Signa

Ouida

Table of Contents

Table of Contents

Signa

Ouida

VOLUME I

CHAPTER I.

HE was only a little lad coming singing through the summer weather; singing as the birds do in the thickets, as the crickets do in the wheat at night, as the acacia bees do all the day long in the high tree tops in the sunshine.

Only a little lad with brown eyes and bare feet, and a wistful heart driving his sheep and his goats, and carrying his sheaves of cane or miller, and working among the ripe grapes when the time came, like all the rest, here in the bright Signa country.

Few people care much for our Signa and all it has seen and known. Few people even know anything of it at all, except just vaguely as a mere name. Assisi has her saint, and Perugia her painters, and Arezzo her poet, and Siena her virgin, and Settignano her sculptor, and Prato her great carmelite, and Vespignano her inspired shepherd, and Fiesole her angel−monk, and the village Vinci her mighty master; and poets write of them all for sake of the dead fame which they embalm. But Signa has found no poet, though her name lies in the pages of the old chroniclers like a jewel in an old king's tomb, written there ever since the Latin days when she was first named Signome−−a standard of war set under the mountains.

It is so old our Signa, no man could chronicle all it has seen in the centuries; but not one in ten thousand travelers thinks about it. Its people plait straw for the world, and the train from the coast runs through it: that is all that it has to do with other folks.

Passengers come and go from the sea to the city, from the city to the sea, along the great iron highway, and perhaps they glance at the stern, ruined walls, at the white houses on the cliffs, at the broad river with its shining sands, at the blue hills with the poplars at their base, and the pines at the summits, and they say to one another that this Signa.

But it is all that they ever do do; it is only a glance, then on they go through the green and golden haze of Valdarno. Signa is nothing to them, only a place that they stop at a second. And yet Signa is worthy of knowledge.

She is so ancient and so wise, and in her way so beautiful too; and she holds so many great memories in her; she has so many faded laurel−boughs as women in their years of age keep the dead rose−leaves of their days of love; and once on a time−−in the Republic's time, as her sons will still turn from the plough or rest on the oar to tell to a stranger with pride;−−she was a very Amazon and Artemis of the mountains setting her breast boldly against all foes, and they were many, who came down over the wild western road, from the sea or from the Apennines, with reddened steel and blazing torch to harry and fire the fields, and spread famine and war to the gates of Florence.

These days are gone.

The years of its glory are done. It is a grey quiet place which now strays down by the water and now climbs high on the hill, and faces the full dawn of the day and sees the sunset reflected in the mirror of the river, and is starry with fireflies in midsummer, and at noon looks drowsy in the heat and seems to dream−−being so very old. The buttressed walls are ruins. The mass bell swings over the tower roofs. The fortresses are changed to farms. The vines climb where the culverins blazed. White bullocks and belled mules tread to and fro the tracks which the free lances made; and the peasants sing at their ploughs where the hosts of the invaders once thundered.

Its ways are narrow, its stones are crooked, its summer dust is dense, its winter mire is heavy, its hovels are many, its people are poor−−oh, yes, no doubt−−but it is beautiful in various ways and worthy of a scholar's thought and of an artist's tenderness. Only the poet does not come to make it quoted and beloved by the world as one single line on the drifting autumn leaves has rendered Vallombrosa.

Here where the ancient walls of its citadel rise hoary and broken against the blueness of the sky; there where the arches of the bridges span the river, and the sand and the shallows and the straw that is drying in summer shine together yellow in the sun; her where under the sombre pointed archways the little children play, their faces like the cherubs and the cupids of the renaissance; there where the cobblers and coopers and the plaiting maidens and the makers of the yellow rush brooms, all work away under lintels, and corbels, and carved beam timbers,

four hundred years old if one; here where through the gate ways with their portcullises woven over by the spiders, there only pass the patient mules with sacks of flour, or the hay carts dropping grasses, or the waggons of new wine; there where the villas that were all fortresses in the fierce fighting times of old, gleam white in the light upon their crests of hills with their cypresses like sentinels around them, and breadths of corn and vineyards traversed by green grassy paths, that lead upward to where the stone pine and the myrtle make sweet the air together. In all these Signa is beautiful; most of all, of course, in the long light radiant summer when the nightingales are singing everywhere, noon as well as night; the summer which seems to last almost all the year, for you can only tell how it comes and goes by the coming and the going of the flowers; the long−lived summer that is ushered in by the daffodils, those golden chamberlains of the court of flowers, and dies, as a king should, on the purple bed of anemones, when the bells of the feast of the saints sound its requiem from hill to hill. And Signa revels in all that brightness of the Tuscan weather, and all about her seems singing, from the cicala piping away all day long, through the hottest heat, to the mandolines that thrill through the leaves at night as the peasants go by strumming the chords of their love−songs. Summer and song and sunshine;−−Signa lies amidst them like some war−bruised shield of a knight that has fallen among the roses and golds the nest of a lark.

One day in summer Signa kept the Feast of the Corpus Domini with more pomp and praise than usual. The bells were ringing all over the plain and upon the hill−sides, and the country people were coming in from all the villages that lie scattered like so many robins' nests amongst the olives and the maize plumes and the arbutus thickets everywhere around. They were like figures out of a Fra Bartolommeo or a Ghirlandajo as they came down through the ripe corn and the red poppies from the old grey buildings up above; in their trailing white dresses and their hoods of blue, with the unlit tapers in their hands, and the little white−robed children running before with their chaplets of flowers still wet from the dew. It was the procession of Demeter transmitted through all the ages, though it was called the Feast of Christ; it might have been the hymns of Ceres that they sang, and Virgil might have looked upon them with a smile of praise as they passed through the waving wheat and under the boughs red with cherries.

The old faith lives under the new, and the old worship is not dead, here in the country of Horace and in the fields where Proserpine wandered. The people are Pagan still; only now they call it being Christian, and mingle together Cupid and the Madonna in their songs.*

It was fairest summer weather. There was sure harvest and promise of abundant vintage. The sweet strong west wind was blowing from the sea, but not too roughly, only just enough to shake the scent out of the acacia blossoms and fan open the oleanders.

The peasantry were in good heart and trooped down to the feast of the Body of God from the loneliest farmstead on the highest hill−crest; and from every villa chapel set along the mountains, or amongst the green sea of the valley vines, there was a bell ringing above an open door.

The chief celebration was at Signa, which had broken from its usual ways, and had music on

_____

Si è partita una nave dallo porto,
Ed è lo mio struggimento.
Madre Maria, dategli conforto
Acciò vada la nave a salvamento.
Lo mare gli si possa abbonacciare
E le sue vele doventin d'argento.
E tu Cupido, che lo puo' aiutare,
Cogli sospiri tuoai mandagli il vento.
Rispetto Toscano.

this great service because a mighty bishop had come on a visit in its neighbourhood, and all its roads and streets and lanes were swept and garnished and watered, and at many open casements there were pots of lilies, white and orange, and in many dark archways groups of little children on whose tiny shoulders it would have

seemed quite natural to see such wings or rose or azure as Il Beato gave his cherubim.

The procession came out from the white walls above on the cliff, and down the steep ways of the hill and across the bridge, and through the Lastra to the little church of the Misericordia. There were great silk banners waving heavily; gold fringe that shone and swayed; priests' vestments that gleamed with silver and colour; masses of flowers and leaves borne aloft; curling croziers and crimson baldacchini; and then came

---

A ship goes out from port,
And with it goes my own immense desire.
Oh, Mother Mary, lend it strength and comfort,
So that the ship may steer to sure salvation.
And all its sails become of silver pure.
And thou, dear Cupid, who canst aid it too,
Breathe froth thy sighs and waft it fairest winds.
Tuscan Popular Song.

all the white−clothed contadini, by tens, by twenties, by hundreds, and the cherubic children singing in the sun; it was Signa in the Middle Ages once again, and Fra Giovanni might have stood by and painted it all in a choral book, or Marcillat have put it in a stained window, and have illumined it with the azure sky for its background, and the rays of the morning sun slanting down, like beams that streamed straight to earth from the throne of God.

The procession came down the hill and across the bridge, with its irregular arches and its now shallow green water shining underneath, and on its sands the straw lying drying, and beyond it the near hills with their dusky pines, and the white streaks where the quarries were cut, and the blue haze of the farther mountains.

All the people were chaunting the Laus Deo−−chaunting with chests made strong by the mountain air, and lips made tuneful by the inheritance of melody; men and women and children were all singing, from the old white−haired bishop who bore the host, to the four−year−old baby that trod on the hem of its mother's dress.

But above all the voices there rose one sweetest and clearest of all, and going up into heaven, as it seemed, as a lark's does on a summer morning. He was only a little fellow that sang−−a little boy of the Lastra a Signa, poorer than all the rest; with his white frock, clean, but very coarse, and a wreath of scarlet poppies on his auburn curls; a very little fellow, ten years old at most, with thin brown limbs and a lean wistful face, and the straight brows of his country, with dark eyes full of dreams beneath them, and naked feet that could be fleet as a hare's over the dry yellow grass or the crooked sharp stones.

He was always hungry, and never very strong, and certainly simple and poor as a creature could be, and he knew what a beating meant as well as any dog about the farm. He lived with people who thrashed him oftener than they fed him. He was almost always scolded, and bore the burden of others' faults. He had never had a whole shirt or a pair of shoes in all his life. He kept goats on one of the dusky sweet−scented hillsides above Signa, and bore, like them, the wind and the weather, the scorch and the storm. And yet, by God's grace and the glory of childhood, he was happy enough as he went over the bridge and through the white dust, chaunting his psalm in the rear of the priests, in the ceremonies of the Corpus Domini.

For the music was in his head and in his heart; and the millions of leaves and the glancing water seemed to be singing with him, and he did not feel the flints under his feet, or the heat of them, as he went singing out all his little soul to the river and the sky and the glad June sunshine, and he was quite happy, though he was of no more moment in the great human world than any one of the brown grilli in the wheat, or tufts of rosemary in the quarryside; and he did not feel the sharpness of the stones underneath his feet or the scorch of them as he went barefoot along the street, because he was always looking up at the brightness of the sky, and expecting to see it open and to see the faces of curly−headed winged children peep out from behind the sunrays as they did in the old pictures in the villa chapels.

The priests told him he would see them for a certainty if he were good; and he had been good, or at least had

tried to be, but the heavens never had opened yet.

It is hard work to be good when you are very little and very hungry, and have many sticks to beat you, and no mother's lips to kiss you.

But he tried in his own small way. When he carried the bright blue plums to the market, not to taste even one when his mouth was parched with the dust and the sun; to let his reed−flute lie mute while he searched for a straying kid; to tell the truth, though it cost him a thrashing; to leave his black bread untouched on a feast morning, though he was so hungry, because he was going to confession; to forbear from pulling the ripe grapes as he went along the little grass paths through the vines;−−these were the things that were so hard, and that he tried his best to do, because in his little dim mind he saw what was just, and in his loneliness endeavoured with all his might to follow it, that he might see the faces of the angels some day; and he wondered now why he could not see the cherubs through the blue smiling sky, as the old fresco−painters had done who did not want it half so much as he did, because no doubt the painters were wise men and knew a great deal, and were very happy, and were not like him, who was always wanting to know everything, and could never get any one to tell.

The old painters would have painted him, and would have made a cherub of him, with his wreath of poppies and his wondering eyes and his little singing mouth, and would have taken all the leanness out of his face, and the paleness out of his cheeks, and the darns out of his little coarse frock, and would have made his field−flowers roses of paradise, and would have glorified him, and made him a joy to the wondering world for ever.

But he did not know that; he did know that the painters never saw any other little angels than just such foot−tired and sun−tanned little angels as he, which their genius lifted up and transfigured into the likeness of the children of God.

He did not know that Fra Angelico would have kissed him, and Raffaelle would have put him for ever in the internal sunshine of the Loggie, with gold rays about his head and the lilies of Mary in his hands.

He only looked up−−in vain−−for the cherubs in the shining morning skies, and was sorry that he was not good enough to have the right to see them; and yet was glad at heart as he went carrying his taper in the rear of the silken banners and the silvered robes and the chaunting contadini, over the green sunlightened Arno water, with the midsummer corn blowing on all the hills around, and the west wind bringing the salt of the sea with it to strengthen the young bud−clusters of the vine.

Glad−−because he was so young, and because he was sure of one creature that loved him, and because the music thrilled him to his heart's delight, and because it was a happiness to him only to sing, as it is to the thrush in the depths of the woods when the day dawns, or to the nightingale when she drinks the dew in heats of noon off the snow of a magnolia flower.

He had a little lute of his own, given to him by the only hand that ever gave him anything. Where he lived he might not play it on pain of its being broken; but upon the hills he did, and along the country roads; and when people were asleep in their beds in Signa, they would be awakened by notes that were not the birds' rippling up the street in the sweet silent dark, and going higher and higher and higher−−it was only the little fellow playing and singing as he went along in the dusk of the dawn to his work.

In the Lastra no one thought anything of it. In any other country, lattices would have been opened and heads hung out and breaths of deep pleasure held to listen better, because the child's music was wonderful in its way, or at least would have been so elsewhere. But here there was so much music everywhere: nobody noticed much. It was no more than a hundred other lutes strumming at cottage doors, than a thousand other stornelli or rispetti sung as the oxen were yoked.

There is always song somewhere.

As the wine−waggon creaks down the hill, the waggoner will chaunt to the corn that grows upon either side of him. As the miller's mules cross the bridge, the lad as he cracks his whip will hum to the blowing alders. In the red clover, the labourers will whet their scythes and sickles to a trick of melody. In the quiet evenings a kyrie eleison will rise from the thick leaves that hide a village chapel. On the hills the goatherd, high in air, amongst the arbutus branches, will scatter on the lonely mountain side stanzas of purest rhythm. By the sea−shore, where Shelley died, the fisherman, rough and salt, and weatherworn, will string notes of sweetest measure under the tamarisk tree on his mandoline. But the poetry and the music float on the air like the leaves of roses that blossom in solitude, and drift away to die upon the breeze: there is no one to notice the fragrance, there is no one to gather the leaves.

The songs of the people now are like their fireflies in summer. They make night beautiful all over the dusky hills, and the seas of vine, and the blowing fields of maize, in a million lonely places of the mountains and the plains. But the fireflies are born in the corn and die in it; few eyes see their love−fires, except those of the nightingale and the shrew mouse.

Theocritus cried aloud on his Sicilian muses, and the world heard him and has treasured the voice of his sweet complaining.

But the muse of these people now lives with the corncrake under the wheat, and the swallow under the house−eaves, and is such a simple natural home−born thing that they think of her no more than the firefly does of her luminance. And so they have no Theocritus, but only ever−renewing bursts of song everywhere as the millet grows ripe, and the lemon−tree flowers, and the red poppies leap with the corn.

Often they do not know what they sing:−−Does the firefly know that she burns?

This little fellow did not know what he sang.

He did not know what he was.

At home he was always being told that he had no right to exist at all; perhaps he had not; he did not know.

Himself, he thought God had made him to sing, made him just for that; as he made the finches and nightingales. But he did not tell any one so. At home they would have asked him what should the great God want with his puny oat pipe. Toto could make as good a noise cutting a reed in the fields any day.

Perhaps Toto could. He thought his own voice better, but he was not sure. He was only glad to sing, because all the world seemed singing with him, and all the sky seemed one vast space of sweetest sound−−as, perhaps, it seems to a bird, who knows?

When he went to bed in the hay he could hear the nightingales and the owls and the grilli singing all together in the trees behind the village and in the fields that stretched by the river; and in the dusk of the dawn when he ran out with his little bare feet, dripping with dew, there were a million little voices hymning in the day. That was what he heard. Other people, no doubt, heard cart−wheels, and grinding mills, and the scolding of women, and the barking of dogs, and the creaking of doors, and a thousand other discordant things; but to him the world was full of the singing birds and the humming insects, and the blue heavens teemed with a choir of angels: he could not see them, but he heard them, and he knew they were near, and that was enough: he could wait.

"Do you hear anything up there?" the other children would ask him, when he stood listening with his eyes lifted, and they could not see so much as a bird, and he would look back to them quite sorrowfully.

"Do you not hear, too? You are deaf then!"

But the children of Signa would not allow that they were deaf, and pelted and fought him for saying so. Deaf, indeed! when it was he who was the simpleton hearing a bird song where none was.

Were they deaf? or, was his dreaming?

The children of Signa and he never agreed which was which.

It is the old eternal quarrel between the poet and the world; and the children were like the world, they were strong in numbers; since they could see no bird, they would have it there could be no music, and they boxed his ears to cure him of hearing better than his neighbours.

Only it did not cure him.

His angels sung above him this day of the Corpus Domini, and he did not feel the sun hot on his bare head, nor the stones sharp under his bare feet, and he did not remember that he was hungry, and that he had been beaten that morning, until the music ceased suddenly, and he dropped to earth out of the arms of the angels.

Then he felt his bruises, and the want of food gnawed in him, and he gathered up his little white acolyte's dress and ran as quickly as he could, the withering poppies shaking off his hair.

He was only Pippa's child.

CHAPTER II.

THERE is wild weather at Signa. The mountain streams brim over and the great historic river sweeps out in full flood, and the bitter Alpine wind tears like a living thing over the hills and across the plain. Not seldom the low−lying fields become sheets of dull tawny water, and the little hamlets amongst them are all flooded, and from the clock−towers the tolling bells cry aloud for succour, while the low, white houses seem to float like boats.

In these winters, if the harvests before have been bad, the people suffer much. They have little or no bread, and they eat the raw grass even sometimes. The country looks like a lake in such weather when the floods are on; only for ships there are churches, and the lighthouses are the trees; and like rocky islands in all directions the village roofs and the villa walls gleam red and shine grey in the rain. It is only a short winter, and the people know that when the floods rise and spread, then they will find compensation, later on, for them in the doubled richness of grass and measure of corn.

Still, it is hard to see the finest steer of the herd dashed a lifeless dun−coloured mass against the foaming piles of the bridge; it is hard to see the young trees and the stacks of hay whirled together against each other; it is hard to watch the broken crucifix and the cottage bed hurled like dead leaves on the waste of waters; it is hardest of all to see the little curly head of a drowned child drift with the boughs and the sheep and the empty hencoop and the torn house door down the furious course of the river.

Signa has seen this through a thousand winters and more in more or less violence, and looked on untouched herself; high set on her hills like a fortress, as indeed she was, in the old republican days.

In one of these wild brief winters, in a drenching night of rain, a woman came down on foot along the high road that runs from the mountains, the old post road by which one can travel to the sea, only no one now ever takes that way. In sunshine and mild weather it is a glorious road, shelving sheer to the river valley on one side and on the other hung over with bold rocks and bluffs dusky with ilex and pine; and it winds and curves and descends and changes as only a mountain road can do, with the smell of its rosemary and its wild myrtle sweet at every turn. But on a winter's night of rain it is very dreary, desolate and dark.

The woman stumbled down it as best she might.

She had come on foot by short stages all the way from the sea some forty miles over hill and plain. She carried a bundle with her, and never let go her hold on it however wildly the wind seized and shook her, nor however roughly the rain blew her blind. For the bundle was a child.

Now and then she stopped and leaned against the rocks or the stem of a tree and opened her cloak and looked at it; her eyes had grown so used to the thick darkness that she could see the round of its little red cheek and the curve of its folded fist and the line of its closed eyelashes. She would stop a minute sometimes and bend her head and listen, if the wind lulled, to the breathing of its parted lips set close against her breast; then she would take breath herself and go onward.

The child was a year old, and a boy, and a heavy weight, and she was not a strong woman now, though she had once been so; and she had walked all the way from the sea. She began to grow dizzy, and to feel herself stumble like a footsore mule that has been driven until he is stupid and has lost his sureness of step and his capacity for safety of choice. She was drenched through, and her clothes hung in a soaked dead weight upon her. Even with all her care she could not keep the child quite dry.

Somewhere through the darkness she could hear bells tolling the hour. It was eight o'clock, and she had been in hopes to reach Signa before the night fell.

The boy began to stir and cry.

She stopped and loosened her poor garments and gave him her breast. When he grew pacified, she stumbled on again; the child was quiet; the rain beat on her naked bosom, but the child was content and quiet; and so she went on so.

Sometimes she shivered. She could not help that. She wondered where the town was. She could not see the lights. In earlier years she had known the country step by step as only those can who are born in the air of it and

tread it daily in their ways of work. But now she had forgotten how the old road ran. Her girlhood seemed so far away; so very, very far. And yet she was only twenty−two years of age.

But then life does not count by years. Some suffer a lifetime in a day, and so grow old between the rising and the setting of a sun.

She had gone over the road so many times in the warm golden dawns and the white blamy nights, plaiting her wisps of straw, bare−headed in the welcome air, and with a poppy or a briar− rose set behind her ear for vanity's sake rather than for the flower's. But she had been long away−−though she was so young−−at least it seemed very long to her, and with absence she had lost all the peasant's instinct of safe movement in the dark, which is as sure as an owl's or an ass's, and comes by force of long habit and long treading of the same familiar way. She was not sure of her road; not even sure of her footing. The wind terrified her and she heard the loud surge of the Arno waters below; beating and foaming in flood. She was weak too from long fatigue, and the weight of the water in her clothes, and of the child in her arms, pulled her earthward.

No one passed by her.

Every one was housed, except sentries on the church−towers watching the rising of the waters, and shepherds getting their cattle upward from the low−lying pastures on to the hills.

She was all alone on the old sea−road, and if she were near the lights of Signa she could not see them for the steam and mist of the furious rain.

But she walked on resolutely, stumbling often over the great loose stones. She did not care for herself. Life was over for her. She would have been glad to lie down and die where she was. But if the boy were not under some roof before morning, she knew he would perish of cold in her arms. For she could give him so little warmth herself. She shivered in all her veins and all her limbs; and she was soaked through like a drowned thing, and he was wet also. So she went on, growing frightened, though her temper was bold, and only keeping her courage to love by feeling now and then as she went for the fair face of him at her breast. But the touch of her hand made him cry−−it was so cold−−and so even that comfort ceased for her, and she could only pray in a dumb unconscious way to God to keep the numbness out of her arms lest they should drop the boy as she went.

At a turn in the road there is a crucifix−−a wooden one set in the stone.

She sat down a moment under it, and rested as well as she could, and tried to think of heaven. But the wind would not let her. It tore the covering off her head, and tossed her long hair about; it scourged her with a storm of snapt boughs; it stung her with a shower of shrivelled leaves; it pierced through and through her poor thin clothes. She prayed a little as well as she could in the torment of it, but it went round and round her in so mad a whirl that she could not remember how the words should go. Only she remembered to keep the child warm, as a mother−sheep sets her body between the lamb and the drifts of snow.

After a while she began to cry.

Do what she would she could not keep a sense of chilliness and discomfort from reaching him; he wanted the ease and rest of some little cosy bed; her cramped arms held him ill, and the old shawl that wrapped him up was wet and cold.

She murmured little words to him, and tried even to sing some scrap of old song; but her voice failed her, and the child was not to be comforted. He cried more, and stirred restlessly. With great effort she bent her stiffened knees, and rose, and got on her way again. The rocking movement, as she carried him and walked on, stilled him a little.

She wished that she had dared to turn up a path higher on the mountain that she knew of, which she had passed as the Ave Maria bell hand rung. But she had not dared.

She was not sure who was there; what welcome or what curse she might get. He who was certain to be master there now had always been fierce with her and stern; and he might be married, and new faces be there too−−she could not tell; five years were time enough for so much change.

She had not dared go up the path; now that is was miles behind her she wished that she had taken it. But it was too late now. The town she knew, must be much the nearer of the two, now that she had come down so far; so she went onward in the face of the blinding rain−storm. She would go up in the morning, she thought, and tell him the truth; if he were brutal to herself, he would not let the child starve; she would go up in the morning−−so she said, and walked onward.

Her foot had slipped a dozen times, and she had recovered her footing and gone on safe. Once again in the

dark she slipped, her foot slid farther on loose wet earth, a stone gave way, she clutched the child with one arm, and flung out the other−−she could not see what she caught at in the dark. It was a bush of furze. The furze tore her skin, and gave way. She slipped farther and farther, faster and faster; the soil was so drenched, and the stones were unloosed. She remembered the road enough to know that she was going down, down, down, over the edge. She clasped the child with both arms once more, and was borne down through the darkness to her death.

She knew nothing more; the dark night closed in on her; she lost the sound of the ringing bells, and she ceased to feel the burden of the child.

CHAPTER III.

AN hour later two men came with lanthorns into the fields that lie between the rough vineyards underneath the road from the sea. They had sheep there, which they were going to drive into the town in the morning, and they were afraid that the flock, terrified in the winds and rains, might have broken loose, and strayed across the iron rails of the other road that runs by the river, and might get crushed under the wheels of the night trains running from the west.

As they went they stumbled against something on the ground, and lowered their lights to look.

There was a broken bramble−bush, and some crushed ferns, and a thing that had fallen from the height above the soaking soil. By their dim lanthorns they saw that the thing was a woman, and bending the light fuller on her as well as they could for the rain, they saw that she had been stunned or killed by the fall.

There was a great stone on which the back of her head had struck. She lay face upward, with her limbs stretched out; her right arm was close round the body of a living child; her breast was bare.

The child was breathing and asleep; he had fallen upon his mother, and so had escaped unhurt.

The men had been born peasants, and they were used to wring the throats of trapped birds and to take lambs from their mothers with small pity. They lifted the boy with some roughness and some trouble from the stiffening arm that enclosed him; he began to wail and moan; he was very wet and miserable, and he said a little word which was a call for his mother, like the pipe of a little bird that has fluttered out of the nest, and lies cold on the grass and frightened.

One of them took him up, and wrapped his cloak across the little sobbing mouth.

The other knelt down, and tried to make his light burn better, and laid his hand on the woman's breast to feel for pulse of life. But she was quite dead. He did what he could to call back life, but it was all in vain; at length he covered her breast, and stared up at his fellow.

"This looks like Pippa," he said, slowly, with a sound as of awe in his voice.

The other lowered his light too and looked.

"Yes, it is like Pippa," he said, slowly, also.

Then they were both silent for some moments, the lanthorn light blinking in the rain.

"Yes, it is Pippa; yes, certainly, it is Pippa," said the first one stupidly; and he ran his hand with a sort of shudder over the outline of her features and her form.

The one who held the child turned his light on the little wet face; the baby ceased to cry, and opened his big, dark, wondering eyes at the flame.

"And whose byblow is this?" said he.

"The devil knows," said he who knelt by the mother. "But it is Pippa. Look here on her left breast−−do you see? there is the little three−cornered scar of the wound I gave her with my knife, at the wine fair, that day."

The other looked closer while the rain beat on the white cold chest of the woman.

"Yes, it must be Pippa."

Then they were both silent again a little, for they were Pippa's brothers.

