have not asked Massimilla.... Shall we go and see?”

He rose to his feet, seized with a feverish impatience, and took a few steps towards the door. But Antonello, who was still lying on his pillows, rose also with the same look—how well I remembered it!—as had passed over his face when he warned us of the coming of the gloomy sedan chair; and raising a finger to his lips to bid us keep silence, he leant against the wall which formed a side of the loggia and listened. Nothing was to be heard in the silence save the gentle monotonous patter of the soft spring shower in the enclosed garden.

“Don’t go out!” whispered Antonello.

We did not ask why, for the cause of his terror was evident in his thin contracted face. And as the sound of steps and voices reached us, Oddo went up to the door, opened it a little, and peeped out. I went up to it too, and, standing at his shoulder, I could see through the chink Anatolia leading her mother along the covered loggia, with her arm in hers, and one of the grey woman servants following. Princess

Aldoina walked with difficulty, leaning her whole weight upon her daughter. She was strangely dressed in a grand gown with a long train, and was decked out with false jewellery. She looked pale and enormous, with her head raised and a little thrown back, her eyes half closed, and an indescribable smile playing on her lips, as if the sound of the rain on the pavement of the quadrangle had been a murmur of homage from courtiers, through whose ranks she was passing, a queen on the way to her throne. And the full light of sorrowful pity shone in the daughter's face as she leant over the mad woman.

As the apparition vanished, our souls for a few moments were full of affectionate anguish. And while the echo of the sad footfalls was still audible, the maiden's figure in that attitude of pity and sorrow which had revealed her to me in her true and supreme light rose before me with extraordinary clearness. And my inmost soul felt an almost religious awe, such as one feels in presence of a holy mystery; for none of the previous actions wrought before my eyes by this pure spirit of consolation seemed equal in value and significance to this action performed by her, all unconscious of my hidden gaze. She rose suddenly to a sublime height in my soul; she shone with the whole glory of her moral beauty, supported by the whole force of her heroic will. Contemplated thus, apart from any affinity to myself, in the secret of her own life to which I was a stranger, in the absolute sincerity of her feeling, she seemed to me a being of an ideal race; and my spirit linked her with those noble creatures immortalised by the poets, divine victims of a voluntary sacrifice. Antigone leading her blind father by the hand, or prostrating herself to strew dust over her brother's corpse, was not more tender or stronger than she, had not a purer brow nor a larger heart. In the midst of that sort of languid monotony, in that enervating shadow where a sick man was sounding the depth of his own ills, and a restless voice was calling up a vision of empty misery from withered flowers, the consoler appeared suddenly bringing refreshment to my soul; and as a sudden light piercing a dark wall makes the motionless sword glitter among the hanging

trophies, so did she strike a great flash out of my dormant will. There was strength in her to produce miraculous fruit. Her substance might have nourished a superhuman germ. She was indeed the “nourisher,” but such a one as the virgin Antigone appeared to the blind Œdipus when he was exiled and erring. Did not she alone, like the ancient heroine, keep alive in the depths of her great heart the genial flame which had been extinguished on the hearth of her failing race? Was not she alone the life of the gloomy house? Massimilla in her barren garden, Violante in her cloud of perfumes, paled before their sister as she walked along the path of self-sacrifice with so firm a step, so sweet a smile.

And I thought of Him who was to come.

We were sitting, Prince Luzio and I, near an open balcony about the hour in the afternoon when the fierce heat of that dying May was beginning to be tempered, and the pilgrim clouds were throwing a few deep blue shadows over the burning valley. The anniversary of King Ferdinand’s death was approaching, so the loyal Prince, who always celebrated it with mourning, was relating to me all the sorrows and horrors of the long agony of the King; and against a background of perfumes rising from the walled garden, the gloomy phantoms awakened by the aged voice followed each other in long succession. The silent journey over the heights of Ariano, and through the valley of Bovino amid snowstorms; the fatal omens which occurred at every step; the first signs of illness appearing one frosty evening when the King, numb with cold, was toiling over the ice which covered the slope; his anxious desire to continue on his road without any delays, as if an inexorable destiny were urging him on; the fearful pallor which suddenly came over him in presence of the crowd, amongst honours which he felt to be the last he would receive; the cries which the attack drew from him, but which were drowned by the clamour of the wedding feast; the distress of the doctors who assembled round his bed to consult under the hostile and suspicious eyes of the Queen; his burst of tears when the Duchess of Calabria, a fresh, youthful figure, entered the infected room where he lay aged and almost

stupefied by suffering; then his tragic good-bye to his own statue as the nurses were carrying him into another room; then the embarcation on board ship, a ceremony as sad as a funeral, and his mournful words as the litter was carried down under the hatchways, which had been enlarged by the strokes of hatchets; then the arrival at Caserta, the rapid change for the worse, the putrid decay of his body on the great bed surrounded by sacred images, miraculous relics, crucifixes, lamps, and tapers; at the last the pomp of the Viaticum, the King sitting up among the pillows quite unrecognisable, to the terror of those present; the last words, the Christian serenity of his death, the dispute between the Queen and the doctors about the embalming of the body, the band of soldiers round the bier told off to cleanse incessantly the innumerable terrible sores;—all these sorrows and all these horrors passed through his recollection. And I listened and thought of the Duke of Calabria sobbing in a corner like a girl. “Ah, what grand and beautiful ambitions the odours of death might have nourished in his youthful soul through those terrible spring weeks! In what proud intoxicating meditations my soul would have been wrapped beneath the shadow of the great trees, and how petty the eager agitation caused by the stirring of the sap in their powerful trunks would have seemed in comparison with mine!”

Prince Luzio told me how one day the Duke of Calabria, trembling and aghast, suddenly entered his sick father’s room to tell him of the expulsion of the Grand Duke of Tuscany, and with what violent words the King had condemned his relation’s timidity.

“Ah, if Ferdinand had not died!” exclaimed the old man, with an almost threatening gesture. “A few hours before he expired he said: 'The crown of Italy has been offered me....’ Don’t you think, Claudio, that a Bourbon might have been wearing it now?”

“Perhaps,” I replied, very respectfully. “And if it were so, the highest honours in the kingdom ought to be bestowed upon the Prince of Castromitrano. Let me tell you

how much I admire your dignity and faith! You are one of the very few among our equals who have maintained the sentiment of the virtue of race intact and intense. Rather than renounce your privileges and take up an attitude unsuited to your legitimate pride, rather than appear only a survival of yourself, you retired from the world, but not until you had startled it with the supreme splendour of your magnificence; and you have sought in solitude to await the fortune which Fate may be reserving for your house. Misfortune has treated you as a great man, for sorrow also has its privileges, and yours have been fully acknowledged."

The Prince's fatherly face had become grave and attentive. The veneration I felt in my soul for his beautiful white head was far deeper than that expressed in my words; and added to it was a tender feeling so pure that only a feminine presence could have inspired it. The fact was that I felt the presence of Anatolia's spirit. She had appeared on the threshold of the door at the end of the room, had passed silently along the wall, and had sat down in a shadowy corner, looking white, mysterious, and propitious as a family genius.

"Far away from the world though you are," I added, "and wrapped in such a thick cloud of sadness, you have yet been able to nourish to this day hope of the resurrection of that which is dead; and the prophecy of your faith still rings in my ears. No doubt that which is dead shall rise again, but it shall be changed. If you were to turn your eyes for a single moment upon the spectacle which the world presents to-day, you would feel your dream fall from your soul like a dry leaf, and you would see that the recovery of his little state, and even the acquisition of Italy, would be useless to Francis of Bourbon. Whether a Bourbon or a Sabaudo be on the throne, the King is equally absent; for that man cannot be called a king who has submitted to the will of the many in accepting a prescribed and narrow office, and who then humbles himself to fill it with all the diligence and modesty of a public clerk who is perpetually spurred on by the fear of being dismissed. Do I not speak truly? Nor would Francis be able to reign in any other way. Directly after his

father's death he wrote out with his own hand an edict to re-establish the results of the abolished constitution. And it was Alessandro Nunziante who prevented its being published. Just think of the lamentable proclamation of the 8th December, dated from the guard-house at Gaeta. Was that the language of a king, and of a vanquished king?"

Prince Luzio had listened in silence, with knitted brows, and now he said, not without a shade of severity—

"One can see that you have the blood of Gian Paolo Cantelmo in your veins."

"The blood of all my ancestors is in my veins. Ah, dear father (let me call you by that name!), I well know how painful it must be to you to renounce an ideal of justice before which the flame of your loyalty has burned for so many, many years; but I must tell you that for us and our like there is no salvation unless we substitute energetic purpose for empty hopes. Allow me to speak to you plainly and without circumlocution. It is useless to hope that any heroic fire will suddenly arise from the stagnant blood of Saint Louis. I have seen the exile quite recently; he is full of placid resignation, given up to good works and prayer; he remembers his short reign as a far-away, painful dream. Your prophecy would call up a mild, incredulous smile on his lips—that is all. If his spirit sometimes flies towards the bay, not Capodimonte but the height of Camaldoli is its goal. He has grown used to a quiet, pious life; the glitter of the crown no longer disturbs his nights. Let us leave him to sleep peacefully!"

