THE PASSPORT

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BY

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THE PASSPORT

I

The fierce heat of the mid-day hours was waning, and the leaves stirred in the first faint breath of the evening breeze stealing over the Roman Campagna from the sea that lay like a golden streak along the western horizon. It was the month of the *sollione*–of the midsummer sun "rejoicing as a giant to run his course." From twelve o'clock till four the little town of Montefiano, nestling among the lower spurs of the Sabine Hills, had been as a place from which all life had fled. Not a human creature had been visible in the steep, tufa-paved street leading up to the square palace that looked grimly down on the little township clustering beneath it–not even a dog; only some chickens dusting themselves, and a strayed pig.

The *cicale*, hidden among the branches of a group of venerable Spanish chestnuts on the piazza in front of the church, had never ceased their monotonous rattle; otherwise silence had reigned at Montefiano since the church bells had rung out *mezzogiorno*—that silence which falls on all nature in Italy during the hours when the *sollione* blazes in the heavens and breeds life on the earth.

But now, with the first coming of the evening breeze, casements were thrown open, green shutters which had been hermetically closed since morning

were flung back and Montefiano awoke for the second time in the twenty-four hours.

A side door of the church opened, and Don Agostino, the parish priest, emerged from it, carrying his breviary in one hand and an umbrella tucked under the other arm. Crossing the little square hurriedly, for the western sun still beat fiercely upon the flag-stones, he sought the shade of the chestnut-trees, under which he began pacing slowly backwards and forwards, saying his office the while.

A tall, handsome man, Don Agostino was scarcely the type of priest usually to be met with in hill villages such as Montefiano. His black silk *soutane* was scrupulously clean and tidy; and its button-holes stitched with red, as well as the little patch of violet silk at his throat, proclaimed him to be a *monsignore*. Nobody at Montefiano called him so, however. To his parishioners he was simply Don Agostino; and, in a district in which priests were none too well looked upon, there was not a man, woman, or child who had not a good word to say for him.

This was the more remarkable inasmuch as Don Agostino was evidently of a very different social grade from even the most well-to-do among his flock. At first sight, a stranger would have thought that there could not be much in common between him and the peasants and farmers who stood in a little crowd at the doors of his church on a *festa* while he said mass, and still less with the women and children who knelt within the building. There was, however, the most important thing of all in common between them, and that was sympathy—human sympathy—so simple a thing, and yet so rare.

This, again, was remarkable; for no one could glance at Don Agostino's countenance without at once realizing that it belonged to a man who was probably intellectual and certainly refined. It would not be imagined, for instance, that there could be any fellow-feeling between him and the woman a few yards down the street who, indifferent as to the scantiness of the garments by way of clothing a well-developed bust, was leaning out of a window screaming objurgations at a small boy for chasing the strayed pig. Nevertheless, Don Agostino would doubtless have entered into the feelings of both the woman and the boy—and, probably, also into those of the pig—had he noticed the uproar, which, his thoughts being concentrated for the moment on the saying of his office, he did not do.

He had been at Montefiano some years now, and the stories current at the time of his arrival in the place as to the reason why he had been sent there from Rome were wellnigh forgotten by his parishioners. At first they held aloof from him suspiciously, as from one who was not of their condition in life, and who had only been sent to Montefiano because—well, because of some indiscretion committed at Rome. Some said it was politics, others that it was women, and

others, again, that it was neither the one nor the other. All agreed that an *instruito* like Don Agostino, with his air of a *gran signore*, and money behind that air, too, was not sent to a place like Montefiano for nothing.

Don Agostino, however, had not troubled himself as to what was said or thought, but had taken up his duties with that unquestioning obedience which spiritual Rome has incorporated with the rest of her heritage from the Cæsars. He neither offered any explanations nor made any complaints concerning the surroundings to which he found himself relegated. For two or three years after his first coming to Montefiano strangers had sometimes visited him, and once or twice a cardinal had come from Rome to see him—but that was ten years ago and more, and now nobody came. Probably, the Montefianesi said, the Vatican had forgotten him; and they added, with a shrug of the shoulders, that it was better for a priest to be forgotten in Montefiano than remembered in a cup of chocolate in Rome.

As to any little affair of morals—well, it was certain that twenty, nay, even fifteen, years ago Don Agostino must have been a very good-looking young man, priest or no priest; and shoulders were shrugged again.

Whatever had been the cause of it, morals or politics, Monsignor Agostino was *parroco* of Montefiano, a Sabine village forty miles from Rome, with a population of some three thousand souls—a gray mass of houses clustering on a hill-side, crowned by the feudal fortress of its owners who had not slept a night within its walls since Don Agostino had taken over the spiritual interests of their people.

To be sure, Montefiano was a commune, and petty officialism was as rampant within its bounds as in many a more important place. But the princes of Montefiano were lords of the soil, and lords also of its tillers, as they were of other possessions in the Agro Romano. There had been a time, not so very many years ago, when a prince of Montefiano could post from Rome to Naples, passing each night on one of the family properties; but building-contractors, cards, and cocottes had combined to reduce the acreage in the late prince's lifetime, and Montefiano was now one of the last of the estates left to his only child, a girl of barely eighteen summers.

The Montefiano family had been singularly unlucky in its last two generations. The three younger brothers of the late prince had died—two of them when mere lads, and the third as a married but childless man. The prince himself had married early in life the beautiful daughter of a well-known Venetian house, who had brought a considerable dowry with her, and whom he had deceived and neglected from the first week of his marriage with her until her death, which had occurred when the one child born of the union was but a few months old.

Then, after some years, the prince had married again. He had taken to religion in later life, when health had suddenly failed him.

His second wife was a Belgian by birth, and had gained a considerable reputation for holiness in "black" circles in Rome. Indeed, it was generally supposed that it was a mere question of time before Mademoiselle d'Antin should take the veil. Other questions, however, apparently presented themselves for her consideration, and she took the Principe di Montefiano instead. It appeared that, after all, this, and not the cloister, was her true vocation; for she piloted the broken-down *roué* skilfully, and at the same time rapidly to the entrance, at all events, to purgatory, where she left the helm in order to enjoy her widow's portion, and to undertake the guardianship of her youthful step-daughter Donna Bianca Acorari, now princess of Montefiano in her own right.

Some people in Rome said that the deceased Montefiano was bored and prayed to death by his pious wife and the priests with whom she surrounded him. These, however, were chiefly the boon companions of the prince's unregenerate days, whose constitutions were presumably stronger than his had proved itself to be.

Rome—respectable Rome—was edified at the ending that the Prince of Montefiano had made, at the piety of his widow, and also at the fact that there was more money in the Montefiano coffers than anybody had suspected could be the case.

The portion left to the widowed princess was, if not large, at least considerably larger than had been anticipated even by those who believed that they knew the state of her husband's affairs better than their neighbors; and by the time Donna Bianca should be of an age to marry, her fortune would, or should, be worth the attention of any husband, let alone the fiefs and titles she would bring into that husband's family.

The Princess of Montefiano, since her widowhood, had continued to live quietly on the first floor of the gloomy old palace behind the Piazza Campitelli, in Rome, which had belonged to the family from the sixteenth century. The months of August, September, and October she and her step-daughter usually spent at a villa near Velletri, but except for this brief period Rome was their only habitation. The princess went little into the world, even into that of the "black" society, and it was generally understood that she occupied herself with good works. Indeed, those who professed to know her intimately declared that had it not been for the sense of her duty towards her husband's little girl, she would have long ago retired into a convent, and would certainly do so when Donna Bianca married.

In the mean time, the great, square building, with its Renaissance façade which dominated the little town of Montefiano, remained unvisited by its possessors, and occupied only by the agent and his family, who lived in a vast apartment on the ground-floor of the palace. The agent collected the rents and forwarded them to the princess's man of business in Rome, and to the good people of Mon-

tefiano the saints and the angels were personalities far more realizable than were the owners of the soil on which they labored.

Not that Don Agostino knew the princess any better than did his parishioners. He always insisted that he had never seen her. His attitude, indeed, had been a perpetual cause of surprise to the agent, who, when Don Agostino first came to the place, had not unreasonably supposed that whenever the priest went to Rome, which he did at long intervals, becoming ever longer as time went on, one of his first objects would be to present himself at the Palazzo Acorari.

Apparently, however, Don Agostino did not deem it necessary to know the princess or Donna Bianca personally. Possibly he considered that so long as his formal letters to the princess on behalf of his flock in times of distress or sickness met with a satisfactory response, there was no reason to obtrude himself individually on their notice. This, at least, was the conclusion that the agent and the official classes of Montefiano arrived at. As to the humbler members of Don Agostino's flock, they did not trouble themselves to draw any conclusions except the most satisfactory one involved in the knowledge that, as the Madonna and the saints stood between them and Domeneddio without their being personally acquainted with him, so Don Agostino stood between them and the excellencies in Rome, who, of course, could not spare the time to visit so distant a place as Montefiano.

II

Don Agostino, his office completed, closed his breviary and stood gazing across the plain below to where Rome lay. On a clear day, and almost always in the early mornings in summer, the cupola of St. Peter's could be seen from Montefiano, hung, as it were, midway between earth and heaven; but now only a low-lying curtain of haze marked the position of the city. Down in the valley, winding between low cliffs clothed with brushwood and stunted oaks, the waters of the Tiber flashed in the slanting sun-rays, and the bold outline of Soracte rose in the blue distance, like an island floating upon a summer sea.

And Don Agostino stood and gazed, and as he did so he thought of the restless life forever seething in the far-off city he knew so well—the busy brains that were working, calculating, intriguing in the shadow of that mighty dome which bore the emblem of self-sacrifice and humility on its summit, and of all

the good and all the evil that was being wrought beneath that purple patch of mist that hid—Rome.

None knew the good and the evil better than he, and the mysterious way in which the one sprang from the other in a never-ending circle, as it had sprung now for wellnigh twenty centuries—ever since the old gods began to wear halos and to be called saints.

Don Agostino, or, to give him his proper name and ecclesiastical rank, Monsignor Lelli, had been a canon of the basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, in Rome, before he fell into disgrace at the Vatican.

Notwithstanding the gossip which had been rife concerning the reasons for his exile from Rome to Montefiano, private morals had had nothing to do with the matter. For several years he had filled a post of some confidence at the Vatican—a post, like that held by Judas Iscariot, involving considerable financial responsibility.

Judas Iscariot, however, had been more fortunate than Monsignor Lelli, inasmuch as he was attached to the financial service of Christ, and not to that of Christ's vicar.

To make a long story short, certain loans, advanced for political purposes, though private social interests were not extraneous to the transactions, lightened the money-bags to an unforeseen extent, and the securities which Monsignor Lelli held in their stead soon proved to be little better than waste paper. It was known that Monsignor Lelli had acted under protest, and, moreover, that he had obeyed instructions which he had no choice but to obey.

The Vatican, however, differs in no way from any other organization to carry on which the rules of discipline must be strictly maintained; and when a superior officer blunders, a subordinate must, if possible, be found to bear the blame. In this case Monsignor Lelli was manifestly the fit and proper scape-goat; and here all comparison with Judas Iscariot ended, for he had walked off with his burden to Montefiano without uttering so much as a protesting bleat.

But at Rome the true motives for actions both public and private are rarely to be discovered on the surface. Nominally, Monsignor Lelli's disgrace was the direct consequence of his negligence in safeguarding the sums of money for the sound investment of which he was supposed to be responsible. Practically, its cause lay elsewhere. He was known to be a Liberal in his political views, the friend of a prominent foreign cardinal resident in Rome, to whose influence, indeed, he owed his canonry of Santa Maria Maggiore, and whose attitude towards the Italian government, and also towards various dogmatic questions, had for some time aroused the ill-will of a pontiff who was even more anti-Italian than his predecessor. Unfortunately for himself, Monsignor Lelli had published his views on the relations between Church and State, and had drawn down upon

his head the wrath of the clerical party in consequence. His enemies, and they were many, left no means untried to bring about his disgrace, fully aware that by doing so they would at the same time be striking a blow at the obnoxious cardinal who supported not only Monsignor Lelli but also every Liberal ecclesiastic in Rome. When it became evident that more than one grave financial blunder had been committed by others in authority, it was equally obvious that the moment to strike this blow had arrived, and it was delivered accordingly.

All these things, however, had happened years ago. The cardinal was dead—of one of those mysteriously rapid illnesses which he made no secret to his more intimate friends as being likely some day to overtake him—and Monsignor Lelli remained at Montefiano, forgotten, as his parishioners declared, though he himself knew well that at Rome nothing is forgotten, and that so long as his enemies lived, so long would he, Monsignor Lelli, be required to devote his learning and his intellect to the needs of a peasant population. Afterwards—well, it was of the afterwards he was thinking, as he gazed dreamily over the great plain stretching away to Rome, when the sound of horses' hoofs in the street below attracted his attention, and, looking round, he saw the agent, Giuseppe Fontana—Sor Beppe, as he was commonly called in Montefiano—riding towards him apparently in some haste.

Don Agostino moved out of the shade to meet him.

"Signor Fattore, good-evening!" he said, courteously, knowing that the man liked to be given his full official title as administrator of the Montefiano fief.

Sor Beppe rode up alongside of him, raising his felt hat as he returned the salutation. He wore his official coat of dark-blue cloth, on the silver buttons of which were engraved the arms and coronet of the Montefiano. He was a powerfully made man with a dark, grizzled beard, inclining to gray, and he sat his horse—a well-built black stallion—as one who was more often in the saddle than out of it. On ordinary days he would carry a double-barrelled gun slung across his shoulders, but to-day the weapon was absent.

Don Agostino noted the fact, and also that the agent's face was lighted up with unusual excitement.

"And what is there new, Signor Fontana?" he asked, briefly.

"*Perbacco*! What is there new?" repeated Fontana. "There is a whole world of new—but your reverence will never guess what it is! Such a thing has not happened for fifteen years—"

"But what is it?" insisted Don Agostino, tranquilly. "I quite believe that nothing new has happened in Montefiano for fifteen years. I have been here nearly ten, and—"

"I have ridden down to tell you. The letter came only an hour ago. Her excellency the princess—their excellencies the princesses, I should say—"

"Well," interrupted Don Agostino, "what about them?"

The agent took a letter from his pocket and spread it out on the pommel of his saddle. Then he handed it to Don Agostino.

"There!" he exclaimed. "It is her excellency herself who writes. They are coming here—to the palace—to stay for weeks—months, perhaps."

Don Agostino uttered a sudden ejaculation. It was difficult to say whether it was of surprise or dismay.

"Here!" he said—"to Montefiano? But the place is dismantled—a barrack!"

"And do I not know it—I?" returned Sor Beppe. "There are some tables and some chairs—and there are things that once were beds; but there is nothing else, unless it is some pictures on the walls—and the prince—blessed soul—took the best of those to Rome years ago."

Don Agostino read the letter attentively.

"The princess says that all the necessary furniture will be sent from Rome at once," he observed, "and servants—everything, in fact. The rooms on the *piano nobile* are to be made ready—and the chapel. Well, Signor Fontana," he continued, "you will have plenty to occupy your time if, as the princess says, everything is to be ready in a fortnight from to-day. After all, the palace was built to be lived in—is it not true?"

"Very true, reverence; but it is so sudden. After so many years, to want everything done in fifteen days—"

"Women, my dear Signor Fontana—women!" said Don Agostino, deprecatingly.

The agent laughed. "That is what I said to my wife," he replied.

"It was not a wise thing to say," observed Don Agostino.

"It is an incredible affair," resumed the other, brushing a fly from his horse's flank as he spoke; "and no reception by the people—as little notice as possible to be taken of their excellencies' arrival. You see what the letter says, reverence?"

"Yes," replied Don Agostino, meditatively. "It is unusual, certainly, under the circumstances."

"But," he added, "the princess has undoubtedly some good reason for wishing to arrive at Montefiano in as quiet a manner as possible. Perhaps she is ill, or her daughter is ill—who knows?"

"They say she is a saint," observed Fontana.

Don Agostino looked at him; the tone of Sor Beppe's voice implied that such a fact would account for any eccentricity. Then he smiled.

"She is at all events the mistress of Montefiano, until the young princess is of age or marries," he remarked; "so, Signor Fontana, there is nothing more to be said or done."

"Except to obey her excellency's instructions."

"Exactly—except to obey her instructions," repeated Don Agostino.

"It is strange that your reverence, the *parroco* of Montefiano, should never have seen our *padrona*."

"It is still stranger that you—her representative here—should never have seen her," returned Don Agostino.

"That is true," said the agent; "but"—and his white teeth gleamed in his beard as he smiled—"saints do not often show themselves, *reverendo*! My respects," he added, lifting his hat and gathering up his reins. "I have to ride down to Poggio to arrange with the station-master there for the arrival of the things which will be sent from Rome." And settling himself in his saddle, Sor Beppe started off at an easy canter and soon disappeared round a turn of the white road, leaving a cloud of dust behind him.

Don Agostino looked after him for a moment or two, and then returned thoughtfully to his house.

The intelligence the agent had brought him was news, indeed, and he wondered what its true purport might be. It was certainly strange that, after studiously avoiding Montefiano for all these years, the princess should suddenly take it into her head to come there for a prolonged stay. Hitherto, Don Agostino had been very happy in his exile, chiefly because that exile was so complete. There had been nobody at Montefiano to rake up the past, to open old wounds which the passing of years had cicatrized, and which only throbbed now and again when memory insisted upon asserting her rights.

The petty jealousies and malignities which poison the atmosphere of most courts, and which in that of the Vatican are the more poisonous inasmuch as they wear a religious mask, could not penetrate to Montefiano, or, if they did, could not long survive out of the air of Rome. Monsignor Lelli had quickly realized this; and, the confidence of his parishioners once gained, he had learned to appreciate the change of air. The financial conditions of the Vatican did not interest Montefiano. Consequently, the story of Don Agostino's financial indiscretions had not reached the little room in the Corso Garibaldi, which was the nightly resort of the more wealthy among the community, and in which high political matters were settled with a rapidity that should have made the parliaments of Europe blush—were any one of them capable of blushing.

As to the other stories—well, Don Agostino had soon lived them down. Montefiano had declared—with some cynicism, perhaps, but with much justice—that there were those who were lucky in their adventures and those who were unlucky, and that priests, when all was said and done, were much the same as other people. Nevertheless, Montefiano had kept its eyes on Don Agostino for a while, in case of accidents—for nobody likes accidents to happen at home.

But it was not entirely of these matters that Don Agostino was thinking as

he let himself into the little garden by the side of the church. His house, connected with the sacristy by a *pergola* over which vines and roses were struggling for the mastery, stood at the end of this garden, and Don Agostino, opening the door quietly lest his housekeeper should hear and descend upon him, passed into his study.

The news Sor Beppe had brought had awakened other memories—memories which took him back to the days before he was a priest; when he had been a young fellow of three or four and twenty, very free from care, very good to look upon, and very much in love.

It was strange, perhaps, that the impending arrival at Montefiano of an elderly lady and a girl of seventeen, neither of whom Don Agostino had ever seen, should arouse in him memories of his own youth; but so it was. Such links in the chain that binds us to the past—a chain that perhaps death itself is powerless to break—are perpetually forging themselves in the present, and often trifles as light as air rivet them.

In this case the link had been forged long ago. Don Agostino remembered the forging of it every time he donned the sacred vestments to say mass, and was conscious that the years had riveted it only more firmly.

It was, perhaps, as well that his housekeeper was busy plucking a chicken in the back premises; and it was certainly as well that none of his flock could have observed their pastor's actions when he had shut himself into his study, otherwise unprofitable surmises, long rejected as such, would have cropped up again round the measures of wine in the Caffè Garibaldi that evening.

For some time Don Agostino sat in front of his writing-table thinking, his face buried in his hands. The joyous chattering of the house-martins flying to and from their nests came through the open windows, and the scent of roses and Madonna lilies. But presently the liquid notes of the swallows changed into the soft lapping of waters rising and falling on marble steps; the scent of the lilies was there, but mingling with it was the salt smell of the lagoons, the warm, silky air blowing in from the Adriatic. The distant sounds from the village street became, in Don Agostino's ears, the cries of the gondoliers and the fishermen, and Venice rose before his eyes—Venice, with the rosy light of a summer evening falling on her palaces and her churches, turning her laughing waters into liquid flame; Venice, with her murmur of music in the air as the gondolas and the fishing-boats glided away from the city across the lagoons to the Lido and the sea; Venice, holding out to him youth and love, and the first sweet dawning of the passion that only youth and love can know.

Suddenly Don Agostino raised his head and looked about him as one looks who wakes from a dream. His eyes fell upon the crucifix standing on his table and on the ivory Christ nailed to it. And then his dream passed.

Rising, he crossed the room, and, unlocking a cabinet, took from it a tiny miniature and one letter—the only one left to him, for he had burned the rest. The keeping of this letter had been a compromise. For do not the best of us make a compromise with our consciences occasionally?

The face in the miniature was that of a young girl—a child almost—but exceedingly beautiful, with the red-gold hair and creamy coloring of the Venetian woman of the Renaissance.

Don Agostino looked at it long; afterwards, almost mechanically, he raised the picture towards his lips. Then, with a sudden gesture, as though realizing what he was about to do, he thrust it back into the drawer of the cabinet. But he kissed the letter before he replaced it beside the miniature.

It was merely another compromise, this time not so much with his conscience, perhaps, as with his priesthood.

"Bianca!" he said, aloud, and his voice dwelt on the name with a lingering tenderness. "Bianca! And she—that other woman—she brings your child here—here, where I am! Well, perhaps it is you who send her—who knows? Perhaps it was you who sent me to Montefiano—you, or the blessed Mother of us all—again, who knows? It was strange, was it not, that of all places they should send me here, where your child was born, the child that should have been—"

The door was flung open hastily, and Don Agostino's housekeeper filled the threshold.

"*Madonna mia Santissima!*" she exclaimed. "It is your reverence, after all. I thought I heard voices—"

"Yes, Ernana, it is I," said Don Agostino, quietly.

"*Accidente!* but you frightened me!" grumbled the woman. "I was plucking the chicken for your reverence's supper, and—"

"So I perceive," remarked Don Agostino, watching feathers falling off her person to the floor. "And you heard voices," he added. "Well, I was talking to myself. You can return to the chicken, Ernana, in peace!"

"The chicken is a fat chicken," observed Ernana, reflectively. "*A proposito*," she added, "will your reverence eat it boiled? It sits more lightly on the stomach at night—boiled."

"I will eat it boiled," said Don Agostino.

"And with a *contorno* of rice?"

Don Agostino sighed.

"Rice?" he repeated, absently. "Of course, Ernana; with rice, certainly with

rice."

III

Palazzo Acorari, the residence in Rome of the princes of Montefiano, was situated, as has already been said, in that old quarter of the city known as the Campitelli. It stood, indeed, but a few yards away from the piazza of the name, in a deserted little square through which few people passed save those whose business took them into the squalid streets and *vicoli* opening out of the Piazza Montanara.

It was not one of the well-known palaces of Rome, although it was of far greater antiquity than many described at length in the guide-books; neither was it large in comparison with some of its near neighbors. Nine people out of ten, if asked by a stranger to direct them to Palazzo Acorari, would have been unable to reply, although, from a mingled sense of the courtesy due to a *forestiero*, and fear of being taken for *forestiero* themselves, they would probably have attempted to do so all the same, to the subsequent indignation of the stranger.

There was no particular reason why Palazzo Acorari should be well known. It contained no famous works of art, and its apartments, though stately in their way, were neither historic nor on a large enough scale to have ever been rented by rich foreigners as a stage on which they could play at being Roman nobles to an appreciative if somewhat cynical audience.

A narrow and gloomy *porte cochère* opened from the street into the courtyard round which the Palazzo Acorari was built. Except for an hour or two at midday no ray of sunlight ever penetrated into this court, which, nevertheless, was picturesque enough with its graceful arches and its time-worn statues mounting guard around it. A porter in faded livery dozed in his little office on one side of the entrance, in the intervals of gossiping with a passer-by on the doings and misdoings of the neighbors, and he, together with a few pigeons and a black cat, were generally the only animate objects to be seen by those who happened to glance into the quadrangle.

The princess and her step-daughter inhabited the first floor of the palace, while the ground-floor was apportioned off into various *locali* opening on to the streets, in which a cobbler, a retail charcoal and coke vender, a mattress-maker, and others plied their respective trades.

On the second floor, immediately above the princess's apartment, was another suite of rooms. This apartment had been unlet for two or three years, and it was only some six or eight months since it had found a tenant.

The princess was not an accommodating landlady. Possibly she regarded concessions to the tenants of her second floor as works of supererogation—laudable, perhaps, but not necessary to salvation. Moreover, the tenants on the second floor never went to mass—at least, so the Abbé Roux had gathered from the porter, whose business it was to know the concerns of every one dwelling in or near Palazzo Acorari.

There had been, consequently, passages of arms concerning responsibility for the repairs of water-pipes and similar objects, in which it was clearly injurious to the glory of God and the interests of the Church that the princess should be the one to give way. She had been, indeed, on the point of declining the offer of Professor Rossano to take the vacant apartment. He was a well-known scientist, with a reputation which had travelled far beyond the frontiers of Italy, and, in recognition of his work in the domain of physical science, had been created a senator of the Italian kingdom. But a scientific reputation was not a thing which appealed to the princess, regarding as she did all scientific men as misguided and arrogant individuals in league with the freemasons and the devil to destroy faith upon the earth. The Abbé Roux, however, had counselled tolerance, accompanied by an addition of five hundred francs a year to the rent. The apartment had been long unlet, and was considerably out of repair; but the professor had taken a fancy to it, as being in a quiet and secluded position where he could pursue his studies undisturbed by the noise of the tram-cars, which even then were beginning to render the chief thoroughfares of Rome odious to walk and drive in, and still more odious to live in.

As he was a man of some means, he had not demurred at the extra rent which the princess's agent had demanded at the last moment before the signing of the lease. Apart from the fact that he was a scientist and a senator of that kingdom of which the princess affected to ignore the existence, there had seemed to be nothing undesirable about Professor Rossano as a tenant. He was a widower, with a son of four-and-twenty and a daughter a year or two older who lived with him; and, after her tenant's furniture had been carried in and the upholsterers had done their work, the princess had been hardly conscious that the apartment immediately above her own was occupied. On rare occasions she had encountered the professor on the staircase, and had bowed in answer to his salutation; but there was no acquaintance between them, nor did either show symptoms of wishing to interchange anything but the most formal of courtesies. Sometimes, too, when going out for, or returning from, their daily drive, the princess and her step-daughter would meet Professor Rossano's daughter, who was usually ac-

companied by her maid, a middle-aged person of staid demeanor who seemed to act as a companion to the Signorina Giacinta, as, according to the porter, Senator Rossano's daughter was called. The girls used to look at each other curiously, but weeks went by before a word passed between them.

"They are not of our world," the princess had said, decisively, to Bianca shortly after the Rossanos' arrival, "and there is no necessity for us to know them"—and the girl had nodded her head silently, though with a slight sigh. It was not amusing to be princess of Montefiano in one's own right and do nothing but drive out in a closed carriage every afternoon, and perhaps walk for half an hour outside one of the city gates or in the Villa Pamphili with one's stepmother by one's side and a footman ten paces behind. Bianca Acorari thought she would like to have known Giacinta Rossano, who looked amiable and *simpatica*, and was certainly pretty. But though there was only the thickness of a floor between them, the two establishments were as completely apart as if the Tiber separated them, and Bianca knew by experience that it would be useless to attempt to combat her step-mother's prejudices. Indeed, she herself regarded the professor and his daughter with a curiosity not unmixed with awe, and would scarcely have been surprised if a judgment had overtaken them even on their way up and down the staircase; for had not Monsieur l'Abbé declared that neither father nor daughter ever went to mass?

This assertion was not strictly true—at any rate, so far as the Signorina Giacinta was concerned. The professor, no doubt, seldom went inside a church, except, perhaps, on special occasions, such as Easter or Christmas. He possessed a scientific conscience as well as a spiritual conscience, and he found an insuperable difficulty in reconciling the one with the other on a certain point of dogma which need not be named. He was not antichristian, however, though he might be anticlerical, and he encouraged Giacinta to go to the churches rather than the reverse, as many fathers of families in his position do, both in Italy and elsewhere.

Professor Rossano and his daughter had inhabited the Palazzo Acorari nearly three months before Bianca made the discovery that the girl at whom she had cast stolen glances of curiosity, as being the first heretic of her own nationality she had ever beheld, was, if appearances spoke the truth, no heretic at all. She had actually seen Giacinta kneeling in the most orthodox manner at mass in the neighboring church of Santa Maria dei Campitelli. Bianca had informed the princess of her discovery that very day at breakfast in the presence of the Abbé Roux, who was an invariable guest on Sundays and feast-days. She nourished a secret hope that her step-mother might become more favorably disposed towards the family on the second floor if it could satisfactorily be proved not to be entirely heretical. The princess, however, did not receive the information in the spirit Bianca had expected.

"People of that sort," she had responded, coldly, "often go to mass in order to keep up appearances, or sometimes to meet—oh, well"—she broke off, abruptly—"to stare about them as you seem to have been doing this morning, Bianca, instead of saying your prayers. Is it not so, Monsieur l'Abbé?" she added to the priest, with whom she generally conversed in French, though both spoke Italian perfectly.

The Abbé Roux sighed. "Ah, yes, madame," he replied, "unluckily it is undoubtedly so. The Professor Rossano, if one is to judge by certain arrogant and anticatholic works of which he is the author, is not likely to have brought up his children to be believers. And if one does not believe, what is the use of going to mass?—except—except—" And here he checked himself as the princess had done, feeling himself to be on the verge of an indiscretion.

"You hear, Bianca, what Monsieur l'Abbé says," observed the princess. "You must understand once for all, that what Professor Rossano and his daughter may or may not do is no concern of ours—"

"So long as they pay their rent," added the Abbé, pouring himself out another glass of red wine.

"So long as they pay their rent," the princess repeated. "They are not of our society—" she continued.

"And do not dance," interrupted Bianca.

The princess looked at her a little suspiciously. She was never quite sure whether Bianca, notwithstanding her quiet and apparently somewhat apathetic disposition, was altogether so submissive as she seemed.

"Dance!" she exclaimed. "Why should they dance? I don't know what you mean, Bianca."

"It is against the contract to dance on the second floor. The guests might fall through on to our heads," observed Bianca, tranquilly. "Bettina told me so, and the porter told her—"

The princess frowned. "Bettina talks too much," she said, with an unmistakable air of desiring that the subject should drop.

Bianca relapsed into silence. It was very evident that, however devout the Rossano girl might be, she would not be allowed to make her acquaintance. Her observant eyes had watched the Abbé Roux's countenance as she made her little effort to further that desired event, for she was very well aware that no step was likely to be taken in this, or, indeed, in any other matter unless the Abbé approved of it. Privately, Bianca detested the priest, and with a child's unerring instinct—for she was still scarcely more than a child in some things—she felt that he disliked her.

Nor was this state of things of recent origin. Ever since the Abbé Roux had become, as it were, a member of the Montefiano household, Bianca Acorari had

entertained the same feeling towards him. Her obstinacy on this point, indeed, had first awakened the princess to the fact that her step-daughter had a very decided will of her own, which, short of breaking, nothing was likely to conquer.

This stubbornness, as the princess called it, had shown itself in an unmistakable manner when Bianca, though only twelve years old, had firmly and absolutely refused to confess to Monsieur l'Abbé. In vain the princess had threatened punishment both immediate and future, and in vain the Abbé Roux had admonished her. Make her confession to him, she would not. To any other priest, yes; to him, no—not then or ever. There was nothing more to be said or done—for both the princess and Monsieur l'Abbé knew well enough that the child was within her rights according to the laws of the Church, though of course she herself was unaware of the fact. There had been nothing for it, as weeks went on and Bianca never drew back from the position she had taken up, but to give way as gracefully as might be—but it was doubtful if the Abbé Roux had ever forgiven the want of confidence in him which the child had displayed, although he had afterwards told her that the Church left to all penitents the right of choice as to their confessors.

When Bianca grew older, the princess had intended to send her to the Convent of the Assumption in order to complete her education, and at the same time place her under some discipline. The girl was delicate, however, and it was eventually decided that it was better that she should be educated at home.

Perhaps it was the gradual consciousness that she was debarred from associating with any one of her own age which had made Bianca think wistfully that it would be pleasant to make the acquaintance of the attractive-looking girl whom she passed occasionally on the staircase, and who had come to live under the same roof as herself. She could not but notice that the older she became the more she seemed to be cut off from the society of others of her years. Formerly she had occasionally been allowed to associate with the children of her step-mother's friends and acquaintances, and, at rare intervals, they had been invited to some childish festivity at Palazzo Acorari.

By degrees, however, her life had become more and more isolated, and for the last year or two the princess, a governess who came daily to teach her modern languages and music, and her maid and attendant, Bettina, had been her only companions.

Rightly or wrongly, Bianca associated the restriction of her surroundings with the influence of the Abbé Roux, and the suspicion only increased the dislike she had always instinctively borne him.

It never entered into her head, however, to suggest to the princess that her life was an exceedingly dull one. Indeed, having no means of comparing it with the lives of other girls of her age, she scarcely realized that it was dull, and she accepted it as the natural order of things. It had not been until she had seen

Giacinta Rossano that an indefinable longing for some companionship other than that of those much older than herself began to make itself felt within her, and she had found herself wondering why she had no brothers and sisters, no cousins, such as other girls must have, with whom they could associate.

In the mean time, life in Palazzo Acorari went on as usual for Bianca. She fancied that, when they passed each other, the daughter of the mysterious old professor on the second floor who wrote wicked books looked at her with increasing interest; and that once or twice, when Bianca had been accompanied only by Bettina, she had half-paused as though about to speak, but had then thought better of it and walked on with a bow and a slight smile.

On one occasion she had ventured to sound Bettina as to whether it would not be at least courteous on her part to do something more than bow as she passed the Signorina Rossano. But Bettina was very cautious in her reply. The princess, it appeared, had been resolute in forbidding any communication between the two floors, excepting such as might have to be carried on through the medium of the porter, in the case of such a calamity as pipes bursting or roofs leaking.

December was nearly over, and Rome was *sotto Natale*. People were hurrying through the streets buying their Christmas presents, and thronging the churches to look at the representations of the Holy Child lying in the manger of Bethlehem; for it was Christmas Eve, and the great bells of the basilicas were booming forth the tidings of the birth of Christ. In every house in Rome, among rich and poor alike, preparations were going on for the family gathering that should take place that night, and for the supper that should be eaten after midnight when the strict fast of the Christmas vigil should be over.

The majority, perhaps, paid but little heed to the fasting and abstinence enjoined by the priests, unless the addition of fresh fish to the bill of fare—fish brought from Anzio and Nettuno the day before by the ton weight and sold at the traditional *cottìo* throughout the night—could be taken as a sign of obedience to the laws of the Church. But the truly faithful conformed rigidly throughout the day, reserving themselves for the meats that would be permissible on the return from the midnight masses, when the birth of a God would be celebrated, as it has ever been, by a larger consumption than usual of the flesh of His most innocent creatures on the part of those who invoke Him as a merciful and compassionate Creator.

This particular Christmas Eve it so happened that the princess was confined to her bed with a severe cold and fever, which made attendance at the midnight masses an impossibility so far as she was concerned. Bianca, however, was allowed to go, accompanied by Bettina, and shortly after half-past eleven they left Palazzo Acorari, meaning to walk to the church of San Luigi dei Francesi in the Piazza Navona, one of the few churches in Rome to which the public were admit-

ted to be present at the three masses appointed to be said at the dawning hours of Christmas Day.

It was raining in torrents as they emerged from the *portone* of the *palazzo*, and to get a cab at that hour of night on Christmas Eve appeared to be an impossibility, except, perhaps, in the main streets.

Bianca and her attendant consulted together. They would certainly be wet through before they could reach the Piazza Navona, and it seemed as though there was nothing to be done but to remain at home. Bettina, however, suddenly remembered that at the little church of the Sudario, less than half-way to the Piazza Navona, the midnight masses were also celebrated. To be sure, it was the church of the Piedmontese, and chiefly attended by members of the royal household, and often by the queen herself. The princess would not be altogether pleased, therefore, at the substitution; but, under the circumstances, Bianca expressed her determination of going there, and her maid was obliged to acquiesce.

Five minutes plunging through puddles and mud, and battling with a warm sirocco wind which blew in gusts at the corners of every street, brought them to the little church hidden away behind the Corso Vittorio Emmanuele.

A side door communicating with the building was open, and they passed from the darkness and the driving rain into a blaze of warm light and the mingled scent of incense and flowers. The high altar, adorned with priceless white-and-gold embroideries, sparkled in the radiance of countless wax-candles. Overhead, from a gallery at the opposite end of the church, the organ was playing softly, the player reproducing on the reed-stops the pastoral melodies of the *pifferari*, in imitation of the pipes of the shepherds watching over their flocks through that wonderful night nineteen centuries ago.

Although it wanted yet twenty minutes to midnight the church was nearly full, and Bianca and her companion made their way to some vacant seats halfway up it. Glancing at her neighbors immediately in front of her, Bianca gave a start of surprise as she recognized Giacinta Rossano.

Bettina's gaze was fixed on the altar, and Bianca hesitated for a moment. Then she leaned forward and whispered timidly, "*Buona Natale, buona feste*"—with a little smile.

A pair of soft, dark eyes smiled back into her own. "*Buona Natale, e buona anno, Donna Bianca.*" Giacinta Rossano replied, in a low, clear voice which caused Bettina to withdraw her eyes from the altar and to look sharply round to see whence it proceeded. Somebody else turned round also—a young man whom Bianca had not noticed, but who was sitting next to Giacinta. For a moment their eyes met, and then she looked away quickly, half conscious of a sensation of effort in doing so that caused her a vague surprise. The gaze she had suddenly encountered had seemed to enchain her own. The eyes that had looked into hers

with a wondering, questioning look were like Giacinta Rossano's, only they were blue—Bianca felt quite sure of that. They had seemed to shut out for a second or two the blaze of light on the altar. The momentary feeling of surprise passed, she turned her head towards the altar again, and as she did so she overheard Giacinta Rossano's companion whisper to her, "*Chiè?*" accompanied by a rapid backward motion of his head.

Giacinta's reply was inaudible, for at that moment a clear alto voice from the gallery rang out with the opening notes of the *Adeste Fideles*. The doors of the sacristy opened, and the officiating priest, glittering in his vestments of gold-and-white, knelt before the altar. *Venite Adoremus* burst forth triumphantly from the choir, the alto voice rising above the rest like an angel's song. Presently, as the strains of the Christmas hymn died away, and the soft reed-notes of the organ resumed the plaintive refrain of the *pifferari*, the celebrant rose, and then kneeling again on the lowest step of the altar, murmured the *Confiteor*—and the first mass of the Nativity began.

After the elevation, Bianca Acorari rose from her knees and resumed her seat. The mellow light from the wax-candles glinted upon the tawny gold of her hair and her creamy complexion, both of which she had inherited from her Venetian mother. Many eyes were turned upon her, for though, so far as regularity of features was concerned, she could not be called beautiful, yet her face was striking enough, combining as it did the Italian grace and mobility with a coloring that, but for its warmth, might have stamped her as belonging to some Northern race.

Owing to the general shuffling of chairs consequent upon the members of the congregation resuming their seats after the elevation, Bianca suddenly became aware that Giacinta Rossano's companion had somewhat changed his position, and that he was now sitting where he could see her without, as before, turning half round in his seat. Apparently, too, he was not allowing the opportunity to escape him, for more than once she felt conscious that his eyes were resting upon her; and, indeed, each time she ventured to steal a glance in Giacinta's direction that glance was intercepted—not rudely or offensively, but with the same almost wondering look in the dark-blue eyes that they had worn when they first met her own.

Bianca glanced furtively from Giacinta's companion to Giacinta herself as soon as the former looked away.

Decidedly, she thought, they were very like each other, except in the coloring of the eyes, for Giacinta's eyes were of a deep, velvety brown. Suddenly a light dawned upon her. Of course! this must be Giacinta Rossano's brother—come, no doubt, to spend Christmas with his father and sister. She had always heard that the professor had a son; but as this son had never appeared upon the

scene since the Rossanos had lived in the Palazzo Acorari, Bianca had forgotten that he had any existence.

How she wished she had a brother come to spend Christmas with her! It would, at all events, be more amusing than sitting at dinner opposite to Monsieur l'Abbé, which would certainly be her fate the following evening. From all of which reflections it may be gathered that Bianca was not deriving as much spiritual benefit from her attendance at mass as could be desired. Perhaps the thought struck her, for she turned somewhat hastily to Bettina, only to see an expression on that worthy woman's face which puzzled her. It was a curious expression, half-uneasy and half-humorous, and Bianca remembered it afterwards.

The three masses came to an end at last, and to the calm, sweet music of the Pastoral symphony from Händel's *Messiah* (for the organist at the Sudario, unlike the majority of his colleagues in Rome, was a musician and an artist) the congregation slowly left the church, its members exchanging Christmas greetings with their friends before going home to supper. Bettina hurried her charge through the throng, never slackening speed until they had left the building and turned down a by-street out of the crowd thronging the Corso Vittorio Emmanuele. Even then she glanced nervously over her shoulder from time to time, as though to make sure they were not being followed.

The rain had ceased by this time, and the moon shone in a deep violet sky, softening the grim mass of the Caetani and Antici-Mattei palaces which frowned above them. Presently Bettina halted under a flickering gas-lamp.

"A fine thing, truly," she exclaimed, abruptly, "to go to a midnight mass to stare at a good-looking boy—under the very nose, too, speaking with respect, of the *santissimo*!"

Bianca flushed. "He looked at me!" she said, indignantly.

"It is the same thing," returned Bettina—"at least," she added, "it is generally the same thing—in the end. Holy Virgin! what would her excellency say—and Monsieur l'Abbé—if they knew such a thing? And the insolence of it! He looked—and looked! Signorina, it is a thing unheard of—"

"What thing?" interrupted Bianca, tranquilly.

"What thing?" repeated Bettina, somewhat taken aback. "Why—why—oh, well," she added, hastily, "it doesn't matter what thing—only, for the love of God, signorina, do not let her excellency know that you spoke to the Signorina Rossano to-night!"

"There was no harm," replied Bianca. "I only wished her a good Christmas—"

"No harm—perhaps not!" returned Bettina; "but, signorina, I do not wish to find myself in the street, you understand—and it is I who would be blamed."

Bianca raised her head proudly. "You need not be afraid," she said. "I do

not allow others to be blamed for what I do. As to the Signorina Rossano, I have made her acquaintance, and I mean to keep it. For the rest, it is not necessary to say when or how I made it. Come, Bettina, I hear footsteps."

"You will make the acquaintance of the other one, too," Bettina said to herself—"but who knows whether you will keep it? Mali!" and with a sharp shrug of the shoulders she walked by Bianca's side in silence until they reached Palazzo Acorari, where the porter, who was waiting for them at the entrance, let them through the gateway and lighted them up the dark staircase to the doors of the *piano nobile*.

IV

"I tell you that it is a *pazzia*—a madness," said Giacinta Rossano. "The girl is a good girl, and I am sorry for her—shut up in this dreary house with a step-mother and a priest. But we are not of their world, and they are not of ours. The princess has made that very clear from the first."

"And what does it matter?" Silvio Rossano exclaimed, impetuously. "We are not princes, but neither are we beggars. Does not everybody know who my father is, Giacinta? And some day, perhaps, I shall make a name for myself, too—"

Giacinta glanced at her brother proudly.

"Yes," she said, "I believe you will—I am sure you will, if—" And then she hesitated.

"If what?" demanded Silvio.

"If you do not make an imbecile of yourself first," his sister replied, dryly.

Silvio Rossano flung the newspaper he had been reading on to the floor, and his eyes flashed with anger. In a moment, however, the anger passed, and he laughed.

"All men are imbeciles once in their lives," he said, "and most men are imbeciles much more frequently—"

"Oh, with these last it does not matter," observed Giacinta, sapiently; "they do themselves no harm. But you—you are not of that sort, Silvio *mio*. So before making an imbecile of yourself, it will be better to be sure that it is worth the trouble. Besides, the thing is ridiculous. People do not fall in love at first sight, except in novels—and if they do, they can easily fall out of it again."

"Not the other ones," said Silvio, briefly.

"The other ones? Ah, I understand," and Giacinta looked at him more gravely. She was very fond of this only brother of hers, and very proud of him—proud of his already promising career and of his frank, lovable disposition, as well as of his extreme good looks. In truth, when she compared Silvio with the large majority of young men of his age and standing, she had some reason for her pride. Unlike so many young Romans of the more leisured classes, Silvio Rossano had never been content to lead a useless and brainless existence. Being an only son, he had been exempt from military service; but, instead of lounging in the Corso in the afternoons and frequenting music-halls and other resorts of a more doubtful character at night, he had turned his attention at a comparatively early age to engineering. At the present moment, though barely five-and-twenty, he had just completed the erection of some important water-works at Bari, during the formation of which he had been specially chosen by one of the most eminent engineers in Italy to superintend the works during the great man's repeated absences elsewhere. Thanks to Silvio Rossano's untiring energy and technical skill, as well as to his popularity with his subordinates and workmen, serious difficulties had been overcome in an unusually short space of time, and a government contract, which at one moment looked as if about to be unfulfilled by the company with whom it had been placed, was completed within the period agreed upon. There could be little doubt that, after his last success, Silvio would be given some lucrative work to carry out, and, in the mean time, after an absence of nearly a year, he had come home for a few weeks' rest and holiday, to find his father and sister installed in Palazzo Acorari.

It was, perhaps, not to be wondered at if Giacinta Rossano felt uneasy in her mind on her brother's account. She knew his character as nobody else could know it, for he was barely two years younger than she, and they had grown up together. She knew that beneath his careless, good-natured manner there lay an inflexible will and indomitable energy, and that once these were fully aroused they would carry him far towards the end he might have in view.

The interest that Donna Bianca Acorari had aroused in Silvio had not escaped Giacinta's notice. She had observed where his gaze had wandered so frequently during the midnight mass a few nights previously, and, knowing that Silvio's life had been too busy a one to have left him much time to think about love, she had marvelled at the effect that Bianca Acorari seemed suddenly to have had upon him. Since that night, whenever they were alone together, he would begin to question her as to the surroundings of their neighbors on the floor below them, and urge her to make friends with Donna Bianca. It was in vain that Giacinta pointed out that she had only interchanged a word or two with the girl in her life, and that there was evidently a fixed determination on the princess's part not to permit any acquaintance.

This last argument, she soon discovered, was the very worst that she could use. Like most Romans of the *bourgeoisie* to which he by birth belonged—and, indeed, like Romans of every class outside the so-called nobility—Silvio was a republican at heart so far as social differences were concerned; nor—in view of the degeneracy of a class which has done all in its power in modern days to vulgarize itself in exchange for dollars, American or otherwise, and to lose any remnant of the traditions that, until a generation ago, gave the Roman noblesse a claim upon the respect of the classes nominally below it—could this attitude be blamed or wondered at.

At first, Giacinta had laughed at her brother for the way in which he had fallen a victim to the attractions of a young girl whom he had never seen before, but she had very soon begun to suspect that Silvio's infatuation was no mere passing whim. She was well aware, too, that passing whims were foreign to his nature. Since that Christmas night, he had been more silent and thoughtful than she had ever seen him, except, perhaps, in his student days, when he had been working more than usually hard before the examinations.

Of Bianca Acorari herself he spoke little, but Giacinta understood that the drift of his conversation generally flowed towards the family on the *piano nobile* and how its members occupied their day. Moreover, Silvio, she observed, was much more frequently *in casa* than was altogether natural for a young fellow supposed to be taking a holiday, and he appeared to be strangely neglectful of friends and acquaintances to whose houses he had formerly been ready to go. Another thing, too, struck Giacinta as unusual, and scarcely edifying. Silvio had never been remarkable for an alacrity to go to mass, and Giacinta knew that he shared the professor's views on certain subjects, and that he had little partiality for the clergy as a caste. Apparently, however, he had suddenly developed a devotion to some saint whose relic might or might not be in the church of Santa Maria in Piazza Campitelli, for Giacinta, to her surprise, had met him face to face one morning as she had gone to mass there, and on another occasion she had caught a glimpse of his figure disappearing behind a corner in the same church. It was only charitable, she thought, casually to inform this devout church-goer that the Princess Montefiano had a private chapel in her apartment, in which the Abbé Roux said mass every morning at half-past eight o'clock.

In the mean time, the professor, occupied with his scientific research, was in happy ignorance of the fact that disturbing elements were beginning to be at work within his small domestic circle, and Giacinta kept her own counsel. She hoped that Silvio would soon get some employment which would take him away from Rome, for she was very sure that nothing but mortification and unhappiness would ensue were he to make Bianca Acorari's acquaintance.

Some days had elapsed since Christmas, and Giacinta Rossano had not

again seen either Bianca or the princess. Under the circumstances, she by no means regretted the fact, for she rather dreaded lest she and her brother might encounter them on the staircase, and then, if Silvio behaved as he had behaved in the Sudario, the princess would certainly suspect his admiration for her step-daughter.

In Rome, however, families can live under the same roof for weeks, or even months, without necessarily encountering each other, or knowing anything of each other's lives or movements; and it so happened that no opportunity was given to Giacinta, even had she desired it, again to interchange even a formal greeting with the girl who had evidently made such an impression at first sight on her brother.

Of late, too, Silvio's interest in their neighbors had apparently diminished, for he asked fewer questions concerning them, and occasionally, Giacinta thought, almost seemed as though desirous of avoiding the subject.

She was not altogether pleased, however, when, after he had been at home about a month, Silvio one day announced that he had been offered work in Rome which would certainly keep him in the city for the whole summer. It was delightful, no doubt, to have him with them. She saw that her father was overjoyed at the idea, and, had it not been for other considerations, Giacinta would have desired nothing better than that Silvio should live permanently with them, for his being at home made her own life infinitely more varied. She could not help wondering, however, whether Bianca Acorari had anything to do with Silvio's evident satisfaction at remaining in Rome. Hitherto, he had shown eagerness rather than disinclination to get away from Rome, declaring that there was so little money or enterprise in the capital that any young Roman wishing to make his way in the world had better not waste his time by remaining in it.

Now, however, to judge of Silvio's contented attitude, he had found work which would be remunerative enough without being obliged to seek it in other parts of Italy or abroad. And so the weeks went by. Lent was already over, and Easter and spring had come, when Giacinta made a discovery which roused afresh all her uneasiness on her brother's behalf.

In some way or another she began to feel convinced that Silvio had managed either to meet Bianca Acorari, or, at all events, to have some communication with her. For some little time, indeed, she had suspected that his entire cessation from any mention of the girl or her step-mother was not due to his interest in Bianca having subsided. Silvio's interest in anything was not apt easily to subside when once fully aroused, and that it had been fully aroused, Giacinta had never entertained any doubt. Chance furnished her with a clew as to where Silvio's channels of communication might possibly lie, if indeed he could have any direct communication with Donna Bianca, which, under the circumstances, would

seem to be almost incredible.

It so happened that one April morning, when summer seemed to have entered into premature possession of its inheritance, when the Banksia roses by the steps of the Ara Coeli were bursting into bloom and the swifts were chasing each other with shrill screams in the blue sky overhead, Giacinta was returning from her usual walk before the mid-day breakfast, and, as she turned into the little piazza in which Palazzo Acorari was situated, she nearly collided with Silvio, apparently engaged in lighting a cigarette. There was nothing unusual in his being there at that hour, for he sometimes returned to breakfast *a casa*, especially on Thursdays, when little or no work is done in Rome in the afternoons, and this was a Thursday. It struck her, nevertheless, that Silvio seemed to be somewhat embarrassed by her sudden appearance round the corner of the narrow lane which connected the piazza with the Piazza Campitelli. His embarrassment was only momentary, however, and he accompanied her to the *palazzo*. The cannon at San Angelo boomed mid-day as they turned into the *portone*, and was answered by the bells of the churches round. As they slowly mounted the staircase, a lady came down it. Giacinta did not know her by sight, and, after she had passed them, she half-turned to look at her, for she fancied that a glance of mutual recognition was exchanged between her and Silvio, though the latter raised his hat only with the formality usual in passing an unknown lady on a staircase. The stranger seemed to hesitate for a moment, as though she were disconcerted at seeing Silvio in another person's company. The lady continued her way, however, and if Giacinta had not happened to look round as she and Silvio turned the corner of the staircase, she probably would have thought no more of her, for she was not particularly remarkable, being merely a quietly dressed woman, perhaps eight-and-twenty or thirty years of age, neither good-looking nor the reverse. But, as Giacinta looked, the lady coughed, and the cough re-echoed up the staircase. At the same time she dropped a folded piece of paper. Apparently she was unconscious that she had done so, for she continued to descend the stairs without turning her head, and disappeared round the angle of the court-yard.

"She has dropped something, Silvio," Giacinta said. "Had you not better go after her? It is a letter, I think."

"Of course!" Silvio answered, a little hastily. "I will catch up with her and give it to her," and he turned and ran down the staircase as he spoke.

Giacinta, leaning over the balustrade, saw him pick up the piece of paper. Then he crumpled it up and thrust it into his pocket.

"That," said Giacinta to herself, "was not prudent of Silvio. One does not crumple up a letter and pocket it if one is about to restore it to its owner, unless one's pocket is its proper destination."

Nevertheless, Silvio continued to pursue the lady, and three or four minutes

or more elapsed before he rejoined his sister.

"Well," Giacinta observed, tranquilly. "You gave her back her letter?"

"It was not a letter," said Silvio, "it was only a—a memorandum—written on a scrap of paper. A thing of no importance, Giacinta."

"I am glad it was of no importance," returned Giacinta, not caring to press her original question. "Do you know who she is?" she added.

"I think," answered Silvio, carelessly, "that she must be the lady who comes to teach the princess's daughter."

"Step-daughter," corrected Giacinta, dryly.

"Of course—step-daughter—I had forgotten. Do you know, Giacinta," he continued, "that we shall be very late for breakfast?"

It was a silent affair, that breakfast. The professor had been occupied the whole of the morning in correcting the proofs of a new scientific treatise, and he had even brought to the table some diagrams which he proceeded to study between the courses. Silvio's handsome face wore a thoughtful and worried expression, and Giacinta was engrossed with her own reflections.

Presently Professor Rossano broke the silence. He was eating asparagus, and it is not easy to eat asparagus and verify diagrams at the same time.

"Silvio," he said, mildly, "may one ask whether it is true that you have fallen in love?"

Silvio started, and looked at his father with amazement. Then he recovered himself.

"One may ask it, certainly," he replied, "but—"

"But one should not ask indiscreet questions, eh?" continued the professor. "Well, falling in love is a disease like any other—infectious in the first stage—after that, contagious—decidedly contagious."

Silvio laughed a little nervously. "And in the last stage?" he asked.

"Oh, in the last stage one—peels. H one does not, the affair is serious. I met Giacomelli yesterday—your *maestro*. He said to me: 'Senator, our excellent Silvio is in love. I am convinced that he is in love. It is a thousand pities; because, when one is in love, one is apt to take false measurements; and for an engineer to take false measurements is a bad thing!' That is what Giacomelli said to me in Piazza Colonna yesterday afternoon."

Silvio looked evidently relieved.

"And may one ask whom I am supposed to be in love with?" he demanded.

"As to that," observed the professor, dryly, "you probably know best. All that I would suggest is, that you do not allow the malady to become too far advanced in the second stage—unless"—and here he glanced at Giacinta—"well, unless you are quite sure that you will peel." And with a quiet chuckle he turned to his diagrams again.

Silvio caught his sister's eyes fixed upon him. Giacinta had perhaps not entirely understood her father's metaphors, but it was very clear to her that others had noticed the change she had observed in Silvio. He had evidently been less attentive to his work than was his wont; and the eminent engineer under whom he had studied and made a name for himself, becoming aware of the fact, had unconsciously divined the true cause of it. The Commendatore Giacomelli had doubtless spoken in jest to the father of his favorite pupil, thinking that a parental hint might be useful in helping Silvio to return to his former diligence. Giacinta knew her father's good-natured cynicism well enough, and felt certain that, though treating the matter as a joke, he had intended to let Silvio know that his superiors had noticed some falling off in his work.

But Giacinta was, unfortunately, only too sure that the right nail had been hit on the head, even if the blow had fallen accidentally. She did not feel uneasy lest her father should discover the fact, nor, if he did so, that he would make any efforts to discover the quarter in which Silvio's affections were engaged. The professor lived a life very much of his own, and his nature was a singularly detached one. His attitude towards the world was that of a quiet and not inappreciative spectator of a high comedy. His interests were centred in the stage, and also in the stage-machinery, and he was always ready to be amused or to sympathize as the case might be, in the passing scenes which that complex machinery produced. Giacinta often wondered whether her father ever thought of the possibility of her marriage, or ever considered that her position as an only daughter was somewhat a lonely one. He had never made the faintest allusion to the subject to her; but she was sure that if she were suddenly to announce to him that she was going to marry, he would receive the information placidly enough, and, when once he had satisfied himself that she had chosen wisely, would think no more about the matter. And it would be the same thing as far as Silvio was concerned—only, in Silvio's case, if Donna Bianca Acorari were the object on which he had set his affections, Giacinta was certain that the professor would not consider the choice a wise one. He had a great dislike to anything in the nature of social unpleasantness, as have many clever people who live in a detached atmosphere of their own. In print, or in a lecture-room, he could hit hard enough, and appeared to be utterly indifferent as to how many enemies he made, or how many pet theories he exploded by a logic which was at times irritatingly humorous and at times severely caustic. But, apart from his pen and his conferences, the Senator Rossano was merely a placid individual, slightly past middle age, with a beard inclining to gray, and a broad, intellectual forehead from under which a pair of keen, brown eyes looked upon life good-naturedly enough. Perhaps the greatest charm about Professor Rossano was his genuine simplicity—the simplicity which is occasionally, but by no means always, the accompaniment of

intellectual power, and the possession of which usually denotes that power to be of a very high order. This simplicity deceived others not infrequently, but it never deceived him; on the contrary, it was perpetually adding to his knowledge, scientific and otherwise.

Both Professor Rossano's children had inherited something of their father's nature, but Silvio had inherited it in a more complex way, perhaps, than his sister. In him the scientific tendency had shown itself in the more practical form of a love for the purely mechanical and utilitarian. Nevertheless, he had the same detached nature, the same facility for regarding life from the objective point of view, as his father, and the same good-humored if slightly cynical disposition. Of the two, Giacinta was probably the more completely practical, and had, perhaps, the harder disposition. Nor was this unnatural; for their mother had died when Silvio was a child between five and six years old, and Giacinta, being then nearly eight, had speedily acquired a certain sense of responsibility, which, owing to the professor's absorption in his scientific researches, largely increased as time went on. But Giacinta, also, had her full share of good-nature and sympathy, though she was incapable of, as it were, holding herself mentally aloof from the world around her as did her father and, to a certain degree, her brother.

Breakfast over, Professor Rossano soon retired again to the correction of his proofs, leaving Giacinta and Silvio alone together. For a short time neither of them spoke, and Silvio apparently devoted his whole attention to the proper roasting of the end of a "Verginia" cigar in the flame of a candle. Giacinta meditated on the possible contents of the piece of paper that she felt positive was still lying in a crumpled condition in her brother's pocket, and wondered what particular part the lady who had passed them on the staircase might be playing in the business—though she had already made a very natural guess at it. She would have given a good deal to know whether the note—or the memorandum, as Silvio had called it, with a possibly unconscious humor that had made Giacinta smile—was written by Bianca Acorari herself or by the quietly dressed young person who was, no doubt, Bianca's daily governess. If it were from Donna Bianca, then things must have advanced to what the professor would have termed the contagious stage—only Giacinta did not employ that simile, its suggestiveness having escaped her—which would be a decidedly serious affair. If, however, as was far more probable, the missive came from the governess, who had been disappointed of the expected opportunity to give it to Silvio unobserved, and so had dropped it for him to pick up, the matter was serious, too, but not so serious. If Silvio had won over the governess to aid him in furthering his plans, Giacinta thought that she, too, might manage to do a little corrupting on her own account with the same individual. It did not immediately strike her that Silvio's sex, as well as his particularly attractive face and personality, might have removed many diffi-

culties out of his path in dealing with the demure-looking female who devoted three hours a day to the improvement of Donna Bianca's education.

Presently, Giacinta became restive under the prolonged silence which followed the professor's departure from the room.

"You see, Silvio," she observed, as though she were merely continuing an interrupted conversation, "it is not only I who notice that you have had your head in the clouds lately—oh, ever since Christmas. And first of all, people will say: 'He is in love'—as Giacomelli said to papa yesterday; and then they will begin to ask: 'Who is the girl?' And then, very soon, some busybody will find out. It is always like that. And then—"

"Yes, Giacinta—and then?" repeated Silvio.

"I will tell you!" returned Giacinta, decidedly. "Then that priest, Monsieur l'Abbé Roux, as they call him, will be sent by the princess to see papa, and there will be well, a terrible *disturbo*—"

"The Abbé Roux can go to hell," observed Silvio.

"Afterwards—yes, perhaps. Papa has several times given him a similar permission. But in the mean time he will make matters exceedingly unpleasant. After all, Silvio," Giacinta continued, "let us be reasonable. The girl is an heiress—a princess in her own right, and we—we are not noble. You know what the world would say."

Silvio Rossano glanced at her.

"We are Romans," he said, "of a family as old as the Acorari themselves. It is true that we are not noble. Perhaps, when we look at some of those who are, it is as well! But we are not poor, either, Giacinta—not so poor as to have to be fed by rich American and English adventurers at the Grand Hôtel, like some of your nobles."

Giacinta shrugged her shoulders. "Donna Bianca Acorari is of that class," she said, quietly.

Silvio instantly flew into a rage. "That is so like a woman!" he retorted. "Do you suppose I meant to imply that all our nobles are like that? Each class has its *canaglia*, and the pity of it is that the foreigners as a rule see more of our *canaglia* than they do of the rest, and judge us accordingly. As to Donna Bianca Acorari, we can leave her name out of the discussion—"

Giacinta laughed. "Scarcely," she said; "but, Silvio *mio*, you must not be angry. You know that I do not care at all whether people are noble by birth or whether they are not. All the same, I think you are preparing for yourself a great deal of mortification; and for that girl, if you make her care for you, a great deal of unhappiness. You see how she is isolated. Does anybody, even of their own world, ever come to visit the princess and Donna Bianca? A few old women come occasionally, and a few priests—but that is all. Who or what the girl is

being kept for I do not know—but it is certainly not for marriage with one not of her condition. Besides, except as her *fidanzato*, what opportunity could you have, or ever hope to have, of seeing her or of knowing what her feelings might be towards you?"

"And if I know them already?" burst out Silvio.

Giacinta looked grave.

"If you know them already," she said, "it means—well, it means that somebody has been behaving like an idiot."

"I, for instance!" exclaimed Silvio.

"Certainly, you—before anybody, you. Afterwards—"

"Afterwards—?"

"The woman who dropped the note that you have in your pocket."

"Giacinta!"

"Oh, I am not an imbecile, you know, Silvio. You were waiting for that woman to come away from her morning's lessons with Bianca, and I do not suppose it is the first time that you have waited for her—and—and, what is to be the end of it all, Heaven only knows," concluded Giacinta. It was a weak conclusion, and she was fully aware of the fact; but a look on Silvio's face warned her that she had said enough for the moment.

He took his cigar from his lips and threw it out of the open window. Then, rising from his chair, he came and stood by his sister.

"I will tell you the end of it," he said, very quietly—and his eyes seemed to send forth little flashes of light as he spoke. "The end of it will be that I will marry Bianca Acorari. You quite understand, Giacinta? Noble or not, heiress or not, I will marry her, and she will marry me."

"But, Silvio—it is impossible—it is a madness—"

"*Basta*! I say that I will marry her. Have I failed yet in anything that I have set myself to do, Giacinta? But you," he added, in a sterner voice than Giacinta had ever heard from him—"you will keep silence. You will know nothing, see nothing. If the time comes when I need your help, I will come to you and ask you to give it me, as I would give it you."

Giacinta was silent for a moment. Then she plucked up her courage to make one more effort to stem the current of a passion that she felt would carry Silvio away with it, she knew not whither.

"But the girl," she said, "she is almost a child still, Silvio. Have you thought what unhappiness you may bring upon her if—if the princess, and that priest who, they say, manages all her affairs, should prove too strong for you? You do not know; they might put her in a convent—anywhere—to get her away from you."

Silvio Rossano swore under his breath.

"*Basta*, Giacinta!" he exclaimed again. "I say that I will marry her."

And then, before Giacinta had time to reply, he suddenly kissed her and went quickly out of the room.

V

Giacinto Rossano was quite mistaken in supposing the piece of paper she had seen her brother thrust into his pocket to have been still there when he returned to her after its pretended restoration to its rightful owner. As a matter of fact, a capricious April breeze was blowing its scattered remnants about the court-yard of Palazzo Acorari, for Silvio had torn it into little shreds so soon as he had read the words written upon it.

She had been perfectly correct, however, in her other suppositions, for since Silvio had first beheld Donna Bianca in the church of the Sudario on Christmas night, he had certainly not wasted his time. He had been, it is true, considerably dismayed at learning from Giacinta who the girl was who had so immediate and so powerful an attraction for him. Had she been almost anything else than what she was, he thought to himself impatiently, the situation would have been a far simpler one; but between him and the heiress and last remaining representative of the Acorari, princes of Montefiano, there was assuredly a great gulf fixed, not in rank only, but in traditional prejudices of caste, in politics—even, it might be said, in religion—since Bianca Acorari no doubt implicitly believed all that the Church proposed to be believed, while he, like most educated laymen, believed—considerably less.

Perhaps the very difficulties besetting his path made Silvio Rossano the more determined to conquer them and tread that path to the end. What he had said of himself to his sister, not in any spirit of conceit, but rather in the confident assurance which his youth and ardent temperament gave him, was true. When he had set his mind on success, he had always gained it in the end; and why should he not gain it now?

After all, there were things in his favor. Although he might not be of noble blood, his family was a good and an old one. There had been Rossano in Rome before a peasant of the name of Borghese became a pope and turned his relations into princes. One of these early Rossano, indeed, had been a cardinal. But, unluckily for the family, he had also been a conscientious priest and an honest

man—a combination rarely to be met with in the Sacred College of those days.

But there were other things to which Silvio attached more weight—things of the present which must ever appeal to youth more than those of the past. His father was a distinguished man; and he himself might have—nay, would have—a distinguished career before him. Money, too, was not wanting to him. The professor was not a rich man; but he had considerably more capital to divide between his two children than many people possessed who drove up and down the Corso with coronets on their carriages, while their creditors saluted them from the pavements.

And there were yet other things which Silvio, reflecting upon the wares he had to go to market with, thought he might fairly take into account, details such as good character, good health, and—well, for some reason or other, women had never looked unfavorably upon him, though he had hitherto been singularly indifferent as to whether they did so or not. Something—the professor would no doubt have found a scientific explanation of a radio-active nature for it—told him, even in that instant when he first met her glance, that Bianca Acorari did not find him *antipatico*. He wondered very much how far he had been able to convey to her his impressions as regarded herself.

In an incredibly short space of time it had become absolutely necessary to him to satisfy his curiosity on this point—hence that sudden desire to attend the early masses at Santa Maria in Campitelli, which had done more than anything else to arouse Giacinta's suspicions.

For some weeks, however, Silvio had been absolutely foiled in his attempts again to find himself near Bianca Acorari. He had very quickly realized that any efforts on his sister's part to improve her acquaintance with the girl would be detrimental rather than the reverse to his own objects, and he had, consequently, soon ceased to urge Giacinta to make them. But Silvio Rossano had not spent several years of his boyhood in drawing plans and making calculations for nothing; and he had set himself to think out the situation in much the same spirit as that in which he would have grappled with a professional problem demanding accurate solution.

Occasionally he had caught glimpses of Bianca as she went out driving with the princess, and once or twice he had seen her walking in the early morning, accompanied by the same woman who had been with her in the Sudario. It had been impossible, of course, for him to venture to salute her, even if he had not fancied that her companion eyed him sharply, as though suspecting that his proximity was not merely accidental.

Bettina was probably unconscious that she had been more than once the subject of a searching study on the part of the *signorino* of the second floor, as she called him. But the results of the study were negative, for Silvio had in-

stinctively felt that any attempt to suborn Donna Bianca's maid would almost certainly prove disastrous. The woman was not young enough to be romantic, he thought, with some shrewdness, nor old enough to be avaricious.

And so he had found himself obliged to discover a weaker point in the defences of Casa Acorari, and this time fortune favored him; though in those calmer moments, when scruples of conscience are apt to become so tiresome, he felt somewhat ashamed of himself for taking advantage of it.

It had not escaped Silvio's notice that punctually at nine o'clock every morning a neatly dressed Frenchwoman entered Palazzo Acorari, and was admitted into the princess's apartment, and the porter informed him that she was the *principessina's* governess, who came from nine o'clock till twelve every day, excepting Sundays and the great *feste*.

Silvio studied Donna Bianca's governess as he had studied her maid. Mademoiselle Durand was certainly much younger than the latter, and better looking. Moreover, unlike Bettina, she did not look at Silvio witheringly when she happened to meet him in or near Palazzo Acorari, but perhaps a little the reverse. At any rate, after a few mornings on which bows only were exchanged between them, Silvio felt that he might venture to remark on the beauty of the spring weather. He spoke French fluently, though with the usual unmistakable Italian accent, and his overtures were well received.

Mademoiselle Durand smiled pleasantly. "Monsieur lived in Palazzo Acorari, did he not? A son of the famous Professor Rossano? Ah, yes—she had heard him lecture at the Collegio Romano. But perhaps it would be as well not to say so to Madame la Princesse. Madame la Princesse did not approve of science"—and Mademoiselle Durand looked at him, smiling again. Then she colored a little, for her glance had been one of obvious admiration, though Silvio, full of his own thoughts, was not aware of it.

After that, the ice once broken, it had been an easy matter to become fairly intimate with Donna Bianca's instructress. Knowing the precise hour at which she was accustomed to leave Palazzo Acorari, Silvio frequently managed to meet her as she crossed the Piazza Campitelli on her way back to her abode in the Via d'Ara Coeli, where she occupied a couple of rooms over a small curiosity shop.

Fortunately, probably, for Silvio, Mademoiselle Durand very soon discovered that it was due to no special interest in herself if this good-looking young Roman sought her acquaintance. It had scarcely struck him that his advances might easily be misinterpreted; and, indeed, for the space of a few days there had been not a little danger of this misinterpretation actually occurring. The shrewdness of her race, however, had prevented Mademoiselle Durand from deceiving herself; and Silvio's questions, which he flattered himself were triumphs of subtle diplomacy, speedily revealed to her how and where the land lay.

On the whole, the thought of lending herself to a little intrigue rather commended itself to the Frenchwoman. Life in Rome was not very amusing, and to be the confidante in a love-affair, and especially in such an apparently hopeless love-affair, would add an interest to it. Perhaps a little of the sentimentality, the existence of which in Bettina Silvio had doubted, entered into the matter. Mademoiselle Durand liked her pupil, and had always secretly pitied her for the dulness and isolation of her life; and as for Silvio—well, when he looked at her with his soft Roman eyes, and seemed to be throwing himself upon her generosity and compassion, Mademoiselle Durand felt that she would do anything in the world he asked her to do. The Princess of Montefiano she regarded as a mere machine in the hands of the Abbé Roux. Though she had only been a few moments in her present position, Mademoiselle Durand had fully realized that the Abbé Roux was master in the Montefiano establishment; and, though she had been highly recommended to the princess by most pious people, she entertained a cordial dislike to priests except in church, where, she averred, they were necessary to the business, and no doubt useful enough.

"It is Monsieur l'Abbé of whom you must beware," she insisted to Silvio, after she was in full possession of his secret. "The princess is an imbecile—so engaged in trying to secure a good place in the next world that she has made herself a nonentity in this. No—it is of the priest you must think. I do not suppose it would suit him that Donna Bianca should marry."

"Does he want to put her in a convent, then?" asked Silvio, angrily, on hearing this remark.

"But no, Monsieur Silvio! Convents are like husbands—they want a dowry." She looked at Silvio sharply as she spoke, but it was clear to her that he was quite unconscious of any possible allusion to himself in her words.

"It is true, mademoiselle," he answered, thoughtfully. "I forgot that. It is a very unlucky thing that Donna Bianca Acorari has not half a dozen brothers and as many sisters; for then she would have very little money, I should imagine, and no titles."

Mademoiselle Durand hesitated for a moment. Then she looked at him again, and this time her black eyes no longer had the same shrewd, suspicious expression.

"*Tiens!*" she muttered to herself; and then she said, aloud: "And what do you want me to do for you, Monsieur Silvio? You have not confided in me for nothing—*hein*? Am I to take your proposals for Donna Bianca's hand to Madame la Princesse? It seems to me that monsieur your father is the fit and proper person to send on such an errand, and not a poor governess."

"*Per Carità!*" exclaimed Silvio, relapsing in his alarm into his native tongue. "Of course I do not mean that, mademoiselle. I thought perhaps—that is to say, I

hoped—"

He looked so disconcerted that Mademoiselle Durand laughed outright.

"No, *mon ami*," she replied. "I may call you that, Monsieur Silvio, may I not, since conspirators should be friends? I promise you I will not give your secret away. All the same, unless I am mistaken, there is one person to whom you wish me to confide it—is it not so?"

"Yes," replied Silvio; "there is certainly one person."

"But it will not be easy," continued Mademoiselle Durand, "and it will take time. Yes," she added, as though to herself—"it will be fairly amusing to outwit Monsieur l'Abbé—only—only—" and then she paused, hesitatingly.

"Only?" repeated Silvio, interrogatively.

"*Ma foi*, monsieur, only this," exclaimed his companion, energetically, "that I like the child, and I do not wish any harm to come to her through me. Have you thought well, Monsieur Silvio? You say that you love her, and that she can learn to love you; you will marry her if she be twenty times Princess of Montefiano. Well, I believe that you love her; and if a good countenance is any proof of a good heart, your love should be worth having. But if you make her love you, and are not strong enough to break down the barriers which will be raised to prevent her from marrying you, will you not be bringing on her a greater unhappiness than if you left her to her natural destiny?"

Silvio was silent for a moment. Was this not what Giacinta had said to him more than once? Then a dogged expression came over his face—his eyes seemed to harden suddenly, and his lips compressed themselves.

"Her destiny is to be my wife," he said, briefly.

Mademoiselle Durand shot a quick glance of approval at him.

"*Diable!*" she exclaimed, "but you Romans have wills of your own even in these days, it seems. And suppose the girl never learns to care for you—how then, Monsieur Silvio? Will you carry her off as your ancestors did the Sabine women?"

Silvio shrugged his shoulders. "She will learn to care for me," he said, "if she is properly taught."

Mademoiselle Durand laughed. "*Tiens!*" she murmured again. "And I am to give her a little rudimentary instruction—to prepare her, in short, for more advanced knowledge? Oh, la, la! Monsieur Silvio, you must know that such things do not come within the province of a daily governess."

"But you see her for three hours every day," returned Silvio, earnestly. "In three hours one can do a great deal," he continued.

"A great deal too much sometimes!" interrupted Mademoiselle Durand rapidly, under her breath.

"And when it is day after day," proceeded Silvio, "it is much easier. A word

here, and a word there, and she would soon learn that there is somebody who loves her—somebody who would make her a better husband than some brainless idiot of her own class, who will only want her money and her lands. And then, perhaps, if we could meet—if she could hear it all from my lips, she would understand."

Mademoiselle Durand gave a quick little sigh. "Oh," she said, "if she could learn it all from your lips, I have no doubt that she would understand very quickly. Most women would, Monsieur Silvio."

"That is what I thought," observed Silvio, naïvely.

The Frenchwoman tapped her foot impatiently on the ground.

"Well," she said, after a pause, "I will see what I can do. But you must be patient. Only, do not blame me if things go wrong—for they are scarcely likely to go right, I should say. For me it does not matter. I came to Rome to learn Italian and to teach French—and other things. I have done both; and in any case, when my engagement with Madame la Princesse is over, I shall return to Paris, and then perhaps go to London or Petersburg—who knows? So if my present engagement were to end somewhat abruptly, I should be little the worse. Yes—I will help you, *mon ami*—if I can. Oh, not for money—I am not of that sort—but for—well, for other things."

"What other things?" asked Silvio, absently.

Mademoiselle Durand fairly stamped her foot this time.