"Let us go and tell them in the Lastra, and get the bier." said the one who knelt by her, getting up to his feet, with a sullen, dazed gloom on his dark face.

"And leave her here?" said the one who had the child.

"Why not? nobody will run away with the dead!"

"But this little beast−−what can one do with him?"

"Carry him to your wife."

"There are too many at home."

"She has one of his age; she can take him."

"She will never touch Pippa's boy."

"Give him to me, then, and stay you here."

"No, that I dare not−−the foul fiend might come after her."

"The foul fiend take your terrors. Let us get into the Lastra; we can see then. We must tell the Misericordia, and get the bier−−"

"There is no such haste; she is stone dead. What a pipe this brat has! One would think he was a pig with the knife in its throat."

"It is very cold. Who would have thought it could have lived−−such a fall as that, and such a night!"

"It lives because nobody wants it. She had no gold about her, had she?"

"I do not know."

The one who held the child stopped over the dead woman awhile, then rose with a sigh of regret−−

"Not a stiver; I have felt her all over."

"Then she must have done ill these five years."

"Yes−−and yet so handsome, too. But Pippa never plaited even."

"Nay, never−−poor Pippa!"

So they muttered, plodding over the broken heavy ground, with the sound of the swollen river in their ears and the lanthorn lights gleaming through the steam of the rain. In the noise of the waters the child sobbed and screamed unheard. The man had tossed him over his shoulder as he carried the new−born lambs, only with a little less care.

They clambered up into the road and tramped through the slough of mud into the town. The woman had drawn nigh to the upper town by a dozen yards, when her foot had slipped, and she had reeled over to her death. But the feet of the shepherds were bare, and kept sure hold, like the feet of goats. They tramped on, quick, through the crooked streets and over the bridge; the river had run high, and along the banks, and on the flat roofs of the towers there were the lights burning of the men who watched for the flood. They heard how loud and swiftly the river was running as they went over the bridge and down in to the irregular twisting streets, and under the old noble walls of the lower village of the Lastra.

The one who carried the child opened a rickety door in the side of a tumbledown house, and climbed a steep stairway, and pushed his way into a room where children of all ages, and trusses of straw, and a pig, and a hen with her chickens, and a black crucifix, and a load of cabbage−leaves and maize−stalks, and a single lemon−tree in a pot, were all together nearly indistinguishable in the darkness. He tossed the child to a sturdy brown woman with fierce brows.

"Here, Nita, here is a young one I found in the fields. Feed it to−night, and to−morrow I will tell the priest and the others, and we shall get credit. It is near dead of cold already. No−−I cannot stay−−do you hear how the waters are out? Bruno is down below wanting me to help to house the sheep."

He clattered away down the stairs, and joined his brother in the street.

"I told her nothing of Pippa," he said, in a whisper. "If she knew it were Pippa's not a drop of milk would he get to−night. As it is, it is a pretty little beggar; she will let him share with Toto. She knows charity pleases Heaven. And−−and−−see here, Bruno, why need we speak of Pippa at all."

His brother stared at him in the murky gloom. "Why? −−why we must fetch her in and bury her."

"The waters will do that before morning if we let them alone; that will spare us a deal of trouble, Bruno."

"Trouble−−why?"

"Oh, it is always trouble−−the church and the law, and all the rest. Then you know the Syndic is such a man to ask questions. And nobody saw her but ourselves. And they may say we tumbled her over. She has come back poor, and all Signa knows that you struck her with your knife on the day of the fair, and that she has been a disgrace and a weariness always. We might have trouble, Bruno."

"But the child?"

"Oh, the child! I have told Nina we picked it up lost in the fields. Why should we tell anybody to−night about Pippa? The poor soul is dead. No worse can come. Men do not hurt dead women. And there is so much to do to−night, Bruno. We should see for our sheep on the other side now, and then stay down here. The devil knows what pranks the Arno may not play to−night. In five hours I warrant you he will be out all over the country."

"But to leave her there−−all alone−−it is horrible!"

"How shall we show we did not push her there to her death?"

"But we did not."

"That is why they would all say we did. Everybody knows that there was bad blood with us and Pippa: and most of all with you. Let the night go over, Bruno. We want the night to work in, and if she be there at day dawn, then we can tell. It will be time enough."

"Well−−lie as you like," said the other, sullenly. "Let us get the sheep in anyhow."

So they went out to the open country again, through the storm of the west wind that was blowing the river back from the sea, so that it could not get out, and was driven up again between the hills, and so overflowed the lands through which it travelled. The men worked hard and in earnest, housing their own sheep and driving their neighbours' cattle on rising knolls, or within church doors, or anywhere where they were safe from the water; and then came down again into the street towards midnight, where all the people were awake and astir watching the Arno, and holding themselves ready to flee.

"You have got the ague, Bruno," said the man at the wine−shop, for his arm shook as he drank a draught.

"So would you if you had been up to your middle in water all the night like me," said the elder brother, roughly.

But it was not the water, they were too used to that. It was the thought of the woman dead all alone under the old sea−road.

The night became a bitter black night. Up the valley the river was out, flooding the pastures far and near. Boats went and came, taking help, and bringing homeless families. Watchfires were burning everywhere. Bodies of drowned cattle drifted in by scores. There were stories that the great city herself was in flood. In such a time every breath is a tale of terror, and every rumour grows instantly to giant proportions.

The upper town of Signa itself was safe. But was great peril for the low−lying Lastra. No one went to their beds. The priest prayed. The bells tolled. The men went to and fro in fear. The horrid loudness of the roaring waters drowned all other sounds.

When the morning broke, sullen and grey, and still beaten with storm, the cold dull waste of water stretched drearily on either side of the great bridge. The two brethren went with the crowd that looked from it eastward and westward.

The river had spread over the iron rails, and the grassy, broken ground, and the bushes of furze, and reached half way up to the rocks and the hill−road above. The wind had changed, and was blowing in from the eastward mountains. The water rolled under its force with furious haste to the sea like a thing long imprisoned, and frantic with the joy of escape.

"It has taken Pippa," said the brothers, low to one another.

And they felt like men who have murdered a woman.

Not that it mattered of course. She was dead. And if not to the sea, then to the earth, all the dead must go,−−into darkness, and forgotten of all.

CHAPTER IV.

THE brothers looked pale under their brown skins in the ashen light of the dawn.

But they had lost sheep like other folks, and so like other folks were pitied as they went back into the Lastra to get a mouthful of bread, after the sickly vigil of the night.

Bruno was an unwedded man, and could bear misfortune; but Lippo was a man early married, and having six young children to clamour round his soup−pot, and fight for the crusts of bread. He was pointed out amongst the crowd of sufferers, and was one of those who were pitied the most, and who was sure to get a good portion of the alms−giving and public relief.

"Give Bruno a cup of wine and a crust, Nita," said he, going up the stairs into the house of his wife. He lived there with her because her father, who was a cobbler, owned the place, and he himself best liked the life of the Lastra. The wife, too, having been a cobbler's daughter and grand−daughter, had been always used to see life from the half−door of the workshop; she would not become a mere contadina, hoeing and weeding and plaiting and carrying dung in a broad−leaved hat and a russet gown−−not she, were it ever so; and Anita was one those strong and fortunate women who always get their own way by dint of their power to make everyone wretched who crosses them.

"Leave me to speak," said Lippo, with a glance of meaning to his brother.

It was five in the morning, very cold, and still dusky. Anxiety was allayed, since the wind blew from the east, and the waters were sinking, though slowly.

Nita, who had been up all night on the watch, like the rest of the women, was boiling coffee in a tin−pot, and fanning the charcoal. The chil− dren lay about as they chose on the floor. None of them had been put to bed, since at any moment they might have had to run for their lives.

Bruno looked round for Pippa's child. He did not see it.

"An awful night," said Lippo, kicking the pig out of a doze. "They do say the Vecchio bridge is down in Florence, and that the jewellers could not get out in time. I wish the gold and silver and stones would drift down here. All the Grève country is swamped. St. Guisto sticks up on his tower like a masthead. The cattle are drowned by herds. Whole stacks of wheat are against the piles, making hungry souls' mouths water; rotted and ruined; fine last year's grain; the good God is bitter−hard sometimes. Where is the baby I brought you last night, my woman?"

Nita pointed with her charcoal fan; her coffee was on the point of boiling.

The brothers looked where she pointed, to a nest of hay close to the hen and her chickens. The child lay there sound asleep, with his little naked limbs curled up; and close against him was Toto, a yearling child also.

The elder brother turned away suddenly, and his body shook a little.

"You have never dried your clothes, Bruno," said his sister−in−law. "What a baby a man is without a wife. Drink that, it is hot as hot. And what did you bring me that baby for−−you and Lippo? You know whose brat it is, I suppose, and look out for the reward? I thought so, or I would not have given it house−room. Toto is more work than enough, so masterful as he is−−and so ravenous."

"Nay," said Lippo, as with a sheepish apology for his weakness. "I know nothing of whose brat it is−−I was just sorry for it; left in the soaking fields there; and I picked it up as I should pick up a lame lamb. What do you think of it, my dearest? does it look like a poor child or a rich one, eh? Women are quick to judge."

The black brows of Nita lowered in wrath.

"Mercy of heaven! Who would have to do with such dolts as men? Just because the child was there you pick it up, never thinking of all the hungry mouths half−fed at home! Shame on you. You are an unnatural brute. You would starve your own to nourish a stranger!"

"Nay, sweetest Nita!" murmured Lippo, coaxingly. "On such a night−−and a child taken down by flood, too−−not a living soul but would have done as I did. And who knows but he may be some rich father's child, and make our fortunes? Any way, the township will give us credit, and he can go to the Innocenti to−morrow if we find no gain in him. Look what his things betoken."

"Oh, his things are rough−spun enough, and vile as can be," said his wife, in a fuming fury. "And would a rich man's child be out on flood? It is only the poor brats that the weather finds loose for it to play antics with; the child is a beggar's son, and this thing linked round his neck by a little string, is a thing you get at the fairs for a copper−bit."

The two men looked together at the locket that she held to them; it was of base−metal−−a little poor round trumpery plaything. On it there was the one word in raised letters of Signa, and inside a curl of soft light hair. That was all. They could none of them read, so the letters on the metal told them nothing. They stooped together over the sleeping child.

He was pretty and well made; he lay quite naked in the hay, and beside brown Toto looked like one of the little marble children of old Mino. His lashes and his brows were black, but over his forehead hung little rings of soft, fair, crumpled hair.

Bruno turned away.

"She used to look just like that when she was a little child," he muttered to himself.

Lippo glanced round to see if his wife heard. But she was busy with the hen, who had got into a barrel of rice, and was eating treble her own price at the market at one meal.

"The brat must go," said she, turning and flogging the hen away. "As for a chance that it is a rich man's child, that is all rubbish. You make your bread with next year's corn. Chances like that are old wives' tales. What we have to do is to feed six hungry stomachs. You were a fool to bring it here at all. But to dream one should keep it! Holy Mary!"

"Holy Mary would say, keep it," said Bruno, munching his crust.

"Maybe it is your own, Bruno. Those that hid can find," said his sister−in−law sharply. "The child shall pack to−day. I shall go and tell them at the guard−house. Toto is more than enough, and as for that locket, you can get such trash as that at nay fair for a couple of figs. That goes for nothing."

"Well, well, keep the poor baby till noon, and I will see what the Curato says. It is always well to see what he says," her husband answered her hurriedly, and afraid of the gathering storm on Bruno's face.

Bruno was passionate, tempestuous, and weak, and the quieter, subtler brother ruled him with ease whilst seeming to obey. But for turning the baby of dead Pippa's to public maintenance−−Lippo had a foreboding in him that in this matter his brother would be too strong for him.

He hurried away out of pretext of labour awaiting them in the inundated country, not without misgiving that the darkest suspicions as to the fatherhood of the foundling were awakening in the jealous soul of his wife.

They went straight to the edge of the river, and got out their old black boat, with its carved prow and tricoloured tiller, and pulled down the current of the now quiet water to see with the rest what could help so save from the flotsam and jetsam of the flood. Whole districts lay under water, and the river was full of dead cats and dogs, drowned sheep, floating pipkins and wine−casks, bales of hay, carcases of cows. and broken bits of furniture from many a ruined farmstead and peasant's hut laid low.

"Listen," said the elder brother suddenly, when the boat was fairly out from the bank, and with his hooked pole he drew in a spinning−wheel with its bank of flax drenched like a drowned girl's hair. "Listen to me, Lippo. Pippa's son must not go to charity. Do you hear?"

"I hear. But we are poor men, and Pippa was −−"

"That is neither here nor there," said Bruno, with his dark brows meeting. "She never asked alms of us, nor house−room, nor did anything except to go to her death just as sheep tumble over a rock. The baby must not go to the parish. We did faulty enough−−letting her go down flood with never an office of church said over her. And who knows−−who knows−−she might not be quite dead, after all."

"Nita will not keep him−−that is sure," said the younger quickly. "Look, that is Barcelli's old red cow. You may know her by the spot on her side."

"Would she keep him if she were paid?"

Lippo's eyes lighted with joy, but he bent a grave face over his pole as he raked in a floating oil−flask by its wicker coat.

"I doubt if she would. She has a deal of trouble with Toto. And who is there to pay, pray? We know no more than the cow there who the man was−−you know that."

"I will pay."

"You!"

"Yes; I will pay the child's keep."

"Holy angels! And you who were for ever at words and blows with Pippa, and stabbed at her even for being too gay!"

"I will pay," said Bruno.

Lippo rowed on in silence some moments.

"How much?" he asked at last.

"I will give you half all I get."

Lippo's white teeth showed themselves in a sudden smile. His brother gained a good deal in corn and oil and beans and hay and wine, being on good land, and being a man who worked and got the uttermost out of the soil that he shared with his master, and Lippo was often pinched by his father−in−law Baldo the cobbler, and half famished by his wife, and was a true son of the soil, and knew the worth of a hundredth part of a copper coin as well as any man between sea and mountain.

"Half all you get, and we to keep the child?" he said absently, and as with reluctance. "But what can we say to Nita?"

"You are never at a loss for good lying, Lippo."

Lippo smiled; his vanity was flattered.

"I never lie to Nita. She always finds one out. Only in the matter of Pippa's son I hid the truth to please you. She never would nurse the child if she guessed. Bust as for making her keep him, say what one will, it will be impossible−−impossible, my dear."

"It must be," said Bruno, withdrawing his hand from the tiller and bringing it down with violence on the boat's side, while his eyes flashed with blue fire as the lightning flashes most summer nights over the blue hills of his own Signa. "It must be. I will pay. I will give you half I get. Good harvests−−you know what that is. But Pippa's child shall not go to parish while I have an arm to drive a plough through the ground or to guide over the field. Settle it with your wife your own way. But Pippa's child shall grow up amongst us."

"Dear Bruno, to please you I will try," said gentle Lippo with a sigh. "But we have brats too many in the house, and you know what Nita's 'Nay' can be."

"Nay or yea, the child stays," said Bruno.

"The half of everything," murmured Lippo, as he bent to his oars and passed by a dog howling on the top of its floating kennel to reach his pole to a butcher's basket of meat that was tossing amongst the rubbish.

But Bruno, having the tiller, pushed first to reach the dog.

"It is only a cur," said Lippo.

Bruno pulled the dog into the boat.

In the Lastra, and in the town, and in all the country round or near Signa, the brothers were known as well as the mass−bells of the churches. The Signa people thought that Bruno the contadino was a bad man enough, ready with his knife and often in a brawl, and too often seen at fairs and with other men's wives on feast−days. Lippo they liked and respected, and everybody spoke him fair; and he would keep the peace most beautifully when men got angry in the streets before his house−door.

They were both handsome men, and could neither of them read, and believed in their priest and their paternoster, and had never been beyond the mountains around Signa, except now and then−−Bruno with his bullocks, and Lippo in a donkey−cart to buy leather−−down the Valdarno into the Lily City.

Bruno lived on the wild hillside, amongst the thyrne and the myrtle and the gorze and the grass−cropping sheep and the ever−singing nightingales. Lippo dwelt down in the street, doing as little as he could, and by preference nothing, in the smell of his wife's frying and in the sound of her father's little hammer; rowing out his boat when there was any chance for it to pay, and seeing after the few sheep that the shoemaker kept above the bridge. They had been born within a year of one another−−sons of peasants and workers in the fields. Bruno stayed on the old land where his fathers had had rights of the soil uncounted generations. Lippo had loitered down love−making into the Lastra, and had married very early the daughter of well−to−do old Baldo.

There had been several sons after them. Two had been killed as soldiers, and others had died in infancy by various strokes of evil chance; and the youngest of them all had been Pippa−−Pippa, whose body was gone out on

the flood to the sea with never a prayer said over her. Beautiful, fierce, wayward, wilful, fire−mouthed Pippa, who had run over the hills like a lizard, and who had had saucy words on her tongue as a rose has its thorns, and who had had all Signa gazing after her for her beauty when she had walked singing like a cherub in the wake of the banners of the church.

Not that she had ever cared much for the church,−−poor Pippa.

She had always been quarrelsome and self−willed and headstrong; and had flouted her lovers, and been petulant to her own hindrance, and as wild as a hawk, and provoking,−−yes, provoking, past the endurance of any man who was a brother and nothing more. She would never sit quiet and spin; she would never keep her eyes on her tress of straw as other girls did; if she milked the cow she would upset the pail just out of wantonness, and would laugh and dance to see their rage when she let the pigs run in amongst her brother's plot of green peas. Yes, certainly, she was provoking; a bad girl, even though loving at heart; no one was to blame that she had gone away without a word and come back so, with a child at her breast, to find her death the night of the flood.

A self−willed foolish girl and with wrong−doing ingrained in her−−as for patience, who could be very patient with a woman that let the pigs in amongst your peas just when green peas fetched their weight in silver? And then she had such a tongue too, the little shrew−−true, she did not bear malice, and would not growl, growl, growl for hours together as Nita would, and Nita's mother, thinking it the only way to manage men; true, she was a generous soul, and would let a beggar have her dinner, though meals were meagre on the hills; and when one had beaten her till she was blue she would not tell, but say she had fallen from the ladder trimming the vines, or that the bees had stung her. Still a wilful, quarrelsome, pettish thing; no man could be blamed for her ill−hap nor for her end. So Lippo said to himself when his brother had gone up to the hills, and he himself left his boat to go down the narrow street homeward, pondering on Pippa's child and on what he should say to Nita.

As he went up the stairs he settled the lie to his mind's content, and entered the room looking with his fairest faith out of his clear brown eyes.

"I am going to be frank with you, Nita," he said, and then he sat down and lied so prettily, that if there be a Father of Lies he must quite have rejoiced to hear him.

Nita listened as well as a woman can listen−−that is, interrupting twenty times and getting up to do some irrelevant thing twice twenty.

"Bruno's son!" she cried at last.

"Hush! The children will hear," said Lippo. "It is as I tell you. Only Bruno must not know that you know, because he is so afraid that red−haired Roma whom he is courting should hear of it. But you see why I closed with him, Nita. It will be a good thing for us. We can eat like fatting pigs off Bruno's land. Nothing to prevent us. And it is hill land, you know, and his share comes to a good bit, taking fair weather and foul. And then, besides that, we shall have credit in the Lastra, for Bruno never will say a word, and the curato and all the place may as well think the child a foundling as not. A good deed smells sweet in the neighbours' nostrils, and a good name is like a blest palm. We must tell your father, or he will grumble at the seventh mouth. But nobody else need know. The brat will grow up with the others, and we shall seem kind, that is all."

"To think of its being Bruno's!" cried Nita, with a clap of her big brown hands. "Did I not say so, now? Did I not jeer him as he looked at it asleep? Oh−−oh! Who can deceive me? Never you try, Lippo, more!"

"You can see through a millstone," replied Lippo, with an embrace of her. "Only an ass can ever seek to blind you, and that is why I told you the truth, though Bruno would have screened it. He is so afraid of the creature he goes to now ever knowing−−you understand."

"The child will be a bother," said Anita, remembering the kicks and cuffs with whose best administration she could scarce manage to keep the peace amongst her brood or their hands ever out of the soup−pot.

"Oh, no," said Lippo, shrugging his shoulders, "where there are six there may as well be seven. He will tumble up with the others. We are to have half of all Bruno gets, and I can guess to a stalk, you know, what an acre of wheat is worth, or what an olive or a fig tree bears. No fattore would outwit me. I was not bred out on the fields for nothing. Half of everything, you know, Nita. That will mean a good deal in good seasons. I am very hungry, carina. Could you not fry something in oil, nice and tempting for one? An artichoke, now, or a blackbird?"

Nita grumbled at the extravagance, but being in a good humour went downstairs and across the way and brought over some artichokes and fried them and ate them with her husband, the children being sent to make dust pies and castles in the sun on the stones below, old Baldo keeping an eye on them over his half−door.

Lippo and his wife ate their artichokes, and drank a little wine with them.

Pippa's son cried unnoticed in his nest of hay, and sobbed out his one little word for mother, which was like the moan of a little unfledged bird left in the snow.

"We will bring him up to help himself," said Lippo, with his mouth filled with the fried eggs and oil.

The child sobbed on, and felt for his mother's breast, and only had his small soft rosy hands torn with the thorns and pricked with the burrs and briars of the sun−dried hay.

CHAPTER V.

MEANWHILE Bruno went up the hills; up the same old road which had felt Pippa's footsteps on it the night before; with the river underneath it, and on the other side of the mountains rising, with the olives and vines about their sides, and on their summits old watchtowers and fortresses, and dusky woods of ilex, and cloudy masses of stone−pine, that sent their strong odour down the valley a score of miles.

Bruno went on his way, looking neither right nor left. He went over the ground so often, and he had seen it all from the year he was born; always this and never anything else; and long familiarity dulls the sense of beauty, even where such sense has been awakened, and Bruno's never had been−−except for a woman's looks.

He strode on, not looking up nor looking back; a straight−limbed, swarthy, fine−built peasant, of thirty years or more, with the oval face of his country, and broad, black, luminous eyes, soft and contemplative, like the eyes of the ox, when the rage was not alight in them.

He did not look round, because peasants do not look up from the soil; and he did not look back, because he had no care to see the spot where he had kneeled down in the wet grass by the broken bushes, with the noise of the river in his ears.

He went up the sea−road some way, and then quitted it and ascended to the left. The estate to which he belonged was on the side of a spur of the mountains, that turns to Signa, and faces straight down the valley, and whose wine is named as famous in the Bacco in Toscana of Redi.

There are beautiful hills in this country, steep and bold, and formed chiefly of limestone and sandstone, covered all over with gum− cistus and thyme, and wild−roses and myrtle, with low growing laurels and tall cypresses, and boulders of stone, and old thorn trees, and flocks of nightingales always, and the sad−voiced little owl that was beloved of Shelley.

Bruno's farmstead was on one of these hills; half the hill was cultured, and the other half was wild; and on its height was an old, grey, mighty place, once the palace of a cardinal, and where there now dwelt the steward of the soil on which Bruno had been born.

His cottage was a large, low, white building, with a red roof, and a great arched door, and a sun−dial on the wall, and a group of cypresses beside, and a big walnut−tree before it. There was an old well with some broken sculpture; some fowls scratching under the fig boughs; a pig hunting for roots in the black bare earth; behind it stretched the wild hill−side, and in front a great slope of fields and vineyards; and far below them in the distance the valley and the river and the bridge, with the high crest of the upper Signa, and the low lying wall−towers of the Lastra on either side of the angry waters.

Bruno did not look back at it at all. He saw the sun rise over it, and the beautiful pale light steal up, and up, and up, and up, wherever he rose to his work in the day−dawn. But is was nothing at all to him. When now and then a traveller or a painter strayed thither, and said it was beautiful, Bruno smiled, glad because it was his own country−−that was all.

He went into his cold, quiet, desolate house, and sat down for a minute's rest; he was tired. There was no one to greet him. He did everything for himself. He had no neighbours. The nearest contadino lived a mile down beyond the fields which in summer were a sea of maize and a starry world of fire−flies; and the old palace was some distance higher on the crest, where the gorze grew thickest, and the mountain moss clustered about the roots of the stone−pines.

Here−−in the long, low rambling dwelling, with the sun−dial on its wall, and the great archways underneath it, and the stacks of straw before it−−there had been nine of them once. Now Bruno lived there alone.

He sat down a minute on the settle, and thought. Thinking was new work to him. He never thought at all, except of the worm in the ripening wheat, or the ticks in the flock's fleeces. The priest did his thinking for him. What use was it to pay a priest for having opinions if one had to think for one's self as well?

But he sat and thought now.

Poor Pippa! what a little, ruddy, pretty thing she was, lying in her white swaddling bands, when he was a big

rough boy twelve years old, with bare feet and chest, who used to come in from the fields hungry and footsore, and feel angry to the last−come child in his mother's arms, getting all her care and caresses.

He bore Pippa a grudge from her birth.

They were all boys, rough and tumble together, share and share alike; and then one summer morning the girl came, and their mother never seemed the same to them again−−never any more. The little girl, with a face like the bud of the red rose laurel, seemed to be all she thought about−−or so they fancied; and anything good that could be got, honey, or a drop of new milk, or a little white loaf from the town, or an apricot from the fattoria, was always set aside for Pippa; pretty, saucy, noisy, idle Pippa, who was more often in mischief than they were, but never got, as they did, a thrashing, and a wish that the devil might come and fetch away all naughty children.

There had been times when he had hated Pippa, hated her from the first day he saw her lying on her mother's bosom, with her little red mouth, clinging as bee does at a flower, to the night when he had scolded her for dancing with any fool that asked her, and then she had mocked him about a dead love, and he had struck at her with his knife, and the people had dragged him off her, all blind with rage and shame at his own misdoing; and the blood had sprouted up out from her neck, and stained the lace she wore as red as a goldfinch's feathers.

He had hated her always.

It seemed to him now that he had been like a brute to her−−poor, pretty, brown−eyed, happy, self−willed thing, who had been spoilt from her babyhood upward.

Lippo remembered how provoking she had been, and justified himself as he went home through the Lastra.

But Bruno forgot it, and only reproached himself. He had always been rough and fierce and moody with her−−oh yes, no doubt. If he had been patient with her−−he twelve years older, too−−she might never have run away from her home on the hill, and borne that nameless child, and gone to her death on the old sea−road.

No doubt he had done wrong by her; had been too severe and tyrannous, and had helped to make the cottage distasteful to her after their mother had died and he had become master, and had tried to shut her in, as a thrush is shut in a wicker cage.

He forgot all her faults−−poor dead Pippa−−and he remembered all his own. Liberal natures will err thus to themselves; and Bruno, with all his evil ways, was liberal as the sun and winds.

Poor Pippa!