The head of the loyal prince had fallen on his breast, and I saw the lines deepen on his bent brow like furrows full of thoughts.

"It is not for him alone that fate is dark. The twilight of kings is ashy, blinded of all glory. Look even beyond the Latin countries. Under the shadow of artificial thrones you will see false monarchs fulfilling their public duties with the accuracy of automatons, or giving their attention to the cultivation of their childish manias and

their petty vices. The most powerful of all, the lord of the hugest multitudes, consumes away alone in his dark misanthropy, his herculean muscles corroded by the moth of suspicion. He has not even the taste for quenching the petty chemical formulas of his rebel subjects in some magnificent massacre by the naked sword, such as might water and fatten his barren lands. He has a truly royal soul, however, which perhaps you may have been able to study near at hand, for he is of the race of Maria Sophia. Wittelsbach attracts me by the immensity of his pride and his melancholy. His efforts to make his life conformable to his ideal are desperate in their violence. All human intercourse makes him shudder with disgust and anger; all pleasure seems nauseous to him unless it is what he himself has planned. Exempt from the venom of love, hostile to all intruders, for years he has held intercourse with no one, save the resplendent heroes which a creator of beauty has given him as companions in super-terrestrial regions. In the depths of rivers of music he slakes his anguished thirst for the divine, and then he ascends to his solitary haunts, where, amidst the mystery of mountains and lakes, his spirit creates the inviolable kingdom over which alone he desires to reign. This profound feeling for solitude, this power of breathing on the highest and loneliest summits, this consciousness of being unique and unapproachable in life, makes Louis of Bavaria truly a king, but king of himself and of his dreams. He is incapable of stamping his will upon the multitude, and of bending it under the yoke of his idea; he is incapable of reducing his inward power to action. At the same moment he appears sublime and childish. When his Bavarian troops were fighting the Prussians, he was far away from the battlefield, hidden in one of his lake islands, where he forgot his shame under one of those ridiculous disguises which he wears to favour his visionary illusions. It would be better for him if, instead of placing a screen between his majesty and his ministers, he could attain to the marvellous nocturnal empire sung by his poet! It seems incredible that he should not have left the world before now, carried away by his flights of fancy....”

The Prince’s head was still bent in such a solemn attitude, that even in the heat of speaking my heart smote me with the fear of having wounded him; and a filial desire came over me to comfort him, to lift up his grand white head, and to see the unwonted light of joy in his eyes. Anatolia’s presence kindled a sort of generous fire in my soul, and made me feel a great desire to reveal what was noblest and strongest within me. She sat motionless and silent in the shadow like a statue, but her attention shone on my soul like a flood of light.

“You see, my dear father,” I resumed, unable to control the tremor throbbing in my voice—“you see how old legitimate monarchies are everywhere declining, and how the Multitude stands by ready to swallow them down its miry throat. Truly they deserve no other fate! And not monarchies alone, but all great, and noble, and beautiful things, all the sovereign ideals which once were the glory of struggling and conquering Man, all are about to disappear under the immense flood of corruption which is rising and swaying onwards. I will not tell you how far the shame has gone, for I should have to use words which would offend your ear; and afterwards it would seem as though the air had to be purified with grains of incense. I came away from the city choking with disgust, but now I think almost with rejoicing of the general dissolution. When everything shall have been profaned, when all the Altars of Thought and Beauty shall have been cast down, when all the vessels containing ideal essences shall have been broken, when ordinary life shall have reached such a pitch of degradation as seems unsurpassable, when the last smoking torch shall have gone out in the great darkness, then the Multitude will stop, suddenly seized by a panic far exceeding any that has ever before shaken its miserable soul; and, suddenly deprived of the frenzy which blinded it, will feel itself astray in the desert strewn with ruins, without any path or light to guide it. Then will the law of the need of heroes descend upon it; and it will pray for the iron rod by which it must be disciplined anew. And I believe, dear father, that these heroes, these new kings of the earth, shall arise from our race, and that from this day all our energies ought to be directed towards

preparation for their earlier or later advent. That is my faith."

The Prince had lifted his head, and was looking at me with intent and rather astonished eyes, as if I had appeared to him in an unexpected light. But an unusual vivacity animating his whole person told me how much he had been touched by my eagerness.

"I have lived for several years in Rome," I continued, with greater confidence, "that third Rome which was to have represented 'the unconquerable love of the Latin race for the Latin soil,' and whose hills were to have shone with the marvellous light of a new ideal. I have witnessed there the most shameful violations and the most obscene connections which ever defiled a sacred spot. And I can understand the lofty symbolism hidden in the act of the Asiatic conqueror, who cast five myriads of human heads into the foundations of Samarkand, when he wished to make it his capital. Don't you think that the wise tyrant meant to signify the necessity of severe pruning on the part of those who are about to institute a really new order of things? It was necessary to sacrifice and cast into the foundations of the third Rome the men who were called liberators, and, according to the funeral custom of the ancients, to place at their feet, at their sides, and in the hands which freed their country the objects which they knew and loved best, and then to dig out and drag down the heaviest granite boulders from the mountain tops to close the deep sepulchre for all eternity. But never were lives so tenacious and so pestiferous laid in the earth! Quite lately, dear father, I heard the following in Rome: 'The fleet of the Thousand only sailed from Quarto to obtain state protection for the right of barter!' And yet amidst the clatter of traders I caught the sound of that remote mysterious voice which lingers in every stone, and murmurs in every sea-shell; and the sublime view of the Campagna consoled me for all my disgust. Ah, father, who can ever despair of the fate of the world while Rome is still under the heavens? When I think of her and worship her, I only see her as she is figured on Nerva's medal—with the rudder in her hand. When I think of her and worship her, I can only describe her strength in

the words of Dante: 'In every generation of things, that is best which is most perfectly One.' And her principle of unity, as of old, shall once more be the concentrating, ordering, and preserving force of everything in the world that is good and amenable to order. The Dantesque similes of the soil and the flames are well adapted to her, because one can conceive the former as making a single base, and the latter as united in a single and identical apex. I firmly believe that the greatest height of power in the future will be that which shall have its base and its apex in Rome; for I, a Latin, glory in having set at the head of my faith the mystical truth expressed by the poet: 'It is certain that Nature disposed one place in the world to be suitable for universal empire, and that that place is Rome.' Now from what mysterious union of races, what vast experience of culture, what auspicious harmony of circumstances, shall the new King of Rome arise?"

The fine fever which had warmed my thoughts to intoxication in the Latian desert again kindled in my veins; and the great phantoms created by the sacred soil again took tumultuous possession of my spirit; and all the hopes begotten by my violent pride in those solitudes haunted by memories of the most bloody of human tragedies, rose again and stirred vaguely, giving me a feeling of excitement which I could scarcely endure. The venerable old man's appearance assumed a graver solemnity, for at that moment I looked upon him as the embodiment of all those varied qualities which had expanded like flowers along the stem of his ancient race under the warmth of the light of glory, and had been manifested to the world in many magnificent characters; and I was about to justify my ambitious dream to this man who was already declining towards the grave, treating him as a judge to whom sorrow had given insight; I was going to ask his good auspices as an omen, and to propose to him as my equal the alliance which I desired.

My anxiety was heightened by the presence of the silent maiden in the shadow, for she appeared to me in truth to be the one destined to become through love "her who propagates and perpetuates the idealism of a race favoured by Heaven." I did not

dare to turn towards her, so sacred did the mystery of her virginity seem to me at that moment; but I remembered the vague idea of hidden treasures, which the wonderful light that shone in flashes from her transparent eyes had sometimes awakened in me; and even without turning round I could feel a kind of animated wealth throbbing in that strip of shadow, a living form containing an inestimable prize, something infinitely grand and mysterious, like the divine treasures guarded under veils in the holy of holies of temples.

“You, as well as I, are convinced,” I added, “that every form of excellence of the human type is the effect of an initial effort, which by one selection after another reaches its highest intensity, and is manifested in the race, modified by temporary circumstance. It is not only our patrician pride which vaunts the virtue of Race, but it is acknowledged also by the most exact science. The highest examples of human conscience can only appear at the summit of a race which has sprung up in time out of the continual accumulation of energies and work; of a race in which during long periods of centuries the fairest dreams, the most vigorous sentiments, the noblest thoughts, the most lordly wills have been born and nourished. Now, take the case of a race of remote royal origin, which is springing up under the Latin sun in a happy land furrowed with the rivulets of a new poetry. Transplanted into Italy, it flourishes with such vigour that in a short time no other race can compare with it. 'Worthless is the disciple who cannot outdo his master,’ da Vinci has pronounced. And that race seems to have inscribed its greatness on an even bolder motto: 'Worthless is the son who cannot outdo his father.’ Through united and uninterrupted energies it goes on from one generation to another, raising itself up to the higher manifestations of life. In times of blind anger, when reason can trust to nothing but arms, it seems already to understand 'that those men who above all others possess strength of intellect are by nature lords over others.’ And from the very beginning its discipline is of an intellectual nature, and seems to have been dictated by Dante; for it consists in always reducing to action the whole available power of intellect, first of all by

laying down theories, and then by working them out. In the most important offices, as truly as on the bloodiest battle-fields and at the most liberal banquets, this race excels: equally admirable whether leading armies, governing states, conducting embassies, protecting artists and sages, erecting palaces or churches. It mingles with Italian life in all its most varied forms; it bathes itself in every fresh fountain of culture. Living is to it the perpetual assertion and increase of itself: living to it is ruling. The formidable instinct of rulership is always driving it forward, while clear and steady thought directs this lasting impulse. And always—like those careful archers whom Machiavelli cites as examples—always it aims higher than the mark. Its deeds are so illustrious that the greatest poets have sung their renown, and the writers of history compare them to those of the ancient generals, and quote them as the examples for the future. Yet it seems that the strength of this race has not yet been fully manifested, has not yet reached the unsurpassable height: it seems that its accumulated energies must, either to-morrow, or in the course of a century, or at some indefinite time, expand themselves in one supreme manifestation...."