"*Peste!*" she exclaimed, sharply. "What do they matter—the other things? Let us say that I want to play a trick on the princess; to spite the priest—by-the-way, Monsieur l'Abbé sometimes looks at me in a way that I am sure you never look at women, Monsieur Silvio! Let us say that I am sorry for that poor child, who will lead a stagnant existence till she is a dried-up old maid, unless somebody rescues her. All these things are true, and are they not reasons enough?"

And Silvio was quite satisfied that they were so.

VI

Bianca Acorari was sitting by herself in the room devoted to her own especial use, where she studied in the mornings with Mademoiselle Durand, and, indeed, spent most of her time. It was now the beginning of June—the moment in all the year, perhaps, when Rome is the most enjoyable; when the hotels are empty, and

the foreigners have fled before the imaginary spectres of heat, malaria, and other evils to which those who remain in the city during the late spring and summer are popularly supposed to fall victims.

Entertainments, except those of an intimate character, being at an end, the American invasion has rolled northward. The gaunt English spinsters, severe of aspect, and with preposterous feet, who have spent the winter in the environs of the Piazza di Spagna with the double object of improving their minds and converting some of the "poor, ignorant Roman Catholics" to Protestantism, have gone northward too, to make merriment for the inhabitants of Perugia, or Sienna, of Venice, and a hundred other hunting-grounds. Only the German tourists remain, carrying with them the atmosphere of the *bierhalle* wherever they go, and generally behaving themselves as though Italy were a province of the fatherland. In the summer months Rome is her true self, and those who know her not then know her not at all.

To Bianca Acorari, however, all seasons of the year were much the same, excepting the three months or so that she passed in the villa near Velletri. To these months she looked forward with delight. The dull routine of her life in Rome was interrupted, and any variety was something in the nature of an excitement. It was pleasanter to be able to wander about the gardens and vineyards belonging to the villa than to drive about Rome in a closed carriage, waiting perhaps for an hour or more outside some convent or charitable institution while her stepmother was engaged in pious works. At the Villa Acorari, she could at all events walk about by herself, so long as she did not leave its grounds. But these grounds were tolerably extensive, and there were many quiet nooks whither Bianca was wont to resort and dream over what might be going on in that world around her, of which she supposed it must be the natural lot of princesses to know very little. The absence of perpetual supervision, the sense of being free to be alone out-of-doors if she chose to be so, was a luxury all the more enjoyable after eight months spent in Palazzo Acorari.

But within the last few weeks Bianca Acorari had become vaguely conscious of the presence of something fresh in her life, something as yet indefinable, but around which her thoughts, hitherto purely abstract, seemed to concentrate themselves. The world was no longer quite the unknown realm peopled with shadows that it had till recently appeared to her to be. It held individuals; individuals in whom she could take an interest, and who, if she was to believe what she was told, took an interest in her. That it was a forbidden interest—a thing to be talked about with bated breath, and that only to one discreet and sympathizing friend, did not by any means diminish its fascination.

It had spoken well for Mademoiselle Durand's capabilities of reading the characters of her pupils that she had at once realized that what Bianca Acorari

lacked in her life was human sympathy. This the girl had never experienced; but, all the same, it was evident to any one who, like Mademoiselle Durand, had taken the trouble to study her nature, that she was unconsciously crying out for it. There was, indeed, not a person about her with whom she had anything in common. The princess, wrapped up in her religion and in her anxiety to keep her own soul in a proper state of polish, was an egoist, as people perpetually bent upon laying up for themselves treasure in heaven usually are. And Bianca practically had no other companion than her stepmother except servants, for the few people she occasionally saw at rare intervals did not enter in the smallest degree into her life.

Mademoiselle Durand had very soon discovered Bianca's desire to know the girl who lived in the apartment above her, and her annoyance that she had not been allowed to make any acquaintance with the Signorina Rossano. This very natural wish on her pupil's part to make friends with some one of her own sex, and more nearly approaching her own age than the people by whom she was surrounded, had afforded Mademoiselle Durand the very opening she required in order to commence her campaign in Silvio Rossano's interests. As she had anticipated, it had proved no difficult matter to sing the praises of the brother while apparently conversing with Bianca about the sister, and it must be confessed that she sang Silvio's praises in a manner by no means half-hearted. Nor did Mademoiselle Durand find that her efforts fell upon altogether unwilling ears. It was evident that in some way or another Bianca's curiosity had been already aroused, and that she was not altogether ignorant of the fact that the heretical professor's good-looking son regarded her with some interest.

Mademoiselle Durand, indeed, was somewhat surprised at the readiness displayed by her pupil to discuss not only Giacinta, but also Giacinta's brother, and she at first suspected that things were a little further advanced than Silvio had pretended to be the case.

She soon came to the conclusion, however, that this was not so, and that Bianca's curiosity was at present the only feeling which had been aroused in her.

Mademoiselle Durand was not particularly well-read in her Bible; but she did remember that curiosity in woman had, from the very beginning of things, been gratified by man, and also that the action of a third party had before now been necessary in order to bring the desired object within the reach of both. She was aware that the action of the third party had not been regarded as commendable; nevertheless, she quieted any qualms of conscience by the thought that, after all, circumstances in this case were somewhat different.

On this particular June afternoon Bianca Acorari was free to amuse herself in-doors as she chose until five o'clock, at which hour the princess had ordered the carriage, and Bianca would have to accompany her to visit an orphanage

outside the Porta Pia. She was not at all sorry for those orphans. An orphan herself, she had always thought their life must be certainly more amusing than her own, and she had once ventured to hint as much, to the manifest annoyance of her step-mother, who had reproved her for want of charity.

The afternoon was warm, and Bianca, tired of reading, and still more tired of a certain piece of embroidery destined to serve as an altar-frontal for a convent-chapel, sat dreaming in the subdued light coming through closed *persiennes*. Through the open windows she could hear the distant noise of the traffic in the streets, the monotonous cry of *Fragole! Fragole!* of the hawkers of fresh strawberries from Nemi and the Alban Hills, and now and again the clock of some neighboring church striking the quarters of the hour.

In a little more than a fortnight, Bianca was saying to herself with satisfaction—when St. Peter's day was over, before which festival the princess would never dream of leaving Rome—she would be at the Villa Acorari, away from the dust and the glare of the city, passing those hot hours of the day in the deep, cool shade of the old ilex-trees, and listening to the murmur of the moss-grown fountains in the quiet grounds, half garden and half wilderness, that surrounded the house.

The view from the ilex avenue seemed to unfold itself before her—the vine-clad ridges melting away into the plain beneath, Cori, Norma, and Sermoneta just visible, perched on the distant mountain-sides away towards the south; and, rising out of the blue mist, with the sea flashing in the sunlight around it, Monte Circeo, the scene of so many mysterious legends both in the past and in the present. Far away over the Campagna the hot summer haze quivered over Rome. Bianca could see it all in her imagination as she sat with her hands clasped behind her tawny mass of curling hair; though, in reality, her eyes were fastened upon an indifferent painting of a Holy Family, in which St. Joseph appeared more conscious than usual of being *de trop*.

The three hours of studies with Mademoiselle Durand that morning had been frequently interrupted by conversation. Of late, indeed, this had often been the case. Bianca had been delighted when she learned that Mademoiselle Durand was intimate with the Rossano family, and the governess had not thought it necessary to explain that Silvio was the only member of it with whom she was on speaking terms.

The fact was that Silvio had been becoming impatient lately, and Mademoiselle Durand's task grew more difficult in consequence. To afford him any opportunity of meeting Bianca, or of interchanging even a single word with her, appeared to be impossible. The girl was too well guarded. Mademoiselle Durand had once suggested to her that she should take her some morning to the galleries in the Vatican which Bianca had never seen. The princess's permission had, of

course, to be obtained, and Bianca broached the subject one day at breakfast. For a moment her step-mother had hesitated, and seemed disposed to allow her to accept Mademoiselle Durand's proposition. Unfortunately, however, Monsieur l'Abbé was present, and, true to her practice, the princess appealed to him as to whether there could be any objections.

Apparently there were objections, although the Abbé Roux did not specify them. But Bianca knew by his manner that he disapproved of the idea, and was not surprised, therefore, when the princess said it could not be—adding that she would herself take her through the Vatican some day.

It was but another instance, Bianca thought, of the priest's interference in her life, and she resented it accordingly. Latterly she had become much more friendly with Mademoiselle Durand, who had at first confined herself almost entirely to lessons during the hours she was at Palazzo Acorari.

Nevertheless, after it became evident that she would never be allowed to go out under her escort, Bianca thought it prudent not to let it be supposed that Mademoiselle Durand talked with her on any other subject but those she was engaged to talk about, lest she should be dismissed and a less agreeable woman take her place.

Whether it was that Mademoiselle Durand was urged to stronger efforts by Silvio Rossano's increasing impatience, or whether she considered the time arrived when she could safely venture to convey to her pupil that Giacinta Rossano's good-looking brother was madly in love with her, the fact remained on this particular morning that never before had she spoken so much or so openly of Silvio, and of the happiness that was in store for any girl sensible enough to marry him.

Bianca Acorari sat listening in silence for some time.

"He is certainly very handsome," she observed, presently—"and he looks good," she added, meditatively.

"Handsome!" ejaculated Mademoiselle Durand. "There is a statue in the Vatican—a Hermes, they call it— Well, never mind—of course he is handsome. And as to being good, a young man who is a good son and a good brother makes a good husband—if he gets the wife he wants. If not, it does not follow. I am sorry for that poor boy—truly sorry for him!" she added, with a sigh.

Bianca pushed away a French history book and became suddenly more interested.

"Why, mademoiselle?" she asked.

Mademoiselle Durand pursed up her lips.

"Because I fear that he will certainly be very unhappy. *Enfin*, he *is* very unhappy, so there is no more to be said."

"He did not look it when I saw him," observed Bianca, tranquilly.

Mademoiselle Durand glanced at her. Like Princess Montefiano, she was never quite sure how much might be concealed beneath Bianca's quiet manner. But, like most of her race, she was quick to seize a point in conversation and use it to advance her own argument.

"Of course he did not look it—when you saw him," she repeated, "or when he saw you," she added, significantly.

Bianca knitted her brows. "If he is unhappy," she said, "and I am very sorry he should be unhappy—I do not see how a person he does not know can make him less so."

"That," said Mademoiselle Durand, "all depends on who the person is. It is certainly very sad—poor young man!" and she sighed again.

"I suppose," Bianca said, thoughtfully, "that he is in love with somebody—somebody whom he cannot marry."

"Yes," returned Mademoiselle Durand, dryly, "he is in love with somebody. He could marry her, perhaps—"

"Then why doesn't he?" Bianca asked, practically.

Mademoiselle Durand was a little taken aback at the abruptness of the question.

"I will tell you," she replied, after hesitating for a moment or two. "He has no opportunity of seeing the girl, except sometimes as she is driving in her carriage, or well, in church. By-the-way, I believe he first saw her in a church, and fell in love with her. That was odd, was it not? But what is the use of seeing people if you can never speak to them?"

"He could speak to her parents," said Bianca, who apparently knew what was proper under such circumstances.

Mademoiselle Durand shrugged her shoulders.

"Scarcely," she said, "since they are in heaven. Besides, he would not be allowed to ask for this girl's hand in any case. She is like you, of noble birth; and, like you again, she is rich. Those about her, I dare say, are not very anxious that she should marry at all. It is possible."

Bianca Acorari did not speak for a few moments. At length she said, slowly: "I wonder what you would do, mademoiselle, if you knew somebody was in love with you, and you were not allowed to see or speak to that person?"

Mademoiselle Durand looked at her critically.

"It entirely depends," she replied.

"And upon what?"

"Upon what? Oh, upon something very simple. It would depend upon whether I were in love with him."

"I don't think it is at all simple," observed Bianca. "How would you know if you were in love with him or not?"

Mademoiselle Durand laughed outright. Then she became suddenly grave. "Well," she replied, after hesitating a moment, "I will tell you. If I thought I did not know—if I were not sure—I should say to myself: 'Marie, you are in love. Why? Because, if you are not, you would be sure of the fact—oh, quite sure!'"

"And supposing you were in love with him?" demanded Bianca. She looked beyond Mademoiselle Durand as she spoke.

"Ah—if I were, then—well, then I should leave the rest to him to manage. Between ourselves, I believe that to be what is troubling the poor young Rossano. He does not know if the girl he loves has any idea that he does so, and still less if she could ever return his love. It is very sad. If I were that girl, I should certainly find some means of letting him know that I cared for him—"

"But you say she cannot—that she would never be allowed—"

Mademoiselle Durand sang the first few bars of the *habanera* in "Carmen" to herself. "When two people are in love," she observed, "they do not always stop to think of what is allowed. But, if you please, Donna Bianca, we will go on with our history—I mean, our French history, not that of Monsieur Silvio Rossano," and Mademoiselle Durand suddenly reassumed her professional demeanor.

It was of this little interlude in her morning's studies that Bianca Acorari was meditating as she sat waiting for the hour when she would have to accompany her step-mother in her afternoon drive. She wished that Mademoiselle Durand would have been more communicative. It was certainly interesting to hear about Giacinta Rossano's brother. Silvio! Yes, it was a nice name, decidedly—and somehow, she thought, it suited its owner. It must be an odd sensation—that of being in love. Perhaps one always saw in the imagination the person one was in love with. One saw a well-built figure and a sun-tanned face with dark, curling hair clustering over a broad brow, and a pair of dark-blue eyes that looked—but, how they looked! as though asking a perpetual question.... How pleasant it would be there in the gardens of Villa Acorari!—so quiet and cool in the deep shade of the ilex-trees, with the sound of the water falling from the fountains. But it was a little dull to be alone—always alone. What a difference if she had had a brother, as Giacinta Rossano had. He would have wandered about with her sometimes, perhaps, in these gardens ... and he and she would have sat and talked together by the fountains where the water was always making a soft music of its own. What was the story she had heard the people tell of some heathen god of long ago who haunted the ilex grove? How still it was—and how the water murmured always ... and the eyes looked at her, always with that question in their blue depths—and the graceful head with its short, close curls bent towards her ... the god, of course—they said he often came—and how his sweet curved lips smiled at her as he stood in that chequered ray of sunlight slanting through the heavy foliage overhead....

And with a little sigh Bianca passed from dreaming into sleep; her face, with its crown of tawny gold hair, thrown into sharp relief by the red damask cushions of the chair on which she was sitting, and her lips parted in a slight smile.

VII

"Bianca is certainly a strange child," the Princess Montefiano was saying. "I confess I do not understand her; but then, I never did understand children."

Baron d'Antin looked at his sister, and then he smiled a little satirically.

"After all," he replied, "the fact is not surprising. You married too late in your life—or, shall we say, too late in your husband's life—but it does not matter! No, Bianca is decidedly not like other girls of her age, in certain ways. But I think, Jeanne, that you make a mistake in regarding her as a child. She seems to me to be a fairly well-developed young woman."

"Physically so, perhaps," returned the princess.

Her brother smiled again—not a very pleasant smile. Monsieur d'Antin was scarcely middle-aged, being a good many years younger than his sister. He was tall for a Belgian, and tolerably handsome, with well-cut, regular features, and iron-gray hair as yet fairly plentiful. But he was a man who looked as though he had "lived." His eyes had a worn, faded expression, which every now and then turned to a hard glitter when they became animated; and his small, well-shaped hands were apt to move restlessly, as though their owner's nerves were not always in the best of order.

"Physically?" he repeated. "Precisely, my dear Jeanne. Physically, your step-daughter is—well, no longer a child, we will suppose. Some young man will probably suppose the same thing one of these days; and he will presumably not wish to confine himself to suppositions," and Monsieur d'Antin blinked his eyes interrogatively at his sister.

During the last couple of years, Baron d'Antin had abandoned Brussels and Paris, where he had hitherto passed the greater part of his time, for Rome. He had certainly not chosen Rome as a place of residence on account of its worldly attractions, and its other claims to interest did not particularly appeal to him. As a matter of fact, Monsieur d'Antin found Rome exceedingly dull, as a city. It is, indeed, scarcely the capital that a man of pleasure would elect to live in. Now

Monsieur d'Antin had certainly been a man of pleasure while his constitution and years had allowed him to be so, and he still liked amusing himself and being amused. Unfortunately, however, when necessity obliged him to pursue other pastimes with greater moderation, he had given way more and more to a passion for gambling, and he had left the larger portion of his patrimony in clubs, both in his own capital, in Paris, and in Nice. It was not unnatural, perhaps, that, on financial disaster overtaking him, he should have remembered his sister, the Princess of Montefiano, and have been seized with a desire to pass a season or two in Rome; and it had never, somehow or other, been quite convenient to return to Belgium or to Paris since.

He had come to Rome, he told his acquaintances, to economize; which, in plainer language, meant to say that he had come there to live upon his sister. The princess, indeed, was not unconscious of the fact; but her brother carried out his intention with such unfailing tact and consideration that she had no excuse for resenting it.

Monsieur d'Antin did not often invade the austere seclusion of Palazzo Acorari. It would, no doubt, have been more economical to breakfast and dine at his sister's table, when not bidden elsewhere, than to eat at a restaurant or club. But Monsieur d'Antin liked to be independent; and, moreover, the pious atmosphere of Palazzo Acorari did not at all appeal to him.

His sister bored him, and her entourage bored him still more. It was infinitely more convenient every now and then to borrow sums of money from her to meet current expenses, on the tacit understanding that such loans would never be repaid, than to take up his abode in Palazzo Acorari, as the princess had at first more than once suggested he should do.

Monsieur d'Antin was an egoist, pure and simple, but he could be a very agreeable egoist—so long as he was supplied with all he wanted. Fortunately, perhaps, for his popularity, his egoism was tempered by an almost imperturbable good-humor, which, as a rule, prevented it from ruffling the nerves of others.

There are some men, and a great many women, who invariably succeed in obtaining what they want out of daily life. Their needs are trifling, possibly, but then life is made up of trifles—if one chooses to live only for the present. But to be a really successful egoist, it is necessary at all events to acquire a reputation for good-humor.

Monsieur d'Antin had acquired this reputation in Rome, as he had acquired it elsewhere; and he was shrewd enough to make it one of his most useful possessions. Indeed, it was almost a pleasure to lose money to Monsieur d'Antin at cards, or to place at his disposal any convenience of which he might momentarily be in need, such was his invariable *bonhomie* in society. He had very soon made a place for himself in the Roman world, and in this it must be confessed that he

had shown remarkable ingenuity. Had he arrived in the Eternal City possessed of ready money, it would have made no difference whether he was a Belgian gentleman or an English or American "bounder," for all Rome would have willingly allowed him to entertain it at the Grand Hotel or elsewhere, provided he got the right society women to "run him." But Baron d'Antin had arrived in Rome with no reputation at all, beyond that of being an elderly *viveur* who happened to be the brother of the Principessa di Montefiano. He had studied his ground, however, and it had not taken him long to come to the conclusion that an unofficial foreigner, to be a social success in modern Rome, must usually be either an adventurer or a snob, and that the two almost invariably went together. Being a gentleman in his own country, albeit in somewhat straitened circumstances, Monsieur d'Antin had at first been amazed at the apparent inability of the average Romans of society to distinguish between a foreigner, man or woman, who was well-bred and one who was not. Finally, he had come to the conclusion that good-breeding was not expected from the unofficial foreigner, nor, indeed, any other of the usual passports to society—but merely a supply of ready money and a proper appreciation of the condescension on the part of the Roman nobility in allowing it to be spent on their entertainment. This, however, was not a condition of affairs that suited Monsieur d'Antin's plans. He had come to Rome not to be lived upon by the society he found there, but to make that society useful to him. That he had done so was entirely due to his own social talents, and to his apparently amiable disposition. He had no need of the Palazzo Acorari, so far as his society and his food were concerned, for there were few evenings of the week during the winter and spring that he had not a dinner invitation; and if by any chance he had no engagement for that meal, there were various methods at his disposal of supplying the deficiency.

Altogether, Baron d'Antin had become *persona grata* in Roman society, and in his good-humored, careless way he had deliberately laid himself out to be so, even waiving his prejudices and suppressing a certain nervous irritation which the Anglo-Saxon race generally produced in him, sufficiently to dine with its Roman members in their rented palaces.

"My dear Jeanne," he would say to his sister, "you have no sense of humor—absolutely none at all. I dined the other night with some of my Anglo-Saxon friends—I should rather say that I passed some hours of the evening in eating and drinking with them. The wines were execrable—execrable!—and the man who poured them out told us their supposed dates. Some of them, I believe, had been purchased when Noah sold off his cellar after the subsidence of the flood—although, if I remember rightly, he liked his wine, and his—well, sacred history is more in your line than mine, Jeanne. In any case, it was very amusing—and when one looked at the fine old rooms—the *mise en scène* of the comedy, you know—it

was more amusing still."

But Monsieur d'Antin was much too shrewd to laugh at any of the component parts of the society he had determined to exploit. Had he wanted nothing out of it, as he frequently told himself, he could have afforded to laugh a good deal; and, being possessed of a very keen sense of humor, he would probably have done so. As it was, however, he concealed his amusement, or, at the most, allowed himself to give it rein when calling upon his sister, who was unable to appreciate his sarcasms, living as she did, completely apart from the cosmopolitan society in which her brother preferred to move.

Monsieur d'Antin had been paying the princess one of his occasional visits, which he did at regular intervals. To say the truth, he did not by any means approve of the compatriot he as often as not would find sitting with his sister when he was announced. He was well aware that Jeanne was a very pious woman; and very pious women, especially those who had reached a certain age, liked to have a priest at their beck and call. This, Monsieur d'Antin considered, was very natural—pathetically natural, indeed. All the same, he wished that the Abbé Roux had been an Italian, and not a Belgian priest. When Monsieur d'Antin had first appeared upon the scene in Rome, he had instantly felt that the director of his sister's spiritual affairs was not over well pleased at his coming. Accustomed as he was to study those with whom he was likely at any time to be brought much into contact, Baron d'Antin had at once arrived at the conclusion that the abbé probably did not confine himself to the direction of Princess Montefiano's spiritual concerns only; otherwise the advent of her brother would have left him profoundly indifferent. A sudden instinct told Monsieur d'Antin that he and the priest must clash—and then he had reflected, not without some humor, that, after all, there might be such a thing as honor among thieves. He had done his best to conciliate the Abbé Roux whenever they had chanced to meet at Palazzo Acorari, but the priest had not responded in any way to his advances. Monsieur d'Antin knew that the late Prince Montefiano had left as much as the law allowed him to leave in his wife's hands, and that she was his daughter's sole guardian until the girl should marry or come of age. The princess, however, had never written to her brother concerning her affairs—neither had there been any particular reason why she should do so. Rome had absorbed her, and even for some years before her marriage she had practically become Roman in everything but in name. There are many, both women and men, whom Rome has absorbed in a similar way; nor can an explanation of her magnetic attraction always be found in religion or in art, since the irreligious and the inartistic are equally prone to fall under her spell. Rather, perhaps, is the secret of her power to be found in the mysterious sense of universal motherhood which clings around her name—in the knowledge, at once awe-inspiring and comforting, that there is no good

and no evil, no joy and no sorrow which humanity can experience, unknown to her; and that however heavily the burden may bear upon our shoulders as we walk through her streets, multitudes more laden than we have trod those stones before us, and have found—rest.

It could hardly be supposed, however, that the burden borne by Princess Montefiano was of a nature requiring the psychological assistance of Rome to lighten it. So far as she was concerned—and in this she differed in no respect from many other pious people of both sexes—Rome merely suggested itself to her as a place offering peculiar facilities for the keeping of her soul in a satisfactory state of polish.

As he saw more of his sister in her home life, Monsieur d'Antin became convinced that the Abbé Roux, as he had at once suspected, by no means confined himself to directing her spiritual affairs. It was very evident that the Abbé managed Palazzo Acorari, and this was quite sufficient to account for his distant attitude towards a possible intruder. As a matter of fact, Monsieur d'Antin had no great desire to intrude. He intended to benefit by the accident of having a sister who was also a Roman princess with a comfortable dowry, and he had very quickly made up his mind not to attempt to interfere with the Abbé Roux so long as that ecclesiastic did not attempt to interfere with him.

During the last few months, Monsieur d'Antin had often found himself wondering what his sister's position would be should her step-daughter marry. In any case, scarcely four years would elapse before Donna Bianca Acorari must enter into absolute possession of the Montefiano estates, and yet it was evident that the princess regarded her as a mere child who could be kept in the background. It had not escaped his notice that it was clearly his sister's wish that Donna Bianca should not receive any more attention than would naturally be paid to a child. Nevertheless, when Monsieur d'Antin looked at the girl, he would say to himself that Jeanne was shutting her eyes to obvious facts, and that at some not very distant day they would probably be opened unexpectedly.

He had tried to make friends with Bianca, but the princess had markedly discouraged any such efforts; and latterly he had observed that his sister almost invariably sent her step-daughter out of the room if she happened to be in it when he was announced.

Bianca Acorari herself had shown no disinclination to be friendly with her newly arrived step-uncle. Anybody who was not the Abbé Roux was welcome in her eyes. When Monsieur d'Antin had first come to Rome, before he had realized the monotony of domestic life in Palazzo Acorari, he had been in the habit of coming there more frequently than was now the case, and had repeatedly dined with his sister Bianca, and occasionally the Abbé Roux, making a little *partie carrée*.

It had amused him to address no small part of his conversation to his step-niece during these little dinners, and Bianca had talked to him readily enough. She was pleased, possibly, at having the opportunity to show the Abbé Roux that she could talk, if there was anybody she cared to talk with. Perhaps Monsieur d'Antin, with his accustomed penetration, had already guessed that the relations between the girl and her step-mother's spiritual director were those of a species of armed neutrality, at all events upon Bianca's side. However this might be, he had affected not to perceive the obvious disapproval with which his sister regarded his endeavors always to draw Bianca into the conversation, nor the offended demeanor of the priest at being sometimes left out of it.

To say the truth, Monsieur d'Antin was by no means insensible to Bianca Acorari's physical attractions. He flattered himself that he had an eye for female beauty in its developing stages; and he had arrived at an age when such stages have a peculiar fascination for men of a certain temperament. Perhaps the observant eyes of the Abbé Roux detected more warmth in his lay compatriot's glance, as the latter laughed and talked with the girl, than altogether commended itself to his priestly sense of what was due to innocence. In any case it was certain that on the last two occasions on which Monsieur d'Antin had proposed himself to dinner at Palazzo Acorari, Bianca had presumably dined in her own apartment; for she did not appear, and when Monsieur d'Antin inquired after her, the princess had said dryly that her step-daughter was scarcely old enough to dine with grown-up people.

Monsieur d'Antin felt this banishment to be due to clerical suggestion; and so, it must be confessed, did Bianca herself. He was bound to admit, however—and he admitted it with decided complacency—that his sister was right in safeguarding her step-daughter from premature masculine admiration. He reflected, too, that in Italy—as, indeed, in Belgium, or other Catholic countries—uncles and nieces were permitted to marry under dispensations comparatively easy to obtain; and that in the case of a step-uncle, no consanguinity existed. The reflection had been a pleasant one to Monsieur d'Antin, and he looked upon the uneasiness he had apparently inspired in the mind of the Abbé Roux as a proof that he might still consider himself as dangerous to female peace of mind—whereby he showed himself to possess to the full that peculiar form of male vanity supposed to be inherent in the Gallic races.

VIII

"Yes," continued Monsieur d'Antin, as his sister gazed at him in a slightly bewildered manner, "Bianca has only got to be seen, and to see a few men who do not cover their legs with a cassock, and she will very soon find out, Jeanne, that she is no child."

"Really, Philippe!" expostulated Princess Montefiano.

"There is no necessity to be shocked," proceeded Monsieur d'Antin, tranquilly. "I know what I am talking about. There are certain temperaments—female temperaments—one has come across them, you know. *Bien*, your step-daughter is one of these, unless I am much mistaken. Mark my words, Jeanne, if you keep her as though she were going to be a nun, everything will go on quietly for a time, and then one fine day you will discover that she has had an affair with the footman. What would you have?" and Monsieur d'Antin shrugged his shoulders philosophically.

Princess Montefiano appeared thoroughly alarmed.

"Do you really think so?" she asked, hurriedly. "I have always looked upon Bianca as—well, as quite a child still in all these ways, you know. I wonder," she added, suddenly, looking at her brother, "what makes you think she is not."

"Ah," repeated Monsieur d'Antin, meditatively, "what makes me think she is not?"

His meditations seemed to afford him some pleasure, for he did not hurry himself to answer the question. "Well, really," he continued, at length, with a little chuckle, "I could hardly explain what it is that makes me think so, my dear Jeanne—not to you, at all events, for I do not at all suppose you would understand. But all the same, I think so—oh yes—I certainly think so!" and, rising from his chair, Monsieur d'Antin began to walk up and down the room, gently rubbing his hands together the while.

The princess looked perplexed. "After all, Philippe," she said, "Bianca is only just seventeen. Of course she is tall for her age, and, as you say—er—well developed. I suppose men only judge by what they see—"

"Precisely," interrupted Monsieur d'Antin; "it is the only way we have of forming an idea of—what we do not see."

"I have thought only of her mind—her nature," continued the princess. "I suppose," she added, "that is what you mean? I cannot say that I understand her. I find her silent—apathetic. She seems to me to interest herself in nothing."

"Probably because you do not provide her with sufficient material."

"I try to do my duty by her," returned the princess, a little stiffly. "A stepmother is always placed in a difficult position. Of course, Bianca being, as it were, like an only son, and everything going to her, does not make things easier."

Monsieur d'Antin looked at his sister curiously. She had very rarely spoken to him of family affairs, and he had very little idea how the Montefiano property

was settled, beyond a natural conclusion that the old prince would have left the bulk of it to his only child and representative.

"But of course," he observed, "you are always well provided for—in the event of Bianca marrying, I mean—or, as she must do before very long, taking over the estates into her own hands?"

"There is my jointure, certainly," said the princess, "but it is not large. I do not understand business matters very well, but naturally, so long as Bianca is a minor and unmarried, I must be better off than I shall be afterwards. A great deal will depend upon Bianca's husband. That is what Monsieur l'Abbé always says to me—that we must not be in a hurry to marry Bianca. She must not marry a man who simply wants her titles and money to use them for his own purposes."

"Monsieur l'Abbé is perfectly right," said Baron d'Antin, with a dry little laugh.

The princess glanced at him. "You do not like him," she said.

Monsieur d'Antin hesitated for a moment. Then he laughed again, easily.

"Not like him?" he repeated. "But, my dear Jeanne, I like him very much. I am not fond of priests as a rule. They are not—well, not what I am accustomed to, you know. But your tame abbé, I should say that he was a most estimable person, and, no doubt, to a woman in your position, a most useful adviser."

The princess sighed. "Oh, most useful!" she exclaimed. "He is a good man of business, too," she continued. "I feel that he acts as a kind of intermediary between me, as Bianca's representative, and the agents and people. After all, Philippe, I am a foreigner, you know—though I scarcely feel myself to be one—and Bianca is not. So I am doubly glad of Monsieur l'Abbé's advice sometimes."

"But he is as much a foreigner as you are, Jeanne," remarked Monsieur d'Antin.

"Oh, but then he is a priest!" exclaimed the princess. "That makes such a difference. You see, he was brought up in Rome, and went through his studies here."

"An admirable training," said Monsieur d'Antin, suavely.

"Yes, admirable," assented the princess. "It gives such a grasp of, such an insight into, human nature. That is one of the strange things about Bianca, for instance," she added, suddenly.

"That she has an insight into human nature?" demanded Monsieur d'Antin. "If she has, Jeanne, it must be a miraculous gift, for she can have seen little enough of it."

"No, no! I mean that she cannot bear Monsieur l'Abbé. Would you believe it, Philippe, that notwithstanding all his kindness, that child positively refuses to go to confession to him? She refused years ago, and now I never mention the subject."

"*Tiens!*" observed Monsieur d'Antin.

"It is incredible," continued his sister, "but nevertheless it is true."

Monsieur d'Antin shrugged his shoulders.

"It appears," he said, enigmatically, "that your step-daughter also has studied in Rome."

The princess dropped her voice mysteriously.

"I believe," she said, "that the mother, my blessed husband's first wife, you know, was an odd woman—or child, rather—for she was little more. There was some story—she was in love with some other man who was not thought a good enough match for her, and her family obliged her to marry my poor husband. It was not a happy marriage."

"That," observed Monsieur d'Antin, "was no doubt his reason for marrying again. He was determined to find happiness."

"Ah, well!" Princess Montefiano replied, with a sigh—"he needed rest. His life had been a troubled one, and he needed rest."

Monsieur d'Antin smiled sympathetically. He had heard it remarked in Rome that the late Montefiano had indeed worn himself out at a comparatively early period in life.

"I do not wonder," he said, presently, "that you feel the responsibility of selecting a suitable husband for Bianca. All the same," he added, "I think you will be wise to contemplate the possibility of her not remaining a child indefinitely. If you do not, I should be inclined to regard the footmen as a perpetual source of anxiety."

"Philippe!" exclaimed the princess. "You are really perfectly scandalous! One does not allude to such things, even in jest. But I see what you mean, although I must say that I think you put it rather grossly. I will consult Monsieur l'Abbé about the advisability of gradually letting Bianca see a few more people. I don't want it to be supposed that I am keeping her from marrying when the proper time comes for her to do so; and my only object would be to find her a suitable husband. Of course, as Monsieur l'Abbé says her marriage must almost certainly alter my own circumstances, but one must not allow one's self to think of that."

"Ah," said Monsieur d'Antin, thoughtfully, "Monsieur l'Abbé says so, does he?"

"It is natural that he should look at the matter from all points of view," returned the princess.

"Perfectly natural—from all points of view," repeated Monsieur d'Antin; "and," he added to himself, "more particularly from his own, I imagine. Well," he continued, "I must leave you, Jeanne. I should consult Monsieur Roux, by all means. He looks as though he knew something about feminine development—

your little abbé; and you tell me that he has studied in Rome. *Au revoir*, my dear Jeanne—*à bientot*! Ah, by-the-way, there is one little matter I had nearly forgotten. Could you without inconvenience—but absolutely without inconvenience—lend me a thousand francs or so? Two thousand would be more useful—I do not say no. In a few weeks my miserable rents must come in, and then we will settle our accounts—but, in the mean time, it would be a great convenience."

The princess looked uneasy. "I will try," she said; "but, to say the truth, it is not a very favorable moment—"

Monsieur d'Antin waved his hands.

"Not a word—not a word more, I beg of you, my dear Jeanne!" he exclaimed. "You will think the matter over; and if two thousand is not convenient, I must make one thousand suffice. In the mean time, *di nuovo*, as the Italians say," and he kissed his sister affectionately and hurried from the room.

As he walked from the Palazzo Acorari to his little apartment in the Ludovisi quarter of the city, Monsieur d'Antin was unusually preoccupied, and more than once he chuckled to himself. His sister Jeanne was certainly not gifted with a sense of humor, but he found himself wondering whether she was quite as incompetent to look after her own affairs as she wished him to believe. Experience taught him that while piety and humor seldom went together, piety and a shrewd eye to worldly advantage were by no means unfrequently to be found working very harmoniously side by side.

Somebody in Palazzo Acorari, Monsieur d'Antin felt convinced, had an interest in maintaining the *status quo*, so far as the existing constitution of the Montefiano establishment was concerned. Jeanne might be a bad woman of business, but, when all was said and done, at thirty-five or so, with no money—with nothing, in short, except a local reputation for holiness—she had succeeded in marrying a man who had been able to give her a very substantial position in the world, and who had had the tact to leave her a good many years in which to enjoy its full advantages without the incubus of his company.

But it was more likely that Jeanne allowed herself to be swayed by the counsels of the priest whom, according to her own account, she always consulted. It was conceivable, nay, it was even probable, that Monsieur l'Abbé Roux might desire that Donna Bianca Acorari should remain as much as possible secluded from the world for reasons of his own. So long as she remained unmarried, so long would she, no doubt, be content that the Montefiano properties should be managed more or less as they had been hitherto managed; and who could tell how much benefit the Abbé Roux might not, directly or indirectly, gain from the present system of management.

And Bianca Acorari? Monsieur d'Antin allowed his thoughts to dwell upon her dreamy face, with its eyes that seemed always to be looking into an un-

explored distance, upon the curved mouth and firm, rounded throat, upon the graceful lines of the figure just melting into womanhood, and came to the conclusion that Jeanne and her abbé were a couple of fools. Why, the girl had something about her that stirred even his well-worn passions—and how would it not be with a younger man? She had some idea, too, of her own power, of her own charm, unless he was very much mistaken. It was a vague, undefined consciousness, perhaps, but none the less fascinating on that account. A child? Nonsense! A peach almost ripe for the plucking.

IX

It was very still in the ilex grove of the Villa Acorari. The air was sultry, and not a leaf stirred; yet angry-looking clouds occasionally drifted across the sky from the sea, and cast moving patches of purple shadow on the plain stretching away from below Velletri to the coast.

The sunbeams glanced here and there through the heavy foliage. They threw quaint, checkered patterns on the moss-grown flag-stones surrounding a group of fountains, and flashed upon the spray falling over sculptured nymphs and river-gods wantoning in cool green beds of arum leaves and water-lilies.

A gentle, drowsy murmur of insects filled the air, and the splashing of the fountains—otherwise deep silence reigned. Lizards, green and golden-brown, darted out of the crevices in the old stone seats, paused abruptly with little heads poised in a listening attitude, and darted away again; while blue dragon-flies hawked over the waters of the fountains, now giving mad chase to a fly, now resting—jewels set in green enamel—on a lily leaf.

It was not to be wondered at if the gardens of the Villa Acorari were reputed to be haunted by spirits of the old gods. On this July afternoon some mysterious influence, infinitely peaceful but infinitely sad, seemed to brood over them. All the glamour of a mighty past seemed to enfold them—such a past as many an old villa in the neighborhood of Rome has witnessed, in which every passion, good and bad, has played its part; in which scenes of love and hate, of joy and sorrow, of highest virtue and foulest crime have succeeded each other through the centuries.

Tradition declared that a shrine sacred to the rites of the *Lupercalia* once stood in the midst of this ilex grove, on the very spot where the fountains now

murmured and the water-lilies lifted their pure whiteness to the hot caress of the sunbeams.

If this were so, it was certainly as well that times had changed; that lizards and dragon-flies had usurped the place of the *Luperci*, and that lascivious Pan slept with the rest of the joyous company of Olympus; else had Bianca Acorari, quietly reading her book in the deep shadows of the ilex-trees, run grievous risk of receiving the sacred blow from the thong of some lustful votary of the god.

St. Peter's festival had come and gone, and Bianca, to her great satisfaction, had already been some days at the Villa Acorari. It was an untold relief to her to feel that for at least three months she was free to wander about these old gardens instead of driving through the hot, dusty streets of Rome. This year, too, she would not be quite so much alone as she had usually been. The princess had consented to a scheme whereby Mademoiselle Durand was to continue giving her lessons, at any rate for another month; and it had been duly arranged that she should come to the villa three times a week from Albano, where, it appeared, she was going to pass the remainder of the summer. The proposition had come from Mademoiselle Durand herself. She had other pupils, she had informed the princess, who would be in *villeggiatura* at Albano and Ariccia, and it would be very easy for her to come over to the Villa Acorari if the princess wished it.

Somewhat to her step-mother's surprise, Bianca jumped eagerly at the idea. There could be no objection, the princess thought, to the girl pursuing her studies with Mademoiselle Durand for a few more weeks; and she saw, moreover, that Bianca welcomed the thought of occasionally having the governess as a companion. She would not have wished Bianca to walk with Mademoiselle Durand in Rome, certainly; but at the villa it was a very different thing; and, after all, it was better for her than being perpetually alone, or merely having Bettina's society.

Mademoiselle Durand had already been over twice, and Bianca had shown her all her favorite walks, and the places where she liked to sit and read or work during the heat of the afternoons.

It had struck Bianca that the Frenchwoman displayed considerable curiosity as to her movements. Mademoiselle Durand insisted upon being taken all over the grounds of the villa, and almost appeared as though she were studying the topography of the spots which Bianca pointed out as being her usual resorts.

They had talked of many things only a couple of days ago—things which, it must be confessed, had nothing whatever to do with Bianca's education. In the course of the last few weeks the girl had lost much of the reserve she had formerly displayed towards her governess. The Rossano family had been, as it were, a sympathetic link between Mademoiselle Durand and Bianca, a subject to which it was refreshing to both to turn after wrestling with French history or German poetry.

Mademoiselle Durand had talked of Silvio on this very spot where Bianca was now giving herself up to the pleasant feeling of drowsiness induced by the murmur of the fountains and the fragrant warmth of the July afternoon, and she had shaken her head sadly and significantly.

That young man, she assured Bianca, was breaking his heart and ruining his health. It did not at the moment strike either her or her listener that Silvio could hardly do the one without doing the other. It was certainly very sad, and Bianca had confided to Mademoiselle Durand that she wished she could do something to avert such a catastrophe.

"Perhaps," the Frenchwoman said, tentatively, "if you were to make his acquaintance, he might become more reasonable," and Bianca had gazed at her with a startled air.

"You know, mademoiselle," she said, a little impatiently, "that I can never make his acquaintance."

"Never is a long time," returned Mademoiselle Durand, smiling. "Supposing—I only say supposing—you met him somewhere, on one of your walks, for instance, and that he spoke to you, would you not try to—well, to give him some good advice—to be kind to him?"

"He probably would not ask me for my advice," replied Bianca, laughing.

Mademoiselle Durand looked at her and hesitated for a moment.

"I think he would," she said, slowly. "You see, Donna Bianca, there is such a close resemblance between your own position and that of the girl with whom the poor boy is so madly in love."

Bianca was silent.

"I wonder," persisted Mademoiselle Durand, "what you would do. It would be very interesting to know."

"You mean—" began Bianca.

"I mean," interrupted Mademoiselle Durand, "if by any chance you happened to meet Monsieur Silvio and he asked you for your advice, as, *du reste*, he has asked me. You would not run away—no?"

"No," said Bianca, thoughtfully, "I don't think I should run away. I think I should try to help him if I could. I am very sorry for him."

Mademoiselle Durand suddenly sprang up with a little scream.

"A scorpion!" she exclaimed. "I am sure I saw a scorpion! It ran in there—into that hole close to my foot."

"I dare say," said Bianca, indifferently. "It is the time of year when one finds them, but I have never seen one just here. It is too damp for them, I think."

Mademoiselle Durand had made no further allusion after this either to Silvio Rossano or to the scorpion. Indeed, she turned the conversation into professional channels with some abruptness, and shortly afterwards she returned to

the house preparatory to going back to Albano.

Mademoiselle's question returned to Bianca's mind as she sat under her ilex-tree. It was all nonsense, of course, for how could she meet Silvio Rossano and talk to him about his love-affair? Mademoiselle Durand knew perfectly well that there could be no question of such a thing. But still it would be very interesting to hear all about this mysterious girl with whom he was so hopelessly in love. And, yes, she would certainly like to meet him and talk to him. It was odd how well she remembered his features, though she had never dared to look at him very much. Nevertheless, since that Christmas night in the Sudario they had seemed to be impressed upon her mind. And that other girl, the one he was in love with, whose name Mademoiselle Durand declared she was bound in honor not to mention, did she think much about him—remember the look of his eyes and the expression of his mouth? Perhaps she never thought about him at all.

At this stage of her reflections Bianca suddenly found herself becoming angry. She had just paused to ask herself why this should be, when a soft, pattering sound which was not that of the fountains fell upon her ear. Looking up, she became aware that the sunlight had faded, and that the shade around her had grown suddenly deeper. The air felt heavier and more stifling, and the pattering noise that had at first attracted her attention seemed to come nearer and nearer as the light grew more dim. From somewhere in the underwood a frog began to croak contentedly:

"Or s'ode su tutta la fronda
crosciare
l'argentea pioggia
che monda,
il croscio che varia
secondo la fronda
più folta, men folta
Ascolta.
La figlia del aria
è muta; ma la figlia
del limo lontana,
la rana,
canta nell'ombra più fonda,
chi sa dove, chi sa dove!"[#]

[#] *Le laudi; (Pioggia nel Pineto) Gabriele d'Annunzio.*

Bianca rose hurriedly and looked at the sky. The *campagna* below, and even the vineyards on the slopes of the hill immediately beneath the park of the Villa Acorari, still lay bathed in sunshine. The light rain that was falling was evidently only a passing summer-shower, and not, as she had for a moment feared, the immediate precursor of one of those violent hail-storms that sometimes sweep over the Alban hills, devastating in a few minutes the crops of a whole district, and turning smiling vineyards, laden with fruit, into brown and barren wildernesses.

Bianca picked up her neglected book and made her way towards a little casino which stood at the end of the ilex avenue, inside which she proposed to shelter herself until the shower should have passed over. She had scarcely taken a few steps under the sombre green branches when she started back with a little cry. A man stepped from behind one of the gnarled trunks and stood before her, bare-headed. In an instant she recognized him. He was not the god—no. For a second she had almost thought that he might be. Then she looked at him again. Not the god—no; but surely the god could scarcely be fairer.

She turned aside hesitatingly.

"Donna Bianca!"

The low voice, very gentle, very pleading, seemed to mingle its tones with the murmur of the fountains and the *croscio* of the rain-drops among the ilex-leaves.

Silvio Rossano stood and looked at her. Bianca put her hand up to her throat. Something seemed to rise in it and choke back her words.

"You!" she exclaimed.

He smiled a little. "I, Silvio," he said, simply. "Donna Bianca," he continued hurriedly, as though anxious not to give her time to say more, "if you tell me to go, I will go, and you shall never see me again."

And then he waited.

A great silence seemed to follow his words, as though all the sylvan deities in their lurking-places were listening for her answer.

Only the frog croaked:

"Chi sa dove, chi sa dove!"

Presently Bianca Acorari spoke.

"I do not tell you to go," she said.

Then Silvio moved a few steps nearer to her.

Suddenly Bianca started, as though rousing herself from a dream.

"What am I saying?" she exclaimed. "Of course you must go! You should never have come here. If they were to find you—alone with me—"

Silvio's eyes flashed.

"Yes," he said; "alone with you—at last!"

Bianca drew back from him.

"At last!" she repeated. Then she smiled. "Of course," she continued, "you wished to talk to me. Mademoiselle Durand told me—though I do not understand what I can do."

Silvio looked at her in bewilderment.

"You knew!" he exclaimed; "and yet—you do not understand what you can do? Donna Bianca," he added, earnestly, "please do not laugh at me. Surely you understand that you can do—everything—for me?"

Bianca shook her head. "I do not laugh at you," she said slowly. "I am sorry for you. I would help you if I could; but how can I?"

She moved towards the casino as she spoke.

"Listen!" she added, "the rain is coming on more heavily. Do you not hear it on the leaves? And it grows darker again."

He followed her to the summer-house, but as she pushed open the door he drew back, and glanced at her hesitatingly.

"I will remain here," he said. "Afterwards, when the shower is over, if you will let me speak to you—"

Bianca Acorari looked at him. "Come," she said, briefly.

It was an unheard of proceeding. Verily, as Monsieur d'Antin had said, Bianca was no child—unless, indeed, she was more childish than her years warranted. Any behavior more diametrically opposed to all the rules and customs that so strictly regulate the actions of a young girl in Italy could scarcely be conceived.

Silvio Rossano himself was taken aback at her confidence in him. Her demeanor was so natural, however, and her manner, after the first surprise of seeing him had passed, had become so self-possessed, that he never for an instant misunderstood her.

Bianca seated herself upon a dilapidated chair—the only one, indeed, having its full complement of legs that the casino contained.

"Mademoiselle Durand said that if I—if we ever met, you would perhaps ask me for my advice," she said, gravely. "I cannot understand why you should think any advice of mine could help you. Perhaps she made a mistake, and you are here by accident."

Silvio almost laughed at her gravity, but she spoke with a certain dignity of manner which contrasted very charmingly with her fresh, girlish beauty.

"No," he said quietly, "I am not here by accident, Donna Bianca. I am here to see you—to tell you—"

"Ah, yes, I know!" interposed Bianca, hurriedly. "It is very sad, and, believe

me, I am very sorry for you—very sorry."

Silvio's bronze face grew suddenly white.

"Sorry!" he exclaimed. "That means you can give me no hope—that you think me presumptuous—"

Bianca glanced at him. "I can give no opinion," she replied; "but I think—" and she paused, hesitatingly.

"Yes?" asked Silvio, eagerly. "What do you think, Donna Bianca?"

"That if I were a man," returned Bianca, slowly, "I would marry whom I chose, no matter how many difficulties stood in my way—that is to say," she added, "if I knew the woman whom I cared for cared for me."

"Ah," exclaimed Silvio, quickly, "but supposing you didn't know?"

"Then I should ask her," said Bianca Acorari, bluntly.

Silvio started violently. Then he came and stood beside her.

"Donna Bianca," he said, in a low, eager voice, "do you know what you are saying?"

Bianca looked at him a little wonderingly. She could not but notice his agitation. "Certainly I do," she replied. "You see, Monsieur Silvio," she added, and then stopped in confusion. "I beg your pardon," she said, blushing violently. "I am very rude—but I have so often heard Mademoiselle Durand speak of you as 'Monsieur Silvio,' that I fear—I am afraid—"

Silvio Rossano's head began to swim. He looked at her and said nothing. Then he swore at himself for being a fool and losing his opportunities.

"You see," proceeded Bianca, picking up the train of her thoughts again, "I am afraid I am not like other girls. I have lived most of my life alone, and I suppose I have odd ideas. When I am of age, I shall certainly please myself—but until then, I have to please other people. Of course, I know that a man is obliged to speak to a girl's parents before he can tell her that he loves her. But I am quite sure that if I were a man and wanted to know if my love were returned, I should ask the person I loved."

Silvio looked at her curiously.

"And is that your advice to me, Donna Bianca?" he said. "You advise me to ask the girl I love—whom I have loved ever since I first saw her seven months ago, though I have scarcely spoken to her in my life—whether she returns my love?"

"If I were in your place—yes," returned Bianca. "Why not, Mons—Signor Rossano?"

Silvio drew a long breath.

"It is what I came here this afternoon to do," he said, quietly.

Bianca looked at him with a bewildered expression. The blood left her face and she became very pale.

"What—you came here to do?" she repeated, slowly—"here? I do not understand."

"Ah, no? You do not understand? Then I will take your advice—I will make you understand." The words came to his lips fast enough now.

"Dear," he burst out, "you shall understand. I love you! Do you know what it means—love? I have loved you ever since that night—that Christmas night—when you looked into my eyes with yours. Do you understand now? I know I have no right to love you—no right to ask you to be my wife—for you are Donna Bianca Acorari, Princess of Montefiano, and I am—nobody. But this is what I have come to ask you—only this—whether you love me? If you do, I swear by God and by the Son of God that I will marry you, or I will marry no woman. If you do not love me, or will not love me, send me away from you—now, at once."

Bianca Acorari sprang up from her chair.

"Me?" she exclaimed. "You love me? Ah, but it is absurd—how can you love me? You are mad—or dreaming. You have forgotten. It is she you love—that other one—"

Silvio seized her hand almost roughly.

"Bianca!" he said, hoarsely, "what, in God's name, do you mean? I love you—you only. I have never looked at another woman—I never knew what love meant till I saw you."

Suddenly Bianca began to tremble violently. In a moment Silvio's arms were round her, and he was pressing hot, passionate kisses to her lips.

"Bianca!" he exclaimed. "Tell me—for God's sake, tell me—"

With a quick gesture she yielded herself wholly to him, drawing his face to hers and running her hands through his close, curly hair.

"Silvio," she whispered, "ah, Silvio! And it was I all the time! I thought—Mademoiselle Durand pretended that it was somebody else—some girl like me—and all the time I wondered why I cared—why I was angry—"

His arms were round her again, and he crushed her to him, while his lips blinded her eyes.

"Ah, Silvio *mio*," she sighed, "it is too much—you hurt me—ah, but it is sweet to be hurt by you—"

Suddenly she wrenched herself from him, crimson and trembling.

"God!" she exclaimed. "What have I done—what must you think of me? I did not know love was like that. It—hurts."

Silvio laughed aloud in the very intoxication of his joy.

"Beloved," he said, "that is only the beginning."

But Bianca shook her head. "I must be very wicked," she said. "I did not know I was quite so wicked. Silvio," she added, looking at him, shyly, "for the love of God, go! It is getting late. At any moment they may be coming to look

for me. No—not again—"

"But I must speak with you here to-morrow—the day after," urged Silvio.

"Yes," said Bianca, hurriedly. "I must think," she added. "We must confide everything now to Mademoiselle Durand. Ah, Silvio, you should not have loved me—I shall bring you unhappiness."

Silvio looked at her gravely. "If we are true to each other," he said, "everything must come right. Even if we have to wait till you are of age and free to do as you choose, that is not a very long time."

They had left the casino as Silvio was speaking, and Bianca glanced uneasily down the avenue. Not a soul was visible. The rain had cleared away, and the sun, sinking westward, was streaming into the darkest recesses of the ilex grove. No sound broke the stillness except the splashing of the fountains, and now and again the notes of birds announcing that the hot hours were passed and the cool of evening was approaching.

Bianca turned and laid her hands on Silvio's. "Go, beloved," she said. "We must not be seen together—yet."

Silvio drew her to him once more. "Do you know," he said, "that you have never told me whether you will marry me or not?"

Bianca Acorari looked at him for a moment. Then she answered, simply:

"If I do not marry you, Silvio, I will marry no man. I swear it! Now go," she added, hastily—"do not delay a moment longer. I will communicate with you through Mademoiselle Durand."

"After all," said Silvio, "even if we have to wait three years—"

Bianca stamped her foot on the turf.

"Silvio," she exclaimed, "if you do not go, now—at once—I will not marry you for six years."

She turned away from him and sped down the avenue, while Silvio vanished through the undergrowth.

And the ilex grove was left in possession of the spirits of Pan and his *Luperci*; also in that of Monsieur d'Antin, who, with a little chuckle, stepped from behind the casino and emerged into the sunlight.

X

"You do not congratulate me, Giacinta."

Silvio and his sister were sitting alone together after a late dinner which was practically merely a supper. In the summer months in Rome, to be compelled by fashion to sit down to a meal at the pleasantest hour in all the twenty-four is a weariness to the flesh and a vexation to the spirit. Entirely in opposition to all the orthodox ideas inculcated by the guide-books and received by the British tourist, the Romans do not labor under the delusion that death stalks abroad with the sunset, and that deadly diseases dog the footsteps of those who wander through the streets or gardens when the shadows of evening are beginning to fall.

Those whose duties or inclinations keep them in Rome during the summer months do not, as a rule, complain of their lot, knowing full well that of all the larger Italian cities, and, indeed, of all southern capitals, it is on the whole by far the coolest and healthiest.

The Rossano family, like the majority of Romans, adapted their hours to the various seasons, and dinner, which was at any time from half-past seven to half-past eight in winter, became supper at nine or so in summer.

This evening the professor, as was his usual habit on fine nights at this season of the year, had gone out immediately after supper to smoke his cigar and read his evening papers, seated outside one of the *caffè's* in Piazza Colonna, where a band would be playing till between ten and eleven o'clock.

He had never again alluded to the subject of Silvio having presumably fallen in love. Indeed, he had forgotten all about it immediately after he had startled Silvio by accusing him of it. Giacinta, however, had by no means forgotten it. Silvio's silence, or rather his marked disinclination to discuss either Bianca or anything to do with Casa Acorari, only increased Giacinta's suspicions that he was at work upon his plans in his own way. That he would abandon his determination to make Bianca Acorari's acquaintance she never for a moment contemplated, knowing his strength of will. It was, in Giacinta's eyes, a most unlucky infatuation. In all probability, Donna Bianca Acorari's future husband had been chosen long ago, not by the girl herself, of course, but by the princess and her friends. Silvio's appearance on the scene as a suitor must infallibly lead to trouble, for the difference in their social position was too great to be overcome, except by a very much larger fortune than Silvio could ever hope to possess.

Giacinta Rossano's pride was aroused. It would be intolerable to feel that her brother was regarded as not good enough to be the husband of an Acorari, or of anybody else, for that matter. Knowing Silvio's contemptuous indifference to merely hereditary rank, she wondered that he did not realize the false position into which he was apparently doing his best to put himself. That Donna Bianca Acorari would fall in love with Silvio, if any reasonable opportunity were given her, Giacinta had very little doubt. Any woman might fall in love with him, if it were only for his good looks. But what would be gained if Donna Bianca did

fall in love with him? There would be a great *disturbo*—a family consultation—probably a dozen family consultations—a great many disagreeable things said on all sides, and after the girl had had one or two fits of crying, she would give up all thoughts of Silvio, and allow herself to be engaged to some man of her own world. And, in the mean time, Silvio's life would be wrecked, for he would never stand the mortification of a refusal on the part of Princess Montefiano to regard him as a suitable husband for her daughter. He would probably become soured and embittered, and as likely as not take to wild habits. Altogether, Giacinta Rossano had a very unfavorable opinion of the whole business. She devoutly wished that the fates had led her father to choose any other apartment than the second floor of Palazzo Acorari; for in that case Silvio would certainly not have gone to mass at the Sudario on Christmas Eve, and lost his heart and his common-sense when he got there.

This process of reasoning was scarcely logical, perhaps—but Giacinta had quite made up her mind that the midnight mass was responsible for the whole affair. She believed that if Silvio had happened to see Donna Bianca Acorari for the first time under more ordinary circumstances, he would not have thought twice about her. Besides, to fall in love with a person in church, she considered, was certainly improper, and very likely unlucky.

Giacinta had listened to Silvio's account of his meeting with Donna Bianca in the grounds of the Villa Acorari, complete details of which, it is hardly necessary to add, he did not give his sister, with something approaching consternation. She had never doubted that sooner or later Silvio would succeed in obtaining some interview with the girl, but she had certainly not expected to hear that Bianca Acorari was so ready to give everything he asked of her. She had thought that at first Bianca would be bewildered, and scarcely conscious of what love might be, and that it would require more than one meeting before Silvio would succeed in fully arousing a corresponding passion in her.

Evidently, however, from Silvio's words, reticent though he was when he touched upon Bianca's avowed love for him, it had been a case of love at first sight on both sides, and not only, as she had always hoped, on that of Silvio only. This, Giacinta felt, complicated matters considerably; and it was natural, perhaps, if, at the conclusion of Silvio's confidences, she remained silent, engrossed in her own reflections.

"You do not congratulate me," repeated Silvio, as her silence continued.

Giacinta hesitated. "I would congratulate you," she replied, "if I were sure that what you have done will be for your happiness. But as yet," she added, "there is nothing to congratulate you upon."

"How do you mean—nothing to congratulate me upon," said Silvio, with an unruffled good-humor that almost annoyed Giacinta, "when I tell you that she

loves me—that she has promised to be my wife? Is not that reason enough for you to congratulate me? But, of course, I always told you I was sure she returned my love."

"You never told me anything of the kind," said Giacinta curtly. "Until this evening, I do not think you have mentioned Donna Bianca Acorari's name to me for three months."

"Have I not?" asked Silvio, carelessly. "Well, it was no good talking about the matter until I was sure of my ground, you know."

"And you are sure of it now?"

"But of course I am sure of it! Has she not promised to marry me?"

"Oh, that—yes," returned Giacinta; "but, Silvio, you know as well as I do that in our country engagements are not made like that. Bianca Acorari is not an English miss. It all reminds me of English novels I have read, in which young men always go for long walks with young girls, and come back to the five-o'clock saying that they are going to be married. This is just what you have done; but, unluckily for you, we are not in England."

Silvio laughed. Nothing could shake his serenity, for had not Bianca sworn that if she did not marry him, she would never marry?

"You forget," he said, "that Bianca and I can afford to wait. Even if Princess Montefiano makes difficulties, it is a mere question of time. In three years Bianca will be her own mistress, accountable to nobody for her actions."

Giacinta shook her head. "That is all very well, Silvio," she replied, "but a great many disagreeable things may happen in three years. Do you think that Donna Bianca loves you enough to keep her promise to you, whatever opposition she may encounter?"

Silvio smiled. "Yes," he said, simply, "I do."

Giacinta was silent for a moment. Silvio was strangely confident, she thought. Perhaps she underrated Bianca Acorari's strength of character. It might be that this girl was really in love with Silvio, and that her character and Silvio's were alike in tenacity of purpose and loyalty. At any rate, she had no right to judge Bianca until she knew her, or at least had had some opportunity of observing how she behaved by Silvio when the storm which they had brewed finally burst, which it certainly must do very quickly.

"You are very sure of her, Silvio *mio*," she said, at length, with a smile.

"Very sure," responded Silvio, tranquilly. "After all, Giacinta," he continued, "what can the princess or her advisers do? They can but refuse to allow the engagement, but Bianca and I shall not consider ourselves the less engaged on that account. And when they saw that opposition was useless, that Bianca intended to marry me, and me only, they would have to give way. Otherwise, we should simply wait till Bianca was of age."

"But pressure might be brought to bear upon her," objected Giacinta.

"Pressure!" exclaimed Silvio.

"Yes; there are many ways. She might be placed in a convent, for instance. Such things have been done before now. Or they might force her to marry somebody else."

"Or kill me! Go on, Giacinta," said Silvio, laughing. "We are not in the Middle Ages, *cara mia sorellina.* In these days, when people disappear, inquiries are made by the police. It is a prosaic system, perhaps, but it has certain advantages."

"Silvio," exclaimed Giacinta, suddenly, "it is all very well for you to laugh, but have you considered how isolated that girl is? She has absolutely no relations on her father's side. Babbo says there are no Acorari left, and that the old prince quarrelled with his first wife's family—Donna Bianca's mother's people. She is alone in the world with a step-mother who is entirely under the thumb of her priest."

"And with me," interrupted Silvio.

Giacinta glanced at him. "They will keep you at a safe distance," she said, "if it does not suit the Abbé Roux that Donna Bianca should marry."

"*Cristo!*" swore her brother, between his teeth. "What do you mean, Giacinta? Do you know what you are implying?"

Giacinta Rossano's eyes flashed. She looked very like Silvio at that moment.

"I know perfectly well what I am implying," she said, quickly. "You have not chosen to trust me, Silvio, and perhaps you were right. After all, I could not have done so much for you as that Frenchwoman has done. God knows why she has done it!"

Silvio looked a little abashed. "How did you know about the Frenchwoman?" he asked.

Giacinta laughed dryly. "Never mind how I know," she replied, "and do not think I have been spying upon your actions. I have been making a few inquiries about the Montefiano *ménage* on my own account—about things that perhaps Mademoiselle Durand—is not that her name?—might never be in a position to hear, as she does not live in the house."

"Ah!" exclaimed Silvio. "Go on, Giacinta."

"The princess," proceeded Giacinta, "must be a strange woman. From what I can hear of her, I should doubt whether anybody knows her the least intimately, except the Abbé Roux. Oh no, Silvio, I do not mean to imply any intimacy of that nature between them," she added, hastily, suddenly becoming aware of the expression on her brother's face. "She is, I imagine, a curious mixture of worldliness and piety, but not worldliness in the sense of caring for society. She would have made an excellent abbess or mother-superior, I should think, for she loves power. At the same time, like many people who love to rule, she is weak, and allows her-

self to be ruled, partly because she is a fanatic as far as her religion is concerned, and partly—well, partly, I suppose, because she has a weak side to her nature."

Silvio looked at his sister, curiously.

"How did you learn all this?" he asked.

Giacinta shrugged her shoulders.

"You might ask—Why did I learn it?" she said. "I learned it because I wished to analyze the kind of psychologic atmosphere into which you might find yourself plunged!"

Silvio laughed. Giacinta often amused him; she was so like the professor in some ways.

"Perhaps," continued Giacinta, "had it not been that Prince Montefiano developed a conscience late in life, the princess would have been ruling nuns at this moment instead of managing the Montefiano estates."

A quick look of intelligence passed across Silvio Rossano's face. They were Romans, these two, of the sixth generation and more, and were accustomed to the Roman conversational habit of leaving *i*'s to be dotted and *t*'s to be crossed at discretion.

"Of course, she would not be very ready to give up her interest in them," he said.

"Of course not," returned Giacinta. "Moreover," she added, "the priest would do his best to prevent her from giving it up."

"*Si capisce*," said Silvio, briefly. "But how in the world do you know all this, Giacinta?"

"Oh," she replied, "I know a good deal more! I know that the Abbé Roux keeps his eye upon everything; that the princess does not spend a thousand francs without consulting him. She is tenacious of her rights to administer the Montefiano fiefs during Donna Bianca's minority, that is true. But the real administrator is the Abbé Roux. There is another person, too, with whom you ought to be brought into contact, Silvio—and that is the princess's brother, Baron d'Antin. He is *niente di buono*, so my informant tells me. But I do not imagine that Monsieur l'Abbé allows him to have any great influence with his sister. Apparently he comes here but seldom, and then only when he wants something. I do not suppose that he would concern himself very much about you and Donna Bianca."

"So you think all the opposition would come from the princess and that infernal priest?" said Silvio.

"But naturally! They do not want the girl to marry—at any rate, before she is of age. Why two or three years should make so much difference I have no idea. I should like to find out, but it would not be easy."

"I cannot imagine how you have found out so much," said Silvio.

Giacinta laughed. "I have stooped to very low methods," she said, "but it

was for your sake, Silvio. If you must know, my maid has chosen to engage herself to one of the Acorari servants, and she tells me all these little things. Of course, she has told me considerably more than I have told you, but, allowing for exaggerations and for all the misconstructions that servants invariably place upon our actions, I believe what I have told you is fairly correct. It is not very much, certainly, but—rightly or wrongly—there appears to be an impression that Donna Bianca is being purposely kept in the background, and that neither the princess nor Monsieur Roux intends that she should marry. Perhaps it is all nonsense and merely gossip, but it is as well you should know that such an impression exists.

"May one ask what you and Donna Bianca mean to do next, Silvio?" concluded Giacinta, a little satirically. "The proceedings up to now have been—well, a little *all' Inglese*, as I think we agreed; and I do not quite see how you propose to continue the affair."

A look half of amusement and half of perplexity came into Silvio's eyes.

"To tell you the truth, Giacinta," he said, "neither do I. Of course, I must see Bianca again, and then we must decide when and how I am to approach the princess. I shall have to tell my father, of course. The usual thing would be for him to speak to Princess Montefiano."

"Poor Babbo!" exclaimed Giacinta. "It seems to me, Silvio," she added, severely, "that you have landed us all in a *brutto impiccio*. I certainly wish that I had never thought it would be good for your soul to go to mass last Christmas Eve!"

XI

Monsieur d'Antin did not immediately return to the house after having been an unobserved spectator of the parting scene between Bianca and her lover.

His presence in the ilex groves of the Villa Acorari that afternoon had been due to the merest chance—if, indeed, it were not one of those malicious tricks so frequently performed by the power that we call Fate or Providence, according to our own mood and the quality of the practical jokes played upon us.

He had been spending the day at Genzano, where he had breakfasted with a well-known Roman lady possessing an equally well-known villa lying buried in its oak and chestnut woods. The breakfast-party had been a pleasant one, and

Monsieur d'Antin had enjoyed himself so much that he felt disinclined to return to Rome as early as he had at first intended. It would be agreeable, he thought, to drive from Genzano to the Villa Acorari, spend two or three hours there, and drive back to Rome, as he had been invited to do late in the evening, instead of returning by train.

Monsieur d'Antin had duly arrived at the Villa Acorari about four o'clock, only to find that the princess had gone to Rome for the day on business, and was not expected back until six. Donna Bianca, the servants told him, was at home, but she was in the gardens. Monsieur d'Antin was not so disappointed as he professed to be on hearing this intelligence. He would rest for a little while in the house, as it was still very hot—and—yes, an iced-lemonade would be very refreshing after his dusty drive from Genzano. Afterwards, perhaps, he would go into the gardens and see if he could find Donna Bianca.

A stroll through the ilex walks with Bianca would not be an unpleasing ending to his day among the Castelli Romani. Hitherto he had never been alone with her, and he was not sorry that chance had given him an opportunity of being so. The girl might be amusing when she was no longer under supervision. At any rate, she was attractive to look upon, and—oh, decidedly she sometimes had made him feel almost as though he were a young man again. That was always a pleasurable sensation, even if nothing could come of it. It was certainly a pity that he was not twenty years younger—nay, even ten years would be sufficient. Had he been so—who knows?—things might have been arranged. It would have been very suitable—very convenient in every way, and would have kept the Montefiano estates and titles in the family, so to speak. And Bianca was certainly a seductive child—there was no doubt about it. That mouth, that hair, and the lines of the figure just shaping themselves into maturity—Bah! they would make an older man than he feel young when he looked at them. Yes, it was certainly a pity. Jeanne, no doubt, would delay matters until—well, until those charms were too fully developed. That was the worst of these Italian girls—they were apt to develop too fast—to become too massive.

Monsieur d'Antin leaned back in an arm-chair in the cool, darkened *salone* of the Villa Acorari, and abandoned himself to these and various other reflections of a similar nature. He found the mental state a very pleasant one after his somewhat ample breakfast and hot drive. There was something, too, in the subdued light of the marble saloon, with its statues and groups of palms, and in the soothing sound of a fountain playing in the court-yard without, that gently stimulated such reflections.

At length, however, a striking clock had roused Monsieur d'Antin, and he sallied forth into the gardens, directed by a servant to the broad, box-bordered walk that led up the hill to the ilex groves where, as the man informed him, Donna

Bianca usually went.

Probably, had it not been for that self-same shower of rain which had disturbed Bianca's meditations and caused her to seek the shelter of the avenue and the casino, he would have found her sitting in the open space near the fountains, where, as a matter of fact, Silvio Rossano had been watching her for some little time, wondering how he should best accost her. Silvio, concealed behind his tree, would certainly have seen Monsieur d'Antin approaching, and would have waited for another opportunity to accomplish his object. But, as usual, Puck or Providence must needs interfere and cause the rain to descend more heavily just as Monsieur d'Antin arrived at the fountains. Seeing that the avenue would afford him shelter he had entered it, and, after waiting for a few minutes, had bent his steps in the direction of the casino he observed at the farther end of it. The sound of voices coming from within the summer-house had caused him to stop and listen; and what he overheard, although he could not entirely follow the rapid Italian in which its occupants were speaking, was enough to tell him that Bianca Acorari was one of the speakers, that the other was a man, and that love was the topic of the conversation. Very quietly, and crouching down so as to be invisible from the window of the casino, Monsieur d'Antin had stepped past the half-closed door and concealed himself behind the little building. Through the open window he had been able from his hiding-place to hear every word that was said, and also to hear the sounds which certainly could not be called articulate.

Monsieur d'Antin's face, during the quarter of an hour he spent behind the casino, would have provided an interesting and instructive study to anybody who had been there to see it; it would also have made the fortune of any actor who could have reproduced its varied expressions. Astonishment, envy, lust, and malicious amusement, all were depicted upon his countenance in turn.

At last, when Bianca and her companion left the summer-house, Monsieur d'Antin was able to see what manner of man he was who had had the good fortune to arouse her passion. A single glance at Silvio, as the boy stood in the centre of the avenue with the sunlight falling on his well-built figure and comely face, explained the whole matter. If Bianca had such a lover as this, all that he had just overheard was fully accounted for. Nevertheless, a gust of envy, all the more bitter from the consciousness of its impotence, swept through Monsieur d'Antin's middle-aged soul.

He wondered who this good-looking lover of Bianca's might be. The lad was a gentleman, evidently; but Monsieur d'Antin could not remember ever having seen him in society in Rome. *Diable!* but he had been right, as usual. He, Philippe d'Antin, always was right about women. And this was Jeanne's "child"—this girl who gave herself to be kissed, and told her lover it was sweet to be hurt by him! Ah! he had heard that. The words had made the blood leap in his veins.

He watched Silvio disappear through the tangled brush-wood growing between the avenue and the park-wall, and Bianca's figure vanish in the direction of the villa, before he finally emerged from his hiding-place. Then he walked slowly several times up and down the avenue, thinking about what might be the best use to make of his discovery. Should he keep silence, and allow Bianca Acorari to compromise herself a little more irrevocably, or should he speak to Jeanne at once? He wished he had some means of knowing whether the meeting he had witnessed was a first interview, or only one of many. Unluckily his knowledge of Italian was not sufficient to enable him clearly to learn all he might have learned from the lovers' conversation. If it were a first meeting only, the matter could be the more easily nipped in the bud—and then— Here Monsieur d'Antin paused. He hardly ventured, even to himself, to cast the thoughts that were beginning to revolve in his mind into concrete form.

The worst of it was that Jeanne must be utterly incompetent to deal with anything of the nature of a love affair. He did not believe that in all his sister's life she had ever known what love was. Certainly her marriage with the Principe di Montefiano had not let her into the mystery, for everybody knew that it was a marriage which had, so to say, stopped short at the altar.

Who could tell, moreover, who this young fellow might be? It was certainly not likely that he was a suitable match for Bianca, or the two would not behave in so absolutely *bourgeois* a manner. No; the boy was much more probably some adventurer—some shopkeeper from Rome, with the *faux airs* of a gentleman about him. In this case the matter would be very simple. It would not be a very easy thing to find a husband for a girl who was known to have had a *liaison* with a man out of her class; and, this being so, Bianca Acorari would either have to remain single or marry some man who would be willing to overlook such a scandal in her past.

Thus reflecting, Monsieur d'Antin came to the conclusion that, for the moment at all events, he would say nothing to his sister. The first thing to be done would be to find out who this young man was. Afterwards, it would be easier to decide how long the little love-idyl he had assisted at that afternoon should be allowed to continue. If he had to take anybody into his confidence before speaking to Jeanne, why should the Abbé Roux not be that person?

That was a good idea—an excellent idea. The priest could manage Jeanne, and, perhaps, he, Philippe d'Antin, could manage the priest. It was possible, but he was not sure; for priests were—priests. In any case, it would be as well to have the abbé on his side if he found he was able to derive any personal benefit out of the *bouleversement* that must be the immediate result of the discovery of Bianca's conduct.

Yes, he would warn the Abbé Roux that it would be well to keep an eye

on Bianca's movements, and how she passed her hours at the Villa Acorari. Of course the boy would come again—and small blame to him! And if spying were to be done, it had better be done by the priest. In that case he, Monsieur d'Antin, would not incur Bianca's odium as being the destroyer of her romance.

Having arranged his programme to his satisfaction, Monsieur d'Antin strolled back to the villa. He found Bianca in the saloon, and greeted her with an airy good-humor.

"I have been looking for you in the gardens," he said. "They said you were walking there—but where you have been hiding yourself I do not know! Certainly I failed to discover the spot."

If Monsieur d'Antin had been so foolish as to allow himself to look at the girl as he spoke, he would have seen the quick look of relief on her face. As it was, he looked at his watch.

"The servants told me you were here," she replied. "How you did not find me in the gardens, I cannot think. Did you go up to the ilex grove—the wood at the top of the hill?"

The keen note of anxiety in her voice was not lost upon Monsieur d'Antin.

"Yes," he returned. "I looked down the avenue, but I saw nobody. Then it began to rain heavily, and I tried to get back to the house. But I lost my way, and found myself—oh, close to the high road. So I took refuge under a tree, and—here I am!"

Bianca laughed nervously. "What a dull way of spending the afternoon!" she said. "But mamma will be back presently—she had to go to Rome. You are going to stop for dinner, of course? Perhaps to sleep here?"

"Impossible!" said Monsieur d'Antin, consulting his watch again. "I must drive back to Genzano. I told the *vetturino* to wait."

"But mamma," said Bianca, "she will be so disappointed to miss you! Surely you can stay to dinner?"

"Impossible," repeated Monsieur d'Antin. "I have promised to drive back to Rome from Genzano with one of the secretaries of our legation, and we were to start at seven o'clock. Make my excuses to my sister, and tell her that I shall be back again soon to pay her a visit—oh, very soon. But, my dear child, you look pale—you have been too much in the sun, perhaps—"

"Do I?" asked Bianca, hastily. "It is nothing—my head aches a little. Yes, I suppose it is the sun."

Monsieur d'Antin laughed merrily.

"No doubt!" he said. "His kisses are too warm just now—decidedly too warm. You must beware of them, my dear child. Do not let him kiss you too often, or he will spoil that delicate skin."

And laughing always, he bade Bianca good-bye, and went to the entrance-

door where a servant was engaged in trying to rouse his slumbering driver.

XII

"The thing is absolutely incredible!"