He saw her as he had seen her standing out in the light on the hill, with her little brown hands plaiting the straw all unevenly, and her bow−like mouth gay with laughter at some piece of mischief sweet to her as fig in summer. She had used to look so pretty, with her arch eyes shining under her great straw penthouse of a hat, and her supple, slim shape, in brown and red, like a firefly, standing up as a poppy does against the corn on the amber light of the evening sky, here where the hill was just the same, and only she was a thing that was gone for ever and ever and ever.

Bruno shut his eyes not to see the hill. But he could not shut out his thoughts. He had been a brute to her. It stirred and grew in him; this mute remorse, which Lippo would have laughed out, and which had been awake ever since he had gone about his business as the river rose, and left the dead woman alone to drift down with the flood.

She was dead, of course, and it could hurt her no more to be swept out to the salt sea−pools westward than to be lowered into the earth in a coffin. Still Bruno, if he had gone straight to the priest and told him, and had let the Church sorrow over and bury her, would not have been tormented by the thought of her was he was now. Now, in a curious kind of half stupid way, he felt as if he had found her and had killed her.

There had been war between him and Pippa always; and though it had shocked him a little to find her lying there lifeless in the dark, yet he had not cared much at first. But since he had forsaken her to the will of the waters, in the vague fear of that nameless trouble which his brother had threatened him with as possible, Bruno−−a brave man all his days−−felt a coward; and with the tingling shame of that new craven sense came a self−reproach in which any rough word and fierce act of his life against the lost creature rose in judgment against him.

Poor Pippa!

After all, what had her faults been? Only mirth and over−eagerness for pleasure, and a quick tongue, and a love of the sunshine idly spent amongst fruits and flowers whilst others were working. These were all.

She had been truthful and generous of temper, and never unwilling to forgive. Nay, though he had struck at her with his open blade that fair−night, she had called out to the people not to hurt him for it; and when she had left the hillside that very summer−−no one knew for whither nor with whom−−did she not tell an old woman, who

alone saw her going through the millet at break of day with a bundle, "Say to my brothers I am not angry any more; they have been unkind to me, but I have been troublesome, and said hot words very often; and I will pray for them, if that will do any good: only tell them not to try to bring me back, because we never are at peace together"?

Poor Pippa!

He shut his eyes against the sunlight; but, shut them as he would with both hands, he saw her as he had seen her last, coming through the beanflowers, with the long evening shadows and the little golden fireflies seeming to run before her; when he had turned across the fields and avoided her because of the thrust with the knife, which she had never spoken of, and of which he was half ashamed and half defiant, and which therefore he would never admit that he regretted, living on in silence with her under the same roof, trusting to chance.

And chance came−−the chance that one summer morning the bed of Pippa was empty, and old Viola, coming in with a sheath of green cane for her donkey, told them how she had met the girl, and of her farewell words.

Shut his eyes as he would, he saw her so, amongst the purple beanflowers that night when his heart had swelled a little at sight of her, and he had been half inclined to tell her he was sorry for that blow, and then had felt the pride rise in him, and had said to himself that the girl had deserved it−−disobeying him, and then jesting at him−−and so had struck across the rustling corn, and let her go without a word.

And now she was dead−−gone out on the flood to the sea; and he had never told her that he had been sorry for the stab, and never could tell her now.

Would God tell her? or any one of the saints?

Bruno wondered. He felt as if that dead woman whom the river had got stood for ever between him and all the hosts of heaven.

He was a strong man, and his emotions and his intelligence were both unawakened, and his life was much like that of his own plough bullocks; but he shuddered through all his limbs as he rose up from the wooden settle and faced the day. Work with the labourer is an instinct, as watching is the house−dog's; and pain may stifle it for a moment, but no more.

He went out and unloosed the bar of the stable−doors, and brought out his oxen, and muzzled them and yoked them together, and drove them out over the steep slanting fields that ran upward and downward, and were intersected by lines of maples and mulberries with the leafless vines clinging to them, and by watercourses cut deep that the rain might be borne down the mountain side, and by wild hedges of briony and rose and arbutus, with here and there winter−red leaves of creepers that the winds had forgotten to blow away.

It was a grey morning, with heavy white mists lying over all the valley down below; and on the high hills it was very cold. Bruno drove his meek large−eyed beasts through the black earth with a heavy heart.

He seemed always to see Pippa as she had used to come, when their father lived, and she was a child, with a black loaf and a flask of wine, out to them on the hill in the ploughing time, and stroked the bullocks, and put round their leathern frontlets gay wreaths of anemones, purple and red and blue, or the berries of the beautiful corbezzolo.

And now she was dead−−stone dead−−like the mouse the share killed in the furrow.

The bullocks, well used to goad and curse, turned their broad foreheads and looked at him with luminous fond eyes: he was so gentle with them−−they were grateful, but they wondered why.

Bruno ploughed all day, and the wind blew up from the sea, and he felt as if it were blowing her long wet hair against him.

"I will do good by the child, so help me −−, and perhaps they will tell her in heaven," he said to himself, as he went to and fro up and down the shelving fields underneath the lines of the leafless trees.

"Perhaps they will tell her in heaven?" he thought, as he went over the heavy wet clods in the mist.

CHAPTER VI.

BRUNONE MARCILLO, always known as Bruno, did what all his people had always done for seven hundred centuries and more.

They had been vassals and spearmen in the old warlike times, and well−to−do contadini ever afterwards; giving their sons, when need arose, to die in the common cause of the native soil, but otherwise never stirring off their own hillside; good husbandmen, bold men, fierce haters, honest neighbours, keeping their women−kind strictly, and letting their males have as much license as was compatible with unremitting and patient labour in all seasons.

They were a race remarkable for physical beauty−−a beauty that is strictly national; the dark straight−browed classic beauty which Giotto has put in his Garden of Olives, and Signorelli given to his noble Prophets.

They had always intermarried with mountain races like their own, or taken wives from the Lastra households, where the ancient blood ran pure. The father of Brunone and Lippo had done otherwise; he had taken a work−girl of the city, a pretty feckless thing, whom he had seen one market night that he had strayed into the Loggia theatre, when a good harvest had put too much loose cash in his pockets, and the humours of Cimarosa's Nemici Generosi had been making him laugh till he cried.

The girl had become to him a good wife enough, nobody had denied that; but she was not of the stern stuff that the Marcillo housewives always had been, with their busts of Ceres and their brows of Juno, their arms that could guide the oxen and their heads that could balance a wine− barrel.

She was timid, and some said false, though that was never proved, and she had not the hill−born strength of mind and body that these people who had lived nigh a thousand years in the same air possessed.

Her second son, Filippo, or Lippo, inherited her constitution, and with it her supplicating caress of manner and her timidity−−perhaps her falseness too; but the Lastra did not think so; the Lastra was fond of Lippo, though he had deserted the ways of his fathers, and dwelt in an idleness not altogether creditable and altogether alien to the habits of his race, who had always been used to labour together, father and sons, and often grandsons, all under the same roof and on the same fields, generation after generation.

When the large family dwindled down to one man, it was out of custom to leave so much land to solitary labourer. But Brunone Marcillo was a favourite with his master, and one of the best husbandmen in the province; besides he was sure to marry and fill the house, they thought, so he was left undisturbed, and the land suffered nothing; for though he loved his pleasure in a wild lawless way, and took fierce fits of it at times, he was devoted to his home− stead and his work, and loved his birthplace with that fast−rooted love of the Tuscan which makes the little red roof under the red waning skies, on the solitary upland, or in the silent marsh, or amidst the blue−flowered fields of the flax, or above the thyme−covered, wind−blown hills by the sea, more precious and more lovely than any greater fate or fairer gifts elsewhere.

All alone on his little farm Bruno became a man well to do, and who could have put money by had he not loved women so well−−so they said.

It was a broad rich piece of land that went with the dwelling house he occupied. He grew wheat, and maize, and beans, and artichokes, and had several sturdy fig−trees that yielded richly, and noble olives that numbered their hundred years, and the vines that marched with his corn were amongst the best in the Signa country.

The half of all its produce was his, according to the way of the land and the provisions of custom, and the house was a better one than most of its degree; and the fields that were his lay well on the open hillside, sun−swept, as was wanted by vines and grain both, but sheltered from cold winds by the jutting out of the quarried rocks and the woods of ilex and pine that were above.

Bruno was a laborious workman, and was skilled in field labour; he knew how to make an ear of barley bear double, and how to keep blight away, and the fly from the vine.

He could not read; he could not write; his notions of God were shut up in a little square coloured picture, framed and hung up over the gateway into his fields to bring a blessing there; his idea of political duty was

comprised in hating any one who taxed him, and being ready to shoot any one who raised the impost on grain; but he was a husbandman after Virgil's own heart; he wanted no world beyond the waving of his corn, and if a steer were sick, or when the grapes were ripe, he took no sleep, but watched all night, loving his cattle and his fruits as poets their verse or kings their armies.

On the whole Bruno led a contented and prosperous life, and if he had not been so ready with his wrath, might have been welcome in all households; and if he had not been over fond of those fairs in all the little towns where wandering players set up their little music booths, and of the women that he found there, and of the license that is always to be had by any man whose money−bag has its mouth open and its stomach filled, might also have become a very wealthy man in his own way. But he was fierce, and every one feared him, and he was improvident, and every one fleeced him. And he was lax and lawless in his loves, and had a dangerous name in the countryside amongst the mothers of maidens.

So that he of all men had had no title to be hard upon Pippa: and yet hard he had been always.

The most amorous men and the wildest are usually the most exacting of virtue and modesty in their own women.

He had always hated her: yes, honestly hated her he told himself; and as she grew up into girlhood, and they were shut alone in the same house, always opposed on to another, Pippa's idleness, and sauciness, and rebellion against homekeeping, and passion for dancing and straying and idling, infuriated him against her more and more with every day that dawned.

Bruno, with all his excesses, never neglected or slurred over his labour. The land and its needs were always first with him. He would have had his sister one of those maidens, numerous around him, who asked nothing better than the daily round of household and field duties; who could reap as well as a man; who could harness an ox and guide him; and who were busy from dusk of dawn to nightfall hoeing, drawing water, spinning, plaiting, shelling beans, rearing chickens, drying tomatoes, setting cauliflowers, thinning fruit−trees, winding silk off the cocoons, and went to bed with tired limbs and a light conscience, never dreaming of more pleasure than a stroll on a feast−day with a neighbour, or a new white linen skirt for some grand church function.

"Why was not Pippa like that?" he had asked himself, angrily, ten thousand times, instead of a girl that would hardly do as much as tie up a few bunch of carnations or S. Catherine lilies for the market.

The Marcillo women had always been reared in strong usefulness and in stern chastity. This handsome, buoyant, gay, insolent, idle thing offended him in every way and at every turn.

He would have married her away willingly, and dowered her well, to the first honest fellow; but Pippa had laughed in the faces of all the neighbours' sons who had wanted her to wed with them. She was in no hurry, she said.

She made all the countryside in love with her, and then turned her back on it with a saucy laugh, and the sunshine in her face was never merrier than whenever she heard that two young fellows had quarrelled about her, and drawn knives on one another, and set all the Lastra talking.

So that when Pippa disappeared many were glad, and none very sorry. Bruno smarted with shame−−that was all.

Indeed, when she was gone away, the townsfolk talked of a foreigner, a student and painter, who had been seen with the girl at evening on the road, or by the river, or in the shadow of the old Lastra bastions; a young man with a delicate face, and a playful way, and a gay tongue, who had wandered on foot, with his knapsack and colours, down from the Savoy country and into Tuscany, and had danced often with Pippa, and had been met with her after sunset, on the hillside.

But none had told Bruno till too late, being afraid of his ready knife if a hint were taken wrong, and he had known nothing of these tales until Pippa had vanished, and even then the neighbours were slow to rouse his wrath by telling the scanty rumours they had heard.

Even the young man's name the people had not known; a youngster lightly come and lightly gone, whom no one took account of, till of a sudden they noticed that he had been unseen since Pippa had been missing. He had lodged a little while above a wine shop, and gone up and down the river, and to and from the old white town, painting; and had danced at the fairs and learned to strum on a guitar, and eaten piles of fruit, and been restless and graceful as a firefly: that was all; and only a few women had observed as much as that.

It told nothing to Bruno; and, besides, if they had told him a hundred times as much, he could have done

nothing; a contadino is rooted to the soil, and it no more would have seemed possible to him to travel into far countries than to have used his ploughshare for a boat, or driven his steers to turn the sea like sod.

People had hardly ever though what Pippa's fate had been. If anything great had come to her, the countryside would have heard of it.

In these little ancient burghs and hillside villages, scattered up and down between mountain and sea, there is often some boy or girl, with a more wonderful voice, or a more beautiful face, or a sweeter knack of song, or a more vivid trick of improvisation than the others; and this boy or girl strays away some day with a little bundle of clothes, and a coin or two, or is fetched away by some far−sighted pedlar in such human wares, who buys them as bird fanciers buy the finches from the nets; and then, years and years afterwards, the town or hamlet hears indistinctly of some great prima donna, or of some lark−throated tenor, that the big world is making happy as kings, and rich as kings' treasuries, and the people carding the flax or shelling the chestnuts say to one another, "That was little black Là, or that was our old Momo;" but Momo or Là the village or the vinefield never sees again.

If anything great had come in that sort of way to Pippa, Signa would have heard of it. There is always someone to tell of a success−−always someone to bring word, so that the friends may gird up their loins, and go and smell out the spoil, claim the share of it, and remind Momo, as he comes out of a palace, of his barefoot babyhood, and call to Là's mind the time when she, who now quarrels with princes, was glad of the day's bran−bread.

But none had ever said anything of Pippa. She had dropped out of sight and remembrance, and no one had asked what had become of her, though the girl had been beautiful in her way, darkly, brightly, roughly, tenderly, capriciously beautiful, like the barley blowing from shade to sun−−only, no men ever would stand her temper, said the women.

That had been conceded everywhere: and her brothers had been pitied.

Between the day that she had gone over the fields with the farewell word to old Viola and the night that she had stumbled to her death, over the sea, in the dark road, no one had ever heard or known anything of Pippa.

But it was not because her story was a strange one; it was only because it was so common. Mystery is to the tongue of the storyteller as butter to the hungry mongrel; but what is simple is passed over by human mouths as daisies by the grazing horse.

Her tale was very simple.

That fair−day in Signa she had been so resolute to go to the merry−making, because of the stranger, who would whirl to the thrum of the mandolin as a bat does when a lamp burns, and who would come through the beanflowers to see her plait straw when her brothers were out in the fields, and who was gay like herself, and passionate, and young, and found but one song worth the singing when the sun went down and the fireflies burned.

Then there had come Bruno's blow, and the stab in her breast−−and all a man's natural passion of sympathy had been aroused, and all a girl's terror of her fierce brother's worse vengeance, if only the truth were known.

And so her lover took her with him when he went back to France, while the beanflowers faded and died; and Pippa loved him like a dog:−−poor Pippa! who always having been so saucy of tongue, and stubborn of neck, and proud, and full of petulance, clung like a vine, and crouched like a spaniel, and trembled like a leaf, when once she loved, as all such women do.

Thus the broad shining Tuscan fields were changed for streets of Paris, and the hills of olive for the roofs of lead; and the song of the grilli for the beat of the drum; and the fires of the lucciole for the shine of the gas; and Pippa, a thing of sun and wind and seablown air, fresh as a fruit and free as a bird, was cooped up in a student's attic, with the roar of the traffic for ever on her ear, and the glistening shine of the neighbour's house−roofs for ever before her casement.

He did what he could for her.

He was a landscape painter and a student of Paris. He had a beautiful face, great dreams, ardent passions, and no money, except such little pittance as an old doting mother, a widow in a little Breton hamlet, could send him, by pinching herself of oil and bread. For three months he worshipped Pippa; and this scarlet poppy from the Tuscan wheat glowed on a hundred canvases in a hundred forms; and then of course he tired. Then, of course, the poppy ceased to be a magical flower of passion and of sleep; it seemed only a red bubble, blowing useless in the

useful corn.

He thought he hid this from her; but she felt, before he knew, it. Women will always do so who love their lives out in a year, as Pippa did.

The Mimis, and Bibis, and Libis around her were happy enough, with a pot of mignonette for their garden, and a theatre for their heaven, and a Sunday in the woods now and then for their liberty. Besides, they could all chatter with one another, and change their lovers, if need was, and sing little triplets, like little canaries, as they sat sewing at rose−coloured ball−skirts, or twirling up their cambric mock−rosebuds.

But Pippa was in exile. Pippa had the woman's worst crime of loving over much. Pippa had brought nothing with her but her own full, fierce, fond, little heart of storm. Pippa felt her heart break in this cage.

Pippa could not read. Pippa knew nothing that he talked of, except when he told her that he loved her, and men get weary of saving this too long to the same woman. Pippa could only plait straw−−and that not very well; and no one wanted it in Paris.

Pippa, when in the dance−gardens, one night, struck with a knife at a man who would have kissed her, and wounded him sorely, and when hidden away from the perils that arose, could not be made to see she had done wrong, because Bruno had stabbed her, and she had borne him no malice, and here she was on her just defence, and had done right, she thought. Then her lover grew wroth with her, and Pippa, whose spirit was broken, like that of all fiery creatures when they love, could only sob and kiss his feet; and then,−−he went elsewhere.

Then came hard winters, and a crying child, and the garret was cold and empty, and debt stole in like a ghost, and hunger with him, and Pippa sold her pearls−−real pearls, fished up from the deep sea by coral divers, and worn at fairs and feasts by her with the honest pride of the true Tuscan peasant. Only she never let him know the pearls were sold. She made him think that it was one of his own pictures which had brought them that little heap of gold.

But the money lasted very little time, and the child sickened and died, and the summer came; but that would not banish hunger; and Pippa lost her beauty, and her rich, round, radiant look, and her great brown eyes got a frightened look−−because he so seldom kissed her now, and sometimes would give her a little gesture like that which a man gives when he sweeps away quickly with his elbows some dead flower or dropped ashes. Yet still he was good to her−−oh, yes−−he was good. Pippa told herself so a thousand times a day. He never beat her. Pippa, once so saucy and so proud, was grateful. Love is thus.

Then another winter came, the third one−−that was hardest. They had nothing to eat for many days. They sold their clothes and their bed−linen, and even the copper pot in which their food was stewed; and she had no more pearls.

Pippa had nothing either of her beauty left but her straight brows and her big, lustrous eyes. She was no longer even a bright bubble, as the field poppy was. She was a little dusky peasant, pale and starved, and blown amongst the snow like a frozen redbreast.

"It is the pictures that he cares for," she had learned to say to herself. She had found his out. She got to hate them, the senseless things of wood and colour, that cost so much money, and now had all his looks, all his longings, all his memories, all his regrets.

She hated even those canvas likenesses of herself, that had blossomed into being with the purple beanflowers, under the summer suns of Signa, when their passion was new−born.

Pippa loved her lover with the same love, fierce, and faithful, and dog−like, and measureless, as when he had first taken her small head within his hands, and kissed her on the eyes and mouth.

But it was a love that could understand nothing; least of all, change.

One day, in the bitterness of the mid−winter, after weeks of hunger, and the shameful straits of the small debts that make the commonest acts and needs of daily life a byword and reproach, she woke to find herself alone.

There were twenty gold pieces on the bed, long stript of all its covering, and a written line or two. She took the paper to the woman of the house below, who read it to her. It hold her that he was gone to Dresden to copy a famous picture for a wealthy man; he sent her all the sum they had advanced him, and said a little phrase or two of sorrow and of parting, and of hope of better days, and of the unbearable pain of such beggary as they had known. He spoke vaguely of some union in the future.

Pippa cast the twenty gold pieces into the mud of the street, where the poor scrambled and clutched and fought for them. She understood that she was forsaken.

All he had said was true; but the great truth was what he had not said. Pippa was ignorant of almost everything; but this she knew enough to know.

That night they took her to a madhouse, and cut close the long brown braids of her hair, and fastened together the feet that had used to fly, as the wind flies, through the paths of the vines in summer.

Poor Pippa! She had always plaited ill; the women had always said so.

In half−a−year's time she gave birth to a child, and her reason came back to her, and after a time they let her go. She promised to go to her own country.

But she cheated them, and went to Dresden. She had kept that name in her mind. She got there as best she could, begging on the way or working; but of work she knew so little, and of workers there were so many. She carried the child all the way. Sometimes people were good to her; sometimes they were bad; oftenest they were neither one nor the other. Indifference is the invincible giant of the world.

When she reached Dresden it was summer. The city was empty.

With much trouble she heard of him. The copy was done, and he was gone back to France.

"Perhaps he does not want you. If he wanted you he would not leave you," said a comely woman, who was sorry for her, but who spoke as she thought, giving her a roll of bread under a tree in the street.

"Perhaps he does not want me," thought Pippa. The words awoke her memory. She had been left by him. He would not have left her unless he had been tired−−tired of all the poverty and pain, and of the passion that had lost its glow, as the poppy loses its colour once being reaped with the wheat.

There was a dull fierce pain in her. There were times when she wished to kill him. Then at other times she would see a look of his face in the child's and would break into an anguish of weeping.

Anyway, she set backward to find him.

Carrying the child, that grew heavier with each day, and travelling sometimes with gipsies and vagrants, and mountebanks, but more often alone, and begging her bread on the way, she got back into France after many months. She had got stupid and stunned with fatigue and with pain. She had lost all look of youth, but she kept the child as fresh as a rose; and now and then she would smile, because his mouth laughed like her lover's.

Back into Paris she went. The strange fortunes that shelter the wretched kept her in health and strength, though she rarely had a roof over her at night, and all she ate were the broken pieces that people gave her in pity.

In his old haunts it was easy to hear of him; he had gone to study in Rome.

"He will do well for himself, never fear," they said in the old house on the Seine water, where her dream of joy had dreamt itself away. Some great person, touched by his poverty and genius, and perhaps by his beauty, had given him the means to pursue the high purposes of his art at leisure. Some said the great person was a woman, and a princess: no one knew for sure. Anyhow, he was gone to Rome.

Pippa knew the name of Rome.

People had gone through Signa sometimes, to wind away by the sea road, amongst the marshes and along the flat sickly shores, to Rome. And now and then through Signa, at fair time, or on feast days, there had strayed little children, in goatskins, and with strange pipes, who played sad airs, and said they were from Rome.

But the mountains had always risen between her and Rome. It had always been to her far off as some foreign land. Nevertheless, she set out for Rome by the sole way she knew−−the way that she had travelled with him−−straight across France and downward to the sea, and along the beautiful bold road, under the palm trees and the sea alps, and so along the Corniche back to Signa.

She knew that way; and toilsome though it was, it was made sweet to her by remembered joys.

He had gone with her; and at every halting place there was some memory so precious, yet so terrible, that it would have been death to her, only the child was there, and wanted her, and had his smile, and so held her on to life.

Her lover had been with her in the summer and autumn weather; and all the way had been made mirthful with love's happy foolish ways; and the dust of the road had been as gold to her, because of the sweet words he murmured in her ear: and when they were tired they had leaned in one another's arms, and been at rest; and every moonlit night and rosy morning had been made beautiful, because of what they read in each other's eyes and heard in the beating of each other's hearts.

Pippa had forgotten nothing; she had only forgotten that she had been forsaken.

Women are so slow to understand this always; and she, since that day when she had flung the money in the

street, and fallen like a furious thing, biting the dust, and laughing horribly, had never been too clear of what had happened to her.

There was the child, and he−−her love−−was lost. This was all she knew.

Only she remembered every trifle, every moment of their first love time; and as she went, walking across great countries as other women cross a hayfield or a village street, she would look at the rose−bush at a cabin door, and think how he had plucked a rosebud there; or touch a gate rail with her lips, because his hand had rested on it; or lift the child to kiss a wayside crucifix, because he had hung a rope of woodbine there and painted it one noonday; and at each step would murmur to the child, "See, he was here−−and here−−and here−−and here," and would fancy that the baby understood, and slept the sweeter because told these things.

Poor Pippa!−−she had always plaited ill.

Women do, whose only strand is one short human love.

The tress will run uneven; and no man wants it long. Still, it is best to love thus. For nothing else is Love.

So she had walked on, till the golden autumn weather lost its serenity, and stirred with strife of winter wind and rain; so she had walked, and walked, and walked−−a beggar girl for all who met her, with no beauty in her, except her great, sad, lustrous eyes−−until she found herself come out once more on that familiar road which she had trodden daily in her childhood and her girlhood, with her hank of straw over her arm, and a pitcher of milk, or a sheaf of gleaned corn, or a broad basket of mulberries balanced on her head.

She thought she would see Bruno−−just once. He had been rough and fierce with her; but once she could have loved Bruno, if he would have let her do so. She thought she would show him the child, and ask him−−if she never got to Rome−−

Then her foot slipped, and she fell down into darkness, and of Pippa there was no more on earth−−only a dead woman, that the flood took out, with the drowned cattle and the driftwood, to the sea.

CHAPTER VIII.

LOCAL tradition has it that all this plain of Signa was once a lake with only the marsh birds calling and the reeds waving in the great silence of its waters−−long ago. Their "long ago" is very dim in date and distance, but very clear to fancy and to faith. Here Æneas is a hero born only yesterday, and Catiline brought his secret sins into the refuge of these hills an hour since its seems; and Hercules−−one can almost see him still, bending his bold brows over the stubborn rock in that stream where the quail dips her wing and the distaff cane bends to the breeze.

Nay, it is not so very far away after all since the dove plucked the olive off the moun− tains yonder, and no one sees anything strange in the stories that make the sons of Enoch and the children of Latona tread these fields side by side, and the silver arrows of Apollo cleave the sunshine that the black crucifixes pierce. Nay, older than tale of the Dove or legend of Apollo is this soil. Turn it with your spade and you shall find the stone coffins and the gold chains of the mighty Etruscan race whose buried cities lie beneath your feet, their language and their history lost in the everlasting gloom.

This was once Etruria, in all the grace and greatness of her royalties; then through long ages the land was silent, and only heard the kite shriek or the mountain hare scream; then fortified places rose again, one by one, on the green slopes, and Florence set to work and built between her and the sea−−between her and the coast, and all her many enemies and debts−−the walled city of Lastra Signa; making it noble of its kind, as she made everything that she touched in the old time; giving it a girdle of the massive, grey mountain stone, and gateways with carven shields and frescoes; and houses within, braced with iron, and ennobled by bold archways and poetised by many a shrine and symbol.

And the Lastra stood in the green country that is called the Verdure even in the dry city rolls, and saw the spears glisten among the vines, and the steel head−pieces shine through the olives, and the banners flutter down from the heights, and the condottieri wind away on the white road, and the long lines of the pilgrims trail through the sunshine, and the scarlet pomp of the cardinals burn on the highway, and the great lords with their retinues ride to the sea or the mountains, and the heralds and trumpeters come and go on their message of peace or strife; and itself held the road when need arose, staunchly, through many a dark day, and many a bitter night, for many a tale of years, and kept its warders on the watch−towers, looking westward through the centuries of war. And then the hour of fate struck when the black eagle, who has "two beaks to more devour," flew with his heavy wing over the Arno; and the Republic had no help or hope but in Gideon, as she called him:−−frank Ferruccio.