"Cave, adsum!" interrupted the Prince, with a grand smile. "Is not that the motto of the race you are speaking of?"

"It might also bear the motto of the Montaga," I replied readily, "Sub se omnia!"

The Prince bowed with a gesture that served of itself to show that my reply had not been a simple courtesy, but was indeed due to the dignity of his great name. I saw him again before me with the figure I remembered in my boyhood: a fine example of superior humanity, every action revealing his distinction, his absolute separation from the multitude, from common duties, and common virtues. It seemed to me as if he had shaken the weight of sorrow that was crushing him off his shoulders, and had risen up in all his manly strength, his whole frame assuming that marvellous quality possessed by his hands—those beautiful pure hands preserved unchanged as if they had been embalmed—surviving ministers of a liberality which can only be

compared to the ancient “who for small services loved to reward greatly.”

The last hour of daylight was fading away, and from the burning sky the annunciation of summer came down on the patrician garden, where amid the austere odour of centenarian box-trees, the statues—pale and yet watchful, like memories in a faithful soul—called up by their gestures the phantoms of past grandeur. But outside the cloister rose the immense crown of rock fashioned by primeval fires, looking so harsh and proud that it seemed worthy of supporting on each peak a Prometheus Bound.

I had seen those same peaks on the first evening of my arrival, flaming in the sky like rockets, shining with incredible radiance, the highest of them standing out like a tongue of flame against the background of general shadow, and cleaving the sky like a cry of hopeless passion. I was alone then in that remote twilight, and the three mysterious princesses were at hand in their walled garden, and my fate was still apart from their fate. But now in the same conjunction of circumstances the fate prophesied by that first agitation of my feelings was about to be fulfilled: I was about to utter solemn and irrevocable words. Was I indeed quite freed from perplexity? Had I at last chosen from those three blessed ones, whom I had seen in fancy on that far away evening receiving my spring gift with open arms, had I at last chosen out one for the necessary union? And was I about to pronounce her name in her father’s presence? Fresh uneasiness crept over me, and it seemed to me as if Anatolia were no longer alone in the shadow, but as if her sisters had come in silently and taken their places beside her, and as if their eyes were fixed anxiously upon me.

As I turned round I saw the white motionless figure in the corner, and everything else vanished, and all my vain restlessness was calmed.

She was the living symbol of security, the watcher and the guardian. With her strength and her patience, lit up by her own smile, she had turned sorrow into an

adamantine armour which made her invincible. She was made to guard, nourish, and defend to the death that which was committed to her charge. And once again I saw her, in my dream, watching, her pure brow radiant with prophecy over the son of my blood and of my soul.

Then from the very roots of my being, where sleeps the indestructible virtue of ancestors, there arose and went forth towards the Elect the will to create that one to whom all the ideal riches of my race and my own conquests and the maternal perfections were to be transmitted. And deeper than ever grew the feeling of primary dependence which bound my actual being to my remotest ancestors; and just as the summit of the tree comprises in itself the whole life of the branching trunk down to the deepest roots, so I felt the life of the whole race living within me, that life which death could only destroy through its bodily manifestations in the transitory forms taken by succeeding generations. And the fulness and vehemence of that life seemed to overthrow the limits of my natural powers.

“Not long ago you recognised in me, not without a shade of severity, the descendant of Gian Paolo Cantelmo,” I said to the Prince, smiling. “I must confess that in my house the examples of disobedience and rebellion against kings are not rare. But the red Lion justifies them; and you cannot be unaware of the patent which the Cantelmi received from Charles II. of England. Being themselves of ancient royal blood, they have never easily resigned themselves to treating the king as other than their equal. It appears, too, that they never fight any other adversary with such zeal as they fight the king. And while Gian Paolo disturbed the slumbers of Ferdinand of Aragon, and humbled Alphonso, James I. and Menappo defeated Manfred at Benevento, James VIII. warred successfully against Ladislaus side by side with Braccio di Montone and the Sforza, while Antonio opposed René of Anjou. There is a natural tendency in every Cantelmo to form his own party, to separate himself, and to define his own person and power very clearly. It seems as if each of them founded his conception of his own dignity upon the firm conviction 'that being one is the root of being good,

and that what is good is such, because it is one.’ I joyfully acknowledge in this, one of the essential characteristics of the ruler to come: of the Monarch, the Despot. But there is another peculiarity which strengthens my faith, and that is the great number of rulerships which have fallen into the hands of the Cantelmi on Latin soil. It may be said that at different times and separately they have held the government of all Italy. James I. is Ambassador for Peace to the Republic of Genoa, Vicar in Lombardy, Captain-General in the March of Ancona, Viceroy of the Abruzzi; James II. is Vicar and Podestà of Florence; Bonaventura VIII., Viceroy of Sicily; Rostaino VII., Captain-General of the Serenissima, Senator of Rome.... Everywhere they hold rule, and their experience of different peoples teaches them to 'know well how men are to be gained or lost.’ Everywhere they fight and lose their lives in the act of performing some prodigy of valour: the 'good Cantelmo,’ immortalised in Tasso’s verse, stains the walls of Jerusalem with his royal blood; James II. dies fighting for the Florentines against Castruccio Castracane; Nicholas, first Duke of Sora, dies with Constantine Paleologus in the defence of Constantinople; Ascanio dies in the waters of Lepanto beside the Archduke John of Austria; Bonaventura VIII. is deemed worthy by Charles V. of the defence of the whole empire; and it is of him the Emperor says that he would choose him for his champion had he to risk his crown in a joust. The great Andrea is an extraordinary example of a life spent entirely in ceaseless fighting from his earliest youth to his latest breath.... He is indeed the most finished type which my race has produced to this day. Andrea is one of the finest heroes of will and strength. We need not reckon up the number of his exploits. In Italy, Germany, Flanders, France, and Spain, innumerable are the cities and fortresses acquired by him and added to the Catholic empire, innumerable are the sieges he laid and sustained. He is the Poliorcetus par excellence, a more fertile master of stratagem than any other, at once eager and prudent; 'for in him we discover,’ says one of his biographers, 'the union of all those gifts and qualities which in other captains may be noticed separately.’ But what in my eyes raises him

above the heads of all others is the unheard-of severity of the discipline he enforced on himself and his troops. Certain traits of this rigour fill me with more enthusiasm than the sight of the banners he took from the enemy. Though the troops he commanded are unpaid and badly armed, he manages to have them as ready and obedient to his hand as his own sword. No one ever understood better how to impress his own personality on the conduct of others. Eloquent and nervous in speech he yet always prefers the direct force of example to the power of words. He always moves at the head of his troops, on foot when he leads the infantry; he always sleeps in his clothes, eats and drinks nothing but what his soldiers eat and drink, is always the first in assault, the last in retreat; though covered with wounds, he refuses to take off his armour; on the field of victory or in the conquered city he never touches the booty. And in the war in Flanders he wins such terrible renown, that mothers use his name to frighten their children into obedience. Could any man determine his own likeness in clearer and more vigorous outline? Was ever coined metal stamped with a prouder effigy? In his time Andrea was surnamed the new Epaminondas. Well, even in this indefatigable warrior, the intellectual character of his race comes out. He is not only learned in speech, a distinguished mathematician, a master of military architecture, a writer on the science of war, but also a good connoisseur and splendid patron of the liberal arts. Eritio Puteano, in dedicating a Latin work to him, calls him Armorum gloria, Litterarum tutela. Cornelius Schult of Antwerp, presenting him with a book of fantastic designs, represents him as Eros cultivating elegance in the midst of arms, Heros inter arma elegantias colens. Andrea in this carries on the family tradition, the origin of which shines in the wreathed figure of Fanetta Cantelmo, Lady of Romanino, who composed poetry 'with a certain divine fury,' among the laurels of Provence, in one of the courts of love. And does not some of the wonderful aptitude which raised Alessandro above the other disciples of Da Vinci at Milan seem to have been transmitted to him? He thinks out new methods of fortification, constructs the celebrated fort on the Meuse, named in

honour of its inventor Fort Cantelmo, makes strange weapons which seem almost magical to his contemporaries.... Is there not something Leonardesque in these inventions, something which recalls Alessandro?”