It was the Abbé Roux who was speaking. He sat with his hands folded on his lap. They were puffy hands, and looked unnaturally white against the black background of his *soutane*.

Monsieur d'Antin sat a few paces away from him, smoking a cigarette. The two had been in earnest conversation together in Monsieur d'Antin's little apartment in the Via Ludovisi, where the Abbé Roux had arrived half an hour before very much exercised in his mind as to why the princess's brother should have made such a point of wishing to speak with him in private.

Monsieur d'Antin looked at his visitor, and his face contracted with one of his satirical little smiles.

"You think so, my dear abbé?" he said, dryly. "That is because you are so infinitely superior to the weaknesses of the flesh. To me, on the contrary, the thing is perfectly credible; it is even natural. But we must endeavor to save Donna Bianca Acorari from the consequences this particular weakness would entail. I am glad I decided to confide in you before speaking to my sister. Of course, had Bianca been her own child, it would have simplified matters considerably; but as it is, I am sure you will agree with me, my dear abbé, that we must help my sister in this very difficult position."

The Abbé Roux unfolded his hands and began rubbing them gently together.

"Certainly, Monsieur le Baron, certainly," he replied. "It is, indeed, a duty to assist the princess in this—this exceedingly painful affair."

He paused, and looked at Monsieur d'Antin inquiringly, as though to intimate that he was only waiting to hear how the latter proposed to act.

Monsieur d'Antin proceeded with some deliberation to light another cigarette.

"I felt convinced that you would agree with me," he said, at length. "I am quite aware—my sister has often told me, indeed—what confidence she has in your judgment. I regard it as very fortunate that she has so reliable a counsellor. A woman left in her position needs some man at her side who will give her disin-

terested advice; and you, of course, Monsieur l'Abbé, enjoy two great advantages. In the first place, you have the influence of your sacred calling, which, as we both know, my sister regards with extreme reverence; and, in the next place, though a foreigner by birth, you are as much at home in Italy and with Italians as though you were one of themselves."

The Abbé Roux bowed. "Madame la Princesse has, indeed, chosen to honor me by asking my advice occasionally on matters quite apart from my profession," he replied.

Monsieur d'Antin blew a cloud of smoke into the air. There was, perhaps, the faintest suspicion of impatience in the action.

"Precisely," he returned. "Knowing this, I feel that we can discuss the peculiar situation in which Donna Bianca has placed herself—or, I should rather say, in which an unscrupulous young man has placed her—as two men of the world. Is it not so? My sister," he continued, without giving the priest time to reply, "would naturally merely look at the affair from the moral point of view. She would be deeply scandalized by it, and shocked at what she would regard almost as depravity in one whom she has hitherto considered to be still a child. All that is very well—but we men, my dear abbé, know that there are other things to be thought of in these cases of indiscretion on the part of young girls."

"The deception," said the Abbé Roux, shaking his head; "the princess will feel the deception practised by her step-daughter very acutely."

Monsieur d'Antin tapped a neatly shod foot on the floor.

"Dear Monsieur l'Abbé," he observed, gently, "let us ignore the deception as being one of those moral points of the case which, I think, we have agreed to leave out of our discussion. The question is, does my sister wish Donna Bianca to marry, or does she not?"

"Most decidedly not!" exclaimed the Abbé Roux, hastily, almost angrily.

Monsieur d'Antin glanced at him. "I do not necessarily allude to Donna Bianca's marriage with this unknown lover," he returned, "but to her marriage in the abstract."

The other hesitated.

"The princess, I believe, considers that it would be very unadvisable for Donna Bianca to marry too young," he said. "She has her good reasons, no doubt," he added—"women's reasons, Monsieur le Baron, with which you and I need not concern ourselves."

Monsieur d'Antin laughed softly.

"It appears to me," he said, "that Donna Bianca has proved them to be mere ideas, not reasons. I do not think my sister need be uneasy on that score. I should say, on the contrary, that in this instance marriage was advisable—very advisable indeed. You have often, I have no doubt, had to recommend it to your penitents,

Monsieur l'Abbé."

The Abbé Roux spread out his hands with a deprecatory gesture. "In the present case," he said, "there are, I believe, other considerations which madame your sister, as guardian to Donna Bianca Acorari, has to take into account."

Monsieur d'Antin nodded his head. "I understand," he observed. "Pecuniary considerations."

The abbé looked at him. "In a sense—yes," he said. "The prince," he continued, "was not a man of business."

"So I have always heard," remarked Monsieur d'Antin.

"He left his affairs in a very involved state. The princess, since she has had the management of them, has been endeavoring to bring them into better order during Donna Bianca's minority."

"I understand," said Monsieur d'Antin again. "So that," he added, "it is, from a business point of view, very desirable that Donna Bianca should not marry before she is twenty-one."

"Exactly!" assented the abbé. "From a business point of view it is more than desirable, it is important," he added. "In the event of Donna Bianca's marrying, even as a minor, she would bring to her husband the Montefiano properties, and their administration by madame your sister would cease. These were the terms of the prince's will."

"It is perfectly clear," observed Monsieur d'Antin. "My sister and I have never discussed these matters," he continued. "There would have been no object in her talking to me about them, for I am absolutely ignorant of Roman customs where landed property is concerned. As I say, it is fortunate that she has had you to advise her as to how to act for the best in her step-daughter's interest. I fully understand the situation, however; or, if I do not, you will correct me—is it not so? *Bien*! I will proceed to explain myself—with your permission."

The abbé bowed silently.

"For business reasons, into which it is unnecessary to enter in detail, it is not convenient that Donna Bianca Acorari should marry for, at all events, three years. But surely, my dear Monsieur l'Abbé, it would very much depend upon whom she married, whether these business calculations were upset or not? An accommodating husband—or one who was in a position to be independent of any fortune his wife might bring him, need not necessarily, so far as I can see, interfere with arrangements you may have thought it wise to suggest to my sister for the better administration of her step-daughter's property."

Monsieur d'Antin looked penetratingly at his visitor as he said these words, and the abbé returned his gaze. Then something like a smile crossed the faces of both men simultaneously.

"No doubt," the priest replied, tranquilly, "very much would depend upon

the husband. But I do not see your argument, monsieur," he continued. "You surely are not suggesting that Donna Bianca's very deplorable entanglement with a young man, whose identity, I must remind you, is as yet unknown to us, should be permitted to go on? The very fact of this individual meeting your niece—"

"Not my niece, Monsieur l'Abbé—not my niece!" interrupted Monsieur d'Antin. "The accident of Donna Bianca Acorari's father having married my sister *en secondes noces*, does not make that young lady any relation to me."

"Pardon!" said the abbé; "I forgot. Of course, as you say, Donna Bianca is absolutely no relation to you—not even a connection, indeed."

"Precisely—not even a connection," repeated Monsieur d'Antin. "But pray proceed—"

"I was about to say," resumed the abbé, "that no young man of good family would place a young girl in such an unheard-of position as to make love to her before speaking to her relations. The man is no doubt some adventurer."

"That," said Monsieur d'Antin, "I must leave to you to ascertain. As I have just observed, I am no relation of Donna Bianca Acorari. I therefore prefer not to interfere further than to utter a private warning to those who have the right to move in the matter as to what has accidentally come to my knowledge."

"It will not be difficult to identify the individual whom you saw in Donna Bianca's company," said the priest. "As you remarked, he is sure to repeat his visit to the Villa Acorari. For this reason I should be inclined to say nothing to the princess until we have ascertained who it is with whom we have to deal."

"Exactly!" exclaimed Monsieur d'Antin. "I thoroughly agree with you. You will admit, however, my dear abbé, that the matter is serious. For instance, what is to prevent the young couple from taking the law into their own hands and running away? If the young man is merely an adventurer, he might persuade Donna Bianca to take such a step. There has been an example of the kind in Rome not so very long ago, if I am not mistaken."

"There is nothing to prevent them from doing so, certainly," replied the Abbé Roux. "They could get themselves married ecclesiastically, no doubt, but not legally. It would hardly be worth an adventurer's while to burden himself with a wife over whose fortune he would have no legal rights."

"He might prefer to establish rights over her person," said Monsieur d'Antin, dryly. "Young men—are young men; and this one, unless I am greatly mistaken, thinks more of Donna Bianca's face than her fortune."

The Abbé Roux shrugged his shoulders. "He seems to be on the high road to establish those rights already," he observed, "if one is to judge by what you overheard. The blessing of the Church is not invariably sought in cases of this kind," he added.

Monsieur d'Antin chuckled. "True," he replied, "the girl is inexperienced,

and of a temperament—oh, but of a temperament—" He paused abruptly.

The abbé looked at him quickly. Then he smiled a curious little smile not altogether in keeping with his clerical attire.

"Ah," he said, "I think, Monsieur le Baron, that you have had occasion to remark on this—this delicate subject before, have you not? The princess mentioned to me some time ago that you had told her you thought she was mistaken in believing her step-daughter to be still a child. You have evidently been studying Donna Bianca attentively. After all, she is a very attractive young lady, and is developing greater beauty every few months. But your warning to Madame la Princesse has turned out to be singularly justified by subsequent events. One sees that you have an insight into female character, Monsieur le Baron."

Monsieur d'Antin looked at him suspiciously for a moment, and then he laughed good-humoredly.

"What would you have, my dear abbé?" he asked. "I am not such an old man—yet; and I am not a priest. I have my little experiences—yes—and I am not often mistaken about a woman," and Monsieur d'Antin slapped himself encouragingly on the breast. "I will make you a little confession, my friend," he continued, gayly. "It is of no consequence that I am smoking a cigarette, and that you do not happen to have your stole on—you can give me absolution all the same. I find my 'niece,' as you choose to call her, charming—absolutely charming. It is a thousand pities that she has so hopelessly compromised herself with this mysterious young man, for if the story becomes known, when my sister wants to find a husband for her it will not be such an easy matter to do so. Ah, my dear Monsieur l'Abbé, had I only been younger, a very few years younger, I would have come forward and said: 'I, Philippe d'Antin, will marry you, and protect you from the evil tongues of the world. I pardon your youthful indiscretion, and I make you the Baroness d'Antin.'"

Monsieur d'Antin paused and looked at the Abbé Roux gravely. He appeared to be almost overcome by a sense of his own magnanimity.

The abbé was apparently engrossed in his own thoughts. He sat silently rubbing his hands together, and it was some moments before he spoke.

"I agree with you, monsieur," he said, presently. "It is not every man who will marry a young lady who has placed herself in an equivocal position. You are very generous. I offer you my congratulations on your chivalrous spirit; and though, as you remark, I have not my stole on, I shall respect your confidence. All the same, *nous sommes toujours là*! Donna Bianca Acorari's marriage would not be advisable for the present. The princess, I feel convinced, would not countenance it."

"But, my dear abbé," exclaimed Monsieur d'Antin, "I assure you that I thoroughly understand! I was merely stating what I should have been prepared to do

had I only been a slightly younger man. I do not conceal the fact from you that I have a certain admiration for Donna Bianca, which you, with your knowledge of frail human nature, will readily pardon as a mere weakness of the flesh—is it not so? At the same time, I should have been prepared to sacrifice myself in order to prevent any scandal; and, moreover, perhaps there would not be the same objections to me as a husband for Donna Bianca as there might be in the case of a stranger. We should, so to speak, be keeping the Montefiano properties in the family, should we not, Monsieur l'Abbé? and there would have been no reason to fear that your and my sister's excellent schemes for the benefit of the estates would not have had ample time to be realized. However, these are mere *châteaux en Espagne*. We need not discuss so unlikely a contingency any further. I consider that I have done my duty in warning you, as my sister's confidential adviser and spiritual director, as to what is taking place; and, as I have said, I must leave it to you to take such steps as you think proper regarding when and how the princess is to be made acquainted with the story. After what I have confided to you of my personal feelings, I am sure you will understand my determination not to mix myself up in the matter—unless I am wanted. If I can be of any use eventually, you know, my dear Monsieur l'Abbé, what I am prepared to do in order to protect Donna Bianca from any scandal."

The Abbé Roux rose from his chair. "I think, Monsieur le Baron," he said, "that you may safely leave this very delicate matter to me. The first thing to be done is to find out who this young man may be. When I have accomplished this, we can discuss what may be the best course to be taken. For the moment, I shall say nothing to the princess. A day or two's delay can do no harm, and may do good."

Monsieur d'Antin accompanied his visitor to the door of the staircase, where he took leave of him. Then he returned to his sitting-room, and, having closed the door, gave vent to quiet but genuine merriment.

XIII

Silvio Rossano had quickly made up his mind that, as was only fitting and proper, he would tell his father without further delay of the situation in which he and Bianca found themselves. It would be the professor's duty to call on Princess Montefiano and make a formal proposal on the part of his son for Donna Bianca's

hand. That the proposal would not be listened to by the princess, Silvio was convinced. He had never attempted to deceive himself upon that subject, and less than ever after hearing from Giacinta what she had learned. But, at all events, once having sent his father as his ambassador, he would have conformed to the usages of society, and would afterwards be free to take his own line.

Mademoiselle Durand, to whom he had of course confided the successful result of his interview with Bianca in the grounds of the Villa Acorari, had counselled patience. There was no reason, she thought, why, with the exercise of ordinary prudence, Silvio and the girl whom he now looked upon as his betrothed wife should not repeatedly meet each other in the same manner, and there was surely no necessity to be in a hurry to explode the mine they had laid—more especially as it was not so easy to calculate what the effects of the explosion might be. But Silvio was firm. Had there been the slightest hope of being able to accomplish his object in any other way, he would never, as he told Mademoiselle Durand, have approached Bianca secretly, and already he blamed himself for having placed the girl in so unusual a position. Now, however, that he had heard from her own lips that Bianca returned his love, and since they had mutually vowed to marry each other, or not to marry at all, he would have no more concealment. If the princess refused to accept him as a husband for her step-daughter, then he should feel that he and Bianca were at liberty to carry out their future plans in their own way.

Mademoiselle Durand expostulated in vain. Silvio begged her to deliver a letter to Bianca when she next went to the Villa Acorari. In this letter he explained all his reasons for not risking another interview with her until they should have learned the result of his father's visit to the princess, and these reasons he put before Bianca in the simple, straightforward way which was part of his nature. Mademoiselle Durand promised to deliver the letter the very next day, and in the mean time Silvio had carried his story to his father.

Professor Rossano had received his son's intelligence with a blank dismay which was almost ludicrous; for never, surely, had a task for which he was so absolutely ill-fitted been thrust upon him. At first he had positively declined to interfere, or to be by way of knowing anything at all about the matter. Silvio had chosen to fall in love in an impossible quarter, and the best thing he could do was to fall out of love again as quickly as possible. As to thinking that the Principessa di Montefiano would allow her step-daughter and the last representative of the Acorari to marry the son of the tenant of her second floor, that was altogether an absurdity. Giacomelli had been quite right when he said Silvio was in love, and would be taking false measurements in consequence. He had taken them—deplorably false measurements.

"But," Silvio observed quietly, after the first stream of objection had some-

what subsided, "I do not the least think the princess will consent to our marriage."

"Then, may I ask, what is the use of sending me on a fool's errand?" the professor retorted, witheringly.

"Nevertheless, whether she consents or not, Bianca Acorari and I shall marry each other. All the same," continued Silvio, "if she gives her consent, it will, of course, obviate a great many difficulties."

His father gazed at him with an expression half angry and half humorous.

"*Diamine!*" he observed, "I imagine that it would! It appears to me, Silvio, you forget that marrying an heiress is not the same thing as building a bridge. In the mean time, as I say, you wish to send me on a fool's errand. Well, you may 'go out fishing!' These people are noble, and I am not going to expose myself and my son to certain prejudices which an old-fashioned woman like Princess Montefiano probably entertains. Moreover, they are clericals—fervent Catholics—and when people are fervent Catholics—*mah!*" and the professor shrugged his shoulders.

Silvio laughed. "It is a mere formality, Babbo," he said, "and it is the only thing I shall ask you to do in the matter. If you like, you can go to the princess and say to her, 'My son has fallen in love with your step-daughter, and means to marry her. I have told him he is an imbecile, and that I will not give my consent; but he declares he will marry her all the same.'"

"Oh, oh!" exclaimed the professor, "so you would marry without my consent, would you? And pray, what would you live upon?"

"My wits."

"It seems to me that you are a pumpkin-head, and that you have lost them," returned the professor. "Does Giacinta know of this folly?"

"She knows that I am going to marry Donna Bianca Acorari."

"The devil she does!" observed Professor Rossano. "Go and talk it over with Giacinta, Silvio," he continued; "she is a sensible girl, and will tell you that you are going to make a fool of yourself, and of your family as well. As for me, I will have nothing to do with it. I have no time to spend on such trifles."

"But if I have already talked it over with Giacinta?" said Silvio. He knew very well how to manage his father. The professor would certainly end by doing what either of his children asked him to do. It was his method of carrying out his sense of parental duty. His children, whenever he remembered to think about them, puzzled him considerably; or rather, it puzzled him to know what was expected of him as a father. Occasionally he would sit and look at Giacinta with much the same expression on his face as may be seen on that of a retriever bitch whose puppies are beginning to assert their independence. He often felt that it was probably incumbent upon him to do something on her behalf, but he did not at all know what it might be, and still less how to do it. In Silvio's case things

had been different. The boy had so early given unmistakable proofs of having both the brains and the character to take a line of his own in the world, that the professor had never had seriously to think of possible responsibilities towards him.

This affair of Silvio's, however, would, as Professor Rossano was quick to realize, need some careful handling on a father's part. He was very fond of his children, notwithstanding all his apparent absorption in his scientific occupations, and he was proud as well as fond of his son. He might laugh at Silvio, and call him an "imbecile," and he might pretend to regard his love for this Acorari girl as a foolish fancy that need not be seriously discussed. But in his heart Professor Rossano was uneasy. He knew that Silvio was not a susceptible lad, and that he had hitherto appeared to be remarkably indifferent to women. But he knew, too, his tenacity of character, and how when he had once fairly made up his mind to attain some object he would pursue his purpose with an energy that was almost dogged.

Added to these traits in Silvio's character, the professor knew the gentleness and loyalty of his nature and his simple, affectionate disposition. It would go very hard with the boy, he thought, if he were deceived or played with by any woman upon whom he had really set his affections. Notwithstanding his assertion that he would have nothing to say or do in the matter, Professor Rossano had not the slightest intention of allowing Silvio's life to be made unhappy if he could prevent it. The boy had a career before him, and it should most certainly not be wrecked by a priest-ridden woman and the daughter of so poor a specimen of humanity as the late Principe di Montefiano was reputed to have been. What Donna Bianca Acorari might be, the professor neither knew nor cared. Though they lived under the same roof, he had never set eyes upon the girl. She was probably bored to death with her step-mother and her step-mother's pious practices, and had encouraged the first good-looking young man she saw to make love to her, which young man had unfortunately happened to be Silvio.

Perhaps Silvio guessed something of what was passing in his father's mind. "I have already talked it over with Giacinta," he repeated, as the professor remained silent. "She does not think, any more than I think, that there is the slightest chance of Princess Montefiano listening to any proposal coming from us."

"And why not, I should like to know?" exclaimed the professor with sublime inconsistency.

"For various reasons," returned Silvio, suppressing an inclination to laugh. "Giacinta knows more about Casa Montefiano than any of us," he continued. "I told her some time ago how it was with me, and she has been making some inquiries. It appears that there is a priest—the Abbé Roux, they call him—"

"May the devil take him!" interrupted the professor. "He puts his nose

everywhere. When we took this apartment the princess had agreed to make certain alterations, but the porter told my lawyer that the Abbé Roux—well, never mind!—what were you going to say about him, Silvio?"

"Only that, as you say, he puts his foot everywhere. Giacinta has heard that neither the princess nor he really wish Donna Bianca to marry at all."

"Which means to say that the priest does not wish it, for some reasons of his own—money reasons, probably. The princess will do what he tells her to do, of course."

"Of course," repeated Silvio, dryly.

"And do you mean me to go and bribe the Abbé Roux?" asked the professor, "for I shall most decidedly do nothing of the kind!"

"Oh, not at all!" returned Silvio, quietly; "I tell you, it does not matter, Babbo. Bianca and I shall wait three years, unless we get tired of waiting and run away with each other before. We could be married in a church, you know, and the legal marriage might be postponed till she was of age, but I think it would be better to wait the three years."

"*Diamine!*" ejaculated the professor, "but you seem to be very certain of your arrangements, *figlio mio*, and of the girl."

Silvio nodded. "You see," he said, "I don't want to put her in any false position, and if we ran away with each other before she is of age, people would say I had done it in order eventually to get her money. Besides, in the course of three years she will have ample time to be quite sure that she has not made a mistake," added Silvio, with a smile.

The professor looked at him. "Yes," he said, "you are quite right, but not many young men would be so thoughtful or so confiding. In the mean time, you think—Giacinta thinks there is no chance of your being allowed to pay your addresses to Donna Bianca Acorari, because, I suppose, you would not be considered well-born enough nor rich enough. You might be a contractor risen from nothing, or a *mercante di campagna* whose father had herded pigs, and, if you had money, no objections would be made to your marrying into the Acorari or any other family. *Figlio mio*, take my advice. Leave these people alone, and take your wife from a class that has good brains and healthy blood, not from these worn-out families of which the country has very little further need. You are only preparing for yourself trouble and disappointment."

Silvio shook his head. "I will marry Bianca Acorari, or I will marry nobody," he said.

The professor shrugged his shoulders.

"That being the case," he observed, mildly, "what is the use of discussing the matter any further? Why send me to the girl's step-mother? It is a waste of time."

"You could write," suggested Silvio.

"Of course I should write!" returned his father testily. "You don't suppose I should spend a whole day in going to Velletri and back on such an affair, do you? All the same, I see why you think the formal proposal should be made in the usual way. If it is declined by the princess—as, of course, it will be—you and the girl will consider yourselves to be justified in taking the matter into your hands—is it not true?"

"Exactly," answered Silvio. "Moreover," he added, "I want to be certain that Giacinta's informant is right, and that there is some reason why Donna Bianca will not be allowed to marry either me or anybody else, if it can be prevented."

The professor nodded his head slowly. "Depend upon it, the priest is at the bottom of it," he said. "He is probably feathering his nest, or somebody else's nest, well out of the Montefiano revenues, and does not want any premature change in the situation. And that reminds me," he added, laughing, "that you had better have been anybody's son than mine. The priests—I mean those of the Abbé Roux type—regard me as a freemason, a heretic, anything you please that is damnable, because—well, because I believe Domeneddio to have given us minds in order that we should use them. I am afraid, Silvio *mio*, that Donna Bianca Acorari would never be allowed to marry the son of a senator, who also happens to be a scientist in a modest way."

"I tell you again, Babbo," said Silvio, "that it doesn't matter. All I want is to be refused by the princess, after a formal proposal has been made in the recognized manner. That will quite satisfy me. Do you not see, too, that we should be placing ourselves in a humiliating position if we did not approach the Princess Montefiano? She has the right to expect it, and by not conforming to the usage it would appear as though we knew ourselves to be in an entirely different class; whereas we are not that. We do not happen to possess a title, but for all that we can show as good blood as the Acorari; while you are a senator, and your name is known throughout Italy."

The professor passed his hand through his hair. "Yes," he replied, "I believe you are right, Silvio. I imagine that you will very quickly be satisfied if a refusal is all you want. But remember, I will have nothing more to do with the matter after I have informed Princess Montefiano that you wish to marry her step-daughter, and have conveyed her answer to you. You are very obstinate, and I suppose you and this girl are in love with each other. That being the case, you must make fools of yourselves in your own way. Only, don't expect me to help you. I am going to the Lincei."

And without waiting for Silvio to reply, Professor Rossano took up his soft felt hat and his walking-stick, which were lying on a table near him, and walked

out of his study, leaving Silvio satisfied that he would do as he had asked him.

XIV

Four days only had elapsed since the Abbé Roux's interview with Monsieur d'Antin in the Via Ludovisi, when he received a telegram from Princess Montefiano, begging him to come to the Villa Acorari at once, as she wished to consult him on urgent business.

The abbé had endeavored to find out, by judicious inquiries from the porter at Palazzo Montefiano, and from one or two servants who were left in charge of the princess's apartments, whether any stranger who might answer to Monsieur d'Antin's description of the young man he had seen with Donna Bianca had ever presented himself there. He had intended going to the Villa Acorari himself under some excuse of business, and, without saying anything for the moment to Princess Montefiano, to cause the grounds to be watched, and the intrusion of any stranger duly reported to him. Indeed, he had determined, so far as time permitted, to do a little watching on his own account. It was clearly advisable, as Monsieur d'Antin had said, to know with whom one was dealing. It might be, though it was not at all likely, that Bianca Acorari's Romeo was a son of some well-known Roman house, living in *villeggiatura* at his family palace or villa in the neighborhood; and that the scene at which Monsieur d'Antin had assisted was merely the escapade of some thoughtless youth at a loss how to pass his time in the country.

It was curious that, in turning over in his mind all the possible men who could have had any opportunity of seeing enough of Donna Bianca to fall in love with her, the Abbé Roux never thought of the son of the obnoxious senator who lived in Palazzo Acorari. As a matter of fact, he had never seen Silvio Rossano, for he had never happened to encounter him on the staircase or in the court-yard of Palazzo Acorari on the occasion of his frequent visits there, though he was very well aware of his existence.

It was, therefore, a pure coincidence that Silvio should happen to enter the palace at the very moment when the abbé was in deep conversation with the porter at the foot of the staircase. Probably the priest would scarcely have noticed him, had it not been that Silvio had looked at him with, as he fancied, some curiosity. Monsieur l'Abbé asked the porter who Silvio was, and the man

seemed surprised.

"That one?" he said. "Why, that is the *signorino* of the second floor, a *bel ragazzo*—is it not true, *monsignore*?"

The Montefiano establishment always gave the Abbé Roux the title of *monsignore*, not being quite clear as to what an abbé might be.

"Ah, of course," returned the abbé, "the *signorino* of the second floor"—and he followed Silvio's retreating form with his eyes.

"*Un bel ragazzo davvero—proprio bello!*" he continued, giving Silvio a prolonged look, as the latter turned the angle of the staircase, and enabled the abbé to see his face distinctly. "He is always in Rome?" he inquired, carelessly.

"Yes, the Signorino Rossano was living at home now," the porter declared. "He was a very quiet young man—*molto serio*. Indeed, he, the porter, had never seen him engaged in any adventures, unless—"

"Unless—what?" asked the abbé, smiling. "A young man cannot be expected to be always *molto serio*," he added, leniently.

"*Sicuro!* especially so handsome a lad as the *signorino*. Naturally the women made up to him. The French mademoiselle who came to the *principessina*, for instance; he had met the *signorino* and her walking together—oh, more than once. Not that there was anything in it, probably—for it was in the daytime he had met them—in the morning, indeed—and who wanted to make love on an empty stomach?"

The Abbé Roux checked the porter's garrulity with a slight gesture, and appeared to take but little interest in the matter.

Nevertheless, as he left Palazzo Acorari he wondered whether by any chance this young Rossano could be the individual he was looking for. His personal appearance answered to Monsieur d'Antin's description of Donna Bianca's lover—and what more probable than that the two had met repeatedly in this way in and out of the *palazzo*, and had managed to communicate with each other? The Frenchwoman, of course! She had been the channel of communication! The abbé thought that he must have been very dull not to think at once of so simple an explanation of the affair. But he had momentarily forgotten that Professor Rossano's son was living at home. He had heard all about Silvio, and knew that he was an engineer who was rapidly making a considerable reputation for himself in his profession.

But the thing was absurd—preposterous! There could be no difficulty in at once putting a stop to this young man's presumption. Moreover, the princess would be horrified at the bare idea of her step-daughter marrying the son of an infidel scientist who had ventured to attack certain dogmas of the Church. At any rate, if the princess were not properly horrified at the notion of such an alliance, he, the Abbé Roux, would have little difficulty in making her so.

Altogether, it was perhaps very fortunate that Donna Bianca's lover had turned out to be young Rossano and not somebody of higher rank, whose proposals might not be so easy to dismiss as unsuitable. He must try to get definite proof of Silvio Rossano being the suitor, however, and once he had this proof in his hands, he could speak to the princess as Monsieur d'Antin had proposed. And Monsieur d'Antin? The Abbé Roux laughed softly to himself as he thought of Monsieur d'Antin. It was certainly droll. Monsieur le Baron was—well, it was very evident what he was. But he was shrewd, too! He wished to gratify two passions at once. After all, his proposal was worthy of consideration; for if his scheme were carried out, everybody's little passions might be gratified and nobody would be the worse—except, perhaps, Donna Bianca Acorari. Yes, it was certainly worth thinking about—this self-sacrifice offered by Monsieur d'Antin. If the princess could be brought to see it, a marriage between her step-daughter and her brother would, as Monsieur d'Antin had frequently remarked, keep the Montefiano possessions in the family, where it was very advisable from his—the abbé's—point of view that they should be kept.

The Abbé Roux had not been virtually the manager of Donna Bianca Acorari's future inheritance for nearly ten years without having developed a very keen personal interest in it. The princess, as she said of herself, was not, and never had been, a woman of business. If she had displayed a certain amount of worldly acumen in inducing the late Prince Montefiano to make her his wife, there had been, it is only fair to say, no undue pecuniary motives in her manoeuvres. Her life was a lonely one, with absolutely no interests in it except those supplied by her religion. These, indeed, might have been wide enough—so wide as to embrace all humanity, had Mademoiselle d'Antin's religion been other than a purely egoistical affair. But, like many other ultra-pious people of all creeds, she labored under a conviction that future happiness was only to be purchased at the cost of much present mortification. Her own soul, consequently, was a perpetual burden to her; and so, although in a very much less degree, were the souls of others. Hence, at one moment of Mademoiselle d'Antin's life, a convent had seemed to be the most fitting place in which to retire, and she had come to Rome almost persuaded that she had a vocation to save herself and others, by a life of seclusion and prayer, from the future evils which she honestly imagined a Divine Creator petty and vindictive enough to be capable of inflicting on His creatures.

It was at this period that she happened to be thrown in the society of Prince Montefiano, who had taken to appearing in the *salons* of the "black" world, perhaps as a sincere though tardy means of mortifying that flesh which he had invariably indulged so long as it had been able to respond to the calls made upon it.

Very soon after her marriage with the reclaimed sheep, Mademoiselle d'Antin, now Principessa di Montefiano, had made the acquaintance of her compatriot, the Abbé Roux—at that time acting as secretary to a leading cardinal of the Curia, well-known for his irreconcilable and ultramontane principles. It was, perhaps, an exaggeration to declare, as did the gossips in the clubs, that the princess and the Abbé Roux between them had wrestled so hard for the salvation of Prince Montefiano's soul as to cause him to yield it up from sheer *ennui*. It was certain, however, that he soon succumbed under the process, and that the abbé became more than ever indispensable to his widow.

Prince Montefiano had, as the Abbé Roux soon found, left his affairs in a very unsatisfactory state. The lands remaining in his possession were heavily mortgaged, and a large proportion of the income derived from the fief of Montefiano—the only property of any importance left was swallowed up in payment of interest on the mortgages.

Like many other landed proprietors in the Roman province, the prince farmed out his rents to a middle-man, who paid him a fixed sum yearly, and took what he might be able to make out of the estate over and above this sum as his own profit. An agent at Montefiano collected the rents, in money or kind, from the tenants, and paid them over to this middle-man, who was himself a well-to-do *mercante di campagna* with a fair amount of capital at his back, and this individual was bound to pay in to the prince's account the sum agreed upon, whether the season and the crops were bad or good. After Prince Montefiano's death, this system had been continued, by the advice of the Abbé Roux, to whom the princess—feeling herself to be at a disadvantage in dealing with it—not only as a foreigner, but also as merely the second wife of her husband and not the mother of his only child and heiress had very soon confided the superintendence of all the business connected with the estates.

The abbé, it is true, had, after the course of two or three years, made a slight alteration in the system. On the expiration of the contract with the middle-man who had hitherto farmed the rents, his offer to renew on similar terms for a further number of years was not accepted. The abbé had assured Princess Montefiano that, if she would intrust the matter fully to him, he would find her a middleman who would pay a larger yearly sum than had hitherto been given for the rights. The princess had consented, and Monsieur l'Abbé had been as good as his word. He produced an individual who offered some ten thousand francs a year more than the *mercante di campagna* had offered; and, as the abbé pointed out, though not a very large addition to income, it was not a sum to be thrown away in such critical times. This new arrangement had worked so satisfactorily that, by degrees, the system was extended to other portions of the Montefiano property, and not merely to the fief which gave the princely title to its owners.

Abbé Roux had been perfectly frank with the princess when he proposed this extension of the "farming" system to the whole of her step-daughter's property. It would not, he declared, be possible, unless it could be guaranteed, or, at any rate promised, that the contracts should be renewable at the expiration of the legal period of their validity. It was, as he explained, an offer of a decidedly speculative nature on the part of his friend the middle-man, and one which could only be made on the understanding that its tenderer should not be disturbed in his contract until Donna Bianca Acorari should come of age, which would give him some ten years' rights over the produce of the estates in question. This proviso, the abbé assured Princess Montefiano, was, in his opinion, fair enough. The risks of bad seasons had to be taken into account; the inability of tenants to pay their rents; the vicissitudes to which live stock was always liable; and many other considerations of a similar nature. Moreover, there was the risk that Donna Bianca might die, or that the mortgagees might foreclose and sell land—risks, in fact, of every kind.

The princess had hesitated. The advantages of the proposal were obvious if the few thousand francs' addition to yearly income was the only point to be looked at. She did not, however, feel quite comfortable in her mind as to whether she had any right to pledge Bianca not to interfere or refuse to renew the contracts until she should be of age. Supposing the girl were to marry before she was of age? In that case, according to the prince's will, the estates were to be considered as Bianca's dowry, and he had only added a stipulation (which, indeed, the Abbé Roux had suggested), empowering his widow, Bianca's step-mother, to give or withhold her consent in the event of a proposal of marriage being made to his daughter while she was still a minor.

The princess had put her scruples clearly before her adviser. She meant to do her duty by Bianca according to her lights, although these, perhaps, were not very brilliant. The abbé, however, had pointed out that Donna Bianca would be in an altogether unusual position for a young girl when she was a few years older. She would be an heiress, not perhaps to a very large fortune, but, at all events, to one worth bringing to any husband, and also to titles which would descend to her children, certainly one of which, moreover, she would have the right of bestowing upon the man she married. It would be a mere question of settling a certain ruined castle and village upon him which carried a title with them, and of going through the necessary formalities required by the Italian government before a title so acquired became legal and valid. This being the case, the danger of Donna Bianca Acorari becoming the prey of some needy fortune-hunter, or even of some rich adventurer who would marry her for the sake of her titles, was undoubtedly great.

The danger would be great even when she was twenty-one, and might be

supposed to have gained some knowledge of the world and to know her own mind. How much greater would it not be if she were to be allowed to marry when she was seventeen or so?

The abbé reminded Princess Montefiano of the clause in her husband's will leaving it to her discretion to accept or refuse any proposal made for Donna Bianca's hand while the girl was a minor. Surely, he argued, it was wiser, under the circumstances, to take full advantage of the powers given her. So far as the guaranteeing of the contracts for the farming of the rents until Donna Bianca was of age was concerned, this, the abbé declared, was not only a safeguard and protection against Donna Bianca making an undesirable marriage, but it should also, with good management, enable the princess to spend more money on the improvement of her step-daughter's property while it was under her control. Donna Bianca would, therefore, be all the better off when she came of age—and Madame la Princesse would feel, when that time arrived, that she had been a faithful steward of her interests.

The princess was convinced, and more than convinced, by these arguments. She had wondered how it was that she could even have entertained a doubt as to the advisability of adopting Monsieur l'Abbé's proposals. It was very true. Bianca would be placed in a very unusual position when she arrived at a marriageable age. It could do no harm to delay her marriage a year or two—and if, as Monsieur l'Abbé said, the scheme he proposed would benefit the estates, she, the princess, should feel she was not doing her duty by Bianca were she to oppose it.

All this had happened six or seven years ago, and Princess Montefiano had not since had any reason to doubt the soundness of the advice she then received. The sums required by the terms of the contract were paid in half yearly by the "farmer" of the rents with unfailing regularity, and a great deal of trouble and responsibility was lifted from her own shoulders.

As for the Abbé Roux, he also had every reason to be satisfied with the arrangement. It gave him no doubt a great deal of work to do which was certainly not of a strictly professional character—but, as he told the princess, having undertaken the supervision of her worldly affairs, and having given her advice as to their conduct, he felt it to be his duty personally to look into them. The *fattori* on the different properties had to be interviewed, and their accounts checked at certain seasons of the year; and though all these matters were regulated by the head-agent and administrator to the "Eccellentissima Casa Acorari" in the estates office in Rome, nothing was finally approved of until it had been submitted to the Abbé Roux, as directly representing their excellencies the Principessa and

the Principessina Bianca.

XV

On his arrival at the Villa Acorari, the Abbé Roux was at once ushered into Princess Montefiano's private sitting-room, where she was waiting him with evident anxiety. It was clear that something had occurred to upset and annoy her, and the abbé was at once convinced that, as he had suspected when he received her telegram, she had by some means discovered her step-daughter's secret.

He was scarcely prepared, however, for what had really happened.

That morning's post had brought the Princess Montefiano a letter from the Senator Rossano. To say that its contents had filled her with amazement would be but a meagre description of her feelings. It was a very short letter, but, like the learned senator's discourses, very much to the point, and couched in a terseness of language very unusual in Italian missives of so formal a character.

The professor briefly apologized for addressing the Princess Montefiano personally, without having the honor of knowing her otherwise than as a tenant in her house, but added that the personal nature of the matter he had to lay before her must be his excuse. He then proceeded, without any further circumlocution, to inform the princess that his only son, Silvio, had fallen desperately in love with her step-daughter, Donna Bianca Acorari; that his son had some reason to believe Donna Bianca might return his attachment were he permitted to address her; and finally, that he, the Senator Rossano, at his son's desire, begged to make a formal request that the latter should be allowed to plead his own cause with Donna Bianca. The princess had, not unnaturally, been petrified with astonishment on reading this letter, and her amazement had quickly been succeeded by indignation. The thing was absurd, and more than absurd; it was impertinent. Evidently this young man had seen Bianca going in and out of the Palazzo Acorari, and had imagined himself to have fallen in love with her—if, indeed, it was not simply a barefaced attempt to secure her money without love entering at all into the matter.

Her first impulse had been to send for Bianca and ask her what it all meant. On second thoughts, however, she decided not to mention the subject to her until she had consulted the Abbé Roux. If, as was probable, Bianca knew nothing about it, and the whole affair were only the silly action of a boy who had persuaded his

father that he was desperately in love with a young girl upon whom he believed himself to have made an impression, it would be very imprudent to put any ideas of the kind into her head. No, the only wise course, the princess reflected, was to hear what Monsieur l'Abbé might advise, though naturally there could be but one answer to the Senator Rossano's letter. Indeed, she would not reply to it in person. Such an impertinence should be treated with silent contempt; or, if some answer had to be given, she would depute the abbé to interview these Rossanos.

The door had hardly closed behind the servant who showed him into the room when Princess Montefiano put the letter into the abbé's hands.

"Did you ever read anything so extraordinary in your life?" she asked him. "Yes, it was about this I telegraphed to beg you to come to me. It is an unheard-of impertinence, and I think the professor, senator—or whatever he might be—Rossano must be a fool, and not the clever man you say he is, or he would never have listened to this ridiculous son of his."

Princess Montefiano was evidently thoroughly angry, as, indeed, from her point of view, she had every right to be. The Abbé Roux read the letter through attentively. Then he coughed, arranged his *soutane*, and read it through a second time.

"Well?" asked the princess, impatiently. "Are you not as much amazed as I am?"

The abbé hesitated for a moment. Then he said, quietly: "No, madame, I am not amazed at all."

The princess stared at him. "Not amazed at all?" she re-echoed. "But—"

"May I ask," he interrupted, "if you have spoken to Donna Bianca of this—this offer?"

"Offer!" exclaimed the princess, scornfully. "I do not call it an offer; I call it an insult—at least, it would be an insult if it were not a stupidity. No, I have not as yet mentioned the subject to Bianca. I thought I would wait until I had consulted with you. You see, Monsieur l'Abbé, it is a delicate matter to discuss with a young girl, because, if there is any love at all in the matter, it can only be a case of love at first sight on the part of this youth—and for love at first sight there is another name—"

The abbé smiled. "Exactly, madame," he said. "You are very wise not to mention the senator's letter to Donna Bianca. It would be better that she should never know it had been written. At the same time, if you read the letter carefully, you will observe that the young man believes his affection to be reciprocated."

The princess shrugged her shoulders. "The vanity of a youth who no doubt thinks himself irresistible," she observed. "How could it be reciprocated? I dare say he has seen Bianca driving, or, at the most, passed her on the staircase."

"I am inclined to think," said the abbé, "that he has more reason than this

to believe Donna Bianca to be not indifferent to him."

Princess Montefiano started visibly.

"*Mon Dieu*, monsieur, what do you mean?" she exclaimed.

The Abbé Roux carefully refolded the letter, and, placing it in the envelope, returned it to her.

"Madame la Princesse," he said, after a pause, "the subject, as you observed just now, is a delicate one. I regret that I should be obliged to give you pain. Even had I not received your telegram, I should have felt it to be my duty to come to see you on this matter."

"You knew it, then?" asked the princess, more bewildered than ever.

"Yes, I knew it," replied the priest. "It came to my knowledge only three or four days since. I fear, madame, that Donna Bianca has given this young man every reason to feel himself justified in persuading his father to address this letter to you. That does not excuse his presumption—certainly not! But, as I say, it makes it more reasonable."

Princess Montefiano turned to him with some dignity. "Monsieur l'Abbé," she said, "are you aware what your words imply? You are speaking of my step-daughter, of Donna Bianca Acorari."

The Abbé Roux spread out his hands apologetically. "Alas, madame!" he replied, "I am fully aware of it. But I consider it to be my duty to speak to you of Donna Bianca. I think," he added, "that you have never had cause to complain of my failing in my duty towards Casa Acorari, or of any lack of discretion on my part, since you honored me with your confidence."

"That is true," said Princess Montefiano, hurriedly; "I ask your pardon, Monsieur l'Abbé. I am sure that whatever you may have to tell me is prompted by your sense of the confidence I repose in you. But, Bianca! I do not understand—"

"It is a very simple matter," interrupted the abbé. "A person of my acquaintance was an accidental witness of an interview between Donna Bianca and young Rossano—here in the grounds of the Villa Acorari—a few days ago. It appears that there can be no doubt it was a lover's interview, and probably not the first of its kind between these two young people."

The princess turned a horrified gaze upon him.

"And you call that a simple matter!" she exclaimed, so soon as she could find words.

The abbé shrugged his shoulders.

"Madame," he replied, "between two people who are young and good-looking, love is always a simple matter! It is in its results that complications arise."

"Monsieur l'Abbé!" exclaimed the princess.

"Precisely," he proceeded—"in its results. It is from these results that we

must try to save Donna Bianca."

Princess Montefiano seemed as though she were about to give way to uncontrollable agitation.

"But it is impossible!" she cried. "Great God—it is impossible! Bianca is little more than a child still. You do not mean to suggest—what can I say? The thought is too horrible!"

The Abbé Roux rubbed his hands gently together. "We will trust things are not quite so serious as that," he said, slowly. "Indeed," he added, "I do not for a moment believe that they are so. Nevertheless, my informant declares that the interview between the two lovers was—well, of a very passionate nature. I fear, madame, you have been mistaken in looking upon Donna Bianca as merely a child."

The princess groaned. "That is what my brother has told me more than once of late," she said.

"He has said the same to me," remarked the abbé. "Monsieur your brother is, as one may say, a keen observer," he added.

"But what can we do?" exclaimed Princess Montefiano, almost hysterically. "Good Heavens!" she continued; "how thankful I am that I telegraphed to you! I can rely on your discretion, monsieur, as a friend—as a priest!"

"As both, madame," returned the abbé, bowing. "The situation is certainly a difficult one, and Donna Bianca, through her inexperience, has no doubt placed herself in an equivocal position. Unfortunately, the world never forgets an indiscretion committed by a young girl; and, as I have said, there was a witness to Donna Bianca's last interview with this young man. That is to say, this individual could hear, though he could not see, all that passed between them."

"Ah! And who is this individual?" asked the princess, hastily. "Is he a person whose silence can be bought?"

The Abbé Roux shook his head. "I am pledged not to reveal the name," he replied. "I must beg of you, madame, not to ask me to do so. As regards his silence, that is not to be bought—and even if it were, I should not advise such a course. It would be equivalent to admitting—well, that the worst construction could be placed on Donna Bianca's unfortunate actions."

"Good Heavens!" repeated the princess. "What can be done? What course can we pursue with that unhappy child? Ah! it is the mother's blood coming out in her, Monsieur l'Abbé."

The abbé thought that the paternal strain might also be taken into account; but he very naturally kept the reflection to himself.

"The responsibility is a terrible one for me," continued Princess Montefiano. "If anything happens to Bianca, if she were to make a bad marriage—and, still more, if there were to be any scandal about her, people would say I had neglected

her because she was not my own child—"

"Yes, madame," interposed the abbé, quietly, "but there must be no bad marriage, and there must be no scandal. It will be my task to assist you in making both things impossible."

"Yes, but how? She has put herself in the power of these Rossanos. Probably the father is quite aware that the child has compromised herself with his son by the very fact of meeting him alone and secretly—otherwise he would not have ventured to write this letter. And then, there is this, other person—your informant. Do you not see, monsieur, that my step-daughter's good name is seriously compromised by being at the mercy of people like these Rossanos, who are not of our world? They would be quite capable of revenging themselves for my treating their proposal with the contempt it deserves by spreading some story about Bianca."

The abbé did not reply for a moment or two. "I do not think they will do that," he said, presently. "The senator is too well-known a man to care to place himself and his son in a false position. Though the story, if it became known, would certainly be injurious to Donna Bianca, it would not redound to the credit of the Rossanos. A young man with any sense of honor does not place an inexperienced girl in such an equivocal position. No—I should be much more afraid that, unless Donna Bianca is removed from all possibility of being again approached by the young Rossano, he will acquire such an influence over her that sooner or later he will oblige her to marry him."

"But it would be an absolute *mésalliance*!" exclaimed Princess Montefiano.

"Of course it would be a *mésalliance*, from the worldly point of view," said the abbé. "It would also be a crime," he added.

"A crime!"

"Yes, certainly, madame. Would you give a young girl, for whose spiritual welfare you are responsible, to the son of Professor Rossano—a man whose blasphemous writings and discourses have perverted the minds and ruined the faith of half the youth of Italy? Why, Bruno was burned for hazarding opinions which were orthodox in comparison with the assertions made by Rossano on the authority of his miserable science!"

The princess shuddered. "Of course!" she replied. "I forgot for the moment whom we were discussing. No matter what might happen, I would never give my consent to Bianca's marriage with a free-thinker. I would rather see her dead, and a thousand times rather see her in a convent."

The Abbé Roux smiled. "Fortunately," he said, "there are other solutions. Donna Bianca has shown very clearly that she has no vocation for conventual life, and of the other we need not speak."

"I do not see the solutions you speak of," returned the princess, with a sigh.

"There is only one which presents itself to my mind as being not only simple, but absolutely necessary for the moment," said the abbé. "Donna Bianca," he continued, looking at the princess gravely, "must be removed where there can be no danger of her again seeing this young Rossano. She is young, and evidently impressionable, and in time she will forget him. It is to be hoped that he, too, will forget her. Do you recollect, madame, my telling you that for a young lady in Donna Bianca Acorari's position, anything that protected her against marrying before she attained years of discretion was an advantage?"

The princess nodded. "I do, indeed," she replied. "I see now how right you were. A young girl with the prospects Bianca has is always in danger of falling a prey to some fortune-hunter, such as, no doubt, this Rossano is."

"I hope," continued the abbé, "that my present advice to you will prove as sound as the advice I gave you then, and as advantageous to Donna Bianca's true interests. I, personally, am convinced that it will prove so—and I offer it as the only solution I can see to the problem with which we have to deal—I mean, madame, the problem of how to extricate Donna Bianca from the position in which she has been placed, without further difficulties arising. May I make my suggestion?" he added.

"Why, of course, Monsieur l'Abbé!" replied Princess Montefiano. "It is what I asked you here to do—to give me your assistance in this very painful matter.

"You must take Donna Bianca away from here, madame."

"Of course," said the princess; "I had already thought of that. But the question is, where can I take her? To return to Palazzo Acorari is impossible. She would be exposed to the probability of meeting this young man every day. I cannot turn the Rossanos out of their apartment, for, so far as I recollect, the lease has still two years to run. And if I take Bianca to some other town, or to some sea-side place, what is to prevent the young man from following us?"

"Very true," assented the Abbé Roux. "I also have thought of these difficulties," he added. "I have considered the matter well, and it seems to me that there is only one place in which Donna Bianca could satisfactorily be guarded from further annoyance."

"And where is that?"

"Her own castle at Montefiano."

"Montefiano?" the princess exclaimed. "But, Monsieur l'Abbé, Montefiano, as you well know, is practically deserted—abandoned. There is, I believe, no furniture in the house."

"The furniture could be sent there," said the abbé. "There could be no better place for Donna Bianca to remain for a few months, or until she has forgotten this youthful love-affair. It would not be easy for a stranger to obtain access to the castle at Montefiano without it being known—and, as you are aware, madame,

the domain is of considerable extent. It would not be an imprisonment."

"I have only once been at Montefiano," said the princess, "and then only for the day. It struck me as being a very dreary place, except, perhaps, in the summer."

"The air is good," observed the abbé, a little dryly, "and, as I say, it has the advantage of being out of the way. My advice would be to take Donna Bianca there as soon as possible. In a week or ten days the rooms could be made quite comfortable, and servants could be sent from Rome. After all, there would be nothing strange in the fact of your having decided to spend a few weeks at Montefiano, especially at this season of the year."

"Perhaps you are right, monsieur," said the Princess Montefiano. "At any rate," she added, "I can think of no better plan for the moment. What distresses me now is that I do not know what to say to Bianca, or how to say it. I cannot let her think that I know nothing of what has happened—and I am still in the dark, Monsieur l'Abbé, as to—well, as to how much has happened."

The abbé pondered for a moment. "I should be inclined, madame, not to give Donna Bianca any definite reason for your visit to Montefiano. You can scarcely tell her your real object in taking her there without letting her know that young Rossano has made you a formal proposal for her hand. You must remember she is quite unaware that her meeting with him was observed, and she would, therefore, at once guess that you must have had some communication from the Rossano family."

The princess looked doubtful. From the Abbé Roux she would, to quote Shakespeare, "take suggestion as a cat laps milk." Nevertheless, to pretend to Bianca that she was in complete ignorance of her conduct seemed to be derogatory to her own position as the girl's step-mother and guardian.

"I must certainly speak to Bianca sooner or later," she began.

"Then, madame," said the abbé, "let it be later, I beg of you. There will be time enough when you are at Montefiano to explain to Donna Bianca your reasons for your actions. If you go into the subject with her now she may communicate with her lover, and warn him that she is being taken to Montefiano. When she is once safely there, it will not matter. It will, of course, be known that you are residing at Montefiano, but Montefiano is not Villa Acorari. A convent itself could not be a more secure retreat."

"Well," returned the princess, "perhaps you are right. But I must say I do not like the idea of meeting Bianca as if nothing at all had happened. It appears to me to be scarcely—scarcely honorable on my part, and to be encouraging her in maintaining a deception towards me."

"*Chère madame*," said the Abbé Roux, blandly, "I fully understand your scruples, and they do you credit. But we must remember the end we have in

view. This absurd love-affair between a boy and a girl—for it is, after all, nothing more serious—must be put an end to in such a way as to preserve Donna Bianca Acorari's name from any breath of scandal."

"Then," replied Princess Montefiano, "you advise me to say nothing to Bianca at present."

"At present I should say nothing. There is one thing, however, that you should do, madame—a necessary precaution against any further communication passing between Donna Bianca and young Rossano. I believe that Mademoiselle Durand continues giving Donna Bianca lessons, does she not? I think you told me that she was at Albano, and that you had arranged for her to come here two or three days weekly."

"Ah!" exclaimed Princess Montefiano, "Mademoiselle Durand! Do you mean to say that she has been the go-between in this affair?"

"I know nothing for certain," replied the abbé, "but I have been told that young Rossano and she are on intimate terms—that they walk together in Rome—"

"A respectable company, truly, for my step-daughter to find herself in!" said Princess Montefiano—"a professor's son and a daily governess!"

The Abbé Roux sighed. "I fear," he said, "that this woman has played a very mischievous part, but I cannot be certain. It would be as well, perhaps, not to give her any explanations, but merely to inform her that you no longer require her for Donna Bianca. All these details, madame," he added, "you will learn later on, no doubt, from Donna Bianca herself. But for the moment, believe me, the less said to any one on the subject, the better."

"Yes, yes, I quite see that you are right, Monsieur l'Abbé," said the princess, hurriedly. "Your advice is always sound, and whenever I have not taken it I have always regretted the fact. There is one person, however, to whom I must give some explanation of my sudden move to Montefiano, and that is my brother. He was coming to spend a fortnight or so here."

"Ah, Monsieur le Baron," observed the Abbé Roux. "No, there would, of course, be no objection in your confiding in Monsieur le Baron. Indeed, it would be but natural to do so."

"Exactly," returned Princess Montefiano. "My brother is, after all, the child's uncle, so to speak."

The abbé smiled. "Scarcely, madame," he replied; "there is not the slightest connection between them."

"Of course not, really," the princess said, "but a kind of relationship through me."

"I think," observed the abbé, hesitatingly—"it has seemed to me that monsieur your brother takes a great interest in Donna Bianca. He has certainly been

very quick to discern things in her which have escaped the notice of others."

Princess Montefiano directed a quick glance at him, and then she looked away.

"I am afraid," proceeded the priest, "that this affair will be quite a blow to him; yes, indeed, quite a blow. Monsieur le Baron, after all, is a comparatively young man, and—"

He hesitated again, and then stopped abruptly.

The princess glanced at him nervously.

"It is strange that you should say this, Monsieur l'Abbé," she said. "I have, I confess, sometimes thought, sometimes wondered— Ah, but certain things cross one's mind occasionally which are better left unspoken!"

The Abbé Roux looked at her. "We may leave our present thoughts unspoken, Madame la Princesse," he said, with a smile. "I imagine," he continued, "that the same idea has struck both of us. Well, supposing such a thing to be the case, what then? There is nothing unnatural in the situation—nothing at all. A disparity of age, very likely; but, again, what is disparity of age? An idea—a sentiment. A man who has arrived at the years of Monsieur le Baron may be said to have gained his experience—to have had time *de se ranger*. Such husbands are often more satisfactory than younger men."

The princess checked him with a gesture.

"But it is an imagination!" she exclaimed—"a mere idea. I confess I have once or twice thought that my brother looked at Bianca in—in rather a peculiar way, you know—as if he admired her very much; and, yes, I have even made an excuse sometimes to send Bianca out of the room when he was calling on me. I did not think she should be exposed to anything which might put ideas into her head."

"It appears to me, madame, that your precautions were unnecessary," said the Abbé Roux, dryly. "The ideas, as we now know, were already there."

"Alas, yes!" sighed the princess. "But," she added, "do you really think that there can be anything in it, Monsieur l'Abbé? It seems too strange—too unnatural, I was about to say; but that would not be quite true, as you pointed out just now."

The Abbé Roux made a gesture with outspread hands.

"Madame," he said, "I know as much as you do of what may be in monsieur your brother's mind. It is probable, however, that he has some thoughts of the kind concerning Donna Bianca, or we should not both have suspected their existence. Does the idea shock you so much?" he added, suddenly.

"Yes—no," returned Princess Montefiano, confusedly. "I can hardly tell. Do not let us talk any more about it, Monsieur l'Abbé—not, at all events, at present. We have so much else to occupy our thoughts. Of course, I must let my brother

know what has happened, and explain to him that I shall not be able to receive him here."

"Of course," assented the Abbé Roux. "I have no doubt," he added, "that Monsieur le Baron will be quite as pleased to pay his visit to you at Montefiano."

The princess apparently did not hear him. She stooped and picked up Professor Rossano's letter, which had fallen from her lap onto the floor.

"And this?" she asked, holding the missive out to the abbé. "What reply am I to send to this—if, indeed, any reply is necessary?"

"There is only one reply to make; namely, that the proposal cannot be entertained either now or at any future time," replied the abbé. "It is not necessary to enter into any explanations," he continued.

And, after discussing for some time longer with the princess the necessary arrangements to be made for moving to Montefiano with as little delay as possible, the Abbé Roux took his leave and returned by an afternoon train to Rome.

XVI

"I told you how it would be, Silvio," Giacinta Rossano said to her brother. "I don't see what else you could have expected."

"I did not expect anything else," returned Silvio, placidly. "At all events," he added, "we now know where we are."

Giacinta laughed dryly. "Do you?" she asked. "It appears to me that you are—nowhere! Nothing could be more explicit than Princess Montefiano's reply to Babbo's letter—and nothing could be more marked than the brief way she dismisses your proposals. I can assure you that Babbo is very much annoyed. I do not think I have ever seen him so annoyed about anything—unless it was when a servant we had last season lighted the fire with some proof-sheets he had left lying on the floor."

"It is not the slightest use his being annoyed," said Silvio.

"At least you must admit that it is not a pleasant position for a father to be placed in," observed Giacinta. "He told me this morning, Silvio," she added, "that nothing could induce him to do anything more in the matter. He says you have had your answer, and that the best thing you can do is to try to forget all that has happened. After all, there are plenty of other girls to choose from. Why need you make your life unhappy because these Acorari will not have anything to say

to you?"

"Princess Montefiano is not an Acorari," replied Silvio, obstinately. "There is only one Acorari concerned in the matter, and she has everything to say to me!"

Giacinta sighed. She knew by experience that it was of no use to argue with this headstrong brother of hers when once an idea was fixed in his mind.

"May one ask what you propose to do next?" she inquired, after a pause. "Your communications in the shape of Mademoiselle Durand having been cut, and Villa Acorari no doubt probably watched and guarded, I do not see how you are going to approach Donna Bianca in the future. At any rate, you mustn't count upon Babbo doing anything, Silvio, for he told me to-day he did not wish to hear the subject mentioned any more. You know what he is about anything disagreeable—how he simply ignores its existence."

Silvio Rossano smiled. "I know well," he replied. "It is not a bad plan, that of simply brushing a disagreeable thing to one side. But few people are able to carry it out so consistently as Babbo does. In this case, Giacinta, it is the best thing he can do. There is nothing to be said or done, for the moment. When there is, you will see that Bianca and I will manage it. It is certainly a bore about Mademoiselle Durand having been told to discontinue giving her lessons at Villa Acorari."

Giacinta shrugged her shoulders. "Considering the subject chosen for instruction, it is not to be wondered at if the princess thought they had better cease," she remarked, dryly.

Silvio smiled. Knowing that Bianca Acorari loved him, nothing seemed to matter very much. It had been the uncertainty whether she had observed and understood his passion for her, and the longing to be sure that, if so, it had awakened in her some response, which had seemed so difficult to insure.

"Luckily," he said, "the princess played her card a day or two too late. Bianca had my letter, and Mademoiselle Durand brought me back her answer to it."

"Ah!" exclaimed Giacinta, "you never told me that you had corresponded with each other since you met."

"I don't think you and I have discussed the subject since I told you of our meeting," said Silvio. "I told Babbo."

"What did he say?"

"He said I was an imbecile—no, a pumpkin-head," answered Silvio, his eyes twinkling with mirth. "Also, he said I was like a donkey in the month of May, and that he did not wish to hear any more asinine love-songs—and, oh, several other observations of the kind."

"His opinion is generally looked upon as being a very good one," observed Giacinta, tranquilly.

Silvio laughed outright. Giacinta's satirical remarks always amused him, even when they were made at his expense. "It is certainly a misfortune that Mademoiselle Durand is no longer to go to Villa Acorari," he said. "I must say," he added, "she has proved herself to be a most loyal friend—and an entirely disinterested one, too."

Giacinta glanced at him. "I suppose," she said, "that Mademoiselle Durand likes a little romance. I believe most single women who are over thirty and under fifty do."

"I suppose so," observed Silvio, carelessly. "She seemed quite upset when she told me of the note she had received from Princess Montefiano. I thought, of course, that she felt she had lost an engagement."

"But did the princess give a reason for dispensing with her services?" asked Giacinta.

"No. The note merely said that as Donna Bianca's studies would not be continued, there was no necessity for Mademoiselle Durand to come any more to Villa Acorari. The princess enclosed money for the lessons given—and that was all. But, of course, Giacinta," continued Silvio, "I felt that Mademoiselle Durand had lost her engagement through befriending me. Though the princess for some reason did not allude to anything of the kind, I am sure she must know, or suspect, the part Mademoiselle Durand has played."

"I should think so, undoubtedly," remarked Giacinta.

"And naturally," Silvio proceeded, "I felt very uncomfortable about it. I did not quite know what to do, and I offered—"

"Yes?" said his sister, as he paused, hesitatingly.

"Well, Giacinta, you see, she had probably lost money through me, so I offered to—to make her loss good, so to say."

"And then?"

"Oh, and then she was very angry, and said that I insulted her. After that she cried. One does not like to see grown-up people cry; it is very unpleasant. She said that I did not understand; that what she had done was out of mere friendship and sympathy—for me and for Bianca. I knew she had grown attached to Bianca, Giacinta; she had told me so once before. After all, nobody who saw much of Bianca could help being fond of her."

Giacinta looked at him for a moment or two without speaking.

"I am not surprised that she was angry," she said, at length. "As to her being attached to Donna Bianca—well, it appears that even people who have not seen much of her become attached to that girl. It is a gift, I suppose. But all this does not tell me what you mean to do, now you can no longer employ Mademoiselle Durand to fetch and carry for you."

"We mean to wait," said Silvio, quietly. "Bianca and I are quite agreed as to

that. Three years are soon over, and then, if she still chooses to marry me, neither the princess nor anybody else can prevent her. It is the best way, Giacinta, for it leaves her free, and then none can say that I took advantage of her inexperience."

"And in the mean time, if they marry her to somebody else?"

"But they will not. They cannot force her to marry. If they tried to do so, then we would not wait three years, nor even three weeks."

"But you might know nothing about it, Silvio," said Giacinta. "And they might tell her you had given her up, or that you were in love with some one else—anything, in fact, to make her think no more about you."

Silvio smiled. "You are full of objections," he said; "but you need not be uneasy. It is true that we no longer have Mademoiselle Durand to depend upon, but we shall find other means of communicating with each other. After all, shall we not be under the same roof here all the winter and spring? The princess will not remain at the Villa Acorari forever. No—if there should be any pressure put upon Bianca to make her give me up against her will I shall very soon know it. We are agreed on all those points. If the princess keeps quiet, we shall keep quiet also. She has a perfect right to refuse her consent to Bianca marrying me—for the present. But in course of time that right will no longer hold good. While it does, however, Bianca and I have agreed to respect it, unless, in order to protect ourselves, we are forced to set it at defiance, get some priest to marry us, and delay the legal marriage till afterwards. This is what I have explained to Babbo—and he calls it the braying of donkeys in May. Well, at least the donkeys know what one another mean, which, after all, is something gained—from their point of view!"

Giacinta laughed, and then became suddenly grave again.

"Well, Silvio *mio*," she replied, "you seem to have settled everything in your own mind, and I only hope it will all be as easy as you think. So much depends on the girl herself. If you are sure of her, then, as you say, three years soon pass. In the mean time, if I were you, I would watch very carefully. As I have told you before, for some reason which we know nothing of, it is not intended that the girl should marry; and when I say they might marry her to somebody else, I do not believe it."

Silvio shrugged his shoulders. "All the better for me," he observed; and Giacinta, with a slight gesture of impatience, was about to reply, when the professor

entered the room.

XVII

The *sollione* had ran his course. Already the vines on the slopes below Montefiano were showing patches of ruddy gold among their foliage, and the grapes were beginning to color, sometimes a glossy purple, sometimes clearest amber. Figs and peaches were ripe on the fruit trees rising from among the vines, and here and there tall, yellow spikes of Indian-corn rattled as the summer breeze passed over them.

Solitary figures prowled about the vineyard with guns—no brigands, but merely local sportsmen lying in wait for the dainty *beccafichi* which visit the fig-trees at this season and slit open the ripest figs with their bills. In the evening a half-dozen of the plump little brown-and-white birds will make a succulent addition to the dish of *polenta* on which they will repose. Perhaps, if fortune favor, a turtle-dove, or even a partridge, may find its way into the oven for the sportsman's evening meal. In the mean time, a few purple figs, from which the sun has scarcely kissed away the chill of the night dew, a hunch of brown bread and a draught of white wine from a flask left in the shade and covered with cool, green vine leaves, form a breakfast not to be despised by one who has been out with his gun since the dawn was spreading over the Sabine hills and the mists were rolling back before it across the Roman Campagna to the sea.

Who that has not wandered through her vineyards and forests, among her mountains and by the side of her waters in the early hours of a summer dawn, or the late hours of a summer night, knows the beauty of Italy? Then the old gods live again and walk the earth, and nature triumphs. The air is alive with strange whisperings: the banks and the hedgerows speak to those who have ears to hear—of things that lie hidden and numbed during the hot glare of the day.

The gray shadows lying over the *campagna* were fast dissolving before a light that seemed to change almost imperceptibly from silver into gold, as the first rays of the rising sun stole over the Sabine mountains. Across the plain, the summit of Soracte was already bathed in light, while its base yet lay invisible, wreathed in the retreating mists. The air was fresh with the scent of vines and fig-trees, and long threads of gossamer, sparkling with a million dew-drops, hung from grassy banks rising above a narrow pathway between the terraces of the

vineyards.

A black figure suddenly appeared round an angle of the winding path. Don Agostino Lelli, his cassock brushing the blossoms of wild geranium and purple mallow as he passed, was making his way in the dawn of the summer morning back to Montefiano. He had been sitting through the night with a dying man—a young fellow whom an accident with a loaded wagon had mortally injured. The end had come an hour or two before the dawn, and Don Agostino had speeded the parting soul with simple human words of hope and comfort, which had brought a peace and a trust that all the rites enjoined by the Church had failed to do. Perhaps he was thinking of the failure, and wondering why sympathy and faith in the goodness of God had seemed to be of more avail at the death-bed he had just left than ceremonies and sacraments.

His refined, intellectual countenance wore a very thoughtful expression as he walked leisurely through the vineyards. It was not an anxious nor an unhappy expression, but rather that of a man trying to think out the solution of an interesting problem. As a matter of fact, he had been brought face to face with a problem, and it was not the first time he had been confronted by it.

He had, as in duty bound, administered the last sacrament of the Church to a dying man who had made due confession to him. But he had known perfectly well in his own mind that those sacraments had been regarded by his penitent as little else than a formality to be observed under the circumstances. He knew that if he had asked that lad when he was in health whether he honestly believed the *santissimo* to be what he had been told it was, the answer would not have been satisfactory to a priest to hear. He had asked the question that night, and two words had been whispered back to him in reply—"*Chi sa?*"

They were very simple words, but Don Agostino felt that they contained a truth which could not be displeasing to the God of Truth. Moreover, he honored the courage of the lad more than he did that of many who dared not confess inability to believe what reason refused to admit.

"Who knows?" he had said to himself, half-smiling, repeating the young fellow's answer. And then he had added aloud, "You will know very soon—better than any of us. Until then, only trust. God will teach you the rest."

Afterwards, answered by the look on the dying lad's face, he had given the sacrament.

And now Don Agostino was walking homeward in the peaceful summer dawn, and if there was pity in his heart for the strong young life suddenly taken away from the beautiful world around him, there was also some joy. Even now the veil was lifted, and the boy—knew. Perhaps the simple, human understanding, which could have no place in theology, had not led him so far astray, and had already found favor in the eyes of Him who gave it.

And Don Agostino looked at the landscape around him, waking up to a new day and laughing in the first rays of a risen sun. As he looked he crossed himself, and the lad who had been summoned from all this beauty was followed to his new home by a prayer.

Suddenly Don Agostino's meditations were interrupted by the report of a gun fired some yards in front of him, immediately succeeded by a pattering of spent shot among the leaves on the bank above him. He called out quickly, in order to warn the unseen *cacciatore* of his propinquity; for there was a sharp bend in the pathway immediately ahead of him, and he by no means wished to receive the contents of a second barrel as he turned it. A reassuring shout answered him, and he quickened his pace until, after turning the corner, a brown setter came up and sniffed at him amicably, while its owner appeared among the vines close by.

Don Agostino lifted his hat in response to the sportsman's salutation and regrets at having startled him.

"I was safe enough where I was, *signore*," he said, smiling; "but it was as well to warn you that there was somebody on the path. I did not wish to be taken for a crow," he added, with a downward glance at his *soutane*.

The *cacciatore* laughed. "Your reverence would have been even safer as a crow," he replied; "but indeed there was no danger. I was firing well above the path at a turtledove, which I missed badly. But it is better to miss than to wound."

Don Agostino looked at the speaker, and there was approval in his glance, either of the sentiment or of the appearance of the sportsman—perhaps of both.

"*Sicuro*," he replied, "it is better to miss than to wound. For my part, I should prefer always to miss; but then I am not a sportsman, as you see. All the same, I am glad you *cacciatori* do not always miss—from the point of view of the stomach, you know. The *signore* is from Rome, I conclude?"

The other hesitated for a moment.

"From Rome—yes," he replied,

Don Agostino glanced at him again, and thought how good-looking the young man was. A gentleman, evidently, by his manner and bearing—but a stranger, for he had certainly never seen him in Montefiano.

"I," he said, "am the *parroco* of Montefiano—Agostino Lelli, *per servirla*."

The young *cacciatore* started slightly, and then he hesitated again. Courtesy necessitated his giving his own name in return.

"And I, *reverendo*," he replied, after a slight pause, "am Silvio Rossano, of Rome."

Don Agostino looked surprised.

"Rossano?" he said. "A relative, perhaps, of the Senator Rossano?"

"My father," replied Silvio. "Your reverence knows him?"

"*Altrocchè*!" exclaimed Don Agostino, holding out his hand. "Your father

is an old friend—one of my oldest friends in days gone by. But I have not seen anything of him for years. *Che vuole*! When one lives at Montefiano one does not see illustrious professors. One sees peasants—and pigs. Not but what there are things to be learned from both of them. And so you are the son of Professor Rossano? But you have not come to Montefiano for sport—no? There is not much game about here, as no doubt you have already discovered."

He glanced at Silvio's game-bag as he spoke. Three or four *beccafichi* and a turtle-dove seemed to be its entire contents.

Silvio looked embarrassed, though he had felt that the priest's question must come. His embarrassment did not escape Don Agostino, who jumped at the somewhat hasty conclusion that either this young man must be hiding from creditors, or else that he must be wandering in unfrequented places with a mistress. In this latter case, however, Don Agostino thought it improbable that he would be out so early in the morning. It was, no doubt, a question of creditors. Young men went away from Montefiano when they could scrape up enough money to emigrate, but he had never known one to come there.

Silvio's answer tended to confirm his suspicions concerning the creditors.

"I did not come to Montefiano for the sport, certainly," he said; "and, indeed, I am not living in Montefiano itself. I am staying at Civitacastellana for the moment."

"Civitacastellana!" exclaimed Don Agostino. "Pardon my curiosity, my dear Signor Rossano, but how in the world do you occupy yourself at Civitacastellana—unless, indeed, you are an artist? It is a beautiful spot, certainly, with its neighboring ravines and its woods, but—well, after Rome you must find it quiet, decidedly quiet. And the inn—I know that inn. One feels older when one has passed a night there."

"I cannot call myself an artist," said Silvio, laughing, "though I certainly draw a great deal. I am an engineer by profession, and Civitacastellana is—well, as you say, a very quiet place. Sometimes one likes a quiet place, after Rome."

"Ah, yes, that is true," returned Don Agostino, thoughtfully. "I, too, have come to a quiet place after Rome, but then I have been in it more than ten years. I think the change loses its effect when one tries it for so long a time."

Silvio glanced at him. He had at once realized that this was no ordinary village priest, scarcely, if at all removed from the peasant class. The quiet, educated voice, the polished Italian, the clear-cut, intellectual features, all told their own tale quickly enough. And this Don Lelli was an old friend of his father. Silvio was well aware that his father did not number very many priests among his friends, and that the few whom he did so number were distinguished for their wide learning and liberal views.

"You know Rome, *reverendo*?" he inquired, with some curiosity, though he

knew well enough that he was talking to a Roman.

Don Agostino smiled. "Yes," he replied, "I know Rome. That is to say," he added, "if anybody can assert that he knows Rome. It is a presumptuous assertion to make. Perhaps I should rather say that I know one or two features of Rome."

"You no doubt studied there?"

"Yes, I studied there. I was also born there—like yourself, no doubt. We are both *Romani di Roma*—one cannot mistake the accent."

"And it was then you knew my father, of course," said Silvio.

"When I was a seminarist? No, some years after that period of my life. I knew your father when—well, when I was something more than I am now," concluded Don Agostino, with a slight smile.

"When you were a parish priest in the city?" asked Silvio.

"When I was at the Vatican," replied Don Agostino, quietly.

"At the Vatican!" Silvio exclaimed.

Don Agostino laughed quietly. "Why not?" he returned. "You are thinking to yourself that members of the pontifical court are not usually sent to such places as Montefiano. Well, it is a long story, but your father will tell it you. He will not have forgotten it—I am quite sure of that."

They had walked on together while they were talking, and presently emerged on the steep road leading up the hill to Montefiano. From this point Silvio could see the little town clustering against the face of the rock some mile or so above them, and the great, square castle of the Acorari dominating it.

"You have been to Montefiano?" Don Agostino asked his companion.

"Yes," answered Silvio, "several times. But," he added, "the Montefianesi do not seem very communicative to strangers."

Don Agostino laughed. "They are unaccustomed to them," he said, dryly; "but they are good folk when once you know them. For the rest, there is not much for them to be communicative about."

"Has the castle no history?"

"It has much the same history as all our mediæval and renaissance strongholds—that is to say, a mixture of savagery, splendor, and crime. But the Montefianesi would not be able to tell you much about it. I doubt if nine out of every ten of them have ever been inside it."

"But it is inhabited now," said Silvio, quickly.

Don Agostino glanced at him, struck by a sudden change in the tone of his companion's voice.

"Yes," he replied, "for the first time for many years. The princess and her step-daughter, Donna Bianca Acorari, are there at present."

"You know them, of course, *reverendo*?"

"I have not that honor," replied Don Agostino. "My professional duties do

not bring me into communication with them, except occasionally upon paper. But," he continued, "will you not come to my house? You can see it yonder—near the church, behind those chestnut-trees. It is getting late for your shooting, and I dare say you have walked enough. I have to say mass at six o'clock, but this morning I shall be late, for it is that now. Afterwards we will have some coffee and some eggs. We have both been occupied for the last few hours, though in different ways; and I, for one, need food."

Silvio accepted the invitation with alacrity, and they proceeded to mount the long hill together.

"I thought," he observed, presently, "that you would certainly be acquainted with Princess Montefiano."

"Are you acquainted with her?" asked Don Agostino, somewhat abruptly.

"No," replied Silvio, "except by sight. My father lives in Palazzo Acorari in Rome—we have the second floor."

Don Agostino said nothing, and they walked on for some minutes in silence. The heat of the sun was by this time becoming considerable, and both of them felt that they would not be sorry to arrive at their journey's end. Twenty minutes more brought them to the little piazza in front of the church, and here Don Agostino paused.

"I must say the mass at once," he said; "the people will have been waiting half an hour or more. There," he added, "is the house. You can go through the garden and wait for me if you do not care to assist at the mass."

Silvio, however, declared that he wished to be present, and Don Agostino led the way into the church. Half a dozen peasant women and one or two old men formed the congregation, and Silvio sat down on a bench near the altar, while Don Agostino disappeared into the sacristy to vest himself.

The mass did not take long, and at its conclusion Don Agostino beckoned to his guest to follow him into the sacristy, whence a passage communicated with the house. By this time Don Agostino was fairly exhausted. He had eaten nothing since the evening before, and his long walk and sad vigil through the night had left him weary both in body and mind. His mass over, however, he was at liberty to eat and drink; and the *caffè e latte*, fresh-laid eggs, and the rolls and butter his housekeeper had prepared were most acceptable. Even Silvio, who had already breakfasted on figs and bread, needed no pressing to breakfast a second time.