Ferruccio knew that the Lastra was the iron key to the gates of Florence. But he had no gifts of gods to make him omniscient, and he was rash, as brave men are most apt to be. With his five hundred troopers he wrought miracles from of valour and of relief, but in a fatal hour he, scouting the country to search the convoys of food that he conveyed to Florence, left the Lastra for Pisa, and the traitor Bandini whispered in the ear of Orange, "Strike now−−while he is absent." And Orange sent his Spanish lances and the Lastra beat them back. But he sent them again as many in numbers against the place as well as all Ferruccio's army, and with artillery to aid, and they made two breeches in the walls, and entered and sacked and pillaged, and ravished and slew; the bold gates standing erect as they stand to−day.

Is not the record painted in the Hall of Leo the Tenth?

The brave gates stood erect, but the Lastra was an armed town no more.

Its days of battle were done.

The grass and the green creepers grew on the battlements; and out of the iron doors there only passed the meek oxen and the mules and the sheep.

The walls of the Lastra are very old, and are still beautiful. Broken down also in many places, and with many places where are hillocks of grass and green bushes instead of the old mighty stones, or, worse still, mean houses and tiled roofs. But they are still erect in a great part and very picturesque, with the ropemakers at work on the sward underneath them, and the white bullocks coming out of their open doors. The portcullis still hangs in the gateways that face the east and the west, and the deep machicolations of the battlements are sharp and firm as a

lion's teeth. There is exquisite colour in them, and noble lines severe and stern as any that Arnolfo drew, or raised. "She is so old−−our Lastra!" say the people, with soft pride, while the women sit and spin on the stairs of the old watch−towers, and the mules drink, and the waggons pass, and the sheep are driven under their pointed archways.

Of the Lastra it may be written, as of the old tower of Calais church:−−"It is not as ruins are, useless and piteous, feebly or fondly garrulous of better days; but useful still, going through its daily work as some old fisherman beaten grey by storm yet drawing his daily nets." Its years of war indeed are done; it can repel no foe−−it can turn aside no invader; the wall−sorrel grows on its parapets, the owl builds in its loopholes, the dust of decay lies thick upon its broken stairs; in its fortified places old women spin flax and the spiders their webs; but its decay is not desolation, its silence is not solitude; its sadness is not despair; the Ave Maria echoes through it morning and night; when the warm sunrise smites the battlements, its people go forth to the labour of the soil; when the rays of the sunset fill the west, there rises from its mountains a million spears of gold, as though the hosts of a conquering army raised them aloft with a shout of triumph; it garners its living people still as sheep within a fold−−"its bells for prayer still rolling through its rents." Harvest and vintage and seed−time are precious to it: fruits of the earth are brought within it; the vine is green against its doors, and the corn is threshed in its ancient armouries; beautiful even where unsightly; hoary with age, yet linked with living youth; noble as a bare sea cliff is noble, that has kept the waves at bay throughout uncounted storms, the Lastra stands amidst the green billows of the foliage of the fields as a lighthouse amongst breakers; its towers speaking of strength, its fissures of sorrow, its granaries of labour, its belfries of hope.

When a great service was over, and the bishop and the nobles had passed away in their glory, and the bells had ceased for a season to ring, and the white−robed contadini had gone up amongst their hills, and the families of Lastra had gone within doors and closed their window−shutters to the sun, the little singer, who loved every stone of the old place, laying off his little surplice, and by a rare treat being free of task and punishment, and sent only to gather salads from the hill garden of his one friend, made his way quickly through the village, and out by the western gate.

Just a child of Pippa's−−with no name or use or place or title that anyone could see, or right to live at all, if you pushed matters closely.

That was all he was−−a child of Pippa's, who had died without a coin upon her, or a roof she could call her own, or anything at all in this wide world except this little sunny−headed, soft−limbed, useless thing, fresh as dew and flushed like apple−blossoms, that she left behind her, as the magnolia−leaf, dropping brown, to the brown earth, leaves a blossom.

Himself, he did not know even as much as this, which indeed was as bad as nothing to know. To himself he was only a foundling, as he was to everyone else; picked up as any blind puppy might have been, motherless, on the face of the flood.

The old white town had stood him in the stead of father and mother, and nation and friends; and though the Church, purifying him with baptismal water, had given him a long saint's name, Signa was his true eponymus.

The children had called him Signa, because of the name on the little gilt ball that they were scratched on−−the little gilt ball which Nita had hung round his neck by its string again.

"It looks well to give it to him," she had said to her husband. "And it would fetch so little, it is not worth keeping for oneself."

So his little locket had been left him−−the locket that had been bought that day of the fair, and filled with a curl of sunny−brown hair, which Pippa had cut off herself in the dusk where the vines met overhead;−−and he was called after the word that was on it, first by the children, and then by their elders, who had said, "As well that as any name, why not? the dogs of Jews are often called after the towns that bear them; why not this little cur, so near drowned here, after the place that sheltered him?"

Hence he was Signa, like the town; and in a vague fancy that he never followed out; he had some dim idea that this village of the Lastra, which he loved so dearly, had created him; out of her dust, or from her wandering winds, or by her bidding to the owls that roosted in her battlements: how he did not know, but in some way. And he was thoroughly content; loving the place with a great love quite reasonless, and quite childlike, and yet immeasurable.

He was proud because he had the name. Whey they beat him, he would not cry out, because the Lastra had been brave; so the old people who told stories of it to him said; and he would be brave likewise.

It was like his impudence to dare be brave when honest−born children squealed like caught mice! so Nita would say to him a score of times, slapping his cheek when Toto had trodden on her gown, or beating him with the rods of alder when Toto had stolen the fritters from the frying−pan.

"She is a good woman, Nita," said the neighbours, shaking out the gleaned hay before their house−doors, or sitting to plait together in the archways; "and Lippo is an angel. To think of them−−seven children, and an eight nigh−−and keeping, all for charity, that little stray thing found at the flood. Any one else had sent it packing, a poor child, as one could tell by its clothes that were all rags, and no chance for any rich folk ever coming after it. And yet treating it always like their own, share and share alike, and no preference shown−−ah, they were good people. Old Baldo, too, not saying even a word, though he was a sharp man about shoe−leather, and no blame to him, because, after all, who will save the skin of your onion for you unless you do it yourself?"

As from a baby it grew into a little child, Bruno ever and again saw to its wants.

"The child must be clean," he had said; and he would not have it go in rags.

"The child must be well kept," he had said; and he would not have its curls shaved close, as Toto's was.

Then as it grew older.

"Let the child learn," he had said; and Nita humoured him, because she believed it to be his own offspring, and Lippo, because of that good half of everything, which kept his father−in−law in such good humour, and left himself free to idle in the sun, and lie face downward on the stone benches, and do nothing all day long except kill flies.

So Lippo and his wife were very careful to have the child's curls shine, instead of shearing them close as they did their own babies', and when he ran into the street would give him a big lump of crust to eat as people passed, and on saint days take him with them to the church in a little frock snow−white, like one of the straight−robed, long−haired, child−figures in any panel or predella of Della Francesca or the Memmi. He was so pretty that people gave him cakes and fruits and money, just for the beauty of his wistful eyes, and to see his little mouth, like a carnation bud, open to sing his Aves.

And of course there was reason that the child, once home, should give up the cakes and fruits to the other children who were like foster−brothers and sisters to him, and as for the money, of course he could not keep it, being such a little thing; they took it from his to take care of it−−they were good, honest people.

As for the little lad, true he was hungry often, and beaten often, when no one was looking, and worked like a footsore mule at all times.

But then nobody noticed that, because he was always taken to mass, and had the little white shirt on just like Toto, and no difference made, and all his curls brushed out. The curate's sister said there never was so sweet a soul as Lippo's, for of course it all was Lippo's doing; Nita was an honest woman, and true−hearted; but Lippo it was that was the saint in the house. Another man would have turned the brat out by the ears first sight: not he−−he cut the stray child's bread as big as any of his boys', and paid for him, too, to learn his letters.

So the curate's sister said, the neighbours said after her; and Lippo, being a meek man, smiled gently, and cast his eyes down underneath the praise, and said in answer, that no one could have turned a pretty baby like that out after once housing it, and added, with a kindly grace that moved the women to tears, that he hoped the child might be like those gold−winged porcellini that, flying in your window with the sunbeams, bring good will and peace, the people say.

This day, after the ceremony, the little fellow ran over the bridge and up the hill−road, where his mother, of whom he knew nothing, had met her death. He was stiff with a severe beating that had been given him.

The night before there had been a basket of red cherries missing, and Toto had been found crunching them in the loft, and Toto had said that he had been given them by Signa, who first had eaten half; and old Baldo, who had got them as a present for the priest, had been beside himself with rage, and Nita had beaten Signa, as her habit and daily comfort was, because he never would cry out, which made him the more provoking, and also was always innocent, than which there is nothing more irritating anywhere.

He was very stiff, and felt it now that the music was all done; but almost forgot it again in the pleasure of the hill−side and the holyday.

The country was full of joys to the child that he never reasoned about, but which filled him with delight. The great bold curves of the oak bough overhead; the amethyst and amber of the trefoil blossoms; the voices of the wood doves; the jovial croakings of the frogs; the flash of butterflies; the glories of the oleanders here, white as

snow, and there rosily radiant as flame; the poppies that had cast their petals, and had round grey heads like powdered wings; the spiders, red and black, like bits of old Egyptian pottery; the demure and dusky cavaletti, that looked like ghosts of nuns, out by an error in the daylight; the pretty lizards that were so happy asking nothing of the world except a sunbeam and a stone to sleep under; the nightingales that were so tame, and sang at broad noontide to laugh at poets; the orchids, gold and ruby, the mimicked bees and flies to make fun of them, because there is so much humour in nature with all her sweet seriousness of beauty; the flies that shone like jewels; the hedges of china roses that ran between the corn; the gaunt stern spikes of the artichokes; the green Madonna's herb; the mountains that were sometimes quite lost in the white mists, and then of a sudden lifted themselves in all their glory, with black shadows where the woods were, and hazy breadths of colour where the bare marble shone beneath the sun;−−all these things, so various, great and small, wonderful and obscure, under his feet, or on the far horizon, were sources of delight to the child, who as he went lost sight of nothing from the little gemmed insect in the dust he trod to the last glow left on the faintest, farthest peak of the great hills that rose between him and the sea.

Nobody had ever told him anything.

None had led him by the hand and bade him look.

Some instinct moved him to see and hear where others were blind and deaf. That was all.

To the ploughman of Ayr the daisy was a tender grace of God, and the mouse a fellow traveller in the ways of life.

To Signa, who was only a baby still, and was beaten most days of the week, and ran barefoot in the dust, the summer and the world were beautiful without his knowing why, and comforted him. For in all the sea of sunshine−−as in the music−−he forgot his pain.

He ran like a little goat up the road with the green river winding below, and the hills changing at each step with those inconstancies of light and shade, and aspect, and colour in which all hills delight. It was an hour before, always climbing steadily, he reached an old stone gateway set in breadths of grain just golden for the sickle, with a black crucifix against it, and above it a little framed picture of the Annunciation.

He stooped his knee, and crossed himself; then ran between the old stone posts, which had no gate in them, and sent his voice up the hill−side before his feet. "Bruno! Bruno! Bruno!"

"Here!" sang the man's voice in answer from above, amongst the corn.

Signa climbed the steep green patches that ran between the wheat and under the vines up the face of the hill, and threw his arms round Bruno's knees.

"A whole day to spend!" he cried, breathless with running. "And are you working? Why it is Corpus Domini. They do not work anywhere!"

Bruno put down the handful of corn that he had just cut and wound together.

"No; one should not work," he said, with some shame for his own industry. "But those clouds look angry; they may mean rain at sunset; and to spoil such grain as this−−and the Padre will not come this way; he never gets so far down on feasts. And you are well, Signa?"

"Oh quite well."

"But you must be hungry?−−running so?"

"No; I can wait."

"You have had your bread then?"

"Yes."

It was not true. But then Signa had found out two things: one, that when he told Bruno that he was ill−treated or ill−fed at home, there were quarrels and troubles between Bruno and his brother; and the other, that if he let Bruno see that he was at all unhappy, Bruno seemed to be consumed with self−reproach. So that the child whose single love, except that for the old town itself, was Bruno, had early learned to hold his tongue and bear his sorrows silently as best he might, and tell an innocent little lie even now and then to spare pain to his friend.

Bruno always took his part. It was Bruno who got him any little joy he ever knew, and Bruno who would not let them shave his pretty clustering curls to make a bare round pumpkin of his head like Toto's; and one day when he had been only seven years old, and Bruno by chance had found him crying, and learned that it was with the smart of Nita's thrashing, Bruno and Lippo had had fierce words and blows; and late that night the eldest boy of Lippo's had come and shaken him in his bed of hay, and hissed savagely in his ear:

"You little fool, if you go telling my uncle Bruno we ill−treat you, he will strike at my father and kill him perhaps, who knows, he is so violent, and then a nice day's work you will have made for every one;−−you little beast. My father dead, and Bruno at the galleys, all through you who are not worth the rind of a rotten melon, little cur!"

And Signa, trembling in his bed, had vaguely understood the mischief he might do, though why they quarrelled for him, and why Lippo gave him a home, and yet ill−treated him, or why Bruno should have any care to take his part, he could not tell; but he comprehended that all he had to do was to accept ill−usage dumbly, like the dogs, and bring none into any trouble by complaining. And so he grew up−−with silence for a habit: for he loved Bruno.

Bruno, who was fierce and wayward and hated and feared by every one on the country side, but who to him was gentle as a woman, and was always kind. Bruno, who had a terrible knack of flashing out his knife in anger, and who had quarrelled with all the women he had wooed, and who had a rough heartless way of speech that made people wonder he could be of the same blood and bone as mild and pleasant Lippo, but who to him was never without a grave soft smile that took all the darkness from this face it shone on, and who for him had many tender thoughts and acts that were like the blue radish flower on its rough, grey, leafless stalk.

The child never wondered why Bruno cared for him. Children take love as they take sunshine and their daily bread. If it rain and they starve, then they wonder, because children come into the world with an innocent undoubting conviction that they will be happy in it, which is one of the oddest and the saddest things one sees; for, being begotten by men and borne by women, how can any such strange error ever be alive in them?

Bruno put by his reaping−hook, and let the big bearded turkish wheat stand over for another day. He had risked his own soul to make sure of the wheat−−for to Bruno it was a soul's peril to use a sickle on a holy day;−−but he let go the corn rather than spoil the little fellow's pleasure.

"You can eat something again−−come," he said, stretching his hand out to the boy's.

Pippa's child was like her, only with something spiritual and far−reaching in his great dark eyes that hers had never had, and a gleam of gold in the soft thickness of his hair that did not come from her. He was more delicate, more slender, more like a little supple reed than Pippa ever had been, and he had a more uncommon look about him; but he was like her−−like enough to make Bruno still shudder now and then thinking of the dead woman left all alone to the rain and to the river.

"Come and eat," he said, and took the child indoors.

His house had a great arched door where Pippa had stood plaiting many a night. It had a brick floor and a ceiling of old timbers, and some old dusky chests and presses that would have fetched a fortune in city curiosity shops, and a strong musty smell of drying herbs and of piles of peas and beans for winter uses, and trusses of straw cleaned and cut for the plaiters; and hens were sitting on their eggs inside an old gilded marriage coffer six hundred years old, if one, whose lid, that had dropped off the hinges, was illuminated with the nuptials of Galileo in the style of the early school of Cortona.

Through a square unglazed window there was seen the head of a brindled cow munching grass in her shed on the other side, and through a wide opening opposite that had no door, the noon sun shining showed the great open building that was granary and cart−shed, and stable and hothouse all in one, and where the oil−presses stood, and the vats for the wine, and the empty casks.

Against one of the walls was a crucifix with a little basin for holy water, for Bruno was a man who believed in the saints without question; and above the arched entrance there grew a great mulberry−tree that was never stripped, because he had no silkworms, and magnolias and cistus−bushes, and huge poppies that loved to glow in the stones, and big dragon−heads flaming like rubies, and arabian jessamine of divinest odour, and big myrtles, all flourishing luxuriant alike together, because in this country flowers have nine lives like cats, and will live anywhere, just because no one wants them or ever thinks of gathering them unless there be a corpse to be dressed.

"Eat," said Bruno; and he got the little lad out some brown bread and a jug of milk, and a cabbage−leaf of currants, which he had gathered early that morning before the mass−bells rang, being sure Signa would come before the day should be over.

Signa ate and drank with the eager goodwill of a child who never got enough, except by some rare chance on a feast−day like this; but the larger part of the currants he left on the leaf, taking only one or two bunches.

Bruno watched him.

"Are you going to give them away?"

"I will give them to Gemma−−I may?"

"Do as you like with your own. But if you must give them to any one, give them to Palma."

Signa coloured on both his little pale cheeks.

"I will give them to the two," he said, conscious of an unjust intention nipped in the bud.

"Palma is a better child than Gemma," said Bruno, sharpening a vine−stake with his clasp−knife.

Signa hung his head.

"But I like Gemma best."

"When that is said, there is no more to be said," answered Bruno, who had learned enough of human nature on the hills and in the Lastra to know that liking does not go by reason nor follow after merit.

"Gemma is so pretty," said the little fellow, who loved anything that had beauty in it; and he ran and got his mandoline out of the corner where Bruno let him keep it, and began to turn its keys and run his fingers over its strings and call the cadence out of it with as light a heart as if his back had never been black and blue with Nita's thrashing.

"If Gemma broke your chitarra, would you like her the better then?" asked Bruno.

"I would hate her," said Signa under his breath; for he had two idols−−his lute and the Lastra.

"I wish she would break it, then," said Bruno, who was jealous of this little child for whom Signa was saving his currants.

But Signa did not hear. He was sitting out on the threshold of an empty red lemon−pot turned upside down, with the slope of the autumn corn and the green hillside beneath him in the sun, and beyond them, far down below in the great valley, and golden in the light were first the walls of the Lastra set in the sea of vines, and then the towers and domes of Florence far away; and farther yet, where the east was warm with morning light, the mountains of Umbria, with the little towns on their crest, from which you see two seas.

With all that vast radiant world beneath him at his feet, Signa tuned his mandoline and sang to himself untired on the still hillside. The cow leaned her mouth over the window−sill, and listened; cows seem so stupid, chewing grass and whisking flies away, but in their eyes there is the soul of Io; the nightingales held their breaths to listen, and then joined in till all the branches that they lived in seemed alive with sound; the great white watch−dog from the marshes came and laid down quite quiet, blinking solemnly with attentive eyes; but the cicali never stopped sawing like carpenters in the tree−tops, nor the gossipping hens from clacking in the cabbage−beds, because cicali and chickens think the world was made for them, and believe that the sun would fall if they ceased from fussing and fuming:−−they are so very human.

Bruno laid himself down face forward on a stone bench, as contadini love to do when they have any leisure, and listened too, his head upon his arms.

The water dropped from the well−spout; a lemon fell with a little splash on the grass; the big black restless bees buzzed here and there; blue butterflies danced above the grain as if the cornflowers had risen winged; the swallows wheeled round the low red−tiled roof; the old wooden plough lay in the shade under the fig−trees; the oxen ate clover and the leaves of cane in fragrant darkness in their shed; the west wind came from the pines above with the smell of the sea and the thyme and the rosemary.

Signa played and sang, making up his song as he went along, in rhymes strung like chains of daisies, all out of his own head, and born in a moment out of nothing, and, beginning with the name of a flower, and winding in with the sun and the shadow, the beasts and the birds, the restless bees and the ploughshare at rest, and the full wheat−ears and the empty well−bucket, and anything and everything little and large, and foolish and wise, that was there about him in the midsummer light.

Anywhere else it might have been strange for a little peasant to make melody so; but here the children lisp in numbers, and up and down on the hills, and in the road when the mule−bells ring, and on the high mountains with the browsing goats, the verse and song of the people fill the air all day long−−this people who for the world have no poet.

Bruno, lying face downward and listening, half asleep, to the rippling music, thought it pretty, but nothing rare or of wonder; the little lad played better than most of his age, and had a gift for stringing his rhymes, that was all.

For himself, he was almost jealous of the lute as he was of the child Gemma. For Bruno loved the boy with a covetous love and a strong love, and felt as if in some way or other Signa had escaped him.

The boy was loving, obedient, grateful, full of caressing and tractable ways; there was no fault to find with him; but Bruno at times felt that he held him no more surely than one holds a bird because it alights at one's feet.

It was a vague feeling with him. Bruno, being an unlearned man, did not reason about his impressions nor seek to know whether they were even wise ones. But it was a strong feeling with him, and something in the far−away look of the little lad's eyes as he sang, strengthened it.

Pippa had never had that look; no one had it except the little Christs or St. Johns sometimes in the old frescoes in the churches that Bruno would enter once a year or so, when he went to Prato or Carmignano or Pistoia to buy grain or to sell it.

"That is God looking out of the eyes," an old sacristan here said once to him, before one of those altar pictures, where the wonderful faces were still radiant amidst the fading colours of the age−clad frescoes.

But why should God look out of the eyes of Pippa's child?

Why was God in him more than in any others?

Those children in the frescoes were most fitting in their place, no doubt, amongst the incense, and the lilies, and the crosses, and above the sacred Host. But to sit at your bench, and eat beans, and be sent to fetch in sheep from the hills;−−Bruno felt that a more workaday soul was better for this, he would have been more at ease if Signa had been just a noisy, idle, troublesome, merry morsel, playing more like other boys, and happy over a baked goose on a feast−day. He would have known better how to deal with him.

And yet not for worlds would he have changed him.

CHAPTER VIII.

IF Pippa had not been quite dead that night when they had found her in the fields? If here had been any spark of life flickering in her that with warmth and care and a surgeon's skill might have been fanned back again into a steady stream? It was not likely; but it was possible. And if it had been so, then what were he and Lippo?

The sickly thought of it came upon him many a time and made him shiver and turn cold. When he had left the woman lying in the field he had been quite sure that all life was gone out of her. But now he was not so sure. Cold and the fall might have made her senseless. Who could tell?−−if they had done their duty by her−−Pippa might have been living now.

It was not probable. He knew the touch of a dead thing, and she had felt to him dead as any slaughtered sheep could be. But sometimes, in the long lonely nights of autumn, when he sat watching his grapes, with the gun against his knee, lest thieves should strip the vines, Bruno would think of it, and say to himself−−"If she were not really dead, what was I?"

He told all to the good priest in the little brown church beneath the vines on his hill; told it all under the seal of confession, and the priest absolved him by reason of his true penitence and anxious sorrow. But Bruno could not absolve himself.

He had left her there for the flood to take her;−−and after all she might have been brought back to life, had he lifted her up on his shoulders and borne her down in to shelter and warmth, instead of deserting her there like a coward.

The water had done it; had washed her away out of sight and killed her if she were not already dead when it rose, and swept her out to the secrecy of the deep seas. But he told himself, at times, that it was he who was the murderer−−not the water.

When he looked at the river shining away between the green hills and the grey olives, he felt as if it knew his guilt, as if it were a fellow sinner with him, only the more innocent of the two. Of course the pain and the remorse of it were not always on him. He led an active life; he was always working at something or another, from daybreak till night; the free fresh air blew always about him, and blew morbid fancies from his brain. But at times, when all was quiet, in the hush of midnight, or when he rested from his labours at sunset, and all the world was gold and rose, then he thought of Pippa; then he felt the cold, pulseless breast underneath his hand; then he said to himself−−"If she were not quite dead?" The torment of the thought worked in him and weighed on him, and made his heart yearn to the little lad, who, but for his cowardice, might not now have been motherless and alone.

Bruno sat on at his house door that night, watching the little lad run along the hill. He could see all the way down the slope, and though the trees and the vines at times hid Signa from sight, and at times he was lost in the wheat, which was taller than he, yet at intervals, the small flying figure with the sunset about its hair, could be seen going down, down, down along the great slope, and Bruno watched it with a troubled fondness in his eyes.

He was doing the best for the child that he knew. He had him taught to read and write; he had him sing for the priests; he was learning the ways of the fields, and the needs of beasts, tending his sheep and Lippo's by turns, as a little contadino had to do in the simple life of the open air. he could not tell what more to do for him; he a peasant himself and the son of many generations of peasants, who had worked here one after another on the great green hill above the Lastra valley.

He did not know what else to do.

That was the way he had been brought up, except that he had never been taught a letter; running with bare legs over the thyme on the hills, and watching the sheep on the high places amongst the gorze, and pattering through the dirt after the donkey, when there were green things to go into market, or loads of fir cones to be carried, or sacks of corn to be borne to the grinding press. If there was a better way to bring up a child he did not know it. And yet he was not altogether sure that Pippa, if she saw, from heaven, was satisfied.

The child was thinner than he liked, and his shirt was all holes, and never a little beggar was poorer clad than

was Signa winter and summer; and Bruno knew that he gave into Lippo's pocket more than enough to keep a child well, for his land was rich, and he laboured hard, and he bore with Lippo's coming and going, and prying and calculating always to make sure how much the grain yielded, and to count the figs and potatoes, and to watch the winepress, and to see how the peas yielded, and to satisfy himself that he always got the full amount they had agreed for; he bore with all that from Lippo, though it was enough to exasperate a quieter man, and many a time he could have kicked his brother out of his fields for all that meddling and measuring; and being an impatient temper and resentful, chafed like a tethered mastiff, to have Nita and her brood clamouring for roots and salads and eggs and buckwheat, as if he were a slave for them.

"The half of all I get," he had said in the rash haste of his repentance and remorse; and Lippo pinned him to his word.

He would have given the world that instead of that mad bargain made without thought, he had taken the child to himself wholly and told the truth in the Lastra, and given the poor dead body burial, and been free to do with Pippa's boy whatever he chose. But Bruno, like many others, had fallen by fear and haste into a false way; and stumbled on in it galled and entangled.

Bruno was now over forty years old, and his country folk spoke more ill of him rather than less. When he went down into the Lastra to sit and take a sup of wine, and play a game at dominoes as other men did, none were glad to see him. The women owed him a grudge because he married none of them, and the men thought him fierce and quarrelsome, when he was not taciturn, and found that he spoiled mirth rather than increased it by his presence.

He was a handsome man still, and lithe, and burnt brown as a nut by the sun. He wore a loose shirt, open at the throat, and in winter he had a long brown cloak tossed across from one shoulder to the other. He had bare feet, and the walk of a mountaineer or an athlete. Marching beside his bullocks, with a cart−load of hay, or going down the river for fish, with his great net outspread on its circular frame, he was a noble, serious, majestic figure, and had a certain half wild, half lordly air about him that is not uncommon to the Tuscan peasant when he lives far enough from the cities not to be contaminated by them.