I had uttered the name of him who lived in continual communion with my spirit, and whom I held to be the genius of the race, destined some day to reappear higher up the surviving family tree in some manifestation of sublime life. 'Oh thou, be what thou oughtest to be.’ My task had been developed along definite lines under his gaze and his teaching; and now at the moment when I was about to take a great resolve, he stood by my side. I saw him alive before my eyes, as if his white tyrannical hand were resting on the corner of the table beside me, and as if the statuette of Pallas and the pomegranate with its pointed leaf and flaming flower were there too. 'Oh thou, be what thou oughtest to be.’ And another youthful figure, apparently his younger brother, clung to him as closely as his shadow.

“Alessandro and Hercules! These were the two purple flowers so early cut off, which Leonardo and Ludovico gathered up and transmuted into imperishable essences. Andrea Cantelmo when he died had already displayed all the energies he possessed, and death overtook him on the verge of old age, covered with glory after that siege of Balaguer, which was the greatest of his heroic enterprises. But these two, facing life with their hands full of all the seeds of hope, had every great possibility open to them. Their youthful heads seemed made to wear the royal crown, that ancient crown which their fathers had already worn. In one of them Da Vinci divined the future founder of a new principality, the triumphant tyrant who was to lay upon the multitude the yoke of that science and beauty into which the great master had initiated his favourite disciple. But fate interfered with the fulfilment of his prophecy. Both of them threw away their lives in the first burst of their ardour, for they were devoured by too vehement enthusiasm. Hercules perished in the sands of the Po, fighting against the Sclavonians; Alessandro on the banks of the Taro in the battle of Fornovo. Do you remember the verses in which Ariosto

celebrates the beautiful son of Sigismond Cantelmo?

'Il più ardilo garzon che di sua etade Fosse da un polo a l'altro e da l'estremo Lito de gli Indi a quello ove il Sole cade....'

"His death was too cruel! He was made prisoner in a rash inroad, and his head was cut off before his father's eyes on the ship's deck, which was used as a block. I can imagine the blood spurting from the wound like a flame and scorching the side of the galley. Indeed, I do not only imagine it, I see it. What a wonderful and terrible storm of youthful courage it must have been which provoked him to set spurs to his horse and rush furiously against the enemy's entrenchments! Ah, dear father, I have known those storms myself, and my horse knows them, and so do the ruins of the Roman Campagna....

"No doubt at that moment Hercules felt worthy of bestriding the winged horse born of the blood of Medusa. Cave, adsum! Ariosto, as he sings his praises, uses an expression which of itself lights him up with glory, showing how the bold youth died to maintain the resolution which every Cantelmo makes—that of remaining at the post he has taken, and has thought to be the best, even in the face of the worst forms of death. He had a companion at his side during the assault. When both had rushed upon the enemy,

'Salvossi il Ferrufin, resto il Cantelmo.'

"He stayed, one against a thousand. And the divine Ludovico places his beautiful bleeding figure at the beginning of a song telling how Bradamante performed prodigies with his golden lance. But the death of Alessandro is like that of a demi-god. At Fornovo in the hottest of the battle a hurricane arises, and the Taro overflows its banks with terrible violence. Alessandro suddenly disappears, like one of those ancient Greek heroes, carried away from the earth in a whirlwind, and supposed to be transported to heaven. His body was never found on the field or anywhere else. But he lives, lives on through the ages, with life more intense than

our own. Not only his portrait has been transmitted to me by da Vinci, but his life, his true life. Ah, dear father, if you had once seen that picture, you would never be able to forget it. It is impossible to forget. Nothing in the world is of such value to me, and no treasure was ever guarded with such passionate jealousy. Who gave me strength to bear such long solitude and such hard discipline? Who poured into my spirit in the midst of the harshest rigour of discipline that kind of sober intoxication which makes all effort seem light? Who but Alessandro? He represents to me the mysteriously significant power of style, inviolable in my own person by any one, even by myself. All my life develops beneath his steady gaze; and in truth, dear father, he who can stand the searching trial of that fire is not degenerate. 'Oh thou, be what thou oughtest to be!' that is his daily precept. But while he thus urges me to keep my personality entire, he also places before my eyes the vision of an existence superior to my own in dignity and power. And I am always thinking of Him who is to come."

I stopped, for I felt my voice change, and I feared that the blood filling my heart might of a sudden overflow. And the old man's soul was in such deep communication with mine, that at that moment he involuntarily stretched out both hands to me.

"Since a double will is necessary for the creation of that one who is to outstrip his creators," I added in a low voice, bending towards him, "I could aspire to no higher union than that which would give me the right to call you father, as I am doing now...."

And overcome by emotion, I sat leaning forward with his trembling hands in mine, while his lips touched my brow without a word being spoken. But in the silence, between the throbbing of my heart and her father's quick breathing, I heard the light step of Anatolia gliding out of the room. Was she going to weep by herself? Her form, which I had seen motionless and white in the shadow, shone on my inner

heaven like a constellation of tears. Was she going to weep alone? Perhaps she would meet her sisters on the way.... This doubt suddenly made me uneasy. My eyes fell on the cameo that shone on the father’s hand.

And as the perfume of evening rose up from the walled garden, a dim sentiment spread through my soul, like a spell deepening round me with the slow falling of the twilight.

How in the meantime fared the heart of her who was about to depart? In what manner was her mystical life disposing itself round the memory of that supreme hour marked by the hand on the luminous dial?

“ME LUMEN, VOS UMBRA REGIT.”

Perhaps she may have returned more than once to the little cemetery with the yew-trees and anemones, and may perhaps again have laid her slender hands on the dial to feel its heat, and she may have remembered my exhortation: “Warm your hands in the sun, bathe them in the sun, poor hands, for soon you will carry them crossed on your breast or hidden under the coarse brown woollen habit in the shadow....” And more than once perhaps, with her palm laid over the figures indicating the divine moment, she may have waited, quivering in the great silence, to see the shadow of the hand reach the extremity of her ring-finger, as it did on that day of dreams; and perhaps she may have wept that the miracle of love had not been renewed.

“SINE SOLE SILEO.”

I connected the picture of the guardian of dried plants sketched for me by Oddo with the picture of that sad soul wandering round the sundial which had pointed out the hour of blessedness for her in vain. And I thought: “If only I had power to fashion for thee a beautiful fate, as the artist fashions the obedient wax, O thou who earnest towards me out of a barren garden where a funereal vow had imprisoned thee Massimilla, thus should I complete thy ideal figure with death, with timely death I

should complete thy perfection; for no other hour awaits thee in which thou canst hope to find any value, now that thou hast once penetrated into that part of life, beyond which none can go who intend to return. Guided by that divine memory, I would have thee return to the place where in dreams I gathered crown-like anemones, to strew them on thy head; and there I would have thee fall again into the harmonious attitude that once I praised, close to the marble sundial. And the moment the point of the shadow reached the tip of thy ring-finger should be the moment of thy death. Then beneath the stony gaze of the crouching caryatid I should myself dig the grave for thy frail remains; and I should lay thee out as the gentle ladies laid out Beatrice in Dante's vision, and should spread their veil over thy head. But I should not set a cross over thy grave, nor any other pious symbol; rather I should call upon the youngest of the sons of the Graces, a native of Palestine, like thy celestial Spouse; I should call upon Meleager of Gadara, the hyacinth-garlanded, the sweet flute-player, the poet who sings the early death of maidens; and he should carve an epitaph worthy of thy gentle grace. Oh Earth, universal Mother, all hail to thee; be gentle to this maiden, who weighs so lightly upon thee."

Thus it pleased me to adorn the sentiment with which she inspired me, and turn her sadness into poetry.

"Has the narcissus bulb in the herbarium sprouted for the third time?" I asked her suddenly one day, as we were boating on the Saurgo near the dead city.

She was quite disturbed, and looked at me with startled eyes.

"How do you know?"

I smiled and repeated—

"But has it sprouted?"

"No, not again!" she replied, looking down.

We were alone in a little skiff, which I was paddling myself with one oar. Violante, Anatolia, and Oddo were in other boats rowed by the boatmen. The river here was

so wide and sluggish that it was almost like a pond, and a dense flock of water-lilies covered it. The great white flowers, shaped like roses, floated among their shining leaves, diffusing a moist fragrance, which seemed to have the property of slaking thirst.

It was here that Simonetto's botanising had come to an end that fatal autumn. I imagined the figure of the young botanist leaning over the water exploring its slimy depths at the season when the water-lilies are nearly over. His hortus siccus, no doubt, contained lifeless specimens of all that aquatic flora which surrounded the ruins.

Massimilla's eyes followed the movement of my oar as from time to time it crushed a leaf or broke a stalk, and I said softly—

"Are you thinking of Simonetto?"

She started.

"How do you know?" she asked me again, much agitated, with flushing cheeks.

"I know from Oddo...."

"Ah!" she said, without concealing her regret at this knowledge of mine, which seemed to wound her. "Oddo told you...."