The food and rest quickly revived his host's strength, and very soon Silvio could hardly believe that he was sitting at the table of a parish priest in the Sabina. Don Agostino proved himself to be a courteous and agreeable host. He talked with the easy assurance of one who was not only a man of God, but also a man of the world. Silvio found himself rapidly falling under the spell of an individuality which was evidently strong and yet attractive. As he sat listening to his host's

conversation, he wondered ever more and more why such a man should have been sent by the authorities of the Church to live, as he had himself expressed it, among peasants and pigs in a Sabine town. He was scarcely conscious that Don Agostino, while talking pleasantly on all sorts of topics, had succeeded in quietly eliciting from him a considerable amount of information concerning himself, his profession, and, indeed, his personality generally. And yet, so it was. Monsignor Lelli had not occupied an official position in the Vatican for some years without learning the art of being able to extract more information than he gave.

In this instance, however, Don Agostino's curiosity concerning his guest was largely due to the favorable impression Silvio's good looks and frank, straightforward manner had made upon him; as well as to the fact that he was the son of a man for whose learning he had a deep admiration, and with whom he had in former years been very intimate.

The more he talked to Silvio, the more he felt his first impressions had not been wrong. He would have liked very much to know, all the same, why this handsome lad was wandering about the neighborhood of Montefiano. He shrewdly suspected that a few birds and a possible hare were not the true inducement; and that, unless he were hiding himself, this young Rossano must have some other game in view.

The expression which had passed over Silvio's face on hearing that he was not acquainted with the owners of Montefiano had not escaped Don Agostino's notice. He had observed, moreover, that his young guest more than once brought the conversation round to Princess Montefiano, but that he never alluded to her step-daughter. Monsignor Lelli had been young himself—it seemed to him sometimes that this had happened not so very long ago—and he had not always been a priest. As he talked to Silvio Rossano, he thought of the days when he had been just such another young fellow—strong, enthusiastic, and certainly not ill-looking. Meeting the frank glance of Silvio's blue eyes, Don Agostino did not believe that their owner was hiding from anything or from anybody. He felt strangely drawn towards this chance acquaintance, the only educated human being, the only individual of his own class in life with whom he had interchanged a word for months—nay, for more, for it was now more than two years since some private business had taken him to Rome, where he had seen one or two of his old friends.

Their light breakfast over, Silvio Rossano presently rose, and thanking the priest for his hospitality, was about to depart. Don Agostino, however, pressed him to remain.

"I do not have so many visitors," he said, with a smile, "that I can afford to lose one so quickly. You will give me great pleasure by staying as long as you can. It is hot now for walking, and if you are returning to Civitacastellana, you

can do that just as well in the evening. I have a suggestion to make to you," he added, "which is, that we should smoke a cigar now, and afterwards I will have a room prepared for you, and you can rest till *mezzogiorno*, when we will dine. When one has walked since dawn, a little rest is good; and as for me, I have been up all the night, so I have earned it."

Silvio hesitated. "But I cannot inflict my company upon you for so long," he said. "You have been already too hospitable to me, Don Agostino."

Don Agostino rose from the table, and, opening a drawer, produced some cigars. "I assure you," he replied, "that it is I who will be your debtor if you will remain. As I say, I seldom have a visitor, and it is a great pleasure to me to have made your acquaintance. I think, perhaps," he continued, looking at Silvio with a smile, "that it is an acquaintance which will become a friendship."

"I hope so, *monsignore*," replied Silvio, heartily, "and I accept your invitation with pleasure."

"That is well," returned Don Agostino; "but," he added, laughing, "at Montefiano there are no *monsignori*. There is only the *parroco*—Don Agostino."

XVIII

Don Agostino was quite right when he said that a little rest after walking since daybreak would be a good thing. Silvio, at any rate, found it so, for he very soon fell fast asleep in the room that had been prepared for him—so fast, indeed, that even the church-bells ringing *mezzogiorno* did not awaken him.

Don Agostino, fearing for the omelette his house-keeper had already placed on the table as the first dish of the mid-day meal, had gone up-stairs to rouse his guest, and, receiving no response to his knock, had quietly entered the bedroom.

Silvio was lying as he had flung himself on the bed, after having divested himself of most of his clothes. He lay on his back, with one arm under his head and the hand half-buried in the short, curly hair, in face and form resembling some Greek statue of a sleeping god, his well-made, graceful limbs relaxed, and his lips just parted in a slight smile.

Don Agostino stood and watched him for a moment or two. It seemed a pity to rouse him—almost sacrilege to wake the statue into life.

"It is the Hermes of the Vatican," he said to himself, smiling—"the Hermes reposing after taking a message from the gods. Well, well, one must be young to

sleep like that! I would let him sleep on, but then Ernana will say that the dinner is spoiled," and he laid his hand gently on Silvio's arm.

Apparently the sleeper was more sensitive to touch than to sound, for he opened his eyes instantly, and then started up with a confused apology.

"It is I who should apologize for waking you," said Don Agostino; "but it is past twelve o'clock, and my housekeeper is a tyrant. She is afraid her dishes will be spoiled!"

Silvio sprang from the bed. "I will be ready in a few minutes," he said; and before Don Agostino could beg him not to hurry himself, he had filled a basin with cold water, into which he plunged his face as a preliminary to further ablutions.

In ten minutes he had rejoined Don Agostino in the little dining-room, and the two sat down to the dinner which Ernana had produced, not without some grumbling at the delay, which, she declared, had turned the omelette into a piece of donkey's hide.

Silvio did ample justice to her cookery, however, and indeed Don Agostino's house-keeper looked with scarcely concealed admiration and approval at him as she served the various dishes. She also wondered what this *bel giovanotto* was doing at Montefiano, and several times came very near to asking him the question, being only restrained therefrom by the thought that she would learn all she wanted to know from Don Agostino so soon as the visitor should have departed.

After dinner, Don Agostino produced a bottle of old wine—such wine as seldom comes to the market in Italy, and which, could it only travel, would put the best French vintages to shame. Ernana served the coffee and then departed to her kitchen, and Don Agostino proceeded to prepare cigars by duly roasting the ends in the flame of a candle before handing one of them to his guest to smoke.

"And so," he observed, presently, "you actually live in the Palazzo Acorari at Rome. Your father, no doubt, knows the princess and Donna Bianca?"

Silvio shook his head. "No," he replied. "You must remember—" he added, and then paused, abruptly.

Don Agostino blew a ring of smoke into the air.

"What must I remember?" he asked, smiling at Silvio's obvious embarrassment.

"You know my father's opinions," continued Silvio, "and perhaps you have read some of his works. He is not—I speak with all respect—of the *Neri*, and Princess Montefiano is, they say, a very good Catholic."

Don Agostino laughed. "Ah, I forgot," he said. "No, I never looked upon your father as a good Catholic. It really was never any business of mine whether he was so or not. But the princess—yes, I believe she is very strict in her opinions,

and your father is, very naturally, not beloved by the Vatican party."

Silvio glanced at him. "You have read his books, Don Agostino?" he asked.

"Certainly I have read them—all of them."

"And yet you continue to regard him as a friend?"

Don Agostino smiled. "Why not?" he asked. "I do not always agree with his conclusions on certain subjects. If I did, I should not wear this dress; it would be to me as the shirt of Nessus. But is it necessary always to agree with one's friends? I think the best friends and the best lovers are those who know how to disagree. However, we were talking of Princess Montefiano. I can quite understand that she would not desire to be on friendly terms with Professor Rossano."

"Or with any of his family," added Silvio, bluntly.

Don Agostino gave him a scrutinizing glance.

"Ah," he said, "you mean that she visits the sins of the father upon the son."

Silvio hesitated. There was something very sympathetic about this priest—something that seemed to ask, almost to plead, for his trust and confidence. And yet could he, knowing so little of him, dare to confide to him why he was in the neighborhood of Montefiano? Certainly this Don Agostino was a friend of his father, and, as such, might be disposed to help him. Moreover, Silvio could not help seeing that his host was disposed to like him for his own sake, and that for some reason or other there was a current of sympathy between them, though as yet they were almost strangers to each other.

Perhaps Don Agostino observed his companion's hesitation, for he spoke again, and this time it was to ask a question which did not tend to diminish it.

"I suppose," he said, "that you have seen Donna Bianca Acorari? I do not ask you if you know her personally, after what you have just told me; but no doubt, as you live under the same roof, so to speak, you know her by sight?"

Silvio felt the color rising in his face, and felt, too, that Don Agostino's eyes were fixed upon him with a strange intensity. Could it be, he wondered, that the priest suspected the truth, or had, perhaps, been warned about him by the princess herself? The thought was a disagreeable one, for it made him mistrust his host's good faith, as Don Agostino had distinctly denied any acquaintance with Princess Montefiano. The expression of Don Agostino's face puzzled him. It spoke of pain, as well as of curiosity, and he seemed to be anxiously hanging upon the answer to his question. That the priest should be curious, Silvio could well understand, but there was no apparent reason why Bianca Acorari's name should call forth that look of pain on his countenance.

"Yes," Silvio replied, guardedly. "I know Donna Bianca Acorari by sight, extremely well."

Don Agostino leaned forward in his chair. "Ah," he exclaimed, eagerly, "you know her by sight! Tell me about her. I saw her once—once only—and then she

was quite a little child. It was in Rome—years ago. She is, no doubt, grown into a beautiful girl by now."

Silvio looked at him with surprise. The eagerness in his voice was unmistakable, but there was the same strange expression of pain on his face.

"But surely," he replied, "your reverence must have seen her here at Montefiano, or, at least, others must have seen her who could tell you about her?"

Don Agostino shook his head. "Nobody has seen her since her arrival here," he said. "The castle is large, and the park behind it is very extensive. There is no reason why its inmates should ever come into the *paese*, and they never do come into it."

"But the servants—the household?"

"The servants were all brought from Rome. Most of the provisions also are sent from Rome. There is practically no communication with the town of Montefiano, and, except the *fattore*, I have heard of nobody who has been admitted inside the castle walls since the princess and Donna Bianca arrived."

"It is very strange," said Silvio.

"Yes," returned Don Agostino, "it is certainly strange. But," he added, "you do not tell me of Donna Bianca—what she is like; whether she is beautiful, as beautiful as—" he stopped abruptly and passed his hand almost impatiently across his eyes, as though to shut out some vision.

"Beautiful?" repeated Silvio, in a low voice. "I do not know—yes, I suppose that she is beautiful—and—and— But why do you ask me?" he suddenly burst out, impetuously, and the hot color again mounted to his cheeks and brow.

Don Agostino suddenly turned and looked at him keenly.

"Why should I not ask you?" he replied, quietly. "You have seen her," he added, "and I—I am interested in her. Oh, not because she is the Princess of Montefiano—that does not concern me at all—but—well, for other reasons."

Silvio was silent. Indeed, he did not know how to answer. What he had just heard confirmed his suspicions that Bianca was practically isolated from the world, as though she were within the walls of a convent. He had asked in Montefiano about the castle and its inmates, and had learned absolutely nothing, save what might be implied by the shrugging of shoulders.

Suddenly Don Agostino spoke again.

"And you?" he said, laying his hand for a moment on Silvio's—"forgive me if I am inquisitive—but you, also, are interested in Donna Bianca Acorari—is it not true?"

Silvio started. "I!" he exclaimed.

Don Agostino smiled. His agitation seemed to have passed, and he looked at the boy beside him searchingly, but very kindly.

"If I am mistaken," he repeated, "you must forgive me; but if I am not, I

think that you will not regret telling me the truth."

Silvio looked at him steadily.

"It is true," he said, slowly, "that I am interested in Donna Bianca—very much interested. You have been very good to me, Don Agostino," he added, "and I will be quite open with you. I feel that you will not betray a confidence, even though it may not be told you in the confessional."

Don Agostino made a slight gesture, whether of impatience Silvio could not quite be sure.

"A confidence between gentlemen," he said, "and, I hope, between friends."

"Then," returned Silvio, quietly, "I will confide to you that it is my interest in Donna Bianca Acorari which brings me to Montefiano."

"And she?" asked Don Agostino, quickly. "Is she—interested—in you, Signor Rossano?"

Silvio blushed. "Please," he said, "do not address me so formally. Surely, as an old friend of my father, it is not necessary! Yes," he added, simply, "we are going to marry each other."

"*Diamine!*" ejaculated Don Agostino; and then he seemed to be studying Silvio's face attentively.

"But what made you suspect this?" asked Silvio, presently; "for it is evident that you have suspected it."

Don Agostino smiled. "I hardly know," he replied. "Your manner, perhaps, when I mentioned Donna Bianca's name, coupled with the fact that, though you asked me many questions about Montefiano and the princess, you studiously avoided any allusion to her step-daughter. But there was something besides this—some intuition that I cannot explain, though I know the reason of it well enough. I am glad you have told me, Silvio—I may call you Silvio, may I not? And now, as you have told me so much, you will tell me all your story; and afterwards, perhaps, I will explain to you why you will not regret having done so."

In a very few words Silvio related all there was to tell. Don Agostino listened attentively, and every now and then he sighed, and Silvio, glancing at him, saw the pained look occasionally flit across his countenance.

"Of course," he said, as Silvio finished his story, "they have brought the girl here to be out of your way, and they will keep her here. I suspected something of the kind when I first heard that the princess was coming to Montefiano. And when I saw you, an instinct seemed to tell me that in some way you were connected with Bianca Acorari being here. When you told me who you were, and that you lived in Palazzo Acorari, I was certain, or nearly certain of it. You wonder why I am interested in Donna Bianca, as I have only once seen her as a child, and why I should wish to know what she is like now, do you not? Well, you have given me your confidence, Silvio, and I will give you mine. Come with

me into my study," and Don Agostino led the way into a little room beyond the dining-room, in which they were still sitting.

Silvio followed him in silence, greatly wondering what link there could be between Bianca and this newly found friend who had so unexpectedly risen up at Montefiano, where a friend was so badly needed.

Don Agostino went to the cabinet standing in the corner of his little study, and, unlocking a drawer, took out the miniature, which he had not again looked at since the day, now nearly two months ago, when he had heard that the Princess Montefiano and her step-daughter were coming to inhabit the castle.

"I asked you to tell me what Donna Bianca Acorari is like now," he said, quietly. "At least," he added, "you can tell me if there is a resemblance between her and this miniature." And, opening the case, he placed it in Silvio's hand.

Silvio uttered an exclamation of astonishment as he looked at the portrait.

"But it is Bianca—Bianca herself!" he said, looking from the miniature to Don Agostino in amazement. "The same hair, the same eyes and mouth, the same coloring. It is Bianca Acorari."

"No," interrupted Don Agostino, "she was Bianca Acorari afterwards. Then, when the miniature was painted, she was Bianca Negroni."

"I do not understand," muttered Silvio, in bewilderment.

Don Agostino took the case from him. "She was Bianca Negroni then," he repeated, in a low voice, as though speaking to himself. "She should have been Bianca Lelli—my wife. We were engaged. Afterwards she was called Bianca Acorari, Principessa di Montefiano."

Silvio looked at him in silence. He understood now.

"We were engaged," continued Don Agostino, "as you and her child are engaged, without the consent of her family. They forced her to marry Prince Montefiano. It was an unhappy marriage, as, perhaps, you have heard."

Then he turned away, and gently, reverently, as though replacing some holy relic in its shrine, put the miniature back into the drawer of the cabinet.

"You can understand now," he said, quietly, "why I wished to know what her child is like. As for you, Silvio—" he paused, and looked at Silvio Rossano earnestly. "Well," he continued, "I have had one intuition to-day which did not mislead me, and I think my second intuition will prove equally true. I believe that you would make any woman a good husband—that your character does not belie your face."

Silvio looked at him with a quick smile.

"I will make her a good husband," he said, simply. The words were few, but they appealed to Don Agostino more than any lover's protestations would have appealed to him.

"And she?" asked Don Agostino, suddenly. "You are sure that she would

make you a good wife? If her nature is like her mother's she will be faithful to you in her heart. I am sure of that. But she is her father's daughter as well, and—well, he is dead, so I say no more. And no doubt the knowledge that he had married a woman whose love was given elsewhere accounted for much of his conduct after his marriage. We will not speak of him, Silvio. But you are sure that you have chosen wisely?"

"Oh, very sure!" exclaimed Silvio.

Don Agostino smiled—a somewhat pathetic smile. "I am very sure, also," he said. "It is strange," he added, thoughtfully, "that your story should be an exact repetition of my own. Almost one would think that she"—and he glanced towards the cabinet—"had sent me here to Montefiano to help her child; that everything during these years had been foreordained. I wondered, when they sent me to Montefiano, whether it were not for some purpose that would one day be made clear to me; for at Montefiano her child was born, and at Montefiano she died, neglected, and practically alone."

Don Agostino sat down at his writing-table. He covered his eyes with his hands for a moment or two, and above him the ivory Christ gleamed white in the sunlight which filtered through the closed Venetian blinds.

"It is strange—yes," said Silvio, in a low voice; "and I, too," he added—"I have felt some power urging me to tell you my story, and my true reason for being here. But," he continued, "our case—Bianca's and mine—is different from yours in one particular, Don Agostino."

Don Agostino looked up. "Yes," he replied; "Donna Bianca Acorari's mother, though she had money, was not the heiress to estates and titles."

"I did not mean that," returned Silvio. "I forgot it," he added. "I am always forgetting it. Perhaps you do not believe me, but when I do remember it I wish that Bianca Acorari were penniless and not noble. There would be nothing then to keep us apart. No; I mean that, in her case, there can be no forcing of another marriage upon her, because I am very sure that Bianca would never submit."

Don Agostino glanced at him. "Are you so sure?" he asked. "That is well. But, Silvio, we can hardly realize the pressure that may be placed upon a young girl by her family."

"She has no family," observed Silvio, tranquilly. "It is true," he continued, "that there is her step-mother, who is her guardian until she is of age. But Bianca is not a child, *reverendo*. She will not allow herself to be coerced."

Don Agostino looked at him for a moment and appeared to be considering something in his mind.

"How come you to know her character so well?" he asked, presently. "How can you know it? You guess at it, that is all."

Silvio shook his head. "Her character is written on her face," he said. "Be-

sides, when one loves, one knows those things."

Don Agostino smiled. "Yes," he observed, "or one thinks one knows them, which does quite as well, so long as one is never undeceived. So," he continued, "you think that the girl has sufficient strength of will to resist any pressure that might be brought to compel her to marry somebody else. That is well; for, unless I am mistaken, she has been brought to Montefiano for no other purpose than to be exposed to pressure of the kind."

Silvio started. "What do you mean?" he exclaimed. "I thought you said you knew nothing of the princess and Donna Bianca—that nobody went inside the castle. Do you mean to say that they are already trying to coerce her in some way? But not by forcing her into another marriage. Giacinta declares they do not want her to marry, and she knows."

"Giacinta?" said Don Agostino, inquiringly.

"My sister. Ah, I forgot; I have not spoken to you about her. She is sure that a priest whom the princess confides in does not wish Bianca to marry at all, for some reason—"

"Yes," interrupted Don Agostino; "the Abbé Roux—a Belgian."

"You know him?" asked Silvio, surprised.

"Oh yes, I know him," replied Don Agostino, dryly.

"Therefore," Silvio continued, "you see that I have not to fear anything of that kind, as—as you had."

Don Agostino was silent.

Silvio looked at him inquiringly. "You think that I have?" he asked, hastily.

"It is possible," returned Don Agostino. "I do not know for certain. I have no means of knowing for certain," he added, "but I hear rumors—suppositions. Perhaps they are purely imaginary suppositions. In a small place like Montefiano people like to gossip, especially about what they do not understand. Apparently the princess and her daughter are not alone in the castle. A brother of the princess, Baron d'Antin, is staying with them, and also the Abbé Roux, who says mass in the chapel every morning. So, you see, my services are not required."

"Her brother!" said Silvio. "I did not know the Princess Montefiano had a brother."

Don Agostino nodded. "Yes," he returned, "and—well, it is precisely about this brother that people talk."

Silvio looked at him with amazement.

"About him!" he exclaimed. "What could there be to say about him and Bianca? It is too ridiculous—"

Don Agostino interrupted him. "I should not call it ridiculous," he said, "if the suppositions I have heard are true. I should rather call it revolting."

"But it would be an unheard-of thing—an impossibility!" said Silvio, angrily,

and his eyes flashed ominously.

"No," Don Agostino observed, quietly, "it would be neither the one nor the other, Silvio. Such alliances have been made before now—in Rome, too. There is no consanguinity, you must remember. No dispensation even would be required. But if it is true that such a crime is in contemplation, the child must be saved from it—ah, yes, she must be saved from it at all costs!"

Silvio suddenly grasped the priest's hand. "You will help me to save her, Don Agostino!" he exclaimed. "For her own sake and for her mother's sake—who, as you said a few minutes ago, perhaps sent you here to protect her—you will help me to save her!"

Don Agostino, still holding Silvio's hand in his own, looked into his eyes for a moment without speaking.

"I have seen you to-day," he said, at length, "for the first time, but I trust you for your father's sake and also for your own. Yes, I will help you, if I can help you, to save Bianca Acorari from being sacrificed, for the sake of her mother, *anima benedetta*. But we must act prudently, and, first of all, I have a condition to make."

"Make any condition you please," said Silvio, eagerly, "so long as you do what I ask of you."

"Is your father aware that you are here—I mean, that you are in the neighborhood of Montefiano?" asked Don Agostino.

Silvio shrugged his shoulders. "I cannot tell you," he replied. "My sister, Giacinta, knows it, and she may have told him. My father, Don Agostino, told me that he had done all he could in asking the consent of the princess to an engagement between his son and her step-daughter, and that, as this consent had been unconditionally refused, I must in future manage my own affairs in my own way. This is what I am doing to the best of my ability."

Don Agostino smiled slightly. "I understand," he said. "Well, Silvio, my condition is that I should see your father and discuss the matter with him before doing anything here. He will give you a good character, I have no doubt, and will assure me that you would make Bianca Acorari a good husband. I owe it to—well, you know now to whom, to make this condition."

Silvio smiled. "Is that all, *reverendo*?" he asked. "It is a condition very easily carried out," he added.

"We will go to Rome, you and I, to-morrow," said Don Agostino, "and for to-night you will stop with me here. In the evening, when it is cooler, we will go to Civitacastellana, and we will bring your things back with us. No; I am doing you no kindness—I am doing a kindness to myself. As I told you before, it is not often that I have a friend to talk to at Montefiano, and in this case, well—"

Don Agostino did not complete his sentence. His gaze fixed itself upon the

cabinet before him, and Silvio understood all that he had left unsaid.

XIX

Although Rome is supposed to be abandoned during the months of August and September by all who can afford the time and the money to leave it, there is always a certain number of people who from choice remain within its walls throughout the summer, declaring, not without reason, that the heat is felt far less in the vast, thick-walled palaces than in country villas and jerry-built hotels.

Among this number was the Senator Rossano. He had fitted up for himself a library in Palazzo Acorari, a long, high room looking to the north, which, if difficult to keep heated in winter, was always deliciously cool even on the hottest of summer days. Here he did the greater part of his writing, and passed the weeks when Rome is deserted, both pleasantly and profitably. Usually he was quite alone during these weeks, for Giacinta as a rule went with friends to one or another of the summer resorts in the Apennines or the north of Italy, or perhaps southward to the fresh sea-breezes of Sorrento.

This year, however, she had delayed her *villeggiatura* later than usual, and was still in Rome. The professor was engaged upon a new scientific work, dealing with no less complicated a theme than the moral responsibility of criminals for the crimes they happened to have committed. Giacinta had been busily engaged in making a clear copy of her father's manuscript. The wealth of detail and example which the professor had brought to bear in order to support certain of his theories did not, it must be owned, always form suitable reading for even the comparatively young, and certainly not for an unmarried woman of Giacinta's age.

But Professor Rossano did not trouble himself about such a trifle as this. He regarded his illustrations as illustrations, mere accidents necessary to his arguments; and it would never have entered into his head that his daughter might not look at them from the same detached point of view. As a matter of fact, Giacinta did so look at them; consequently, no harm was done.

She was sitting with her father in his library, engaged in sorting some papers. It was nearly five o'clock and the great heat of the day was nearly over; in another hour or so she would insist on dragging the professor away from his work, and making him accompany her in a drive outside one of the gates of the

city. She was contemplating some suggestion of the kind when her father suddenly looked up from his writing.

"I tell you what we will do this evening, Giacinta," he observed. "We will go and dine at the Castello di Costantino. I have not been there yet this summer. Perhaps we shall find some friends there. The Countess Vitali—she often dines there at this time of year, and nobody can be more amusing when she is in the vein. Her dry humor is most refreshing; it is like something that has been sealed up in an Etruscan tomb and suddenly brought to light with all the colors fresh upon it. Yes, we will go to the Castello di Costantino, and you can tell the servants we shall not eat here."

Giacinta was more than ready to fall in with the idea. She was about to ring the bell in order to tell the servants not to prepare dinner, when the door opened and Silvio walked into the room.

The professor gazed at him placidly.

"I thought that you were at Terni," he said.

"So I was," replied Silvio, smiling, "a fortnight ago. But I completed my business there, and placed the order for the steel girders. Since then I have been in the Sabina. I came from Montefiano this morning."

Giacinta started. "From Montefiano?" she exclaimed.

"From Montefiano—yes," repeated Silvio. "I have not been staying at the castle there," he added, dryly.

"You have been committing some folly, I suppose," remarked the professor, "and I do not wish to hear about it. You will have the goodness, Silvio, not to mention the subject."

"I have been staying with a friend of yours, Babbo," Silvio replied, laughing. "Don Agostino—"

"Don Agostino?" repeated his father. "The devil take your Don Agostino! I do not know whom you mean."

"Monsignor Lelli, then," returned Silvio. "He has come to Rome with me, and he is here—in the house. I left him in the drawing-room. I suppose you will go there to see him; or shall I tell him that you hope the devil may take him?"

The professor burst out laughing. "Lelli! Here?" he exclaimed. "Certainly I will go. I have not seen him for years. I remember now, of course—they sent him to Montefiano—those *imbroglioni* at the Vatican! And so you have been staying with Lelli? Well, at least you have been in good company. I hope he has succeeded in putting a little common-sense into your head."

He hurried out of the room to greet his old friend, leaving Silvio and Giacinta alone together.

"I suppose," said the latter, "that you have seen Donna Bianca again—otherwise I cannot imagine what you have found to do at Civitacastellana for

nearly a fortnight? I am told there is nothing to see there."

"It is very picturesque," observed Silvio. "The river, and the situation—"

"No doubt; but I never supposed you went there to look at the river. When I heard it was only four or five miles from Montefiano, then I understood! But who is this Monsignor Lelli, Silvio? I think I have heard Babbo tell some story about him, but I have forgotten what it was."

"He is the *parroco* of Montefiano," replied Silvio, "and he used to be at the Vatican some years ago. I do not know the story—he would not tell it me; but Babbo knows it well, and we will ask him—the history of his earlier life—that he did tell me. Imagine, Giacinta, he was engaged to Bianca Acorari's mother. They forced her to marry the Principe di Montefiano, and then he became a priest. But he never ceased to love her, although he did become a priest; that I know."

Giacinta looked at him.

"And now?" she asked.

"Now he has come to ask Babbo for my character," answered Silvio, smiling. "If he gets a good one, he will help me to marry Bianca. Do you know, Giacinta, that they want to marry her to a brother of the princess—a Baron d'Antin? Did you ever hear of anything so outrageous? As Don Agostino—he will not be called *monsignore*—says, such a thing must be prevented, and, of course, I am the proper person to prevent it."

"Of course!"

"You must admit that it is strange, Giacinta, that Don Agostino should have been engaged to Bianca's mother—and her name was Bianca also—just as I am engaged to the daughter, and that he should be at Montefiano. It seems like a destiny. As for this Baron d'Antin—"

"I have seen him several times," observed Giacinta. "He always stares very hard. I asked the porter who he was. He is not so very old, Silvio; he looks younger than the princess."

"You had better marry him," returned Silvio; "then you will become my step-aunt by marriage as well as being my sister."

Giacinta laughed. "Don't talk nonsense," she said; "but tell me what you and Monsignor Lelli propose to do. I never expected that you would confide your love affairs to a priest. First of all a French governess, and now a *monsignore*. You are certainly an original person, Silvio."

"Ah, but Don Agostino is not like most priests—"

"Because he has been in love himself?" interrupted Giacinta, laughing.

"Oh, not at all! There would be nothing unusual in that," answered Silvio, dryly. "Priests are no different from other people, I suppose, although they may profess to be so. No; Don Agostino is not like the majority of his brethren, because he has the honesty to be a man first and a priest afterwards. He does not

forget the priest, but one hears and feels the man all the time he is talking to one.

"As to what I am going to do, Giacinta," Silvio continued, tranquilly, "I am going to marry Bianca Acorari, as I have told you before—"

"Very often," added Giacinta.

"But how I am going to do it, is certainly not quite clear at present. I would have waited, and so would she; but how can we wait now that they are trying to force her to marry this old baron in order to prevent her from marrying me?"

"It is very strange," said Giacinta, thoughtfully. "I certainly believed they did not intend her to marry at all—at any rate, for some years."

"Ah, but that was before I appeared on the scene," observed Silvio. "Now they are afraid of her marrying me, and so would marry her to anybody who happened to be noble."

Giacinta shook her head. "There is some other reason than that," she replied. "The princess could find scores of husbands for the girl without being obliged to fall back on her own brother, who must be nearly thirty years older than Donna Bianca. A marriage between those two would be a marriage only in name."

Silvio stared at her. "What in the world do you mean, Giacinta?" he exclaimed.

"Oh," she returned, hurriedly, "I don't mean—well, what you think I mean! I meant to say that, supposing Bianca Acorari were married to this old baron, everything would go on as before in Casa Acorari. It would be, so to speak, merely a family arrangement, which would, perhaps, be very convenient."

"*Perbacco*!" exclaimed Silvio, "but you have your head upon your shoulders, Giacinta! I never thought of that. I thought it was simply a scheme to marry Bianca as soon as possible, in order to get her away from me. But very likely you are quite right. There is probably some intrigue behind it all. We will hear what Don Agostino thinks of your supposition—ah, here they come!" he broke off suddenly as his father and Don Agostino entered the library together.

Silvio made the priest acquainted with his sister, and then turned to the professor.

"I hope, Babbo," he said, "that you have given me a fairly good character."

"I have explained that you are as obstinate as a mule," replied his father.

Don Agostino laughed. "I have heard a few other things about you also," he said, laying his hand on Silvio's shoulder. "After all," he added, "they were only things I expected to hear, so I might quite as well have stopped at Montefiano instead of coming to Rome—except for the pleasure of seeing an old friend again."

"Don Agostino will spend the evening with us," said Silvio to his father, "and early to-morrow morning I am going back with him to Montefiano."

Giacinta looked somewhat perplexed. "Do you know," she said, "we had

settled to dine at the Castello di Costantino this evening? You see, Silvio, I had no idea you were coming back, and still less that we should have a visitor—"

"But we will all go and dine at the Costantino," interposed the professor, jovially. "Why not? We shall be a party of four—and four is a very good number to sit at table, but not to drive in a *botte*—so we will have two *botti*, and then nobody need sit on the back seat. You will go with Silvio, Giacinta, and *monsignore* and I will go together."

Don Agostino hesitated for a moment. "It is a place where one may meet people," he said, "and nobody knows that I am in Rome—"

"No, no," returned the professor, hastily, "you are not likely to meet any one you know at the Costantino, unless it be Countess Locatelli—and you certainly would not mind meeting her?"

"On the contrary," said Don Agostino. "It is always a pleasure to meet her—and to talk to her. Doubly so," he added, "after so long an exile at Montefiano. I do not find the female society of Montefiano very—what shall I say? sharpening to the intellect. My house-keeper is occasionally amusing—but limited as to her subjects."

Silvio and his father both laughed. "At any rate, she gives you a better dinner than you will get to-night," said the former.

A quarter of an hour's drive brought them to the Aventine, the most unspoiled and picturesque of the seven hills of Rome, with its secluded convent-gardens and ancient churches, its wealth of tradition and legend. In no other quarter of Rome—not even in the Forum, nor among the imperial ruins of the Palatine—does the spirit of the past seem to accompany one's every step as on the almost deserted Aventine. Especially as evening draws on, and the shadows begin to creep over the vineyards and fruit-gardens beyond the city walls; as the scattered ruins that have glowed rose-red in the rays of the setting sun now stand out—purple masses against the green background of the *campagna*, and Tiber reflects the orange and saffron tints of the sky, the dead present seems to be enwrapped by the living past in these groves and gardens hidden away on the Aventine and far removed from the turmoil and vulgarity of modern Rome.

In those years the so-called Castello di Costantino was not the well-known resort that it has recently become. It was, indeed, little more than a somewhat superior *trattoria*, where one ate a bad Roman dinner and drank good Roman wine on a terrace commanding one of the most picturesque, as it is assuredly one of the most interesting, views in the world. In those days it was not the scene of pompous gatherings in honor of foreign or home celebrities, followed by wearisome speeches breathing mutual admiration in hackneyed phrases. A few artists, a few secretaries of embassies left to conduct international affairs while their chiefs were in cooler climates; a few ladies of the Roman world who

happened to be still left in the city, these, and a family party or two of the Roman *mezzo-ceto*, were its occasional visitors in the hot summer evenings when it is pleasant to get away from the baked pavements and streets of the town, and to breathe the fresh, sweet air stealing in from the open country and the sea.

The terrace behind the restaurant was almost deserted, and Professor Rossano selected a table at one corner of it, whence an uninterrupted view could be obtained over a part of the city, and across the *campagna* to the Sabine mountains in the nearer background; while between these and the Alban Hills the higher summits of the Leonessa range glowed red against the far horizon as they caught the last rays of the setting sun.

Monsignor Lelli cast a rapid glance around him as he seated himself at the little table, while the professor discussed the ordering of the dinner with the waiter. There was nobody, however, who would be likely to know him by sight, and comment on his presence in Rome in quarters where he would prefer it to remain unknown. A few couples, already half-way through their meal, or smoking their cigars over a measure of white wine, were the only visitors to the Castello di Costantino that evening besides Professor Rossano and his party, and these were evidently students either of art or of love.

"And so," observed Professor Rossano to his guest, as the waiter retired with his order, "you have come to Rome to tell me that you mean to help my son to make an idiot of himself. I suppose you are a little short of something to occupy you at Montefiano?"

Don Agostino laughed. "There was certainly more to occupy me when I lived in Rome," he said, dryly. "As for helping Silvio to make an idiot of himself, I am inclined to think he would make a worse idiot of himself without my assistance."

"*Grazie*, Don Agostino!" murmured Silvio, placidly.

"I wonder when they will call you back?" the professor said; "not," he added, with a quick movement of the head towards the Vatican, "as long as—"

"*Caro senatore!*" interrupted Don Agostino, deprecatingly.

"Of course—of course!" returned Professor Rossano, hastily. "I forgot your *soutane*—I always did, in the old days, if you recollect. We will talk of something else. It is always like that—when a man insists upon his right to use his own reason and to think for himself—"

"I thought you proposed to talk of something else," suggested Giacinta, mildly, to her father.

Don Agostino looked at her and laughed.

"He is the same as he was twenty years ago—our dear professor," he said.

"You are quite right, Giacinta," returned Professor Rossano. "When I think of the intellects—God-given—that have been warped and crushed in the name of

God, it makes me fly into a rage. Yes, it is certainly better to talk of something else. All the same, Monsignor Lelli understands what I mean. If he did not, he would still be at the Vatican, and not at Montefiano."

"I am particularly glad that Don Agostino understands," interposed Silvio.

"You!" exclaimed the professor, witheringly. "I have told you more than once that you are a pumpkin-head. A fine thing, truly, to make my old friend Monsignor Lelli a confidant of your love affairs! Not but what you appear to have confided them to him at a tolerably early stage. It is usually at a later stage that a priest hears of a love affair—is it not so, *caro monsignore*?" he added, with a twinkle of amusement in his brown eyes.

Don Agostino smiled. "Yes," he replied, "at a much later stage;" and then he paused and glanced across the table at Giacinta.

The professor saw the look and misinterpreted it. "Oh," he observed, carelessly, "my daughter knows all about Silvio's folly. But I do not wish to hear anything more about that. You have asked me certain questions about Silvio, and I have answered them, and that is enough. If you choose to help the boy in making an idiot of himself, my dear friend, I suppose you must do so, but I do not wish to know anything of the matter. There will be disturbances, and I am too busy for disturbances. I am preparing my work on criminal responsibility. It will be followed by another volume on responsibility in mental diseases. By-the-way, if I had the time I would study Silvio's case. It might be useful to me for my second volume. No; Giacinta and I are decidedly too busy to be troubled with Silvio's love affairs. Giacinta, you must know, acts as my secretary and copies out my manuscripts."

Don Agostino raised his eyebrows slightly.

"All of them?" he asked.

"Certainly, all of them. Her handwriting is exceedingly clear, whereas mine is frequently almost illegible. If it were not for Giacinta, I should have to employ a typewriter."

Don Agostino said nothing, but he glanced again at the girl, and wondered how much she understood of the professor's physiological arguments, and of the examples upon which many of them were based. The few minutes' conversation he had had alone with Professor Rossano had speedily convinced him that the professor was both proud and fond of his son. He had given Silvio the character which Don Agostino, a practised reader of countenances and the natures those countenances reflected, had felt sure would be given. At the same time, the professor had expressed his opinion of his son's passion for Donna Bianca Acorari in very decided terms, and had upbraided his old friend for encouraging the boy in his folly. Don Agostino had not explained his motives for espousing Silvio's cause. He had learned all he wanted to know, and was satisfied that he

had gauged Silvio's nature and character correctly. He felt, indeed, an unconquerable aversion from explaining the motives which prompted him to interest himself in a love affair between two headstrong young people. Everybody knew why he had left the Vatican; but very few people knew why, some four-and-twenty years ago, a good-looking young fellow, by name Agostino Lelli, became a priest. Most of us have an inner recess in our hearts—unless we are of that fortunate number who have no hearts—a recess which we shrink from unlocking as we would shrink from desecrating a tomb over which we are ever laying fresh flowers. Something which he could scarcely define had impelled Don Agostino to allow Silvio Rossano to glance into his jealously guarded shrine. He felt as though he had received some message from his beloved dead that the boy had a right to do so. He was convinced, moreover, in his own mind that the living spirit of the woman he had loved was urging him to save her child from the unhappiness that had fallen upon herself. Perhaps he had brooded too long and too deeply over the strange change of coincidences which had brought him and Silvio together—at the strange similarity between his own life's story and that of his old friend Professor Rossano's son, between the dead Bianca, Princess of Montefiano, and the child who bore her name and bodily likeness. In any case, it seemed to Don Agostino as though he were living over again those far-off years in Venice; as though he saw in Silvio Rossano his own youth, with all its hopes and all its joys, and yet with the same dark shadows—shadows that only youth itself had prevented him from realizing—threatening to overwhelm and destroy both.

"The boy is in earnest," he had said to Professor Rossano during their conversation together before setting out for the Castello di Costantino. "Cannot you see that he is in earnest?"

He spoke almost angrily, the more so, perhaps, on account of that strange feeling which never left him—the feeling that he was pleading his own cause and that of his dead.

"My dear friend," the professor had responded, with a slight shrug of the shoulders, "when one is young and in love, one is always in earnest—each time. Are you so old that you cannot remember? Ah, I forgot, you had no experience of such things—at least, no official experience."

Don Agostino smiled. "No," he repeated, "no official experience."

The professor glanced at him with a gleam of satirical amusement. He fancied he had detected a note of irony in the other's voice, but in his interpretation of it he was very wide of the mark.

And Don Agostino had found that the result of his conversation with Silvio's father was exactly what Silvio himself had foretold. The professor had dismissed the whole affair with airy good-humor as a *pazzia*, a folly in which he

had so far participated as to have made formal overtures on his son's behalf for Donna Bianca Acorari's hand, and of which he did not wish to hear anything more. If Silvio thought the girl would make him a good wife, then by all means let him marry her, if he could. If he could not, there were plenty of other girls to choose from, and any one of them who married Silvio would be a great deal luckier than she most probably deserved to be.

Don Agostino had very soon come to the conclusion that the professor would place no serious obstacles in the way to hinder his son from marrying Donna Bianca Acorari, should Silvio find means to accomplish that object. During the remainder of their dinner at the Castello di Costantino he threw himself, as it were, into Professor Rossano's humor, and it soon became evident to Silvio and Giacinta that their father and his guest were mutually enjoying one another's conversation. Giacinta, indeed, was not a little astonished at hearing the professor discourse so readily with a priest. But then, as she noted the facility with which Monsignor Lelli met her father on his favorite ground, the knowledge which he displayed of the scientific and political problems of the day, the serene tolerance with which he would discuss questions which she knew to be anathema to the ecclesiastical temperament, it was at once revealed to her that this was no ordinary priest, whose mental vision was limited by the outlook of the sacristy. The professor, as the evening wore on, seemed to be in his element. From subject to subject he flew with a rapidity which would have been bewildering had it not been for the conciseness and pungency of the arguments he brought to bear upon each of them. But Monsignor Lelli met him at every turn, agreeing with him often, but often parrying his thrusts with rapier-like stabs of keenest satire. The summer twilight was already fading into dusk, and the moon was rising over the Aventine, casting long shadows from the cypress-trees over the gardens and vineyards stretching away beneath the terrace, and still the two continued their discussions.

People seated at little tables near them ceased from laughing and talking, and turned round to listen, for the waiters had whispered that the *signore* with the beard was the famous Senator Rossano, and that the priest was without doubt a cardinal who had dressed as an ordinary priest lest he should be compromised by being seen in public in such company.

Suddenly, in the midst of a more than usually brilliant sally, provoked by some observation from his host, Monsignor Lelli stopped abruptly and addressed an entirely irrelevant remark to Giacinta. Silvio, who happened to be looking at him, saw his face change slightly as he looked beyond the professor towards the door leading from the restaurant on to the terrace. A small group of new arrivals was issuing from this door, and its members began to make their way to a vacant table a short distance from that occupied by the professor and his party.

Giacinta also had caught sight of the new-comers. "Look, Silvio!" she exclaimed, in a low tone; "look, father, there is Princess Montefiano's brother, Monsieur d'Antin, with those people!"

"Very well, Giacinta," returned the professor, vexed at the interruption; "he can go to the devil! Go on with what you were saying," he added to Don Agostino. "It was well put—very well put, indeed—but I think that I have an argument—"

"*Caro senatore*," observed Don Agostino, tranquilly, "are you aware that it grows late? We can continue our discussion as we return to the city. *Signorina*," he continued, turning to Giacinta, "you are sitting with your back to the view. Is it not beautiful, with the moonlight falling on those ruins?"

He rose from his chair as he spoke, and motioned to Giacinta to accompany him to the parapet of the terrace.

"Bring your father away," he said to her, in a low voice, "and Silvio. It is as well for us not to be seen together."

"But Baron d'Antin does not know Silvio by sight," returned Giacinta, "and I doubt if he knows either my father or me by sight. Do you know him, *monsignore*?" she added.

"I have never seen him," said Don Agostino, "and it is not of him I am thinking—but of the other, the young man who is with him. No, do not look round, *signorina*! At present I think that we are unobserved. It will be more prudent for me to leave you without any further ceremony. We can meet again outside the restaurant."

"But who is he—that other one?" asked Giacinta, quickly.

"A person I would rather not meet," replied Don Agostino—"at least," he added, "I would rather not be seen by him under the present circumstances, *signorina*. I beg of you to explain to your father that he will find me waiting for him outside," and, turning from her, Don Agostino walked rapidly towards the door, having satisfied himself that the new-comers were occupied with the head-waiter in ordering their dinner, and that he could probably leave the terrace unobserved by them.

XX

On emerging from the restaurant, the Rossanos found Don Agostino awaiting them.

"Giacinta told me I must pay the bill and come away," the professor said to him. "For myself," he added, "I should have preferred to remain another half-hour. That white wine is certainly good. May one ask, *monsignore*, what made you leave us so suddenly? Did you discover a cardinal of the holy office in disguise?"

Don Agostino laughed. "Not quite a cardinal," he replied, "but somebody very near to a cardinal."

"Do you mean the man who was with Baron d'Antin—the young man?" asked Silvio.

"Precisely," returned Don Agostino. "He is not quite so young as he looks, however," he continued. "In fact, he must be certainly ten or twelve years older. Do you know him, Silvio?"

"By sight, yes. I do not know who he is, but one sees him in the world here in Rome—sometimes with English people—old ladies with odd things on their heads, and their daughters who walk like *carabinieri* pushing their way through a crowd. *Diamine*, but how they walk, the English girls! Everything moves at once—arms, shoulders, hips—everything! It is certainly not graceful."

"Never mind the English girls, Silvio, since you are not going to marry one," interrupted Giacinta. "Who is Baron d'Antin's friend, *monsignore*?" she added.

Don Agostino hesitated. "His name is Peretti," he replied, "the Commendatore Peretti. He is very intimate with the cardinal secretary of state. Some people say that he supplies his eminence with useful information which he acquires in the world outside the Vatican. He gives Italian lessons, I am told, to Silvio's English ladies; also to members of the embassies to the king."

"A spy, in fact," observed Silvio.

Don Agostino shrugged his shoulders. "*Mah!*" he ejaculated. "In any case," he continued, "I did not particularly wish to be seen by him, for it would at once be known at the Vatican that I had been in Rome in your and your father's company, and—well, the less *quelli signori* of the Vatican interest themselves in your affairs, Silvio, the better for you. For me it does not matter."

"It seems to me that it has mattered very much," growled the professor.

"And you think he did not see you?" said Silvio. "Ah, but you are mistaken, Don Agostino. He did see you, and he pointed you out to Baron d'Antin; and the baron saw me, too."

Don Agostino looked at him quickly.

"But you told me that Monsieur d'Antin did not know you by sight," he exclaimed.

"I thought he did not know me, because I did not know him by sight," returned Silvio; "but I was mistaken," he added. "It is true that I never saw Monsieur d'Antin before to-night, to my knowledge, but he has seen me. I saw that he knew me by the expression in his eyes when he looked at me, and I am quite sure that

he whispered my name to his friend—Peretti, is it?"

"Ah!" said Don Agostino, "it is certainly unfortunate that they should have seen us together. One never knows—"

"They looked at me in such a way that for two *soldi* I would have gone up to them and asked what they wanted of me—and then there would have been a row. Yes, Giacinta, for two *soldi* I would have boxed both their ears—a *soldo* for each of them," and Silvio's eyes began to flash ominously.

"Less than a *soldo*," observed his father, quietly. "They have four ears, Silvio. That would be at the rate of two *centesimi* and a half for each ear. All the same, I am glad you did not do it."

"I thought he would have done it," said Giacinta, in an undertone to Don Agostino, "but I made him come away at once."

Don Agostino looked grave. "I do not understand," he said to Silvio. "How could Monsieur d'Antin know you if you had never seen him before?"

"*Che ne so io?*" answered Silvio, carelessly—"and what does it matter?" he added, with a laugh. "He probably knows now that I should like to break his head, just as I know that he would like to break mine."

"Not for anything that he would find inside it," interposed the professor, dryly. "*Via*, Silvio, what is there to wonder at if Baron d'Antin looks at you with some curiosity? He has probably heard his sister speak of you as a lunatic!"

Silvio and Don Agostino glanced at each other. The latter laid his hand on Professor Rossano's arm. "*Caro senatore*," he said, "we shall do well not to discuss these things here. Let us walk back to Palazzo Acorari; or, still better, let us prolong our walk a little and go to the Forum. I honestly admit that by daylight I detest the Forum—the archæologists have turned it into a hideous affair. But by moonlight it is another matter. I think Domeneddio must have made the moonlight in order to allow the Romans to forget for a few hours that archæologists exist."

Professor Rossano laughed. "Let us go to the Forum, by all means," he observed. "There will be no archæologists at this hour. They will all be calling one another idiots and impostors elsewhere—perhaps in the *salon* of the Countess Vitali."

It was not to be supposed that the professor and Giacinta would walk from the Castello di Costantino to the Foro Romano; although Don Agostino, accustomed to long expeditions on foot in the Sabines, and Silvio, who could walk the whole day provided that he were carrying a gun, would have thought nothing of doing so. Professor Rossano however, seldom used his legs if he could avail himself of any other means of locomotion, and on the first opportunity he stopped a passing *botte* and directed the driver to set them down at the Colosseum. Guttural shouts from a party of German tourists about to enter the building caused

the professor to turn away from it with an impatient shrug of the shoulders. Much as he admired the scientific and philosophical attainments of the Germans, in common with most Italians he disliked them intensely as a nation. The offending Teutons disappeared into the Colosseum as Professor Rossano and his companions walked slowly towards the arch of Titus. The ruins in the Forum looked ghostly and unreal in the moonlight. In front, the great square mass of the Capitol loomed grimly, while from the dark, cypress-crowned Palatine on their left came the mournful cries of owls flitting to and fro in the roofless halls of the palace of the Cæsars.

"You are sure that Baron d'Antin recognized you?" Don Agostino asked of Silvio, who had stopped to light a cigar, while his sister and the professor walked on a little ahead of them.

"As sure as I am that you were recognized by your little spy, Peretti," Silvio replied. "What puzzles me," he added, "is how he could know me."

"It is not very strange, considering that you live in Palazzo Acorari."

"But I am sure that I have never seen him," insisted Silvio. "After all," he continued, "it does not matter very much; and I do not suppose it matters if Peretti recognized you."

"Except that the accident of his having seen me in your company might lead to my being moved from Montefiano to some other still more remote place," said Don Agostino, quietly.

Silvio looked blank. "Why should it do that?" he asked.

Don Agostino smiled. "One never knows," he said. "The Princess Montefiano has no doubt many friends at the Vatican. If it were suggested to her that I was on friendly terms with you and your family, she might very easily bring about my removal from Montefiano. I wish we had not gone to the Costantino, Silvio. I have a presentiment that our encounter with Monsieur d'Antin and that little busybody, Peretti, may add to our difficulties."

"At any rate," said Silvio, "we will return to Montefiano to-morrow, Don Agostino, and I must find some means of communicating with Bianca. We know now that Baron d'Antin is in Rome and not at Montefiano. Probably," he added, "he has understood by this time that Bianca would not be induced to listen to him."

"If he has," observed Don Agostino, "the fact is not likely to make him feel very friendly towards a more successful suitor. No, Silvio, be guided by me; and do not do anything in a hurry. Remember that if it were discovered that you are living with me at Montefiano, I should certainly be removed from my duties there, of that I am quite sure; and my removal would be a misfortune. Perhaps I can do more for you at Montefiano than you can do for yourself—yet."

"But if you never go to the castle," began Silvio.

"I have never been as yet," returned Don Agostino, "but that does not mean to say that I am never going there. Besides, sooner or later what happens in the castle will be talked about in the *paese*. It is a mere question of time. And what is talked about in the *paese* sooner or later is talked about to Ernana," he added, with a smile. "How, for instance, do you suppose I knew that Monsieur d'Antin proposed to marry Donna Bianca Acorari? I do not often listen to Ernana's gossip, for if she were encouraged she would doubtless tell a great deal, and some of it would probably be true—not much, but some of it."

Silvio gave an impatient exclamation.

"How can the princess tolerate the idea of such a marriage?" he burst out, angrily. "I can understand her objecting to me—but surely it is more natural that her step-daughter should marry a young man than that old—"

"Precisely!" interrupted Don Agostino. "You have exactly defined the situation. I, too, understand the objection to you—from a worldly point of view—as a husband for Donna Bianca Acorari. But you are not the only young man in the world, my dear Silvio. There are many others, possessing better social qualifications, from whom the princess could select a husband for her step-daughter. It was assuredly not necessary to fall back upon Baron d'Antin, even in order to get rid of you! No, there must be some other reason for sacrificing the girl—for indeed I call it a sacrifice. It seems to me, Silvio, that we should discover that reason before you attempt to communicate again with Donna Bianca. Until we know it, we are working in the dark. I have my suspicions what the reasons may be; but they are at the best but vague suspicions, which probably I have no right to entertain."

Silvio looked at him keenly.

"What are they?" he asked, briefly.

Don Agostino hesitated. "I said that I had probably no right to entertain them," he repeated. "I do not wish to wrong anybody, but it has sometimes struck me that possibly there may be money difficulties—that it would not be convenient to the administrators of the Montefiano estates were Donna Bianca to marry a stranger."

"Money difficulties!" repeated Silvio. "You mean that perhaps Bianca's property has been interfered with—that she would not be as rich as she was supposed to be when she comes of age? Is that what you mean, Don Agostino?"

"Partly—yes."

Silvio's eyes gleamed blue in the moonlight. "*Magari!*" he exclaimed, simply.

Don Agostino looked at him for a moment, and then he smiled.

"You would be glad?" he asked.

"Of course I should be glad—I should be delighted," returned Silvio. "If it

were not for her money," he continued, "it would all have been so simple—do you not see what I mean? Of course there are the titles—but anybody can have titles. I know a cab-driver in Naples who is a *marchese*, an absolutely genuine *marchese*, of Bourbon creation. But the money makes it another affair altogether."

"The money makes it another affair altogether," repeated Don Agostino; "that is very true." He spoke more as though talking to himself than to Silvio.

"Perhaps," continued Silvio, "if the princess and her Belgian confessor could be made to understand that I do not want Bianca's money—that I have enough of my own both for her and for myself—they would not be so anxious to marry her to that old baron. So you see, Don Agostino, my reason for being glad if there has been some mismanagement of the Montefiano properties."

Don Agostino looked at him with a smile.

"Yes, Silvio," he said, "I see your reason—it is one that I should have expected from you. But it is not a good reason."

Silvio glanced at him with surprise.

"Not a good reason!" he repeated. "And why not? It seems to me to be a very natural reason. I want Bianca Acorari herself. I do not want her money, and I would not accept one of her titles."

"It is a very natural reason, yes—for a *galantuomo*," returned Don Agostino, "but it is not one that will appeal to those who are not *galantuomini*. You must remember that dishonest people do not easily credit others with honesty. In this case I cannot help suspecting—it is a suspicion only—that Monsieur d'Antin has some hold over his sister, and perhaps also over the Abbé Roux. Moreover, you must recollect that Donna Bianca has evidently aroused—well, a certain passion in him; and the passion of an elderly man for a young girl—"

Silvio Rossano muttered something under his breath. It was not complimentary to Baron d'Antin.

"It is no use to fly into a rage—none at all," proceeded Don Agostino, tranquilly. "We must look at things as they are, and human nature is a complicated affair. What we have to do is to find out, so to speak, all the cards that Monsieur d'Antin holds in his hand. I do not wish to be uncharitable, but it is scarcely credible that the princess would encourage, or even tolerate, her brother's aspirations, were he not able to bring some more convincing argument to bear upon her and the Abbé Roux than the mere fact that he had conceived a sudden passion for her step-daughter."

"Yes," said Silvio, thoughtfully; "I see what you mean. You are more clever at reasoning than I am," he added.

Don Agostino smiled. "I am considerably older than you are, *ragazzo mio*," he replied; "and," he continued, "I am not in love with Bianca Acorari, though her welfare is very dear to me, for—for her mother's sake." He paused, and Silvio saw

him make the sign of the cross almost imperceptibly.

"I think," Don Agostino continued, "that you would do well not to return with me to Montefiano to-morrow. If Baron d'Antin knew that you were in the neighborhood, and especially if he knew that you were in my house—it would certainly not make things easier."

Silvio's face fell. "But what am I to do?" he exclaimed. "I had meant—"

"Yes," interrupted Don Agostino, "let us hear what you had meant to do at Montefiano—or rather, I will tell you. You had meant by some means to obtain another interview with Donna Bianca—to persuade her to escape with you, perhaps—and that I should marry you. In fact, you had a whole romance in your head. Is it not true?"

Silvio laughed. "Something of the sort, I admit," he answered.

"Well," continued Don Agostino, decidedly, "it will not do; it will not do at all. We are not characters in a novel, and we can afford to act like ordinary human beings who are face to face with a difficulty, but who are also not quite sure of their ground. In real life it is wonderful how things settle themselves if we will only be patient and allow them to do so. No; you are not the hero in a romance, and it is not necessary for you to bring about a situation lest the public should become tired of you. The situation will probably come of itself—*per forza maggiore*."

"And am I to sit down and do nothing, and leave the field clear for Baron d'Antin?" asked Silvio.

"For a short time—for a few days, perhaps—yes."

"But you forget," Silvio interrupted, quickly. "Bianca is expecting to hear from me in some way. I promised her I would communicate with her. That is now nearly a month ago, and as yet I have been unable to send her a single word, for a letter would certainly never reach her—that is to say, until I can find some trustworthy person who would give it to her."

"Write your letter, and I will undertake that it reaches her," said Don Agostino.

"You!" exclaimed Silvio.

"Yes; I will be your messenger. Yesterday I would not have undertaken to help you so far. You can probably guess why, Silvio."

"Because you were not sure of me—that I was worthy of your help?"

"Oh, as to that, I was always sure from the first," said Don Agostino, quietly. "I am very seldom mistaken in my first impressions of people whom I care to study, and I studied you. But I was determined not to act on my impressions until they should have been confirmed by your father. I always told you as much, if you remember."

"And now they are confirmed? I am glad," said Silvio, simply.

Don Agostino smiled. "Amply," he replied, laying his hand affectionately on Silvio's shoulder. "Be guided by me, *figlio mio*," he continued. "Remain quietly here in Rome until I tell you to come to Montefiano. In the mean time, I will do all I can for you. It may be very little, or it may be more than you think; I cannot tell as yet. Write your letter to-night, and I will take it with me to-morrow morning. You quite understand, however, that it may be some days before I have an opportunity of conveying it safely to its destination, so you must not be impatient."

"You will see that I shall be patient," said Silvio. "It was the apparent impossibility of being able to communicate with Bianca that has made me impatient. It was natural, for the weeks were passing, and after what you told me about Baron d'Antin, I dared not leave Bianca much longer without fulfilling my promise that she should hear from me. However, now that I know that our affairs are in your hands, I will be as patient as you please."

"That is well," replied Don Agostino, briefly. "And, above all, Silvio," he added, "do not confide in anybody. Do not move from Rome until you receive a letter from me bidding you come to Montefiano, or to some other place in its neighborhood that I will name in the letter. *Dunque, siamo intesi*? Then let us catch up with the others. It is growing late, and I must return to my hotel. You can bring me your letter to-morrow morning. I shall leave Rome by the eight-o'clock train, and it will be wiser for you to come only to the hotel, and not accompany me to the railway station. The less we are seen together now the better. It is a strange thing, but the accident of having met those two individuals to-night has made me feel uncomfortable."

"What harm can they do?" said Silvio, carelessly. "If Monsieur d'Antin had seen us together at Montefiano, then he might well have been suspicious; but here, in Rome, we are—"

"In Rome," interrupted Don Agostino, dryly; and he said no more than might be implied by a slight shrug of the shoulders and a quick gesture with the hands.

The professor and Giacinta had halted at this moment. By this time they had reached the upper end of the Forum, and a few paces more would bring them out into the Via S. Teodoro, close to the narrow flight of steps leading up to the piazza of the Capitol.

As soon as Don Agostino and Silvio joined them, Professor Rossano begged the former to return with them to Palazzo Acorari, but Don Agostino declined. It was time for him to go back to his hotel, he declared, and Silvio, rightly guessing that he did not wish to run any risks of again being seen with them, forebore from seconding his father's invitation. After bidding the professor and Giacinta a cordial farewell, Don Agostino stopped a passing cab, and directed the driver to the Albergo Santa Chiara, a modest little hotel near the Minerva, largely frequented

by foreign priests and pilgrims.

"I will be with you at seven o'clock to-morrow morning," said Silvio to him as he got into the cab. Don Agostino nodded, and, raising his broad beaver hat, drove away.

"There," said the professor, jerking his head in the direction of the disappearing *botte*, "is another of them."

"Another of whom, Babbo?" asked Giacinta.

"Why, another honest man, with a head upon his shoulders, too, whom those priests across the Tiber have driven away!" replied Professor Rossano, angrily.

"Why did he leave the Vatican?" asked Silvio. "He would never tell me his story at Montefiano, but always said that you would remember it well enough."

"Remember it? Of course I remember it!" returned the professor. "At one time all Rome was talking of Monsignor Lelli. They declared at the Vatican that he had speculated and lent money on bad security from the funds intrusted to him; accused him, in short, of a carelessness almost equivalent to fraud. But everybody knew that he had been forced to use the money in the way it was used, and that he was afterwards disgraced when things went contrary to expectations. *Che vuoi?*"

Silvio said nothing. His thoughts were occupied with the letter he would write to Bianca Acorari that night, and he wondered how Don Agostino would find the means of giving it, or causing it to be safely delivered. It was a disappointment to him not to return to Montefiano on the morrow, but he could not but feel that Don Agostino was right in advising him to remain quietly in Rome. It would certainly not help matters were his only friend at Montefiano to be suddenly transferred to some other post; and Silvio knew enough of his world fully to realize how important a part intrigue and personal animosities played, not only at the Vatican, but also in every phase of Roman life.

The clocks were striking ten when they reached Palazzo Acorari, and though nobody thinks of going home at ten o'clock on a summer night in Rome, or anywhere else in Italy, Silvio Rossano accompanied his father and sister up the dimly lighted staircase to their apartment. The professor was anxious to continue the correction of his proofs, and Silvio was longing to begin his letter to Bianca Acorari.

Apparently, however, he had something else on his mind; for, after the professor had retired to his library, he followed Giacinta into her sitting-room, a little room opening off the drawing-room. Giacinta, who was tired after her walk, took off her hat and the light wrap she was wearing, and settled herself comfortably in an arm-chair; while Silvio, after lighting a cigarette, began to pace somewhat restlessly up and down the room. It was very evident that he had something to

say, and Giacinta, who knew her brother's moods, sat waiting for it in silence.

"I am not going back to Montefiano with Don Agostino to-morrow," he began, presently.

"I did not know that you intended to do so," observed Giacinta.

"Of course I intended to do so!" Silvio returned. "However," he continued, "Don Agostino thinks it wiser that I should not return just yet, and I believe he is right. He is going to take a letter from me to Bianca."

Giacinta glanced at him with a smile. "No doubt you think he is right in that also," she observed.

Silvio laughed. "How like you are to Babbo, sometimes!" he exclaimed. "Yes, I think he is quite right. The only thing is, Giacinta—" and he paused, hesitatingly.

"That you would not know what to say in the letter?"

"Ah, no! Well, perhaps I do not know what to say. If it amuses you to think so, I am quite content. The question is, that I want to send something to Bianca—something that I value. You understand? I have given her nothing as yet—I have not even written to her. I want to send her something—with my letter—something that belonged to our mother. It is so easy to walk into a shop and buy a bit of jewelry, but it is not the same thing—"

"I understand," said Giacinta, quietly.

"And so," continued Silvio, a little hurriedly, "I thought that if I sent her one of our mother's rings—you have all her jewelry, Giacinta, have you not? You could spare me one of the rings, perhaps?"

"They are as much yours as mine," answered Giacinta. "Babbo gave the jewelry into my charge; you know there are pearls and other things. Wait, and I will bring you the case from my room, and then you can see for yourself."

She got up from her chair and went into the next room, returning presently with an old case covered with faded red velvet and fastened with heavy clasps of gilded metal.

"Ecco!" she said, holding out to Silvio an elaborately ornamented key, also heavily gilded. "You must turn it three times in the lock before it will open the box. In the upper tray there are the rings, and below are the pearls."

"The pearls can remain where they are," observed Silvio. "You will want them when you marry," he added, as he unlocked and opened the case. "I will take this ring," he continued, pointing to an old "marquise" ring, on which a sapphire was mounted in the centre of a cluster of white Brazilian diamonds. "The rest you will keep, but this one I will send to Bianca and tell her that it belonged to my mother. You do not mind, Giacinta?"

With a sudden movement Giacinta turned and kissed him. "Why should I mind?" she exclaimed; "only—"

"Only what?" asked Silvio, as she paused.

"Only I wish you had sought for a wife elsewhere," she continued, earnestly. "Those people—they will despise you, because they are noble and we are not. You will never be allowed to marry Donna Bianca Acorari, Silvio! Never, I tell you! That priest and Baron d'Antin, they will never permit it. The girl will not be allowed to marry anybody, unless it be Monsieur d'Antin. You will see."

"*Sciocchezze!*" exclaimed Silvio, contemptuously. "What have I often told you, Giacinta?" he continued. "Bianca and I can afford to wait until she is her own mistress. If they were to attempt to force her to marry Baron d'Antin or anybody else, then we would go away and get some priest to marry us. The civil marriage could wait. I have told you so a hundred times."

Giacinta was silent for a moment. Then she said, suddenly:

"I am glad you are not going back to Montefiano. It was wise of Don Agostino, as you call him, to advise you to remain here."

"Oh, but I shall go back there very soon," returned Silvio. "In a few days Don Agostino will write to me to come. You see, Bianca must be protected from that old baron. She will be glad to know that I am near her, even if we cannot see each other."

"Do not go, Silvio!" Giacinta exclaimed, almost passionately. "You will be mad to go! Ah, but I saw Baron d'Antin's expression when he recognized you! I could see that he recognized you—and you, you looked at him as if you would have struck him."

Silvio laughed. "And I could have struck him—very hard," he replied, "for he stared at me in an insolent manner. Of course, I shall return to Montefiano, Giacinta, whenever Don Agostino writes to me that I can do so. I cannot imagine what you are afraid of."

Giacinta smiled slightly. "After all," she said, "I hardly know myself! But there is some mystery—something I do not understand. I am afraid that it is money—that they want to keep Donna Bianca's money. Oh, not the princess! She is only a fool. But these others, the Abbé Roux and Monsieur d'Antin, they are not fools. And if it is money, and you stand in their way—well, who knows what people will not do for money? They might murder you at Montefiano, and who would be the wiser?"

Silvio laughed again. "Scarcely, Giacinta *mia*," he replied. "If they tried to put me out of the way, several people would be the wiser, and some of them—Don Agostino, for instance—would make awkward inquiries. *Via!* we are not in the Middle Ages; and the son of the Senator Rossano is not a completely obscure person who could be made away with with impunity. I assure you that you need not be alarmed. Now I must go and write my letter, for at seven o'clock tomorrow morning I have to be at the Albergo Santa Chiara, for Don Agostino

leaves Rome at eight. *Buona notte*, Giacinta, *e buon riposo*, and do not get foolish ideas into your head, or you will lie awake."

And so saying, Silvio went off to his own room, taking with him the ring he had selected from his mother's jewel-case.

XXI

Bianca was walking slowly up and down the terrace beneath the castle of Montefiano. Every now and then she would pause and lean over the low stone parapet, gazing thoughtfully into the deep ravine below, or across the ridges of the Sabines to the towns and villages perched upon their rocky eminences commanding the upper valley of the Tiber. It was late in the afternoon, and cool enough upon the terrace, which was sheltered from the westering sun by the shadow of the mass of building above it.

More than a month had passed since she had been brought to Montefiano, and no word had come to her from Silvio. That a letter should not have reached her in the ordinary way, did not surprise her. She had very rarely received a letter in her life, save, perhaps, some words of greeting at Easter or at the New Year; and under the circumstances it was not very likely that any missive could arrive for her by the post without being intercepted and confiscated by those who were so evidently determined to guard against any renewal of communication between her and her lover.

The days had passed slowly enough at Montefiano. The great suite of rooms on the *piano nobile* of the palace had been put into a certain order, as the princess had directed; but the furniture sent from Palazzo Acorari at Rome made a sorry show of comfort in the huge rooms of the Montefiano fortress. Indeed, it was only the corners of the living-room which could be made habitable—little oases, as it were, in a desert of marble floors, of walls from which faded damask was hanging in tattered strips, and upon which hung mirrors that had long ago ceased to reflect, or such pictures as the late prince had left as not being worth the trouble and expense of being moved to Rome to be sold to foreign collectors.

An indescribable atmosphere of dreariness seemed to pervade the interior of Montefiano, that dreariness which is produced by the sense of departed strength and grandeur. The apartments occupied by the princess and Bianca were entirely on one floor. A large vestibule formed the centre of the suite, approached

by a double flight of stone steps leading up from the quadrangle or inner court of the palace. On one side of this hall were high double doors opening into an immense drawing-room, and opposite to them similar doors led into a gallery, at the farther extremity of which were two other sitting-rooms. Beyond these, again, was the princess's bedroom, and a smaller room beyond it, and at the end of the suite was Bianca's room, which could only be reached by passing through her step-mother's sleeping apartment. There were other rooms on the opposite side of the court-yard, which were occupied by the Abbé Roux and Monsieur d'Antin; while the servants inhabited a part of the house to get to which endless corridors and unused chambers had to be traversed. If life at the Palazzo Acorari and at the villa near Velletri had been quiet, it was amusing compared with that led by the princess and her step-daughter at Montefiano. Even the horses and the carriage had been left behind at Rome. Except a daily walk about a few acres of brushwood and coppices behind the castle—an enclosed piece of ground dignified by the name of a park, access to which was only possible by descending a damp, moss-grown flight of steps at the end of the terrace—Bianca never left the immediate precincts of the old dwelling, half palace and half mediæval fortress, of which she was nominally the mistress.

The Abbé Roux had been quite right when he had declared that no convent could afford a more secure retreat from the world than the castle of Montefiano. The little town, nestling beneath the grim, battlemented walls and flanking round towers on the southern side of the building, might have been a hundred miles away, for not a sound from it ever penetrated to that part of the castle in which the princess and Bianca lived, nor was so much as a roof-top visible. The cries of the jackdaws, or the scream of a hawk during the daytime, or, after dusk, the melancholy note of the little gray owls haunting the *macchia*, the monotonous croaking of the frogs in a swampy piece of ground in its recesses, were the only sounds audible, except that of the bell of Cardinal Acorari's clock over the Renaissance façade, tolling the passage of the hours and half-hours, as it had tolled them for over two centuries.

They had been some weeks at Montefiano, and the princess had never spoken to Bianca on the subject of what she termed the imprudent attempt of an adventurer to lead her into an entanglement in which she might have seriously compromised herself. Perhaps Princess Montefiano had never before felt how far removed from Bianca she was, how little sympathy and confidence existed between her and her step-daughter, as during the period immediately following the discovery of what, in her conversations with the Abbé Roux and with her brother, she called Bianca's indiscretion. She felt that she did not understand the girl; and, more keenly than she had ever done before, she felt conscious that Bianca regarded her as a foreigner. Had it been consistent with her sense of

duty, Princess Montefiano would very readily have relegated the office of explaining to her step-daughter the gravity of her offence against all the rules that should guide the conduct of a young girl, and the utter impossibility of any alliance being tolerated between the heiress and representative of Casa Acorari and the son of a professor, however illustrious that professor might be. But to whom could she relegate the task? Certainly not to the Abbé Roux, although the subject was one in which fatherly advice from a priest would surely be better than any advice, save that of a mother, and she was not the girl's mother—all the difficulty lay in that point. But to expect Bianca to open her heart to the Abbé Roux, or to tolerate any open interference from him in her actions, was, as the princess had learned from experience, an altogether hopeless idea. The situation was certainly embarrassing, all the more so because Bianca shut herself up in an impenetrable reserve. She had accepted the sudden move to Montefiano without making any comment, or uttering any protest. Under any other circumstances, Princess Montefiano would have attributed this attitude to that apathy which she had until lately honestly believed to be one of Bianca's characteristics. Unluckily, recent events had conclusively proved this belief to be an illusion. As Monsieur d'Antin had pointed out to his sister, in language admitting of no misconstruction, young girls who were apathetic did not allow young men to make love to them in a manner that had—well, certainly nothing of apathy about it. And the princess had sighed and shaken her head. She felt herself to be out of her depth. Her experiences of love had been limited to the short period of married life passed with the Principe di Montefiano, experiences which of necessity were very limited indeed. As was her invariable practice when confronted by any difficulty, she had sought counsel of the Abbé Roux, and the abbé had readily understood and sympathized with her in her embarrassment. He could not offer to speak to Donna Bianca and point out to her the grave dangers, both worldly and spiritual, to which she had exposed herself, and the still greater unhappiness which was certainly in store for her were she to continue in her present unfortunate state of mind. Donna Bianca, he reminded the princess, had shown too plainly her want of confidence in him, both as a priest and as an individual, to allow of his making any attempt to force that confidence. But there was another person to whom, perhaps, she would be more communicative, and who might possibly succeed in distracting her thoughts from their present object. Donna Bianca had, at all events, shown symptoms of being more at her ease with Monsieur le Baron than she had with himself, or even—madame must pardon his frankness—with her step-mother. Why not, the Abbé Roux had concluded, refrain from pointing out to Donna Bianca the impossibility of the situation into which she had drifted until Monsieur d'Antin had endeavored to make her see matters in a different light? It might well be, considering the obvious sympathy which had existed

between Monsieur le Baron and Donna Bianca, that the former might succeed where he himself would certainly, and Madame la Princesse possibly, fail. In the mean time, a rigorous seclusion at Montefiano would not cease to be advisable. The very dulness of this seclusion, the gradual certainty that no communication with young Rossano would ever be permitted, would doubtless soon break down Donna Bianca's obstinacy; while very probably the young man himself would realize the hopelessness of his suit and turn his attentions elsewhere.

Princess Montefiano had not received this suggestion without considerable misgivings. Her brother's interest in Bianca had certainly not diminished since the day when she had discovered that the Abbé Roux shared her suspicions that this interest was not altogether platonic. She was in some ways a sensitive woman, always thinking what people might or might not say of her and her actions. Ever since her marriage to the late Prince Montefiano, she had been haunted by a nervous dread lest she should be supposed to neglect his daughter; and though she scarcely realized it herself, it had been this feeling, rather than any affection for Bianca, that had made her almost timidly anxious not to fail in anything which she might conceive to be her duty towards the girl. Bianca, however, had realized when quite a child, with all that quick intuition which children share with other animals, that however kind her step-mother might be to her, it was a kindness certainly not born of love. Strangely enough, it would never have entered Princess Montefiano's head that her step-daughter was capable of detecting the difference. Like many conscientious people, she was quite satisfied by the constant reflection that she was doing her duty. That Bianca was not equally satisfied with and duly appreciative of the fact, she had long ago accustomed herself to attribute to the girl being possessed of a cold and indifferent nature.

After duly considering the abbé's advice, Princess Montefiano had decided to act upon it. It was true that, should he be correct in his calculations that a policy of seclusion and of a quiet but determined ignoring of the pretensions of the Rossano family would result in Bianca's submission, everything would be gained. At the same time, the world would think it strange, and not altogether seemly, that the girl should marry a man old enough to be her father, and who was also the brother of her father's second wife. But, as the abbé had pointed out, similar marriages, though possibly unusual, were not unheard of; and in Rome there had certainly been instances in which they had turned out satisfactorily to all parties. Moreover, even were the world to criticise her for allowing Bianca to contract such an alliance, criticism, as the Abbé Roux rightly insisted, would instantly cease were it suspected that the affair had been arranged in order to prevent the heiress of the Acorari from marrying a man who was not of her own social condition, but who had presumed to ask for her hand.

Altogether it had seemed better to the princess to take the unbiased advice of a man of the world, who was at the same time a priest, and to wait patiently to see whether Bianca would not in time come to her senses, and be glad to accept the devotion of a man of her own order, even if there was some disparity of age between him and her.

Matters had not, however, gone quite so smoothly as Monsieur l'Abbé had anticipated. For the first few days after his arrival at Montefiano it had appeared as if Bianca rather welcomed Baron d'Antin's attentions to her than otherwise. The princess even began to ask herself whether, after all, the Abbé Roux had not been right when he had hinted that her step-daughter's clandestine love-affair with a young man must not be taken too seriously—that Donna Bianca was of a temperament which demanded certain things—oh, but certain things that one husband could supply as well as another. Princess Montefiano had felt somewhat shocked at the idea. Nevertheless, when she observed that Bianca seemed to take pleasure in her brother Philippe's society, and that she was less silent and reserved when talking to him than she was at other times, she wondered whether the Abbé Roux had not read the girl's nature accurately, and she began to congratulate herself on having listened to his advice.

It was with not a little anxiety and disappointment, therefore, that Princess Montefiano noticed a sudden but unmistakeable change in Bianca's demeanor towards Monsieur d'Antin. Whereas she had always been ready to talk to him, she now seemed anxious to avoid him. If he addressed her at meals, she would answer in monosyllables, or perhaps not at all. Her manner betrayed an uneasiness and suspicion whenever she was in company, and at times would become almost sullen. If he proposed to walk with her on the terrace, or in the park, instead of consenting almost with alacrity, as she had usually done, she would answer coldly that she was not going out.