The nine years that had run by since the night of the flood, had darkened Bruno's name in the Lastra country.

Before that night he had been, whatever other faults or vices he had had, openhanded to a degree most rare amongst his people. A man that he had struck to the ground one day, he would open his leathern bag of coppers to the next. Whatever other his crimes, he had always been generous, to utter improvidence, which is so strange a thing in his nation, that he was often nicknamed a madman for it. But no one quarrels with a madness that they profit by, and Bruno's generosity had got him forgiven many a misdeed and many a license, by men and women.

Since the flood, little by little, parsimony growing on him with each year, he had become careful of spending, quick to take his rights, and slow to fling down money for men's sport or women's kisses. The country said that Bruno was altogether given over to the devil, he was no longer good to get gain out of even; he had turned niggard, and there was no excuse for him, they averred; a better padrone no man worked under than he, and his fattore was old and easy; and the land that in the old time had served to maintain his father and mother with a tribe of children to eat them out of house and home, now had only himself upon it, good land and rich, and sheltered though on the mountains, whilst, as every one knows, the higher the land lies the better is the vintage. Men gossipping in the evenings under the old gateways of the Lastra, watching Bruno with his empty bullock−cart go back between the hedges to the bridge, would shake their heads:−−

"A bad fellow!" said Momo, the barber, for Bruno never came to have his head shaved as clean Christians should in summer, but wore his thick dusky mane tossed back much like a lion's.

"Brutal bad!" echoed Papuccio, who was a tailor, with slack work. "No doubt that little fly−blow is his own, and see how he fathers it on Lippo. Lippo has as good as told me it was that poor Frita's child by Bruno; you remember her, a pretty young girl, died of a ball in the throat−−or they said so−−very likely it was Bruno, that wrung her neck in a rage−−I should not wonder. He would have left the boy to starve, only Lippo took it home, and shamed him."

"He is good to the child now," said Noë, the tinman, who had a weakness for seeing both sides of a question, which made him very disagreeable company.

"Oh hi!" demured the barber, with his under−lip out in dubious reply. "The other day the little lad was bathing with my youngster, and I saw his back all blue and brown with bruises. 'Is he such a bad child you beat him so?' I

said to Lippo, for indeed he was horrid to look at, and Lippo, good man, looked troubled. 'Bruno will be violent,' he told me quite reluctantly, 'he forgets the child is small.' Oh, I daresay he does forget, and when he has him alone there flays him of half his skin!"

"Why say the child was Bruno's or Frita's, either. He was found in the fields at the great flood, and Frita was dead a year before," said Noë, who had that awkward and unsocial quality, a memory. "Not but what I daresay it is Bruno's, and perhaps he pays for it," he added with an afterthought, willing to be popular.

"No, not a stiver," said the barber. "Lippo and Nita have said to me a score of times, 'we took the boy from pity, and we keep it from pity. Not a pin's worth shall we ever see back again this side heaven. But what matter that. When we feed eight mouths it is not much to feed a ninth.' They are good people, Lippo and his wife."

"Good as gold," said Brizzo, the butcher, "and saving money, or I suppose it is old Baldo's; they have bought that little pasture up at Santa Lucia; a snug little place, and twenty little Maremma sheep upon it as fat as I ever put a knife into;−−Lippo has God's grace."

"A fair spoken man always, and good company," said Momo, who had shaved him bare and smooth as a melon that very morning.

This was the general opinion in the Lastra. Lippo who had always a soft smart word for everybody; who smiled so on people who knew he hated them, that they believed they were loved whilst he was smiling; who was always ready for a nice game at dominoes or cards, and if he did cheat a little, did it so well that no one could fail to respect him the more for it; Lippo was well spoken of by his townsfolk, and one of the Council of the Misericordia had been often heard to say that there was not a better man in all the province.

But Bruno, now that he chose to save money, was a very son of the fiend without a spot of light anywhere. Now that he would never drink, and now that he would never marry, the Lastra gave him over to Satan, body and soul, and for all time.

Bruno cared nothing at all. They might split their throats for any notice that he took.

"Ill words, rot no wheat," he would say to his one friend, Cecco, the cooper; who lived across by the bridge, and had a workshop there, with a great open arch of the thirteenth century sculpture, and a square window with crossed bars of iron, and a screen of vine−foliage behind it that might have been the background of a pietà−−so beautiful was it when the sun shone through the leaves.

He went on his own ways, ploughing with his oxen, pruning his olives, sowing and reaping, and making the best of his land, and going down on market days into the city, looking as if he had stepped out of Ghirlandaio's panels, but himself knowing nothing of that, nor thinking of anything except the samples of grain in his palm or the cabbages in his cart.

Bruno earned nothing for other folks' opinions. What he cared for was to keep faith with Pippa in that mute compact born of his remorse, which he firmly believed the saints had witnessed on her behalf.

He had cared nothing for the child at first, but as it had grown older, and each year caught hold of his hand more fondly, as if it felt a friend, and lifted up to him its great soft serious eyes, a personal affection for this young life which he alone protected, grew slowly upon him; and as the boy became older, and the intelligence and fancies of his eager mind awed the man whilst they bewildered him, Bruno loved him with the deep love of a dark and lonely soul, for the sole thing in which it makes its possibility of redemption here and hereafter.

He sat now at the house−door and watched the running figure so long as it was in sight. When the bottom of the hill was reached and the path turned under the lower vines, he lost him quite, and only knew that he must still be running on, on, on, under all those roofs and tangles of green leaves.

He was not quite at east about him. The boy never complained; nay, if questioned, insisted he was happy. But Bruno mistrusted his brother, and he doubted the peace of that household. The children, always grovelling and screaming, greedy and jealous, he hated. It was not the nest for this young nightingale−−that he felt. But he did not see what better to do.

Lippo held him fast by his word; and he had no proof that the boy was really ill−used. Sometimes he saw bruises on him, but there was always some story of an accident, or of a childish quarrel to account for these, or of some just punishment, and he, roughly reared himself, knew that boys needed such; and Signa's lips were mute; or if they ever did open, said only "they are good to me,"−−a lie, for which he confessed and besought pardon on his knees in the little dark corner in the Misericordia church.

Still Bruno was not satisfied. But what to alter he knew not, and he was not a man who could spare time or

acquire the habit of holding communion with his own thoughts.

When the child had quite gone out of sight, he rose and took his sickle again and went back to his wheat.

He seldom had anyone in to help him; men were careless sometimes, and split the straw in reaping, and spoiled it for the plaiters. He generally got all the wheat in between S. Procolo's day and S. Paul's; and the barley he took later.

The evening fell suddenly; where this land lies they lose the sunset because of the great rise of the hills; they see a great globe of fire dropping downward, it touches the purple of the mountains, and then all is night at once.

The bats came out an the night kestrels and the wood owls, and went hunting to and fro. Nameless melodious sounds echoed from tree to tree. The cicali went to bed and the grilli hummed about in their stead; they are cousins, only one likes the day and the other the night. The fireflies flitted, faint and paling, over the fallen corn. When the wheat was reaped their day was done. later on a faint light came above the far Umbrian hills−−a faint light in the sky like the dawn; then a little longer, and out of the light rose the moon, a round world of gold ablaze above the dark, making the tree−boughs that crossed her disc, look black.

But Bruno looked at none of it.

He had not eyes like Pippa's child.

He stooped and cut his wheat, laying it in ridges tenderly. The fireflies put out their lights because the wheat was dead.

But the glowworms under the leaves in the grass shone on; they were pale and blue, and they could not dance; they never knew what it was to wheel in the air, or to fly so high that men took them for stars; they never saw the tree−tops of the nests of the hawks, or the lofty magnolia flowers, the fireflies only could do all that; but then the glowworms lived on from year to year, and the death of the wheat was nothing to them; they were worms of good sense, and had holes in the ground.

They twinkled on the sod as long as they liked, and pitied the fireflies, burning themselves out by soaring so high, and dying because their loves were dead.

CHAPTER IX.

THE child Signa ran on through the soft gray night.

Toto was afraid of the night, but he−−never.

The fireflies ran with him along the waves of the standing corn. Wheat was cut first on the sunniest land, and there was much still left unreapen on the lower ground.

One wonders there are no fairies where there are fireflies, for fireflies seem fairies. But no fairies are found where the Greek gods have lived. Frail Titania has no place beside Demeter; even Puck will not venture to ruffle Pan's sleep; and where the harp of Apollo Cytharoedus was once heard, Ariel does not dare sing his song to the bees.

Signa caught a firefly in his hand and watched it burn a minute and then let it loose again, and ran on his way.

He wished he could be one of them, up in the air so high, with that light always showing the mall they wished to know; seeing how the owls lived on the roofs of the towers, and how the bees ruled their commonwealth on the top of the acacias, and how the snow blossom came out of the brown magnolia spikes, and how the cypress tree made her golden balls, and how the stone−pine added cubics to his height so noiselessly and fast, and how the clouds looked to the swallows that lived so near them on the chapel belfries, and how the wheat felt when it saw the sickle, and whether it was pained to die and leave the sun, or whether it was glad to go and still the pain of hungry children. Oh what he would ask and know, he thought, if only he were a firefly!

But he was only a little boy with nothing to teach him anything, and a heart too big for his body, and no wings to rise upon, but only feet to carry him, that were often tired, and bruised, and weary of the dust.

So he ran down towards the Lastra, stumbling and going slowly, because he was in the dark, and also because he was so constantly looking upward at the fireflies, that he lost his footing many times.

Across the bridge, he turned aside and went up into the fields to the right of him before he walked on to the Lastra.

Between the bridge and the Lastra it is a picturesque and broken country. On one side is the river, and on the other hilly ground, green with plumes of corn, and hedges of briar−rose, and tall rustling poplars, and up above, cypresses; and old villas, noble in decay, and monasteries with frescoes crumbling to dust, and fortresses that are barns and stables for cattle, and convent chapels, whose solitary bell answers the bells of the goats as they graze.

Signa ran up the steep grassy ways a little, and through a field of two under the canes, twice his own height, and came to a little cottage, much lower, smaller, and more miserable than Bruno's house; a cottage that had only a few roods of soil apportioned to it, and those not very arable.

Before its door there were several sheaves of corn lying on the ground; all its produce except the few vegetables it yielded. The grain had been cut the day before and was not carried in on account of the day being a holy one, for its owner did not venture to risk his hereafter as Bruno had dared to do.

The man was sitting on the stone bench outside his door; a good−humoured fellow, lazy, stupid, very poor, but quite contented. He was one of the labourers in the gardens of a great villa close by, called Giovoli. He had many children, and was as poor as it is possible to be without begging on the roads.

"Where is Gemma," called Signa. The man pointed indoors with the stem of his pipe:

"Gone to bed, and Palma too, and I go too, in a minute or less; you are out late, little fellow."

"I have been with Bruno," said Signa, unfolding his cabbage leaf and his currants in the starlight, that was beginning to gleam through the deep shadow of the early evening. "Look, I have brought these for Gemma; may I run in and give them to her? They are so sweet!"

The gardener, who was called Sandro by everybody, his name being Alessandro Zanobetto, nodded in assent. He was a good−natured, idle, mirthful soul, and could never see why Lippo's wife should treat the child so cruelly; he had plagues enough himself, but never beat them.

"If Gemma be asleep she will wake, if there be anything to get," he said, with a little chuckle; himself he thought Palma worth a thousand of her.

Signa ran indoors.

It was a square−built place, all littered and untidy; there were hens at roost, and garden refuse, and straw with a kid and its mother on it; and a table and a bench or two, and a crucifix with a bough of willow, and in the corner, a bed of hay upon the floor, sweet−smelling, and full of dry flowers.

Two children were in it, all hidden in the hay, except their heads and the points of their feet.

One was dark, a little brown, strong, soft−eyed child, and the other was of that curious fairness, with the hair of reddened gold, and the eyes like summer skies, which the old Goths have left here and there in the Latin races. Both were asleep.

They were like two little amorini in any old painting, with their curving limbs, and their curly heads, and their rosy mouths, curled up, in the withered grasses; the boy did not know anything about that, but he vaguely felt that it was pretty to see them lying so, just as it was pretty to see a cluster of pomegranate flowers blowing in the sun.

He stole up on tiptoe, and touching the cheek of the fair one with a bunch of currants, laughed to see her blue bright eyes open wide on him with a stare.

"I have brought you some fruit, Gemma," he said, and tried to kiss her.

"Give me! give me quick!" cried the little child tumbling up half erect in the hay, the dried daisies in her crumpled curls, and her little bare chest and shoulders fit for a statue of Cupid. She pushed away his lips; she wanted the fruit.

"If I do not eat it quick, Palma will wake," she whispered, and began to crunch them in her tiny teeth as the kid did its grasses. The dark child did wake, and lifted herself on her elbow.

"It is Signa!" she cried, with a little coo of delight like a wood pigeon's.

"I kept you no currants, Palma!" said Signa, with a pang of self−reproach. He knew that he had done unkindly.

Palma looked a little sorrowful. They were very poor, and never hardly tasted anything except the black bread, like dogs.

"Never mind; come and kiss me," she said, with a little sigh.

Signa went round and kissed her. But he went back to Gemma again.

"Good−night," he said to the pretty white child, sitting up in the hay; and he kissed her once more. So Gemma was kissed twice; and had the currants as well.

Palma was used to that.

Signa ran out with a hardened conscience. He knew he had been unjust; but then if he had given any of the currants to Palma, Gemma never would have kissed him at all.

He liked them both; little things of ten and nine, living with their father and their brothers close to the gates of the great garden, low down on the same hill where, higher, Lippo's sheep were kept.

He liked them both, having seen them from babyhood, and paddled in the brook under the poplars with them, and strung them chains of berries, and played them tunes on the pipes he cut from the reeds.

They were both his playfellows, pretty little things, half−naked, bare−footed, fed by the air and the sun, and tumbling into life, as little rabbits do amongst the grass.

But Palma he did not care about, and about Gemma he did. For Gemma was a thousand times prettier, and Palma loved him always, that he knew; but of Gemma he never was so sure.

Nevertheless, he knew he had not done them justice about those currants, and he was sorry for it, as he ran along the straight road in to the Lastra, and with one look upward to the gateway that he loved, though he could not see the colour on the parapet because it was dark, he darted onward quickly lest the gate should close for the night and he be punished and turned backward, and hurried up the passage into Lippo's house.

Lippo lived in a steep paved road above the Place of Arms, and close to the open−arched loggia what used to be the wood market, against the southern gate. There is no great beauty about the place, and yet it has light and shade, and colour, and antiquity, to charm a Prout or furnish a Canaletto. The loggia had the bold round arches that Orcagna most loved; the walls have the dim, soft brown and greys of age, with flecks of colour, where the frescoes once were; through the gateway there come the ox carts and the mules, and the herds of goats, down the steep paved way; there is a quiver of green leaves, a breadth of blue sky, and at the bottom of the passage−way there is a shrine of our Lady of Good Council, so old that he people can tell you nothing of it; you can see the angels still with their illumined wings, and the Virgin with the rays of gold, who sits behind a wicket of grey wood, with a carven M interlaced before her, and quaint little doors that open and shut; but of who made it or first

set it up for worship there they can tell you nothing at all.

It is only a bit of the Lastra that nobody sees except the fattori rattling over the stones in their light carts, or the contadini going in for their master's letters, or now and then a noble driving to his villa, and the country folks coming for justice or for sentence to the Prefettura. But there is beauty in it, and poetry; and the Madonna who sits behind her little grey wicket has seen so much since first the lilies of liberty were carved on the bold east gate.

The boy's heart beat quickly as he went up the stairs; he was brave in a shy, silent way, and he believed that the angels were very near, and would help him some day. Still Nita's weighty arm, and the force of her alder twigs or her ash stem, were not things to be got rid of by dreaming, and the angels were very slow to come; no doubt because he was not good enough, as Signa thought sorrowfully. And he had sent them further away from him than ever by that unjust act about the currants, so that his heart throbbed fast as he climbed the rickety stairs where the spiders had it all their own way, and the old scorpions never were frightened by a broom, which made them very happy, because scorpions hate a broom, and tumble down dead at the sight of one (cleanliness having immeasurable power over them), in as moral and allegory as Æsop and Fontaine could ever have wished to draw.

Nita and all her noisy brood were standing together over the table with a big loaf on it, and an empty bowl and flasks of oil and vinegar, getting ready for supper.

Lippo was down in the street playing dominoes, and old Baldo was sitting below puzzling out, by a bronze lamp, from a book of dreams, some signs he had had visions of in a doze, to see their numbers for the tombola.

"How late you are, you little plague, I gave you till sunset," screamed Nita, as she saw him. "And where is the salad−−give me−−quick!"

"I am very sorry," stammered Signa, timidly. "The salad? I forgot it. I am very sorry!"

"Sorry; and I waiting all this time for supper," shrieked Nita. "Nothing to do but just to cut a lettuce, and some endive off the ground, and you forgot it. Where have you been all day?"

"With Bruno."

"With Bruno−−of course with Bruno−−and could not bring a salad off his land. The only thing you had to think of, and we waiting for supper, and the sun over the mountains more than an hour ago, and you stuffed up there, I warrant, like a fatting goose!"

"I had some bread and milk," said Signa. He was trembling in all his little limbs; he could not help this, they beat him so, so often, and he knew well what was coming.

"And nothing else?" screamed Nita, for every good thing that went to him she con− sidered robbery and violence done on her own children.

"I had fruit−−but I took it to Zanobetto's girls," said Signa, very low, because he was such a foolish little fellow, that neither example, nor execration, nor constant influence of lying could ever make him untruthful, and a child is always either untruthful or most exaggeratedly exact in truth−−there is no medium for him.

"And not to us," screeched Nita's eldest daughter, and boxed him on the ear.

"You little beast," said Georgio, the biggest boy, and kicked him.

Toto waited about, and sprang on him like a cat, and pulled his hair until he tore some curls out by the roots.

Signa was very pale, but he never made sound nor effort. He stood stock−still and mute, and bore it. He had seen pictures of S. Stephen and S. Lawrence and of Christ−−and they were still and quiet always, letting their enemies have their way. Perhaps, if he were still too, he thought it might be forgiven to him−−that sin about the currants.

Nita, with an iron hand, sent her offsprings off, reeling to their places, and seized him herself and stripped him.

He was all bruised from the night's beating still; but she did not pause for that; but she did not pause for that. She plucked down her rod of alder twigs, and thrashed his till he bled again. Then threw him into the hay in the inner room beyond where the boys slept.

All the time he was quite mute. Shut up in the dark his courage gave way under the pain, and he burst out crying.

"Dear angels, do not be angry with me any more," he prayed, " and I only did it to make Gemma happy; and they beat me so here, and I never tell Bruno."

But the angles, wherever they be, never now come this side of the sun; and Signa lay all alone in the dark, and go no rest nor answer.

"The lute will be sorry," he thought, getting tired of waiting for the angels.

He told all his sorrows and joys to the lute, and he was sure it understood, for did it not sing with him, or sigh with him, just as his heart taught it?

"I will tell the lute," said Signa, sobbing in his straw, with a vague babyish dim sense of the great truth that his art is the only likeness of an angel that the singer ever sees on earth.

CHAPTER X.

THE little fellow had a laborious life at the best of times, but he had so grown up in it that it never occurred to him to repine.

True Toto, the same age as himself, and a mother's darling, led one just as lazy and agreeable as his was hard and over−worked. Toto sported in the sun at pleasure, played morra for halfpence, robbed cherry trees, slept through noon, devoured fried beans and green almonds and artichokes in oil, and refused to be of any earthly use to any human creature through all his dirty idle days as best beseemed to him. But Signa from the cradle upward had been taught to give way to Toto, and been taught to know that the measure of life for Toto was golden and for him was lead. It had always been so from the first, when Nita had laid him hungry in the hay to turn to Toto full but screaming.

Signa, sent out in the dark before the sun rose to see to the sheep on the hill, kept on the hill winter and summer if he were not sent higher to fetch things from Bruno's garden and fields; running on a dozen errands a day for Baldo or Lippo or Nita; trotting by the donkey's side with vegetables along the seven dusty miles into the city, and trotting back again afoot, because the donkey was laden with charcoal, or linen to be washed, or some other town burden that Lippo earned a penny by in fetching for his neighbours; early and late, in heat and in cold, when the south wind scorched, as when the north wind howled, Signa was always on his feet, doing this and that and the other. But he had got quite used to it, and thought it a wonderful treat that they allowed him to sing now and then for the priests, and that he let his voice loose as loud as he liked on the hill−sides and in the fields.

When he went up into these fields and knew the beautiful Tuscan world in summer, the liberty and the loveliness of it made him happy without his knowing why, because the poetic temper was alive in him.

The little breadths of grass−land white as snow with a million cups of the earth−creeping bindweed. The yellow wheat clambering the hill−sides and darkened to ruddy bronze when the vine−shadows fell over it. The springtide glory of the Judas trees, which here they call in cruel irony the Tree of Love, with their rose flowers blushing amongst the great walnuts and the cone−dropping figs. The fig−trees and the apple−trees flinging their boughs together in June, like children clasping arms in play. The glowworm lying under the moss, while the fireflies shone aloft in the leaves. The blue butterflies astir like living cornflowers amongst the bearded barley, and the dainty grace of the oats. The little shallow brooks sleeping in sun and shade under the green canes, with the droll frogs talking of the weather. The cistus, that looks so like the dog−rose that you pluck one for the other every day, covering the rough loose stones and crumbling walls with beauty so delicate you fear to breathe on it. The long turf paths between the vines, left for the bullocks to pass by in vintage time, and filled with colours from clover or iris, blue bugloss, or bright fritillaria. The wayside crucifixes so hidden in coils of vine and growing stalks of rush−like millet and the swaying frond of acacia off−shoots that you scarce can see the cross for the foliage. The high hills that seem to sleep against the sun, so still they look, and dim and dreamful, with clouds of olives, soft as mist, and flecks of white where the mountain villages are, distant as far off sails of ships, and full, like them, of vague fancy and hope and perils of the past. All these things were beautiful to him, and he was very happy when he went up to Bruno.

Besides, this tall dark fellow, who scowled on everyone and should have been a brigand, people said, was always good to him.

He had to work, indeed, for Bruno, to carry the cabbages into the town, to pump the water from the tanks, to pick the insects off the vines, to cut the distaff canes, to carry the cow her fresh fodder, to do all the many things that are always wanting to be done from dawn to eve on a little farm. But then Bruno always spared him half an hour for his lute, always gave him a good meal, always let him enjoy himself when he could, and constantly interceded to get him spared labour on a feast day, and leave to attend the communal school.

He did not wonder either at Bruno's kindness or at the other's unkindness; because children take good and evil as the birds take rain and sunshine. But it lightened the troubles of his young life and made them bearable.

He had never wandered farther than the hills above the town, and sometimes he was sent with the donkey into

Florence; that was all. But the war−worn staunch old Lastra is enough world for a child; it would be too wide a one for an historian, could all its stones have tongues.

It is a trite saying that it is not what we see but how we see that matters; and Signa saw in his battle−dinted world−forsaken little town more things and more meanings than a million grown−up wanderers would have seen in the width of many countries.

He got the old men to tell him stories of it in the great republican centuries; the stories were apocryphal, no doubt, but had that fitness which almost does as well as truth in popular traditions, and, indeed, is truth itself in a measure.

He knew how to read, and in a old muniment rooms, going to decay in farmhouses and granaries, found tattered chronicles which he could spell out with more or less success. He knew all the old towers and ruined fortresses as the owls knew them. When he got a little time to himself, which was not very often, he would wander away up into the high places and play his lute to the sunny silence, and fancy himself a minstrel like those he saw in the illuminations of the vellum rolls that the rats ate in many a villa, once a palace and now a wine−warehouse, whose lords had died out in root and branch. Wading knee−deep in the green river water amongst the canes and the croaking frogs that the other boys were fishing for, his shining eyes saw the broad channel of the river filled with struggling horses and fighting men, as they told him it had been in the old days when Castruccio had forded it and Ferruccio had ridden over it with his lances.

It was all odds and ends and waifs and strays of most imperfect knowledge that he got, for every one was ignorant around him, and though the people were proud of their history, they so mixed it up with grotesque invention and distorted hyperbole that it was almost worthless. Still the little that he knew made the old town beautiful to him and venerable and most wonderful, as Troy, if he could see it entire, would seem to a Hellenic scholar. His little head was full of delicate and glorious fancies, as he pattered on his bare brown feet beside the donkey under the gateways of the Lastra;−−the west one with its circlet of azure where the monochrom used to be, and its chasm of green where the ivy and bushes grow; and the east one with its great stone shields, and its yawning depth of arch, and its warders' turrets on the roof.

He was so absorbed in thinking, that he would sometimes never see the turnips jump out of the panniers, or the chestnuts shake out of the sacks on the donkey's back, and Nita would beat him till he was sick for leaving them rolling in the Lastra streets−−to be puzzling about old colours on the tops of gates, when the blessed vegetables were flying loose like mad things on the stones!−−it was enough to call down the instant judgment of heaven, she averred.

Those gleams of blue on the battlements, what use were they? and as for the clouds−−they were always holding off when they were wanted, and coming down when rain was ruin. But as for turnips and beans−−about their preciousness there could be no manner of doubt. And she taught the priority of the claims of the soup−pot with a thick cudgel, as the world teaches it to the poet. The poet often learns the lesson, and puts his conscience in to stew, as if it were an onion; finding philosophy will bake no bread.

But no beating could cure Signa of looking at the frescoes, and hearing the angels singing in the clouds above.

Signa was not as other children were. To Nita he seemed more foolish and more worthless than any of them, and she despised him.

"You cannot beat the gates down nor the clouds," said Signa, when she thrashed him, and that comforted him. But such an answer seemed to Nita the very pertinacy of the Evil One himself.

"He was an obstinate little beast," said Nita, "and if it were not for that half of Bruno's land −"

But he was not obstinate. He only stretched towards the light he saw, as the plant in the cellar will stretch through the bars.

Tens of millions of little peasants come to the birth, and grow up and become men, and do the daily bidding of the world, and work and die, and have no more of soul or Godhead in them than the grains of sand. But here and there, with no lot different to his fellows, one is born to dream and muse and struggle to the sun of higher desires, and the world calls such a one Burns, or Haydn, or Giotto, or Shakespeare, or whatever name the fierce light of fame may burn upon and make iridescent.

Some other relaxations and enjoyments too the child found; and here and there people were good to him; women for the sake of his pretty innocent face, with the cloud of dusky golden hair tumbling half over it always, and priests for the sake of his voice, which gave such beauty to their services, when anything great happened to

demand a full ceremonial in their dark, quiet, frescoed sanctuaries scattered under the hills and on them. Indeed Lippo would have taken him into the city, and made money of his singing in the celebrations at Easter time, or on Ascension Day, or in Holy Week at the grand ceremonies of Rome. But of that Bruno would never hear. He set his heel down on the ground with an oath.