She relapsed into a silence which I felt to be a very painful one for her. I stopped rowing for a few seconds, and the light boat rested motionless amidst the wide extent of white blossoms.

"Did you love him very much?" I asked the silent maiden, with a gentleness that reminded her perhaps of our earlier interviews.

"As I love Oddo, as I love Antonello," she replied, with a tremble in her voice, without raising her eyelids.

After a pause I asked her—

"Are you going into the convent to sacrifice yourself to his memory?"

“No, not for that. It would be too late now....”

“Why, then?”

She did not answer. But I looked at her hands, which she was clenching as if she wanted to wring them, and I understood all the involuntary cruelty of my useless question.

“Is it true that you have decided to go in a few days?” I added almost timidly.

“It is true.”

Her lips trembled; they had turned white.

“Will Oddo and Anatolia go with you?”

She nodded her head in answer, and pressed her lips together to force back a sob.

“Forgive me, Massimilla, if I have hurt you,” I said with deep emotion, for I felt a weight of sadness suddenly fall on me.

“Be quiet, please!” she implored, in a voice I scarcely recognised. “Don’t make me cry! What would my sisters think? I should not be able to hide my tears.... And I am choking.”

Oddo’s voice was heard calling to us from the ruins. Anatolia and Violante had already set foot in the dead city. One of the boatmen came towards us with his skiff, thinking perhaps that our delay was caused by my inexperience in guiding the boat through the tangle of water-lilies.

“Ah, I shall always bear within me the regret of having lost thee!” I said in silence to her who was about to depart. “I should rather behold thee laid out in the perfection of death than know thy soul to be straitened in a life alien to that which my love and my art had promised thee. And perhaps thou wouldest have led me to explore some far-away region of my inner world, which without thee will remain neglected and uncultivated....”

The boat was gliding lightly over the snowy flock; in its track the leaves and

blossoms rippled apart, and through the crystalline clearness of the water the pale forest of stems was visible, pale and languid, as if fed by the mud of Lethe. The ruins of Linturno embraced by the water and the flowers looked, in their secular, stony apathy, like a great collection of broken skeletons. Even the eyeballs of a human skull are not so lifelessly empty as were the hollows of those worn-out stones, bleached white like bones by the mists and the heat. And I imagined that I was ferrying a dead maiden.

Everything after that bore the impress of my sadness on that cloudless afternoon. For a long time we wandered about the ruins searching out the traces of vanished life.

They were uncertain traces, which gave rise to all sorts of different conjectures. Was the theory true of the band of youths crowned with garlands descending to the parent river singing and dedicating their unshorn, growing locks to him? Or was it rather a white procession of catechumens like little children, fed on milk and honey, who descended there to receive baptism? A dim legend of martyrs cast a sort of mournful sanctity over the pagan remains. “Martyris ossa jacent....” we read on the fragment of a sarcophagus; and here and there among the few sculptured stones lying about we found emblems and symbols of double meaning; Jove’s eagle and Cybele’s lion subdued to the Evangelists; the vines of Dionysius twisted to express the parable of the Saviour; Diana’s stag representing the thirsty soul. Now and then a snake darted out from among the stones and roots, and vanished quickly as an arrow. An invisible bird was making a strange imitation of the rattles which announce the hours of silence on Good Friday.

“And where is your great Madonna?” asked Anatolia, recalling my words of long ago. We sought among the fallen masonry for a path to lead us to the ruined basilica, which stood at the extreme end of the island, on the branch of the Saurgo nearest the rocks.

“Perhaps the water will prevent our getting there,” I said, as I perceived the

glittering reflections close to the wall.

The river had indeed flooded part of the sacred ruin, and a forest of water weeds was growing there undisturbed. But we found a gap by which we were able to enter the apse. Each of the three sisters as she entered made the sign of the cross, amid a great whirring of wings.

Inside all was cool and damp, and the palpitating light took a greenish hue. The apse and a few pillars of the central nave were left, and formed a kind of cave, which the waters had invaded almost up to the deserted altar steps; and a multitude of water-lilies, larger and whiter even than those through which we had rowed, clustered as if in adoration at the feet of the great Madonna in mosaic, who occupied alone the concave heaven of gold which formed the apse. She did not hold the Infant in her arms, but stood alone, wrapped in a mantle of leaden hue like a shadow of mourning, and a deep mystery of sorrow lay in her large, fixed eyes. High above the curve of the arch the swallows had made a charming crown of nests, following the order of the words written round it—

“QUASI PLATANUS EXALTATA SUM JUXTA AQUAS.”

And then the three maidens knelt down together and prayed.

“If we were to leave thee in this refuge with the water-lilies and the swallows!” I thought, looking at Massimilla, who was bending lower and lower as she prayed. “Thou wouldest live here like a hermit Naiad who has forsaken Artemis to worship the new sorrowful divinity.” And I pictured her metamorphosis: after completing her solitary rites amid the choir of swallows, she would plunge into the water and descend to the roots of the flowers....

But to my eyes nothing here surpassed the whiteness of a neck burdened with a weight of hair thicker than the marble clusters of grapes that decorated the front of the altar. For the first time I saw Violante on her knees, and the attitude was so unsuited to the quality of her beauty that it pained me like a discord; and I waited

with strange restlessness for her to rise from the place between the two symbolical peacocks, who were spreading their feathers among the clusters of grapes.

She rose before the others, with one of those magnificent movements in which her beauty seemed to surpass itself, as a steady light seems to wax larger before it suddenly breaks into sparks. Exaltata juxta aquas!

When we returned she came with me on the river, sitting in the little prow opposite me while I stood and paddled. I was overcome by uncontrollable emotion as I remembered the hand beaded with blood and the hill-slope covered with blossom. It was the first time since that far-away hour that I had found myself alone with Violante face to face.

“I am so thirsty,” she said, leaning over the water with a movement which, while expressive of her desire, seemed to identify her with the liquid voluptuous element.

“Don’t drink that water!” I begged her, seeing that she bared her hands.

“Why?”

“Don’t drink it!”

Then she plunged in her bare hands, picked a water-lily, and bent over it to breathe its fragrant moisture. It seemed as if a vague shiver passed over the flowery covering around us. The sun had sunk behind the rocks, and an almost imperceptible rosy reflection fell from the evening sky on the innumerable white flowers.

“Look at the water-lilies!” I exclaimed, resting on my oar. “Don’t you think they look marvellously alive just now?”

She plunged in her hands again up to the wrists, and held them in the water like rosy floating flowers; and as her eyes wandered over the trembling multitude, the smile on her lips was so divine that in my soul I invested it with miraculous powers.

Truly she was worthy to work wonders, and to subdue the very soul of things to her beauty. I dared not utter a word, so speaking was the silence by her side. But as we

bent over the water, the same spell seemed to bind us to each other as had united us that first day in the presence of the volcanic rock. The hawks were not screaming over our heads, but round us the swallows were twittering as they flew by, and something like a ray of light flashed from their white breasts as they passed.

“Well; aren’t we going on? Have you no strength left?” she said, turning round with an indefinable tone of derision in her voice, and reading the very depths of my eyes. “Don’t you see that the other boats are far ahead?”

I gazed at the little flotilla for a few moments with knitted brows.

“Anatolia is calling us,” she added. “Make haste!”

The Saurgo seemed to grow broader in the twilight, to vanish away into infinite distance, then to regain the strength of its current, to give promise of carrying us on into fairer lands. And that royal creature, bending over the great soft, rosy stream in the eagerness of her thirst, of her fierce desire for a liquid suited to her voluptuous being, was full of such mystery, of beauty, and poetry that my soul went out to her in the most fervent act of worship.

“Look!” then said the enchantress, pointing to the scene which she seemed to have called up with a wave of her hand. “Look!”

All around us on the water, over which a slight shiver was passing, the living calyxes were closing with a slow lip-like motion, hesitating a few moments, withdrawing, sinking, disappearing under the leaves one by one or in groups, as if some power of slumber were calling them below. Wide spaces were left deserted, but here and there in the midst of them a single belated lily would display the utmost of her grace in this delay. A vague melancholy hovered over the water on each spot where one of the lingerers disappeared. And then it seemed as if the dreams of the submerged multitude rose up like a mist from the great soft rosy stream.

But it was on the summit of Corace that the unexpected revelation took place which finally decided our fate.

We had stopped at Scultro to visit the ancient abbey, where the remains still exist of a sumptuous mausoleum, the work of Maestro Gualtiero of Germany, built as a memorial of herself and her three sons by a lady of the Cantelmo family—that magnificent Domina Rita, who as the wife of Giovanni Antonio Caldora was mother of the great condottiere Jacopo. And Anatolia and I had lingered behind in the mouldy chapel to gaze at the recumbent figure of the young hero, clad to the throat in heavy armour, with only the curly head uncovered, reposing so royally on the marble pillow.