This state of things had lasted some days, and one evening at dinner Monsieur d'Antin suddenly announced his intention of going to Rome the following morning, as he had some business to do there.

The princess, who happened to glance at Bianca, saw an expression of intense relief pass over her countenance. The look surprised and then shocked her. It was the look that some trapped animal might give when just set at liberty.

Nothing more was said at that moment, however, and very soon after dinner Bianca went to her own room. The next morning Monsieur d'Antin left early, in order to catch a train which would enable him to reach Rome by twelve o'clock.

At the mid-day breakfast Bianca and her step-mother were alone together, for the Abbé Roux, as the princess explained, was occupied with the *fattore* on business.

"It is very annoying," she observed, presently, to Bianca, when the servants

had brought in the coffee and left the room. "I have had to discharge Fontana—the agent, you know."

Bianca looked up from a fig she was peeling. "Ah," she said, quickly, "what has he done?"

"It is rather a case of what he has not done," replied Princess Montefiano. "Monsieur l'Abbé," she continued, "has been occupying himself with going about the estate since we have come here. He finds everything in a very unsatisfactory condition, I am sorry to say. Apparently the *fattore*, this Fontana, has resented any inquiries being made into his management. Monsieur l'Abbé is quite sure Fontana has ruled here too long, and that it will be better to make a change. He knows of a man—"

"Of course!" interposed Bianca, dryly.

The princess glanced at her. "It is very fortunate for you," she observed, "and for me, that we have a shrewd man of business like Monsieur l'Abbé to advise us. That is what you will never understand, Bianca."

Bianca Acorari pushed her plate from her impatiently. "No," she said, abruptly, "I shall never understand it. I think I should prefer priests who were not shrewd men of business, and men of business who were not priests."

The princess sighed. "When you are older, *figlia mia*," she remarked, "you will understand many things better than you do at present. I am sorry that you are vexed about Fontana. I am annoyed also, for I do not like turning off an old servant who has been here many years. But we, Monsieur l'Abbé and I, have to think of your interests."

Bianca raised her eyebrows. "Monsieur l'Abbé is, no doubt, very disinterested," she observed; and then she relapsed into silence, idly stirring her little cup of black coffee. Suddenly she rose from her chair, and, crossing to the opposite side of the table, stood beside her step-mother.

"How long do you—you and Monsieur l'Abbé—propose to keep me imprisoned here at Montefiano?" she asked, abruptly.

The princess set down her coffee-cup hastily—so hastily, indeed, that she spilled some of its contents.

"Bianca!" she exclaimed. "What do you mean? Imprisonment? That is an altogether absurd expression to use. You are here because—well, because I think it for your good that you should be here; and you must remember that, until you are of age, I am your guardian."

"Until I am of age, or marry," interrupted Bianca.

"You cannot marry without my consent before you are of age," the princess returned, quickly.

Bianca laughed—a hard little laugh.

"Without your consent, and that of Monsieur l'Abbé Roux," she replied.

"Oh, but I understand that very well. It is the reason why I am here. No? A proposal of marriage was made to you for me, and you—you and Monsieur l'Abbé—refused your consent. Why?"

Princess Montefiano gazed at her step-daughter with an amazement nearly amounting to stupefaction. She had thought Bianca apathetic, perhaps even sullen, and had believed that she would probably never speak of her own accord about her love for Silvio Rossano. She had certainly not calculated upon her suddenly assuming an aggressive attitude, and that it was an aggressive attitude a glance at the girl's face, and the quiet, determined tone of her voice, showed clearly enough.

For a moment or two the princess remained silent, astonishment and indignation striving for mastery in her mind. It was not long before indignation triumphed. The absolute disregard which Bianca had shown for all the convenances had been bad enough; the manner in which she had allowed herself to become entangled in a love-affair, to have words of love spoken to her—and more than words, if Philippe was to be believed—by the son of an infidel professor, as though she had been some girl of the *borghesia*, was a horrible and an unheard-of thing. Nevertheless, nothing, at least in Princess Montefiano's eyes, was so culpable as want of submission to authority. All that intolerance of disobedience and defiance, which would have made the princess so admirable a mother-superior, arose within her at Bianca's words.

"I refused it—yes," she said, curtly. "We need not discuss the matter, Bianca. I do not intend to reprove you for your want of confidence in me, nor for your conduct. Your conscience should tell you how wrong, how—I must use the term—immodest that conduct has been. Yes; the proposal which the Professor Rossano had the insolence to make on behalf of his son was refused by me, and that is enough. In the mean time, you wish to know how long we remain here at Montefiano. The question is easily answered. You will remain here as long as I consider it fit that you should do so. You must learn to submit your will to those whom God has placed in authority over you. I shall certainly not shrink from doing what I know to be my duty towards you, although you have shown me very plainly that it is likely to be a thankless task. You have never given me your confidence, Bianca, never—not even when you were a child."

The defiant look on Bianca's face melted suddenly.

"It was not my fault," she said, slowly; "at least, I do not think it was my fault. I wanted to give it to you so often; but you did not love me, even when I was a child. You did your duty by me, but duty is not love; I understood that."

The princess knitted her brows, as though she were considering the point.

"That is nonsense," she said, presently. "The duty of a parent to a child, and of a child to a parent, is the same as love; and though I am not your mother, I

have always tried to behave towards you as though you were my own child."

Bianca did not answer, but a little smile stole over her face and played about her lips. The hardness was all gone now, and there was only tenderness in her expression. Perhaps she was thinking that within the last few weeks she had learned the difference between love and duty.

"No, Bianca," continued Princess Montefiano, "if you had wanted to give me your confidence—if you had ever felt enough affection for me to make you wish to give it me—there could be no reason why you should persistently have withheld it. Nevertheless," she added, "your ingratitude towards me will not deter me from doing my duty. You must be protected against your own inexperience of the world, and against those who would take advantage of that inexperience."

Bianca looked at her almost wistfully. "You think me ungrateful," she said. "I am not that. But to confide in you meant confiding in Monsieur l'Abbé. He has always come between you and me—oh, ever since I was a child."

Princess Montefiano made a gesture of impatience. "If I have found Monsieur l'Abbé worthy of my confidence and my esteem, it should be a proof that he is also worthy of yours," she said. "You have a rebellious nature, Bianca, and God will punish you for it, both in this world and in the next."

A quick gleam of amusement flashed from Bianca's eyes. "How do you know?" she asked.

The princess stared at her. Assuredly, she thought, Bianca became every day more difficult to deal with.

"As to Monsieur l'Abbé," she said, preferring to leave her step-daughter's question unanswered, "your dislike to him is unreasonable—it is unreasonable and wrong. Setting aside his devotion to your worldly interests, which, when you are of an age to understand, you will appreciate better than you are able to do now, you owe him respect as a priest, the respect due to his sacred calling. I am deeply grieved at your attitude towards him; but there again your rebellious nature is at fault. As to saying that he comes between you and me, that is absurd. What does come between us is your own self-will—your own arrogance."

Bianca looked at her step-mother steadily for a moment, and the hard expression on her face returned.

"*E sia!*" she replied. "Do not let us discuss Monsieur l'Abbé Roux; it is a waste of time. As you say, when I am of an age to understand his devotion to my worldly interests I shall be able to appreciate them. I am sorry that Fontana is dismissed," she continued. "To be sure, I have only seen him a few times, but he appears an honest man."

The princess glanced at her, and her countenance displayed more displeasure than ever. "These business matters need not concern you for nearly three years to come," she said, coldly. "Your interests are in my hands, Bianca, as you

very well know. Luckily for you, you have no voice in the management of your affairs. If you had, I fear you would very soon fall a prey to some adventurer like this—"

She stopped abruptly, a look on Bianca's face warning her that it would be more prudent not to complete her sentence. Nevertheless, Princess Montefiano was angry—seriously angry—and, though perhaps she scarcely realized it, alarmed. Her authority was very dear to her, and she clung to it more than she knew. She had always known there must come a time when that authority must cease; but she had certainly no intention of yielding it up before she was legally obliged to do so. Moreover, she felt perfectly assured that she divined the motives which lay behind Bianca's remark. Had she any doubts upon the point, they were speedily removed by her step-daughter's next words.

Whereas the princess was both angry and alarmed, Bianca Acorari showed no symptoms of being either the one or the other. She raised her head proudly, and a look came into her eyes that Princess Montefiano had seen on other occasions—a quiet, resolute look, which had generally preluded her own discomfiture when she had attempted to exercise her authority over her step-daughter beyond its justifiable limits.

"That is what I wanted to say to you," Bianca observed, calmly. "It is much better that you should understand. In three years' time I shall have the management of my own affairs. Well, three years is not a very long time. We, Silvio and I, can afford to wait; and at the end of three years, when I am of age, I shall marry him. But I will not marry Monsieur d'Antin—my uncle."

"Bianca!" exclaimed the princess, "you are either mad, or you are a wicked girl! For the sake of a disgraceful passion for a man in an inferior position of life to your own you rebel against those whom God has placed in authority over you. Yes, it is quite true, my brother loves you. I have suspected it for some time. And why should he not? At least, in marrying him you would be marrying a man of your own order, and not— But what is the use of discussing the matter? You shall never marry this young Rossano with my consent—never, never, I tell you! and without my consent you cannot marry anybody."

Bianca smiled. "Never is a long time," she observed, tranquilly; "whereas, three years— You quite understand," she added, after a pause, "I will marry Silvio Rossano, or I will marry nobody. You have chosen to refuse his offer, and you have a perfect right to do so. I, too, shall have my rights some day. But in the mean time you will tell my uncle that I do not wish for his society any more. I do not want his love. It—it disgusts me. Besides, he has deceived me."

The princess stared at her in dismay.

"Deceived you?" she repeated.

"He pretended to be my friend," answered Bianca, bitterly, "and, like an im-

becile, I confided in him. Who else was there for me to confide in? He pretended to know Silvio, and that he would be able by degrees to remove your objections to our marriage. Well, it was all a lie. At first I did not understand; but now—" and Bianca gave a shudder which told, better than any words could have done, all that was passing in her mind of physical repulsion and disgust.

Princess Montefiano looked, as indeed she felt, sorely perplexed. A certain sense of justice made her sympathize with the girl. Although love was to her an unknown and unexplored element in life, she could not but recollect that when first she had suspected her brother's interest in Bianca not to be of a purely Platonic nature, the idea had shocked her as being almost an unnatural one.

At the same time, the Abbé Roux had never ceased to remind her of the gravity of the position in which Bianca had placed herself, of the hopeless manner in which her step-daughter would be compromised in the eyes of the world should it ever be known that she had formed an attachment for a man in whose company she had been alone and unprotected. By degrees Princess Montefiano had come to regard her brother's passion for Bianca as a possible safeguard, not only against the presumption of the Rossano family, but also against a scandal, for which she herself would certainly be blamed by the world, as being the result of a lack of proper supervision on her part towards her step-daughter. Not once, but many times, had the Abbé Roux descanted upon the generosity of Baron d'Antin in being ready to shield Bianca from any troubles which her folly might bring upon her in the future. Princess Montefiano had not stopped to reason that her brother's generosity might be exaggerated by the priest, and that he would receive a good return for it. There were certain things beyond her comprehension, mentally as well as physically, and passion was one of those things. People fell in love, of course; but, in Princess Montefiano's eyes, falling in love was a mere accident, necessary to the carrying-on of human society. She quite believed that she had loved the late Principe di Montefiano, and that he had loved her; and, in itself, this belief was harmless enough. The pity of it was that she was unable to realize any variations in the human temperament, or to understand that what had satisfied her, when at the mature age of five-and-thirty or so she had married a man considerably older than his years, would not be likely to satisfy Bianca. As to her brother's love for the girl, after the first impression caused by its discovery had passed, Princess Montefiano had been only too ready to accept the view of it that the Abbé Roux had more than once delicately hinted to her—namely, that it was a love similar to that of Bianca's father for herself—a placid, protective love, altogether disinterested, and admirable both from a worldly and a spiritual stand-point.

It is possible that the late Principe di Montefiano's point of view would have been different. But, fortunately, perhaps, for herself, Mademoiselle Jeanne

d'Antin had not made the acquaintance of her husband until he had already, like King David and King Solomon, experienced misgivings of a religious character, and hence the Abbé Roux's *apologia* for her brother's state of mind seemed to her to be perfectly reasonable and satisfactory.

So Bianca's abrupt pause and little shiver of disgust passed unobserved by the princess. It was evident to her that the girl did not realize the generosity of Philippe's affection. Bianca was, no doubt, contrasting him with that insolent young Rossano, and the thought added to her irritation and displeasure.

"I do not think you understand, Bianca," she began, after hesitating for a moment or two.

"I assure you that I understand well—perfectly well," returned Bianca, dryly. "I am not a child any longer: for the matter of that, I do not recollect ever having been a child, and it is useless to treat me as though I were one. You may keep me here at Montefiano three years, if you wish. It will be the same thing in the end. But I will not be made love to by my uncle."

The princess rose from the table and began to walk rapidly up and down the room.

"Bianca," she cried, "your language is disgraceful, indelicate! Besides," she added, weakly, "he is not your uncle. It is absurd, and, as usual, you are ungrateful. He wished to save you from the consequences of your conduct. Oh, you need not think that he has said anything to me of his motives. He is too much of a gentleman to do so. But he has confided them to Monsieur l'Abbé, and Monsieur l'Abbé has been profoundly touched. A disinterested affection is not such an easy thing to find, *figlia mia*," she added, more gently. "Take care that, in despising it, you do not throw away a great blessing."

Bianca did not reply. She seemed to be thinking over her step-mother's last words. A note of kindness found an instant response in her. Princess Montefiano noticed her hesitation, and decided that the moment was opportune for pressing her point. It might quite well be, she thought, that Bianca was really unconscious of the equivocal position in which she might find herself placed before the world.

"You see, Bianca," she continued, gravely, "a young girl cannot act as you have done without laying herself open to very disagreeable things being said of her. Do you suppose that any man would wish to marry you were it to be known that—well, that any such episode as has occurred had happened to you? Most decidedly he would not. Nevertheless, my brother is ready to overlook what another would not overlook, on account of the affection he entertains for you. He knows that you were not to blame so much as that thoughtless young man who ventured to—to persuade you to give him an interview."

"He was not to blame," interrupted Bianca, quickly. "He would have gone away if I had told him to do so, but I did not tell him."

"It does not matter," continued the princess, hurriedly, anxious to avoid a discussion on the subject at that particular moment. "You may be sure that it was only an impudent attempt to compromise you. But the world would never take that into consideration. With my brother, however, it is different."

Unluckily, Princess Montefiano had struck a wrong chord.

"It was nothing of the sort," Bianca exclaimed, indignantly. "It is perfectly true that we met, there in the ilex grove at the Villa Acorari, and I suppose our meeting was seen, and that you were told of it."

"Of course," interrupted the princess. "My brother saw you. Did you not know it was he who heard voices in the casino, and then saw you and—and that young man emerge from it?"

Bianca started violently. "Liar!" she exclaimed, under her breath.

"It seems to me that it is a further proof of my brother's generosity," continued Princess Montefiano. "Knowing all the circumstances, he has from the first endeavored to shield you."

Bianca laughed a quiet but not very pleasant laugh.

"*Sicuro!*" she said. "It is a further proof of Monsieur d'Antin's generosity. It appears that everybody at Montefiano is disinterested—my uncle, Monsieur l'Abbé, everybody! But you will explain to them that I need no sacrifices. Ah, it is of no use to interrupt me now! I have learned all I wanted to know, and you—you will learn something from me—something final, definite. It is this: I will marry Silvio Rossano when I am Principessa di Montefiano and my own mistress, and until that time I will wait, unless—"

Princess Montefiano turned towards her, her face quivering with anger.

"Unless—what?" she asked.

"Unless he wishes me to marry him before," answered Bianca, quietly.

"You will not dare—"

Bianca laughed again, and threw her head up like a young horse.

"Dare!" she said, scornfully. "When I have given my word, I do not break it—and do you suppose that I shall break my word when I have given my love? Ah, no, *per esempio*! I am not so vile as that."

"Oh, but the girl is mad, possessed!" ejaculated Princess Montefiano.

Bianca looked at her almost indifferently.

"I think not!" she said, quietly—and then her eyes flashed with sudden contempt, as she added: "And as for Monsieur d'Antin, you will tell him from me that I have no need of the generosity of a coward and a liar."

And turning on her heel, Bianca walked slowly from the room without another word, leaving Princess Montefiano in a condition of speechless aston-

ishment and dismay.

XXII

After leaving her step-mother, Bianca went to her own room, where she shut herself up in order to be able to think quietly. Although she felt that she had been by no means the vanquished party in the unexpected skirmish which had just taken place, she was far more ill at ease in her own mind than she had allowed herself to show to the princess. Whatever might be Bianca Acorari's faults, lack of courage, moral or physical, was certainly not among them; and during the time she had been at Montefiano, her courage and her pride combined had forbidden her to show any external sign of the doubt and uncertainty ever increasing in her heart as the days lengthened into weeks, and yet no word from Silvio Rossano had reached her.

That Silvio's father had written to her step-mother making a formal proposal of marriage on his son's behalf, and that this proposal had been indignantly rejected by the princess, Bianca was already well aware. Monsieur d'Antin had informed her of the fact a very few days after his arrival at Montefiano. It had been this information, indeed, and the kindly and sympathetic manner of its conveyance, that had caused Bianca to regard Monsieur d'Antin as the one person about her to whom she might venture to confide her hopes and difficulties. It had not been long, however, before vague and fleeting suspicions, which she had at first dismissed from her mind as not only absurd, but almost wrong to entertain, as to Monsieur d'Antin's motives for seeking her society, developed into certainties, before which she had recoiled with fear and disgust. Her instinct had very soon told her that there was more in her uncle's—for she had begun to regard him in that relationship—manner towards her than was justified by his professed compassion and sympathy. Sometimes, when alone with her, he had made certain observations which, although apparently in connection with her and Silvio's love for each other, had offended her sense, if not of modesty, at least of propriety and good taste. She could hardly explain to herself why they should have done so, but she was conscious that they did do so. Sometimes, too, she had surprised an expression on Monsieur d'Antin's countenance as he looked at her which had made her shrink from him, as she might have shrunk from some evil thing that meant to harm her. Her suspicions once aroused, Bianca had been

quick to perceive that the more she was alone with Monsieur d'Antin, the more apt he became to assume a manner towards her which caused her no little embarrassment as well as distaste. The result had been an ever-growing feeling of distrust, which soon made her regret bitterly that she had ever allowed herself to talk to her uncle about Silvio, and latterly she had sought every pretext to avoid being alone with him. Sometimes, too, she reproached herself deeply for having disregarded her promise to Silvio that she would confide in nobody until he had an opportunity of again communicating with her. This promise, however, as she repeatedly told herself, had been given when they had still a channel of communication in the person of Mademoiselle Durand, and before she had become, to all intents and purposes, a prisoner at Montefiano. But now Mademoiselle Durand had utterly vanished from the scene—gone, as Monsieur d'Antin informed her, to Paris with the wife and children of a secretary of the French embassy in Rome, and Bianca had quickly realized that no communication, direct or indirect, from her lover would be allowed to reach her as long as she was within the walls of Montefiano.

Monsieur d'Antin, moreover, had certainly played the opening moves of his game very well, and a more experienced person than Bianca might have been deceived by them. He had extracted her confidence by impressing upon Bianca that he, and he alone, could by degrees overcome the objections that his sister entertained to an alliance with the Rossano family. He had explained to her how these objections came in reality much more from the Abbé Roux than from the princess, and that the latter would infallibly relent if the abbé's good-will could be secured. It had been Monsieur d'Antin, too, who had warned Bianca that her step-mother had decided, always by the Abbé Roux's advice, absolutely to ignore, at any rate for the present, the fact of her having met Silvio and allowed him to propose to her. He had carefully impressed upon her that any attempt on her part to overcome the princess's objections, any allusion, indeed, to the subject, would only result in failure; and that Bianca's best plan, in her own and her lover's interests, would be to maintain an absolute silence, except, of course, to himself. No questions, he told her, would be asked her by her step-mother, and no lectures on her conduct given to her. Therefore, there would be no need for her to give her confidence in a quarter where it was not demanded, and where the giving of it could only prejudice her cause. And everything had happened as Monsieur d'Antin had foretold. The princess had not made the slightest allusion to her step-daughter regarding the meeting in the grounds of the Villa Acorari, and, save for the sense of being continually guarded and watched, Bianca could not truthfully say to herself that her life at Montefiano differed in any particular degree from the life she had been accustomed from childhood to lead.

At first, when Bianca had finally decided to yield to her uncle's suggestions

and confide in him, she had more than once asked him to assist her in sending or in receiving some communication from Silvio. But Monsieur d'Antin had always declared this to be impossible. He had explained plausibly enough that if his sister and the Abbé Roux were once to suspect him of such a course, all the influence he might be able to use with them in order to overcome their objections would be hopelessly destroyed. Moreover, his sister would certainly ask him to leave Montefiano, and then Bianca would be left without her only friend and sympathizer.

And so long as Monsieur d'Antin, counselling patience, had himself been patient, matters had progressed fairly well for the furtherance of the object he and the Abbé Roux had in view. Bianca was, if not easy in her mind, at least satisfied that there was no other course open to her but to keep silence and wait for her uncle's influence to do its work.

But Monsieur d'Antin had not had patience. The success attending his first efforts to gain Bianca's confidence had been his undoing. The constant companionship of the young girl, whose very youth and inexperience had kindled afresh his well-worn passions, had brought about its almost inevitable psychological result. Monsieur d'Antin began to lose his head, and to be unable, or at any rate unwilling, to place the restraint upon himself that a younger man would probably have done. He believed that Bianca would certainly in the end be compelled by force of circumstances to see that a marriage with Silvio Rossano was impossible for the heiress of the Acorari. It was true that she might come to realize this, and yet make up her mind to marry some other young man who might present himself—some flaccid, Roman youth with empty pockets, but the possessor of a spurious title which would render him, in the eyes of the little, but strangely snobbish Roman world, an eligible husband for Donna Bianca Acorari. But Baron d'Antin felt comfortably convinced that even should this contingency arise, he still held in his hand the trump-card which would win him the game. If such a young man were to present himself—well, a few words spoken in a few Roman drawing-rooms, a hint or two dropped at the clubs of what had recently occurred at the Villa Acorari, a suggestion that the Princess Montefiano was anxious to marry her step-daughter in order to prevent her making a *mésalliance* in a quarter in which she had already compromised herself—and the young man's family would at once break off negotiations.

But there had come a day when Monsieur d'Antin, in the course of a walk with Bianca in the parco at Montefiano, had allowed his passion momentarily to get the better of him, and in that moment Bianca had understood all. She had entertained no suspicions since that instant—only the certainty that she was the object of Monsieur d'Antin's desires. Indignation rather than fear, or even aversion, had been her first sensation—indignation at the cowardice of this elderly

hypocrite who had tricked her into giving him her confidence. Monsieur d'Antin probably never knew how near he had been to receiving a blow in the face from Bianca's clinched fist, as, with a few scathing words of anger and disgust, she had left him and almost run back to the terrace, where Princess Montefiano was sitting reading in the shade under the castle.

Nor had this episode been all that had occurred during the last few days to confirm Bianca Acorari's suspicions and make her doubly uneasy in her mind.

It so happened that, while wandering through some of the disused apartments of the castle, in the wing opposite to that occupied by the princess and herself, she had overheard a portion of a conversation between domestics, certainly not intended for her ears. Her attention was arrested by the mention of her own name in a loud and rather excited female voice; and approaching nearer to the room whence the voices proceeded, she saw her own maid, Bettina, and a girl whom she recognized as the *fattore* Fontana's daughter, engaged in mending some linen. They were also, apparently, occupied in a discussion of which she herself was the object, and the agent's daughter appeared to be taking her part with some vigor.

"It was a shame," Bianca heard the girl exclaim, "that the *principessina* should be forced to marry an old man like the baron, when there was a *bel giovanotto* who loved her and whom she loved. For her part, if she were the Principessina Bianca she would box the baron's ears—*uno, due*—so! and marry the lad she loved. What was the use of being a princess if one could not do as one chose?"

Then had followed some words in a lower tone from Bettina, the sense of which Bianca could not catch, but which appeared to have the effect of still further arousing Concetta Fontana's indignation.

"Ah, the poor girl!" Bianca heard her reply. "They shut her up here in this dreary place, and they will keep her here until she lets that old he-goat have his own way. And the priest is at the bottom of it—oh, certainly, the priest is at the bottom of it! It is useless to tell me. I have heard him and the Signor Barone talking together—and I know. If one could ever approach the *principessina* to get a word with her, I would warn her that it is a trap they are laying for her—just as though she were a bird, the poor child!"

Bianca Acorari turned away, sick at heart. The servants, then, and the people about Montefiano, knew for a fact what she had never even suspected. She had regarded Monsieur d'Antin's attempt to make love to her as odious and cowardly, and also, perhaps, as ludicrous—but she had not until then suspected that others were aware of his passion for her, and still less that her having been brought to Montefiano was part of a deliberately laid plan to force her to yield to that passion.

Concetta Fontana's words seemed suddenly to make everything clear to her, and to reveal Monsieur d'Antin's treachery in its full light. She understood now, or she thought that she understood. She had been purposely allowed to confide in her uncle, purposely thrown in his company, in the hope that she might in time consent to relinquish her love for Silvio as a thing out of the question.

And her step-mother? Of course her step-mother would do what the Abbé Roux counselled. She had always done so ever since Bianca could remember, and she always would do so. What the priest's motives might be for desiring that she should marry Baron d'Antin, Bianca did not stop to consider. Monsieur l'Abbé had always tried to interfere in her life; and the fact that he knew she wished to marry Silvio Rossano was quite sufficient to account for his determination to marry her to somebody else.

Well, they should see that she, Bianca Acorari, was not to be forced to marry anybody against her will. She was not a foreigner, not a Belgian, thank Heaven—but an Italian—a Roman, the head of an ancient Roman house. And so her pride came to her rescue, as, indeed, it had often done before. And with it had come the courage to face her new difficulties. She could give her step-mother plainly to understand that she knew what steps had been taken and what plans had been made to compel her to abandon all idea of marrying the man she intended to marry. After that, the abbé and Monsieur d'Antin might do their worst. She had only to be firm and patient for three years, and then they could have no more power to interfere with her.

It had been a certain comfort to her to discover that there was one person at Montefiano, however humbly placed, who was her friend. Bettina, she knew well, had an eye only to her own interests, and would not hesitate to betray any confidences Bianca might be tempted to make to her, were she to consider it to her advantage to do so. She had several times noticed Concetta Fontana since her arrival at Montefiano, and had been struck by the honest and straightforward bearing both of the girl and of her father. Fontana himself, indeed, had been very marked in the deference and attention he paid to his young mistress. As a matter of fact, he regarded both the princess and Monsieur d'Antin in the light of foreign intruders, while for the Abbé Roux he felt nothing but the suspicion and dislike with which priests, as a general rule, Don Agostino always excepted, inspired him. The Principessina Bianca, on the contrary, he regarded as his liege lady, the daughter and representative of the princes of Montefiano whom he and his forefathers had served for several generations in one capacity or another.

Bianca Acorari could not have explained why the thought that the agent's daughter took a friendly interest in her was a consolation, but it certainly was so. She had scarcely spoken to the girl beyond wishing her "Good-morning" or "Good-evening" if they met in the passages or the courtyard of the castle.

As she sat alone in her room after the stormy scene with her step-mother, Bianca thought long and calmly over the situation in which that scene must inevitably have placed her. On the whole, she felt rather relieved than otherwise that it had taken place. The keeping up for so many weeks of a pretence that there was nothing unusual in the position between the princess and herself had become more than irksome; and Bianca would certainly not have submitted to Silvio's proposal being passed over in silence by her step-mother, had it not been for Monsieur d'Antin's assurances that nothing but harm would result were she to insist on discussing it.

Her amazement and indignation had been great, however, at hearing from her that it had been no other than Monsieur d'Antin himself who had been a witness to her interview with Silvio in the ilex grove of the Villa Acorari. She had always concluded that one of the servants of the place had been her step-mother's informant, and Monsieur d'Antin had never said anything to lead her to suppose the contrary. It was, of course, but another instance of his treachery and double-dealing towards her; but all the same, Bianca was glad to know the truth. She could understand the course of events more clearly now, and the last discovery, immediately following the remarks she had overheard from Concetta Fontana, pointed without doubt to the existence of some intrigue between her uncle and the Abbé Roux of which she was to be the victim. It was certainly as well that she had that day spoken plainly to her step-mother. In a day or two Monsieur d'Antin would return from Rome, and then she supposed there would be war to the knife.

Well, they should see that she would not give way—not one centimetre. Better to have open war to the knife than to continue to be surrounded by an atmosphere of intrigue and deception.

Ah, but if she could only have one line from Silvio, one word to assure her that he was faithful to her as she was to him! She could afford to wait patiently then—to wait, if need be, till three years were over and she was accountable to nobody for her actions. She could not doubt Silvio—not for one moment; but it was strange that he had not as yet discovered some means of communicating with her. Sometimes a deadly fear struck her that he had believed her step-mother's rejection of his offer to have been written with her knowledge and consent. It was more than likely that an attempt would have been made to induce him to believe this. But she put the thought away from her persistently. Silvio and she had known from the first that his offer would be declined—it had only been made, indeed, as a formality, and as being in accordance with the usages of society.

Nevertheless, she longed for some message, some word to comfort her and give her courage to face the weary months in front of her. Surely he would find some means of sending her this word! It seemed so long ago since his arms were

round her and his lips lay upon hers—so long ago and yet she felt their pressure still. What had he said to her "I will marry no woman if I do not marry you." Ah, but she was sure of that—very sure. And so it was ridiculous to be afraid—cowardly to be afraid and not to trust in his word, that as soon as he could possibly do so with the certainty that his message would reach her, he would communicate with her as to what their next step should be.

XXIII

Don Agostino was sitting in his study the evening after his return to Montefiano from Rome. His housekeeper, Ernana, had waited upon him during his supper, and in the interval of carrying in the dishes from the kitchen had entertained him with all that had occurred in the *paese* during his absence. Not very much had occurred; but then occurrences of any import at Montefiano were apt to be few and far between. The wife of the baker who supplied the house with bread had had a baby; and Ernana, counting up upon her fingers the number of months that had elapsed since the baker's marriage, could only get as far as the little finger of one hand, and shook her head accordingly. There had been a dispute in the *osteria* kept by Stefano Mazza, and Stefano's son, while attempting to put an end to it, had been stabbed. But it was *una cosa di niente*; and it served Stefano's son right, and would teach him that no good ever came of trying to interfere in other folks' quarrels. Nothing else had happened—at any rate, nothing that had reached Ernana's ears. But it certainly was very unfortunate about the baby, and a great pity that the baker had delayed his marriage so long; though, after all, he might have delayed it altogether, which would have been worse.

Don Agostino listened in silence as he ate his *frittura* and salad. He rather agreed with Ernana as to the futility in this world of trying to play the part of a peacemaker, however advantageous having done so might prove to be in the world to come. As to the baby, he had heard about it before, at a very early stage of its creation; and he had nothing further to say regarding it than he had already had occasion to whisper from behind the grille of his confessional.

His supper over, and Ernana having retired into the kitchen to wash up, Don Agostino had betaken himself to his favorite arm-chair in his study, after carefully roasting the end of a Virginia cigar in the flame of a candle on his writing-table, and ascertaining that it drew satisfactorily. On that same writing-

table lay the little packet containing the ring and letter which Silvio had intrusted to him, and which he had undertaken should, by one means or another, be conveyed safely into Bianca Acorari's own hands.

Don Agostino glanced at the packet more than once as he sat and smoked his cigar. A work by Professor Rossano was lying on his lap. He had taken the volume from his bookshelves in order to refresh his memory as to certain arguments propounded in it which had especially roused the indignation of the Sacred Congregation of the Index, some months after the work had appeared. As a matter of fact, however, he was thinking far more of how he should fulfil his promise to Professor Rossano's son, than of the learned senator's unorthodox propositions in print.

The more he thought over the strange combination of circumstances which had led him to interest himself in Silvio's case, the more he became convinced that he had been called upon to save the only child of the woman he had loved from unhappiness, and perhaps from worse. It was scarcely conceivable, he argued to himself, that the similarity between his own youthful love affair and that of Silvio should be a mere coincidence. Indeed, he had long ago rejected the idea as impossible, and to one of his nature, partly philosophical but also largely mystical, there was nothing incongruous or improbable in the thought that his departed love remembered his devotion to her, and was calling upon him from her place in the world beyond the veil to shield her child from evil, and bidding him labor to procure her the happiness which had been denied to her mother.

And Don Agostino did not doubt that a woman who loved Silvio Rossano, and could call him her husband, would be happy. He had never doubted it from the first day that he had talked with Silvio, when the boy had been, as it were, but a chance acquaintance. Much knowledge of human nature had made Don Agostino singularly quick at reading both countenances and character, and experience had taught him that his first impressions, especially of a man, were very seldom wrong impressions.

He had not been satisfied, however, until he had learned from Silvio's father all that the professor had to tell him concerning his son. As Don Agostino had said to Silvio, that "all" was only what he had felt convinced that he should hear. It had told him that the lad was a good son and a good brother, that he had proved himself to be worthy of trust, as well as clever and hard-working, and Don Agostino knew enough of matrimony to realize that such men, when they loved, and if they were loved, made good husbands.

He could not doubt Silvio's love for Bianca Acorari; nor had he any reason to think that Silvio was deceiving himself as to its depth and sincerity. The professor, to be sure, had declared that it was a case of love at first sight—only he had defined it more cynically, if somewhat less gracefully—and had argued

that similar affections were not apt to be of very long duration. This argument, however, had not appealed to Don Agostino as being by any means conclusive. When he had first met Bianca Negroni, Bianca Acorari's mother, he had fallen in love with her there and then, and that love had dominated his whole life. It had not, it was true, been realized, but had it been realized he knew that it would have endured the test of supreme satisfaction—that test which, in love, is the severest of any. He would not have been what he was—the *parroco* of Montefiano! Nor was there anything unnatural or improbable in Bianca Acorari having fallen in love at first sight with Silvio. Such things might not occur with the colder natures of the north, perhaps, or they might occur but rarely. But in the south, among the Latin races, Don Agostino knew very well that such a thing was very far from being uncommon. All the same, however desirable it may be that Bianca Acorari and Silvio should find happiness in living their lives together, Don Agostino did not see how the affair could be managed. None knew better than he how hard a thing to break down, especially among the Roman "nobility," was the prejudice of caste. Money, indeed, provided there was enough of it, could always break it down; but otherwise the line between the so-called aristocracy and the *bourgeoisie* was irremediably fixed.

Don Agostino was revolving all these thoughts in his mind, when he was suddenly disturbed by the sound of the bell at the entrance-door. Somebody, no doubt, was ill, and had sent to summon him, for it was nearly nine o'clock, and no one would be likely to wish to see him on any other business at so late an hour. A moment or two passed, and then Ernana hurried into the room. It was Sor Beppe, she explained, Signor Fontana, who wished to speak with Don Agostino—if the hour was not too inconvenient.

"Fontana!" exclaimed Don Agostino. "Of course, Ernana; bring Signor Fontana in here. And bring some wine, too, and glasses," and he rose from his chair to greet his visitor.

Sor Beppe entered the room hastily, and Don Agostino could see at a glance that he had not come at that hour, uninvited, merely to discuss the affairs of Montefiano. It was evident that Fontana was considerably upset in his mind, or else extremely angry. Don Agostino was not sure whether it was the one or the other, or perhaps both.

He quickly came to the conclusion, however, that it was both. Sor Beppe, indeed, was trembling with ill-suppressed excitement. He scarcely waited to return Don Agostino's greeting; but, after a hasty apology for disturbing him at such an hour, seemed at a loss for words to explain the object of his visit.

"You have heard?" he burst out at length.

Don Agostino motioned to him to sit down.

"I have heard nothing," he replied, quietly. "I only returned from Rome

this morning—or, rather, early this afternoon. Is there anything wrong, Signor Fontana? You look disturbed."

"Anything wrong!" exclaimed Fontana. "There is this that is wrong. I am dismissed!"

Don Agostino started. "Dismissed?" he repeated. "Dismissed from what? I do not understand."

"*Perbacco*, it is very simple!" returned Sor Beppe, sullenly. "I am dismissed from my office. I am no longer *fattore* to the Eccellentissima Casa Acorari at Montefiano. I have said it."

Don Agostino looked at him. "When, and why?" he asked, abruptly.

"When? Two days ago. The day your reverence went to Rome. Why? Because I am an honest man, and because I and my people have been faithful servants to Casa Acorari for a hundred years and more. Is it not reason enough?" and Sor Beppe laughed bitterly.

Don Agostino poured out a glass of wine and pushed it towards him. "Tell me how it has come about," he said. "If I am not mistaken," he added, looking at the agent keenly, "Casa Acorari has too much need of honest men just now to be able to spare one."

"Ah!" exclaimed Fontana, quickly, "you know that, too? You have heard it in Rome, perhaps?"

"I know nothing," replied Don Agostino. "I only guess. And I have heard nothing in Rome concerning the affairs of Casa Acorari—nothing, that is, connected with the estates. May I ask," he added, "apart from the reason you have just given, on what grounds you have been dismissed?"

Sor Beppe drank off his glass of wine.

"I will tell you, *reverendo*," he replied. "Some days ago I received instructions from the estate office in Rome that the rents of certain small holdings here at Montefiano were to be raised five per cent. I represented to the administration that the rents were already high enough, and that to increase them would certainly create much ill-feeling. The people can barely live like Christians and pay the rents they are paying, *reverendo*; and who should know it better than I, who have lived on the land for fifty years?"

Don Agostino nodded. "I know it, too," he observed. "Go on, Signor Fontana."

"I thought my protest had been accepted," continued Fontana, "as I heard no more from Rome. But four or five days ago that foreign priest, the Abbé Roux, as they call him, came into my office and asked what I meant by refusing to obey the instructions I had received from the administration. I replied that I had sent my reasons to the administration; and, moreover, that however many instructions to raise the rents in question might be sent to me from Rome, I should not obey

them until I had explained the truth of the matter to the princess in person, and had received her orders as the Principessina Bianca's representative. Was I right, *reverendo*, or wrong?"

Don Agostino shrugged his shoulders. "You were right, decidedly, I should say," he replied; "but whether you were wise in your own interests is another matter."

"My interests have always been those of Casa Acorari," returned Sor Beppe, simply, "and it certainly is not to the interest of Casa Acorari to arouse ill-feeling among the tenants at Montefiano for the sake of a few hundred francs a year. That is what I intended to have explained to her excellency the princess."

"And why did you not explain it to her?"

"Because I was dismissed by that *mascalzone* of a priest!" exclaimed Fontana, angrily. "I beg your pardon, Don Agostino, I should have remembered that there are priests and priests."

Don Agostino smiled. "Yes," he observed, "for precisely the same reason that there are men—and men! So the Abbé Roux dismissed you in the princess's name, I conclude?"

"In her excellency's name—yes. Everything is done by the Abbé Roux in her name. For some time past I have been *fattore* at Montefiano only nominally. It is no longer any secret that the Abbé Roux is the chief administrator of the estate. Two years ago, as your reverence probably knows, the lease of the rents at Montefiano expired, and the holder of it offered to renew on the same terms. His offer was declined because the Abbé Roux had a friend, a *mercante di campagna*, who offered to pay a rather larger annual sum. Since this man has farmed the rents they have been gradually increased, and now the people cannot pay and make enough out of their *tenute* to live decently."

Don Agostino leaned forward in his chair. "I did not know," he said. "I thought the same individual held the contract. To be sure, I did know that the rents have, in many cases, been raised of late. The peasants have grumbled, and I have heard you blamed for it."

"It was not generally known that there had been any change," said Fontana. "I had my instructions not to talk about the matter, and I obeyed them. It was no affair of mine who farmed the rents; that is the business of the administration at Palazzo Acorari in Rome. My duty was to see that they were paid, and that the tenants cultivated the land properly. It is quite true—I have been called a hard man, especially lately. But there were very few complaints of any kind, and I think still fewer reasonable ones, before this change took place."

"And who is this friend of the Abbé Roux, who has taken over the lease of the rents?" asked Don Agostino.

Sor Beppe hesitated; then, looking round the room as though afraid of being

overheard, he leaned forward and whispered:

"I do not know; I only suspect. But my belief is that the Abbé Roux's friend is—himself."

"*Accidente!*" ejaculated Don Agostino.

"*Sicuro!*" continued Sor Beppe. "I suspect it, but I have no means of proving it. One thing is certain, and that is, that the individual who received the rents has never presented himself in the flesh at Montefiano; whereas the Abbé Roux has presented himself very frequently. There is not a metre of land that he has not been over—not a farm or a cottage that he has not visited, inside and out—and always in the name of their excellencies, *si capisce*—so what could anybody say?"

Don Agostino remained silent for a moment.

"But you have appealed to the princess," he asked, presently, "and perhaps to Donna Bianca? It is true that she has no voice in the management of her affairs as yet, but she is the *padrona*, when all is said and done."

"Of course I have appealed to the princess," replied Fontana. "I saw her personally, but the priest was always with her, listening to every word I said. She was very affable, very sympathetic; but, as she explained, the business matters of the administration lay in other hands than her own. She was merely acting in the interests of the Principessina Bianca, and could only take the advice of those who understood business matters better than she did herself. She regretted the present affair, oh, very much; but it was evident that I was not in accord with the administration of Casa Acorari, and therefore she could not do otherwise than confirm my dismissal from the post of *fattore* at Montefiano."

"And the *principessina*, Donna Bianca?" said Don Agostino, quickly.

Sor Beppe made an expressive gesture with both hands. "The *principessina*," he repeated; "*ma che vuole*? The *principessina*, *poveretta*, is like a fly in a spider's web. I have seen her half a dozen times, but never to speak to, except a few words of respect. The *principessina*? Ah, no! As your reverence says, she has no voice in the management of her own affairs, none at all. And she never will have any, for before she is of age they will marry her to her uncle! Of course he is not her uncle really, but it is much the same."

Don Agostino drew his chair closer to the other, and at the same time poured out another glass of wine.

"Ah," he said, "so you believe that gossip? I had heard it, but it seemed incredible that it should be anything else but gossip."

"Do I believe it!" exclaimed Fontana. "Of course I believe it! My daughter Concetta works at the castle, and they all—all the household—talk of it. It seems that there is somebody else whom the poor child wants to marry—the son of some professor in Rome; but she will never be allowed to marry him. She will marry the *principessa's* brother; you will see."

"That she will not!" exclaimed Don Agostino, emphatically.

Sor Beppe drank half of his glass of wine.

"They have brought her here to Montefiano," he said, "and they will keep her here till she gives way. For the rest, the baron, as they call him, is madly in love with the girl—at least, he is—"

"I understand," Don Agostino, interrupted. "It is monstrous," he added—"a crime!"

"*Altrocchè*! Who knows what may be the motives?"

Don Agostino glanced at Sor Beppe quickly.

"The motives?" he repeated.

"*Sicuro*! Concetta has heard things—oh, but very strange things. *Sa, reverendo*, the castle is a curious building, and especially that part of it in which the family resides. There is not one of them who knows it; but we know it—I and Concetta. *Diamine*! We have lived in it for more than twenty years, so how should we not know it? *Ebbene*! Concetta has overheard things—conversations between the baron and that cursed priest, carried on when they thought themselves secure. At first she could not understand very clearly, for they talked in French; and Concetta understands a little French, but not much. She learned all she knows when she went to a family in Rome. Occasionally, however, the Abbé Roux and the princess spoke in Italian, and by degrees she has been able to learn a great deal of what is going on. The baron and the Abbé Roux are working together, I tell you; the one for lust, the other for money—or both for money. *Che ne so io*?"

Don Agostino looked at him steadily.

"*Adagio*, Signor Fontana!" he said, quietly. "These are very serious allegations to make. Are you sure that in your very natural indignation at being dismissed for no offence but that of doing what your conscience told you was just, you are not exaggerating? Your daughter may have been mistaken, and the things she overheard may not have applied to Donna Bianca at all. As to the Baron d'Antin, it is possible that he may have conceived a passion for Donna Bianca, who is, I believe, a very beautiful girl. After all, the fact, although perhaps somewhat repugnant, would not be unprecedented."

Sor Beppe shook his head. "Concetta made no mistake," he replied, doggedly. "What she heard, she heard not once only, but many times. Donna Bianca is to marry the baron; and the princess believes by consenting to the marriage she will prevent the *principessina* from marrying the other—the son of the Roman professor. But in the mean time, Concetta tells me that the *principessina* has found out the intrigue, and has realized that her uncle wants to make love to her. How Concetta has learned that, I do not know. Perhaps from the Principessina Bianca's maid—or perhaps she has heard Donna Bianca talking to

herself in her own room."

Don Agostino turned his head with a movement of impatience. "One would imagine," he said, "that the walls of the castle had ears."

Sor Beppe glanced at him with a curious expression in his eyes. "The castle was not built yesterday," he observed, enigmatically.

Don Agostino looked round. "What do you mean to imply?" he asked, quickly.

The other laughed. "Only this," he replied; "that there are those who know their way about the castle of Montefiano better than its owners—better than its present owners, at all events. The late prince knew—oh, very well, if all the stories are true! But nobody in the castle now has an idea—except myself and my children—"

"An idea of what?" asked Don Agostino. "*Andiamo*, Signor Fontana, do not let us play at mysteries! It seems that your castle is a dangerous place for confidential conversations."

"And a convenient place for clandestine meetings," added Fontana. "It used to be said that the late prince found it so—blessed soul!"

The suspicion of a smile played round Don Agostino's lips. Then he seemed as though a sudden thought struck him, and he looked at his visitor inquiringly.

"What do you mean?" he exclaimed, almost sharply. "You need not be afraid that anything you say to me will be repeated in the *paese*."

Sor Beppe got up from his chair. "Of course you do not understand," he said. "How should you? Well, I will tell you how it is that it is not always safe to talk secrets in the castle. One should know where one is—oh, decidedly! I will tell you something, *reverendo*, and then, perhaps, you will understand better. If I chose, this very night I could enter the sleeping apartment of the *principessina* without a soul being any the wiser—yes, even if all the doors of the rooms on the *piano nobile* were locked. No one would see me enter that wing of the castle or leave it. Concetta could do the same."

Don Agostino looked at him in amazement.

"Are you joking, my friend?" he exclaimed.

"*Niente affatto*! It is as I say. There is a secret passage in the inside wall, dividing the whole length of the *piano nobile* which their excellencies occupy from the outer gallery. It is in the thickness of the wall itself, so nobody suspects its existence."

"*Perbacco*!" ejaculated Don Agostino. "And the entrance to the passage?"

"It is by a trap-door in the floor of a room in the basement—a little room close to the outer gateway, which has long been uninhabited. My own apartment opens out of it on one side, but the door of communication was blocked up years ago—before I can remember. *Sicuro!* the entrance to the passage is there, and a

narrow staircase leads up to the *piano nobile* above."

"And the egress," asked Don Agostino, eagerly; "where is that, Signor Fontana?"

Sor Beppe's white teeth gleamed from behind his dark beard. "That is the strange part of it," he replied. "The passage leads directly into the room at the extreme end of the *piano nobile*, the room in which the *principessina* sleeps. The princess's room is next to it, and there is no other means of entry visible, except by passing through this. No doubt the princess chose it for Donna Bianca's sleeping apartment as being more secure. But, as I say, anybody acquainted with the passage could enter it."

"By a trap-door in the floor?" Don Agostino asked.

Sor Beppe shook his head. "By a much more artistic contrivance," he replied—"absolutely artistic, you understand. On pressing a spring in the passage a door slides back noiselessly into a groove in the wall of the bedroom. Ah, but those who made it were artists! The door is covered by a picture, the frame of which is so contrived as completely to conceal the groove into which it slides. A person might inhabit the room for a lifetime and not be aware that there was any means of entering or leaving it, except through the adjoining apartment."

Don Agostino leaned back in his chair and gazed at Fontana in silence. What he had just heard did not very much surprise him. He knew an old Medicean villa in Tuscany in which a secret entrance existed almost similar to that described by Sor Beppe, although it was not in so serviceable a state as its counterpart at Montefiano appeared to be. Perhaps the late Prince Montefiano had restored and repaired this one for purposes of his own. However that might be, the main point was that here, under his hand, if Sor Beppe was not romancing, was the very opportunity he had been searching for, to convey Silvio's packet to Bianca Acorari. Don Agostino felt almost bewildered at the way in which difficulties, which appeared at one moment to be insurmountable, were removed. No doubt, he argued to himself, this fresh situation was nothing but a coincidence. There was no reason why a mediæval fortress such as Montefiano, to which a Renaissance palace has been attached, should not have a dozen secret passages concealed in its walls. But it was, at any rate, a very fortunate circumstance, and one which, cautiously made use of, might considerably assist the ends he had in view.

He looked at Fontana silently for a few moments as though trying to read the man's thoughts.

"What you have told me is very interesting," he observed, presently; "but I do not understand how your daughter comes to overhear what may be said while in the secret passage. She does not, I conclude, spend all her time in the vicinity of Donna Bianca's room; and even if she did, how could she hear through a stone

wall?"

"*Altro*! Your reverence is quite right," returned Sor Beppe. "But that is easily explained, only I forgot to explain it. Every word spoken in certain of the apartments on the *piano nobile* can be distinctly heard by any one standing in the secret passage if, *ben inteso*, that person is in that part of it immediately outside the room in which the conversation takes place. It is managed very cleverly. One has only to know where to stand. For example, the passage runs the whole length of the dining-room. That was a wise thought of those who made it, for who knows what secrets the spies of the old Acorari may not have learned? Food and wine open men's mouths. And the room next to the dining-room, *reverendo*, is occupied by the Abbé Roux as his study. It is there that he and the baron sit and smoke at nights when their excellencies have retired to their rooms."

Don Agostino nodded. "As you say," he observed, "the castle of Montefiano is not a safe place for confidences."

"Or for rogues," added Sor Beppe.

"That depends," returned Don Agostino, dryly. "But why," he added, "did you not warn the princess of the existence of this secret entrance? Surely it is scarcely safe if people are aware of it."

"But nobody knows of it," replied Fontana. "All that the people know is that once upon a time there was supposed to be a secret communication between the castle and the town; and when I was a lad, it used to be said that the prince had availed himself of it for certain adventures, for everybody knew that he had an eye for every good-looking woman except his own wife."

"Never mind the prince," interrupted Don Agostino, abruptly. "Nobody else knows of the passage, you say?"

"They think it no longer exists," continued Sor Beppe. "I have always said that it was built up years ago. It was a lie, of course; but it was not necessary to let people think they could get into the castle unobserved. I forbade Concetta ever to mention it. As to naming the matter to the princess, I saw no necessity to do that. I would have told the *principessina* of it if I had ever had the chance of speaking with her alone. But Concetta implored me not to mention it even to the *principessina*. It would make her nervous, she said, to sleep in a room with a sliding-door in the wall."

"Ah," remarked Don Agostino, "you would have mentioned it to Donna Bianca; then why not to the princess?"

Sor Beppe shrugged his shoulders. "She is not the *padrona*—that other one," he said; "and, besides, she is only a foreigner, and a second wife. I would do anything to serve the Principessina Bianca—anything!—for she is an Acorari and Principessa di Montefiano. Who knows," he continued, angrily, "whether it is not because I am loyal to the *principessina* that I am dismissed? I have only seen her

a few times, *reverendo*, but I give you my word that I would rather have a smile and a *buon giorno*, from Donna Bianca than—well, I do not know what to say."

Don Agostino smiled. "I am glad to hear it," he said. "After all, it is very natural that you should feel so. Donna Bianca is your *padrona*."

"Was!" interrupted Sor Beppe, swallowing a curse in his beard at the same time.

"Ah! but let us wait, my friend," proceeded Don Agostino. "Perhaps the princess will discover that she has been ill-advised, and then you will be reinstated. In the mean time, you will not be doing either yourself or Donna Bianca Acorari any harm by continuing to be loyal to her. You may, perhaps, be able to serve her, to have an opportunity of showing your loyalty—who knows?"

Sor Beppe passed the back of his brown hand across his eyes. "*Magari!*" he said, warmly; "*magari!* if I could serve her! *Poveretta*, I fear she needs friends badly enough. It is all very fine of the Abbé Roux to talk about Donna Bianca being in *villeggiatura* at Montefiano. *Ma che villeggiatura*! It is an imprisonment, pure and simple. Do I not know it—I? The poor child! She is shut up here to keep her away from her lover in Rome; the maid, Bettina, has said as much to Concetta. And there are strict orders that no one is to enter the castle—no stranger, that is. All the letters are taken to the princess, both the post that arrives and that which goes out. It would have been more humane to have put the girl into a convent. At any rate, she would have had companions, and there would presumably be no old he-goat to make love to her."

Don Agostino listened to Sor Beppe's flow of language with a certain amount of satisfaction. The man was evidently sincere in his devotion to Bianca Acorari, and it was pleasant to him, moreover, to hear that Bianca was one of those who were able to inspire personal devotion. That Fontana knew, or at least suspected, more than he divulged of the state of affairs at the castle, and of the intrigues of which Bianca formed the central figure, he had not the slightest doubt. Many whispers had already reached his ears as to the close watch which was being kept over the young princess, how she was always accompanied by either her step-mother or the Baron d'Antin, and how the baron was evidently deeply in love with her. He had often wondered how these rumors were spread, for he happened to know that there was little or no communication between the small household the princess had brought with her and the town of Montefiano. There were no young men-servants, indeed, to go out and gossip in the *osteria*; for Princess Montefiano had only brought her *maggior-domo* from Palazzo Acorari, a venerable person of sedate habits, and one scarcely less venerable man in livery; and neither of these had ever been known to leave the castle walls or to exchange a word with the Montefianesi.

No doubt the rumors in question, and more particularly the rumors con-

cerning Baron d'Antin, had been circulated by Concetta Fontana, and Don Agostino was not altogether sorry if this were really the case. It would be no bad thing were public opinion at Montefiano to be aroused to sympathy with Bianca Acorari and distrust of the princess's advisers. It was more than probable that Monsieur l'Abbé Roux, in bringing about Fontana's dismissal, had committed an impolitic act. Although the *fattore* might have lost some of his popularity owing to recent events, he was, nevertheless, a native of the district, and well known throughout the Sabina.

"Does your reverence really think that the princess will reconsider my dismissal?" asked Sor Beppe, as Don Agostino did not speak. "You can understand," he continued, "that it is a hard thing for me. I am not an old man, that is true; but I am too old to be transplanted. Besides, we Fontana have served Casa Acorari for four generations or more, and it is a bitter thing to be turned away by a foreign woman and an *imbroglione* of a priest."

Don Agostino nodded sympathetically. "It is a hard thing, certainly," he replied, "and it is also, so far as I can see, an unjust thing. As to whether the princess will reconsider the matter, that I cannot tell you. You must remember that, as I think I have told you before, I have never seen the princess. But her rule will not last forever; and when Donna Bianca has the management of her own affairs, things may be very different. She is not a foreigner, and is not at all likely to be influenced by priests, I should say. Probably she will reward those who have been loyal to her, and her own people will come before strangers, unless I am very much mistaken."

Sor Beppe looked at him shrewdly. "I thought you said you did not know the *principessina*?" he said.

"Neither do I," answered Don Agostino, "but I know something about her."

"Perhaps you know her lover—oh, I do not mean that Belgian goat, but the other one?"

"Yes—I know him."

"Ah! And he is worthy of the *principessina*?"

"I feel convinced that he is thoroughly worthy."

"Then what is the objection? He has no money, perhaps?"

"He is not noble."

"*Diamine!* and what does that matter if he is worthy in other ways? I do not suppose he is a *contadino*."

"No," replied Don Agostino, smiling, "he is an engineer, and some day he will be a great man, I believe. His father is a great man already, the famous Senator Rossano. You have perhaps heard of him?"

"*Altro*! So it is he whom the *principessina* is in love with! Well, *reverendo*, is it not better than marrying that old baron with ink-pots under his eyes?"

Don Agostino laughed. "Certainly!" he replied. "But the baron and the Abbé Roux think otherwise. That is the difficulty; and what they think, the princess thinks."

"*Si capisce!*"

"Signor Fontana," said Don Agostino, suddenly, "you said just now that you would do anything for Donna Bianca. Were you in earnest?"

"And why not, *reverendo*?"

"*Bene*! You have the opportunity of proving your loyalty."

He rose from his chair, and, taking Silvio's packet from the writing-table, placed it in Sor Beppe's hands. "I have promised Signor Rossano, Donna Bianca's affianced husband, that this should reach her without delay. She has been waiting for it for weeks. Will you undertake that it shall be given into her hands, and into her hands only?"

Sor Beppe's eyes flashed. "I swear it!" he said. "Concetta shall give it to her this very night."

"Concetta? But is she to be trusted?"

"As much as I am to be trusted, *reverendo*. Concetta would do anything to serve the *principessina*. You need not be afraid. Donna Bianca shall have her lover's letter this very night. You can guess how?"

"Of course. But will she not be terrified at seeing your daughter enter her room in such a manner? Remember that the princess sleeps next door to her."

"Concetta will know what to do," returned Sor Beppe.

"Good. But there must be no failure—no risk of the packet falling into other hands, or its delivery being suspected."

"There will be none."

Don Agostino held out his hand. "You will not regret what you have undertaken," he said, "and you may be sure that the *principessina* will not forget it, either. We must save her from a great unhappiness, my friend, and perhaps from, worse than that. Now, I must be inhospitable and ask you to go; for it is late, and you have to arrange matters with Concetta, who by this time is probably asleep. Who knows what led you to visit me this evening? I had been turning over in my mind every means I could imagine to insure that packet reaching Donna Bianca safely. It is certainly very strange."

Sor Beppe buttoned up the little parcel securely in the corner pocket of his coat. "To-morrow I will come again," he said, "and who knows that I shall not bring with me an acknowledgment from the *principessina* that she has received the packet safely? Then you can write to her lover and tell him so. All the same, if I were that young man, I would come to Montefiano and take Donna Bianca away with me—even if I had to slit the throats of the baron and the Abbé Roux in the doing of it." And muttering a string of expletives under his breath, Sor Beppe

passed out into the garden. Don Agostino let him out through the door, opening to the piazza in front of the church; and then, after standing for a few moments to watch his tall figure striding away down the white road towards the castle, he went slowly back into his house, bidding Ernana, whose curiosity as to Sor Beppe's visit had brought her out to the threshold, lock up the door and go to bed.

XXIV

Monsieur d'Antin's visit to Rome was not of long duration. He returned to Montefiano two days after the evening when he had dined at the Castello di Costantino, in close proximity to Professor Rossano and his little party. That evening had certainly been an entertaining one to him, for many reasons. He had, of course, instantly recognized Silvio and Giacinta Rossano, while his host and companion, Peretti, had as quickly identified the professor. Except for the brief glimpse Monsieur d'Antin had caught of Silvio on the staircase of Palazzo Acorari, he had never had an opportunity of watching him with any attention; yet the boy's form and features were well impressed on his memory, and he would in any case have known he must be Giacinta Rossano's brother by the strong likeness existing between the two.

It had been his ill-disguised interest in him, and the marked manner in which he stared, that had nearly provoked Silvio into openly resenting this liberty on the part of a stranger; and probably Monsieur d'Antin had very little idea that he had narrowly escaped bringing about a scene which he might afterwards have had cause to regret. His glance and attitude had been so insolent, indeed, that for a moment or two Silvio had wondered whether he did not intend to provoke a public quarrel, which could have had but one result—a meeting with pistols or swords in some secluded villa garden, where the police were not likely to interfere. Had Giacinta, confident from her brother's face that a storm was brewing, and knowing that though storms were rare with Silvio they were apt to be violent if they burst, not taken Monsieur Lelli's advice and hurried him and her father away from the terrace, there was no saying what complication might not have arisen still further to increase the difficulties of the general situation.

As a matter of fact, Monsieur d'Antin's vanity had received a violent shock. He had known that Silvio Rossano was extremely good-looking, for he had gath-

ered as much when he had seen him ascending the staircase at Palazzo Acorari. But he had not realized it as fully as he did that evening at the Castello di Costantino. The discovery annoyed him exceedingly, for obvious reasons. He had, up to that moment, felt no particular personal antipathy towards a presumptuous young man of the *bourgeois* class, who had ventured to consider himself a fitting husband for Bianca Acorari. On the contrary, Monsieur d'Antin had felt most grateful to him for having, by his presumption and want of knowledge of the ways of good society, placed Bianca in an equivocal position, and at the mercy of anybody who might choose to set a scandal abroad concerning her.

But that night, as he looked across the restaurant at the table where Silvio was sitting, he hated him for his youth, for his tall, well-knit form, for his good-looking face; and perhaps, more than all, for a certain indefinable air of high-breeding and easy grace, which Monsieur d'Antin angrily told himself a person of the middle class had no right to possess. Nothing escaped him. He watched Silvio's manner, his mode of eating and drinking, his dress, everything, in short, which could betray the cloven hoof he was longing to discover. He could overhear, too, snatches of the conversation from Professor Rossano's table, and he was disagreeably surprised by what he heard. There was none of the loud, vulgar intonation of the voices usually the accompaniment of any gathering together of Romans of the middle and lower orders, and none of the two eternal topics of conversation—food and money—from which the Roman of the middle classes can with difficulty be persuaded to tear himself away.

Monsieur d'Antin could not but confess that, so far, at any rate, as appearance and manner were concerned, Silvio was a great deal more of a gentleman than very many of the young men of rank and fashion he was accustomed to meet in the drawing-rooms of *la haute societé* in Rome; and that he had another advantage that these, as a rule, did not possess—he looked intelligent and manly.

The reflection was not pleasing. He would have far preferred to be able to detect some trace of vulgarity in Bianca's presumptuous lover, and he could discover none. He was disagreeably conscious, too, of his own disadvantages as he looked at Silvio—of his years, of his figure, and of other details beside these.

But if the Rossano family, and especially Silvio, had occupied his attention and interest that evening, Monsieur d'Antin had been hardly less concerned with the personality of Monsignor Lelli. His companion had immediately detected the latter's presence and had pointed him out, at the same time rapidly explaining who he was and his past history at the Vatican.

The *commendatore*—he was *commendatore* of the papal Order of St. Gregory—made it his business to know as much as he could find out about everybody in Rome, and his information—when it happened to be of sufficient interest, personal, political, or religious—having been for some time placed at the disposal

of his patron at the Vatican, the cardinal secretary of state, had been duly paid for by the bestowal of a clerical order of chivalry. It was rumored that he had been the instrument of making more than one wealthy English and American convert to Catholicism among the fair sex; which, as he was not ill-looking, and occupied some of his spare time by giving Italian lessons in eligible quarters, was not improbable. At any rate, the *commendatore* knew all about Monsignor Lelli and the history of his falling into disgrace at the Vatican, though he was very careful only to give Monsieur d'Antin the official version of the affair. The story did not interest Monsieur d'Antin very much. Moreover, as it turned upon political and financial matters, in which clerics and their money were concerned, he did not believe more than a very small proportion of what he was told. What interested him far more, was the fact that Monsignor Lelli had been sent to work out his repentance at Montefiano; and that he was undoubtedly on intimate terms with the Rossano family.

The departure from the restaurant of the Rossanos and the priest had not escaped the quick eye of the *commendatore*.

"He does not want it known that he is in Rome," he had whispered to Monsieur d'Antin, as Don Agostino disappeared from the terrace.

Monsieur d'Antin did not reply. He thought it far more probable that Monsignor Lelli did not wish to be seen in Silvio's society by anybody connected with the Montefiano household. He kept his own counsel, however, and allowed his companion to think that it was his appearance on the scene that had frightened the priest away. The time had not yet arrived for letting the outside world into the secret of Bianca Acorari's indiscretion.

"I shall certainly let them know at the Vatican that Lelli is in Rome," Peretti said to Monsieur d'Antin. "Who knows why he is here, instead of attending to his duties at Montefiano? I am almost sure it was to Montefiano he was sent, but I will make certain to-morrow, when I shall see the cardinal."

"Why did they choose Montefiano?" asked Monsieur d'Antin. "It is a dreary place; and whenever I have driven through the town, I have seen nothing but pigs and old women—very ugly old women."

Peretti laughed. "That is why he was sent there," he replied. "The Holy Father concluded that he was better fitted to deal with pigs and old women than with finance."

"How long will he be kept there?"

The other lifted his eyebrows. "*Mah!*" he said. "Who knows?"

It had not suited Monsieur d'Antin's purpose to discuss Monsignor Lelli any further with the host that evening. He reflected that whatever Peretti might know about him, the Abbé Roux would know also, and possibly considerably more. He wondered that the abbé had never mentioned the fact that the parish

priest at Montefiano had once been a member of the papal court, or alluded to him in any way. It did not surprise him that Monsignor Lelli should never have presented himself at the castle, for he quite understood that the Abbé Roux would not allow any opportunity of poaching over his ground on the part of a brother cleric. Besides, there was a chapel in the castle, and mass, and the Abbé Roux said the mass; at which latter thought Monsieur d'Antin smiled, as if it afforded him some amusement.

And so he returned, the next day but one, to Montefiano, resolved to lose no time in acquainting the Abbé Roux with the news that he had seen Monsignor Lelli dining at a Roman restaurant in the company of the Rossano family, and apparently on terms of intimate friendship both with the Senator Rossano and with his son. There could be no kind of doubt that this intimacy, so providentially discovered, might seriously compromise the ultimate success of the scheme which had been so carefully devised for compelling Bianca to give up all thoughts of young Rossano, and accept what was offered to her in the place of his presumptuous attachment. Nothing but a separation from her lover, which should be complete in every detail, could accomplish this object; and if Silvio Rossano had a friend at Montefiano, and that friend the *parroco*, there could be no saying what means might not be resorted to for the purpose of establishing the very communications between him and Bianca which it was so imperative to render absolutely impracticable.

It was nearly mid-day before Monsieur d'Antin, who had taken the early morning train from Rome to Attigliano, arrived at Montefiano, and he had barely time to wash, and change his dusty clothes, before joining his sister at breakfast. A glance at the princess's face showed him that something had certainly occurred during his absence to upset her. The Abbé Roux, who was also at the table, looked both preoccupied and cross. Only Bianca appeared serene, and, to Monsieur d'Antin's surprise, altogether contented. There was a light in her eyes and an expression of scarcely suppressed happiness on her face that he never remembered to have seen there, certainly not since he had been at Montefiano. It reminded him of the look she had worn on the afternoon of his visit to the Villa Acorari, when he had found her alone in the Marble Hall, fresh from her stolen interview with her lover.

Expression and demeanor changed, however, as Monsieur d'Antin greeted Bianca with an airy compliment on her appearance. His salutation was scarcely replied to, and every subsequent attempt to draw her into conversation failed ignominiously. The meal was decidedly not a cheerful one, and it had scarcely concluded when Bianca got up from her chair, and, making a slight courtesy to her step-mother, left the room without a word. The Abbé Roux lifted his eyes to the ceiling with a sigh, and the princess looked pained and uncomfortable.

The men-servants were already bringing in the coffee, and Monsieur d'Antin was constrained to wait until they had served and retired before seeking for an explanation of the state of the social atmosphere in which he found himself.

The princess drank a few mouthfuls of her coffee, and left the table almost as soon as the door had closed upon the servants.

"If you will excuse me, Philippe," she said to her brother, "I am going to my room. I am nervous—unwell. That unhappy child—" Her voice trembled, and it was evident that Princess Montefiano was very near to tears. "Monsieur l'Abbé will explain to you," she continued; "he is entirely in my confidence. You can talk together over your cigars, and we will meet afterwards, when I am calmer."

She left the room hastily, and Monsieur d'Antin looked across the table to the abbé.

"*Que diable!*" he exclaimed. "Might one ask what has happened?"

The Abbé Roux cleared his throat. "Let us go into the next room," he said. "We can talk quietly there without being overheard by the servants"—and he led the way into the apartment specially devoted to his use.

"Ah, my dear monsieur," he said, as soon as they had shut the double doors behind them, "it is not to be wondered at if Madame la Princesse is upset! Since you have been away, Donna Bianca has made a scene—a veritable scene, you understand. It appears that she has asserted her fixed determination to marry this impossible young man, and has announced that she will wait till she is her own mistress, if—"

"If what?" asked Monsieur d'Antin, as he paused.

"*Parbleu*! If her lover does not choose that she should marry him before—the religious marriage, of course."

Monsieur d'Antin lit a cigarette.

"A girl's enthusiasm," he observed. "It will pass."

The abbé glanced at him. "I think not," he replied. "I have known Donna Bianca since she was a child. When she has made up her mind to do or not to do a thing, it is not easy to make her alter it. She is undisciplined—completely undisciplined," he added, almost angrily.

"No doubt. It is all the more reason that she should learn what discipline means. She will make a better wife for knowing it," and Monsieur d'Antin chuckled softly.

"Ah, as to that, monsieur, there can be, I suppose, no question. But what I have already told you is not all. The princess, perhaps, would not have taken Donna Bianca's refusal to submit her will to the direction of those who are her lawful guardians so deeply to heart, if that had been all. She would have trusted to time and—and to Donna Bianca's conscience, to make her step-daughter see reason and realize that obedience is the first of all duties."

Monsieur d'Antin fidgeted uneasily in his chair. "I think, Monsieur l'Abbé," he said, dryly, "that you and I can afford to dispense with moralities, can we not?"

The abbé looked angry for an instant. Then he smiled. "Perhaps," he replied. "After all, we have to regard Donna Bianca's position from a business point of view."

"Precisely, my dear friend, from a business point of view. Let us confine it to that, if you please. Let us assume, for example, that you are—a layman. It will simplify matters very much."

The abbé looked at him suspiciously, and his black eyebrows contracted disagreeably. He was never quite sure whether he were managing Monsieur d'Antin or whether Monsieur d'Antin were managing him.

"It would appear," he observed, presently, "from what Donna Bianca has said to Madame la Princesse, that you have introduced—what shall I say!—a little too much sentiment into your business point of view."

Monsieur d'Antin smiled complacently.

"What would you have, my dear abbé?" he replied. "You know my little secret. If I remember rightly, I confessed to you, and you gave me absolution—is it not so? Yes. I admit that I have perhaps been a little indiscreet, a little premature. But one cannot always control one's feelings. The *soutane* is one thing, and the pantalons are another. You must make allowance for those who do not wear the *soutane*."

"The question is," said the Abbé Roux, a little irritably, "that Donna Bianca will have none of it."

"None of which, my dear friend?" asked Monsieur d'Antin, imperturbably. "Of the *soutane*, or—"

The abbé laughed in spite of himself. "You have frightened her," he said. "She understands; and she has told the princess—oh, told her very plainly! It was a mistake. You should have waited—a month—six months. Moreover, she has found out that it was you who saw her and young Rossano together at the Villa Acorari; and now she feels that you have deceived her throughout the whole business. She will never forgive that. It would have been better to have told her that it was through you the affair became known, that you had felt bound to warn Madame la Princesse of what you believed to be a great peril threatening her step-daughter. Now, Donna Bianca has said that even if she is kept here for three years it will make no difference; that she will not be made love to by you; and that you are a liar and a coward."

Monsieur d'Antin started up from his chair.

"Monsieur l'Abbé!" he exclaimed, furiously.

"Oh, I am quoting Donna Bianca's words. You cannot be surprised that madame your sister should be upset. It is now three days ago—that little scene—

and the girl has scarcely spoken a word to the princess since. She is hard—hard as a piece of stone when she chooses to be so. Now, I ask you, what is to be done? She will wait three years, six years, if necessary, or she will find some means of running away with her lover—who knows? But she will never allow you to approach her, Monsieur le Baron; of that I am convinced."

Monsieur d'Antin swore, softly. "She must give way!" he exclaimed. "It is a mere question of time. The girl has a spirit, that I do not deny, but it can be broken. Bah! it is not worth while *de se faire de la bîle* about a girl's sentimental passion for a good-looking young man who has once kissed her, and whom she will never see again. We have only to remain firm, and all will turn out as we propose. It will take time, perhaps, but from a business point of view—always from a business point of view, my dear Monsieur l'Abbé—time is exactly what we wish to gain, is it not? I admit that, from the other point of view—mine, you understand—delay is not so satisfactory."

The abbé looked up quickly. "Ah, certainly," he said, eagerly, "you are perfectly right; to gain time is everything! And if Donna Bianca does not mind waiting for her lover, well, from a business point of view, delay will be very advantageous."

Monsieur d'Antin lit another cigarette.

"To you," he said, quietly. "To you, dear Monsieur l'Abbé; but, as I said before, to me not quite so much so. There is my part of the bargain to be considered, is there not? And if I am not to marry Donna Bianca Acorari, I confess that I do not particularly care whether she marries young Rossano or goes into a convent. All the same, I do not imagine that she will go into a convent."

Monsieur d'Antin paused, and looked steadily at his companion. His voice and manner were suaveness itself; nevertheless, the abbé was conscious that his words implied something very like a threat.

"Of course," he replied, "there is your part of the question to be considered. I do not forget it. But what you want is not so easy to obtain. I fear that Donna Bianca, even were she finally to renounce all hopes of Rossano, would never be induced to listen to your proposal to take his place. Besides, I very much doubt if Madame la Princesse would go so far as to attempt to force upon her stepdaughter an alliance apparently so distasteful to her. No, Monsieur le Baron, I speak frankly. Donna Bianca's sudden assertion of the course she intends to adopt has materially altered the situation. Who has any influence over her? Certainly not the princess, certainly not myself, to whom she never addresses a word if she can avoid doing so. The only person who, until recently, seemed to have gained her confidence, was yourself. What has caused her to declare, as she has declared, that she will not allow you to approach her, you must know better than I. In the mean time, the field is as clear to you as it was before, and we will

hope that this little outburst on the part of Donna Bianca may not be of much importance. At least, you must admit that I have done my best to further your object. You owe it entirely to me if the princess, against her own inclinations, was persuaded to countenance that object."

"But, my dear Monsieur l'Abbé," returned Monsieur d'Antin, airily, "I fully realize the efforts you have made on my behalf. Why not? As to Donna Bianca having taken me *en grippe*, well, I assure you that I rather enjoy it. I like a woman to show some fight. I shall do my best to remove the bad impression I have made. Apparently, she enjoys it also. I never saw her look so animated as she did to-day. The little scene with my sister, that you tell me of, must have acted as a tonic—and no doubt she will be the better for it, and more amenable to reason. Do not let us talk any more about it for the present. Apropos, how do your little matters of business progress? I think you told me before I left that my sister had some trouble with the agent here, and that you had advised her to dismiss him?"

The abbé frowned. "Yes," he said, curtly, "the man is dismissed, and I have another *fattore* ready to take his place. But there is some little difficulty. It appears that the people are angry at his dismissal. I am told it has created great ill-feeling in Montefiano. There is a meddlesome *parroco* here—"

"*Diable!*" exclaimed Monsieur d'Antin; "I had quite forgotten about him."

"What? You know him?"

"No, my dear friend, no. But I happened to see him two or three evenings ago in Rome, and in whose company do you suppose he was? You will never guess. Well, he was dining at a restaurant with Professor Rossano and his son and daughter."

The Abbé Roux gave an exclamation of surprise.

"*Lelli*! Dining with the Rossanos? Are you sure that it was he?"

"Absolutely sure. I was dining with Peretti—you know whom I mean?—and Peretti knew Monsignor Lelli perfectly well. He left the restaurant very soon after he saw us."

"Lelli!" repeated the Abbé Roux, with a scowl. "Yes, he is the priest at Montefiano. Peretti will have told you his story. He fell into disgrace at the Vatican—in fact, he embezzled money, and rather than have a public scandal, he was sent here to get him out of the way. What was he doing with the Rossanos?"

"Eating his dinner," replied Monsieur d'Antin, tranquilly; "at least, if you call such a thing a dinner. *Ciel!* what filth one eats in a Roman restaurant, even in the best of them. Oh, la, la! Yes, your *parroco* was dining with the Rossano family. It would appear that he is an intimate friend."

"No doubt," observed the abbé, with a sneer. "Lelli was always hand and glove with all the *canaille* in Rome of the literary and scientific world. He is simply a free-thinker—nothing more nor less. It does not at all surprise me that

he should be a friend of Professor Rossano."