"Sell your soul, if you please, and the devil is fool enough to pay for it," he said, "but you shall never sell the throat of Pippa's child like any trapped nightingale's."

Poor Lippo sighed and yielded; it was one of those things in which his own good sense and calm wisdom had to let themselves be overborne by this brother's impetuous unreason. The churches−−even the great ones−−pay but a few pence; it was not worth while risking for a few coppers, or for an uncertain future, that lucrative, "half of my half" off the rich fields and vine−paths of the Artimino mountain.

So Signa sang here and there, a few times in the year, in the little choirs about the Lastra for nothing at all but the love of it; and in the Holy Week sang in the church of the Misericordia, where one of his chief haunts and sweetest pleasures was found at all times.

It is the only church within the Lastra walls, the parish church being outside upon the hills, and very little used. It is a small place, grey and grim of exterior, with its red door veils hanging down much worn, and having, within, its altar piece by Cimabue, only shown on high and holy feasts; no religious building in this country, however lowly, is quite without some treasure of the kind.

The church fills to overflowing at high mass, and the people stand on the steps and in the street, and the sound of the chanting and the smoke of the incense, and the tinkle of the little bells come out on to the air over the bowed heads, and with them there mingle all sweet common country sounds, from bleating sheep and rushing winds, and watch−dogs baying afar off, and heaving ropes grating boats against the bridge; and the people murmur their prayers in the sun, and bow and kneel and go home comforted, if they know not very well why they are so.

Above the body of the church, led up to by a wooden staircase, there are the rooms of the Fraternity to which all good men and true belong for the love of the poor and the service of heaven. Rooms divided into little cells, each with the black robes and mask of a brother of the order in it; and black−lettered lines of Scripture above, and the crossbones of death; and closets where the embroidered banners are, and the sacred things for holy offices, and the black velvet pall, with its memento mori and its golden skulls, that covers each brother on his last travel to his latest rest.

Here, in the stillness and the silence, with these symbols of death everywhere around, there dwelt at this time in the dull songless church a man who, in his day, had been a careless wandering singer, loving his art honestly, though himself one of the lowliest of her servitors.

Born in the Lastra, with a sweet voice and an untrained love of harmony, his tastes had led him to wander away from it, and join one of the troops of musicians who make the chance companies in the many small theatres that are to be found in the Italian towns which lie out of the great highways, and are hardly known by name, except in their own commune. He had never risen high in his profession, though a favourite in the little cities, but had always wandered about from season to season from playhouse to playhouse; and in the middle way of his career a drenching in a rain−storm, after a burning day, had made his throat mute and closed his singing life forever. He had returned to his birthplace, and there joining the Misericordia, had become organist and sacristan to their church in the Lastra, and had stayed in those offices some thirty years, and now was over seventy; a silent, timid, old creature usually, but of a gentle temper, and liking nothing better than to recall the days of his wanderings as a singer, or to linger over the keys of his old organ with some world−forgotten score before him.

There was little scope for his fondness for melody in the Lastra. It was only in Holy Week that he could arrange any choral service; or once in two or three years, perhaps, there would come such a chance for him as he had had on that day of Corpus Domini when the bishop's visit had brought about an unusual greatness of ceremonial.

At all other times all he could ever do was to play a few symphonies or fugues at high mass, and if any village child had a great turn for melody, teach it the little science that he knew, as he taught Signa; Signa who was so docile a pupil that he would have knelt in happy obedience to the whip which S. Gregory bought for his scholars−−only he never would have merited it for the transgressions of singing out of time.

The stillness, the sadness, the seclusion, where no sound came unless it were some tolling bell upon the hills,

the melancholy associations of the place, which all spoke of pain, of effort, of sorrow, of the needs of the poor, and of the warnings of the grave, all these fostered the dreamful temper of the boy, and the thoughtful− ness which was beyond his years; and he passed many a happy tranquil hour listening to the old man playing, or trying to reproduce upon his lute, as best he might, themes of the musicians of earlier generations−−from the figure of Merula−−from the airs of Zingarelli−−from the Stabat Mater of Jesi−−from the Benedictus of Jomelli−−from the Credo of Perez−−from the Cantata of Porpora−−knowing nothing of their names or value, but finding out their melodies and meanings by sheer instinct.

Luigi Dini−−whom everyone called Gigi−−had many a crabbed old score and fine sonata and cantata copied out by his own hands, and the child, having been taught his notes, had grown able to find his way in this labyrinth, and pick out beautiful things from the dust of ages by ear and instinct, and make them all his own, as love appropriates whatever it worships; and never knew, as he went over the stones of the Lastra with the donkey, and woke the people in their beds with his clear voice, whilst all was dark, and only he and the birds were astir, that when he was singing the great Se circa, se dice, or the mighty Misero pargoletto, or the delicious Quelli−là, or the tender Deh signore! he was giving out to the silent street, and the dreaming echoes, and the wakening flush of day, airs that had been the rapture of the listening world a century before.

Grave Gregorian melodies; Laudi of Florentiae laudisti of the Middle Ages; hymns from the monasteries, modelled on the old Greek traditions, with "the note the slave of the word;" all things simple, pure, and old filled the manuscripts of the sacristy like antique jewels. Signa, very little, very ignorant, very helpless, strayed amongst them confused and unconscious of the value of the things he played with, and yet got the good out of them and felt their richness and was nourished on the strength of them, and ran away to them at every stolen moment that he could, while Luigi Dini stood by and listened, and was moved at the wonderful instinct of the child, as the Romans were moved at the young Mozart's rendering of the Allegri requiem.

Music was in the heart and the brain of the child; his feet moved to it over the dusty roads, his heavy burdens were lightened by it, and, when they scolded him, often he did not hear−−there were so many voices singing to him. Where did the voices come from? he did not know; only he heard them when he lay awake in the straw, beside the other boys, with the stars shining through the unglazed window of the roof, as he heard them when the hot noon was bright and still on the hill−top where he strayed all alone with his sheep.

One day he found the magical voices shut up in a little brown prison of wood, as a great soul ere now has been pent in a mean little body;−−one day, a wonderful day, after which all the world changed for him.

In a little shop in the Lastra by the Porta Fiorentina, there was a violin for sale. A violin in pear−wood, with a shell inlaid upon its case, and reputed to be very, very old.

Tonino, the locksmith and tinman, had it. So many years before that he could not count them a lodger had left it with him in default of rent, and never gone back for it. The violin lay neglected in the dust of an old cupboard. One day a pedlar had spied it and offered ten francs for it. Tonino said to himself, if a pedlar would give that, it must be worth four times the sum at least, and put it in his window with his old keys and his new saucepans, and his ancient locks and his spick and span bright coffee pots; a little old dusky window just within the tall east gateway of the Lastra, where the great poplars throw their welcome shadow across the sunny road.

Signa going on an errand there one day and left alone in the shop took it up and began to make the strings sound, not knowing how, but finding the music out for himself as they young Pascal found the science of mathematics.

When Tonino entered his workshop, with a pair of hot pincers in his hand, he was frightened to death to hear the sweetest sounds dancing about the air like butterflies, and when he discovered that he child was playing on his precious violin that the pedlar would give ten francs for, he hardly knew whether to kiss the child for being so clever or whether to pinch him with the red hot nippers for his im− pudence. Anyhow he snatched the violin from him and put it in the window again.

A thing that could make so sweet a noise must be worth double what he thought.

So he put a price of forty francs upon it, and stuck it amongst his tins, hoping to sell it; dealers or gentlefolks came sometimes up and down the Lastra, seeing if there were any pretty or ancient thing to buy, for the people have beautiful old work very often in lace, in majolica, in carvings, in missals, in repoussé, in copper and can be cheated out of these with an ease that quite endears them to those who do it.

A few people looked at Tonino's violin, but no one bought it; because the right people did not see it, or

because it was an old violin without any special grace of Cremona or value of Bologna on its case. As it lay there in the window amongst the rusty iron and the shining tin things, with the dust drifting over it, and the flies buzzing about its strings, Signa saw it twenty times a week, and sighed his little soul out for it.

Oh the unutterable wonder locked up in that pear−wood case! oh, the deep undreamed−of joys that lay in those mute strings!

The child thought of nothing else. After those murmurs of marvellous meanings that had come to him when touching that strange thing, he dreamed of it by day and night. The lute was dear to him; but what was the power of the lute beside those heights and depths of sound that this unknown creature could give?−−for a living creature it was to him, as much as was the redbreast or thrush.

Only to touch it again! just once to touch it again!

He begged and prayed Tonino; but the tinman was inexorable. he could not risk his bit of property in such babyish hands. True the child had made the music jump out of it; but that might have been an accident, and who could tell that another time he would not break it−−a little beggar's brat like that, without people to pay for it if any damage were done.

"Give me my forty francs and you shall have it, piccinino," Tonino would say with a grin, knowing that he might as well tell the child to bring him down the star−dust from the skies.

Signa would go away with his little head hung down; the longing for the violin possessing him with a one−idea'd passion. In the young child with whom genius is born its vague tumultuous desires work without his knowing what it is that ails him.

The children laughed at him, the old people scolded him, Nita beat him, Bruno even grew impatient with him because he was always sighing for an old fiddle, that it was as absurd for him to dream of as it were a king's sword or a queen's pearls.

"As if he were not lazy and tiresome enough as it is!" said Nita, boxing his ears soundly, when she went by one evening and caught him leaning against Tonino's casement and looking with longing, pitiful, ardent eyes at the treasure in its pear−wood shell.

After a time the child, shy and proud in temper, grew ashamed of his own enthusiasm, and hid it from the others, and never any more tried to soften Tonino's heart and get leave to touch that magical bow again.

Bruno thought he had forgotten it and was glad. The violin lay with the metal pots and the rusty locks, and no one brought it. Signa when he had to go past, on an errand through the gate, to Castagnolo or S. Maria del Greve, or any other eastward village, tried not to look at the brown shining wood that the wasps and the mosquitoes were humming over at their will. But he longed for it the more because he kept the longing silent, and had no chance of ever feeling those keys of enchantment under his little fingers. A thing repressed, grows.

He would lie awake at night thinking of the violin; if it had not been so wicked he would have stolen something to buy it with; some days it was all he could do to keep himself from stealing it itself.

One bright afternoon in especial, when everyone was at a marionette show in the square, and he had come back very foot−sore from the city, and passing saw Tonino's place was empty and the old lattice windows were open and the sun's rays fell across the violin, it would have been the work of a second to put his hand in, and draw it out, and run off−−anywhere−−any− where, what would it have mattered where, if only he had carried all that music with him?

For genius is fanaticism; and the little barefoot hungry fellow, running errands in the dust, had genius in him, and was tossed about by it like a small moth by a storm.

To run away and wander, with the violin to talk to him wherever he might go:−−the longing to do this tortured him so that he clasped his hands over his eyes and fled−−without it−−as fast as his feet could take him.

To see it lying dumb when at his touch it would say such beautiful things to him!−−he ran on through the gateway and down the road with the burning temptation pursuing him as prairie flames a frightened fawn.

If any one had had it who could have made it speak he would not have minded; but that it should lie mute there−−useless−−lost−−hurt him with a sharper pain than Nita's hazel rods could deal.

"Oh Gemma−−almost I stole it!" he gasped, panting and breathless with the horror of himself, as he stumbled up against the pretty child on the green strip that runs under the old south wall, where the breaches made by the Spanish assaults are filled in with ivy, and the ropemakers walk to and fro, weaving their strands under the ruined bastions.

Gemma put her finger in her mouth and looked at him.

"Why not quite?" she said. Gemma had stolen many things in her day, and had always been forgiven because she was so pretty.

"Oh, Gemma, I did−−so nearly!" he murmured, unheeding her answer in the confusion of his own new stricken sense of peril and escape.

"Was it to eat?" said Gemma.

"To eat?"

He echoed her words without knowing what he said. Two great tears were rolling down his cheeks. He was so grateful that strength for resistance had been given him; and yet, he was thinking of a song* of the country to a lute; which _____

*
Oh quanto suoni bene chitarruzza!
Le tui corde si possono indorare!
Lo manico diventi una fanciulla!
E dove io vada ti posso menare
Ch'io ti posso menar da qui a Roma
E monti e sassi t'abbiano a inchinare!
TUSCAN SERENADE.

sings of how its owner would gild its strings and wander with it even as far as Rome−−mountains and rocks inclining before its silver sounds.

If only he could have that beautiful strange thing, he thought, how he would roam the world over fearing nothing, or how happy he would lie down among the sheep and the pines, for ever making music to the winds.

"Why did you not take it, if nobody was by to see," said Gemma.

"Oh dear, it is wicked to thieve," said Signa, drearily. "Wicked, you know, and mean."

Gemma put out her lower lip.

"If no one know, it is all right," she said, with accurate perception of the world's standard of virtue.

Signa sighed heavily, his head hung down; he hardly heard her; he was thinking of the violin.

"You are a mammamia," said Gemma, with calm scorn, meaning he was a baby and very silly. "When I wish to do a thing, I do it."

"But you do very wrong things sometimes."

Gemma shrugged her little white shoulders up to her ears.

"It is nice to do wrong," she said placidly.

"They say things are wrong you know," she added, after a pause. "But that is only to keep us quiet. It is all words."

They called her stupid, but she noticed many facts and drew many conclusions. This was one of them; and it was alike agreeable to her and useful. She was a naughty child, but was naughty with logic and success.

"If only he would let me touch it once," murmured Signa.

Gemma finding him such bad company went away hopping on one foot, and wondering why boys were such silly creatures.

"What is the matter?" said one of the ropemakers kindly to the boy. "Do you want to see the puppet show that came in the morning? Here is a copper bit if you do."

Signa put his hands behind his back.

"Oh no, it is not that. You are very good, but it is not that."

"Take what you can get another time," said the ropemaker, offended and yet glad that his too generous offer had been repulsed by him.

"What an ass you are! The puppets are splendid," hissed Toto, who was near, and who had spent an hour in the forenoon, squeezed between the tent−pegs of the forbidden paradise, flat on his stomach, swallowing the dust. "They are half an arm's length high, and there are three kings in it, and they murder one another just like life−−so

beautiful! You might have taken the money, surely, and given it to me. I shall tell mother; see then if you get any fritters for a week!"

"I did not want to see the puppets," said Signa, wearily, and walked away.

It was late in the day; he had worked hard, running into the city and back on an errand; he was tired and listless and unhappy.

As he went thinking of the violin by the walls, not noticing where his steps took him, he passed a little group of strangers. They were travellers who had wandered out there for a day. One of them was reading in a book, and looked up as the child passed.

"What a pity the Lastra is forgotten by the world!" the reader said to his companions; he was thinking of the many memories which the old castello shuts within her walls as manuscripts are shut in coffers.

Signa heard; and flushed with pain up to the curls of his flying hair.

He said nothing, for he was shy, and, besides, was never very sure that people would not take him to Nita for a thrashing; they so often did. But he went on his way with a swelling heart. It hurt him like a blow. To others it was only a small, ancient, desolate place filled with poor people, but to him it was as Zion to the Hebrew children.

"If I could be very great, if I could write beautiful things as Pergolesi did, and all the world heard them and treasured them, then praising me, they would remember the Lastra," he thought.

A dim, sweet, impossible ambition entered into him, for the first time; the ambition of a child, gorgeous and vague, and out of all realms of likelihood; visions all full of gold and colour, with no perspective or reality about them, like a picture of the twelfth century, in which he saw himself, a man grown, laurel−crowned and white−robed, brought into the Lastra, as the old Sacristan told him Petrarca was taken into Rome; with the rays of the sun of his fame gliding its ancient ways, whilst all Italy chanted his melodies and all the earth echoed his name.

"If I could but be what Pergolesi was!" he thought.

Pergolesi who consumed his soul in high endeavour, and died, at five−and−twenty, of a broken heart!

But then he knew nothing of that; he only knew that Pergolesi was a great dead creature, whose name was written on the scores of the Stabat and the Salve Regina which he loved as he loved the roll of thunder and the rose at sunrise: and he knew that it was he who had written that "Se circa se dice," which he had learned in the dusky organ−loft of the Misericordia; that song in which the great poet and the great musician together poured forth the passion of a divine despair, the passion which, in its deepest woe and highest pain, thinks but of saving the creature that it suffers for: "Ah, no! si gran duolo Non darle per me!"

He did not know anything about him, but looked up at the sun, which was sinking downward faintly in the dreamy warmth of the pale green west, and wondered where Pergolesi was, beyond those realms of light, those beams of glory?

Was he chanting the Salve Regina now?

Between him and the radiance of the setting sun stood the little figure of Gemma, her hair all aflame with the light; hair like Titian's Magdalen and Slave and Venus, like the hair that Bronzino has given to the Angel who brings the tidings of the Annunciation, carrying the spray of lilies in his hand.

"Oh, you mammamia!" she cried, in derision, stopping short, with her brown little sister bowed down beside her under the weight of some earthen pots that they had been sent to buy in the Lastra.

"Oh, you mammamia!" cried Gemma, munching a S. Michael's summer pear that some one had given her in the Lastra for the sake of her pretty little round face with its angelic eyes.

Signa took Palma's flower−pots on his own back, and smiled back at Gemma.

"I have nothing to do before bedtime," he said: "I will carry these up for you."

"And then we can play in the garden," said Gemma, jumping off her rosy feet as she finished the pear. "But what were you thinking of? staring at the clouds?"

"Of a dead man that was a very great man, dear, I think, and made beautiful music."

"Only that!" said Gemma, with a pout of her pretty lips; throwing away her pear stalks.

"Tell us about him," said Palma.

"I do not know anything," said Signa, sadly. "He has left half his soul in the music and the other half must be−−there."

He looked up again into the west.

The two little girls walked along in the dust, one on each side of him; Palma wished he would not think so of dead people; Gemma was pondering on the veiled glories of the puppets, of whose exploits Toto had told her marvels.

"Oh, Signa! if we could only see the burat− tini!" she murmured, as they trotted onward; she had been sighing her heart out before the tent.

"The burattini?" said Signa. "Yes. Gian Lambrochini would have given me the money to go; but I would as soon hear the geese hiss or the frogs croak."

"You might have gone in−−really in?−−and seen them, murders and all?" said Gemma, with wide−opened eyes of amazement.

"Yes."

"Money to go in!−−to go in!−−And you did not take the money even!"

"No; I did not wish to go."

"But you might have given it to me! I might have gone!"

The enormity of her loss and of his folly overcame her. She stood in the road and stared blankly at him.

"That would not have been fair to the Lambrochini," said Palma, who was a sturdy little maiden as to right and wrong.

"No−−and he so poor himself, and so old!" said Signa. "It would not have been fair, Gemma."

"If you were fond of me, would you think of what was 'fair'? You would think of amusing me. It is a shame of you, Signa−−a burning shame! And longing to see those puppets as I have done−−crying my eyes out before the tent! It is wicked."

"Dear, I am sorry," murmured Signa. "But, indeed−−indeed, I never thought of you."

"And never thought of all you might have got with the money!"

Gemma twisted herself on one side, putting up her plump little shoulders, sullenly, into her ears, with a scowl on her face.

It cost a whole coin−−ten centimes−−to go in to even the cheapest standing−places in the theatre, and with a whole coin you could get a big round sweet cake for five centimes, and for another centime a handful of melon−seeds, and for another a bit of chocolate, and for another two figs, and for the fourth and fifth and last a painted saint in sugar. And he might have brought all those treasures to her!

Gemma, between her two companions, felt the immeasurable disdain of the practical intelli− gence for the idle dreamer and the hypercritical moralist. She trotted on in the dust sulkily; a little rosy and auburn figure in the shadows, as if she were a Botticelli cherub put into life and motion.

"You are cross, dear!" said Signa, with a sigh, putting his hand round her throat to caress her back into content. But Gemma shook him off, and trotted on alone in outraged dignity.

They climbed the steep ascent of grassy and broken ground past the parish church, with the sombre convent above amongst its cypresses, and the wilder hills with their low woodland growth green and dark and fresh against the south, and then entered the great gardens of Giovoli, where Sandro Zambetto worked all the years of his life amongst the lemons and magnolia trees.

The villa was uninhabited; but the gardens were cultivated by its owner, and the flowers and fruits were sent into the city market, and in the winter down to Rome.

"Are you cross still, Gemma?" said Signa, when he had put the big pots down in the tool− house. Gemma glanced at him with her forefinger in her mouth.

"Will you play? What shall we play at?" said Signa, coaxingly. "Come! It shall be anything you like to choose. Palma does not mind."

Gemma took her finger out of her mouth and pointed to some Alexandrian apricots golden and round against the high wall opposite them.

"Get me four big ones and I will play."

"Oh, Gemma!" cried Palma, piteously. "Those are the very best, the Alexandria S. Johns for the padrone!"

"I know," said Gemma.

"But the fattore counted them this very morning, and knows every one there is, and will blame father if one be gone, and father will beat Signa or make Nita beat him!"

"Besides, it is stealing, Gemma," said Signa.

"Chè!" said little Gemma, with unmeasured scorn. "You can climb there, Signa?"

"Yes, I can climb; but you do not wish me to do wrong to please you, dear?"

"Yes, I do," said Gemma.

"Oh, Gemma, then I cannot!" murmured Signa, sadly. "If it were only myself−−but it is wrong, dear, and your father would be blamed. Palma is right."

"Chè!" said Gemma, again, with her little red mouth thrust out. "Will you go and get them, Signa?"

"No," said Signa.

"Tista!" cried Gemma, with her sweetest little chirp, and flew through the twilight fragrance. "Tista! Tista! Tista!"

Tista was Giovanni Baptista, the twelve−year−old son of fellow−labourer of Giovoli, who lived on the other side of the wall; a big brown boy, who was her slave.

Signa ran after her.

"No, No! Gemma, come back!"

Gemma glanced over her shoulder.

"Tista will get them, and he will swing me in the big tree afterwards."

"No! Gemma, listen−−come back! Gemma−−listen, I will get them."

Gemma stood still, and laughed.

"Get them first, then I will come back; but Tista will do as well as you. And he swings me better. He is bigger."

Signa climbed up the wall, bruising his arms and wounding his feet, for the stones of it were sharp, and there was hardly any foothold; but, with some effort he got the apricots and dropped to the ground with them, and ran to Gemma.

"Here! Now you will not go to Tista? But, oh, Gemma, why make me do such a thing? It is a wrong thing−−it is very wrong!"

"I did not make you do anything," said Gemma, receiving the fruit into her skirt. "I did not make you. I said Tista would do as well."

Signa was silent.

She did not even thank him. She did not even offer to share the spoils. He was no nearer her good graces than he had been before he had sinned to please her.

"Oh, Signa! I never, never would have believed!" murmured Palma, ready to cry, and powerless to act.

"She wished it so. She would have gone to Tista," said Signa, and stood and watched the little child eating the fruit with all the pretty pecking ardour of a chaffinch. Gemma laughed as she sat down upon the grass to enjoy her stolen goods at fuller ease. When she had got her own way, all her good−humour returned.

"What sillies you are!" she said, looking at the tearful eye of her sister, and at Signa standing silent in the shade.

"It is you who is cruel, Gemma," said Palma, and went, with her little black head hung down, into the house, because, though she was only ten years old, she was the mistress of it, and had to cook and sweep and wash, and hoe the cabbages and bake the bread, or else the floors remained filthy and the hungry boys shirtless and unfed.

Gemma did not know that she was cruel. She was anything that served her purpose best and brought her the most pleasure−−that was all.

She ate her apricots with the glee of a little mouse eating a bit of cheese. Signa watched her. It was all the recompense he had.

He knew that he had been weak, and had done wrong, because the fruit trees were under Sandro's charge, who had no right to any of it, being a man paid by the week, and without any share in what he helped to cultivate; and this on the south wall being the very choicest of it all, Sandro had threatened his children with dire punishment if they should dare even to touch what should fall.

When she had eaten the last one, Gemma jumped up. Signa caught her.

"You will kiss me now, and come and play? There is just half an hour."

But Gemma twisted herself away, laughing gleefully.

"No; I shall go and swing with Tista."

"Oh, Gemma! when you promised−−"

"I never promised," said Gemma.

"You said you would come back."

Gemma laughed her merriest at his face of astonished reproach.

"I did come back; but I am going again. Tista swings better than you."

And with her little carols of laughter rippling away among the leaves, Gemma ran off and darted through a low door and banged it behind her, and called aloud:

"Tista! Tista! Come and swing me!"

In a few moments on the other side above the wall her little body curled upon the rope, and her sunny head, as yellow as a marigold, were seen flying in a semicircle up into the boughs of the high magnolia trees, while she laughed on and called louder:

"Higher, higher, Tista!−−higher!"

Signa could see her, and could hear−−that was all the reward he had.

He sat down disconsolate near the old broken statue by the water−lilies.

He was too proud to follow her and to dispute with Tista.

"I will not waste another hour on her−−ever!" he thought, with bitterness in his heart. There were the lute and the music in the quiet sacristy; and old fragrant silent hills so full of dreams for him; and Bruno, who loved him and never cheated him; and the nightingales that told him a thousand stories of their lives amongst the myrtles; and the stones of the Lastra that had the tales of the great dead written on them:−−when he had all these, why should he waste his few spare precious minutes on this faithless, saucy, sulky, ungrateful little child?

His heart was very heavy as he heard her laughter. She had made him do wrong, and then had mocked at him and left him.

"I will never think about her, never any more!" he said to himself while the shadows darkened and the bats flew out and the glowworms twinkled, and in the dusk he could still just see the golden head of Gemma flying in the bronzed leaves of the magnolias.

After a while her laughter and her swinging ceased.

The charm of perfect silence fell on the grand old garden. He sat on, soothed and yet sorrowful. The place was beautiful to him, even without Gemma.

In the garden of these children all the flora of Italy was gathered and was growing.

The delights of an Italian garden are countless. It is not like any other garden in the world. It is at once more formal and more wild, at once greener with more abundant youth and venerable with more antique age. It has all Boccaccio between its walls, all Petrarca in its leaves, all Raffaelle in its skies. And then the sunshine that beggars words and laughs at painters!−−the boundless, intense, delicious, heavenly light! What do other gardens know of that, save in orange−groves of Grenada and rose−thickets of Damascus?