Then after a long climb on foot up a steep narrow path—for we had left the mules behind on the level—we had reached the northern brow of the extinct crater, now transformed into the lake to which Secli gives its name. At our feet we had, on the one hand, the tawny valley of the Saurgo; on the other, two high spurs sent out of the main range into the plains below, beyond which lies the distant sea. Above our heads a few clouds hung almost motionless in the vast expanse of crystalline blue, and seemed compact and dazzling as heaps of snow.

Seated on some boulders, we gazed in silence. Violante and Massimilla seemed tired, and Oddo had not yet succeeded in controlling his nervousness. But Anatolia was moving about, gathering little flowers in the crevices of the rocks.

A vague, confused restlessness stole over me, intensified at times to the point of acute pain. I felt that at last the inevitable moment of choice was hanging over me; that I dared linger no more among the tormenting, delicious alternations of passion and perplexity, nor any more strive to resolve the three noble rhythms into one harmony. That day, for the last time, the three givers of happiness appeared to me in unison beneath the light of the same heaven. How long a time had passed since that first hour when, as I ascended the ancient steps, in the voices and virginal shadows moving like forms of magic, surrounded by the traces of neglect and decay, I had discovered the first music, and wrought the first transformation? On the morrow the

short-lived spell would be broken, and for ever.

Now I felt compelled to say aloud to Anatolia the words I had already silently addressed to the pure, mysterious shadow which had witnessed my interview with her father. As we stood together shortly before in the deserted chapel, looking on that tomb erected by the loyalty of a brave woman, had we not both partaken of the same sentiment and the same idea? Had I not said to her even then, without words: “Thou too mightest become a mother of heroes, oh thou who sharest my consciousness. I know that thou hast gathered up my wish, and hast laid it within thy true heart, where it sparkles like a diamond. I know that in a dream thou hast watched a whole night mysteriously over the sleep of a child. While his body slept, breathing deeply, thou didst hold his soul, tangible as a crystal ball, in thy hands, and thy bosom swelled with marvellous intuitions.”

Now I felt the need of exchanging a binding promise with her before she started off on her mournful journey with the novice and her brother. But my anxiety was deepening into pain, as if some real danger were hanging over me. And I could not fail to acknowledge the cause of the emotion which Violante was perpetually stirring in me by her every action.

The ruins of Linturno lay beneath us in the valley like a heap of white stones, like a strip of dry shore, in the midst of the sweet dead waters, where only yesterday by a double miracle she had cast a spell over the water-lilies and over my soul. The spell was still upon me whenever I looked at her. Seated on a boulder in the same attitude as when seated that first day on the plinth, she looked like one of the immortal statues. Once again I gazed at her, and noticed how, although present, she was yet far away, as she had been that day; and I thought again: “It is right she should remain untouched. Only by a god could she be possessed without shame. Never shall her body bear the disfiguring weight; never shall the flood of milk mar the pure outline of her bosom....”

An inward impulse made me start to my feet as if to free myself from a restraint, and turning to her who was gathering the little flowers in the crevices of the rocks, I said: “As you are not tired, Anatolia, will you come up to the top with me?”

“I am quite ready,” she assented in her clear cordial voice; and she went up to Massimilla and laid the flowers in her lap.

Violante sat still in the same attitude, holding her veil between her fingers—impassive as though she had not heard. But I felt that her eyes were not looking at outward things, and I was troubled, as though a ray of the fascination flowing from the mysterious depths on which her gaze was fixed had penetrated me.

“Don’t be long in coming down!” Oddo begged in his imploring tones, his pale face betraying the discomfort, the perpetual fear of giddiness which he felt on those heights. “We shall wait for you.”

The peak of Corace rose up against the sky as bare and sharp as a helmet, leaning over a little towards the west; and the path ascending it ran along a steep rib as narrow as the edge of a precipice, dividing the two slopes. The passage was so difficult and dangerous that I offered Anatolia my hand for support, and, smiling, she laid hers in mine as she stumbled over the rough rocks. We were out of sight already, free and alone, monarchs of the vast space. Every breath seemed to purify the blood in our veins and to lighten the weight of the flesh. And the aromatic essences which the heat of the sun, like a powerful chemical, pressed out of the rare Alpine plants, quickened the rhythm of our life.

We stopped, both suddenly out of breath, and our hands, which had been too tightly clasped, unloosed themselves. I looked in my companion’s eyes, but she was no longer smiling. Her face became grave, almost sad, as if overshadowed by a regret.

“Let us stop here,” she murmured, lowering her eyelids. “I cannot go any further....”

“A little further,” I said, for a vehement desire to reach the summit was spurring me on, “only a few steps more, and we shall be at the top!”

“I cannot go any further,” she repeated in an exhausted voice unlike her own, and she passed her hands over her face as if to brush away something that distressed her.

Then she tried to smile at me.

“What a strange illusion!” she added. “The top is a long way off yet. We always seem about to reach it, and the higher one goes, the further off it seems to be.”

Then after a pause, in which she seemed to be listening to her own deep heart—

“And there are souls suffering down below!”

She turned her face, on which the shadow of some thought had fallen, towards the place where her sisters were waiting.

“Let us go back, Claudio,” she added, in a tone that I cannot forget, for never did human voice express so many wonderful things so briefly.

“Dear, dear Anatolia!” I broke out, seizing her hands, overcome by the extraordinary feeling aroused in me by those simple words of hers, which I took to be the unmistakable indication of an inward emotion that was almost divine. “Let me first say to you what my silence has told you more than once.... Where can I offer my love more worthily than here on this height, to you who are the highest of created beings, Anatolia?”

She turned very pale, not like one who hears tidings of joy long waited and prayed for, but like one who receives an invisible blow in a vital part; and though apparently motionless, in spirit she was shaken towards me by some strange fearful shudder, by some instinctive movement of horror; and this I saw, not with my eyes, but with one of those unknown senses that sometimes manifest themselves in a momentary vibration on the surface of the human nerves, and then disappear again for ever, leaving the consciousness amazed.

She cast a look of indefinable anxiety around her.

“You speak as if we were alone,” she said vaguely, “as if I were alone ... as if I were

alone....”

“Anatolia, what is the matter with you?” I asked, troubled by her inexplicable distress, by the deep change in her face, the incoherence of her words.

And a thought flashed across my uncertainty. Had she not been suddenly assailed, she accustomed for so many years to her gloomy prison, she the resigned martyr within the ancient walls, had she not perhaps been suddenly assailed by that mysterious terror, that kind of panic which reigns among the solitudes of stern and silent mountains? Yes; no doubt she was a prey to this terrible fascination, and her spirit had gone astray under it.

A savage scene lay at our feet on every side in the glaring light. The chain of rocks, bare and clear in their desolate barrenness to their remotest passes, stretched away like a mass of gigantic and monstrous relics, left for the amazement of mankind as traces of some primeval battle of the Titans. Ruined towers, broken walls, fallen citadels, crumbled domes, tottering porches, mutilated colossi, prows of vessels, backbones of monsters, bones of Titans, every kind of monstrosity was simulated by the jutting peaks and dark ravines of this formidable range. The distance was so transparent that I could distinguish every outline as clearly as if my eyes were beholding, on an infinitely larger scale, the rock which Violante had shown me from the window-sill with that creative sweep of her hand. The most distant peaks were engraved on the sky with the same precise sharpness of outline which the sloping sides of the crater close at hand assumed in the reflected rays of the sun. The vast mouth of the spherical crater gaped with a kind of eddying vehemence in the expression of its curves; it was like a whirlpool, although inert. In part grey like ashes, elsewhere red like rust, it was crossed here and there by long white streaks that sparkled like salt, and were reflected in the metallic calm of the water which had gathered at the bottom. And opposite us, overhanging the edge of the precipice like a petrified flock of sheep, was Secli, the solitary hermit-like village, where from time

immemorial a small industrious population has busied itself in making strings for musical instruments.

“You are tired,” I said to my dear companion, trying to draw her under the shadow of a boulder, which I thought might screen her on one side at least from the sight of the space below, and give her back a sense of security. “You are tired, Anatolia; you are not used to such fatigue, and perhaps this view is rather terrible.... Lean back here and close your eyes for a little. I will stand beside you. Here is my arm. I can take you back without any danger. Now close your eyes for a little....”

Again she tried to smile at me.

“No, no,” she said; “don’t trouble, Claudio.”

Then after a pause, in a changed voice, and very low—

“It is not that.... If I closed my eyes, perhaps I should see....”

My heart was trembling like a leaf beneath a sudden breath of wind. And though Anatolia’s face was composed again into an expression of deep but calm sadness, and though a feeling of power over evil seemed diffused through her whole person, vague analogies led me to think of Antonello’s sudden attacks of distress, of that restlessness of his, which was an infallible warning, and of the visions of the future which lit up his pale eyes.

“Do you understand, Anatolia?” I asked, taking one of her hands, for we stood side by side leaning against the rock. “Do you understand that you, you alone, are the companion whose name my heart pronounced that evening when your father kissed my forehead in sign of consent? You rose and left the room softly like a spirit; and I, I don’t know why, imagined that your face was bathed in tears.... Tell me if you are weeping, Anatolia, and if my dream was dear to you!” She did not answer; but as I held her hand, it seemed to me that her purest heart’s blood flowed magnetically to the tips of her fingers.