"But it is a little unfortunate that a friend of the Rossanos should be curé at Montefiano, is it not?" asked Monsieur d'Antin.

The abbé started. "Assuredly," he said. "You are right. It is a danger. For the moment I did not think of it. Yes, it might be a grave danger. Moreover, the man is mischievous. He is always siding with the peasants. Only yesterday I heard that he had declared Fontana's—the agent's—dismissal to be an injustice. We do not want men of that sort. They spoil the people and make them discontented."

"It is clear that he is very intimate with Professor Rossano and his son," returned Monsieur d'Antin, "and in his position here at Montefiano as parish priest, what is to prevent him from inducing one of the people about to deliver some letter or some message to Donna Bianca? And once she realizes that she can receive communications from the outside world, all our precautions will be useless. The knowledge that she could do so would make her more obstinate than ever in her determination not to give up young Rossano."

The abbé frowned. "Leave it to me, monsieur," he replied. "Lelli will not succeed in entering the castle of Montefiano, however much he may be the village priest. I put a stop to any idea of the kind long ago. Indeed, it was necessary to warn the princess against him. She had never heard his history, and I discovered—oh, two or three years ago—that he was getting money out of her for the poor; and, moreover, that he was always urging Fontana to appeal for a reduction in the rents. Of course, directly the princess realized that he had been sent to Montefiano in disgrace, and heard all the scandal concerning his removal from the Vatican, she ceased to allow him to interfere between the people and the administration of the estates. No, I do not think we need fear Monsignor Lelli."

"At least it will do no harm to be on our guard," insisted Monsieur d'Antin.

"Oh, as to that, of course! Moreover, should there be any cause to suspect that he was helping young Rossano, it would not be difficult to obtain his removal. There are many hill villages which are even more isolated than Montefiano—in the Abruzzi, for instance. And I do not imagine that the Holy Father cares where Lelli is, so long as he is safely out of the way until it pleases Providence to remove him altogether." And the Abbé Roux laughed harshly.

Monsieur d'Antin yawned. "I shall go to my room," he said, throwing away his cigarette and rising from his chair. "Travelling on one of these horrible Italian railways is bad enough at any time, with the dirt and the unpunctuality, but in hot weather it is doubly fatiguing. Then it appears to me, my dear friend," he added, "that notwithstanding Donna Bianca's charming display of petulancy, we remain as before. A little stricter discipline, perhaps—a little more precaution against any possible interference on the part of this *monsignore*, is it not so?"

"Precisely, monsieur—and patience, always patience!"

"Ah!" observed Monsieur d'Antin. "It is an admirable quality—but the exercising of it is apt to become monotonous."

XXV

The evening before Monsieur d'Antin's return to Montefiano from Rome, Bianca Acorari had dined alone. The princess had been invisible most of the day. Although she appeared at breakfast, she had retired to her room later on in the afternoon, a victim to a violent nervous headache, the result, as Bianca was only too well aware, of the agitation she had been in ever since the scene on the previous day. The Abbé Roux had announced at breakfast that he should be away until late that evening, having, as he explained, to go to Orvieto to visit a friend who lived near that city. As Bianca sat alone at dinner, she felt grateful to the abbé for having had the tact to absent himself. She did not feel inclined for a *tête-à-tête* meal with anybody, and certainly not with the Abbé Roux.

To say the truth, her step-mother's evident distress had made Bianca almost regret that she had allowed herself to speak so plainly as she had done the day before. Resolute and strong-willed as she could be when she chose, her nature was both sensitive and warm-hearted; and although she would not have retracted one word that she had said, or retreated one inch from the attitude she had taken up, she felt sorry and disturbed in her mind at the pain she had evidently occasioned the princess. After all, it was not unnatural that her step-mother should consider it to be her duty to impede by every means in her power a marriage of which she disapproved. It was not unnatural, either, that she should disapprove. Bianca, whose sense of justice was unusually strong, would have scorned to be unjust to any individual simply because she happened not to be in agreement with that individual. She was quite aware, too, that her conduct had been certainly not in accordance with that which was considered fitting to a young girl in any position. She should, of course, have refused to allow Silvio to speak a word of love to her until he should first have gained the consent of her step-mother. No doubt she had been wrong—immodest, perhaps, as her step-mother had said—but all the same, she was glad she had not repulsed Silvio that day in the ilex grove. Glad, did she say? But that was an untruth. She had never thought of repulsing him, could not have done so, for she wanted love. She had wanted it for so long, and she had understood that Silvio had it to give her. And she wanted somebody

whom she could love, not merely some one towards whom she was perpetually being told she should be dutiful. No, it was absurd to say she was glad she had listened to him, and had let him tell her his love in his own way. It was worse than absurd—it was a lie told to herself. Ever since that Christmas night when she had seen him in the church of the Sudario, she had understood that she loved, and that he loved her. And she had never thought of repulsing him. She had thought only of the moment when she should hear him tell her of his love; when she should feel his arms around her and his lips on hers; when she could show him that she, too, knew what love was.

From which reflections it was evident that Monsieur d'Antin had been right in his diagnosis of Bianca Acorari's temperament, and in coming to the conclusion that his sister and the Abbé Roux would be preparing for themselves a disillusion if they continued to regard her as little more than a child.

Bianca retired to her room early that night. It was certainly not cheerful to sit alone in the drawing-room after dinner, trying to read a book by the light of one or two old-fashioned moderator lamps, which only served to cast gloomy shadows into the corners of the vast apartment. The princess had caused a pianoforte to be sent from Rome; for the Érard which stood at one end of the drawing-room was reduced by age and damp to a compass of some two octaves of notes which, when played upon, produced sounds that were strange but scarcely musical; while the upper and lower octaves of the key-board had ceased to produce any sound whatever, save a spasmodic, metallic tapping as the hammer struck the broken wires. Bianca used to touch the instrument sometimes, and wonder whether it had belonged to her mother, and if her hands had pressed the yellow keys. She knew that her mother had passed the last year or two of her life at Montefiano, and that she herself had first seen the light there.

But to-night she was not in the humor for either reading or playing the piano. She felt weary, mentally and bodily; for, after the excitement of the discussion the previous day with her step-mother, reaction had set in. She was depressed, and, a thing very unusual to her, nervous. An almost intolerable sensation of loneliness haunted her. It seemed strange to think that a few hundred metres away, down in the *paese*, people were talking and laughing and living their lives. She was not living hers; life was going on all around her, but she had no part or share in it. Ah, if only she could hear something from Silvio!—hear of him, even—she would not feel quite so lonely. She would feel sure then, though they were separated, though probably they would be divided for months and years to come, that they were together in their thoughts; that he was faithful and true to her, as she was struggling with all her force to be faithful and true to the promise she had made him there, under the ilex-trees at the Villa Acorari.

Passing quietly through her step-mother's apartment, lest she should be

perhaps already asleep, Bianca was about to enter her own room, when the princess called to her.

"Come here, *figlia mia*," she said, gently, "I am not asleep."

Bianca approached the bed and remained standing by it. Princess Montefiano took her hand and held it in hers for a moment.

"You think me very cruel, do you not, Bianca?" she said; "like the cruel step-mothers in the fairy-tales," she added, with a little attempt at a laugh. "Well, some day you will understand that if I am unkind, it is for your good. But there is something else I want to say to you. I do not intend to discuss the other matter—the Rossano matter. I shall never change my opinion on that point—never! And so long as you are under my authority, so long shall I absolutely forbid any question of a marriage between you and a son of Professor Rossano, and communication of any sort to pass between you. What I wish to say to you is this. Because I will not consent to your marriage with this young Rossano, you must not think that I wish to influence you or compel you to listen to my brother. That would not be my idea of what is my duty towards you as my husband's child, for whose happiness I am responsible, both before God and before the world. You must understand that you are free, Bianca, absolutely free to do as you choose as regards accepting or not the affection my brother offers you. It may be, perhaps, that when you are in a more reasonable frame of mind, and have realized that under no circumstances would you be allowed to marry out of your own sphere in life—and certainly not the son of an infidel professor, who, no doubt, shares his father's abominable principles and ideas—you will hesitate before throwing away my brother's love."

Bianca shook her head. "It is useless to think of that," she said, "and it is useless to tell me that under no circumstances shall I marry Silvio Rossano. Unless one of us dies, I shall marry him. I have nothing more to say than what I said yesterday, and nothing to unsay. You ask me if I think you unkind. No; I do not think that."

"Surely," exclaimed the princesse, almost wistfully—"surely you can understand that in all this miserable business I am only doing what my conscience tells me to be my duty towards you!"

Bianca withdrew her hand. "Yes," she said; "I quite understand. I have always understood." Then, wishing her step-mother good-night, she bent down and kissed her, and passed into her own room, gently closing both of the double set of doors which separated the two apartments.

She had not been in bed long before sleep came to her, for she was, in fact, more weary in body and mind than she had realized. For four or five hours she slept soundly enough, but after that her slumbers became disturbed by dreams. She dreamed that Silvio was near her, that she could see him but could not speak

to him, and that he had some message for her, some letter which the Abbé Roux was trying to take from him. In her sleep she seemed to hear strange noises and her own name called softly at intervals. Suddenly she awoke with a start. A gleam of moonlight was shining through the window-curtains and half-closed *persiennes*. It made a broad track across the floor to the wall opposite her bed, and fell on the face of a picture hanging near the corner of the room—a portrait of that very Cardinal Acorari who had caused the Renaissance palace to be added to the Montefiano fortress, in order that he might have a villa in the Sabine Mountains in which to pass the hot summer months away from Rome. The moonlight glanced upon his scarlet robes and skull-cap and on his heavy countenance. Time had caused the flesh colors to fade, and the full mouth, with the sensual lips, looked unnaturally red against the waxy whiteness of the rest of the face.

Bianca lay and looked at the streak of moonlight on the floor. Presently her gaze followed the track until it rested on the picture. For some moments she looked at the portrait with a certain fascination. She had never seen it in the moonlight before; it looked ghostly. She had once seen a cardinal lying in state when she was a child, and the sight had frightened her. She was not at all frightened now, for she was no longer a child; but all the same, she could not take her eyes off the picture. She found herself wondering what relation she was to that old Cardinal Acorari—great-great-what? Granddaughter would not do, for cardinals, of course, never had children; certainly not cardinal-priests; and Cardinal Acorari had been bishop of Ostia and cardinal vicar of Rome.

Suddenly she sat up in her bed. Surely she had seen the face move? Yes; it had certainly moved; it was quite ten centimetres more to the right of the moonlight than it had been a moment ago. Now half the features were in shadow, and the cardinal's *biretta* was half red and half black. *Sciocchezze*! Of course, it was the moon that had moved, not the picture; or, rather, she supposed it was the earth that had moved, or the sun! Something had moved, at any rate, but not the cardinal. And smiling at her own stupidity, Bianca withdrew her gaze from the picture, and, turning on her side, tried to compose herself to sleep once more. But it soon became evident that sleep would not return to her. She felt restless, and the night, too, was hot. Rising from her bed, she threw a light wrap over her shoulders and went to one of the windows, the curtains of which she drew gently aside; and then, taking care not to make any noise that could be heard in the room beyond, she opened the green *persiennes* outside the window and leaned out. Not a breath of air was stirring, and the September night was oppressively warm. A silvery haze hung over the *macchia* below the terrace, and far away, under the encircling mountains, Bianca could see the wreaths of mist rising in the valley of the Tiber. The two flanking wings of the palace stood out cold and white in the moonlight, while the double avenue of lofty cypresses on

each side of the great night of stone steps leading down from the terrace into the park looked black and sombre in the nearer foreground.

The splashing of a fountain in the centre of the avenue, and the occasional cry of some bird, alone broke the intense stillness. Bianca rested her arms on the ledge of the window, gazing out upon the scene below her. The moonlight fell full upon her and glanced upon the tawny gold of her hair. For some moments she remained immovable. Then, with a gesture of passionate abandonment, she flung her white arms out into the silver night. "Silvio!" she whispered; "Silvio, not one word? Ah, my beloved, if you knew how I want you, if you knew the loneliness! Ah, but I will be patient, I will be brave, for your sake and for my own—only—*Dio!*—" She turned suddenly with a little cry. Surely she had heard her own name again, spoken very softly from somewhere within the room behind her. She looked hastily round, but could see nobody. Only her own shadow fell across the floor in the moonlight.

"*Eccellenza*! Donna Bianca!"

Ah, this time she was not mistaken! It was her name she had heard whispered, and the voice came from the cardinal's portrait. Bianca started back. For a second or two she felt fear. If she could only see the person who had called her, she would not be frightened, she was certain of that. Gathering her wrap round her she came forward into the room.

"I am Bianca Acorari," she said, in a low, clear voice. "What do you want with me, and how have you ventured to come here? Speak, or I will call for help."

"Ah, *per carità*! do not call—do not be afraid."

"I am not afraid," interrupted Bianca Acorari, quietly. "Why should I be afraid? Besides, it—you are a woman, are you not?"

"*Eccellenza*—yes! It is I, Concetta Fontana, and I bring a message—a letter. Ah, but I have been waiting for an hour before I dared speak. I called you, but you were sleeping, and then, when I saw you at the window, I was frightened—"

The white face of Cardinal Acorari disappeared noiselessly into the wall, and Concetta's form occupied its place. She carried in her hand a small oil-lamp; and, balancing herself for an instant, she dropped lightly down the three or four feet from where the picture had hung, to the floor.

Bianca rushed towards her. "Concetta!" she exclaimed. Then she tottered a little, and, dropping into a chair, began to sob convulsively.

In a moment Concetta was by her side and had thrown her arms round her.

"For the love of God, *eccellenza*, do not cry!" she exclaimed. "Do not make a sound—the princess—she might hear. Yes, it is Concetta—Concetta who has brought you this—who will do anything for you," and she thrust Silvio's packet into Bianca's hand.

Bianca looked at it for a moment as if she scarcely understood her. Then

she tore it open eagerly. A smaller packet fell from it to the floor, but Bianca let it lie there. Her eyes had caught sight of the letter in which it was enclosed, and she wanted that and nothing else. Hurriedly unfolding it, she darted to the window again and held the closely written sheets to the moonlight. "Ah, Silvio!" she exclaimed, "I knew, I knew!"

Concetta, practically, lighted a candle, and waited in silence while Bianca devoured the contents of her lover's letter. Every now and then she cast anxious glances towards the princess's apartment. Then, when Bianca had finished feverishly reading through the letter for the first time and was about to begin it again, she stooped, and picking up the packet from the floor, gave it to her.

Bianca undid the paper, and, opening the little box inside, took out the ring.

"Ah, look!" she said. "Look what he sends me—his mother's ring! Look how the diamonds sparkle in the moonlight, Concetta—and the sapphire—how blue the sapphire is! Blue, like—"

She stopped suddenly, and a hot wave of color mounted to her face. Replacing the ring in its case, she thrust it and the letter into her bosom.

Then she turned to Concetta quickly.

"How did you come here, and why should you do this thing for me?" she asked, almost fiercely. "Are you sent to lay a trap for me? Speak!"

Concetta Fontana flung herself upon her knees, and taking Bianca's hand, covered it with kisses. "No, no," she exclaimed. "I have come because my father sent me—my father and Don Agostino—because you are the *padrona*—not—not that other one—the foreigner. *Eccellenza*, you have no right to mistrust me. I swear to God that there is no deceit, no trap. Nobody knows of the secret passage—only my father and I. My father could not come here—in the dead of night—so I came."

"The secret passage!" repeated Bianca, wonderingly.

Concetta pointed to the hole in the wall where the cardinal's portrait had been. "It is there," she said, "and it runs the whole length of the *piano nobile* and down into the entrance-court. See!" Going to the aperture, she pressed a spring concealed in the groove, and slowly, noiselessly, the picture of Cardinal Acorari glided back into its original position.

"I can come and go when I please," said Concetta, with a smile, "so the *principessina* is no longer a prisoner who cannot communicate with the world outside. Oh, and there are those outside who mean to help her—Don Agostino, and my father, and others besides. We will not have our *padrona* shut up in the castle of Montefiano to please a foreign priest. *Sicuro!* very soon—in a few days perhaps—the *principessina* will understand that she is at Montefiano—among her own people."

Bianca scarcely heard Concetta Fontana's latter words.

"Who is Don Agostino?" she asked, suddenly. "Silvio—this letter—says that the packet will be brought or conveyed to me by Monsignor Lelli."

"Don Agostino—Lelli—it is all one," replied Concetta. "He is our *parroco*, *eccellenza*; and he is good, oh, he is good! If all priests were like Don Agostino—*mah*!"

Bianca took out her letter again. As yet she could hardly realize her happiness. A few minutes ago she had felt utterly alone, almost without hope, save the hope that her own courage and her trust in Silvio gave her. Now the world seemed different. She had got her message from that great world outside, which until just now had seemed so far away from her own—that world where life and love were waiting for her.

Suddenly she turned to Concetta and took both the girl's hands in hers. "Forgive me," she said, softly; "I was wrong to doubt you, but I think I have begun to suspect everybody lately. When one has once been deceived, it is not easy to trust again."

Concetta's eyes flashed. "Who has dared to deceive you, *signorina*?" she asked, hastily. "Not—" she pointed to the letter Bianca was still holding against her heart.

Bianca smiled. "No, Concetta; ah, no, not he! How could he deceive me? I was thinking of somebody else—somebody here at Montefiano. But it does not matter. I do not care at all now. Indeed, I do not think that I shall care about anything again. Ah, Concetta, some day you will know that I am grateful for what you have done to-night. I shall not forget. I shall ask you what I can do for you in return, when I am really Principessina di Montefiano."

Concetta looked at her quickly. "It will not be difficult to repay me," she said; "but I don't want repayment, *eccellenza*; it is not for repayment I mention it. But, some day, if you will remember that my father has been dismissed from your service because he would not consent to an injustice being done in your name to the people, that will be repayment enough."

Bianca started. "Of course!" she exclaimed. "I recollect. Your father has been dismissed from his post, has he not? Well, when I have power to recall him, he shall be recalled. It is enough for me to know that he has been dismissed by Monsieur l'Abbé Roux to suspect that he has been unjustly treated. But what do you mean by injustice to the people done in my name, Concetta? I do not understand."

Concetta hesitated. "You will understand very soon, perhaps," she replied, mysteriously. "But do not be alarmed, *eccellenza*, it is not you with whom the people are angry. They know you cannot help what is being done, although it may be done in your name. *Basta!* if you have no further orders for me, I will go. It is nearly morning, and I have been here too long. If the princess were to

awake and think of coming into your room—"

"She never comes into my room after I have wished her good-night," said Bianca, "and you must not go yet, Concetta—at least, not before I have given you a letter which you will take back to Monsignor Lelli—Don Agostino—for me. You will do that, will you not?"

"*Altro*! But, *eccellenza*, do not be long writing your letter. If I were to be found here—well—" and Concetta shrugged her shoulders significantly.

Bianca suddenly looked round the room in despair. "*Madonna mia!*" she exclaimed, "I have nothing to write with—no ink or paper—only a little pencil."

"The pencil must serve for this time, *signorina*," said Concetta. "To-morrow you can bring some writing-materials here and hide them in the passage outside, for I will show you how to work the spring. Anything you place in the passage is as if Domeneddio had it in his own pocket. But for to-night write a few words on the blank half-sheet of that letter you have, and early to-morrow morning I will give it myself to Don Agostino."

Bianca looked at her doubtfully. She was loath to part with even a scrap of paper that had come from Silvio. But time pressed, and if she did not return an immediate reply to his missive, Silvio would think it had been intercepted. She sat down and wrote a few lines hurriedly, and, folding up her half-sheet of paper, confided it to Concetta's keeping.

"You will tell Don Agostino that I shall send another letter to-morrow by you," she said, "and you will thank him for all he is doing, Concetta, from me. And tell him also that I shall write to him myself, because—"

She hesitated for a moment, then, drawing herself up, she looked Concetta full in the face. "Because my future husband wishes me to do so," she concluded, quietly.

Concetta Fontana took her hand, and, raising it to her lips, kissed it. "I will go to Don Agostino at seven o'clock this morning, before he says his mass, and I will give him the letter. Ah, *signorina*, if the Signorino Rossano is Don Agostino's friend, it is proof enough that, speaking with respect, you have chosen your husband wisely. *Sicuro*! Don Agostino is a good man. There are many at Montefiano who distrust the priests; but there is nobody who does not trust Don Agostino. It is I, Concetta, who say it to you—and I know. But look, *signorina*, the dawn will soon be here. Let me go now—for who knows that her excellency might not awake. You will not be frightened if you see the picture move again? It will only be Concetta looking into the room to make sure that you are alone."

Bianca turned to her quickly. "Ah, Concetta," she exclaimed, "I am so happy—you do not know how happy! And I shall not forget what you have done for me—you will see that I shall not forget. Yes—go—go! I am not alone any longer now."

Concetta lifted up a chair and placed it under the picture. Then, standing upon it, she pressed the spring concealed behind the heavy, carved frame, and slowly, noiselessly, the portrait of Cardinal Acorari slid back into the wall. Another moment, and Concetta was standing in the aperture where the painted panel had been. "Sleep well now, *signorina*," she whispered to Bianca, "and do not be afraid. There are those watching that no harm shall come to you at Montefiano."

She drew back into the passage as she spoke, pressing the corresponding spring on the other side of the wall as she did so; and once more the cardinal looked down on Bianca from the spot where Concetta had been standing but an instant before.

Bianca gazed at the picture for a few moments, and listened for any faint echo of Concetta's footsteps. Not the slightest sound was audible from the passage. Only the twittering of waking birds came through the open window; and Bianca, turning away, went again to it and leaned out. A faint breeze was stirring the trees in the macchia below the terrace, and the drooping tops of the cypresses were swaying softly. The moon was sinking behind the lofty ridges of Soracte, and away in the east the violet sky of night was already streaked with the first pale messengers heralding the coming of the dawn.

And Bianca leaned from the window and watched till the pearly whiteness in the eastern sky deepened into rose red; till the wreaths of mist floating away from the valley of the Tiber rose, and, clinging to the mountain-sides, glided slowly upward till they caught the first golden rays of the yet hidden sun.

From the woodland below came the distant notes of a reed-pipe, and then a boy's voice singing one of the strange minor cadences learned, probably, centuries ago of slaves from the East, and sung still by the peasants and shepherds of the Latin province. In the present instance, Bianca knew that the lad was no shepherd—for the sheep had not yet been brought down from the higher pastures—but that he was engaged in the less poetical occupation of tending pigs.

As she watched, a wave of golden light seemed to spread over the face of the landscape below her, and the sun rose. And Bianca Acorari flung out her arms once more; this time not in doubt and almost in despair, but in a passion of joy, thankfulness, and love.

XXVI

The Caffè Garibaldi, which was situated in the main street of Montefiano—a street that bore, as a matter of course, the name of Corso Vittorio Emanuele—was doing an unusually brisk business. At each little marble-topped table a group of excited men was sitting, each member of which was talking at the top of his voice. Nobody was listening to his neighbor; but then, as all the world knows, there are occasions when no Italian ever does listen to his neighbor during a discussion; the whole aim and object of each speaker being to talk the other down. A considerable amount of wine was being drunk, and some of it was new wine, the process of fermentation being scarcely over. No doubt this fact accounted for much of the heat with which the sole topic of conversation in the Caffè Garibaldi that evening was being discussed. There was an argument, indeed, and, taking into consideration the number of half-litres consumed and the quality of at any rate a large proportion of the wine, it was perhaps as well that everybody was of the same opinion, though each strove to express that opinion more forcibly than his companion. A difference on the main issue in question would have certainly led to quarrels, and quarrels would as likely as not have resulted in the flow of other liquid than Stefano Mazza's red wine at eight *soldi* the litre.

In a room at the back of the *caffè*—a room wherein was to be found the solitary billiard-table in Montefiano, and where the choicer and more exclusive elements of Montefianese society were wont to gather—the conversation was as animated and scarcely less noisy than in the portion communicating directly with the street bearing the name of the Re Galantuomo.

Stefano Mazza, the host, was himself attending to the wants of his clients in this more select part of his premises; and Stefano Mazza was a person of considerable weight in Montefiano, not only bodily but, what was far more important, socially. The *sindaco* of Montefiano himself, with all the importance of bureaucracy at his back, was not so influential a man as Stefano Mazza; for Mazza, so to speak, held the *sindaco* in the hollow of his hand, as he did a very considerable proportion of the *sindaco's* municipal councillors and of the inhabitants of Montefiano generally. There were few, very few of the Montefianesi, from officials to peasants, whose signatures to certain pieces of paper bearing the government stamp and setting forth that the signatories were in his debt to amounts ranging from thousands to tens of *lire*, Stefano did not possess. He was, in short, the money-lender, not only to Montefiano, but to a considerable portion of the agricultural district surrounding it, and, as such, his opinion on most questions was listened to with unfailing respect by all members of the community.

On the whole, *strozzino* though he was, Stefano was neither an unjust nor a hard man. To be sure, he charged a six-per-cent. interest for the money he loaned; but he was content with getting this interest and never departed from his conditions. He had been known to wait for his money, too, when, owing

to bad seasons, some of his poorer clients were unable to pay their interest at the proper dates. The consequence was that Sor Stefano was regarded by his neighbors of all degrees as a personage with whom it was to their advantage to stand well; the more so as even the most prosperous among them could never tell when they might not want to borrow his money, or renew a bill for money already advanced by him.

A sudden hail-storm which would devastate the crops or the vineyards in the space of a few minutes; an unfortunate season with the lambs or the pigs; a failure with the maize or the grain—and it was as likely as not that Sor Stefano's assistance would have to be sought in order to tide over the winter months; and often, too, in order to have the rent ready for Sor Beppe, the *fattore*, when he should come to collect it.

It was certain, therefore, that nobody, not excepting Sor Beppe himself, was so thoroughly acquainted with the financial conditions of the tenants on the Montefiano estates as Stefano Mazza, the proprietor of the Caffè Garibaldi. Moreover, Sor Stefano and Sor Beppe were good and intimate friends, as their fathers had been before them. Sor Stefano, indeed, had recently stood by the *fattore* on more than one occasion, when, after the rents had been farmed out to the new lessee, Sor Beppe had been compelled to obey instructions from Rome and increase them, thereby incurring the dislike of the small holders, who not unnaturally regarded him as the primary cause of the extra burden laid upon them.

The news of Sor Beppe's dismissal from the office of *fattore* had stirred public opinion in and around Montefiano to its depths. Notwithstanding its Corso Vittorio Emanuele, its Via Giordano Bruno, and other outward and visible signs of a desire to tread the path of independence and liberty, Montefiano was conservative enough in maintaining its own traditions, and in not welcoming any changes in the order of things to which it had become accustomed. For five-and-twenty years Sor Beppe had been *fattore* at Montefiano to Casa Acorari; while, for fifty years before he succeeded to the post, it had been occupied by Sor Pompilio, his father. This fact was in itself sufficient to cause the news that another *fattore* was to be appointed in the place of Giuseppe Fontana to be received with astonishment and not a little indignation.

When it became known, however, that Sor Beppe had been dismissed because he had flatly declined to obey instructions of the administration in Rome to raise the rents of certain small holdings without laying the matter personally before the princess, popular indignation had increased until it became a deep and bitter anger. As Sor Beppe had pointed out to Don Agostino, it had been generally known in Montefiano for some time that the *principessa's* foreign priest was practically the head of the administration to the Eccellentissima Casa Aco-

rari; and during the last few weeks, since the sudden arrival at the castle of the princess and the Principessina Bianca, rumor had insisted that the new *affittuario* of the Montefiano estate was no other than the priest himself. If this were not so, it was argued, why did the new *affittuario* never show himself in the flesh, and why did the foreign *monsignore* make a point of personally examining every holding on the property? But that Sor Beppe should be dismissed from a post that he had honorably filled for five-and-twenty years because he would not lend himself to furthering this interloper's schemes for enriching himself at the expense of the poor, and of the good name of Casa Acorari, was an abominable thing. Men and women had talked of nothing else in the streets of the *paese* during the day, and at night the men flocked to the Caffè Garibaldi to hear what Sor Stefano and the more influential members of the community might have to say on the subject.

It was evident that these worthies had much to say; and, like their inferiors in the social scale of Montefiano, they said it loudly and decidedly. Such a thing could not be tolerated; and the voice of the majority was in favor of forming a deputation that should wait upon their excellencies at the castle and point out to them the injustice of Sor Beppe's dismissal, and the ill-feeling among the peasants that insistence on the raising of their rents would infallibly produce. There was, indeed, a secondary motive in the minds of those who, headed by Sor Stefano, had suggested the expediency of a deputation. For some little time mysterious rumors had circulated in Montefiano—rumors of which the Principessina Bianca was the central object. It was whispered, especially among the women, that there was something going on in the castle that was not satisfactory; that the *principessina* had been brought to Montefiano because she wanted to marry a *bel giovane* in Rome, whose only fault was that he had not a title; that instead of being allowed to marry the man she loved she was being forced to receive the attentions of the princess's brother—a worn-out foreign baron, old enough to be the poor child's father. It was insisted that the Principessina Bianca was unhappy, that she was practically a prisoner, and that the priest was at the bottom of it all. Who circulated these stories among the women, Sor Stefano knew perfectly well. It was certain that they became more definite from day to day, and that by degrees a very wide-spread feeling of suspicion had been aroused among all classes at Montefiano that the Principessina Bianca was being made the victim of an intrigue on the part of her step-mother's foreign advisers to possess themselves both of her person and her estates.

Why, it was asked, was the *principessina* never seen? The very few people who had happened to see her at the castle had come away full of enthusiasm concerning her beauty and her kindness of manner. When it became known that Sor Beppe had been dismissed, these stories had been repeated with greater

insistence than ever. Probably the women had determined to excite the compassion and indignation of their menkind on the *principessina's* behalf; for several of the leading peasants and small farmers in and around Montefiano had openly talked of going to the castle and demanding an interview with the Principessina Donna Bianca, in order to see for themselves whether their young *padrona* were in reality exposed to the treatment they suspected.

It was in order to consult together concerning the suggested deputation that the leading spirits of Montefiano had assembled at the Caffè Garibaldi that evening. Notwithstanding the noise, and the totally irrelevant side issues raised by many of his customers, it was clear to Stefano Mazza that the general consensus of public opinion was on his side. The dismissal of Sor Beppe should not be allowed to pass without a protest being made to the *principessa* in person; and at the same time it should be clearly conveyed to her that any *fattore* who should be appointed to succeed Sor Beppe would find his task by no means easy, inasmuch as the people would with truth conclude that he had been sent to Montefiano to carry out changes which were obnoxious and unjust. Sor Stefano, anxious to please all parties, had further suggested that the deputation in question should insist upon the Principessina Bianca being present when its members were received by her step-mother. Her presence, he pointed out, would enable the representatives of the Montefiano people to ascertain whether Donna Bianca was or was not aware of what was being done in her name, whether it was true that she was merely a victim of the unscrupulous designs of this Belgian priest, and of another stranger who was, to all intents and purposes, her uncle. Donna Bianca Acorari was their legitimate *padrona*, the daughter and heiress of the princes of Montefiano; and as such her own people at Montefiano had a right to approach her and hear from her own lips whether all that was said concerning her was truth or fiction.

It was late that night when the Caffè Garibaldi put out its lights and barred its doors after the last of Sor Stefano's clients had left the premises. The chief point under discussion during the evening had been settled, however, and it was unanimously decided that a deputation, headed by the *sindaco* and Sor Stefano, should send a letter to the castle requesting to be received by the princess and the Principessina Donna Bianca. Perhaps the *sindaco* of Montefiano was the only one to display some hesitation as to the advisability of the course determined upon. He had no desire to compromise himself by lending his official sanction to any movement which might end in disturbance and in possible collision with the civil authorities. It was impossible to foretell what might take place were the princess and her adviser to oppose the wishes of the already suspicious and excited peasants, and refuse to entertain the objections of the deputation to the dismissal of the *fattore*, Giuseppe Fontana. The *avvocato* Ricci, *syndic* of Montefiano, like

many other petty Italian lawyers, nourished an ambition to enter political life as a means whereby to fill his empty pockets at the expense of those who might send him to join the large number of his fellow-lawyers in the Chamber of Deputies. It was a somewhat exalted ambition, no doubt; but the *avvocato* Ricci, after all, was in no more obscure a position than many another local attorney now calling himself *onorevole* and making the best of his opportunities as a deputy to rob with both hands, until such time as he should either be made a minister of state or fail to be re-elected by a disillusioned constituency.

It would certainly not add to his prospects were he, as *sindaco* of Montefiano, to compromise himself with the authorities of the Home Office in Rome for the sake of some discontented peasants in his commune, and he had already done his best that evening to throw cold water on Sor Stefano's suggestions, and to dissociate himself from any part in the movement in question. A few words, however, spoken in his ear by Stefano Mazza, conveying a gentle but pointed allusion to certain bills, more than once renewed which Sor Stefano happened to have in his keeping, had effectually silenced the *sindaco* Ricci's official objections to making one of the proposed deputation to the castle.

The gathering at the Caffè Garibaldi had taken place on the very evening of Concetta Fontana's delivery to Bianca Acorari of her lover's missive. Concetta, indeed, knew well enough that the meeting was to take place, and also what its object was. As a matter of fact, it was largely, if not entirely, owing to her that public interest in Montefiano had been aroused concerning the motives for the Principessina Bianca's confinement—for so Concetta had not hesitated to qualify it—in the castle and the park behind the castle. She had let fall mysterious hints as to what she had seen and heard during the hours she was employed in helping the *principessina's* maid in mending the linen and in other household duties; and her tales had certainly not lost in the telling during the long summer evenings when the women of the *paese* had little to do but to sit and gossip outside their doors.

Doubtless, like most gossip, the stories woven round Concetta Fontana's suggestion would soon have been replaced by others of closer interest. The premature appearance of the baker's baby, which had upset the ideas of Don Agostino's house-keeper as to the fitness of things, had been for some days relegated to an altogether secondary place; nor would the men have paid much attention to the tales told them by their womenkind of the treatment to which the Principessina Bianca was being subjected, had it not been for Sor Beppe's sudden dismissal from office. It needed very little to impress upon the farmers and peasantry on the *latifondo* belonging to Casa Acorari that the latter circumstance was in direct connection with the former; and that it had evidently been found necessary to get rid of Giuseppe Fontana and replace him by another agent

who would be nothing more nor less than a tool in the hands of the foreign priest who had already persuaded the princess to consent to their rents being materially increased. It must be confessed that Concetta Fontana had lost no opportunity of duly impressing her friends and acquaintances with this plausible explanation of the reasons which had led to her father's dismissal. She had conceived an enthusiastic devotion to the Principessina Bianca almost from the first moment she had seen her and Bianca had spoken a few kindly words to her. This devotion had been further increased by realizing the loneliness of the girl's position, by sympathy with her for her enforced separation from the man she wished to marry, as well as by the discovery that Bianca was being exposed to the joint intrigues of Monsieur d'Antin and the Abbé Roux. The thought that her young *padrona* had need of her devotion had kindled Concetta's sense of loyalty, in which, as in that of her father, there was much that was nothing short of feudal feeling for the young head of the house of the Acorari of Montefiano.

Concetta, however, could hardly be blamed if, in addition to her genuine desire to rescue Bianca Acorari from the fate into which she felt convinced that Baron d'Antin and the Abbé Roux were trying to force her, she hoped at the same time to benefit her father and bring about his reinstatement. Sor Beppe had been, as it were, stunned by the suddenness of the blow which had fallen upon him. As he had said to Don Agostino, he was too old for transplantation. The interests of Casa Acorari had been his interests ever since he could remember. However unsatisfactory the late Principe di Montefiano might have been in other relations of life—however neglectful he might have been of the fact that he was taking all he could get out of his properties and was putting nothing into them again—he had always been a just and considerate landlord towards the people of the place from which he took his principal title, and which had been the cradle of his race.

It was the thought of how the late Prince Montefiano would have disapproved of the course taken by the Abbé Roux, and by the so-called administration of the affairs of Casa Acorari, that made the injustice of his dismissal all the harder for Sor Beppe to bear. If he had received his dismissal at the hands of the Principessina Bianca, it would have been bad enough; but to receive it from foreigners who, as he more than suspected, were only bent upon filling their own pockets during the *principessina's* minority, was altogether intolerable. The sympathy which had been shown him in the *paese*, and the general indignation aroused by the facts which had led to his dismissal had certainly been very pleasant to Sor Beppe's wounded feelings. He had made no secret of his conviction that so soon as the Principessina Bianca had the control of her affairs he would be reinstated, and public opinion in Montefiano quickly exonerated Donna Bianca Acorari from all responsibility in the matter. That such a thing had happened was, in the eyes of the Montefianesi, only a further proof of the bad foreign in-

fluence by which their young princess was surrounded.

Sor Beppe had carefully abstained from going to the Caffè Garibaldi that evening. It was his custom to spend an hour or two there on most nights, taking a hand at *tresette* or playing a game of billiards. He was aware, of course, of the discussion that was to take place on that particular evening, and it certainly would not have been seemly for him to be present. Moreover, there was no reason to suppose that his cause would suffer by his absence from the gathering. He knew that his friend, Stefano Mazza, would take care that this was not the case.

So, Sor Beppe had taken the opportunity of paying an evening visit to Don Agostino. He had attempted to see him immediately after his interview with the princess, when he had learned that she declined to interfere in his dismissal, but Don Agostino had already departed for Rome. After leaving Don Agostino, Sor Beppe had returned to his own set of rooms in the castle—the home of so many years, which he would now have to leave—and he had found Concetta awaiting him. The girl had required no pressing to deliver the packet Don Agostino had intrusted to her father. She had many times, she told him, wished to go to the *principessina* and offer to take some message for her to her lover—oh, many times, if only to spite the baron and Monsieur l'Abbé, who thought they had laid their plans so well. But she had not dared to take the liberty. Now, of course, she had an excuse; and if Don Agostino was interesting himself in the *principessina's* love-affairs, it was certainly a proof that the young man was worthy of her.

And Sor Beppe had accompanied Concetta to the disused room next to the entrance-gate of the castle, where he kept his firewood and his coke, and had seen her pass through the trap-door and mount the narrow stone steps leading into the secret passage above. Then he had awaited her return, not without some misgivings at the length of time which elapsed before he saw her reappear.

Concetta returned from her expedition flushed and excited, and, indeed, very nearly weeping. Her voice trembled as she recounted all that had passed between the *principessina* and herself; how she had watched the *principessina* standing at the window of her room, and had heard her cry to her absent lover; and how the poor child had seemed almost dazed when she gave her the packet, and had then broken down and cried in her, Concetta's, arms.

She told her father how the *principessina* was aware of his dismissal, but evidently knew nothing of the raising of the rents and his refusal to further acts of injustice, committed nominally in her interests; and how she had declared that, when she had the power to do so, she would reinstate him.

Sor Beppe listened attentively. "She is her father's daughter," he said, when Concetta had concluded, "and she will not allow her people to be wronged."

Concetta's eyes flashed. "And we," she exclaimed—"we will not allow her to be wronged! *Vedete*, it is not the princess, she wants to do her duty by the

principessina—oh, I have heard that a hundred times from the maid, Bettina. It is the Abbé Roux. He makes the princess believe that her duty is to force the poor girl to do what he wants. But he will go too far, and then we shall see is it not true, Babbo?"

Sor Beppe nodded. "He has gone too far already," he said. "Listen, Concetta: the peasants are angry—very angry; and not the peasants only, but also those who are more highly placed than they. There will certainly be trouble if the increase in the rents is insisted upon. Moreover, they suspect something, some foul play towards the *principessina*, and it is as likely as not that there will be a demonstration. Well, if there is, and the Abbé Roux, as you call him, attempts to carry out his plans, I would not answer for the consequences. They are patient, our people—very patient; but when their patience is exhausted, they are not easy to manage. Why, in the Castelli Romani, a few years ago, at Genzano and Ariccia, the peasants held their own against the soldiers, and got what they wanted, too—but there was blood spilled in the getting of it."

Concetta Fontana glanced at her father quickly.

"Do I not know it?" she replied. "Yes, the people are angry. Well, let them be angry. Perhaps, if there is a demonstration, the princess will understand that there is something wrong, and Monsieur l'Abbé will be frightened. But the *principessina* will not be frightened, I am sure of that. She will know that it is only her own people, who will not be ruled by strangers. To-day we shall know what has happened at the Caffè Garibaldi," and Concetta smiled with a satisfied air. "As to the Abbé Roux—" she added.

"Curse the *pretaccio*!" growled Sor Beppe, under his breath.

"He would be wiser to return to Rome," concluded Concetta, "if he does not want to take *delle belle bastonate* some fine day!"

XXVII

Punctually at half-past seven on the morning after Sor Beppe's nocturnal visit to him, Don Agostino, robed in his vestments and accompanied by a small but sturdy acolyte, who was to act as server at the low mass he was about to celebrate, emerged from the sacristy of his church and ascended the steps of one of the side altars. The attendance was not large, the congregation consisting of a few peasant women and two old men; for the day was not a *festa*, and, consequently,

the population of Montefiano was pursuing its usual occupations in the *paese*, or in the fields and vineyards beyond it.

As Don Agostino, after having arranged the sacred vessels and adjusted the markers in the missal to the proper pages, turned from the altar to commence the opening portion of the mass, his quick eyes fell upon Concetta Fontana, who was kneeling in the body of the church some little way behind the group of women gathered round the marble balustrade in front of the altar. It could not be said that Concetta was a frequent attendant at the half-past seven o'clock mass, and her presence had already excited whispered comments among the rest of the congregation, who had at once recognized Sor Beppe's daughter.

The mass over, Don Agostino retired to the sacristy again to disrobe, and thither, after a few minutes had elapsed, Concetta Fontana followed him. Don Agostino was not surprised to see her. Indeed, he had risen earlier than usual that morning in expectation of a visit either from Fontana or his daughter. He had spent an hour or two in his garden tying up refractory branches of his rose-trees and generally attending to the needs of his fellow-beings of the vegetable world—for it was one of Agostino's theories that any form of life was an attribute of the God whom he worshipped as a God of sympathy and of love, and he regarded his trees and his flowers as sentient beings who had a right to his tenderness and care. It was certainly not a theory of which he spoke in the world; but then most of us who are not content with looking only at the binding of God's book of life probably have our little intimate thoughts and theories which, knowing our world, we are prudent enough to keep for our own use and enjoyment, and, perhaps, as stepping-stones on the path we have to tread.

Concetta waited until she and Don Agostino were alone in the sacristy, and then she gave him the folded sheet of paper that Bianca Acorari had intrusted to her.

"To-morrow," she said, "the *principessina* will send another letter by me. There were no writing-materials in her room, so she could only send a few lines, which your reverence will no doubt forward to their destination."

Don Agostino took the paper and placed it carefully in his pocket-book. "I shall send it to the Signorino Rossano to-day," he replied. "Donna Bianca need have no fear of its not reaching him safely. So you took the packet to her last night?" he continued. "You had no difficulty in giving it into Donna Bianca's own hands?"

Concetta quickly related to him all that had passed between Bianca and her the night before. "And I was to tell your reverence," she concluded, "from the *principessina*, that she would write to you herself, because her *fidanzato* wished her to do so. Ah, but you should have seen the proud way the *principessina* drew herself up and looked—a look that a queen might give—when she spoke of her

fidanzato!"

Don Agostino glanced at her with a smile. "You will be faithful to the *principessina*, *figlia mia*?" he asked. "She needs friends, the poor child."

"Faithful to her!" exclaimed Concetta. "I would do anything—anything, for the *principessina*. Imagine if I was glad when my father came home last night and told me I must take her the packet you had given him. I had wanted to go to her, and to tell her that I would do anything she bade me—oh, so often! But how could I venture? Besides, I was afraid of frightening her if I appeared in her room from the cardinal's portrait."

"But she was not frightened?" Don Agostino asked.

"*Niente affatto!*" returned Concetta, emphatically. "It was I who was frightened when I saw her leaning out of the window in the moonlight and calling to her lover. I feared she might be walking in her sleep, and that she might throw herself down on the terrace. Ah, but she knows now that there are those who are ready to help her—and she will know it better in a few days' time."

Don Agostino looked at her. "How do you mean? Why should she know it better in a few days than she does now?" he asked.

Concetta pursed up her lips. "She will know it," she repeated, "and so will the principessa and the Abbé Roux. I am nothing—only a woman—but there are men who will help her—all Montefiano, if it comes to that."

Don Agostino looked at her with greater attention. He had already heard through Ernana something concerning the ill-feeling the dismissal of Sor Beppe had aroused in Montefiano; and something, too, of the part the Abbé Roux was supposed to have played in bringing about the *fattore's* dismissal.

"What do you mean?" he repeated. "You may speak openly to me, *figlia mia*," he continued, "for I also would do all I could to help Donna Bianca Acorari and to protect her from any evil designs against her. Moreover, Donna Bianca's *fidanzato* is my friend, and his father and I have been friends for many years. After all, it is I, is it not, who have asked your father to convey that packet to the *principessina*? And he told me of the means whereby it might be conveyed."

Concetta started. "Ah! he told you of the passage?" she exclaimed.

"Certainly," replied Don Agostino. "So you see," he added, "I am aware that it is possible to communicate with Donna Bianca without the fact being known to those who are trying to isolate her from the outer world. If you have the *principessina's* welfare at heart, as I am sure that you have, you will take me entirely into your confidence, will you not?"

Concetta nodded. "I know nothing for certain as yet," she said, after hesitating for a moment, "but the people are angry, *reverendo*, very angry."

"Yes, I have heard something of that," said Don Agostino, as Concetta paused. "They are angry at the rents having been raised, and at your father's

having been dismissed for his opposition to the increase. But his dismissal has nothing to do with Donna Bianca's position, and the people's anger will not help her, so far as I can see."

"Ah, but it will help her," replied Concetta, eagerly. "They are angry about the rents and about my father, that is true; but they are also indignant at the way in which the *principessina* is shut up and not allowed to see anybody. They have heard that she is in love with somebody whom she is forbidden to see any more, and that the princess's brother wants to force her to marry him instead. And they have put the dots upon the i's, and believe that the foreign priest is at the bottom of the whole affair. You must remember, *reverendo*, that we Montefianesi look upon the *principessina* as our *padrona*. We do not want foreigners to interfere between us and the Principessina Bianca."

"I understand that perfectly well," Don Agostino observed, quietly. "But how do the Montefianesi propose to remedy matters? After all, Donna Bianca is a minor, and as such she is not yet her own mistress; nor," he added, "can her people here, however devoted to her they may be, make her so."

"But they can make the *principessa* get rid of those who are advising her badly," said Concetta. "I do not know what has been decided," she continued, lowering her voice, "but last night there was a meeting at the Caffè Garibaldi. Of course, my father would not be present, for it was his dismissal that they were by way of discussing—that and the raising of the rents. But I am certain that they will have talked about other things besides these; and I know that Sor Stefano meant to propose that a deputation should go to the princess and insist on the rents being lowered to their original amount, and on my father being retained as *fattore*."

"Precisely," interrupted Don Agostino. "But in what way will Donna Bianca be helped by all this talk? That is what I do not understand, *figlia mia*."

Concetta directed a shrewd glance at him. "In this way," she replied, "Sor Stefano—oh, and many others, too—intend to see the Principessina Bianca herself, and to explain to her that she and nobody else is *padrona* at Montefiano, and that they will hear from her own lips, when they have explained matters to her, whether what has been done in her name has her approval or not. This they will do, *reverendo*, not because they do not understand that the *principessina* is still a child, so to speak, but because they intend Monsieur l'Abbé and the baron to understand that their schemes are known and will not be tolerated. *Mi spiego reverendo*?"

Don Agostino's face flushed and his eyes sparkled with an unusual excitement.

"Do you explain yourself?" he said, repeating Concetta's last words. "Certainly, you explain yourself very well. Ah, if your Montefianesi do that, they will,

indeed, be helping their *padrona*."

He paused suddenly, and his countenance became grave and preoccupied.

"And this deputation to the princess," he said, presently—"does your father know of the proposal?"

"Certainly he knows of it," answered Concetta; "but naturally," she added, "he can take no part in it. It is Sor Stefano who will be at the head of it, or perhaps the *sindaco*—oh, and representatives chosen by the *contadini*. And you, *reverendo*, you will surely be asked to join it as the *parroco*. *Sicuro!* it will all have been settled last night; but as yet I have seen nobody, for until I had delivered the *principessina's* letter, as I promised her I would do, I could not be easy in my mind."

Don Agostino's expression remained grave and thoughtful. That the people of Montefiano should resent the interference of the Abbé Roux in their relations with Casa Acorari was certainly natural, and might in the end turn out to be a good thing for both Donna Bianca and Silvio. But Don Agostino well knew the danger that must attend any demonstration of hostility towards the princess and her advisers on the part of the peasants. Such demonstrations were apt unexpectedly to assume serious proportions. If the enraged *contadini* felt that they had the moral support of men like Sor Stefano, they might easily lose their heads, and, should their demands be refused, attempt to enforce them by measures which would necessitate the intervention of the civil authorities, if not of the military. What military intervention too frequently ended in, Don Agostino was fully aware, and he felt every effort should be made to prevent the threatened demonstration assuming any attitude that might furnish an excuse for obtaining it.

The question was, whether Princess Montefiano would consent to receive this deputation, and to hear what its members had to say. Her decision would evidently be inspired by the Abbé Roux, and the abbé's recent action in causing the rents to be increased, and in the dismissal of an old, popular official for venturing to oppose that increase, convinced Don Agostino that the foreign priest, as the Abbé Roux was called, did not understand the character of the people he was attempting to rule.

Don Agostino's experience of human nature made him at once realize the danger of a misunderstanding on either side, in the present condition of public opinion in Montefiano. The abbé might easily underrate the force of that opinion and persuade the princess to decline to listen to, or even to receive a deputation formed to protest against his policy. If he were so to persuade Princess Montefiano, the situation would infallibly become critical, and very likely perilous. All would then depend on whether the Abbé Roux had the nerve and the tact to deal with it, or whether he would oblige the princess to appeal to the authori-

ties to suppress the demonstration. In this latter case a collision would become inevitable; and it was this collision between his people—for was he not their *parroco*?—and the authorities, that Don Agostino was determined to use all his influence to avert.

Concetta Fontana watched his countenance, as for a few moments Don Agostino stood, apparently deep in thought.

"You would join the deputation, *reverendo*, would you not?" she asked him, presently.

Don Agostino hesitated.

"It depends," he replied. "You see, *figlia mia*," he continued, "we must be careful that in trying to do good we do not bring about a great deal of harm and unhappiness. I should like to talk with your father, and to-day I will go to see Stefano Mazza. The *contadini* are within their rights—I do not deny that—and a grave injustice has been done, both to them and to your father. *Sicuro!* they are in the right, but it should be the duty of those who have influence to prevent them from doing anything to put themselves in the wrong. Yes, tell your father that I should like to see him to-day. At *mezzogiorno* he will find a place ready for him if he likes to come to breakfast. We could talk afterwards—while Ernana is washing the dishes. You will go to see Donna Bianca again—as you did last night, will you not? You will tell her that her letter goes to-day to her *fidanzato*, and that he will receive it to-morrow morning in Rome. And you will tell her, also, that I am awaiting the letter she is going to write to me; and when I have it, I will answer her. In the mean time, *figlia mia*, be prudent—if you wish to serve the Principessina Bianca. You and your father have influence with the people—they wish you well. Talk to the women. It is the women who can often lead the men—is it not? Anything that is done must be done cautiously, moderately. There must be no folly—no threats employed in order to enforce demands that in themselves are just. You must tell the women that I, Don Agostino, will support all that is done to obtain justice in a just way—but I will not countenance any measures that may provoke disorder, and perhaps violence. Now go, *figlia mia*, and give my message to your father this morning—and to the Principessina Bianca when you think it safe to go again to her apartment."

And Don Agostino, opening the door of the sacristy, accompanied Concetta through the empty church, and then returned to his own house, and to his morning coffee which Ernana always prepared for him after he had said his early

mass.

XXVIII

Silvio Rossano had quite made up his mind that some days must in all probability elapse before Don Agostino might be able to find a safe opportunity of conveying the letter and ring he had intrusted to him to Bianca. When, therefore, he found on his table, on returning to Palazzo Acorari as usual for breakfast, a notice from the post-office informing him that a registered packet addressed to him was lying at the central office, he did not suppose for a moment that the said packet had come from Montefiano. Indeed, it was not until late in the afternoon that he went to San Silvestro in order to get the packet, as he had some work to do at home which he was anxious to complete. His heart gave a sudden leap when he recognized Don Agostino's handwriting on the registered envelope. The arcade running round the court-yard and garden of palms at San Silvestro, thronged as it was with people asking for their correspondence at the *poste-restante*, with soldiers and men of business, priests and peasants, was certainly not the place to investigate the contents of Don Agostino's missive, which would scarcely have been registered had the contents not been important.

Silvio hurried out of the building, and, crossing the Corso, plunged into the comparative quiet of the little side streets behind Montecitorio, where he eagerly tore open the sealed envelope. There were only a few lines written by Don Agostino himself, and Silvio, hastily glancing at them, gathered that he had had an opportunity of sending the letter and ring to Bianca Acorari by a safe hand, and that her reply was enclosed. He added that he should write more fully in a day or two, by which time he believed he should have something of importance to communicate.

Bianca's letter, too, was short and hastily written in pencil on a half-sheet of paper that Silvio recognized as having been torn from his own lengthy epistle to her. Brief as this letter was, however, it told him much that he was longing to know, and, indeed, repeated Bianca's words to him in the garden of the Villa Acorari, with which she had vowed that she would marry nobody if she did not marry him. But what set his mind at ease more than anything else was her assurance that means of communication were open to them. Bianca did not explain what these means were, but told him that she would write him a long

letter the following day, and that he also could continue to write to her under cover to Monsignor Lelli, as there was now no danger of his letters being intercepted. This, at least, was a comforting piece of news, and Silvio wondered how it had come about that Don Agostino had been able to so quickly find the necessary channel of communication. It was scarcely likely, he reflected, that Don Agostino would venture to go himself to the castle at Montefiano after having been seen by Monsieur d'Antin in his company.

He returned to Palazzo Acorari full of hope, and in better spirits than he had been for many a day. The uncertainty of the last few weeks had begun to tell upon him; and at the same time his complete separation from Bianca Acorari had only increased his love, and had made him more determined than ever to defeat the machinations of those who were trying to break down Bianca's love for him. The first thing to be done was to write to Bianca. She would be expecting to hear from him again, and to know that he had received her pencilled note safely. Silvio shut himself in his room and proceeded to write an epistle longer, if anything, than that he had confided to Don Agostino. The contents were much the same as the contents of other love-letters, and scarcely likely to be of interest to any one except himself and the person to whom they were addressed. Of course, he longed to see her again; and he implored her not to lose any opportunity of allowing him to do so that could be seized upon without risk to herself. He could always, he explained to her, come to Montefiano at any moment, and Monsignor Lelli doubtless would arrange that his presence in the place should be unsuspected.

It was useless, he felt, to attempt to form a plan, until he should have heard again from her and from Don Agostino. He read the latter's note again and again with great attention. It was evident that Don Agostino had something more to communicate than he was able at that moment to write. No doubt he was making sure of his ground before summoning Silvio to Montefiano. In any case, there was nothing to do but to wait patiently for further light upon the situation; and in the mean time he might do more harm than good by suggesting any one of the expedients for obtaining another meeting with Bianca that came into his head.

His letter written, he sought Giacinta's counsel as usual, and told her of what that day's post had brought to him. Giacinta was duly sympathetic. She had, indeed, long ago recognized that Silvio's passion for Bianca Acorari was not to be diminished by any amount of practical reasoning as to its folly. Perhaps the discovery that Monsignor Lelli, whom her father held in such high esteem, not only approved of Silvio's love for Donna Bianca, but had also undertaken to help him, so far as he might be able, to remove the difficulties that stood in the way of his marrying her, had caused Giacinta to take a less pessimistic view of her brother's infatuation; at any rate, since Monsignor Lelli's visit she had

regarded the matter as one which must take its course, for better or for worse, since not only was there no apparent likelihood of Silvio being disheartened by the obstacles in his way, but it seemed that Donna Bianca Acorari also knew her own mind, and had no intention of allowing others to alter it for her.

The professor, too, had become decidedly less cynical on the subject of his son's matrimonial aspirations since his conversation with Monsignor Lelli. To be sure, he did not encourage Giacinta to talk about it; and when she attempted to do so, he put the whole question quietly but decidedly away from him, as he did any question threatening to lead to social unpleasantness in private life. But Giacinta realized that her father also had modified his views as to the folly of Silvio's devotion to a girl whom he had seen only a few times in his life; and that, though he did not intend to move any further in the affair than he had already done, he was not so actively opposed to it as he had at first shown himself to be.

Giacinta had always been doubtful as to whether Bianca Acorari would have sufficient force of character to hold out against the pressure that would certainly be brought to bear upon her in order to make her relinquish all idea of becoming Silvio's wife. It was quite natural that Silvio himself should entertain no doubts on the subject; but then he was in love with Bianca, and she, Giacinta, was not so. But such passages as Silvio chose to read to her from the brief note he had that day received from Bianca finally removed all fears from her mind lest her brother might be exposed to the disappointment and mortification of finding that Donna Bianca had yielded to the influences by which she was surrounded.

"You see, Giacinta," Silvio said, triumphantly, "I was right. I have always told you that Bianca would never give way. And now, after being shut up in that dreary hole for nearly six weeks, she takes the first opportunity of repeating the promises she made to me at the Villa Acorari. If she has to wait three years to marry me, *ebbene*, she will wait three years—and nothing that they can say or do to her in the mean time will make the slightest difference. Oh, I know what you will say—that it is impossible to know what a person's character may be whom one has only seen a few times, and only talked to once. But sometimes two people know each other's character by instinct, by—by—oh, well, by something or other, though God knows what the something is."

Giacinta laughed. "There may be a scientific explanation of the phenomenon," she remarked; "perhaps Babbo will find one. No, Silvio," she continued, more gravely, "I confess I seem to have underrated Donna Bianca's character. She is apparently as much in earnest as you are, and I am glad she is so. It is at least a sign that, if you both succeed in attaining your object, you should be happy together, and your happiness is all that concerns me, Silvio *mio*."

"And Bianca's happiness," added Silvio, "that should concern you, too."

"It will concern me henceforth," returned Giacinta, "because, though I do

not know Donna Bianca, I understand now that her happiness and yours is the same thing."

Silvio looked at her with a quick smile. "You will know Bianca some day," he said, "and then you will see how right I was."

Two mornings afterwards, Silvio received a second letter from Bianca, and from it he learned how it had happened that Don Agostino had so quickly been able to communicate with her. Bianca told him many other things as well; and among them was a piece of information which, while it gave him a considerable amount of satisfaction, at the same time made him uneasy and restless in his mind.

There was, she wrote, a threatening of disturbances among the people at Montefiano in consequence of the Abbé Roux having persuaded her step-mother to dismiss the *fattore* and to consent to the rents being raised. Bianca did not understand very well what was the matter, but it was evident that the Abbé Roux and her step-mother feared that things might become serious, for they had discussed in her presence the advisability of asking for soldiers to be sent to Montefiano if there was any more trouble with the *contadini*. Moreover, Concetta Fontana, the *fattore's* daughter, to whom Bianca had already alluded as being her and Silvio's friend and channel of communication, had told her that the people were angry because they suspected she was being kept as a kind of prisoner at Montefiano until she should consent to marry Baron d'Antin, and that her engagement to Silvio was perfectly well known in the *paese*. The peasants were going to send a deputation to the castle, and to insist not only on the increase in the rents being abandoned and the agent, Fontana, reinstated in his post, but also, according to Concetta, on seeing her, Bianca, and speaking with her as their *padrona*.

The intelligence certainly carried with it food for reflection. Silvio's first feeling on reading Bianca's words was one of satisfaction. If it were known or suspected at Montefiano that Donna Bianca Acorari was being kept in seclusion in order to force her to marry a foreigner old enough to be her father; if it were supposed that her property and interests were being tampered with by strangers for their own benefit, at the expense of her own people, a situation might easily develop which would compel Princess Montefiano to allow her step-daughter to marry the man she wished to marry. It was certainly no bad thing if Bianca were rescued from her present position by the force of public opinion; and if her own people gathered round her, Monsieur l'Abbé Roux and Monsieur le Baron d'Antin might very possibly find themselves obliged to retire from the scene. If this occurred, it might reasonably be hoped that the princess would listen to other counsels than those by which she had hitherto been influenced.

So far, Silvio felt he had no cause to be otherwise than pleased at the

thought that Bianca's own people at Montefiano were likely to interfere with the plans of the Abbé Roux and Monsieur d'Antin. His sense of satisfaction, however, was quickly succeeded by a feeling of uneasiness. Young as he was, he had some experience of what an uneducated mob, with grievances real or fancied, might be capable of doing. He had witnessed strikes in more than one part of Italy; and though it was true that, at Montefiano, disturbances which might occur would be made by peasants and not artisans, he knew how frequently it happened that the uneducated of all classes and occupations lost their heads and went to lengths which neither they nor their leaders perhaps ever contemplated. If Bianca were right, and the rents at Montefiano had been raised through the abbé's instrumentality, and a popular agent dismissed for venturing to oppose the increase, then much would depend on the princess's attitude towards the suggested deputation from her step-daughter's tenants. Should her attitude be unconciliatory, who could tell whether the anger and discontent of the peasantry might not be wreaked on Bianca herself, in whose name these grievances had been inflicted?

Silvio remembered having seen the agent, Fontana, on one occasion during the few days he had spent in the neighborhood of Montefiano; and he had likewise heard Don Agostino mention him as a *fattore* who was just towards the people as well as honest to his employers. At a crisis such as Bianca's letter pointed to as being imminent, the advice and services of a man like Fontana would have been invaluable to Princess Montefiano; for if the peasants were clamoring for his reinstatement, they certainly would have been more likely to be influenced by him than by strangers.

The idea that Bianca Acorari might be exposed to any danger, however problematical, was quite sufficient to render Silvio restless and uneasy. He wondered whether Don Agostino had been thinking of possible disturbances on the part of the peasants of Montefiano when he had written that in a few days he might have something of importance to communicate. To be sure, Don Agostino had not written again, and now nearly three days had passed since Silvio had received his first letter, enclosing the few lines Bianca had sent him by Concetta Fontana. He would certainly, Silvio told himself, have written, or even perhaps telegraphed, had anything alarming occurred at Montefiano. There was, it would appear, nothing to be done except to wait for Don Agostino's promised letter, or at least until Bianca herself should write again and give him further particulars of how matters were going.

That evening the spell of damp, hot weather, which so often makes Rome almost intolerable in the middle of September, broke. A heavy thunder-storm passed over the city, accompanied by torrents of rain, which descended in white sheets as if in the tropics. A steamy fog rose from the ground, parched by the long summer drought. Masses of inky-black clouds began to drift up from the

sea; and at nightfall, long after the storm had rolled away to the mountains, a continuous flicker of lightning illumined the entire sky. In the caffès, or safely in the shelter of their own houses, people congratulated one another that the end of the heat had come, and that when the weather should mend again the first breath of autumn would be felt in the lighter, crisper air.

Silvio dined at home that night with his father and Giacinta, and afterwards, contrary to his usual custom, Professor Rossano did not go to the Piazza Colonna for his cup of coffee and to read his evening paper. The Piazza Colonna, indeed, would have been nothing but an exaggerated puddle, with streams of muddy water running through it from the higher level of Montecitorio; and, besides, it would have been unwise to be abroad in the streets while the first rains after the summer were falling—the only time during the whole year when a genuine malarial fever, and not the "Roman fever" of the overfed and overtired tourist, might possibly be picked up within the walls of Rome.

Dinner had been over some time, and they were smoking and talking together in the drawing-room, when the hoarse cries of the news-venders calling the evening papers came from the street without, and a few minutes later a servant entered the room with copies of the newspapers, which he gave to the professor. Giacinta took up a book and began to read, while Silvio walked restlessly up and down the room, every now and then going to the window to see if the rain had stopped.

The professor turned over the pages of his newspapers in a vain endeavor to extract some news from them. There might be, and no doubt there were, important events happening in the world, even in the month of September—events more important, for instance, than the fall from his bicycle of a student, or the drinking by a servant-girl of a solution of corrosive sublimate in mistake for water. If there were more noteworthy matters to chronicle, however, they had escaped the notice of the press that evening. Professor Rossano was about to betake himself to other and more profitable reading, when a paragraph containing a telegram dated from Montefiano caught his eye and arrested his attention.

"So," he observed, suddenly, "it seems that our *padrona di casa* has got herself into trouble with the people at Montefiano, or, rather, I suppose that meddlesome abbé has got her into trouble with them. Look, Silvio," he added, pointing to the paragraph in question, "read this," and he handed the newspaper to his son.

Silvio took the paper quickly, and eagerly read the telegram. It was very short, and merely stated that in consequence of disorder among the peasantry on the estates belonging to Casa Acorari at Montefiano, and the fear of these disorders assuming more serious proportions, military assistance has been requested by the civil authorities; and that a detachment of infantry would in all proba-

bility be despatched from Civitacastellana if the situation did not become more satisfactory.

Silvio uttered an exclamation of dismay.

"What did I tell you, Giacinta?" he said. "I was certain from Bianca's last letter that some mischief was brewing. Now there will probably be a collision with the military authorities; and we all know what that means."

"Well," observed the professor placidly, "it is no affair of yours, Silvio, so far as I can see, if there are disturbances at Montefiano. Not but what you have done your best to add to their number! All the same," he continued, "it is a foolish thing, and a wrong thing, to drag the soldiery into these disputes if their intervention can possibly be avoided. I suppose the princess and the Abbé Roux are frightened. But surely there must be a *fattore* at Montefiano who can manage the people?"

"That is the point," returned Silvio. "The princess has dismissed the *fattore* because he objected to the raising of the rents; and the peasants are insisting on his being recalled."

The professor glanced at him. "It seems," he remarked, dryly, "that you know all about it."

"No, I don't," answered Silvio, bluntly. "But I want to know all about it," he added. "To-morrow I shall take the first train to Attigliano, and I shall drive from there to Montefiano. Don Agostino will tell me what it all means, and perhaps I shall see for myself what is going on."

"*Sciocchezze!*" exclaimed the professor. "Why the devil should you go and interfere in the matter? It is no concern of yours, and you will only get a bullet put into you by a soldier, or a knife by a peasant. You are an imbecile, Silvio."

"But it does concern me," Silvio replied, obstinately, "and, imbecile or not, by twelve o'clock to-morrow I will be at Montefiano. Who knows? Perhaps I might be of use. In any case, I go there to-morrow. No, Giacinta, it is perfectly useless to argue about it. I wish I had gone at once, when I received Bianca's last letter. I can guess what has happened. The princess has been advised not to receive the deputation from the peasants, or she has received it and refused to grant what was asked, and now the people are exasperated."

The professor shrugged his shoulders. "Of course you will go," he said. "When people are in love they cease to be reasonable human beings, and you have not been a reasonable human being—oh, not since Easter. It is useless to talk to you, as useless as it would be to talk to a donkey in spring," and Professor Rossano got up from his chair and walked off to his library.

Giacinta looked at her brother as the door closed behind the professor.

"Do you suppose the disturbances at Montefiano are serious?" she asked.

"Who can tell?" responded Silvio. "Those things are apt to become serious at a moment's notice. Anyhow," he continued, "I wish to be near Bianca, in case

of any danger threatening her. The people might think she was responsible for the troops being summoned, and then, if any casualty were to happen, they might turn upon her as well as upon others at the castle. Of course I must go, Giacinta! Besides, who knows what this business may not lead to? Of one thing you may be certain. If Bianca is in any danger, I shall save her from it—I shall take her away from Montefiano."

Giacinta stared at him. "You mean that you will make her run away with you?" she asked.

Silvio shook his head. "I do not know," he replied. "It will all depend upon circumstances. But if I asked her to come with me, she would come. And there are those at Montefiano, Giacinta, who would help her to do so."

Giacinta did not reply for a moment. Then she said again, quietly: "Of course you will go, Silvio. After all," she added, "if I were a man, and in your place, I should do the same."

XXIX

It was Sunday; and on Sunday and other feasts Don Agostino celebrated an additional mass at the principal altar in the parish church of Montefiano at half-past seven o'clock. This function was neither a high mass nor a *messa cantata*, for, except on very special occasions, when extraneous talent from Civitacastellana, or from some other larger ecclesiastical centre in the neighborhood, was forthcoming, the difficulties both musical and ceremonial of either form would have been beyond the powers of the faithful at Montefiano satisfactorily to surmount. The *funzione*, as it was generally called, at half-past nine on a *festa* was doubtless an inartistic and even an irreligious affair, if regarded from the point of view of the purist in piety or musical art. At intervals during the celebration of the mass, the organist would rattle out from the wheezy pipes such stirring airs from popular operas, comic and otherwise, as might seem to him likely to please the saint to whom the day was dedicated.

This particular Sunday happened to fall within the octave of the 8th of September, the day on which the Church commemorates the Nativity of the Madonna, and, during the consecration and elevation of the sacred elements at the mass, strains from "La Traviata" assisted the spiritual aspirations of the kneeling worshippers. The remarkable infelicity, under the circumstances, of

the selection, certainly never suggested itself either to the organist or to the congregation, and Don Agostino, remembering that "to the pure all things are pure," was far too wise to think of pointing it out afterwards in the sacristy. Nevertheless, his sense of humor was acute, and not entirely to be suppressed, even when he was ministering at the altar.

But to-day the organist's doubtful compliment to the Madonna passed almost unnoticed by Don Agostino. He knew that his people gave of their best to their religion; and, if that best were not of a standard to satisfy more artistic or more pious conceptions, the fact did not greatly concern him. The truth was that it was not the first time by many that Don Agostino had heard selections from "La Traviata" at the half-past nine o'clock mass, and on this occasion he had more important matters to occupy his mind than the lack both of perception of the fitness of things and of a sense of humor on the part of the organist.

A glance round the church as he had entered it and made his way to the altar, showed him that there was scarcely a man, and certainly none of the younger men, among the congregation. The fact was all the more noticeable because Don Agostino invariably had a good attendance of men at that mass. They did not, to be sure, penetrate very far into the church, and the majority showed a determination to stand as near the door as possible. But the great point was that they came; and they came, moreover, not only to attend mass, but also to listen to the short, practical address—it was certainly not a sermon, for Don Agostino never built imaginary edifices on the foundation of a passage from Scripture—to which they knew that ten minutes were sometimes devoted by their *parroco* before the canon of the mass was begun.

To-day, however, the male element was conspicuous by its absence, and Don Agostino said mass in the presence of women and children only. That very morning an answer had been sent by Princess Montefiano to the request made by its leading members that she would receive a deputation from the tenants on the Montefiano lands to protest against the raising of their rents and the dismissal of Giuseppe Fontana, the *fattore*. The answer had been brief and decided. The princess caused it to be conveyed to the tenants and peasants that she would do nothing of the kind. Any reasonable complaints would be received by the *ex-fattore* Fontana's successor, and would be forwarded by him to the administration, to the Eccellentissima Casa Acorari, for consideration.

Montefiano was in no mood for a mass that morning, even though it was a Sunday and within the octave of the *Madonna di Settembre*. Don Agostino had heard the news as he was vesting himself in the sacristy, and had heard it with no little dismay. He had watched the storm brewing, and though he felt that a storm was much needed to clear the air, he did not wish it to burst with too great a fury. He had, indeed, prepared a discourse which he had intended to

deliver at mass that morning, counselling obedience to all lawful authority, and pointing out that any attempt to redress grievances by unlawful means was not only wrong, but impolitic. The discourse remained undelivered; and when Don Agostino had read the Gospel for the day, he proceeded to recite the *Credo* and passed on to the canon of the mass. Those for whom his words had been specially prepared were thronging the Corso Vittorio Emanuele, eagerly debating as to what steps they should take to show the princess and her foreign advisers that they intended to persist in their determination to place their grievances before her and the *principessina* in person.

The curt refusal to receive the proposed deputation had, as was but natural, provoked intense indignation in and about Montefiano. Had it been a working-day, the news that the princess, as acting for Donna Bianca, had declined to listen to the representatives of the peasants would have circulated more slowly, for there were *tenute* belonging to the estate, some of which were several miles distant from Montefiano. But on a *festa* everybody who could walk, or who had a beast to carry him, came into the *paese*; and after being present, at any rate, during a portion of Don Agostino's half-past-nine o'clock mass, the remainder of the day was spent in gossiping with friends and acquaintances and putting hardly earned money into the pockets of the keepers of the *trattorie* and the wine-shops.

The error in judgment committed by Princess Montefiano in allowing her decision not to receive the deputation which had asked permission to wait upon her to be publicly known in the morning of a *festa* was already bearing fruit. Don Agostino, indeed, had uttered an exclamation of surprise and annoyance when he was told the news, and heard of the excitement and ill-feeling that was being already shown in the *paese*. He had always thought that Princess Montefiano would decline to see the deputation, for it would most probably not suit the Abbé Roux that she and Bianca Acorari should receive it. The abbé, no doubt, had counselled the showing of a firm front and an unconditional refusal to admit that the tenants had any right to interfere with the administration of the estates of the Casa Acorari. But why, in the name of common-sense and prudence, had not the Abbé Roux so arranged that the princess's reply should not be known till Monday? Don Agostino asked himself the question impatiently, and the only reply he could find to it was that the abbé, being a foreigner, had not sufficient knowledge of the customs of the people; and that he probably understood neither the character nor the temper of the Montefianesi.

The mass was scarcely concluded when, after unrobing himself of his vestments, Don Agostino hurried down the flight of steps which formed a short cut from the piazza where the church stood to the main street of the town. As he expected, he found the Corso Vittorio Emanuele thronged by an excited crowd of peasants and farmers. Among them were not a few women. Little groups were

angrily discussing the event of the day, and the countenances of many of those composing them wore an expression not very pleasant to look upon.

Don Agostino noted every little detail as he passed down the street, returning salutations made to him. He intended to see Stefano Mazza, and learn from him what steps the people proposed to take now that their deputation had been refused audience. He knew the man's influence in the district, and also the strong foundations on which that influence had been built up. Casa Acorari might raise its tenants' rents, and the fact would doubtless mean a harder struggle than ever to make two ends come within reasonable distance of meeting. But if Sor Stefano called in his mortgages and refused to renew his *cambiali*, the fact would spell ruin not only to the poorer among the peasantry, but also to many in the district who were regarded by their neighbors as well-to-do men, farming their hundreds of acres. Don Agostino knew this very well. Confidences were occasionally made to him which were outside the confessional—confidences made to a friend by men who would never dream of confessing to a priest; or who, if they did so in order to please their women, would certainly not tell that priest more than a fraction of the truth.

As he knew would be the case, Don Agostino found Sor Stefano busily occupied in attending to his customers at the Caffè Garibaldi. A sudden silence, succeeded by a murmur of surprise, greeted the priest's appearance at the entrance to the *caffè*. Every man there, from Sor Stefano downward, knew what had caused Don Agostino to make his appearance in such a quarter. It was but another proof of the importance and gravity of the situation.

Sor Stefano came forward and greeted his unusual customer. It was certainly suffocatingly hot—dogs' weather, in fact—he observed airily, as if the *parroco* were a daily visitor to his establishment. No doubt Don Agostino would drink a quarter of white wine?—and he escorted him to a little table in the centre of the *caffè*.

No, Don Agostino would not have wine. A little vermouth and seltzer—he had not yet dined.

Sicuro! The weather was hot, and the heat was much more trying than in the middle of summer. But there were signs of a change. The rain must come soon, and then—Don Agostino was as airy and indifferent in his manner as was his host. Nevertheless, he knew, and Sor Stefano knew, and all the other occupants of the *caffè* knew, that these were mere empty phrases demanded by the exigencies of the situation.

Sor Stefano brought a bottle of vermouth and a siphon, and set them down before Don Agostino.

"Your reverence has heard the news?" he asked. "The princess refuses to receive our deputation. It is an incredible thing, but it is true. Well, the deputation

will go to the castle all the same. Only it will be a larger deputation—is it not so?" He turned and appealed to the groups sitting around, as he spoke the last words, and immediately a babel of voices arose within the *caffè*.

"Yes, yes, we will all go to the castle, and then we will see if these cursed foreigners will dare to prevent us from seeing and speaking with the *principessina*! It is the *principessina* we mean to see, not the foreigners!"