The old broken marble statues, whence the water dripped and fed the water−lily; the great lemon−trees in pots big enough to drown a boy, the golden globes among their emerald leaves; the magnolias, like trees cast in bronze, with all the spice of India in their cups; the spires of ivory bells that the yuccas put forth, like belfries for fairies; the oleanders taller than a man, red and white and blush colour; the broad velvet leaves of the flowering rush; the dark majestic ilex oaks, that made the noon like twilight; the countless graces of the vast family of acacias; the high box hedges, sweet and pungent in the sun; the stone ponds, where the gold−fish slept through the sultry day; the wilderness of carna− tions; the huge roses, yellow, crimson, snow−white, and the small noisette and the banksia with its million of pink stars; myrtles in dense thickets, and camellias like a wood of evergreens; cacti in all quaint shapes, like fossils astonished to find themselves again alive; high walls, vine−hung and topped by pines and cypresses; low walls with crowds of geraniums on their parapets, and the mountains and the fields beyond them; marble basins hidden in creepers where the frogs dozed all day long; sounds of convent bells and of chapel chimes; green lizards basking on the flags; great sheds and granaries beautiful with the clematis and the wisteria and the rosy trumpets of the bignonia; great wooden places cool and shady, with vast arched entrances, and scent of hay, and empty casks, and red earthen amphoræ, and little mice scudding on the floors, and a sun−dial painted on the wall, and a crucifix set above the weathercock, and through the huge unglazed windows sight of the green vines with the bullocks in the harvest−carts beneath them, or of some hilly sunlit road with a mule−team coming down it, or of a blue high hill with its pine−trees black against the sky, and on its slopes the yellow corn and misty olive. This was their garden; it is ten thousand other gardens in the land.

The old painters had these gardens, and walked in them, and thought nothing better could be needed for any scene of Annunciation or Adoration, and so put them in beyond the windows of Bethlehem or behind the Throne of the Lamb−−and who can wonder?

The mighty lives have passed away into silence, leaving no likeness to them on earth; but if you would still hold communion with them, even better than to go to written score or printed book or painted panel or chiselled marble or cloistered gloom, is it to stray into one of these old quiet gardens, where for hundred of years the stone naiad has leaned over the fountain, and the golden lizard hidden under the fallen caryatide, and sit quiet still, and let the stones tell you what they remember and the leaves say what the sun once saw; and then the shades of the great dead will come to you. Only you must love them truly, else you will see them never.

Signa, in his little ignorant way, did love them with just such blind untaught love as a little bird born in a dark cage has for the air and the light.

When he stole into the deserted villas, where, after centuries of neglect, some fresco would glow still upon the damp walls where the cobwebs and the wild vine had their way; when he saw the sculptured cornices and the gilded fretwork and the broken mosaic in the halls where cattle were stabled and grain piled; when he knelt down before the dusky nameless Madonnas in the little churches on the hills, or found some marble head lying amongst the wild thyme, the boy's heart moved with a longing and a tenderness to which he could have given no title.

As passion yet unknown thrills in the adolescent, as maternity yet undreamed of stirs in the maiden; so the love of art comes to the artist before he can give a voice to his thought or any name to his desire.

Signa heard "beautiful things" as he sat in the rising moonlight, with the bells of the little bindweed white about his feet.

That was all he could have said.

Whether the angels sent them on the breeze, or the birds brought them, or the dead men came and sang them to him, he could not tell. Indeed, who can tell?

Where did Guido see the golden hair of S. Michael gleam upon the wind? Where did Mozart hear the awful cries of the risen dead come to judgment? What voice was in the fountain of Vaucluse? Under what nodding oxlip did Shakespeare find Titania asleep? When did the Mother of Love come down, chaster in her unclothed loveliness than vestal in her veil, and with such vision of her make obscure Cleomenes immortal?

Who can tell?

Signa sat dreaming, with his chin upon his hands, and his eyes wandering over all the silent place, from the closed flowers at his feet to the moon in her circles of mist.

Who walks in these paths now may go back four hundred years. They are changed in nothing. Through their high hedges of rhododendron and of jessamine that grow like woodland trees it would still seem but natural to see Raffaelle with his court−train of students, or Signorelli splendid in those apparellings which were the comment of his age; and on these broad stone terraces with the lizards basking on their steps and the trees opening to show a vine−covered hill with the white oxen creeping down it and the blue mountains farther still behind, it would be but fitting to see a dark figure sitting and painting lilies, upon a golden ground, or cherubs' heads upon a panel of cypress wood, and to hear that this painter was the monk Angelico.

The deepest charm of these old gardens, as of their country, is, after all, that in them it is possible to forget the present age.

In the full, drowsy, voluptuous noon, when they are a gorgeous blaze of colour and a very intoxication of fragrance, as in the ethereal white moonlight of midnight, when, with the silver beams and the white blossoms and the pale marbles, they are like a world of snow, their charm is one of rest, silence, leisure, dreams, and passion all in one; they belong to the days when art was a living power, when love was a thing of heaven or of hell, and when men had the faith of children and the force of gods.

Those days are dead, but in these old gardens you can believe still that you live in them.

The boy, who did not know hardly why he was moved by it so greatly, musing in this garden of Giovoli, and sitting, watching the glowworms in the ground bindweed, was more than half consoled for the cruelty of his playmate. When the nine o'clock chimes rang down below in the Lastra, he did not move; he had forgotten that if he were away when Nita should shut her house up he would have another beating and no supper.

How often was Giotto scolded for letting the sheep stray?

Very often, no doubt.

When the moon had quite risen, with a ring of mist round her, because there was rain hanging in the air, little feet ran over the bindweed, and a little rosy face, all the prettier for the shadows that played in its eyes and the watery radiance that shone in its curls, looked up into his with saucy merriment.

A little piping voice ran like a cricket's chirp into the stillness.

"You may swing me to−morrow−−do you hear?"

Signa started, roused from his musing.

The beautiful things were mute; the clouds and the leaves told him nothing more. He was only a little bare−footed boy, vexed at being left alone and jealous of big brown Tista.

Gemma was a pretty sulky baby, with a pert tongue and a sturdy will of her own; a little thing that could not read a letter, and cared nothing but for eating and for play; but there were shadowed out in her the twin foes of all genius−−the Woman and the World.

"Are you sulking here?" said Gemma. "Tista swung me so high!−−so high! Much better than you. You must get out of the garden now; father is come to lock the gates."

Signa got up slowly.

"Good−night, Gemma."

"Good−night, Gemma!" echoed the child, mimicking the sadness of his answer. "Oh, how stupid you are! Just like Palma! Tista has more life in him, only he never has anything for one except those little green apples. You may come and swing me tomorrow, if you like."

"No; you love Tista."

"But I love you best."

She whispered it with all the wooing archness and softness of twenty years instead of ten, with the moonbeams shining in her eyes till they looked like wet cornflowers.

Signa was silent. He knew she did not love him, but only his pears that he got for her from Bruno, or his baked cakes that he coaxed for her from old Teresina.

"You will come to−morrow?" said Gemma, slipping her hand into his.

"You will flout me if I do come."

"No," said Gemma.

"Yes, you will. It is always like that."

"Try," said Gemma; and she kissed him.

"I will come," said Signa; and he went away through the dewy darkness, forgetting the stolen apricots and the choice of Tista. It was so very seldom that she would kiss him, and she looked so pretty in the moonlight.

Gemma glanced after him through the bars of the high iron gate with the japonica and jessamine twisting round its coronet.

Tista was going away on the morrow into the city to be bound 'prentice to a shoemaker, who was his mother's cousin, and had offered to take him cheaply.

But it had not been worth while to tell Signa that.

"There would have been nobody to swing me if I had not coaxed him," thought Gemma; "and perhaps he will bring me one of those big sweet round pears of Bruno's."

And the little child, well contented, ran off under her father's shrill scolding for being out so late, and went indoors and drink a draught of milk that Palma had begged for her from a neighbour who had a cow, and slipped herself out of her little blue shirt and homespun skirt, and curled herself up on her bed of hay and fell fast asleep, looking like a sculptor's sleeping Love.

CHAPTER XI.

A FEW days later fell the feast of SS. Peter and Paul, and Signa for more than half a year had been promised a great treat.

Bruno had said that on that day he would take him to see the marble men and the painted angels of the Certosa Monastery, some ten miles away along the bend of the the green Greve water.

What Bruno promised he did always; the child had the surest faith of his word; and by five o'clock in the fair sunrise of the June morning, Signa slipped down the dark staircase, and undid the door and ran out bareheaded into the sweet cold air, and stood waiting on the stones.

The Madonna of Good Council smiled on him through her wooden wicket; bells were ringing over the country around; some tender hand had already placed before the shrine a fresh bunch of field flowers; the sky was red with the rose of the daybreak.

He had not waited long before a tall figure turned the corner, and Bruno's shadow fell upon the slope.

"You are ready? That is right," he said, and without more words the child ran on by his side out of the lofty Fiorentina gate.

The morning was fresh and radiant, very cold, as it always is in midsummer, before the sun has warmed the earth and drunk up the deep night dews that drench the soil.

The shutters of the houses were unclosing and through the open doors, and in the darkness of the cellars there was the yellow gleam of wheat, cut and waiting for the threshers; the gardens and yards were yellow, too, with piles of straw−hats wetted and drying; the shadows were broad and black; men were beginning their work in the great arched smithies and workshops; there was everywhere the smell of the wet earth refreshed and cooled by night.

They went along the road that leads to the Greve river;−−past the big stone barns where the flails would be at rest all day for sake of good SS. Peter and Paul; past the piles of timber and felled fir−trees that strewed the edge of the road; past the old grey villa of the Della Stufa who nigh a thousand years before had come over the mountains, Christian knights and gallant gentlemen, with their red cross and their tawny lions on their shields; the chapel bell was calling the scattered cotters of Castagnolo to first mass; past the pretty bridge of the Stagno (the pool) with its views of the far mountains, and the poplar−trees that the Latins named so because of the restlessness of their leaves, like the unresting mob; past the great fortress of the Castel Pucci, once built to hurl defiance at the city itself, now white and silent, sheltering in its walls the woeful pain, and yet more woeful joys, of minds diseased; past the worthy barber's shop, where it is written up that he has only painted his sign with the tricolour to quiet tasteless whirligigs, he being a man of humour, with a pity kindred to contempt of all the weathercock vagaries of politics; past the old dirty, tumble−down, wayside houses, where the floors were strewn with the new straw picked for the plaiting, and the babies were lying in flat fruit−baskets, swaddled and laughing, and the girls were getting ready for mass with bright petticoats and braided hair and big earrings, and, if they were betrothed maidens, strings of pearls about their throats; past all these till they came to the Greve bridge, where they met a priest with the Host in the brightness of the festal day−dawn.

They uncovered their heads and knelt down in the dust and prayed for the passing soul till the little bell, borne before the holy man, had tinckled away in the distance. Then they walked on by the Greve water under the shivering poplars and amongst the grazing sheep.

There is no regular path along the river; but they made one for themselves, brushing through the canes, getting round the rushes, or when it was needed, wading knee−deep, or oftener, for the water was low, walking in the stony sand of the dry river bed.

Once it was a warlike water enough, in the old days when the Lotteringhi and Alberti, and Acciajoli and Pandolfini, and all the other great races, Guelph and Ghibelline, had their fortified places bristling along its banks; when its stone landing quays were crowded with condottieri watering their horses ere they went to lend their lances to the strongest; when mighty nobles in penitence raised shrines and built hospitals beside it to seek God's

grace upon their arms; when the long lines of pilgrims wound along it, or the creeping files of sumpter mules, of the bright array of the White Company; in those days Greve was a busy stream, and was as often as not made red with the blood let out in many a skirmish or the reflected flames from a castle fired in feud.

But all that is of the past. Now it is only a millrace, a washing pool, a ford, a fishing burn, anything the people liked to make of it; it sees nothing but the miller's mules or the grape waggons, or the women with their piles of white linen; and the only battles it beholds are the fighting of the frogs in the canebrake or of the tree sparrows in the air. Now the Greve is a simple pastoral river. No one has ever sung of it that one knows. It lies so near to the Arno, held dear by every poet and made sacred by every art, that the little Greve is as a daisy set beside a crown diamond; and no one thinks of it.

Yet perhaps−−only one dare not say so for one's life−−perhaps it has as much real loveliness as Arno has. It has the same valley−−it has the same mountains−−it is encompassed by the same scenes and memories; and it has a sylvan beauty, all of its own, like Wye's or Dart's or Derwent's.

Grassy banks where the sheep browse; tall poplars, great oaks, rich walnuts, firs, and maples, and silver larch, and the beautiful cercis that blossoms all over in a night; calm stretches of green water, with green hills that lock it in; old water−mills, half−hidden in maize and dog−grass and plumy reeds; broken ground above with winding roads from which the mule bells echo now and then; steep heights, golden with grain, or fragrant with hay, and dusky with the dark emerald leaf of the innumerable vines; deep sense of coolness, greenness, restfulness everywhere; and then, where the river's windings meet its sister stream the Ema, set in a narrow gorge between two hills, yet visible all along the reaches of the water while far off, the mastery of the Carthusians−−the Certosa−−ending all the sweet song of peace with a great hymn to God.

This is the Greve−−with flowering rushes in it, and the sun in its water till it glows like emeralds, and goats going down to drink, and here and there a woman cutting the green canes, and dragon−flies and swallows on the wing, and oxen crossing the flat timber bridge, and from the woods and rocks above the sound of chapel bells and reapers' voices falling through the air, softly as dropping leaves.

Bruno and the child kept always along the course of the water, walking in its bed or climbing its banks as necessity made them.

Bruno was never a man of many words; the national loquacity was not his; he was fierce, sudden, taciturn, but he smiled on the little lad's ecstasies, and though he could tell him none of the ten thousand things that Signa wished to know, yet he said nothing that did not suit the joyous and poetic mood of the child; for though Bruno was an ignorant man, except in husbandry, Love is sympathy, and Sympathy is intelligence in a strong degree.

Signa was wildly happy; leaping from stone to stone; splashing in the shallow water with a jump; calling to the gossipping frogs; flinging the fir−apples in the air; clapping his hands as the field−mice peeped out from the lines of cut grain; wondering where the poppies were all gone that a week before had "run like torchmen with the wheat."

Once, his hands filled with blossoms and creepers from the hedges, he stopped to gather a little blue cornflower that had outlived the corn as mortals do their joys.

"Why is it called St. Stephen's crown?" he asked.

"How should I tell?" said Bruno; for indeed it seemed to him the silliest name that could be.

"Do you think it saw when they stoned him, and was sorry?" said Signa.

"How should a flower see? You talk foolishness."

"Flowers see the sun."

"That is foolish talk."

"And the moon, too, else how could they keep time and shut and go to bed? And somebody must have named them all−−who was it?"

Bruno was silent. Cattle liked dried flowers in their hay, and horses would not eat them; that was all he knew about them, and when the child persisted, answered him:

"The saints, most likely."

But he said within himself:

"If only the boy would pull off lizards' tails, or snare birds, like other boys instead of asking such odd questions that make on think him hardly sensible sometimes!"

Signa, a little pacified, gathered his hands full, and ran on, puzzling his little brain in silence. He had a fancy

that St. John had named them all one day out of gladness of heart when Christ had kissed him. That was what he thought, running by the Greve water.

Who did indeed first name the flowers? Who first gave them, not their Latin titles, but the old, familiar, fanciful, poetic, rustic ones that run so curiously alike in all the different vulgar tongues?

Who first called the lilies of the valley the Madonna's tears; the wild blue hyacinth St. Dorothy's flower? Who first called the red clusters of the oleander St. Joseph's nosegays, and the clematis by her many lovely titles, consolation, traveller's joy, virgin's bower? Who gave the spiderwort to St. Bruno; the black briony for Our Lady's Seal; the corn−feverfew to St. Anne; the common bean to St. Ignatius; the bane−berry to St. Christopher; the blue valerian to Jacob for his angel's ladder; the toywort to the shepherds for their purse? Who first called the nyctanthes the tree of sadness; and the starry passiflora the Passion of Christ? Who first made dedication of the narcissus to remembrance; the amaranthus to wounded, bleeding love; the scabius to the desolation of widowhood? Who named them all first in the old days that are forgotten?

It is strange that most of these tender old appellatives are the same in meaning in all European tongues. The little German madchen in her pinewoods, and the Tuscan contadina in her vineyards, and the Spanish child on the sierras, and the farm−girl on the purple English moorlands, and the soft−eyed peasant that drives her milch cows through the sunny evening fields of France, all gathering their blossoms from wayside green or garden wall, give them almost all the same old names with the same sweet pathetic significance. Who gave them first?

Milton and Spenser and Shelley, Tasso and Schiller and Camoens−−all the poets that ever the world has known, might have been summoned together for the baptism of the flowers, and have failed to name them half so well as popular tradition has done, long ago in the dim lost ages, with names that still make all the world akin.

Meanwhile the man and boy came to a wooden bridge that bullocks were crossing, with flowers in their frontlets and red tassels. There was a broken arch beyond of a bridge that Greve had thrown down in flood. The reaped wheat was lying on the hills. The long cool grass tossed about to the water's edge. Children were fishing in the shallows.

Up above there was an open space, with a house that had a green bough over its door, and men drinking, and mules resting with their noses in fresh cut cane leaves. Here they left the bed of the stream, and went up on the high path that goes along the wooded heights with the bold green bluffs on either side, and the vines below, and the river under the aspens between them.

They went along the path which is hardly more than a mule and ox track, rising higher and higher, with the blue mountains behind them, through the blackberry brambles and the starry clematis, and the wild myrtle, and the innumerable hill flowers of all hues, and past a rambling farm−house called Assinaria, with old arched doorways, and a boy drawing water by a rope, standing in a high unglazed window, with blue shirt and brown limbs, against the dark behind him, like a figure painted upon an oaken panel; and then ancle−deep through the sea of yellow corn strewn all about around the place awaiting threshing, and out on to a knoll of rock set thick with rosemary, and so on in view of the Certosa.

The Certosa, afar off, above the stream with the woods in front beneath it, so that it seemed lifted on a forest throne of verdure against the morning splendour of the east; as he saw it, Signa was still a minute, and drew a deep, long breath.

Approached from the Roman road the monastery is nothing; a pile of buildings, irregular, and only grand by its extent, on a bare crest of rock; but approached from the Greve river, when the morning sun, shining behind it, shrouds its vast pile in golden mist, and darkens the wooded valley at its feet, the monastery is beautiful, and all the faith and the force of the age that begot it are in it: it is a Te Deum in stone.

"It looks as if the angels fought there," said Signa, with hushed awe, as he stood on the sward and made the sign of the cross; and indeed it has a look as of a fortress, Acciajoli, when he raised and consecrated it, having prayed the Republic to let him make it war−proof and braced for battle.

"Men fight the devil there," said Bruno, believing what he said.

The chimes of the monastery were ringing out for the first mass; deep bells and of sweet tone, that came down the river like a benediction on the day.

Signa kneeled down in the grass.

"Did you pray for the holy men?" Bruno asked him when they rose, and they went on under the tall, green, quivering trees.

"No," said Signa, under his breath. "I prayed for the devil."

"For him!" echoed Bruno aghast, "what are you about, child? are you possessed? do you know what the good priests would say?"

"I prayed for him," said Signa, with that persistency which ran with his docile temper. "It is he who wants it. To be wicked there where God is, and the sun, and the bells."

"But he is the foe of God. It is horrible to pray for him."

"No," said Signa, sturdily. "God says we are to forgive our enemies and help them. I only asked him to begin with His."

Bruno was silent. He did not know what to say to the boy. The devil to him was a terrible reality; had he not seen him with his black, foul deformity and flame−vomiting jaws on the frescoed walls, whenever he had entered any church in the heat of noon, to sit a little and turn his face to the pillars, and hear the murmurs of low mass in some side chapel?

The devil lived in the flesh for Bruno; the devil had made him stab Pippa; the devil was always in the fire of his tongue, and in the haste of his hand; and these holy painters of the church had surely seen the devil in the flesh, or how could they ever have portrayed him?

"Pray for those the devil enters, carino," he said, sadly. "When you have done with them it will be time to pray for him, and they count by tens of thousands."

"It is best to pray for him, himself," said Signa, with his docile determination to keep his own ideas which Nita so constantly endeavoured to thrash out of him. "Perhaps men made him bad, because they would not leave him any hope of being better."

"Do no talk of those things, the priests would not like it, Signa," said Bruno, to whom such a manner of speaking of Satan seemed impious−−only the child was so young−−heaven, he trusted would not be angry.

Signa was silent; he obeyed an order always; only he kept his own ideas; it was as a dog obeys a call, but keeps its instincts.

But his joyous chatter was subdued. He kept looking up at the great monastery above the woods, that was all in a glow of sunlight, and where men fought the devil, and, perhaps, saw God.

"I would not fight him," he thought to himself. "I would just bring him out, and tell him to look down the river, and I think he would take no more pleasure in hell then."

And he fancied he saw golden−haired Michael and the angel that was called Gabriel leading the dark incarnate Sin out there, into the light, till the sun changed his sable wings to silver.

Satan was as real to him as to Bruno; only he felt sorry for him, always sorry, when he heard the priests talk of him and saw the old terrible pictures on the walls of all the woe he wrought and the devouring flames.

Signa had thought a great deal about all these things−−sitting in the dusky aisle with his hand telling his beads and his little hot feet on the cold pavement, while they droned out the mass.

There were other country people waiting to go in; the peasants love these places; you will see them very often in little groups, hushed and yet happy, wandering very quietly through the aisles of the churches or monasteries, or sitting against the columns or in the shade on the altar steps. Though they are a mirthful people at times, and like their lotteries and dominoes and whirling dances and gossiping jokes, there is something in the solemn rest, in the serious dusky stillness, that suits them strangely; the houses of God are really to them abodes of rest; they take their tired limbs there and get repose actual as well as figurative; perhaps they do not think about anything, but sit in a sort of day sleep when their prayers are done; but the influence of the place is with them and their love for it is true.

A white−frocked brother met them in the long vaulted passage−way, looking as though he had stepped out from some canvas of Del Sarto's, and they went in with the five other contadini waiting there; Bruno, with his brown cloak on one shoulder and a clean shirt, and the child in rough white linen with a carnation at his throat; a flower in the ear or at the throat is seen here so often with bare legs and feet.

Signa, awe−stricken and full of the beauty of the place, was mute as they strayed through its cloisters and crypt, and followed the white−frocked brother, and passed other monks kneeling wrapt in prayer or meditation. Only when he came to where the old bishop was asleep in the wonderful marble of Fracesco di San Gallo he was moved by a sudden impulse, and plucked the end of Bruno's cloak.

"I should like to sing him something," he whispered.

"Sing? to whom?"

"To that old man," said Signa, and then coloured, ashamed of himself.

"His soul is in heaven, he would be angered," said Bruno in dismay. "He hears much better singing than yours. Look! the padre is shocked at you, and in this holy place!"

Signa hung his head.

"Are you fond of singing, little fellow?" asked a stranger, who had been looking at the Perugino on the wall.

Signa nodded shyly.

"And why do you want to sing to the dead bishop?"

"Because he is only asleep," said Signa, timidly, "and it might give him pretty dreams. Old Teresina says she always had good dreams towards morning, because I go under the house singing."

"Sing, then," said the stranger, and turned to the monk with some words of entreaty.

"If it be a holy song," said the monk, with reluctant consenting.

"He sings well," said Bruno, with an outbreak of the tender pride in Signa, which he endeavoured to conceal, but could not always.

Signa was shy and silent for a minute; he wished he had not spoken of doing it, with this grand strange signore there; but the old dead man's face smiled at him, and the Holy Child in Perugino's picture seemed to look down in expectation; he forgot the living people; the bishop and the Gesu were all he saw; he joined his hands as if he were at prayer, and sang a sacrament hymn of Pergolesi that they sang in his own church.

Whether the good bishop dead five hundred years, or hard−hearted honest Perugino sleeping under the wayside oak in Frontignano, heard or not, who shall say till the secret of the grave be loosed? But the contadini standing reverently by, and the white−robed monk, and the listening stranger heard, and held their breath. The monk turned his head a moment to Perugino's picture to see if it were not some miracle being wrought there, and the Angels of the Nativity singing instead of this peasant child.

Signa sang on as larks do, forgetting everything when once his voice was loosened on the air, and without knowing what he did, left the hymn of Pergolesi, and sang on and on and on cadences that were to be traced to no written score, and that came to him, he never could tell how−−just as they came upon the mountain side, with not a creature near. The words were the words of the Latin services, but the cadences were his own as much as the thrush's are its own in the hawthorn time.

He might have sang on till sunset if two other monks drawn by the unwonted sounds had not come near and looked on through the half open door. The sound stopped him; he paused startled and half ashamed; and not another note could be got from him.

"He is not angry," he whispered to Bruno, looking at the statue. "He is smiling still."

"You would make marble smile, if it had frowned through ages, till you sang," said the stranger, while the monks murmured something of a gift of God. "My pretty little boy, you may make the world hear of you, your mouth will drop gold."

Signa glanced at him bewildered; he understood nothing of this kind of language.

"Come with me where I am painting," said the stranger, "I should like to hear who taught you your perfect phrasing−−who taught you to sing, I mean? Come with me a few minutes. Is that your father with you?"

"That is Bruno," said Signa. For the first time it occurred to him−−why had he no father? Was he born out of the old town from the stones and ivy as the owls were?

"Not your father? What is he to you then?"

"He is always good. I keep his sheep sometimes."

The artist did not ask any more; the boy was some peasant's son; it did not matter whose. "But who taught you to sing?" he pursued.

"I sing in the churches at home."

"But have you had no teacher?"

"No," said Signa; then added, after a pause, "The birds do not have any."

"But much that you sang−−it is no known music−−is it composed by some village genius of whom no one has heard?"

Signa was very puzzled.

"I sing the music that I have in my head," he said, after a little while.

"Then it is you who have the genius−−a second Mozart?"

Signa could not understand those words at all. Perhaps he was something wicked. Nita was always saying so.

"A genius? that is a sin?" he asked softly.

The artist laughed. "Yes; unless you can sell it well. A sin sold well is half forgiven."

The child did not understand, but was a little frightened. To speak of sin at all was eerie in this great place, where men all day long and all night long fought the fiend.

"I should like to paint your face," said the stranger: "as Perugino did the Holy Child's that you look at so−−oh, a few lines will do, but I fancy your face will be well known to a great world one day, and you have a look in your eyes that is beautiful−−can you wait?"

The child asked Bruno. Bruno was displeased, but an Italian has a respect for art and artists; he muttered unwillingly that it was a feast day, the boy might do as he liked for him; it was a folly, but it would not hurt; it was not as if it were a girl.

The child went willingly into the room that is sacred to the Popes, and where dread Leo frowned on him. In the wide window, looking to the north on to the purple mountains, there stood an easel and other things of a painter's work; the artist being a great man, and bringing authority of governments with him, was painting that glorious view, and living in retreat there for a few days.

Bruno followed them; he would rather have preferred that strangers should leave the boy alone; he was jealous over him, and he thought that praise would make him vain.

So Signa stood in his little white shirt, with his dark curls that had the gold light in them touching his throat, and the painter painted his head and shoulders with his chest half bare, and the carnation bright against the skin.

He swept the likeness in with the fast, broad, true touches of a great artist, who with a dozen strokes can suggest a whole picture, as Rembrandt drew Jan Six's Bridge.