“That evening,” I added, striving to intoxicate her with hope, “as I went back to

Rebursa, I saw a star shining over one of my old towers; and your presence had filled my heart so full of faith, that what was mere chance seemed to me like a divine omen! From that time two figures have shone for me in that radiance.... You know whose the other is. I can hear the first words you spoke to me there on the steps, words which evoked the memory of 'immense kindness.' All that day the figure your words had called up clung to your side to show me whom she had elected. She herself, on some future evening, will come with me into the dwelling which once was full of her smile, and now is deserted.... Look, down there!"

She looked at the distant towers of Rebursa down in the deep hollow where the hanging clouds were casting great circles of shadow; but her gaze passed on to Trigento, and during the interval marks of an inexpressible inward conflict passed over her face. She shook her head, and drew her hand out of mine.

"Happiness is forbidden me," she said in a firm but sorrowful voice, keeping her eyes fixed on the garden of her agony, on the house of her martyrdom. "I, like Massimilla, am dedicated; and my vow also is irrevocable. And it is not only the action of my own will, Claudio. I feel now that the sacrifice is necessary, that I cannot escape from it. You heard the tone in my answer just now when you asked me to go up to the top with you. You saw how easy it was for me to climb with you, with the support of your hand. But now ... I have not been able to go any further; we did not reach the top. See: here I am, nailed to a rock. You make me an offer, the value of which you yourself cannot know as I know it; and here I am, weighed down by grief so heavy that I am afraid of being unable to bear it, I, who have never been afraid of suffering!"

I dared not interrupt her nor touch her. A sort of religious awe filled my soul. Overmastered by even stronger emotion than had overcome me on that solemn evening, I could feel, without turning round, the throbbing of something infinitely noble and mysterious at my side, something resembling the divine mysteries

guarded under veils in the Holy of Holies in temples. Her voice was sounding close to my ear, yet it came from an infinite distance. Her words were simple, but they came from the summit of life, that pinnacle which the human soul can only reach when about to be transfigured into Ideal Beauty.

“Look, down there! Look at the house where from the first day we received you as a brother, where our father received you as a son, where you found the memory of your beloved dead kept fresh. Look how far away it seems! And yet I feel it bound to me by a thousand invisible ties stronger than any chain. I feel that even here my life mingles with the faint life suffering down there. Ah, perhaps you cannot understand! But think, Claudio, of the atrocity of the fate that hangs over us; think of that poor raving mother, of that broken-down feeble old man, of that victim always hovering on the border of madness, of that other, too, who is under the same sentence, and of the horror of contagion, and the solitude, and the grief.... Ah, you cannot understand! From the first day I feared to sadden you; I always tried to put myself between you and our misfortune. Very seldom, perhaps never, have you breathed the real sadness of our house. We met you in the open air, among the flowers which we learned, for your sake only, to love again; and in our neglected garden you have been able to bring some things to life.... But think of the hidden anguish! You cannot see; but I can see from here everything that goes on in there, as much as if the walls were made of glass, and I were touching them with my forehead. Life seems suspended; the father and son are shut up in one room and dare not go out, and dare not breathe; they listen to every sound, one increases the suffering of the other, and both are helplessly waiting for my return, and listening eagerly, hoping to catch the sound of my voice and my step. And she is raving, searching for me in all the passages, all the rooms, calling me aloud, stopping before a closed door and listening or knocking, and my two poor souls inside hear her breathing, and start at every knock, and can do nothing but look in each other’s eyes, my God!”

She pressed her hands to her temples with an instinctive movement, as if to force back some rebound of sorrow; and her whole body, leaving the support of the boulder, leant over towards the distant scene of her martyrdom. And for a few seconds, with the anguish she had communicated to me clutching at my throat, I bent over in the same attitude, I hung over the edge of the precipice, with my gaze fixed on the distant home where those souls were suffering.

“Think,” she continued, in a broken voice now, “think, Claudio, what would happen to them if I were not there, if I forsook them! Even when I leave them for a short time, I feel such regret, such remorse as I cannot describe to you. Every time I cross the threshold to go out, a gloomy presentiment weighs on my heart; and it seems to me as if on my return I should find the house full of shrieks and lamentations....”

An uncontrollable shudder was now shaking her whole figure, and her eyes were dilated as if some cruel vision were filling her with horror.

“Antonello,” she stammered; and for a few seconds she could not utter another word.

I looked at her with inexpressible anguish; and my soul suffered with hers in each contraction of her dear lips. And the vision in her eyes passed into mine; and I saw Antonello’s wasted, white face, and the rapid quiver of his eyelids, and his painful smile and disordered movements, and the waves of terror which used suddenly to sweep over his long thin body, shaking it like a fragile reed.

“Antonello ... tried to kill himself.... Only I know of it.... Nobody else knows it; not even Oddo. Alas!”

She trembled so much that she could not control herself as she leant against the rock. “One evening God warned me, God sent me.... His name be praised for ever!... I went into his room ... and I found him....”

She was choking, and her fingers wandered distractedly to her throat, as if the noose were strangling her; she was trembling, overcome, losing all courage at the

recollection, she who had been able to repress her cries of horror at the sight of the half-dead man, she who had been able to call up the strength of a man in her wrists, to finish her work without asking for help, to hide the horrible secret in her own bosom, and then to live on from one fear to another, from one anxiety to another, with this tragic vision haunting her soul! Thus she revealed herself to me in her sublime truth, desperately devoted to an affection which had its roots in the deepest and most sacred instincts of her being. The voice of blood seemed to cry aloud in all her veins: the ties of blood bound every fibre together. She was born to wear the sweet powerful fetters till death. She was ready to burn herself as a sacrifice that she might nourish the faint flame that flickered on the household hearth. And therefore with what unspeakable love would she have loved the child of her womb!

“You speak of forsaking,” I said, making a painful effort to speak, for any expressions of mine seemed untimely and feeble after the grandeur and beauty of the sentiment just revealed; “you speak of forsaking, Anatolia; and you forget that from the very first day I found my father, my sisters, and my brothers in your house; and you do not know how full my heart is of filial and fraternal piety, not comparable to yours, which is superhuman, but still worthy of serving it by actions....”

She shook her head.

“Ah, Claudio,” she replied, with a sorrowful smile on her dry lips, “your generosity deceives you. My soul is still dazzled by the flames of your dream, and troubled by a sort of repressed violence and dangerous ardour which from time to time flashes from you. You are stirred by the longing for strife and power; and you are determined by every means to force life to fulfil her promises to you. You are young and proud of your lineage, and lord of your own powers, and confident in your faith. Who shall set a limit to your conquests?”

As if suddenly inspired, she had thrown the whole virtue of her clear, warm voice into these last words; and I understood by the thrill they sent through me what a

powerful stimulator of energy she would have been, she who with all her kindness and patience possessed the fundamental instincts of her imperious race.

“But imagine, Claudio, a conqueror dragging after him a cart full of sick folk, and seeing their wasted faces and hearing their lamentations as he prepared himself for battle! Can you imagine such a thing? If life is cruel, he who is resolved to combat her must of necessity take into account the strength of the enemy; and every hindrance will sooner or later arouse his annoyance and his anger....”

She had succeeded in mastering the excess of her emotion; and once more I beheld her brave firmness as she spoke on without a quiver in her voice.

“And I, my very self, should I not at last be forgotten? Should I not be carried away altogether on the stream of new affections, new cares, by the intoxication of your hopes? The task you would assign to the companion of your efforts is too great, Claudio.... Your words are still in my memory.... Alas, it is not possible to feed two flames at the same time! The new one would in a short time become so voracious that I should have to sacrifice all the riches of my soul to it; and the old one so feeble, that if I turned my head away it would go out.”

She was silent, and her head sank again. But with a sudden movement, as if her former anxiety had returned, she looked up and around her, and the working of her parched lips betrayed her thirst to me. Then she turned upon me, and fixing her eyes on mine with a kind of impetuous force, she asked—

“Is it true that your heart has chosen me? Have you examined your heart to the depths? Or does some illusion hang over you like a veil?”

I was so much disturbed by her look, and these sudden doubts of hers, that I felt myself turn pale as if she had accused me of falsehood.

“Anatolia, what do you mean?”

She left the support of the rock, and made a few faltering steps forward; then she paused as if to listen, anxious and agitated.

“There is some soul suffering here on these paths,” she repeated, in the same tone as before; for a few moments she stood perplexed, and her hand went up to her brow with a vague gesture.

Then turning to me, rapidly, anxiously, as if she were being driven on, and was afraid of not having time to say the words—

“To-morrow I am going away. I must go with Massimilla. I have not the courage to let her start alone with Oddo. I must go with her to the very door of her retreat. She is going to pray for us.... I know she is not going there for consolation, but as to death; and so I must help her. I shall stay away for several days. For several days one of us will be alone at Trigento.... She is the eldest; she has almost the right.... She is worthy.... I don’t know; your heart will tell you something, perhaps the truth.... I swear to you, Claudio, that I will pray with all the fervour I have in my soul that on coming back I may find that everything has fallen out for the good of all.... Who knows? Perhaps there is some great good in store for you. I believe in your star, Claudio. But I am under a prohibition.... I can’t explain, I can’t explain.... There is a shadow over my will.... Just now a strange fear came over me, and then a sadness, a sadness I had never known before....”