Sor Stefano nodded. "*Sicuro*, we will all go!" he repeated, and then he looked at Don Agostino. The rest paused and looked at the *parroco* also.

Don Agostino poured a small quantity of vermouth into his glass. Then he added some seltzer-water to it, and drank it off slowly and deliberately.

"*Benissimo!*" he observed, quietly. "But how will you get to the castle?"

The remark was received with a burst of laughter. How would they get there? Oh, *bello!* on their feet, of course—how else?

Don Agostino looked at Sor Stefano gravely.

"Signor Mazza," he said, "if somebody tried to force their way into your house against your will, what would you do?"

"*Perbacco!* lock the door and close the shutters, I suppose," replied Sor Stefano, staring at him.

"Precisely," returned Don Agostino, dryly. "That is what I imagine the princess will do. And then?" he added, abruptly.

A shout, almost a howl, of indignation greeted his words. In a moment every man in the *caffè* had started to his feet, and each one was trying to make his voice heard above that of his neighbors.

"If they lock us out, we will break the doors down!" shouted a tall, well-made young peasant, with a chest and a pair of arms evidently capable of affording valuable assistance towards the carrying out of his suggestion.

A round of applause greeted his words, followed by cries of "Abbasso gli stranieri! *Abbas so gli sfruttatori*! *Evviva la Principessina Bianca*!"—cries which were taken up by those outside the *caffè* till presently the whole street rang with them.

Don Agostino waited for a lull in the excitement raging around him. Then, seizing his opportunity, he got up from his seat and looked round the room calmly and composedly.

"Yes, my friends," he said, in clear, penetrating tones, which could be heard by the crowd gathered outside the *caffè*, "yes, *Evviva la Principessina Bianca*! You are her people, and you wish her well—is it not so?"

"We wish ourselves well also!" shouted a voice from without; and another round of applause, mingled with laughter, burst from the audience.

Sor Stefano came forward and placed himself at Don Agostino's side.

"Your reverence is right," he said, "and the *signore* who just spoke is right

also. *Sicuro*! It is because we wish the Principessina Bianca well that we mean to see her and speak with her; because, too, we believe that she wishes her people well. Do I speak truly?"

"*Bene! bene! Evviva Casa Acorari—non vogliamo gli stranieri!*"

"Your reverence," Sor Stefano continued, as soon as there was silence again, "you come among us no doubt to hear our intentions. It is right. You have our confidence and our esteem."

"*Evviva il parroco! Evviva Don Agostino!*"

Don Agostino smiled.

"I come among you as one of yourselves," he said, "as one of the deputation to which an audience has been refused. You invited me to join the deputation, and I did so gladly, knowing that its object was a just object. You, Signor Mazza, are perfectly right. I have come here this morning to hear what my fellow-members propose to do next."

Sor Stefano shrugged his shoulders.

"*Diavolo!*" he exclaimed. "It seems to me that your reverence has already heard the intentions of these *signori*."

"I have heard them, yes," returned Don Agostino, "but I do not think that they are wise intentions. Let us reflect a little. These things need consideration, and a little patience does no harm. You say that you wish well to Donna Bianca Acorari, and to yourselves? Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that you wish well to yourselves, and to Donna Bianca Acorari; more accurate, and more natural. The question is, however, whether the course you propose to adopt will result in any good, either to you or to her. You tell me that I possess your confidence and your esteem. Believe me, I value both the one and the other; and I think the fact that during the years I have been your *parroco* I have succeeded in gaining this esteem and confidence should be a proof that I am not likely to betray either."

Don Agostino paused for a moment, as a murmur of approval ran round the room.

"If you had come to mass this morning," he proceeded, not without a touch of humor in his voice, "I should have told you in a church what I now tell you in a caffè. Oh, do not be alarmed, my friends, you are not going to hear a sermon. I quite understand that if you had wanted anything of that nature you would have come to mass. *Ebbene!* one is not always in the mood to go to church. And when one is not in the mood, who knows whether it is not better to stay away than to go, and to pay Domeneddio the bad compliment of being bored with him when one gets there? No, I am not going to preach you a sermon; but I am going to make one or two suggestions to you, with your permission, and that of our worthy host," and Don Agostino turned with a smile to Sor Stefano.

"*Evviva Don Agostino*! Speak, speak!" resounded from all parts of the room, and from the street without people pressed nearer to the open doors of the caffè in order to hear more distinctly what the *parroco* had to say.

"My first suggestion," proceeded Don Agostino, "is, that we should not act hastily—that we should stop to think. To-day we are unquestionably in the right; to-morrow, by ill-considered action, we may place ourselves in the wrong. The princess has refused to receive our deputation, and, consequently, she has refused to you, the people of Montefiano, your legitimate request to explain your grievances in the presence of Donna Bianca Acorari, who is the legal owner of these lands, although as yet the law does not permit her the full privileges of her position. Well, so far, the princess is unquestionably in the wrong. That is to say, her excellency has no doubt acted by the advice of those who are not, perhaps, competent to advise her. But we must remember that the princess is placed in a difficult position. She cannot help being a foreigner, nor the fact that Donna Bianca is not her own child."

"She can help bringing foreigners here to interfere in our affairs!" interrupted Sor Stefano. "Why cannot she trust those who have always been loyal to Casa Acorari? And why must she dismiss an old official like Fontana, a man who had the full confidence of the late prince?"

"Bravo—Benissimo!" applauded Sor Stefano's customers and clients, and they looked at Don Agostino curiously, as though anxious to see how he would reply to so crushing an argument.

He hesitated for a moment. Sor Stefano's remark was, in truth, sufficiently to the point.

"But, Signor Mazza," he said, at length, "we must remember that these affairs also concern the princess. She is responsible for the administration of the property until Donna Bianca attains her majority. I do not doubt, indeed, I am convinced, that her excellency is badly advised. But if this is the case, she is not likely to listen to wiser counsels at a moment's notice. It must be proved to her absolutely, and beyond a possibility of doubt, that those whom she trusts are not competent to advise her. You, my friends, declare that you wish well to the Principessina Bianca and to Casa Acorari. If that is the case, do not let us forget that though the princess is a foreigner, she is, nevertheless, in a sense, the *principessa madre*, and as such is entitled to respect and consideration. It will be a strange method of showing your loyalty to Casa Acorari if you present yourselves with threats and violence at the gates of the castle of Montefiano. Nor, believe me, will you be doing yourselves any good by such a proceeding. If the princess is a woman of any spirit, and if those who have advised her are not cowards, she will only persist the more firmly in the course she has adopted. The increase in the rents will be enforced, and our friend Signor Fontana's dismissal

will certainly not be recalled. Moreover, it is scarcely likely that her excellency would be disposed to allow Donna Bianca to be interviewed by those who had threatened to dispute the authority of Donna Bianca's guardian."

As Don Agostino proceeded with his arguments, the faces of his audience gradually became more lowering, and more than once murmurs of disapproval and impatience were audible. Sor Stefano himself looked at first disconcerted, and then suspicious.

"Your reverence appears to be very anxious to defend the princess," he said, "but we Montefianesi want no foreigners. If her excellency has evil counsellors round her, it is because she listens to strangers in preference to trusting her husband's people. No, *reverendo*, we do not forget that she is, as you say, the late prince's wife—but she is not the *principessina's* mother. And by all accounts she is not acting by the *principessina* as a mother would act by her child. We have approached her excellency with fair words, and in a respectful and legitimate manner. She has thought fit to answer us—in the way she has answered us."

Sor Stefano stopped abruptly; then, turning from Don Agostino to the crowd, ever growing more and more dense in the street, he raised his voice yet louder.

"His reverence," he exclaimed, "does not quite understand us, my friends! Oh, it is natural; for, after all, he is a priest, and it is a priest who is at the bottom of the whole business! *Si capisce!* the Church must support the Church. But Don Agostino does not understand us. He thinks that we are considering our interests only—that our only object in going to the castle is to insist on the rents remaining as they were, and on Sor Beppe being recalled to his post. If that were all, *reverendo*, we should not take the trouble to go to the castle—*niente affato*! The rents would not be paid—and as to the new *fattore* whom the foreign priest has appointed—well, he would be a brave man to remain long in Montefiano. He would receive hints—oh, that the air of Montefiano was unhealthy for strangers. And if he did not take the hints and remove himself, the air would no doubt prove fatal. No, we go to the castle because we wish to see and to speak with the *principessina*—because we wish to know what truth there is in certain stories we have heard—that the *principessina* is, as it were, a prisoner here at Montefiano until she gives herself up to the lust of an old foreigner instead of to the love of a Roman youth she wants to marry. We wish to learn if it is true that the Abbé Roux is in reality the lessee of the rents on the Montefiano *latifondo*, and that he means to force the *principessina* to marry her uncle for reasons of his own. These are our reasons, *reverendo*, for insisting on seeing the *principessina* herself, and for being determined to force our way into the castle, if we are compelled to do so. Have I spoken well, or ill?"

A shout from the crowd answered Sor Stefano's speech.

"*Al castello—andiamo al castello! Fuori gli stranieri—evviva la Principessina Bianca!*"

Sor Stefano looked at Don Agostino. "You hear, *reverendo*?" he asked.

"I hear," Don Agostino replied, quietly, and then, drawing himself up to his full height, he added, "And I repeat, with you, '*Evviva la Principessina Donna Bianca Acorari!*' You, Signor Mazza, have spoken, and much that you have said is just. But you have also said what is not just. If I defend the princess, it is because I believe that lady to be innocent of the conduct towards her step-daughter which you impute to her. I believe her to be influenced by dishonest persons who have succeeded in gaining her entire confidence, and in persuading her that she is doing her duty by Donna Bianca. It makes no difference to me that one of these dishonest persons—the chief among them—happens to be a priest. I have not defended his conduct, but merely that of the princess, who has, I believe, been deceived by his advice. It is true, Signor Mazza, that the Church must support the Church; and concerning the Abbé Roux as a priest, I have nothing to say. It is with the Abbé Roux as a man of business that I am concerned—and I have already expressed my opinion of him in that respect. But these things are beside the point. I came here to learn your intentions, my friends, as regards the action of the deputation of which I consented to be a member. I speak frankly. If that action is to be such as you seem to be bent upon, I will not be a party to it. To give my approval to a course which must almost inevitably lead to disorder, if not to worse, would not be consistent with my duty either to you as my parishioners or to myself as a priest. I tell you that you will gain nothing by threats and demonstrations, and the position of the *principessina* will certainly not be improved by any interference of such a character. All that will happen will be that the princess—who, remember, is within her rights and has the law behind her—will call upon the authorities to assist her and to maintain order at Montefiano. You, Signor Mazza, know as well as I do what would be the result of continued resistance under such circumstances. They are not results which any one who wishes well to Montefiano cares to contemplate, and certainly not results which I, a priest, can assist in bringing about. No, my friends, let us be reasonable! You have done me the honor to say that you trust me. Well, I am going to ask you to trust me a little longer—for a few hours longer. I told you that I had one or two suggestions to make to you, and I should like to make my second suggestion."

Don Agostino's audience was apparently undecided. The younger and more excited among the crowd seemed eager for instant action, but the older heads were evidently ready to listen to the *parroco's* advice.

At this juncture no less a person than the *sindaco* intervened. The *avvocato* Ricci had taken no part in the proceedings, though he had been present when

Don Agostino entered the *caffè*. He was, indeed, in a lamentable position of embarrassment and difficulty, what with his fear of offending Sor Stefano on the one hand, and his anxiety lest he should be compromised in the eyes of the authorities on the other. Don Agostino's last sentences, however, had given him the courage to open his lips and to join the *parroco* in dissociating himself from a movement which threatened to become prolific of disorder. Don Agostino's allusion to the danger of so acting as to oblige the princess and her advisers to seek the aid of the authorities had finally decided the *sindaco* of Montefiano to brave the resentment of the man who held so much of his paper locked away in his strong-box.

"In my opinion," he said, "his reverence is right. If it is inconsistent with his duty as *parroco* of Montefiano to associate himself with a movement which tends to create disorder, it is equally inconsistent that I who, as *sindaco*, am responsible to the civil authorities for the maintenance of law and order in the commune should in any way countenance a course which, as Don Agostino justly says, might lead to very deplorable consequences. His reverence, however, has some other suggestion to offer. Is it not so?" he added, turning to Don Agostino.

The intervention was opportune, and Don Agostino felt it to be so. He was determined to prevent, if possible, the proposed march upon the castle by an angry and excited crowd of uneducated peasants and petty farmers. It was not that he feared any violence or excesses on their part, beyond that of perhaps forcing an entrance into the courtyard of the castle, if they found the gates barred against them. He dreaded lest a further blunder should be committed by the Princess Montefiano and those who were advising her. The refusal to receive the deputation and the manner of that refusal were blunders enough; but a still graver error in judgment would be committed were the princess to allow the matter to pass out of her own hands into those of the authorities, civil or military. Don Agostino was determined that if more blunders were committed, he would at all events do all that lay in his power to prevent the people themselves from furnishing any excuse for these blunders.

"Yes, my friends," he said, after considering for a few moments, "I have another suggestion to make to you. It is this. It is possible that the princess, although unwilling to receive a deputation, would consent to receive your *sindaco* and myself, and listen to our representations on your behalf. I think, indeed, that her excellency could scarcely decline to receive us under the circumstances; and we could request that the Principessina Donna Bianca should be present at the interview and hear what we have to say on behalf of her people. At least, no reasonable objection could be taken to this step by her excellency's advisers, and it is possible that we might succeed in demonstrating to the princess that these advisers have misled her. I am ready to go to the castle this afternoon," he

continued. "and ask to see her excellency and Donna Bianca. Doubtless, Signor Sindaco, you will accompany me," he added.

The *avvocato* Ricci glanced nervously at Sor Stefano, then he shook his head. "I think not, Don Agostino," he said. "That you should go and attempt to arrange matters with her excellency is very right and proper. But I am not inclined to interfere unless I should be called upon to do so in my official capacity—a thing which I trust may not happen. No, *signori*," he added, turning to the listening crowd, "I feel sure that your interests are safe in Don Agostino's hands, and his advice is good. Let him go this afternoon to the castle as your representative. The princess has the reputation of being a very devout lady. She will doubtless, therefore, be pleased to receive a visit from the *parroco* of Montefiano. In the mean time, my friends, let us be calm and patient, and await the result of his reverence's interview with the princess and Donna Bianca."

It was evident that Don Agostino's suggestion, seconded as it was by the official influence of the *sindaco*, found favor with the majority of the assembly both within and outside the Caffè Garibaldi. There were a few dissentient voices, and Sor Stefano himself seemed to sympathize with those who were clamoring for more immediate and united action.

Don Agostino took Stefano Mazza aside for a minute or two and spoke earnestly with him. He pointed out how imprudent it would be to encourage the people to go to the castle in their present excited frame of mind. Delay, he argued, was everything, for it would also afford those at the castle time to realize their mistake; and very likely he, Don Agostino, would be able to bring matters at any rate to a compromise, which should satisfy both parties.

To his great relief, Sor Stefano yielded to his persuasions, although he did so with a bad grace. For some reason or other it was clear that Sor Stefano was anxious that matters should come to a crisis; and Don Agostino had throughout wondered what his object might be in so openly supporting the peasants and the more violent faction of the community in their desire to present themselves in person at the castle and force the princess to give way.

A few words from Sor Stefano were sufficient to silence the objections of the minority to the *parroco's* proposal, and after promising that he would go that very afternoon to the castle, Don Agostino left the *caffè*, saluted as he made his way through the crowd by friendly cheers from his parishioners.

XXX

It was not to be expected that the excitement and ill-feeling produced by Princess Montefiano's curt refusal to receive the deputation which had been formed to wait upon her should be unknown in the castle. The Abbé Roux, indeed, was not without his means of information as to what was going on in the *paese*; but it so happened that the intelligence supplied to him was not infrequently both inaccurate and misleading. As he had said to Monsieur d'Antin, he was aware that the dismissal of the agent Fontana had aroused a certain amount of opposition and even of indignation; but he was certainly ignorant of the extent and depth of the feeling his action had excited in the commune. In his opinion, the ill-feeling that he had been told was being manifested by the peasants was merely the result of an attempt on the part of the dismissed *fattore* and his friends to frighten the princess and lead her to recall Fontana to his post and to give way on the question of the raising of the rents. He was persuaded that it was only necessary to be firm, and not to listen to any attempt on the part of the *contadini* to discuss the matter with the administration of Casa Acorari, and in a few days things would quiet down. He had not, therefore, thought fit to tell Princess Montefiano more than was absolutely necessary of the state of affairs prevailing in the *paese*, and he had represented the whole matter as a trifle which was not worthy of her consideration. It is possible that had the abbé been better informed he would have regarded the situation in a different light. If he had known, for instance, of the stories assiduously circulated throughout the district during the last few weeks concerning Donna Bianca Acorari, and the treatment to which she was being subjected—stories which certainly had lost nothing in the process of diffusion—if he had suspected that it was being openly asserted that he and none other was the new lessee of the Montefiano rents, that mysterious *affittuario*, who had never hitherto been seen in the flesh, he would doubtless have proceeded more cautiously. But the Abbé Roux was not well informed. Indeed, could he but have known it, he was being wilfully misled by those whom he believed to be his friends, not only at Montefiano, but also at Palazzo Acorari in Rome, where the business of Casa Acorari was transacted. Long as he had lived in Italy, he had got to learn that he was no match for a certain class of Italians, and more especially of Romans, at petty intrigue. Not a syllable had reached his ears which could lead him to suspect that not only was his actual position with regard to the Acorari estates known, but that the entire scheme by which he hoped to retain that position for a period long enough to enable him to make a considerable sum of money out of it was known also.

It was natural, therefore, that the letter announcing to Princess Montefiano that a deputation from the peasantry proposed to wait upon her, and stating that its members were commissioned particularly to request a personal interview with the Principessina Donna Bianca, should have caused both its recipient and

the Abbé Roux considerable surprise. It had been surprise only, however, and that feeling had been quickly followed by one of contemptuous indifference. The princess, indeed, was not a little indignant. The pointed request that her step-daughter should be personally approached by the tenantry of Montefiano seemed to her to be a reflection upon herself and her position; a stone, as it were, cast against her authority. The Abbé Roux had certainly not attempted to soothe her ruffled feelings. He had, on the contrary, inveighed against the insolence of the peasantry in venturing to send such a document to her excellency, and against the obvious disrespect towards her rule conveyed in the request that the deputation should speak with Donna Bianca in person. He had assured the princess and Monsieur d'Antin, to whom she had shown the letter, that the whole affair was a trifle—a mere *ballon d'essai* on the part of Fontana and his friends to intimidate her excellency with a view to regaining his post. As to the grievance about the rents, that was nonsense. The holdings in question had been for many years under-rented; and the tenants could perfectly well afford to pay the trifling addition imposed. Had he, the abbé, not gone thoroughly into the question, he would not have counselled any increase, but Fontana had been very lax, very behind the times, and he had evidently thought more of keeping on good terms with the *contadini* than of the legitimate interests of his employers.

Monsieur d'Antin had shrugged his shoulders and declined to give an opinion. He did not understand Italian peasants, and he did not want to understand them. He was quite convinced in his own mind that the abbé was making a purse for himself, but doubtless the abbé knew what he was about, and it was no part of Baron d'Antin's programme to interfere in the priest's little arrangements. His sister's indignation at the allusion to Bianca rather amused him. Jeanne was certainly tenacious of her rights. She would have made an admirable mother-superior—yes, admirable.

The princess, who did not lack spirit, had required no advice as to the manner in which she should reply to the letter in question. To do her justice, she was not a woman to be intimidated by what she fully believed to be a blow levelled at her authority by a body of uneducated peasants, instigated to disaffection by a dismissed servant.

The Abbé Roux had scornfully pointed out to her the name of Don Agostino Lelli as being one of the proposed deputation. It was quite sufficient, he declared, that such an individual should be one of its leaders to prove the real character of the movement. The *parroco* of Montefiano had persistently interfered, as Madame la Princesse well knew, in affairs that were quite outside his province, and no doubt he and the dismissed agent were acting in concert. Besides, a priest who had so notoriously fallen into disgrace at Rome was certainly not a fitting person to be received by the princess at the bidding of a few peasants.

In this latter sentiment Monsieur d'Antin had heartily supported the abbé. It was decidedly not advisable that Monsignor Lelli should succeed in obtaining even a single interview with Bianca Acorari. Monsieur d'Antin and the abbé had exchanged a rapid but significant glance when they observed that among those whom the peasants had designated to represent their cause was the name of Don Agostino Lelli; and both of them had resolved that Monsignor Lelli should have no opportunity of even seeing Bianca.

Princess Montefiano had wished to despatch her reply at once to the signatories of the letter she had received, but the abbé counselled delay. Although he affected to regard the whole matter with contempt, he was not quite easy in his mind as to what the effects of so curt a refusal to receive the peasants' deputation might be. He had persuaded the princess, therefore, to keep back her answer until the following morning. He wished to ascertain the exact state of public opinion in Montefiano, and also to prepare for possible emergencies. It had not been without some difficulty that he had succeeded in persuading the princess not at once to send her reply, and it was only when her brother added his representations to those of the abbé that Princess Montefiano had finally consented to any delay. In the mean time, all knowledge of what was happening was carefully kept from Bianca Acorari. The Abbé Roux found it easy enough to point out the advisability of not allowing the fact of there being any difficulty with the people to transpire to Donna Bianca, and more especially that a personal interview with her had been sought by their representatives. The princess had no desire to bring her step-daughter forwards, since by so doing, she would only diminish her own authority to which she was legally entitled. It was absurd to suppose that Bianca could possibly understand business matters; and, as the abbé pointed out, the endeavor to drag an inexperienced girl into such questions was only another proof that the whole agitation had been formed with a view to intimidation. It would be wiser, Monsieur l'Abbé argued, to leave Donna Bianca in complete ignorance of the situation; and so, by common consent, not a word was said in her presence that could lead her to suspect that anything unusual was taking place.

In the mean time, the Abbé Roux sent a private note to the *sindaco* of Montefiano, begging that official to come to see him that evening after dusk at the castle, and enjoining him to keep his visit a secret, as, for obvious reasons, it would not be advisable that it should be known in the *paese* that they had conferred together.

The *sindaco's* report had certainly not diminished the Abbé Roux's growing apprehensions. It was evident that the *avvocato* Ricci regarded the agitation as wide-spread and likely to assume serious proportions. It was headed, as he assured the abbé, by influential members of the community, whose support would undoubtedly encourage the *contadini* to persist in their attitude. He himself had

been approached, and it was true that he had consented to join the proposed deputation to the princess; but he had done so in the hope of exerting his official influence to keep the agitation within legitimate bounds. Among the chief supporters of the peasantry he could assure the abbé that the *parroco*, Don Agostino Lelli, was one of the most active, and, by virtue of his position, perhaps the most influential. It was, of course, well known that the *parroco* was taking this part out of friendship for and sympathy with the *fattore*, Giuseppe Fontana. The Abbé Roux made a gesture of impatience and anger.

"Don Agostino Lelli had better confine himself to his duties," he exclaimed, "otherwise he will find himself removed from Montefiano, as, years ago, he was removed from his post in Rome. You are of opinion, then," he continued, "that this affair is likely to become serious; that disorders, in short, might break out if her excellency the princess refuses to receive this deputation?"

The *sindaco* hesitated. "It depends," he replied.

"And upon what?" asked the abbé, sharply.

"Upon—well, upon whether her excellency is prepared to stand firm, and to take the possible consequences of her refusal. After all, she has the force of the law on her side—"

"And the force of public opinion on the other side," interrupted the abbé.

The mayor of Montefiano shrugged his shoulders. "*Caro signore*," he observed, "the sight of a few bayonets soon changes public opinion. I believe that the peasants will very quickly turn round and disown their own supporters, if they once realize that her excellency will not give way to their demands. In any case, you can rely upon my doing my duty in safeguarding the public order in this commune. Her excellency has only to request the aid of the authorities in the event of the *contadini* proceeding to any excesses, and a telegram to the military authorities at Civitacastellana will do the rest. In the space of three or four hours troops could be on the spot."

"Ah!" repeated the Abbé Roux, thoughtfully; "in the space of three or four hours, you say?"

"*Sicuro!* perhaps less. In my opinion there would be nothing to fear. The sight of the soldiers would soon reduce the peasants to reason."

The abbé looked at him quickly. "The princess has already decided to refuse to receive this deputation," he said. "She has written a very abrupt refusal. I have persuaded her to delay its despatch for a few hours. It appears, however, that there is no reason why it should not be sent to-morrow."

"It will increase the ill-feeling, no doubt," said the *sindaco*—"very seriously increase it, I fear. Still, if her excellency has the courage to stand firm, there can be but one issue. In the end the *contadini* will have to give way, and then they will infallibly turn against those who have encouraged them to create disturbances.

It is always like that."

The Abbé Roux did not reply for a moment or two. Then he said, suddenly: "There is one thing I do not quite understand, Signor Ricci. Why does this deputation insist upon seeing Donna Bianca Acorari? The people must surely know that Donna Bianca, being a minor, has no voice in matters connected with the administration of her property. This insistence on speaking with her is scarcely respectful to the princess, who alone has any authority in the matter. As you were to be a member of the deputation, no doubt you can explain the meaning of this request to interview Donna Bianca?"

The *sindaco* hesitated. Then, having made up his mind to lie, he lied soundly but plausibly, as only an Italian official of the bureaucracy can lie.

"It is very simple," he said, with a laugh. "The peasants have got an idea into their heads that Donna Bianca would take their part and intercede for them, because—well, because she is an Acorari, and her excellency the princess is, after all, a stranger. It is mere sentiment, of course, with a certain amount of shrewdness at the back of it. No doubt the *parroco*, Don Agostino, has put the idea into their heads. But there is nothing in it but sentiment—nothing at all, Signor Abate, I can assure you. I objected to the introduction of Donna Bianca's name into the business, but it was better to let the *contadini* have their own way about what is, after all, a mere trifle. They do not realize that the *principessina* has, as you say, no voice in such matters, being a minor."

The abbé nodded. "I quite understand," he said, pleasantly. "No doubt it has been part of the scheme of these agitators to work upon the sentiment of the peasantry for Donna Bianca, as being their future *padrona*. But, luckily for her, she has those about her who know how to protect her interests and to guard her against being imposed upon. Well, Signor Sindaco, to-morrow morning the princess will send her answer. It is, as I have already told you, a refusal to receive the deputation, or to discuss its objects. You may be sure that her excellency will not give way, no matter what attitude the people may assume. If that attitude should become threatening, we may have to seek the aid of the authorities through you. *A proposito*, would it not be as well to warn the military authorities that a handful of soldiers might be required to keep order at Montefiano? On the receipt of a telegram they could then be despatched without delay. You can doubtless arrange to do this without the matter becoming known; and then, should it be necessary, we would request you to send the telegram regarding the immediate presence of the troops. By these means we could give the idiots the unpleasant surprise of finding that we were prepared for any folly they might attempt to commit. At least the display of a little force could do no harm, and would probably have an excellent moral effect. But not a word, *caro signore*, of our conference to-night. I trust that your visit to the castle will not have been

observed by any of the people. By-the-way, should there be any fresh development in the situation to-morrow morning, after the tenor of the princess's reply has become known, I must beg that you will communicate with me."

The *sindaco* of Montefiano took his leave, assuring the Abbé Roux that all should be done as he had suggested. The evening was dark and rainy, and he encountered nobody on the steep road leading up to the castle from the town below. At any rate, the *avvocato* Ricci thought to himself, he had secured himself against any misrepresentation at Rome of his conduct. If Sor Stefano and the peasantry insisted upon continuing the agitation, there would infallibly be mischief, and in that case it was as well to be on the winning side, which side must inevitably be supported by the authorities. It was certainly no affair of his to enlighten the *abate* as to the real object of the deputation in having insisted upon seeing Donna Bianca Acorari. His affair was to avoid compromising himself in the eyes of the authorities in Rome, and the Abate Roux would have to weather the storm he had created as best he could. The lawyer was not a little struck by the Abbé Roux's caution in providing for a speedy and unexpected appearance on the scene of military force, should its presence be desirable. "Even Sor Stefano," he said to himself, with a chuckle, "would talk less loudly if he were suddenly to find himself confronted by a company of infantry with fixed bayonets, and he, Augusto Ricci, might earn the approval of the minister of the interior and head of the government in Rome for his promptitude in suppressing threatened disorder in the commune of which he was *sindaco*."

XXXI

After leaving the Caffè Garibaldi, Don Agostino returned to his house in a very thoughtful frame of mind. He had promised to go himself to Princess Montefiano and put the peasants' case before her. He had promised, also, that he would speak with Donna Bianca Acorari personally. The question now arose how he was to accomplish what he had undertaken. The princess, it was true, could scarcely refuse to receive him without that refusal being a marked rudeness to him as *parroco* of Montefiano; at the same time, Don Agostino was perfectly aware that she had certainly not displayed any desire to make his personal acquaintance. He had duly left his card, as politeness required, after her arrival at the castle, and had received no invitation to repeat his visit. The fact had not surprised or

annoyed him. He had been tolerably well acquainted with the Abbé Roux in the days when that ecclesiastic was the secretary to a cardinal who had always been his bitter enemy, and who, he well knew, had been more active than any one else at the Vatican in clamoring for his removal and disgrace. The acquaintance had not been a pleasant one, and certain details in the abbé's career which happened to have come to his knowledge had not made Don Agostino desirous of improving it.

It was not likely, therefore, that the Abbé Roux would welcome his presence at the castle of Montefiano, and he would doubtless have used his influence with the princess to prevent her from knowing him in any way than as a priest on Acorari property, who might sometimes have occasion to address a letter to her concerning the needs of his parishioners.

It was certainly from no personal motives that Don Agostino, as he walked back to his house that morning, felt almost nervously anxious lest he should be refused admittance to Princess Montefiano's presence. When he had sought to defend her against the accusations which he was well aware had been made against her of unmotherly conduct towards her step-daughter, he had done so because he believed these accusations to be, if not altogether unfounded, at least erroneous. He had always felt confident that the princess was a victim to her own religious enthusiasm; she had fallen an easy prey to a type of ecclesiastic with which his experience in Rome had brought him into contact on several occasions, and of which the Abbé Roux was no uncommon example. He was convinced that the moment had arrived when the Princess Montefiano's eyes might be opened, and when it might be demonstrated to her, beyond any possibility of doubt, that the counsellor in whom she had trusted had never been worthy of her confidence.

At the same time it was clear that the Abbé Roux was master of the actual situation, and that, having succeeded in getting rid of the one official at Montefiano who for thirty years had had the true interests of his employers at heart, it was not likely he would permit the princess to be approached by the *parroco* of Montefiano, who was known to regard the agent's dismissal as both a mistake and an injustice. The position, however, was serious; and all the more so because it was quite evident that neither the princess nor the abbé realized its gravity. Any rebellious attitude that the peasants might be driven by exasperation to assume could, it was true, be ultimately suppressed by the intervention of the military at the instance of the civil authorities of the commune. But Don Agostino well knew the legacy of hatred and smouldering resentment which such intervention almost invariably left behind it. If he could save his lost Bianca's child from the enduring unpopularity which her step-mother and the Abbé Roux were certainly doing their best to bring upon her by their mistaken policy regarding the administration of her property, he would certainly do so, at whatever cost to himself.

Yes, at four o'clock that afternoon he would go to the castle. By that hour the princess would certainly be visible, if she chose to be visible. He would send up his card to her with an urgent request that she would see him on a matter of grave importance. If she refused to do so, he would write to her—but such a letter as would leave her no possibility of mistaking his meaning.

The afternoon's task was certainly neither an easy nor an agreeable one; but it must in some way or another be accomplished. At least, Don Agostino reflected, he would have done his duty to his people at Montefiano, to Bianca Acorari, and to that absent Bianca who had assuredly willed that he should strive to protect her child.

Don Agostino entered his garden through the little gate by the side of the church. As he approached the house, he was surprised to hear, through the open window of his study, Ernana talking in earnest tones inside the room. His surprise was still greater, however, when at the sound of his footsteps on the gravel-path, Silvio Rossano's form appeared at the window. For a moment, indeed, Don Agostino felt something very like dismay. There were complications enough and to spare without fresh material being added to increase their number. He had purposely delayed writing again to Silvio, thinking that in a day or two the threatened disturbances would have either subsided or assumed proportions which might make his presence at Montefiano desirable in his own and Bianca Acorari's interest. Don Agostino doubted very much, however, whether this was the moment for Silvio to be seen at Montefiano. If his presence became known at the castle, it would probably be regarded by the princess as a proof that the agitation among the peasants had a further scope than merely to obtain the redress of their own and Fontana's grievances. She would not unreasonably suspect that he, Don Agostino, was using the agitation as a means whereby to help Silvio Rossano in renewing his endeavors to marry her step-daughter. As a matter of fact, Don Agostino was quite prepared so to use it, if its results were such as to encourage him to do so. But it would most certainly not further Bianca's or Silvio's interests were it to be supposed that these interests were in any way connected with the business that would take Don Agostino to the castle that afternoon.

He hurried into the house and met Silvio in the little passage outside his study.

"Am I an unwelcome guest?" Silvio said to him, quickly. "I hope not, because—"

"You are always welcome," interrupted Don Agostino, "but—well, to tell you the truth, Silvio, I am not sure that I am very pleased to see you. But if I am not pleased, it is on your own account, not on mine. May one ask what has brought you here so unexpectedly, *ragazzo mio*?"

Silvio took a crumpled newspaper out of his pocket—the number of the

Tribuna that his father had shown him the night before.

"That," he replied, briefly, handing the paper to Don Agostino, and pointing to the telegram dated from Montefiano.

Don Agostino read it. Then he uttered an exclamation of anger.

"Idiots!" he exclaimed; "idiots, and cowards, too! This is the Abbé Roux's doing, of course. Well, it is another blunder, an irremediable blunder. In two or three hours' time the report will be all over Montefiano that troops have been sent for. The afternoon post will bring the *Tribuna*—" He paused in evident agitation.

"I could not remain quietly in Rome after reading that," said Silvio. "So I took the morning train, and here I am. At first I could not understand what it all meant; for Bianca, though she mentioned that there was some trouble with the people because the Abbé Roux had persuaded her step-mother to dismiss the *fattore*, certainly did not write as if it was anything serious. All the same, I was uneasy, for one never knows what a small matter of this kind may not develop into. But Ernana, to whom I have been talking while waiting for you, has given me to understand that it is by no means a small matter, but that the people are really angry and threatening to force their way into the castle."

Don Agostino nodded. "Ernana is right," he said; "it is not a small thing. I fear, directly this telegram in the *Tribuna* becomes known, that it will speedily become a very much bigger thing."

"Then I am doubly glad that I am here," observed Silvio, quietly.

Don Agostino glanced at him. "A moment ago," he said, "I wished that you had not appeared upon the scene. I did not think the time had arrived for you to do so. It was for this reason I delayed writing to you. I had hoped that, whatever might occur, no military aid would be asked for in order to settle a question which only needed to be handled with a little tact and in a conciliatory spirit. This telegram, however, alters the aspect of affairs considerably, and, on the whole, yes, Silvio, I think I am glad you have come. But for the next few hours, at any rate, you must not show yourself. Do you think your arrival here has been observed?" he added.

Silvio shook his head. "I think not," he replied. "Indeed, I hardly met a soul on my way here from Attigliano."

"The people are all in the *paese*," said Don Agostino. "The peasants have come in from miles around. No, you must certainly not be seen—at all events, till I have been to the castle."

"You are going to the castle?" Silvio asked, in some surprise.

Don Agostino briefly related to him the events of the morning, and explained how, as a last hope of bringing about a pacific solution of the situation, and of making the princess realize the danger of the policy the Abbé Roux had made her adopt, he had volunteered to ask to see her and Bianca Acorari person-

ally.

"It was by no means easy," he said, "to persuade the more excited among the people to consent to my going to the princess. They suspected me of being in sympathy with the Abbé Roux," he added, with a smile. "Fortunately, however, the *sindaco* supported me, and I persuaded a certain Mazza, who is practically the money-lender to all this district, and who for some reasons of his own is backing up the peasants, to advise the people to refrain from any further action until I had communicated to them the results of my interview with the princess. One thing is very certain," he continued, "I must, if possible, see Princess Montefiano before the news that troops have been asked for is known in the place. There is no saying what may not happen, in the mood the peasants are now in, should it be known that the princess has sought the intervention of the authorities rather than consent to receive a deputation."

"The telegram does not say that troops have actually been requisitioned," said Silvio; "it alludes to the probability of their being so, if the situation at Montefiano should not improve. It appears to me," he continued, "that the communication is something in the nature of a warning, or a threat, whichever you like to call it."

Don Agostino read the paragraph in the *Tribuna* again.

"That is true," he said, "and you are right, Silvio. Whoever communicated the intelligence to the *Tribuna* probably intended it both as a warning and as a threat. Well, as the former, it will have very little effect. As the latter, it will have a very bad effect, for it will be bitterly resented, unless I am much mistaken. In the mean time, there is no time to be lost. We must trust to the people keeping quiet for another few hours, until I have been to the castle. But you, my friend, must remain quietly here, unseen by anybody. I shall tell Ernana she must hold her tongue about your arrival. For you have become a celebrity in Montefiano, Silvio," he added, with a smile, "and everybody would know what had brought you here."

"Ah," exclaimed Silvio, "that is a thing I do not understand! How in the world have the people here got to know about Bianca and myself? Certainly the princess would not allow it to be talked about by anybody belonging to her household; and who else, except yourself, knows of it?"

Don Agostino shrugged his shoulders. "It is known by everybody that Donna Bianca has declared that she will marry nobody if she does not marry you," he replied. "Indeed," he continued, "I believe it is this love-affair of the *principessina*, as they call her, that has done more than anything else to arouse the indignation of the people against the princess and her brother and against the Abbé Roux. As yet they have not seen the young Roman whom their *padrona* wishes for a husband instead of Baron d'Antin. When they do see him— But do

not let us waste any more time in talking, Silvio. Before we do anything else, let us have breakfast. You must be quite ready for it after your journey, and it is nearly one o'clock."

A couple of hours later Don Agostino left his house, and, choosing a lane leading through the outskirts of the town, in order to avoid the groups of peasants which would still be thronging the main street, made his way to the castle, having extracted a promise from Silvio that the latter would not go into the *paese* until he had returned from his visit to the princess.

He could not help suspecting that his appearance at the entrance-gate of the castle was not altogether unexpected; for the two servants who, in response to his ringing the bell, drew back a lattice and surveyed him from the inside, promptly closed it, and threw open the great wooden doors studded with heavy iron nails, and as promptly closed and bolted them again as soon as he had passed into the court-yard.

Don Agostino informed them that he had come to see her excellency the princess on important business, and producing his card, asked that it might be taken to her at once, with the urgent request that she would receive him.

He was conducted across the court and up a flight of steps leading into a large hall on the first floor of the building, where he was left while the domestics went to execute their commission. In a few minutes one of the men returned. He was desired by her excellency to tell his reverence that she regretted being unable to receive him in person, but her brother, Baron d'Antin, and the Abbé Roux would be happy to see him in her place.

Don Agostino attempted to demur. It was of the greatest importance, he said, that he should see her excellency personally.

The venerable *maggior-domo* spread out his hands with an apologetic gesture. He was grieved, he declared, to be obliged to disappoint his reverence, but her excellency had given strict orders that she was not to be disturbed—that she could receive no one. The Signor Barone and the Abbé Roux were ready to receive his reverence, if he would be pleased to follow him.

Don Agostino hesitated for a moment. Then he came to the conclusion that he had better accept the compromise that had evidently been made. Perhaps, indeed, the princess's absence might be an advantage. He could speak very plainly to Monsieur d'Antin and to the Abbé Roux if it became necessary to do so—more plainly, perhaps, than he could have done had Princess Montefiano been present. At any rate, he was inside the castle, and had been offered an opportunity of discussing the situation with those who were chiefly responsible for its existence, and this was something gained.

He had thought it more than likely that he would not be admitted within the castle walls, and that he would have to return to the *paese* with the intelligence

that he had failed in his mission.

He followed the *maggior-domo* through the long gallery, with which the hall where he had waited communicated, and was ushered into the room used by the Abbé Roux as his study. The abbé, however, was not present, and Monsieur d'Antin came forward and introduced himself. His sister, he assured Don Agostino, much regretted her inability to receive him, but the events of the last day or two had somewhat upset her—and, after all, if he were not mistaken, Monsignor Lelli's business was more suitable for discussion by himself and Monsieur l'Abbé Roux than by ladies—was it not so? Monsieur l'Abbé would join them in a few minutes. In the mean time, anything that Monsignor Lelli might wish to say, he, Baron d'Antin, would faithfully refer to the princess. *Monsignore* spoke French, of course? That was well, for Monsieur d'Antin's Italian was not sufficiently fluent to embark upon a business conversation. A cigarette? No? Well, if it was permitted, he would smoke one himself, and he was all attention, if *monsignore* would proceed.

Don Agostino sat and watched the baron quietly. Monsieur d'Antin was very suave—very polite, and nothing could be more conciliatory than his attitude. It seemed, indeed, as though he were tacitly apologizing for his sister's refusal to receive the *parroco*, and that he was only anxious to do his best to remove all misunderstandings. Don Agostino recognized the diplomatic manner, and, so to speak, took Baron d'Antin's measure before he had uttered a dozen words.

"Doubtless, monsieur," he said, "you are aware of the object of my visit. The importance of that object must be my excuse for seeking to intrude myself upon Madame la Princesse. I regret that she is unable to receive me, because it is to her and to Donna Bianca Acorari that I am, as it were, accredited by the people of Montefiano. However, one cannot question a lady's right to receive or to refuse to receive a visitor, especially if that visitor comes on an unpleasant errand.

"Monsieur le Baron, I think there is no necessity to waste words, and this is not the moment to discuss the rights and the wrongs of the questions which are agitating the minds of the people here at Montefiano. I have come to ask—nay, to implore the princess to reconsider her refusal to receive the deputation suggested by the peasants, and to allow me to tell the people that she and Donna Bianca will listen to their representatives. The people are within their rights, monsieur, and it is I, their priest, who tell you so. They have been treated unjustly in the name of Casa Acorari, and they appeal to the princess and to Donna Bianca Acorari for permission personally to represent their grievances."

Monsieur d'Antin nodded gravely. "I quite understand your view of the matter, Monsieur le Curé," he said. "It is natural that the sympathies of a priest should be with his people; but you must remember that my sister has to regard the question from a business, and not from the sentimental, point of view. Her

position obliges her to think, first of all, of her step-daughter, Donna Bianca's, interests. Those in whom my sister confides to advise her in business matters connected with the Montefiano property, do not share your view as to any injustice having been committed."

"Because, monsieur," returned Don Agostino, bluntly, "Madame la Princesse confides in individuals who are ignorant as to the condition in which the people live, and who are, therefore, incompetent to advise her—"

At this moment the door opened, and the Abbé Roux entered the room. The greeting between him and Monsignor Lelli, if courteous, was certainly not cordial. It was some years since they had last beheld each other, but no allusion was made by either to their past acquaintance.

Monsieur d'Antin looked quickly at the abbé as he came into the room, and Don Agostino fancied that, as he returned the glance, the Abbé Roux shook his head almost imperceptibly.

"Monsignor Lelli," Monsieur d'Antin observed airily, "has come this afternoon as an ambassador from—what shall we call them, Monsieur l'Abbé—the rebels, eh? He wishes my sister to reconsider her refusal to receive their deputation."

"It would seem scarcely necessary for madame to do so," said the abbé, coldly. "Monsignor Lelli," he continued, "has apparently taken upon himself the functions of the deputation."

"Precisely, monsieur," observed Don Agostino, tranquilly. "It seemed to me not impossible that the princess and Donna Bianca Acorari might listen to my representations as *parroco* of Montefiano, even though the reception of a deputation might not be permitted by their advisers."

The Abbé Roux frowned angrily.

"Permitted, monsieur!" he repeated. "I do not understand you. The princess stands in no need of permission to act as she thinks fit and as may be advantageous to Donna Bianca's future interests. Nor do I understand why you assume Donna Bianca Acorari to have any voice in what the princess may choose to do as her guardian. You must surely be well aware that, until she is of age, Donna Bianca has absolutely nothing to say in the management of her properties. It is, therefore, absurd to drag her name into any question arising in connection with that management."

Don Agostino looked at him steadily. "I am aware that Donna Bianca does not enter into the full possession of her estates until she is of age—or until she marries," he said. "Nevertheless, the fact does not prevent her from being regarded by the people in and round Montefiano as their mistress—as the only child of and successor to the late Prince of Montefiano. And the people will insist on regarding her as such, and upon being permitted access to her.

"It is not for me, Monsieur l'Abbé, to discuss what may be your motives for advising the princess to pursue a course which is not only unjust to the people, but injurious to her step-daughter's true interests. I have come here this afternoon to warn the princess that the people intend to insist upon being heard, not by her only, but by Donna Bianca Acorari. They are loyal to Donna Bianca—but—you must pardon me for my plain speaking—they look upon the princess as a foreigner who allows foreign influence to interfere between them and their lawful *padrona*. At any moment, Monsieur l'Abbé, unless you advise the princess to adopt a more conciliatory course, you may hear this from the people themselves. They will tell it you more roughly than I have told it you."

The Abbé Roux laughed disagreeably. "You are very disinterested, *monsignore*," he remarked, "but I regret that I cannot accept your views upon business matters—and this affair of the peasants is purely a business—a financial—matter. You may very possibly be mistaken in your judgment, *monsignore*. It would not be the first time, I think, that you were mistaken in your estimate of sound finance. No, Madame la Princesse will not, I imagine, be disposed to accept your advice on such matters."

The sneer and the insinuation contained in the abbé's words were patent enough, and for a moment Don Agostino reddened with anger. He restrained himself with an effort, however. It was very evident that the Abbé Roux was losing his temper; and time, valuable time, was passing.

Don Agostino shrugged his shoulders, and then, turning his back upon the abbé, he addressed Monsieur d'Antin, whose face he had noticed with some surprise had worn a sudden but unmistakable look of disgust and contempt while the Abbé Roux was speaking.

"Monsieur le Baron," he said, quietly, "I appeal to you as to one who is not a professional man of business in the employ of Madame la Princesse, but who is her brother, and who may therefore not be altogether influenced by pecuniary considerations. I entreat you to take my warning to the princess, and to persuade her to allow me to return, while there is yet time, to the people, with the news that I have spoken with her and with Donna Bianca, and that she is prepared to make some concessions. I entreat you, also, to recall, in her name, the application which has been made for military aid—"

The abbé and Monsieur d'Antin both started. "How, monsieur?" exclaimed the abbé. "Military aid! What folly is this? Who talks of military aid having been applied for?"

Don Agostino drew Silvio's *Tribuna* from his *soutane* and gave it to Monsieur d'Antin.

"If it has not been actually applied for," he said, pointing to the telegram from Montefiano, "its requisition is threatened. That newspaper arrives in Mon-

tefiano every afternoon from Rome," he added, "and by this time the telegram will have been read by everybody in the *paese*."

The Abbé Roux muttered something very like an oath under his breath. Then he looked furtively, almost apologetically, at Don Agostino.

"Absurd!" he exclaimed. "A mere canard! Probably some occasional correspondent to the *Tribuna*, in Montefiano thought he would be very clever and anticipate events."

Don Agostino looked at him narrowly. It was clear that, whoever had sent the telegram to the *Tribuna*, the abbé was disagreeably surprised by its publication. He looked, indeed, both taken aback and ill at ease. Don Agostino, always watching him, saw him take out his watch and look at it, glancing at Monsieur d'Antin as he did so.

"*Enfin*, monsieur," said Don Agostino, again addressing Monsieur d'Antin, "once more I appeal to you as the brother of Madame la Princesse. Am I to go back to the people and tell them that I have obtained nothing, and that I have not been permitted to see either the princess or Donna Bianca? Monsieur," he added, earnestly, "let me beg of you to consider. So little is demanded of the princess—so much bitterness and misery will be the result of not giving way. At least send a telegram to countermand any despatch of troops to Montefiano, and authorize me to tell the people that the telegram in the *Tribuna* was communicated without there being any foundation for it."

Monsieur d'Antin rose from the arm-chair in which he had been smoking cigarettes unremittingly.

"One moment, my dear monsieur," he said to Don Agostino; "believe me, if the matter rested with me, you should go back to your peasants with hands full of concessions. But I have no influence with my sister in these matters. I do not think she understands them; that is true. But unfortunately she knows that I understand them even less than she does. After all, it is natural. We are not Italians, as you pointed out to Monsieur l'Abbé just now."

"It is not necessary to be Italian, monsieur, in order to understand when injustices are being committed. A little common sympathy and a little commonsense are all that is required in this instance; and these qualities are not the exclusive attribute of my compatriots," said Don Agostino, dryly.

The Abbé Roux came forward and placed himself between Don Agostino and Monsieur d'Antin.

"Monsieur le Baron," he said, casting an angry glance at Don Agostino, "it seems to me that we are wasting time. Monsignor Lelli has come here, apparently, with the object of attempting to induce the princess to give way to the insolent demands of these ignorant peasants, and to dictate to her what she should and should not do. Well, I, Monsieur le Baron, as you well know, am honored by

the princess's confidence; and, as you also know, I am deputed by her excellency to give Monsignor Lelli her final and definite answer to his representations on behalf of the peasants and their friends."

Don Agostino interrupted him.

"How did the princess know that I was coming here to-day on behalf of the peasants?" he asked, abruptly.

The Abbé Roux looked suddenly perplexed; and Monsieur d'Antin joined the tips of his fingers together and laughed softly to himself. Don Agostino glanced at him keenly. Baron d'Antin's manner puzzled him. It was the manner that an amused spectator of a comedy might display, but it was certainly not fitting to one of the characters on the stage.

The abbé scowled. "*Parbleu!*" he exclaimed, roughly, "we are not all imbeciles here; and we are better informed as to what has been going on than Monsignor Lelli is aware! We know, for instance, that he did not hesitate to compromise his position as *parroco* by encouraging with his presence a meeting held this morning in a *caffè* by the leaders of this agitation, and that he took upon himself the responsibility of being their spokesman. Ah, yes, *monsignore*, the princess expected your visit this afternoon; but, as you see, she altogether declines to receive you in person."

Don Agostino turned to him with quiet dignity.

"So be it, Monsieur l'Abbé," he said, tranquilly. "The princess must take the responsibility of declining to receive me in person, and to allow me access to Donna Bianca Acorari. Nevertheless, I am here as the representative of Donna Bianca's people, and I will discharge my duty. I shall say, boldly—"

"To the princess and Donna Bianca? No, *monsignore*, you will not have the opportunity. It would be well that you should understand this finally."

"No, not to the princess and Donna Bianca, but to you!" continued Don Agostino. "You tell me that you are honored with the princess's entire confidence. I hope that she equally enjoys your own, Monsieur l'Abbé. If so, you will repeat to her what I say. As you are aware that I attended the meeting held this morning in the principal *caffè* of Montefiano, you are, no doubt, also aware of the attitude of the people towards the princess, towards Monsieur le Baron d'Antin, and towards yourself. You no doubt know that they regard you, Monsieur l'Abbé Roux, as a foreigner who has abused the confidence the princess has had in you as a priest, in order by degrees to fill your own pockets out of Donna Bianca Acorari's possessions and at the expense of the people. You doubtless know that they accuse you of being the real lessee of the rents paid by the tenants on this estate, and believe that the recent raising of those rents and the dismissal of the *fattore* Fontana, for having protested against any increase in the rent, was due to you. You will have heard, also, that you are credited with having devised a scheme

whereby Donna Bianca Acorari is to marry Monsieur le Baron d'Antin in order to keep her patrimony in the family—so to speak—and enable you to continue to administer the properties for some years to come. Of course, Monsieur l'Abbé, you know all this, since you are well informed of what is being said and done in Montefiano."

The Abbé Roux's face while Don Agostino was speaking presented a study in some of the various feelings capable of being reflected on the human countenance. Anger, mortification, dismay—all these displayed themselves in turn as he listened to Don Agostino's words, each one of which was delivered with a calm incisiveness which added to the force of his speech.

"*Monsignore!*" he exclaimed, furiously. "Are you aware of what you are saying? Monsieur le Baron," he added, turning to Monsieur d'Antin, "this is an insult—not to me only, but to the princess and to yourself—"

Monsieur d'Antin looked from one to the other curiously, almost as if he enjoyed the situation.

"I think not, Monsieur l'Abbé," he said, with a little smile, and rubbing his white hands gently together. "I think not, my dear friend. Monsignor Lelli is merely stating the opinion that others hold concerning you—or concerning us, perhaps I should say. He does not, I am convinced, mean us to suppose that he shares this opinion."

Don Agostino was silent.

"In any case," continued Monsieur d'Antin, with a slight shrug of the shoulders as the silence became markedly prolonged, "it is not worth your while to be angry, my dear abbé, for Monsignor Lelli might regard your anger as a proof that the peasants at Montefiano are a very shrewd race—ha, ha, ha!" and he broke into a gentle laugh which sounded genuine enough, but certainly did not tend to allay the abbé's fury.

"No," he continued. "Let us remain calm, I beg of you, and let us hear what else Monsignor Lelli has to tell us from these admirable peasants."

"I have little else to add to what I have already said," observed Don Agostino, "and I make no apologies for the words I have used. They are plain words, and even the Abbé Roux will not, I think, misunderstand them. As to my own opinion—well, I agree with you, Monsieur le Baron, that the people of Montefiano are shrewd, and I believe their accusations to be just."

The Abbé Roux made a step forward, and, purple with rage, shook his clinched fist in Don Agostino's face.

"And you," he exclaimed, "you, whom the Holy Father sent to minister to these pigs of peasants in order to avoid the scandal of proceeding against you for fraudulent speculation with money intrusted to you, you dare to bring these accusations against me! Liar, hypocrite, pig—like the peasants you represent!"

"My dear friend," remonstrated Monsieur d'Antin, laying his hand on the abbé's arm, "let me implore you to be calm. Recollect that you and Monsignor Lelli are priests—that you both wear the *soutane*. You cannot demand satisfaction of each other in the usual way—you cannot challenge each other to a duel. It would be—excessively funny," and Monsieur d'Antin laughed again, in evident enjoyment of the idea. "Besides," he continued, "Monsignor Lelli has, no doubt, more to tell us. We have not yet heard what it is that the peasants require of my sister."

"Monsieur," said Don Agostino, "I can answer for the peasants that, if they are allowed to see and speak with Donna Bianca Acorari, they will certainly not proceed to any excesses. They will probably return quietly to their occupations."

"And you," interrupted the Abbé Roux, in a voice that was hoarse and trembling with anger, "can take back to the peasants the princess's answer which I am commissioned to give in her name. The answer is, that they will not be permitted to see Donna Bianca Acorari, who has nothing to say in the matter of the administration of these lands, or to approach her with any story of their grievances. The princess, *monsignore*, is perfectly well aware of all that underlies this agitation, and that it is directed chiefly against myself. She will not be intimidated into recalling Giuseppe Fontana, or into lowering the rents. She—"

He stopped abruptly. A confused sound of voices came from the gallery outside, and a moment afterwards the door was flung hastily open and the old *maggior-domo* burst into the room, followed by several of the servants, who stood in a frightened group on the threshold.

"The *contadini*!" he exclaimed. "There is a crowd of three hundred or more outside the entrance-gates, and they declare that if the gates are not opened, they will break them down, Signor Abate! Ah, *Madonna mia*! It is a *repubblica*—a revolution—listen!" and rushing across the gallery, he threw open one of the windows looking into the court-yard.

The thick walls of the castle had effectually prevented any sound from penetrating to the apartments on the other side of the gallery, all of which were situated in the portion of the building added to the mediæval fortress by Cardinal Acorari, and overlooked the terrace and open country beneath it. From the gallery, however, the angry roar of an excited mob could distinctly be heard; and, when the windows were opened by the old *maggior-domo*, shouts of "Down with the foreigners! Long live the Principessina Bianca!" became plainly audible.

Don Agostino looked at the abbé and Monsieur d'Antin. "You see, monsieur," he said, quietly, to the latter, "I did not exaggerate matters. But even now it is not too late. If the princess and Donna Bianca will show themselves to the peasants, and allow me to address the people in their name, I am confident that order will quickly be restored. Hark!" he added. "They are attempting to break

open the gates." And even as he spoke, the noise of heavy blows falling on woodwork re-echoed through the court-yard.

Monsieur d'Antin, to do him justice, appeared to be far more composed than the Abbé Roux. He listened for a moment or two almost impassively to the shouts and the uproar which were growing ever louder and more violent. The abbé, on the contrary, was trembling with an excitement that might have proceeded either from fear or from rage, and probably, as Don Agostino thought, from both. He had his watch in his hand, and looked at it repeatedly, as though counting every minute that passed. Don Agostino noticed his action, and as he did so a sudden suspicion dawned upon him.

Monsieur d'Antin drew the abbé aside, and spoke with him for a minute or so in an undertone. The Abbé Roux, it was evident, dissented energetically from his remarks, and finally, with a shrug of the shoulders, Monsieur d'Antin left him and advanced to Don Agostino.

"Monsieur le Curé," he said, "as I have already told you, my sister does not take advice from me as to the management of her affairs, and I frankly confess to you that I do not understand the situation sufficiently to make interference on my part warrantable. The Abbé Roux is my sister's adviser in all that concerns her affairs. I must refer you to him."

Monsieur d'Antin approached the window again; and then, taking his cigarette-case from his pocket, he proceeded to light a cigarette with quiet deliberation. Don Agostino glanced at him almost with approval. At any rate, he reflected, Baron d'Antin, whatever else he might be, was no coward, and knew how to *se tirer d'affaires* like a gentleman.

"Yes," exclaimed the Abbé Roux, "you, Monsieur le Curé, have to refer to me in this matter. And I tell you again that it is useless that you and the *canaille* attempt to intimidate the princess—absolutely useless. What did I say to you a few minutes ago? We are not imbeciles here—certainly not imbeciles, monsieur; as you and your friends outside will find out—if they dare to continue this violence much longer. No; go to these insolent peasants, and tell them that your mission has failed."

Don Agostino looked the abbé steadily in the face for a moment, and then, without a word, turned his back upon him for the second time that afternoon.

"Monsieur le Baron," he said, coldly, "it would be well that you should inform the princess what is taking place, and you will doubtless know how to prevent her and Donna Bianca Acorari from being unduly alarmed. I have done my office here, and it is not my fault if I have failed. My place now is with my people."

Don Agostino was about to pass Monsieur d'Antin with a formal bow, when the latter suddenly held out his hand.

"*Monsignore*," he said, "you came as a peacemaker; and, believe me, I regret

that you do not take away with you terms of peace. I regret it, I repeat, and I am not responsible for what has occurred, or for what may occur."

Don Agostino scarcely heard him. He hurried down the gallery and across the entrance-hall, followed by two trembling domestics, who unbarred the doors opening on to the court-yard.

By this time the fury of the crowd at finding itself prevented from entering the castle had passed all bounds of control. Blow after blow rained upon the wooden gates leading into the court; and suddenly, while Don Agostino was in the act of crossing the court-yard, the gates burst open with a crash, having given way before the impetus of a mad rush from the mob without.

For a moment the peasants stood undecided—surprised, perhaps, at the sudden yielding of the gates.

Don Agostino, seeing their indecision, advanced towards them.

"My friends—" he began.

A great shout drowned his voice.

"*Traditore! Vigliacco d'un prete!*"

Then a stone struck him, and, with a hoarse roar like that of an angry beast, the crowd surged into the court-yard.

XXXII

The stone hurled at Don Agostino had fortunately only hit him on the body, for, owing to the violence with which it had been thrown, it certainly would have stunned him had it struck him on the head. As it was, however, the folds of his *soutane* somewhat broke the force of the blow. Don Agostino was scarcely conscious that he had been struck, so great was his amazement at the savage reception he had met with at the hands of his parishioners. Looking round on the angry faces and threatening gestures of the mob of peasants in front of him, Don Agostino speedily realized that neither Sor Stefano nor any of the more prominent supporters of the peasantry were among those who had forced their way into the court-yard. A feeling of anger and indignation took possession of him as he noted the fact. It was the usual thing, he thought bitterly—the invariable system of the incitement of the poor and the ignorant to do the dirty work by those who would instantly desert them in the hour of danger.

Disgust at what he believed to be treachery on the part of those who

had been mainly instrumental in instigating the peasants to their present action quickly took the place of the surprise and indignation that Don Agostino had felt at the way in which the people had suddenly turned against him.

Without hesitation, and with a demeanor as calm and composed as though he were mounting the steps of his pulpit, he ascended the double stone staircase leading from the court-yard to the doors from which he had issued only a minute or two previously. The doors were shut and bolted now. The servants had fled precipitately at the sight of the entrance-gates giving way before the assault of the mob, and Don Agostino found himself alone with an angry and menacing crowd confronting him, and behind him the great Renaissance palace of Cardinal Acorari, with its portal barred, and the wooden shutters outside the windows on the *piano nobile* already closed by its inmates. He stopped at the top of the first flight of steps; and, advancing to the stone balustrade, looked down on the peasants below him.

They were still crowded together round the entrance-gates, and seemed as though uncertain what their next move should be. Possibly, too, they were taken aback at finding themselves within a deserted court-yard, with closed windows all round them, and nothing but the solitary black figure of Don Agostino standing in front of the entrance to that portion of the castle inhabited by the princess and Bianca Acorari.

Drawing himself up to his full height, Don Agostino made a gesture as though to wave back a group of peasants who, detaching themselves from the rest, were approaching the flight of steps on which he stood—a gesture that was almost imperious.

"You have broken your word to me," he cried; "you, and those who have sent you here and are afraid to come themselves! You promised that you would make no move until I returned from the castle—" Shouts of "*Abbasso il pretaccio*! Liar—traitor!" interrupted and drowned his words.

Don Agostino's eyes flashed with anger.

"Silence!" he exclaimed. "And if there is a man among you, let him stand out and tell me what you mean—what you accuse me of. Choose your spokesman. I am waiting to hear what he has to say." He folded his arms and leaned against the balustrade almost indifferently. His demeanor was not lost on the crowd, composed of peasants though it was. Its members fell to talking excitedly among themselves, and presently one of the younger men came forward. Don Agostino recognized him as the speaker at the Caffè Garibaldi that morning, who had advocated no delay in going to the castle and insisting on seeing Donna Bianca Acorari in person.

"You ask us what it is we accuse you of!" he exclaimed, in a threatening voice. "*Porca Madonna*!"

"There is no necessity to be blasphemous," interrupted Don Agostino, sternly.

"If it had not been for your promises, and because we believed that you would not deceive us, we should have been here this morning. You persuaded us to delay, because all the time you knew that the soldiers had been sent for."

"I did not know it," said Don Agostino, in a voice that rang through the court-yard. "I swear that I did not know it until I read the telegram in the paper that you have probably all seen. Even now I do not know that the report is true. In the castle they deny that there has ever been any idea of sending for troops, and, still more, that they have been actually sent for. You accuse me of having deceived you. I tell you that until a few minutes ago I have been doing my best to persuade the princess to give you a hearing. But other counsels have prevailed, and I have not succeeded in seeing either her or the Principessina Donna Bianca. No—I have deceived you in nothing, but you have been deceived all the same. You have been deceived by those who have encouraged you to come here and commit acts of violence, but who have, nevertheless, taken good care not to compromise themselves. Now, my friends, I have answered your accusations. What further reasons have you to give for turning against me, who have never done anything to deserve your want of confidence?"

Cries of "*È vero! È vero!*" greeted Don Agostino's words, and a few shouts of "*Evviva il parroco!*" were raised from the back of the crowd.

Don Agostino slowly descended the steps, and advanced towards the foremost group of peasants.

"Listen to me, *ragazzi miei*," he said. "Be wise and go back to the *paese*, quietly. I told you this morning that you would obtain nothing by violence, and I tell it you again. There are other means—better means—of obtaining your rights than by committing wrongs. Have I ever deceived you? I think not. Did I deceive *you*, Angelo Frassi, when you were nearly crippled for life, and I sent you to the hospital in Rome, and you came back cured? Or *you*, Pietro Santucci, when your mother was dying, and you had not money left in the house to buy a piece of meat to make her a cup of broth? *Via, figli miei*, you have called me some hard names, but I think, all the same, that you will trust me for a little yet."

Don Agostino paused, and an outburst of cheering came from his audience. The peasants he had named, who were among the most threatening of the younger men among the mob, shrunk back shamefaced and abashed. The *parroco's* appeal was true, and they knew it to be so. There were few in the crowd, moreover, who, in some way or another, had not experienced Don Agostino's sympathy and generosity.

Almost mechanically they made way for him to pass between their ranks, and followed him over the debris of the broken gates out on to the square-paved

piazza, in front of the walls and round battlemented towers flanking the main entrance to the castle.

Don Agostino had just breathed a sigh of relief at the effects of his appeal, when a band of some fifty or sixty men, accompanied by as many women and children, rushed into the piazza out of the steep road leading up to the castle from the town.

"The troops!" they shouted. "The troops! They are entering the town now. In a few minutes they will be here!"

A howl of rage answered them from the mob of peasants behind and around Don Agostino.

"*Traditore—traditore! porco d'un prete*! It was for this you were waiting—deceiving us with your lies till you knew the soldiers would be here! Ah, *vigliacco*!"

A rush was made at him by those nearest, and Don Agostino had just time to defend himself from a blow dealt with the handle of a broken spade, the end of which was still covered by the rusty iron ferrule. His suspicions were verified now. The Abbé Roux had lied to him, and when Don Agostino had seen him glancing every now and again at his watch, he had been calculating how many minutes might elapse before the appearance of the troops he had caused to be summoned. It had been the knowledge that these troops were in the vicinity that had doubtless given the abbé courage to refuse to listen to any representations, even from Monsieur d'Antin, as to the advisability of treating with the peasants.

It had been the suspicion—nay, almost the certainty, that the Abbé Roux was lying, and that troops had already been requisitioned, which had made Don Agostino determined if possible to persuade the peasants to leave the court-yard of the castle. If the troops should arrive when the mob was within the walls, the peasants would be caught, as it were, in a trap, and any additional act of violence on their part, or error of judgment on the part of the officers of the *pubblica sicurezza*, who, in accordance with the law, would have to accompany the officer commanding and call upon him to order the soldiers to charge or fire on the crowd, might lead to appalling results.

It had been of the safety of his people that Don Agostino had been thinking, far more than of his own safety, and even now, with the angry mob shouting execrations and threats upon him for his treachery, he reproached himself bitterly for having played into the Abbé Roux's hands, by delaying his exit from the castle until the peasants had already commenced their assault.

He had little time to think of this now, however. It was in vain that he attempted for a moment to make his voice heard above the din. The mob was too angry now, too certain that it had been deceived, to listen to him a second time, and Don Agostino knew it.

He turned and faced the crowd in silence, and the thought of the irony of his situation brought a fleeting smile to his lips. How could the peasants know that he sympathized with them—that it was not he who had deceived them, but that he himself had been deceived?

"*Morte—morte al pretaccio! Morte all 'assassino!*"

Well, death must come some time; and, at any rate, he had tried to do his duty. Death, perhaps, would come to him as it had done to his Master, at the hands of those who knew not what they did.

"*Morte—morte al traditore!*"

A heavy blow struck from behind him fell upon his head, causing him to reel and totter back. Don Agostino shut his eyes, and his lips moved silently. Surely, death was very near now. Surely—

Suddenly another voice sounded in his ears. His name was shouted out loudly; yes, but in very different accents from those of the peasants now closing round him.

Don Agostino opened his eyes in time to see two men with raised reaping-hooks, who were apparently about to strike him a more deadly blow than the rest, hurled right and left, and the next moment Silvio Rossano stood by his side.

"Stand back!" Silvio shouted. "Back, I say, or by God, I will blow the brains out of the first man who comes within a metre of Don Agostino!" and as he spoke he covered the nearest peasant with a revolver.

"*Coraggio*, Don Agostino!" he said, quickly, "you are not hurt—no? In a minute or two the troops will be here. Ah, I could stay no longer. I knew the mob had gone to the castle, and that you were still there. And then, on my way here, I met Fontana and his daughter, and they told me the peasants had turned against you. When I heard that I ran as hard as I could—and here I am!"

Don Agostino felt sick and dizzy from the blow he had received. "You are just in time, Silvio *mio*," he said. "Another minute, and who knows whether you would have found me alive? Oh, but it is not their fault, the poor people—they think that I knew the troops had been sent for, and that I meant to deceive them."

The peasants, who had fallen back at Silvio's unexpected appearance and at the sight of his revolver, now began to crowd round Don Agostino again, and once more cries of "*Morte al pretaccio!*" were raised, coupled with threats against Silvio and curses at his interference.

Suddenly a woman's voice rose above the uproar. "Fools!—idiots! Are you trying to murder your best friend, Don Agostino? And that other—-do you know who he is? He is the *fidanzato* of the Principessina Bianca!"

The voice was Concetta Fontana's. Accompanied by her father and Sor Stefano, she forced her way through the crowd to where Don Agostino and Silvio were standing.

"Yes," roared out Sor Beppe, "my daughter is right—and you—you are pigs and beasts, and it is I who say it! Don Agostino knew no more than I did that the soldiers had been summoned. *Evviva il fidanzato della principessina!*"

The effect of Sor Beppe's intervention was instantaneous, and the mob took up his cry, while Concetta, after whispering a few words in her father's ear, disappeared within the gateway of the castle.

Suddenly a cry arose from the end of the piazza. "The troops—the troops!"

The leaders of the peasants shouted to the rest to follow them. "Back to the castle!" they cried. "The soldiers shall find us there!" and the crowd surged again through the broken-down gates into the court-yard.

"For the love of God, come!" exclaimed Don Agostino to his companions. "We must put ourselves between them and the soldiers, or who knows what may happen? You, Signor Mazza, speak to the peasants—they will listen to you." Accompanied by Silvio, Fontana, and Sor Stefano, Don Agostino hurried to the gateway and entered the court-yard. Already the mob had swarmed up the staircase at the opposite end of the court, and the foremost were attempting to break in the great double doors in the centre of the *piano nobile*.

They were scarcely inside the court, when the quick tramp of armed men was heard in the piazza; a sharp word of command re-echoed through the gateway, and then a long metallic rattle of steel, as a company of grenadiers and a detachment of infantry fixed bayonets. A moment afterwards the *granatieri* marched through the gateway, the officer in command of them being accompanied by a delegate of public safety wearing the tricolor scarf.

The delegate stepped forward, and in the name of the law called upon the rioters to desist. A shout of defiance answered his words. "We go to see our *padrona! Evviva la principessina, abbasso gli stranieri!*" and a volley of blows resounded on the doors at the top of the double flight of steps.

At this moment the outside shutters of a window in the gallery were thrown open, and the Abbé Roux appeared at it.

"Signor Delegate," he cried, "in the name of the Principessa di Montefiano, I call upon you to protect the inhabitants of this castle from the assault of a disorderly mob. Those men," he added, pointing to Don Agostino and his companions, "are the ringleaders—they are responsible for this agitation."

A howl of execration from the mob followed the Abbé Roux's speech, and sticks and stones were hurled at the window at which he was standing.

The delegate looked from the abbé to Don Agostino and Silvio Rossano, who was standing by his side, in some perplexity.

"Your names, *signori*," he said, curtly.

"Agostino Lelli, *parroco* of Montefiano."

"Silvio Rossano, son of the Senator Rossano."

"*Evviva! Evviva il fidanzato della nostra principessina!*" shouted the crowd.

The official looked up to the window again.

"There is surely some mistake—" he began.

"I tell you, Signor Delegate, that there is no mistake," shouted the Abbé Roux. "Is this a time to waste words, when in a moment the mob will be inside the castle?"

The delegate shrugged his shoulders. Then he turned to Don Agostino and Silvio. "Signori," he said, courteously, "I must ask you to consider yourselves under arrest pending further inquiries. Have the kindness to place yourselves behind the troops!"

The peasants began to leave the staircase and flock into the body of the court-yard.

"*Morte al prele straniero!*" they shouted. "We will have no arrests!"

The delegate made a sign to the officer in command of the grenadiers, and immediately the three bugle-calls which the law ordains shall precede any action on the part of troops against the public resounded through the court-yard.

Moved partly by rage and partly by fear, the peasants made another rush towards the staircase. The delegate called upon the officer in command to order his men to charge. The captain hesitated.

"Signor Delegate," he said, "a little patience; it maybe that my men may be saved from having to perform a disagreeable duty."

Don Agostino went up to him. "You are right, Signor Capitano. For God's sake, let us have patience! Let me see if I can make them hear reason—ah!"

"*Cristo!*" swore the officer, drawing in his breath sharply.

A sudden silence had fallen on the mob, and those who were half-way up the stone staircase paused and stood still.

Then, Sor Stefano's voice rang out:

"*Ecco la principessina! Evviva la nostra padrona!*"

A great shout answered him. The doors at the top of the staircase had opened, and in the centre of them stood Bianca Acorari. She remained for a moment or two looking steadily down on the astonished crowd of peasants and the double line of *granatieri* drawn up at the back of the court-yard. Then, raising her head proudly, she moved forward and rested her hands on the stone balustrade. It was perhaps no wonder that a silence had fallen on the crowd; that the captain of *granatieri* had sworn, and that one of his men had let his musket fall with a clatter to the ground. The sudden appearance of a young girl, simply dressed in white, with the light falling on her tawny gold hair, and her creamy complexion flushed with a glow of excitement, her every movement full of high-bred grace and dignity, among a mob of angry peasants, formed a picture that certainly could not be seen every day.

"They tell me that you want to see me—to speak with me. Well, I am here to speak with you. I am Bianca Acorari."

The low, clear voice could be heard all over the court-yard. There was no tremor of fear, no trace of excitement, even, in its tones. For a few moments soldiers and peasants gazed, as though spellbound, at the girlish figure standing alone upon the steps against the background formed by the columns and heavy mouldings of the portico. Then the silence which succeeded her appearance was broken; and when she ceased speaking, the peasants greeted her with an outburst of cheering, in which—did discipline permit—the soldiers looked as though they would willingly join.

If the delegate representing the law had been perplexed before, he was fairly bewildered now at the turn events had taken. The message received that morning from the *sindaco* of Montefiano had been urgent, and the instant despatch of an armed force had been requested by that official for the purpose both of maintaining public order and of protecting the Princess Montefiano and Donna Bianca Acorari from violence at the hands of their unruly tenants.

The *delegato*, indeed, was about to demand an explanation from the *avvocato* Ricci, who had waited for the arrival of the troops before venturing to show himself among the mob in his official capacity as *syndic*, when the Abbé Roux, livid with rage and excitement, rushed from the doorway down the steps to where Bianca was standing.

"Signor Delegato," he cried, "once more I request that the castle be cleared of these rioters. In the name of her excellency, the princess—" A woman's voice interrupted him.

"*Eccolo—Ecco l'Abate! Fuori gli stranieri!*"

A cry of execration rose from the crowd, and in an instant its passions were kindled afresh. A sudden rush was made for the staircase, but the captain in command of the *granatieri* had watched his opportunity, and by a rapid movement his men had placed themselves between the mob and its base. At the same time a detachment of the infantry left outside the court-yard filed through the gateway and occupied the space in the rear of the mob.

The peasants, as Don Agostino had foreseen would probably be the case were they to be surprised in the court-yard by the troops, were trapped; and it was the discovery that they were so which redoubled their fury against the foreign priest. Uttering a volley of curses and blasphemies, a group of the younger men attempted to force their way to the staircase. For the second time the bugle sounded the three warning blasts. At that instant both Silvio and Don Agostino hurled themselves against the foremost of the peasants who were struggling to break through the ranks of the *granatieri*. They tried to force them back, imploring them at the same time not to oblige the troops to use their weapons.

The delegate misunderstood the action of the two men whom he had a few minutes previously told to consider themselves as under arrest, and a further furious appeal from the Abbé Roux did not help him to keep his head or his temper. He turned angrily to the officer in command, and ordered him to give the word to his men to charge the crowd.

"Yes—yes!" shouted the abbé. "Drive the *canaglia* out of the court-yard! Donna Bianca Acorari, Signor Delegate, has no business to be here. She is a minor, and has no authority. She is being deceived by certain adventurers who have incited the peasants to revolt. You, Signor Capitano, give the order to charge, as the law requires you to do."

The delegate stamped his foot angrily. "In the name of the law, charge the crowd!" he shouted to the soldiers.

"No! I, Bianca Acorari, Principessina di Montefiano, forbid it! I will not have the people—my people—touched."