She stopped, gasping, confused, miserable, as if the feeling of the infinite desolation spreading round us under the burning heat had swept over her again.

“And you too, how you are suffering!” she murmured, without looking at me.

And stretching out both her hands to me in one supreme effort—

“Now, good-bye! we must go back. Thank you, Claudio. Remember me always as a devoted sister. You will never find my tenderness wanting....”

She turned away her face, for her eyes were filling with tears, and I kissed both her hands.

“Good-bye,” she repeated, trying to get up and begin the descent; but she tottered on the rock.

“I entreat you, Anatolia, stay a little longer!” I implored, as I held her up. “Just stay a few minutes longer here in the shade, that you may get back your strength.... The descent is very steep.”

“They are waiting for us! They are waiting for us!” she stammered, almost beside herself, and her frenzied anxiety communicated itself to me. “Let us go, Claudio! I will lean on you. If we stayed any longer, I should feel worse, I should not be able to go one step.... Ah, this horrible thirst!”

I could see well enough that her poor mouth was burning with thirst, and such anguish of pity was I enduring that I would have opened a vein to slake it. There was not a trace of water anywhere around. Nothing but the waters of the lake looking like molten lead at the bottom of the extinct crater. Rapid visions crossed my brain, as they do in the delirium of fever; the great, rosy river covered with water-lilies, Violante leaning over the edge of the boat, her face bending to breathe the moisture of the flowers, the hardness of a sharp glance from under her knitted brows....

But we both started, as a sudden wave of sound came rolling towards us, we knew not whence. The silence in these lofty solitudes was so intense as to seem inviolable, and the rough, sudden breaking of it struck us, in the confused state of our senses, as an extraordinary event. Anatolia clung to my arm, and questioned me with startled eyes.

“Secli,” I said, as I recognised the nature of the sound. “The bells of Secli.”

And we listened, side by side, leaning towards the echoing crater, in the shadow thrown over our heads by the boulder.

The empty crater, resonant as a gigantic drum, echoed back the waves of sound sent by the quivering bells, and mingled them into one long hollow rumble that repeated itself indefinitely through the solitudes of light. All through those solitudes, where primary matter, petrified into a thousand expressions of rage and sorrow, shone in its grandeur, down the tawny valley furrowed by the winding river, through the Alpine

vegetation sloping away to the distant sea, everywhere the voice of bronze, modulated by the terrible fiery mouth, went proclaiming its mysterious message. Further and further it penetrated, and further still again, through limitless space, away to shores beyond the mountains and the sea, away to where my weary sight failed me, away to where my thoughts, still unformed and uncontrolled, but instinct with mysterious creative power, wandered like winds laden with pollen. A grand, vague feeling, in which innumerable things of sorrow and joy, past and future, of death and life, were mingled, troubled my consciousness, and seemed tossing it to and fro as the storm tosses the ocean.

Amazed, I looked down at the Tartarean lake, thick and stagnant like the blind eye of a subterranean world; and I looked at the greedy crater where the impetus of the primeval fire had been arrested, just as the contracted expression of the last agony sometimes lingers on the lips of corpses. And my gaze rested on the humble cottages of Secli, on that fragile nest, hardly distinguishable from the rock on which it hung. And I had a fantastic vision of that unconscious taciturn race, busied from time immemorial in turning the entrails of lambs into musical strings destined to express through the language of art the highest inspirations of life, and to intoxicate myriads of unknown souls in the world.

On and on rolled the sound, rumbling ceaselessly, monotonously, through the scorching air. And seeing my companion motionless at my side, I dared not speak, nor break the spell. But suddenly she turned round and broke into sobs, as if she had just witnessed the end of a death agony. Leaning against the rock with her face in her hands, she sobbed on despairingly.

“Anatolia, Anatolia, what is the matter with you? Answer me, Anatolia! Say one word to me.”

And unable to resist the pain, I was just going to take her wrists and uncover her face.

I heard close by the sound of a swift step on the stones, the sound of painful breathing; I saw a shadow.

“You, Violante?”

She came up the steep rock with something of the elastic stride of a wild animal, something hostile and malevolent expressed in her whole person. Her thick blue veil was wrapped round her head in such a way that her whole face was hidden down to the chin, as if by a mask, and her eyes glittered through the gauze.

She stopped near the boulder in a hostile attitude throwing back her head like one who is suffocating, yet she did not loosen her veil. The vehemence of her breathing made her bosom rise and fall, and the veil flutter; an uncontrollable tremor shook her hands within the torn gloves she wore, torn probably on the sharp rocks in some perilous fall.

“We waited for you,” she said at last in a broken voice that almost hissed; “we waited for you a long time.... As you did not seem to be coming back, I came up ... to meet you....”

I could trace the convulsive motion of her lips through her veil; I could guess at the change in her face behind that suffocating blue mask that she would not lift up. And I felt my inward emotion increase so violently every minute, that it was impossible for me to open my lips. But I felt that not on me alone the necessity for silence had fallen.

The rumble of the bronze bells reverberating in the crater passed ceaselessly over our heads.

Anatolia had stopped sobbing, but the traces of tears were still on her face, and the eyelids that she kept lowered were red. “Let us go,” she said softly, without looking either at me or at her sister.

And in silence, under the desolation of the sunshine, we began the descent, accompanied by the rumbling sound.

Miserable descent, which seemed as if it would never end! They walked on, or lingered behind, according to the necessities of the path; and I supported sometimes the one, and sometimes the other, when their steps faltered. Every now and then my heart failed me with the fear of seeing them succumb. When the bells of Secli ceased ringing we felt a momentary relief; but we discovered immediately that the oppressive irregularity of our breathing in the stillness of the air increased our suffering, and we felt as though we could hear only too distinctly the murmur of the blood in our veins.

With a savage pertinacity Violante persisted in braving suffocation under her blue mask. No doubt her throat must be parched with a horrible thirst, like mine, like her sister’s. When I took her hand to help her down, I saw a little blood where the skin had been grazed through the rents in her glove; and with deep emotion I remembered the hill-slope covered with flowers.

Later on, when we reached the level ground, where my men were waiting with the mules, and where we rested awhile parched with thirst and exhausted by fatigue, I composed the beauty and the sorrow of the three princesses, for the last time, into a harmony of infinite beauty and pain.

They were not in their cloistered garden, yet a rocky cloister worthy of their souls and their fate was surrounding them, for strange and grand was the aspect of the scenery around. The rocks, standing round in a circle of varying height, made one think of some amphitheatre built by Cyclopean hands, worn away, indeed, by centuries and storms without number, yet still remaining like stupendous ruins. Fragments of unknown writing were traceable there, incomprehensible riddles of Life and Death; the twisted veins of the stone were channels for the essence of a divine thought; and the lines of the shapeless masses were as full of meaning as the attitudes of perfect statues.

There we rested, there I caught their final harmony.

A field labourer—very like the one who had cut the branches of almond blossom for us with his bill-hook—showed us the way to a spring hidden in the hollow of a rock. The clear, icy water spurted out with a gentle murmur, and on the pool beneath floated a rustic cup made of bark, cracked and bottomless, like the useless husk of some fruit.

I offered Anatolia another cup, which the man had brought with him. But Violante, without waiting, raised her veil, and bending over the sparkling spring, drank in long draughts like a wild animal.

I saw the drops glistening on her mouth and chin when she rose, but she turned away suddenly and drew down the edge of her veil. Thus veiled, she sat down on the stone nearest to the mountain spring, whose song was too gentle for her taste; and her attitude awakened in my soul all the magic spell of her own fountains. Even in fatigue she did not let her figure relax; for now she sat almost rigidly erect, sustained by her silent angry pride. Once again everything around her seemed to acknowledge the sovereignty of her presence; secret analogies bound up the surrounding mysteries with her mystery. Once again she seemed to drive back my spirit into the furthest distances of time, towards the ancient ideas of Beauty and Sorrow. She was present, and yet far away. And in the silence she seemed to be informing me, like the Princess Dejanira: “I possess an ancient gift from an old centaur, hidden in a vessel of bronze.”

Anatolia had sat down beside her pensive brother; she had thrown one arm round his neck, and her brow seemed gradually to clear as if some inner light were rising. Massimilla seemed to be listening to the faint, unquenchable voice of the spring; sitting with the fingers of her hands clasped together, holding within them the weary knee.

Over our heads the sky bore no traces of clouds, save a slight shadow like the ashes of a burnt-out funeral pyre. The sun was scorching the peaks all around, outlining

their solemn features on the blue sky. A great sadness and a great sweetness fell from above into the lonely circle, like a magic draught into a rough goblet.

There the three sisters rested, there I caught their final harmony.

HERE ENDETH THE BOOK OF THE VIRGINS AND BEGINNETH THE BOOK OF GRACE.

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