The Abbé Roux attempted to restrain her; but, breaking away from him, Bianca rushed down the steps. The soldiers mechanically made way for her to pass between their ranks; and erect, defiant, she stood between the troops and the excited mob confronting them.

The delegate, like the majority of the officials of Italian bureaucracy, was extremely sensitive in any thing which touched his official dignity or prerogative.

"*Signorina*," he exclaimed, "you will have the goodness to retire. We are not here to play a comedy. Signor Capitano, order your men to dislodge the mob from the court-yard."

Bianca turned to the officer, her eyes flashing with anger.

"*Signore*," she said, "your men are not assassins, and you—you will not give that order! The people have come to see me—to speak with me. Who has any right, excepting myself, to turn them away? That priest"—and she pointed with a scornful gesture to the Abbé Roux standing on the steps above—"has lied!"

The officer lowered the point of his sword.

"Signor Delegato," he said, "I protest. My men shall not charge."

"You are here to obey my orders," shouted the *delegato*, angrily. "I shall report you to headquarters."

"I undertake the responsibility of disobeying your orders," returned the officer, coldly. "My men shall not move. Signorina," he added, "you need not be afraid. As you say, we are not assassins."

A murmur ran through the ranks of the *granatieri*. Every man's eyes were fixed upon Bianca Acorari.

At this moment Sor Beppe forced his way through the struggling crowd and approached Bianca.

"Excellenza," he said, quickly, "speak to the people. They will do what you

tell them—you will see."

In the mean time, neither Silvio nor Don Agostino had seen Bianca's descent into the court-yard, so occupied had they been in reasoning and almost fighting with the leaders of that faction of the peasants which was in favor of trying to force a passage through the cordon of troops in front of the staircase.

In a stentorian voice Fontana shouted out that the Principessina Bianca wished to speak to the people, and Sor Stefano seconded his efforts to obtain silence. Bianca moved slowly forward, until she was within a few paces of her lover and Don Agostino.

"*Evviva la nostra principessina*! Speak, speak!" shouted those nearest to her.

Bianca smiled. "I have little to say," she said, simply, "but I have heard that things have been done in my name that are unjust things. You have come here to tell my step-mother, the princess, this; is it not so? Well, I shall tell her; and I, Bianca Acorari, promise you that there shall be no increase in the rents, and that a faithful servant of Casa Acorari, who has been dismissed because he would not consent to injustice being done in my step-mother's and my name, shall be—no—is recalled to his post," and she turned to Sor Beppe with a quiet smile.

A dead silence greeted her words. The peasants forgot to cheer her. They could only look at her, open-mouthed and wonder-struck. Don Agostino started forward and gazed at her almost wildly for a moment. Then, staggering back, and placing his hands to his head, he seemed as though he would have fallen to the ground had it not been for Silvio, who supported him in his arms.

"Listen," Bianca continued, tranquilly, "for I do not wish you, the people of Montefiano, to think what is not the truth. My step-mother is not responsible for what has been done, any more than I am responsible. She is good, and she would never have consented to anything which was unjust. But she has been deceived—yes—deceived by that priest in whom she trusted, who summoned the soldiers here, and who, as you have heard, has called upon them to charge you with their bayonets."

An outburst of hisses and groans followed her last words, and once more the crowd made a movement as though to force its way to the staircase. The soldiers closed up, lowering their muskets with fixed bayonets to the charge.

Silvio Rossano and Don Agostino, who by a supreme effort over himself had regained his composure, sprang to Bianca's side. The color mounted to her face as she looked at Silvio, and their eyes met. Then she turned from him to the crowd that was swaying like the swell of the sea before a coming storm.

"No!" she called out, imperatively. "There must be no more violence. You say that you will do what I ask you—that you trust me? Well, I ask you to go quietly to your homes, secure in having my word that the injustices committed by the Abate Roux will be removed."

"She speaks well! *Evviva la Principessina Bianca!*" shouted the crowd.

"Yes—long live the Principessina Bianca, and long live her betrothed husband, Signor Silvio Rossano! *Evviva*! *Evviva*!" cried Sor Beppe.

His words were taken up with an almost frenzied enthusiasm. It was evident that the peasants had been waiting for some allusion to the *principessina's* own troubles, now that they had obtained their desire and had heard from her lips that she disapproved of what had been done in the princess's and her name. Concetta Fontana's reports had indeed been cleverly circulated, with a view of securing to Bianca the sympathy and support of the people. The women of the *paese* had poured into the ears of their husbands, brothers, and lovers such stories of the *principessina's* unhappiness at being forbidden to marry the man she loved, and at the prospect of being sacrificed to the lust of an old man and the dishonest schemes of the Abbé Roux, as had aroused local indignation to the highest pitch. At the same time, Bianca's defence of the princess and her decided refusal to allow her step-mother to be blamed, had only coincided with the sentiments of the large majority of her hearers. Public opinion in Montefiano had long ago exonerated the princess from any other offence than that of being a foreigner who allowed her own compatriots to interfere in the management of her step-daughter's affairs.

The sight of Silvio Rossano standing by their young *padrona*, who had shown them that she could fearlessly take the part of her people against injustice, was all that had been needed to evoke an unmistakable demonstration that, whatever the princess and her advisers might do, the Montefianesi approved of Bianca's choice.

"*Evviva i fidanzati!*" rang from all parts of the court-yard, while there were also not wanting premature shouts of "*Evviva gli sposi!*"

Bianca blushed scarlet. She stood for a moment hesitating and uncertain, almost unnerved by the acclamations of the crowd of peasants whose threatening attitude a few minutes before had only served to kindle her spirit and rouse her courage. Then, shyly, she turned to Silvio.

"Speak to them," she said, pushing him gently forward.

Silvio was about to obey her, when a sudden movement among the soldiers at the foot of the staircase arrested the attention of the crowd. At a word from their officer, the ranks of the *granatieri* parted, and Princess Montefiano approached her step-daughter. Monsieur d'Antin was by her side, and the Abbé Roux followed immediately behind them.

Bianca rushed up to her step-mother. "Ah," she exclaimed, quickly, in a low voice, "I am glad you have come! See, the people are quite quiet now. There is no more danger. You must not blame me; I was told that nothing would happen if I came and spoke to them, but that if I did not, then they would be more angry

than ever, and the troops would charge—and then—" and she shuddered visibly.

The princess looked at her, and apparently was unable to summon her words for a moment or two. That she was not suffering from fear was evident, for she gazed at the crowd of peasants almost indifferently.

"You are angry," said Bianca. "I am sorry; but I did what I thought—what I was told—was for the best. After all," she added, "they are my father's people, and they wanted me. Surely it was better to try to calm them than to allow a fight with the soldiers! Why should you be angry if I have prevented that?"

"Hush, Bianca, hush!" exclaimed Princess Montefiano. "I am not angry. You did right. I would have come before, but Monsieur l'Abbé Roux persuaded me not to show myself, and until five minutes ago I believed you were in your own room. I have seen and heard everything during the last few minutes from the gallery, but I do not quite understand. Now I have come to learn the truth. Monsignor Lelli," she continued, raising her voice so as to be heard by the crowd, which was now dumb from wonder and curiosity, "you came to see me this afternoon, and I was advised not to receive you. Will you now say what you would have said had I not listened to that advice?"

The Abbé Roux started forward, and was about to speak, but Princess Montefiano waved him back.

"No, monsieur," she said, with dignity, "the people shall hear you afterwards. *Monsignore*," she added, again addressing Don Agostino, "will you have the kindness to explain to me your reasons for wishing to see me this afternoon?"

Don Agostino bowed to her. "My object in asking you to see me, principessa, was to communicate to you personally the requests which would have been made by the deputation you declined to receive. I had, it is true, another and even more pressing object. This was to interest you to prevent the despatch of troops to Montefiano."

The princess did not reply for a moment. Then she said, slowly and emphatically:

"The requests of the deputation which I was advised not to receive, *monsignore*, have been answered by Donna Bianca Acorari. She has promised that certain acts of injustice which have been committed in my name and in hers shall be remedied, and I shall see that her promise is duly carried into effect."

A murmur of applause interrupted her. Monsieur d'Antin, standing a little apart, watched his sister critically.

"*Tiens!*" he said to himself, "Jeanne is a capable woman—more capable than I imagined. She can rise to a situation. If she would only think less of the next world and more of this, she would be more capable still."

"As to the despatch of troops to Montefiano," the princess added, "until five minutes ago I was in ignorance that any such step had been taken. The requisi-

tion for military intervention was made without consulting me and without my authority."

"*Evviva la principessina! Viva l'esercito!*" shouted the peasants.

"*Signori*," Princess Montefiano continued, addressing the delegate and the officer in command of the *granatieri*, "perhaps you will be so good as to tell me at whose request you are here?"

The delegate of public safety bustled forward, full of the consciousness of his own importance and dignity.

"I am here at the request of the *sindaco* of Montefiano," he replied, "to enforce order and respect for the law in this commune."

The princess turned from him abruptly.

"Signor Commandante," she said to the military officer, "I thank you for your discretion in refusing to allow the people to be attacked at the bidding of a civilian. My brother has told me of your declining to order your men to charge the crowd. You may be sure that your conduct will be represented in its proper light to the authorities. In the mean time, perhaps you will tell me who summoned you to Montefiano?"

The captain shrugged his shoulders. "Your *sindaco*, Signora Principessa, telegraphed to the military authorities at Civitacastellana for troops to be despatched at once. An official of the *pubblica sicurezza* accompanied me, according to the requirements of the law in these circumstances, and the law places me at the Signor Delegate's orders for the time being. Nevertheless, an officer is allowed to use a certain discretion as to carrying out any orders that may in his opinion be inopportune—and I merely exercised that discretion. I may add," he continued, with a glance of admiration at Bianca, "that had it not been for the timely arrival of Donna Bianca Acorari on the scene, and her courage in facing the crowd at a very critical moment, I should probably have been reluctantly compelled to order my men to clear the court-yard. We soldiers do not like that kind of work, Signora Principessa; and both I and my men are grateful to Donna Bianca for having spared us the unpleasant duty of performing it."

Princess Montefiano looked round her.

"Where is the *sindaco*?" she asked.

A movement took place in the rear of the crowd, and presently the *avvocato* Ricci advanced into the open space.

"I understand, Signor Sindaco," the princess said, "that the troops are here at your request. With the arrangements of the municipal authorities regarding the town of Montefiano I have nothing to do. But within the castle of Montefiano I am mistress. Why was I not informed that troops had been sent for?"

Monsieur d'Antin rubbed his hands together. "Jeanne is superb," he said to himself, "absolutely superb!"

The *sindaco* looked petrified with astonishment.

"But," he stammered, "it was after consultation with the Signor Abate that I made the official application for troops to be sent. The abate assured me that he was acting in your *eccellenza's* name. He declared it to be your wish that troops should at once be despatched to protect the castle."

"Monsieur l'Abbé," said the princess, quietly, "is this true?"

"Madame," replied the Abbé Roux, sullenly, "I have already explained that if I did not inform you of the fact that I had applied for military protection against a possible assault on the castle by the peasants, it was because I did not wish unduly to alarm you and the inmates of the castle. I believed that I had full authority to act as I might think best in this as in other matters."

"You were mistaken, monsieur," the princess returned, coldly. "This matter," she continued, "has been from the beginning misrepresented to me. What proof have I that in other matters, also, I have not been deceived?"

"Your excellency has been deceived all down the line!" shouted a voice from the crowd. "It is I, Stefano Mazza, who say it!"

Princess Montefiano turned to Don Agostino.

"Stefano Mazza?" she repeated, inquiringly.

Sor Stefano came forward.

"Your excellency, perhaps, is not aware that the Abate Roux is the lessee of the rents of the property belonging to Casa Acorari at Montefiano," he said.

The princess started violently, and Monsieur d'Antin drew nearer to where she was standing.

"What does this mean?" she exclaimed.

"It means, madame, that the man is a liar!" cried the abbé, hoarsely.

Sor Stefano laughed. "If her excellency desires it," he said, "I will this evening put positive proofs into her hands that it is as I say. *Sicuro!* the *affittuario* of these lands is nominally one Signor Oreste Francavalli; is it not so, *eccellenza*? But the Signor Oreste Francavalli is a poor devil of a bankrupt *mercante di campagna*, who has not a lira left in the world, as I know to my cost, and the real holder of the rents is at this moment the Abate Roux. It is not surprising, *eccellenza*, that the *abate* should have wished to increase his profits."

XXXIII

Princess Montefiano seemed to be almost stunned by Sor Stefano's assertion. Once or twice she tried to speak, but appeared to be unable to collect her words.

The Abbé Roux turned furiously to Stefano Mazza. "It is a lie!" he exclaimed. "You cannot prove your assertion. What have I to do with this Oreste Francavalli?"

Sor Stefano laughed scornfully.

"*Mah!*" he returned. "It seems that you have a great deal to do with him, Signor Abate. And I, too, have had a great deal to do with him, as I shall be happy to prove to you from certain documents which I do not carry about with me but which I can produce for her excellency's inspection, should she care to see them. *Sicuro*! Francavalli is an old acquaintance of mine—an old client, I may say. You are probably unaware, Signor Abate, that I found myself reluctantly obliged to make him a bankrupt. It was naturally, therefore, somewhat of a surprise to me to learn that Signor Francavalli had become the new lessee of the *latifondo* of Montefiano. A man does not offer himself as *affittuario* of a large property unless he has some capital at his back—or, if he does do so, his offer is not usually accepted by the administration of that property. It was news to me—interesting news—that Francavalli had capital; for he had certainly not discharged all his liabilities to his creditors, of whom I am not the least important. Do you understand, Signor Abate?"

"It is untrue," the abbé repeated. "Francavalli has never been a bankrupt."

"Ah, no?" returned Stefano Mazza, dryly. "But I tell you that he is a bankrupt—and I will tell you something more, Signor Abate. If Francavalli were the real *affittuario* of these lands, then he would be a fraudulent bankrupt, for he would be in possession of capital and of income which would belong to his creditors. But he is not the real lessee of the lands belonging to Casa Acorari."

"And who says that he is not so?" asked the abbé.

Sor Stefano shrugged his shoulders. "He says so himself," he replied. "Or, rather," he added, "I happen to possess a document signed by him, declaring that he is merely the nominal lessee; that in consideration of a sum of money advanced by you, Signor Abate, he allowed you to use his name, but that the real lessee is yourself. Had it not been for Francavalli's readiness to sign the said document, I should have been compelled to proceed against him for fraud. *Sicuro!* you have been very cautious, Signor Abate, but not quite cautious enough. If you had happened to consult me, I could have told you that in selecting the Signor Oreste Francavalli as your confidant, you had made a bad choice;" and Sor Stefano laughed dryly.

For a moment the Abbé Roux remained silent. He was evidently unable to refute Sor Stefano's words, spoken as they were with the calm conviction of a man who knew that he was in a position to substantiate them. Then he turned

to Princess Montefiano.

"Madame," he said, "it is true that, in a sense, I am the purchaser of the right to take the rents of these lands; and also that, as I did not wish to appear as the lessee, I arranged with Francavalli that the affair should be carried out in his name. You are aware, madame, that a larger annual sum is now paid by the lessee than has hitherto been the case, and that the half-yearly payments of this sum have been punctually made. This being so, I do not see that the fact of my being the real lessee instead of Francavalli or another need concern anybody but myself. You, Madame la Princesse, are better off in consequence of my having taken over the lease; and when I told you that a friend of mine was disposed to pay more for the lease of the rents than the lessee whose tenure was just expiring, I only spoke the truth."

Princess Montefiano hesitated, and then turned to her brother with a distressed look on her face. "It is true," she said, in a low voice. "Monsieur l'Abbé advised me not to give the late *affittuario* a renewal of his term, promising me that he would find a more satisfactory lessee. As he says, we have been better off since the change, and I do not see—"

"*Eccellenza*," interrupted Sor Stefano, "there is more to say, and with your permission, it had better be said now! The peasants are here not only to obtain justice for themselves, but to support their *padrona*, the Principessina Bianca—is it not so?" he added, turning towards the crowd.

"Yes—yes! Long live the Principessina Bianca!" resounded from all parts of the court-yard. Princess Montefiano bit her lip.

"What does he mean?" she asked, abruptly, of Don Agostino.

"*Evviva la principessina! Evviva! Abbasso gli stranieri! Evviva il fidanzato della principessina!*"

The shouts were raised again and again, and among them were others, in which Baron d'Antin was alluded to in terms neither delicate nor complimentary.

The princess flushed with anger.

"*Monsignore*," she exclaimed, turning again to Don Agostino, "am I to understand that you, the *parroco* of Montefiano, encourage your people to insult my brother and myself? I insist upon an explanation, but I will not listen to it from peasants—"

"*Signora principessa*," said Don Agostino, quietly, "you are quite right. Explanations are necessary, but not here—not in the presence of the crowd. Let the Signor Delegato here dismiss the troops, and at a word from you and from Donna Bianca Acorari, the people will disperse quietly. Afterwards," he added, "I shall be entirely at your service to give what explanations I can of the attitude of the peasants."

Princess Montefiano considered for a moment. "So be it, *monsignore*," she

said, at length; and then, turning to the delegate, she added: "*Signore*, as I observed a few minutes ago, I have no right to interfere with the arrangements of the authorities outside these walls; but inside the castle of Montefiano I am mistress, and I beg of you to order the troops to retire. We, I and my step-daughter, have no need of their protection. We are among our own people."

The officer hesitated and looked at Monsieur d'Antin, who had preserved an imperturbable demeanor of good-humor even during the uncomplimentary epithets cast at him by the crowd—epithets, indeed, that he had scarcely understood so well as did the princess.

"My sister is right, *signore*," Monsieur d'Antin observed, tranquilly. "If there are explanations to be made, it is scarcely necessary that the whole population of Montefiano, a company of grenadiers and a detachment of infantry should assist at them. That gentleman," he continued, indicating Sor Stefano, "appears to have considerable authority with the peasants. No doubt he will persuade them to leave the castle quietly, now that they have received assurances that their grievances will be removed."

Sor Stefano turned to the crowd. "Her excellency, the princess, has requested the troops to retire," he said, in a loud voice. "Since she and the *principessina* are here at Montefiano they need no soldiers to protect them. Therefore you will leave the castle quietly and go to your own homes."

"We will go if the *principessina* and her *fidanzato* tell us to go!" shouted a voice from among the group of younger men.

Princess Montefiano drew back suddenly, and her face flushed. For a moment she seemed as if about to resent so obvious an affront to her position and authority.

Monsieur d'Antin advanced towards her. "Jeanne," he said, in a low voice, "I think you would be wise to allow Bianca to complete her office of peacemaker. The peasants evidently are ready to listen to her, and to do what she tells them. Is it not so, *monsignore*?" he added, turning to Don Agostino.

Don Agostino glanced at him with some surprise, and the Abbé Roux's countenance exhibited both astonishment and anger.

"You are quite right, monsieur," Don Agostino replied. "The people will listen to Donna Bianca, and in these cases it is generally prudent to seize every opportunity of bringing matters to a peaceful solution. Moreover," he continued, "if I may presume to say so, the fact of Madame la Princesse putting Donna Bianca forward will have an excellent effect."

Princess Montefiano looked at him quickly. "You mean—" she began, and then she paused, abruptly.

"Madame," Don Agostino said, returning her look and making a slight gesture of apology, "I mean that your encouraging Donna Bianca Acorari to take her

rightful position before the people of Montefiano will remove many misunderstandings and stop much idle gossip."

The princess gazed inquiringly at him for a moment, then she turned to Bianca. "Speak to them, *figlia mia*," she said, quietly.

Bianca shook her head. "No," she replied; "now that you are here, it is for you to speak to them. I came because I knew—"

"You knew what?" interrupted Princess Montefiano.

"Oh, that Monsieur l'Abbé had told you nothing—that you did not even know the soldiers had been sent for."

"*La principessina*!" shouted the crowd, impatient with a colloquy in a language it could not understand. "*Vogliamo sentire la principessina*!"

Princess Montefiano took her step-daughter by the hand and led her forward. "Speak to them," she repeated, in Italian; and as she spoke, she drew back, leaving Bianca standing in front of her.

The words and the action accompanying them met with an immediate response from the peasants. *"Evviva la principessa!"* they cried, and then pressed forward until Bianca was almost surrounded.

"Go," she said, in a quiet, clear voice—"go back to your homes, now you know that neither my step-mother nor I will allow any injustice to be done to our people. *Signori*," she added, addressing the delegate and the officer in command of the *granatieri*, "you will order the troops to retire, is it not true? You see well that we are in no danger here at Montefiano."

An outburst of approval drowned the remainder of her words, and with a shrug of the shoulders the civil official turned to the officer in command and bade him give the order to his men to leave the court-yard.

The peasants fell back to allow the troops to pass through their midst, and cheered the captain of the *granatieri* as he marched through the gateway at the head of his company.

As the last of the soldiers disappeared under the archway, the majority of the peasants prepared tranquilly to follow them. A certain number lingered, however, talking eagerly among themselves, and presently shouts of "*Evviva i fidanzati!*" were raised, succeeded by cries of "*Evviva Rossano!*"

Princess Montefiano turned hastily, and a look of astonishment and anger crossed her face.

"You see, madame," said the Abbé Roux, quickly, "the whole affair has another scope than that which you have been made to believe to be the case. There is the true ringleader of the peasants"—and he pointed scornfully to Silvio Rossano, who was urging the remainder of the crowd to leave the castle without making any further demonstration.

The princess did not answer, but she looked intently at Silvio for a moment.

Then she turned to her brother. "Philippe," she said, coldly, "you will have the goodness to inform Signor Rossano that his presence here is unwelcome, and that he must leave the castle with—his friends!"

Bianca started forward. "No," she exclaimed, abruptly; "if you send that message, Monsieur d'Antin shall not be the bearer of it! It is an insult, a—"

Princess Montefiano waved her back indignantly. "Have you no shame?" she said, rapidly, beneath her breath.

Monsieur d'Antin smiled. "Bianca is right, Jeanne," he observed. "I prefer not to be the bearer of your message. No doubt Monsieur l'Abbé will undertake to deliver it," and then he laughed gently.

Bianca looked at him for a moment in evident perplexity, and then quickly averted her gaze.

"Wait," she said to her step-mother, earnestly—"wait till you have heard—till you know."

Princess Montefiano gave a gesture of impatience.

"I think you are all mad!" she exclaimed, angrily. "And in this, at least, I will be obeyed. Philippe—"

Don Agostino interrupted her.

"Madame," he said, "let me entreat you not to insist. Donna Bianca is right—it would be an insult. When you have heard all Donna Bianca has to tell you—all that others have to tell you—you will understand better, and perhaps you will form a different opinion. But this is not the place for explanations. It is not necessary to discuss a scandal in public."

"How, *monsignore*, a scandal!" exclaimed Princess Montefiano, indignantly.

"I repeat it, madame—a scandal," returned Don Agostino, looking at the Abbé Roux and Monsieur d'Antin steadily. "Donna Bianca Acorari and yourself have been the victims of a dishonorable intrigue. Ah, I am not afraid to use the expression, for I can prove my words."

"But you may be mistaken, *monsignore*—you may be mistaken," observed Monsieur d'Antin, airily, gently rubbing his hands as he spoke.

"If I am so, monsieur, it is for you and the Abbé Roux to prove it," returned Don Agostino, coldly.

"Ah, as to that," Monsieur d'Antin said, composedly, "I can only speak for myself. Monsieur l'Abbé Roux must make his own defence. I am not responsible for his actions."

The abbé's face grew livid.

"What do you mean?" he exclaimed, hoarsely. "Do you mean to say that your honor is less attacked than mine by this disgraced priest?"

"Honor?" repeated Monsieur d'Antin; "honor, Monsieur l'Abbé? Oh, la, la! Monsignor Lelli is right, Jeanne," he continued. "This is not the place for

explanations. I would suggest retiring in-doors."

The princess looked from one to the other. "I do not understand," she said, at length, "but if I am to hear of more deceptions—more abuses of my trust and confidence—this is certainly not the moment to discuss them. Come, Bianca! *Monsignore*," she continued, "you will doubtless explain to me your words in the presence of Monsieur l'Abbé Roux and my brother."

Don Agostino bowed. "I desire nothing better, madame," he said, and then he paused and glanced at Silvio. "I must ask that Signor Rossano may also be present," he added, "since what I and others have to say concerns him nearly, and it is only fair to him and to Donna Bianca that he should hear it."

The princess gave a gesture of dissent.

"No," she replied, "Signor Rossano is a stranger. I cannot admit that he is in any way concerned with my step-daughter's affairs or with my own."

Don Agostino hesitated for a moment. Then he said, quietly: "I cannot press the subject, madame. It is possible, however, that you may change your opinion."

"When I do so, I will send for Signor Rossano," returned Princess Montefiano, obdurately. "Come, Bianca," she repeated, "we will hear what Monsignor Lelli has to say."

The court-yard was by this time nearly empty. Fontana and Sor Stefano, together with a few of the older and more prominent tenants, alone remained. Princess Montefiano turned away, and, accompanied by Bianca, who, now that she had played her part, seemed to be overcome by a nervous shyness, slowly ascended the flight of steps leading up to the portico of the *piano nobile*. Monsieur d'Antin and the Abbé Roux followed them in silence, but Don Agostino lingered for a moment.

Approaching Silvio, who was standing apart, he said to him, hurriedly: "Do not go away, *figlio mio*, you may be wanted to plead your own cause."

And without waiting to offer any further explanations, he followed the princess and the others into the castle.

XXXIV

Of those who accompanied Princess Montefiano into one of the drawing-rooms on the *piano nobile* of the castle, Monsieur d'Antin certainly appeared to be the

least embarrassed. Throughout the crisis which had just been overcome he had preserved an imperturbable air of composure, and almost, indeed, of indifference. The Abbé Roux glanced at his confederate every now and then with an expression at once of bewilderment and resentment on his countenance. Nevertheless, to judge by his demeanor, Monsieur d'Antin appeared to be completely at his ease, and even, in a quiet way, to be enjoying the situation in the development of which he found himself called upon to assist.

"If you have no objection, my dear Jeanne," he observed airily, to his sister, "I will smoke. It calms the nerves." And, producing his case, he proceeded to light a cigarette in a leisurely and deliberate manner.

Monsieur d'Antin's action seemed to break the spell of embarrassment that had fallen upon those around him. The princess, it was true, had already shown herself to be no longer the weak, pliable individual that even her brother had been accustomed to consider her. The suspicion, now almost a conviction, that she had been deceived, that her authority had been exploited and undermined by the person in whom she had placed all her confidence and reliance, appeared to have had the effect of arousing in Princess Montefiano that spirit of imperiousness which in reality was inherent in her nature, as it has almost invariably been in that of the deeply religious of both sexes and of all creeds—being, after all, but a form of intellectual vanity wearing the garb of holiness. To say the truth, Monsieur d'Antin had been not a little surprised at the change in his sister's attitude. He had expected that she would altogether decline to listen to any evidence that should tell against the Abbé Roux. He had not quite understood that great as was the glamour of the priesthood in his sister's eyes, her own authority and power were yet greater, and that she would not readily condone any action tending to infringe or diminish them.

Moreover, Baron d'Antin had not fully realized how strong was Princess Montefiano's sense of her duty towards her husband's child, or how genuine was her desire fully to act up to that sense. He had always regarded Jeanne's marriage as one of those desperate remedies which single women of a certain age were apt to take as a palliative for evils not invariably of a physical nature; and, being quite aware that his sister had very little real affection for her stepdaughter, he had often wondered whether Bianca's existence must not be, as it were, something of a thorn in the flesh.

But if Monsieur d'Antin was surprised at his sister's change of attitude, he was still more astonished at the blunder committed by the Abbé Roux in basing his schemes to enrich himself at Bianca Acorari's expense on so unsound a foundation. He had always taken it for granted that the Abbé Roux was feathering his own nest, but he had never troubled himself to ascertain the details of the process adopted by that ecclesiastic, though he was convinced that in some

way or another the abbé had succeeded in making money out of his position in the Montefiano household. Indeed, Monsieur l'Abbé had not attempted to deny that Donna Bianca's marriage to a stranger would not at all suit the objects he had in view. Monsieur d'Antin was perfectly aware that he was dealing with a rogue—but he had at least given the abbé the credit of being a clever rogue, though perhaps not quite as clever as himself. He certainly would not have believed that the priest would have allowed himself to be outwitted, as he evidently had been outwitted, by a bankrupt *mercante di campagna*, to whom he had been presumably paying a commission for the use of his name. This was a folly and an irretrievable blunder; and Monsieur d'Antin, who was certainly not lacking in astuteness, on hearing Stefano Mazza's confident assertions, had at once realized that the game had reached the stage of *rien ne va plus*. If he were to continue to maintain friendly relations with Jeanne—and it certainly would not be to his advantage that these relations should cease—he must walk warily. And the Abbé Roux? Well, the Abbé Roux must pay the penalty usually inflicted upon the unsuccessful—he must be disowned.

To be sure, he would have liked to possess Bianca; but, as Monsieur d'Antin had told himself more than once lately, this was obviously impossible of attainment. He was conscious of being no match for the girl's quiet, determined will, and he dared not make any second attempt to force his passion upon her. No, it would be better, more diplomatic, to retire gracefully from the contest while there was yet time; and the present moment surely afforded opportunity for a man of ready resource to do so.

In the mean while, Princess Montefiano had been the object of a keener observation than that of Monsieur d'Antin. Don Agostino had noted every expression of her countenance, every inflection of her voice, almost every movement of her person since she had descended into the court-yard. He had marked the succession of feelings called forth by the discovery that she had been deceived where she had most trusted; he had followed the struggle between her sense of justice, her wounded pride, her disgust and mortification at finding that her confidence had been abused by one whose sacred calling had been used as a means whereby to exploit it. And Don Agostino, far from blaming her former weakness, had sympathized with her in his heart, for he felt that he understood all she was suffering, every phase of her trial. Perhaps it had been some sense of this silent sympathy that had made Princess Montefiano more than once turn to him as though intuitively seeking the aid of the man she had so short a time before refused to receive. If Monsieur d'Antin had found his sister's attitude when brought face to face with her difficulties superb, as he had expressed it, Don Agostino had been scarcely less struck by her courage and unexpected assumption of dignity; and he was fully able to appreciate both the one and the other. It was clear to

him that there was nothing mean about Princess Montefiano, and that, once persuaded that wrong had been done, she would right it at whatever cost to her own feelings. Indeed, Don Agostino was fain to admit that both the princess and Monsieur d'Antin showed *sang de race* in a difficult and embarrassing situation. Nevertheless, he felt himself entirely unable to account for Monsieur d'Antin's apparent composure and indifference, knowing, as he now did, of the pact existing between him and the Abbé Roux, whereby Bianca Acorari was, if possible, to be sacrificed.

Don Agostino's reflections were disturbed by the princess addressing him.

"*Monsignore*," she said, quietly, "we can now discuss, in private, matters which it was not fitting to discuss before my step-daughter. I must ask you to explain the meaning of certain expressions you have used regarding Donna Bianca Acorari. I do not wish you to be under any misapprehension, so it will be perhaps as well that I should tell you that my brother has had my full consent in wishing to make Donna Bianca his wife. You appear to be aware that my step-daughter has allowed herself to form another attachment in—in an entirely undesirable quarter. I am her guardian, and without my consent she cannot marry until she is twenty-one. This, *monsignore*, was a special clause to her father's will."

"Madame, I am under no misapprehension," returned Don Agostino. "It is rather you who are so and I regret to be obliged to say what will give you pain to hear."

"Continue, *monsignore*," said Princess Montefiano, as he paused.

"You ought to know, madame, that if you have been persuaded to sanction a union between Baron d'Antin and your step-daughter, it is because such a union would have enabled the Abbé Roux to continue for some years to farm the rents of Donna Bianca's lands. Briefly, madame, you have been tricked by the Abbé Roux, and, I regret to say, by your brother, who, in return for the abbé's assistance in persuading you to allow such a marriage, engaged not to interfere with his lease of the rents for a certain period, before the expiration of which Donna Bianca would long have attained her majority. The danger of her marrying an honest gentleman of good family, who has been represented to you as an adventurer and a nobody, has been perpetually put forward with the object of gaining your consent to what your own sense of justice, of propriety, madame, would otherwise have forbidden you to contemplate."

Princess Montefiano started up from her chair. "*Monsignore!*" she exclaimed; "do you know what you are saying? You forget that you are accusing my brother of a villanous action! Philippe," she continued, passionately, "tell Monsignor Lelli that he is mistaken—tell him that he lies, if you like—but do not let me think that you, my brother, have also deceived me—that you could lend yourself to such a horrible intrigue—"

"My dear Jeanne!" interrupted Monsieur d'Antin. "My dear Jeanne!" he repeated, and then he laughed softly.

"It is incredible—monstrous! I will not believe it!" Princess Montefiano exclaimed, with increasing agitation.

Monsieur d'Antin blew a ring of smoke into the air from his cigarette. "Monsignor Lelli is mistaken, Jeanne," he observed, tranquilly; "one can say as much to him without offence. But to say that he lies would not be permissible. It would be—well, an exaggeration. Before replying to his accusation, I should like to ask Monsignor Lelli on what grounds he bases it. He does not, I presume, derive his information from Monsieur l'Abbé Roux?"

Don Agostino looked at him steadily.

"I derive my information from those who have overheard conversations between you and the Abbé Roux—conversations carried on, as you believed, in private—in which your plans were very fully discussed. Can you deny, monsieur, that the arrangement I have named exists between you and the Abbé Roux?"

Monsieur d'Antin shrugged his shoulders. "I have not the least intention of denying it," he observed, calmly.

"Philippe!" exclaimed the princess.

The abbé started forward. "*Imbécile!*" he muttered, under his breath.

"It is perfectly true," pursued Monsieur d'Antin, ignoring him. "I entered into the compact with Monsieur l'Abbé, the nature of which Monsignor Lelli has described fairly accurately. You see, my dear Jeanne," he continued, "I have not your reverence for the clergy, and I thought it possible—just possible—that Monsieur l'Abbé Roux was—well, taking advantage of your belief in the apostolic succession. Is not that the correct term? By degrees I became convinced of it. It amused me to see how far Monsieur l'Abbé, with a little encouragement, would go; and I—yes, I myself—proposed to him the arrangement which Monsignor Lelli has just disclosed. It was eagerly jumped at, my little proposal," and Monsieur d'Antin rubbed his hands together gently, with a quiet chuckle.

"It is a lie!" cried the abbé, furiously. "You confessed to me that you were in love with Donna Bianca, and asked me to use my influence with the princess to remove her objections to your becoming the husband of her step-daughter."

"And you gave me absolution," returned Monsieur d'Antin, dryly. "Ah, yes, you certainly gave me absolution—but conditionally, Monsieur l'Abbé, always conditionally, you know!"

"But, Philippe," interrupted Princess Montefiano, "I do not understand. You told me yourself that you loved Bianca—that you would only be happy when she consented to be your wife."

"Quite true, my dear Jeanne," Monsieur d'Antin replied. "What would you have? I do not wear the *soutane*, so I have no protection against the weaknesses

of the flesh. Yes, your step-daughter is charming, adorable—but her charms are not for me. She has made that very clear to me. It is deplorable, but I have failed, and there is nothing left for me but to retire in favor of a more fortunate rival. But my failure has nothing to do with the point—nothing at all. If Monsieur l'Abbé wants further explanations of my conduct in allowing him to believe that in return for his assistance in my unlucky affair of the heart I should not interfere with his affairs of the pocket, I am quite ready to give them to him. But, monsieur," he added, as the Abbé Roux, white with rage and mortification, attempted to interrupt him, "do not forget that in giving me absolution when I made my little confession to you of my passion for Donna Bianca, you stipulated for something in return. It is always so, is it not? One is not supposed to come to *le bon Dieu* empty handed. You made it clear that without your support I could never hope to gain my sister's consent to my object, and that you were only disposed to accord this support on the condition of my not interfering with your rights over the rents of the Montefiano lands.

"Well, I agreed; but I agreed under that most convenient of all compromises—a mental reservation. *A la guerre comme à la guerre, n'est-ce pas*, Monsieur l'Abbé? Ha, ha, ha!" and Monsieur d'Antin laughed good-humoredly.

The Abbé Roux remained silent. Perhaps he was thinking that the suspicions he had at times entertained as to whether it were not Monsieur d'Antin who was manipulating him rather than he Monsieur d'Antin, had turned out to be entirely justifiable.

In the mean time, Don Agostino had been regarding Monsieur d'Antin with a peculiar expression, which was certainly not that of a person convinced of the truth of what he had just heard.

"You wish me to understand, then," he said to him, dryly, "that you merely pretended to fall in with the Abbé Roux's suggestions, in order to ascertain how far your suspicions that he was abusing his position as confidential adviser to Madame la Princesse were correct?"

Monsieur d'Antin turned to him with admirable dignity.

"Assuredly, *monsignore*," he replied. "Do you presume, then, to suppose that I should lend myself to a conspiracy to deceive my own sister, and to enrich an unworthy individual at her and Donna Bianca Acorari's expense? No, monsieur! I may have my little weaknesses where women are concerned, and I frankly admit that had Donna Bianca not rejected my advances I should have considered myself a very happy man. But where my honor is concerned, Monsieur le Curé, or the honor of my family, I, Philippe d'Antin, have no weaknesses!"

Don Agostino looked at him hard, and his finely moulded lips curved in an ironical smile.

"I make you my compliments, Monsieur le Baron," he said, quietly. "One

sees that you have done your best to protect yourself from possible misconstructions being placed upon your actions."

Monsieur d'Antin bowed and smiled benignly.

"Precisely," he said, suavely. "You, *monsignore*, as a man of the world, will understand—"

"Everything," interposed Don Agostino, with a slight shrug of the shoulders.

At this moment Princess Montefiano, who had been listening attentively to all that had passed, suddenly rose from her chair.

"Monsieur l'Abbé," she said, coldly, "I have heard enough to convince me that I need no longer trouble you for your advice or assistance in the management of my affairs.

"No, monsieur," she continued, as the abbé tried to speak, "excuses are useless. My confidence has been abused; and you have presumed to mislead me in the exercise of my authority over my step-daughter and her affairs for motives of your own. You may return to Rome, monsieur, since your services here are no longer required. You will have ample time to drive to Attigliano and take the evening train."

"Madame!" exclaimed the Abbé Roux.

"Not a word, sir," returned the princess, imperiously. "I trusted you as a friend and as a priest. You have proved yourself unworthy of that trust, and it is enough. Until the last moment—until the troops were within these walls—you have lied to me—yes, lied. And for what? In order to make money; in order—"

Princess Montefiano's voice failed her, and, suddenly overcome, she sat down in her chair. The Abbé Roux advanced towards her.

"Yes," he said, in accents trembling with anger and mortification—"yes, I will go to Rome, and all Rome shall hear how Donna Bianca Acorari has compromised herself, and how she has given herself to the first man who crossed her path. You may turn me out of your house, madame, but you cannot close my mouth. And you," he added, turning to Monsieur d'Antin, "you are a liar and a coward!"

Baron d'Antin shrugged his shoulders. "And you, Monsieur l'Abbé," he replied, "are a priest; otherwise—"

"Philippe," said the princess, in a hard, dry voice, "will you be so kind as to ring the bell?"

"Madame!" vociferated the abbé again.

The princess took no notice of him, and the *maggior-domo* answered the summons with suspicious promptitude.

"Giovanni," Princess Montefiano said, "a carriage will be wanted to take the Signor Abate and his luggage to Attigliano in time for the evening train to Rome.

"Monsieur," continued the princess, "I will detain you no longer. You have doubtless arrangements to make for your departure."

For a moment the Abbé Roux seemed as though about to make an appeal to her. Then, without uttering a word, he walked hastily across the apartment and disappeared through the double doors leading into the dining-room, beyond which the room he had occupied as his study was situated.

He had scarcely gone when Princess Montefiano turned to her brother and Don Agostino.

"He will ruin that poor girl's reputation!" she exclaimed, bitterly, "and all Rome will say that I have neglected my duty towards her because she is not my own child."

"It will be very easy to prevent anything of the kind, princess," said Don Agostino, quickly.

The princess looked at him. "And how, *monsignore*?" she asked.

"By allowing Donna Bianca to marry the man she loves," returned Don Agostino, "the man who would make her an absolutely worthy husband."

"The son of an infidel professor? Never, *monsignore*!" exclaimed Princess Montefiano, emphatically. "Besides," she added, and then, pausing abruptly, she glanced at Monsieur d'Antin.

Don Agostino looked at him also, and as their eyes met Baron d'Antin averted his own. He read an expression of warning in Don Agostino's glance, a silent hint that, however successfully he might have deceived his sister in his adroit repudiation of any genuine compact having existed between the Abbé Roux and himself, he had not for an instant deceived Monsignor Lelli.

"Monsieur le Baron has already announced his readiness to accept Donna Bianca's refusal to entertain his offer," Don Agostino observed. "Is it not so?" he added, addressing Monsieur d'Antin.

The latter nodded. "You surely would not wish me to force my love upon Bianca?" he said to his sister. "You know, Jeanne, that she will have none of it, and I—well, I must submit," and he sighed.

"No, no, Philippe, of course I should not wish that," the princess replied, hurriedly. "Indeed," she continued, "I am relieved. I never approved of your proposal, and I would never have consented to it, had not the Abbé Roux insisted that Bianca had hopelessly compromised herself."

"But how compromised herself, madame?" interrupted Don Agostino, almost angrily. "Because your step-daughter has given her love to one who loves and respects her, whom she, too, loves, and who is worthy of her love, in what or how has she compromised herself? But these are fables, princess, malicious insinuations, invented for the purpose of advancing the schemes of that—that *imbroglione* who has just left us. At least, receive young Rossano, madame, and

hear what he has to say for himself. It is only justice—justice to him and to Donna Bianca. Why ruin the happiness of two young lives because of caste prejudices, and especially when the difference is one of rank only—for the Rossano are an old and well-born family, lacking nothing but a title to make them the equals of the Acorari."

Princess Montefiano shook her head.

"A man may take his wife from the *bourgeoisie*," she said, "and it does not matter so much. But a woman loses caste by marrying beneath her. But it is not the question of difference in position only," she continued. "You, *monsignore*, cannot expect a stanch Catholic, such as I am, to consent to my step-daughter's marriage to the son of a notorious sceptic and freemason."

"The Senator Rossano may be a sceptic," said Don Agostino, "but he is certainly not a freemason, and he is certainly not antichristian."

"Not a freemason?" repeated the princess. "But, *monsignore*, I have been told that he is one of the most prominent of that abominable organization. I have heard that he is a frequent attendant at those blasphemous orgies in Rome in which sacrileges are committed that I dare not name."

Don Agostino smiled. "The Abbé Roux was no doubt your informant," he observed. "I have known Professor Rossano for many years, and he is most certainly not a freemason. The statement that he is so is as false and fantastic as the legends concerning the orgies and sacrileges to which you have just alluded. May I suggest, princess, that you would do well not to take the assertions of the Abbé Roux too seriously?"

Princess Montefiano colored. "It would indeed seem so," she replied, bitterly. "Philippe," she added, suddenly, turning to her brother, "what is your advice? Shall I do as Monsignor Lelli wishes, and receive Signor Rossano?"

Monsieur d'Antin glanced at Don Agostino.

"Really, Jeanne," he replied, "you are putting my generosity to a severe test, and I should prefer, under the circumstances, to offer no advice. However, I will be generous; and since the young man is here—well, you might take the opportunity of forming your own judgment as to his suitability to become the husband of your step-daughter. At least, I beg of you to spare me the ordeal of being present at your interview. Really, the events of this afternoon have been sufficiently disturbing to the nerves. With your permission, I will retire to my own room and leave Monsignor Lelli to support you during your conversation with my fortunate rival. But, before I leave you, there are one or two little points that I should like to have explained to me, and no doubt Monsignor Lelli can explain them.

"In the first place," continued Monsieur d'Antin, "you, *monsignore*, say that you derive your information from some person or persons who overheard conversations between me and the Abbé Roux—conversations which we believed to

be held in private. I confess that I do not understand how this could be the case; although I can perfectly understand how any third person overhearing certain conversations I have had with the abbé would very naturally conclude that I was his confederate."

"You may not understand," replied Don Agostino; "nevertheless, you were overheard, and much of what passed between you and the Abbé Roux has been repeated in Montefiano. It was owing to this fact, and to Stefano Mazza's assurances that the abbé was in reality the *affittuario* of the rents, that the peasantry were so determined to see and speak with Donna Bianca. The whole *paese* knew, madame," he added to the princess, "what you were in ignorance of. I was very certain that you were being deceived, and it was this certainty which made me so anxious to see you personally, before any disturbance should break out."

Monsieur d'Antin was silent for a moment. He had never contemplated the possibility of his conversations with the abbé becoming known. They had been, as he was well aware, compromising enough, and he now felt more convinced than ever that Monsignor Lelli had not been deceived by his disavowal of any genuine intention to make himself a partner in the Abbé Roux's schemes, nor by his declaration that he had only feigned to agree with them in order to prove to himself the priest's unworthiness to enjoy his sister's confidence.

Monsieur d'Antin, however, was not wanting in assurance. Its possession had on more than one occasion stood him in good Stead, and the present situation was certainly one in which assurance and *aplomb* were needed. It did not greatly concern him what Monsignor Lelli might or might not privately think of him. He had no intention, however, of forfeiting his sister's good opinion, and her summary dismissal of the Abbé Roux had shown him very plainly that Jeanne's character was not quite so weak as he had supposed.

"One must conclude that the walls of Montefiano have ears," he said at length; "but since the eavesdroppers, whoever they may have been, placed a wrong, though very natural, interpretation on what they overheard—at least, so far as my part in the affair was concerned—it does not appear to me greatly to matter."

"Philippe," exclaimed the princess, "for a moment I wronged you. I thought you, too, had deceived me. That would have been a hard thing to bear, for—"

"My dear Jeanne," interrupted Monsieur d'Antin, "do not think of it again, I beg of you. I saw that you suspected me, but I assure you that I made every allowance for you under the circumstances. Let us trust that now you are relieved of the Abbé Roux's presence, there will be no more misunderstandings. After all, Jeanne, a brother is more likely to be disinterested than a stranger who is paid for his services; is it not so?"

Don Agostino looked from Baron d'Antin to the princess, but he said noth-

ing. Indeed, it was only by a slightly ironical smile that he betrayed any sign of having listened to Monsieur d'Antin's remarks.

Monsieur d'Antin did not continue the subject. He kissed his sister affectionately, and then observed: "I leave you, my dear Jeanne. As I said before, the last hour or so has been sufficiently trying to the nerves, and in any case, I do not feel equal to assisting at your interview with Monsieur Silvio Rossano. All the same, I am generous enough to say that, in my opinion, you do quite right to receive him. It may be that our friend the abbé has painted him in blacker colors that he deserves, and perhaps your interview with him will remove other misunderstandings. My only desire, Jeanne, is for Bianca's happiness," and Monsieur d'Antin placed his hand on his heart and sighed.

"*Au revoir*, monsieur," he continued, bowing to Don Agostino; "*à bientôt*, I hope," and then, humming a little tune to himself, he left the room.

"My brother has certainly a generous nature," remarked Princess Montefiano. Don Agostino did not consider himself called upon to reply to her observation.

"You have known this young Rossano for some time, *monsignore*, is it not so?" she asked, presently.

"For some time—yes," Don Agostino replied; "not for long, certainly," he added, "but I know enough of him from his father, who, as I told you, madame, is an old friend of mine, to make me confident that he would make any woman a good husband."

"The Professor Rossano is not an individual of whom I could approve," the princess said, dryly. "Such men do much to create unhappiness in family life by their teaching. You must pardon me if I say that I should not accept his opinion concerning a young man's character."

"Because you do not know him, princess," returned Don Agostino, bluntly. "If I had not full confidence both in Professor Rossano and in his son," he added, "I should certainly not sympathize with the latter in his desire to marry Donna Bianca Acorari. The responsibility would have been too great, and—" He hesitated for a moment, and then was silent.

Princess Montefiano glanced at him with some curiosity. "My responsibility is great," she said, "for my step-daughter is certainly not like other girls. She has a peculiar disposition—inherited, I fear, from her mother—my poor husband's first wife. I do not wish to speak ill of the dead, *monsignore*, but—"

"No," exclaimed Don Agostino, abruptly, "no, madame! Let the dead rest in peace."

Princess Montefiano made the sign of the cross. "Of course," she said, gravely. "But I have a duty towards the living, and I cannot forget that my step-daughter's mother was—well, not all she should have been as a wife. Oh, I do

not mean to imply that, after her marriage, she was guilty of any misconduct," she continued, hurriedly, "but she did not make her husband happy—it was a wretched marriage. At any rate, *monsignore*, I am not injuring her memory by saying that she never loved my poor husband. She had formed an unfortunate attachment, before her marriage, for somebody who was not, I believe, quite her equal, and this seems to have ruined her whole life. You cannot wonder if I am determined to prevent her daughter from falling into the same unhappy circumstances. Indeed, I have sometimes felt an almost superstitious alarm lest the mother's story were destined to be repeated in her daughter's life. It is certainly strange that Bianca also should have formed this violent attachment for a young man who, however worthy he may be individually, is not of her own order."

Don Agostino did not answer immediately. He leaned his arm upon a table beside him, and his face was partially concealed by his hand.

Presently he raised his head and looked earnestly at Princess Montefiano.

"Madame," he said, in a low voice, "you bear the name and have succeeded to the place of her who is no longer here to speak in her own behalf. Do not, I beg of you, misjudge her."

The princess started. "*Monsignore!*" she exclaimed. "What do you know of my husband's first wife? You speak as though her story were known to you. But I forgot. No doubt, during the years you were in Rome you heard stories concerning the disagreements between her and the prince; for I believe there was much gossip at one time."

"I knew her story well, princess," replied Don Agostino, quietly. "Perhaps I ought to tell you that very few people knew it better."

"You knew her?" the princess asked, with surprise.

"Yes—I knew her."

Princess Montefiano hesitated for a moment.

"Ah!" she said, at length. "You were, perhaps, in her confidence, *monsignore*—in your priestly capacity, I mean. If that is the case, of course we will not discuss the subject any more. You must forgive me, but I was quite unaware that you even knew her history, and still less that you had been personally acquainted with her. Naturally, under the circumstances, you would not wish to hear her conduct discussed, especially by me. Believe me, it is only my desire to do my duty by the child she left which makes me dread taking any action which might lead to that child following in her mother's footsteps."

"I was in her confidence—yes," said Don Agostino, after a pause, "but not in the sense you mean, princess—not as a priest. I knew her—ah, many years ago—and you are right: I cannot discuss the subject. At the same time, will you permit me to ask you a question?"

Princess Montefiano bent her head without speaking.

"Are you sure," proceeded Don Agostino, "that in your determination to oppose Donna Bianca's love for Silvio Rossano you are not running the grave risk of bringing about the very state of things you wish to avoid? Ah, madame," he continued, earnestly, "I must ask for your patience—for your pardon—if I seem to interfere in matters which you might justly tell me can be no concern of mine. You fear lest your step-daughter may have inherited her mother's nature. Well, I believe your fears to be justified. Her mother loved once, and once only, during her lifetime, and, strangely enough, under circumstances almost identical with those accompanying Donna Bianca's attachment. She was forced to marry a man she did not love, in order to satisfy the prejudices and the ambition of her family. What was the result, madame? Disaster—unhappiness. What will be the result of pursuing the same course with the daughter as that pursued with the mother—in the case of two natures so similar?

"And whom will you bring forward in the place of young Rossano? Some Roman with a title borrowed from his father, but with nothing else; some young spendthrift who, like many we could name, has paid his court to every rich American, to every wealthy foreign girl, Christian or Jewess, in the hope of buying her fortune with his name—and who will use his wife's money to pay off his creditors and to support a mistress. We need not—we who know Rome—seek far in order to find such examples, princess. You talk of responsibility. Do you venture to contemplate what responsibility for such a course would mean?"

He spoke earnestly, gravely, with a note of warning in his voice which silenced the objections already rising to Princess Montefiano's lips. The princess did not know very much of the under-currents of life, but she was sufficiently well acquainted with the world to be aware that Monsignor Lelli had not exaggerated his presentment of them. Perhaps, too, she contrasted in her own mind his simple, straightforward statements with the more flowery moral speeches she had been accustomed to hear from the Abbé Roux.

"I want my step-daughter to marry happily," she repeated; "and—yes, I will see this young man, *monsignore*. But I will not give my consent to my step-daughter marrying him until I have satisfied myself that he is worthy to be her husband. The fact of the Rossanos not being noble, is, after all, not an insuperable difficulty—one hears of cases every day in which traditions of class are departed from—"

"It is a mere question of money," interrupted Don Agostino. "And money, to make a very banal remark, does not always bring happiness; whereas love—Princess," he added, abruptly, "I feel sure that you will not repent your action in receiving this young Rossano. I will bring him to you; and then, if you will permit me, I will leave you to speak with him alone. Afterwards, if you wish to see me, I shall be entirely at your service."

"Certainly, *monsignore*!" exclaimed Princess Montefiano, hurriedly. "There is much that I wish to learn

XXXV

Don Agostino was amused to find Silvio engaged in earnest conversation with Concetta Fontana outside the court-yard of the castle. The open space beyond the gateway, lately the scene of so much confusion, was now entirely deserted; for the peasants had retired into the *paese*, where all the Montefianesi—men, women, and children—were busy discussing the events of the last few hours at the tops of their voices.

It was evident that Silvio was making the best of his opportunities to learn from Concetta all that she might be able to tell him concerning Bianca, and also as to how she had acquired her information concerning the understanding between the Abbé Roux and Monsieur d'Antin. It was evident, also, that Concetta was readily imparting all the information she had to give on the subject, for the pair were so engrossed in their conversation that they were unaware of Don Agostino's approach.

"The princess wishes to see you," Don Agostino said to Silvio. "I have come to take you to her."

Concetta clapped her hands.

"Vittoria!" she exclaimed. "What have I been telling the *signorino*? That once her excellency's eyes were opened, there would be no more difficulties."

Don Agostino smiled. He thought to himself that if her excellency were to look at Silvio through Concetta's eyes, difficulties would in all probability quickly be smoothed away. But the question yet remained to be proved whether she would do so.

"Come, Silvio," he said, briefly, "you will find the princess alone."

"And Monsieur d'Antin?" asked Silvio.

Don Agostino took his arm and turned into the court-yard. "Monsieur d'Antin?" he repeated. "Ah, Monsieur d'Antin's nerves are upset; he has gone to his room. For the rest, he will not interfere with you. No, indeed; he will probably give you his blessing! Do you know, Silvio, that I cannot make up my mind as to which is the greater scoundrel of the two, Monsieur le Abbé or Monsieur le Baron. But there can be no question as to which has the better head—oh,

none at all! The Abbé Roux put all his eggs in one basket; but Monsieur d'Antin divided his with admirable judgment. All the same, with it all, Monsieur d'Antin is a gentleman in his villanies, and a man of courage. The abbé is neither the one nor the other. Moreover, Monsieur d'Antin has a decided sense of humor; and humor, like charity, covers many sins. No, you need not fear Monsieur d'Antin. And now, Silvio, before we go to the princess, tell me what you have heard from Fontana's daughter. Everything, I suppose?"

"*Sicuro!* everything. She repeated to me the conversation between the abbé and Monsieur d'Antin she had overheard while standing in the secret passage, and also some of those between the abbé and the princess—so far as she was able to follow those last."

Don Agostino nodded. "It is as well that you should know of them," he said. "But, Silvio," he added, "do not say anything to the princess further to shake her confidence in what she believes to be her brother's generosity. She must suffer enough, poor woman, from the discovery of the abbé's treachery, and it would be cruel to give her another disillusion. You and Donna Bianca can afford to pretend that you both realize Monsieur d'Antin's disinterested conduct."

Silvio laughed. "I could, perhaps," he replied, "but Bianca—Concetta Fontana says that Bianca has declared she will never speak to him again; and when Bianca has made up her mind to do a thing—"

"She will do it," concluded Don Agostino. "One sees that very plainly," and then he paused and sighed. "Silvio," he said, suddenly, "there is one other thing I wish to say to you. It may be that the princess will ask you how it has come about that I have pleaded your cause with her. If she does so, tell her that I have pleaded it in the name of her whose name she bears. She will know what I mean. And show her this—as my credentials," and, drawing the little case containing the miniature of Bianca Acorari's mother from beneath his *soutane*, he placed it in Silvio's hand.

"You will bring it back to me," he said. "Yes, I took it with me to-day, thinking that if anything happened—if the soldiers had fired on the people—it would have been with me at the last—for they would have had to fire through me. There would have been a scandal afterwards, I suppose," he added, "when the portrait was found upon me; but by that time I should have been nearer to her—far away from the judgments of men. Come, Silvio *mio*," he continued, with a smile. "It is your passport, I hope—and it is not I only who give it to you, but one who has a better right than I to do so, and whose envoy I am."

Silvio took the case, and as he did so he kissed Don Agostino's hand.

"If somebody had done by you as you have done by me!" he burst out, passionately.

Don Agostino smiled. "*Ragazzo mio*," he interrupted, "the whole of life is

an 'if.' Come." And mounting the steps together, they entered the vestibule of the *piano nobile*, where the *maggior-domo* advanced towards them, saying that he had orders to conduct them to the princess's private sitting-room.

Princess Montefiano, as Don Agostino had told Silvio she would be, was alone. She received Silvio with a distant courtesy, which, nevertheless, was not unkindly, as he was presented to her.

"My friend, Silvio Rossano, will tell you his own story, *principessa*," Don Agostino observed. "With your permission I will wait for him in the drawing-room, for he will return with me to my house," and he left them together. The princess did not speak for a few moments. She appeared to be thinking deeply, and every now and then Silvio felt that her eyes were fixed upon him, while, as he met her glance, he saw an inquiring and almost surprised expression in them. A more embarrassing situation it would certainly have been hard to conceive; but Silvio, who was accustomed to being interviewed by all sorts and conditions of people, comforted himself with the reflection that if he were ill at ease, Princess Montefiano could scarcely be less so. At length the princess broke the silence.

"Signor Rossano," she said, "we need not waste words in coming to our point. I have consented to receive you because—you must pardon me if I speak plainly you have placed my step-daughter, Donna Bianca Acorari, in an intolerable position for a young girl—a position which exposes her to the mercy of any malicious gossip who may choose to make free with her name."

Silvio started to his feet from the chair to which Princess Montefiano had motioned him.

"Signora Principessa," he exclaimed, "you forget that your consent was asked in the usual way."

"No, I do not forget," interrupted the princess. "It was asked after you had spoken to my step-daughter spoken to her alone—a thing unheard of, *signore*."

Silvio was silent for a moment. The princess was certainly right, and he could not deny it.

"Had I not spoken to Donna Bianca," he said, presently, "I could never have been certain that she returned my love. From the instant that I knew she did so, I never attempted to see her again until my father had made a formal offer on my behalf."

"Which offer was declined by me," returned the princess.

"By you, Signora Principessa, yes—"

"And should not that have been sufficient?"

In spite of himself, Silvio's eyes twinkled. "Well, no!" he replied. "It was sufficient neither for Donna Bianca nor for me."

"Signor Rossano!" exclaimed the princess, in amazement.

"Neither for Donna Bianca nor for me," repeated Silvio, tranquilly; "be-

cause, princess, we love each other, and we mean to marry—oh, not this year, or next year, perhaps—but when Donna Bianca is of an age to do as she chooses. Until that time arrives we are quite content to wait, if necessary. It will make no difference in the end."

Princess Montefiano tapped her foot impatiently on the floor. Bianca had said the very same words to her more than once.

"But surely," she began, "you must see for yourself the drawbacks—the difficulties! It is a delicate subject, and I do not wish to offend you, Signor Rossano, but—"

"But I am not noble? I understand that," interrupted Silvio. "It is doubtless a drawback in your eyes," he continued, quickly; "but as to difficulties, I have never been afraid of those. One can always surmount them. And I am not here to make excuses for not having a title," he added, a little haughtily. "We Rossanos have no need to be ashamed of our blood; and, if it comes to that, my mother was of a noble family. I have no need of Donna Bianca's money. My father is not a poor man, and I can earn money if I choose."

"Ah, your mother was noble?" asked Princess Montefiano. "I did not know that—"

"Oh, not of the *alta nobiltà*," said Silvio, "but of a noble family of the Romagna, of older descent than most of the Roman houses. But, Signora Principessa, as you said a few minutes ago, we need not waste words in discussion. Donna Bianca Acorari has done me the honor to say that she will marry me, and I am content to wait until she is in a position to do so. I thank you for having received me, if only because you have given me the opportunity of saying to you that under no circumstances will I seek to make Donna Bianca act against your consent and authority. We both recognize that authority, princess, and while it exists I shall certainly not be the one to dispute it. I should not, it is true, have promised as much twelve hours ago."

Princess Montefiano looked at him quickly, and there was an expression of approval in her glance. Had Silvio Rossano known it, he could not have uttered words more likely to ingratiate himself with her than those in which he expressed his recognition of her authority.

"And why not?" she asked.

Silvio hesitated. "Because I knew that Donna Bianca was the object of an intrigue—that an arrangement had been made whereby she was to marry a man much older than herself whom she could not love—"

"You allude to my brother, *signore*," the princess said, hastily. "But there was no intrigue on his part. He has behaved throughout this painful affair with a marvellous generosity and unselfishness. I must be frank with you, Signor Rossano, and tell you that my brother's primary object was to save

Donna Bianca from the possible consequences of the false position in which your thoughtlessness—for I do you the justice, now that I have seen you and spoken with you, to believe it was nothing more had placed her."

Silvio bowed. "The fact remains," he said, "that Donna Bianca rejected Baron d'Antin's offer, knowing that she was already engaged to me. It is not a matter which I need discuss—the more so, as Don Agostino informs me that the baron has declared his determination to withdraw his suit. It is sufficient for me, Signora Principessa, to know that you no longer regard me as an adventurer, as a man whose birth and character do not permit of his aspiring to be the husband of Donna Bianca Acorari. For the rest, there is no more to be said. Time will prove that I do not seek Donna Bianca because she is heiress to lands and titles, but because I love her, and I know that she loves me. Signora Principessa, I have the honor to salute you, and with your permission I will rejoin Don Agostino."

"Wait, *signore*!" exclaimed the princess, suddenly, as, with a low bow, Silvio moved towards the door. "There are certain things I wish to ask you."

"Ask me anything," Silvio replied. "I am entirely at your service."

"What brings you here—to Montefiano—at this moment?" she continued, looking at him keenly. "It has been said that this disturbance of the peasantry has been largely fomented by you, for obvious reasons—that you wished to enlist public sympathy on your behalf."

"It has been said so, yes," returned Silvio, "by the Abbé Roux. But the Abbé Roux has said many things which will not bear investigation."

The princess winced. "But why are you here—at such a time?" she insisted.

"Because I knew from Donna Bianca that there were threatenings of a rising on the part of the peasants, and yesterday evening I read in a newspaper in Rome that troops had been asked for, to proceed to Montefiano. When I saw that, I determined to come by the first available train, lest there should be danger to her."

"You heard from my step-daughter!" repeated the princess in amazement. "But she knew nothing. Besides, how could she communicate with you, or you with her? There is some fresh mystery here, some new deception that I do not yet understand. Will you be so good as to explain yourself, *signore*?"

"Donna Bianca knew everything," said Silvio, "except that the troops had been summoned. This she did not know. When the mob burst into the court-yard of the castle, your *fattore's* daughter went to Donna Bianca's room by the secret passage, in order to implore her to come out and speak to the people—"

The princess stared at him. "By the secret passage!" she repeated. "Signor Rossano, what fables are these?"

"Ah—you do not know—they have not explained to you yet?" asked Silvio, quickly. "*Sicuro*—by the secret passage which leads into Donna Bianca's room—

where the portrait of the cardinal is—"

"Maria Santissima!" ejaculated the princess. "How do you know," she continued, angrily, "that there is such a portrait in my step-daughter's room? It is an outrage—"

"I know it because Donna Bianca has described it to me," returned Silvio, who did not at the moment understand what it might be that had so suddenly aroused the princess's indignation. "The picture moves into the wall, and behind it is the secret entrance. Concetta Fontana, when she went to warn Donna Bianca that the peasants were forcing their way into the castle, found her locked in her room—"

"*Sciocchezze!*" exclaimed Princess Montefiano. "Why should she be locked in her room?"

"For a very simple reason. The Abbé Roux did not want Donna Bianca to know what was going on. She had retired to her room after breakfast, and when the disturbances began, he turned the key of the door opening into your apartment."

"It is true," said the princess, as if to herself. "The child complained of a headache, and had gone to her room. I thought she was there, until, to my astonishment, I heard that she was speaking to the peasants."

"Concetta Fontana took her down the concealed passage," said Silvio, "and it is fortunate she did so, princess, or there would certainly have been bloodshed at Montefiano to-day."

"Holy Virgin! how many more things am I to hear?" exclaimed Princess Montefiano. "As to this mysterious passage," she continued, "why have I never been told of its existence? Even now I will not believe it until I see it. Concetta Fontana must be romancing. At any rate, I will investigate the matter for myself. And so it was by means of this unknown passage that you communicated—by letter, of course—with my step-daughter?"

"Yes," replied Silvio, simply. "I sent a letter to Don Agostino, begging him to get it conveyed to Donna Bianca if he possibly could do so. The agent—Fontana—told him of the passage, and how Donna Bianca's room could be entered at any time by a person knowing the secret communication. Concetta delivered the letter, and another subsequent one, and took Donna Bianca's replies to Don Agostino. He posted them to me. You see, Signora Principessa," added Silvio, "that I have answered your questions frankly. And you will not blame Concetta, for she only did as she was told."

Princess Montefiano looked at him with something like a smile on her face. Possibly the straightforward manner in which Silvio had spoken to her throughout their conversation had impressed her more favorably than she was fully aware of.

"I do not understand why Monsignor Lelli—Don Agostino, as you call him—should have taken upon himself to help you so untiringly," she observed, presently. "In your case I conclude his friendship with your father to have been the motive. But he seems to be equally concerned for my step-daughter's happiness. To be sure he tells me that he knew her mother, many years ago. He seemed to be under a strange emotion when he spoke of her, and hinted at some kind of responsibility he felt towards my step-daughter."

"Monsignor Lelli considers that he has a certain responsibility towards Donna Bianca," said Silvio; and then he paused.

"But why, *signore*—why? It is inexplicable. Am I to understand that this strange idea forms one of his reasons for so obviously supporting your suit?"

Silvio looked at her quickly. "It is not inexplicable," he replied, quietly. "It is an idea—a sentiment, perhaps—or perhaps it is more than that. If one does not believe that the dead are conscious beings, princess, what is the use of praying for them? And, if they are conscious beings, why may they not exercise an influence over those who are dear to them, and whom they have left behind?"

Princess Montefiano regarded him with surprise—but at the same time with evident approval. She had certainly not expected to hear any such arguments from the lips of a son of Professor Rossano.

"Signor Rossano," she exclaimed, "I thought that you believed in nothing—I mean, that you were an atheist."

Silvio laughed. "Why, princess?" he asked.

"Why? Oh, because—well, because you are your father's son."

"My father is not an atheist," returned Silvio, simply. "He knows too much—or not enough—to be one."

The princess stared at him. Perhaps she scarcely understood the full significance of his answer; but all the same his words, coupled with his preceding remark, gave her a sense both of satisfaction and of relief.

"I am glad," she said, somewhat irrelevantly, "very glad. But as regards Monsieur Lelli, and this strange idea of responsibility towards the daughter of one whom he knew many years ago—how can you explain that? I feel sure that Monsignor Lelli is a good man, though I have heard him much abused. But I have also heard people say that he has been very hardly treated; and possibly his long exile here at Montefiano may have made him somewhat morbid."

"Signora Principessa," said Silvio, approaching the armchair in which she was sitting, "Don Agostino has authorized me to answer your question, in the event of your asking it. Had it not been for this authorization, I must have kept silence. It may be that his idea is a morbid idea; or it may be that, as he is firmly convinced, he is being guided by another intelligence than his own. Of that, princess, you must be the judge," and taking the case Don Agostino had confided

to him from his pocket, he gave it into her hands.

Princess Montefiano opened it, and then she suddenly turned very pale.

"It is Bianca!" she exclaimed. "It is Bianca herself! Signor Rossano," she added, "what does this mean?"

"No," returned Silvio, in a low voice, "it is not Bianca."

Princess Montefiano did not notice his unconscious departure from the formalities. She bent over the miniature and examined it attentively. "No," she said, after a pause, "it is not Bianca—the face has not her character in its expression. It is a weaker face. It is strange," she continued, as though speaking to herself, "but I have never seen any portrait of my husband's first wife; there is none at Palazzo Acorari—and, of course, this is she. But how did the miniature come into Monsignor Lelli's possession?" she added.

"Can you not guess, princess?" asked Silvio, gravely.

Princess Montefiano looked at him. "You mean—" she began, and then she paused.

Silvio nodded. "Yes," he said.

The princess remained silent. She appeared to be deeply moved, for her hands trembled as, after another intent look at the portrait, she closed the case and returned it to Silvio.

He took it from her almost reverently. "Don Agostino told me to say to you that you were to regard the miniature as his credentials; and," he added, "as he hoped, my passport."

"Your passport?" repeated Princess Montefiano.

"Yes. If he had not known me to be worthy of Bianca—to be one who would make her a good husband—he would not have delivered it to me," continued Silvio, quickly. "Listen, princess," and he rapidly told her all that had passed between him and Don Agostino from the day when he had first come to Montefiano and had been received into the *parroco's* house. He told her how Don Agostino had shown him the miniature on that occasion; and how the priest had from the first been convinced that he was only obeying some unseen but powerful influence in giving him his friendship and support.

Princess Montefiano listened to him without uttering a word; but she never took her eyes off his countenance as he spoke.

As he ceased, she rose from her chair and held out her hand. "Thank you, Signor Rossano," she said, gravely, but very courteously—"thank you. You have been very frank with me, and I appreciate your confidence. You stay with Monsignor Lelli to-night, is it not so? Well, you and he will, I hope, give me the pleasure of seeing you here at breakfast at twelve to-morrow. You will find me alone—me and Bianca—for my brother will most probably be returning to Rome in the morning."

Silvio bent over her hand and kissed it. "I will come with great pleasure, princess," he said, "and I think I can answer for Don Agostino that he also will do so."

A happy light shone in his eyes as he spoke. The princess looked at him again and smiled slightly.

"I must think," she said, slowly. "Monsignor Lelli has fulfilled his responsibilities, and you must both allow me to fulfil mine. To-morrow we can talk of many things, and in a few days, Signor Rossano, I promise you that I will give you an answer to a question which I know you are longing to ask me."

With a slight inclination of her head, Princess Montefiano turned towards the bell and rang it. A moment or two afterwards the *maggior-domo*, who had been waiting in the adjoining room, opened the double doors and conducted Silvio to the apartment where Don Agostino was awaiting him.

XXXVI

A year had passed; and on the anniversary of the day that had witnessed the forcible entry of the peasants into the court-yard of the castle at Montefiano, a still larger and scarcely less noisy crowd was assembled on the same spot. Now, however, instead of angry discussions and threatening cries, laughter and jests resounded in the still air of a mellow September morning. The entire population of Montefiano was gathered together inside or around the castle walls, and the peasants and farmers had come into the *paese* from many an outlying village and hamlet in the Sabina to assist at the wedding of the young Princess of Montefiano.

The year that had passed had been a year of probation. True to her word, the *principessa madre*, as she was now termed by the retainers and dependants of Casa Acorari, had given Silvio her answer to his unasked question some ten days or so after he had shown her Don Agostino's so-called credentials. There had been, indeed, no doubt in Princess Montefiano's mind from the moment of her interview with Silvio that he and Bianca Acorari would marry one another in the future, even were she to insist on withholding her consent to their union for the present. Monsieur d'Antin had been right when he said to himself that his sister was capable of rising to a situation. In this instance she had done so at considerably less cost, either to her feelings or to her authority than she had anticipated, for she had speedily come to conceive a strong liking for Silvio, a liking which had

only increased as she grew better acquainted with him. Nevertheless, in withdrawing her opposition to his marriage to her step-daughter, she had insisted that a year should elapse before it should take place: and in this stipulation she had been supported not only by Don Agostino, who, indeed, had counselled her to make it, but also by the Senator Rossano. Professor Rossano was determined that nobody should be able to say that his son was over eager to ally himself with Casa Acorari, or with any other noble house; and there was, moreover, another motive for delay, which neither he nor Monsignor Lelli deemed it advisable to explain to the princess, although they had been obliged to do so to Silvio.

The Abbé Roux had apparently been as good as his word when he declared that he would cause all Rome to learn that Donna Bianca Acorari had compromised herself by receiving, unknown to her relatives, the addresses of a young man. Carefully veiled paragraphs had even appeared in various Roman journals of the second rank, in which the clandestine love-affair between the only daughter and last representative of a princely house and the son of a well-known senator and scientist was mysteriously hinted at. It did not need any great knowledge of the world to realize what would infallibly be whispered were a marriage between Donna Bianca Acorari and Silvio Rossano to be celebrated too speedily.

Silvio himself had been the first to see the wisdom of allowing twelve months to expire before Bianca should become his wife; and he, no less than his father, had no desire to be supposed to be over anxious for the alliance on account of its worldly advantages.

And so everything had been arranged satisfactorily for all the parties chiefly concerned. Bianca herself, now that opposition to her engagement was withdrawn, was quite content to listen to the advice of those round her, especially as Silvio pointed out to her the wisdom of delay. After the uncertainty of the past, the assurance that in a short year they would be united for the remainder of their lives had seemed almost too good to be true.

And the months had sped quickly enough. Silvio had pursued his profession, and had won for himself an increased reputation; and Bianca Acorari and the princess had been happier together than they had ever been before, passing the time between Montefiano and the Villa Acorari near Velletri, and visiting only at rare intervals the old palace in Rome. Bianca had developed a great affection for her home at Montefiano; and, much to the satisfaction of the population, the castle had been gradually refurnished and put in order, and she had announced her intention of making it her almost constant residence in future. Afterwards, when she and Silvio were married, the princess dowager would occupy an apartment in Palazzo Acorari at Rome, and, if she so chose, the villa at Velletri, to both of which she had a right for her lifetime. She and her brother, Baron d'Antin, had already decided that they would live together until such time as Monsieur

d'Antin should elect to return to his native country.

A day or two before their wedding, Bianca had received a letter from Monsieur d'Antin. It was a gay letter, full of congratulations and airy trifles, but containing not even the most indirect allusion to the past. Monsieur d'Antin was vexed beyond words—he assured his dear niece—that he would be unable to interrupt the course of his baths at Aix, and thus be present at her wedding; but the pores of his skin being now well opened, it would be absolutely dangerous to travel so far. Bianca showed the note to Silvio, who laughed and said nothing; but Don Agostino, to whom he subsequently recounted the condition of Monsieur d'Antin's skin, shrugged his shoulders and observed that the material in question was assuredly too thick to be porous.

And now the year of waiting had passed. In Cardinal Acorari's chapel, inside the castle, Monsignor Lelli was saying the few brief words that would make Silvio Rossano and Bianca Acorari man and wife. The civil marriage had already been performed by the *sindaco* of Montefiano, the day before, and now the crowd was waiting in the court-yard for the appearance of the *sposi*.

Suddenly the doors at the top of the stone staircase were thrown back, and shout after shout rent the air as Bianca and Silvio, followed by the princess and Professor Rossano, Giacinta, and the remainder of the witnesses of the religious ceremony appeared.

Bianca led her husband forward, and for a few moments they stood together, bowing and smiling in response to the vociferous applause from below.

Presently the cries of "*Evviva gli sposi!*" died away, to be succeeded by cheers for the *principessa madre* and for the Senator Rossano. Then shouts of *"Evviva Don Agostino—evviva il nostro parroco*!" were raised, as Don Agostino, more popular and beloved by his people than ever, since the attack made upon him in that very place a year before, advanced to where the young couple were standing.

He had removed his vestments, and his tall, black form stood out in sombre contrast with the color of the bridal dresses and the flowers round him.

For a moment or two he paused, holding both Silvio's and Bianca's hands in his own.

"God, and the spirits of God, protect you both, in this life and in the life to come," he said; and, dropping their hands, he made the sign of the cross over them.

Then he turned, and, descending the steps, made his way quickly through the crowd, and passed through the dark gateway into the golden sunlight beyond.

THE END

*** END OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE PASSPORT ***

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