In half an hour he had what he wanted ; a little face full of sadness and joy together, and most purely child−like, with a look in the eyes that would make women weep.

He had been waiting for such a face in his great picture of the child Demophöon in the sacred fire; for whose scene he had come to these purple hills and dreamful plains as all the old painters−−and Rafaelle, in his days of wisdom−−had come to these or such as these.

To move the boy to wondering interest and wake the eager, rapt look in his eyes, the painter talked to him, with easy graphic language, simple, yet eloquent, such as the child had never heard.

He told him about the flowers he loved; about the mountains; about the dead Acciajoli, whose marble effigies were in the crypt below; about Donatello, who had carved the stone warriors in their mighty rest; about Guiliano, who had sculptured the fruits and flowers there to take away all terrors from the tomb; about S. Bruno the founder, and of the far lone Alps, where he had dwelt, forbidding the sight of woman for many a mile around; about the builder of this charter−house, gentle Orgagna, that good old man, who loved to paint Cupids frolicking with young maidens under orange boughs, and brave youths hawking under sunny skies, and yet could draw Black Death as if he feared her not, but sent her upward through the air as though, by allegory, not to leave men without hope; one of those mighty workers who could write sculptor on their canvas and painter on their marble; one of those great, rich, wise lives that make the best of our own look so barren, spent in raising great piles and colouring beautiful things, and dwelling in peace and honour, and closing tranquilly when their course was run. Orgagna was writing sonnets when he died to a young lad he loved. Sixty years old, and yet with strength and youth and faith enough, and enough freshness of heart and soul, to write a sonnet that should please a boy! These men had never been bitten in the heel by the snake of Satiety; the wound which kills the Achilles of Modern Art.

Bruno, stretched on a bench, lay still as a felled tree and listened.

"If I could talk like that to Signa he would love me better," he thought; but how was he to talk like that−−a man who knew how to make barley grow, and how to drive bullocks over the land, and how to cleanse the vines with sulphur, but no more.

He wished the painter would not tell the child the world would know of him−−what use was there in that. Valdarno and the hills were world enough−−and were he to sing and the great unknown cities hear him, he would have to go away for that, and Bruno hoped to keep him always−−always−−always, and see him safe for all the future after him on that good piece of land on the hill−side, where Pippa had come through the beanflowers at sunset.

What better life was there than that, with the meek beasts on the corn−lands, high in the air amongst the vines?

Kings no doubt were higher, and great lords; but Bruno pitied them.

Two o'clock came, and the monks had their simple dinner in their refectory, and the same fare was brought to the artist as to any laity who may dwell there in retreat, and he made them bring portions for the contadino and the child, and added wine of his own getting, rich and rare.

Bruno and Signa took it without ado, and with the single animal−like grace which is bred in Italian blood as in the limbs of the chamois or the wings of the swallow.

He was a great man, perhaps, and rich, no doubt, and far above them; but why should they be ashamed to break his bread with him?

They would have broken theirs with him.

As for him, now he had the face he wanted−−the face that he had sought for high and low amongst the beautiful children of the Riviera, and always vainly−−he did not care how soon they went nor where; and yet the boy had a wonderful voice−−only children were so often wonderful in Italy that no one ever heard of when they were grown to men−−a precocious, swiftly passing, universal genius, that burst to beauty like a rose laurel blossom, and dropped down without fruit. Still, this little barefoot boy, that sang to the dead bishop, had something in his face that surely would not die.

"If I took you with me to the big world they would make an idol of you, little lark," he said, as the boy put down his white bowl of soup. "Would you come if I would take you?"

Signa looked up to Bruno's face and across at the hills that hid his old town from his sight.

"No," he said, simply, but his face flushed all over suddenly; a vague fancy, a dim possibility broke before him like the faint rose that is promise of the sunrise. Only he was too young and knew too little to be able to be sure of what he thought.

"No? Well, you are right," said the great painter, smiling. "To a million blanks one prize, only the prize is a proud one, once got; though the men whose hands are empty deny it, to console themselves. But be content in your life, little fellow; it is a good one; you are not like a town child, 'un brin d'herbe, sans soleil, entre deux pavés.' You have the sun and the air and the country, the old painters knew the value of these; we do not. Look here, my pretty boy, take these pieces and buy what you fancy, and if you ever do wander far afield and want help, here is my name; come to me and remind me of the Certosa, and such influence as I have with other men I will use for you. But is you are wise you will not wander. The ox furrows are safer travelling than the city stones. Farewell."

He gave the boy two gold pieces of France, and smiled at him. and went within to the dormitory. He would not have minded the child remaining all the day, but he was tired of seeing that black−browed contadino stretched, listening and silent, on the bench. Besides, he wanted to go on with his landscape.

"Am I to keep them," said Signa, looking down at the money in his palm.

"Money is money," said Bruno, briefly. "It is forty francs. Francs do not hang in the hedges."

Signa was silent in absolute amaze. He had never had a centime for his own in his whole life. He felt dizzy.

Then all at once he gave a ringing shout of rapturous joy.

"I could buy the violin!" he cried, till the vault of the chamber echoed.

It was to him as if could buy the earth and the sun and the planets.

"Yes; you can buy the violin," said Bruno.

Signa laughed all over his little face as a brook does when the sun and wind together please it; he was beside himself with bewildered happiness. He shouted, he leaped, he sang, he raced, regardless of the silence and sanctity of the place, till Bruno hurried him away fearful that the good brethern might enter and be displeased.

"What did the paper say? you have forgotten the paper," said Bruno, as they passed the pharmacy, where the monks were distilling their sweet odours and strong waters with a delicate fragrance of coriander and coromandel seeds, and of dried herbs and lemons and the like, upon the air.

Signa, giddy and breathless, unfolded the crumbled scrap on which the painter had written his name with a pencil, his surname−−Istriel−−curtly, as men write who know that the one word tells all about them to the world.

He spelt the name out slowly, but the line beneath it puzzled him; it was only an address in Paris, but then the little boy did not know what Paris meant.

He crushed the slip of paper together with the gold and ran out of the cool vaulted corridors, that were so still and hushed and grey, like twilight, into the path that runs down the vines.

"I can buy the violin!" he cried to the bright sky; he thought that the sky smiled back again.

After all the angels had thought of him.

"Oh this wonderful day!" he shouted. "Oh Bruno, are you not happy that we came?"

"I am glad if you are glad", said Bruno. And that was the truth at all times. Half way down the hill Signa stopped and looked back to the monastery.

"I forgot to thank the Holy Child," he said, with sharp contrition.

"Where? and for what?"

"The little Christ in the picture that they call Perugino−−he sent me this to buy the violin. I am sure of that. He smiled at me all the while I sang, and I never said a prayer to thank him. Let me go back."

"They would not let you in; say your prayers to him at home; he will be quite as pleased. But it was the painter who gave you the money."

"It was the Holy Child sent it," said Signa, who had seen so many frescoes of the heavenly host descending to mingle in the lives of men, and had heard so many miracles and legends, that the visible interposition of Perugino's Gesu was only such a thing as he had looked for naturally.

Well, the Gesu might, why not? thought Bruno, the child was worthy even of such memory.

He did not know−−it seemed presumptuous to think they could think in heaven of a child's wish for a wooden toy; but still, who could tell?−−it is such simple, humble, foolish hopes as these that keep the peasants' hearts and backs from breaking under the burden of unending toil. Untiring intelligence may live best without a faith, but tired poverty and labour must have one of some sort. Called by what name it may be, it is the selfsame thing, the vague, sad, wistful hope of some far off, but certain, compensation.

To Bruno, indeed, it seemed that the Gesu had sanctioned the spending of a vast fortune on a mere plaything; it was the cost of a sheep or of a barrel of wine; but he could no more have denied the child than he could have cut his hand off−−besides, if the saints willed it.

As for Signa, he had no doubt that heaven had sent it to him. He cried and laughed in his delight. He showed his gold to the birds, to the frogs, to the butterflies. He leaped from stone to stone in the water, laughing at his own image. He stopped to tell every contadino he met, and every fisherman throwing a net from the canes. He ran through the hedges of acacia and clematis, and told the spiders weaving silver in the leaves. He stopped to tell the millers at the mill−house over the river, where the good men leaned out of a little square window with the yellow light of a candle behind them, and above the moss−grown roof the apple boughs interlaced against a dreamy blue evening sky, like a Rembrandt set in a Raffaelle. He caught a big brown velvet stingless bee, and whispered it the story, and let it go free to carry the news before him to the swallows in the Lastra; and when he came to red cross that stands on a pile of stones, where the Greve is broad and green under the high woodlands, where they mighty Acciajoli once reigned, he knelt down and said the prayers he had forgotten, while the wind chased the shadows in the water, and the weir and the waterwheel sang to each other.

"Will it be too late to buy it to−night?" he said, as he saw Venus rise above the mountains from the sea.

"Not if Tonino be not in bed," said Bruno, who never could bear not to humour the child. So they walked on as fast as they could.

"You are tired?" said Bruno. "If you are tired get on my back."

"I am not tired!" laughed the child, who felt as though he had wings, and could dart all the way home as swiftly and straight as a dragon−fly. It was quite dark when they reached the Lastra.

It was a hot night. The mosquitoes and the little white moths were whirling round the few dusky lamps. There were lights behind the grated windows, and darksome doorways lit as Rembrandt loved.

The men stood about in their shirt−sleeves, and the women lingered, saying good night as they plaited the last tress. There were groups in the archways, and on the high steps, and in the bakers' and wine−sellers' shops, where the green boughs were drooping after the heat of the day. In uncurtained casements only lighted by the moon young mothers undressed their sucklings. There was a smell of ripe fruit, of drying hay, of fir−apples, of fresh straw, of that sea−scent which comes here upon the west wind, and of magnolia flowers from the villas on the hills.

Signa's heart beat so fast he felt blind as he flew under the gateway, and looked to see if Tonino had shut his

house for the night.

His heart leaped in him as he saw a light in the place, and the big keys magnified in the shadow till they were fit for the very keys of St. Peter, and in the door the locksmith himself, with bare arms and easy mind, chatting with his neighbour, Dionisio the cobbler.

Signa darted to him.

"Give it me! quick−−quick−−quick−−oh, please, good Tonino!" he panted. "See−−here are the forty francs−−all beautiful real gold−−and the fair child in the monastery sent it to me to−day. Quick−−quick, oh dear Tonino! You never have sold it while we were away?"

"The child pleased an artist to−day, and sat for a picture, and so got the money. Let him have the toy," said Bruno, following, to the astonished Tonino, who had stretched out a hand by sheer instinct to seize the boy, making sure that he had stolen something.

"I have not sold it," he said, with wide open eyes. "But buy it−−forty francs!−−the like of you, you little bit of a fellow! It cannot be! It cannot be!"

"Oh, dear Tonino!" cried the child, piteously, and he began to tremble all over with dread, his colour went and came hotly and whitely in the yellow gleams of the locksmith's brass lamp; and he could hardly speak plain for excitement, with both his hands clinging to the man's bare arm. "Oh, dear, good Tonino, you never have sold it? oh say you have not sold it? Here is the gold−−beautiful real money, and you never do have gold in Signa, and pray, pray do let me have it quick; I have longed for it so. Oh, you never will know how! Only I said nothing because you all scolded and laughed; and now, perhaps, you have sold it−−do say you have not sold it?"

And Signa broke down, crying with a very rain of tears in the reaction from this immeasurable joy to fear.

Bruno's hand fell heavily on the locksmith's shoulder.

"It is good money. You cannot refuse your own price. Let the boy have the fiddle."

"But a baby like that!" stammered Tonino. "And if there are painters about that pay so, there is my little Ginna, rich and rosy as a tomato, and how can you, even in conscience, let that brat squander such a heap of wealth,−−the price of a calf almost, and a barrel of wine quite, and the best wine in the commune too; and sure he ought to be made to take it to that good soul Lippo, who has kept him, body and soul together, all these years, when any other man would have let such a little mouse drown in the flood where he came from; and I do not think I could in conscience let the lad throw all that away, and he a beggar one may say, unless I speak to Lippo and Nita first, and they be willing, because −−"

Bruno's eyes took fire with that sudden light which all the Lastra had dreaded since he had been a stripling, and his hand went inside his shirt, where, about the belt of his breeches, he was always believed to carry a trusty knife, notwithstanding all law and peril.

"Keep your conscience for your neighbours' kettles and pans that you send home with new holes when you solder the old ones!" shouted Bruno. "Out with the fiddle, or as the saints live above us, choked you shall be, and dead as a doornail. Take the gold and fetch me the toy, and learn to preach to me if you dare!"

"But in conscience," stammered the locksmith.

"Give the child the plaything," he cried in a voice of thunder, shaking him as a dog does a chicken, "or it shall be the worse for you. You know me!"

"I would take the gold when I could get it, if I were you, Tonino," whispered the cobbler, who was a man of peace. "Gold is a rare sight for sore eyes in Signa, and what is Lippo to you?"

"That is true," murmured the tinman, frightened out of his wits, and thankful for any excuse to yield. "But it is only to−day that I heard that the fiddle is worth quite double. There is a great singer come to stay at one of the villas who saw it−−and to let a child have it who will break it−−nevertheless, to please a neighbour −−"

And having soothed himself a little with this elaborate and useless fiction, as his country folk will, always deriving a very soothing and softening effect from the pleasure of lying, Tonino went grumbling within, and poked about with his dim lamp, and came out slowly with the violin, and clutched the two gold pieces before he would let it go. Signa, who stood trembling with wild excitement, took the precious instrument in both his hand with trembling reverence, the tears falling fast down his cheeks.

"Beast! you have made him cry!" muttered Bruno, and kicked the tinman into his own doorway with a will, and laid his hand on the child's shoulder, and strode up the street of the Lastra, glancing from right to left with mute challenge if any man should have the courage to stop his progress.

No one attempted to call him to account. Tonino was not a popular man, and the weight of Bruno's wrath and the keenness of his knife had been felt by more than one of the eager, chattering audience who leaned out of the windows and crowded each other in the doorways, in breathless hope to see a pretty piece of stabbing.

Bruno went through them in silence. Signa trotted by his side, his hands clasping the violin to his chest, and his great eyes dewy with tears, yet radiant as jewels, in his joy.

Tonino grumbled that if a man made such a sweet morsel of his own bastard he should not be above the owning of it, and went to his bed with sore bones and a grieved heart that he had not asked double for the fiddle; though for more years than he could remember he had always thought it worthless lumber.

Bruno and Signa went up the street in the moonlight, with yellow flashes now and then falling across them from the lamps swinging in the doorways.

"Where will you play on it, dear little lad," said Bruno, gently, "if you take it home?"

The child looked at him with the smile of a child dreaming beautiful things in its slumber.

"I will keep it at old Teresina's. She will let me, and I will bring it to you when I come. Oh! is it really, really true that I have got it?"

"Quite true; and it is dearer to you already than the old lute, Signa?"

Signa was silent. Bruno had given him the lute.

They passed out of the Lastra and along the road into the street that curves towards the bridge; it was quite dark; but at the little café there which looks towards the river, several men were drinking and playing dominoes on the stones by the feeble light of the brass oil−lamps. Bruno saw Lippo amongst them.

He put his own tall from with the dark cloud of his brown cloak between Lippo and the child, and strode on carelessly without stopping.

"Good night," he called out, "I am taking the boy up with me. I want him to help stack wheat, and he will have to be up at four, so he had best sleep on the hill."

Lippo nodded, and hardly looked up from his dominoes.

They went on over the bridge unquestioned.

They bridge had many groups upon it as on all hot nights; leaning against the parapets, and chatting in the cheerful, garrulous Tuscan fashion. The moon was bright on the wide reaches of the river. The sky was studded with stars.

On a summer night, Signa loses her scars of war and age, and is young as when Hercules shook her sunny waters from his sunny locks; resting from labour.

The child looked up at the stars. He wondered if ever in all the world there had been so happy a thing as he. And yet he could only see the stars through his tears; he did not know why the tears came.

An aziola owl went by with its soft cry, "Such as nor voice nor lute nor wind nor bird The soul never stirred, Unlike and far sweeter than they all."

"Oh, dear Chiù!" said Signa to the owl, calling it by the familiar name that the people give it, "will you tell the little Christ how happy I am, and the old dead bishop too? They may think I am thankless because I cry. Do tell them, Chiù, you go so near the sky!"

"What fancies you have," said Bruno; but the little brown hand was hot as it touched his own. "You are tired and excited," he said more gravely. "You dream too much about odd things. The owl is hunting gnats and mice, and not thinking about the angels."

"I am not tired," said Signa, but he was walking lame, and his voice was weak and trembled.

Bruno, without asking him, lifted him up in his arms; he himself was a strong man, and the light burden of the thin little lad was a small one to him.

"Go to sleep, I will carry you up the hill," he said, putting the child's head down against his shoulder. Signa did not resist. He still clasped the violin to him.

Bruno went up the steep road where his mother had carried him through the darkness and cold before she stumbled and fell.

With fever and fatigue Signa dropped asleep, and not awaken all the way up the long lonely paths through the vines and the reapen fields.

"How he loves that thing already−−as never he will love me," thought Bruno, looking down at him in the starlight with the dull sense of hopeless rivalry and alien inferiority which the self−absorption of genius inflicts

innocently and unconsciously on the human affections that cling to it, and which later on Love avenges upon it in the same manner.

Bruno, nevertheless, was glad that he had it. Fierce and selfish in all his earlier life, he had taught himself to be gentle and unselfish to Pippa's son. He carried him into the house, still sleeping, and laid him down under the crucifix on a pile of hay, and would have undressed him, but the child, murmuring, resisted, clasping the violin to him, as though in his sleep, afraid that anyone should take it from him.

So Bruno left him as he was upon the hay with his tumbled curls and his violin folded in his crossed arms, in the deep dreamless sleep of a great fatigue, and lit a lanthorn and went round to fodder to cow and see to the ass, and make sure that all had been safe during his absence, and then, with his loaded gun beside him, laid down to rest himself.

He had not been asleep an hour himself, before he was awakened by silvery sweet music that seemed to him to be like the voices of all the nightingales in May singing together; but the nightingales were most of them dumb now−−now that the lilies were dead, and the hay gathered.

Bruno started up and listened and looked; he too believed in a dim sort of way in the angels; only he never saw them come down on the slant of the sun−rays as the good men had done that had decorated the churches.

The moon was shining into the house; by the white cool light he was that it was the child sitting up in the hay and playing. Signa's eyes were open and lustrous, but they had a look in them as if he were dreaming.

His chin was resting on the violin, his little hands fingered the keys and the bow; his face was very pale; he looked straight before him; he played in his sleep.

Bruno listened aghast; he had a melodious ear himself, the music was never wrong in a chord; it was sweet as all the nightingales in the country singing all together.

He dared not wake the boy, who played on and on in the moonlight.

"It is the gift of God," thought Bruno, awed and sorrowful; because a gift of God put the child farther and farther from him.

He listened, resting on one arm, while the owls cried "Woe!" from the great walnut trees over the house−roof. The sweet melody seemed to fill the place with wonder, and to live in the quivering rays of the moon, and to pass out with them through the lattice amongst the leaves, and so go straight to the stars.

A little while, and it faltered a moment, and then ceased. Signa's head dropped back, his eyes closed, his hands let the violin sink gently down; he slept again as other children sleep.

"It is a gift of God; one cannot go against a gift of God," said Bruno, making the sign of the cross on his own broad breast. And he was very sorrowful; and yet proud; and could not bear that it should be so, and yet would not have had it otherwise; as men were in the old days of faith whose sons and daughters went out to martyrdom.

When he got up to his labour before the sun was up, and while the faintest rose−red alone glowed beyond the mountains in the east, he stepped noiselessly not to awaken the boy, and left him sleeping while he went out to his work at the stacking of corn, with the earth dim with shadow and silvered with dew.

He thought of the child and the gifts of God. He did not know that he had seen Pippa's lover.

CHAPTER XII.

"WHERE is the little bit of paper with the name on?" said Bruno, eating his bit of black bread when the morning was up wide and golden over all the harvest land.

Signa lifted up his head from his violin. "I lost it. When I caught the bee, coming home, the paper flew away, the winds too it; does it matter?"

"No. Only it might have been a friend for you. Do you recollect the name?"

Signa shook his curly head.

Recollect anything!−−with the violin in his hand, and the music dancing out on the sunbeams, and saying everything for him that he never could say for himself.

What was the name to him; the giver of the gold had only been the ministrant of the little Christ.

Bruno let him alone.

The boy was so happy; sitting in the shade there; trying all cadences that came to him on this new, precious, wondrous thing; he had not the heart to call him to come out in the sun and carry the wheat.

He had been too rough with Pippa. He atoned by being too gentle with this child.

So he went out into the fields again by himself, and built up his stacks, made low because of the hurricanes that come over when there are white squalls upon the sea, and covered till there should be time to thatch them, with snowy linen cloths, so that they look like huge mushrooms growing for the table of Gargantua.

When he had been at work some two or three hours, hearing at intervals, when the wind blew it towards him, the song of the violin that the boy was enjoying within with the cow in her shed, and the sitting hens, and the tethered goat and her kid for listeners, he heard the little feet that he knew patter over the stubble, and from his half completed stack looked down on Signa's upraised face.

The child had the violin with him.

"Bruno," he asked shyly, "I have been thinking−−there is old Nunziata often without bread, and Giudetta, whose children all died of those poison berries, and Stagno the blind man, that has no legs either, and−−and so many of them that want so much, and are only hungry and sad−−was it selfish of me not to give them the money between them−−was it wicked to have the violin? I am sure the angels meant the violin, you know; but still did the angels wish me to think of others or all of myself? What do you think? Do you think I was wrong?"

"Anyway it is too late now, bambino," said Bruno, with the curtness of his natural speech. "You have wanted the violin a year, why spoil the pleasure of it?"

"But was it selfish?" persisted Signa.

"Why worry yourself; it is done?"

"But is was, then?" cried the little fellow, with a sort of feverish pain.

Bruno came down the ladder and took up more corn.

"Oh, no; you things that love sounds or sights or bits of wood or oils and earths better than human creatures, always are selfish, so. But I don't know why ever you should be blamed. There is no more selfish beast than a cow with her calf, or a woman with her wean. Why should you not have your fiddle like that; only you will be like Frisco. I knew Frisco−−he thought of nothing but saving every scrap of money to buy things to paint with, and he was always after the churches and the gateways and places where the colours are; and he said it was a fine gift, and a glorious one. I am not saying it was not; only he went away and left his old mother to be kept by the commune, and people say he is a great man away in Rome; but the old soul is dead and never saw him again. Not that it is for me to say evil of any man."

"But I have no mother," said Signa.

Bruno shrank as though a grass adder had stung him; and stooped and gathered more corn again.

"No, dear," he said, after a moment, very gently, "make a mother of your music if you can. The good God gave it you in her stead. And it is not selfish, dear; you praise heaven in it, and make the children dance with joy, and the old folks forget they are old when they hear you. Do they not say so in the Lastra a thousand times? Do

not fret yourself, Signa. The angels sent you the fiddle. Be glad in it. To quarrel with happiness is to quarrel with God. It is but seldom he sends any; perhaps he would send more, only whenever they get it people spoil it by fuming and fretting, as a bad spinner knots the smooth flax. Play to the sick folk and the old and the sorrowful. That will be the way to please the little Christ."

Signa was comforted, and sat down amongst the loose wheat and played all his little fancies away on those strings that were to him as of silver and gold, whilst the cicale buzzed in chorus in the tree−tops, and all the field finches strained in their pretty throats in rivalry.

But he did not play gaily as he had done in the house. He was afraid the Gesu was not content; and why had he no mother as other boys had?

Bruno, working on the top of his golden rick could have bitten his own tongue out for having reminded the child of that.

Signa never asked any questions. They had told him he had come on the wave of the flood, and for himself he thought that the owls had dropped him there. But then it was never of any use to ask an owl. They never said anything to any one, except "Chiù, chiù!" "Woe, woe!"

Bruno sent him away at sunset, with a big basket of beans and cabbages for Nita, to propitiate her into good humour.

It was cheating his lord, because it is understood that what a contadino takes for eating shall be what is needed in his own house; but Bruno did not see harm in it; the men who would not take a crumb out of their master's dwelling for all the temptings of the worst hunger, will never see any sin in taking things off the soil they labour on, and Bruno was no better than his neighbours. Besides, he would have done a wrong thing knowingly, to serve or help the child.

"I should love him little if I would not take a sin on my own soul for his welfare," he said to himself often; that was his idea of how he ought to keep his word to Pippa. He did not argue it out so clearly as that, because peasants do not analyse, but the sense of it moved him always.

So Signa kissed his old lute in farewell, and laid it away on the old marriage box under the crucifix, and sprinkled rose−leaves on it and meadow mint, because he fancied it would like sweet smells, and then shouldered his big skip full of vegetables, and made his way down the hill, hugging the violin close to him.

The waning moon hung silvery and round over the town as he entered. In many of the interiors and in the stone barns the men were thrashing, the flails heaving and falling in pleasant regular cadence, the workers knee−deep in the yellow grain. A few machines hum in Tuscany, but they are very few; they fear to spoil the straw for the plaiters, and they cling to the old ways, these sons of Ceres Mammosa.

The rush skip on his back was heavy, but his heart was light as he went. The wonderful wooden thing that he could make sing like a nightingale was all his own for ever.

Only to think what he could do; all that he heard−−and he heard so much from the birds and the bees and the winds at dawn, and the owls at night, and the whispering canes and the poplars down by the water, and the bells that swing for prayer−−he could tell again on those wonderful strings, of whose power and pathos the child, all untaught, had a true intuition.

With the violin against his shoulder he felt strong enough to face the world and wander over it−−ten years old though he was, and of no more account than a little moth, that a man can kill with the wave of the hand.

The fancy came once to him to go away, with the wooden Rusignuolo, as he called it, and see what people would do to him, and what beautiful things he could hear, going along the roads, and into the strange streets, playing. If only he had not loved the town so well; but every stone of the Lastra was dear to him. They held his feet to the soil.

And, besides, he was only a little child, and the mountains looked too high for him to climb, though those old painters, he knew, must have gone higher still, or how could they have seen the clouds and the little angels and amorini that dwell in the worlds where the rose never fades and the light never ceases?

But neither mountains nor clouds were within his reach, so he only trotted down into the Lastra with his skip of cabbages and beans upon his little tired back, very happy because he had his heart's desire; and if he had been selfish he had asked to be forgiven−−none of us can do more.

All people were still astir in the place; by eight of the clock it is nearly dark under these hills when once the day of SS. Peter and Paul is past; they were sitting about in the street, the doorways showed the golden straw that

the girls were still sorting; there was the smell of the fields everywhere; oxen in red waggons crept through the twilight taking grain to the thrashing barns; men came in from the river−side with their nets wet and their bare legs shining with sand, and their pumpkin gourds full of little fish; here and there was a brown monk with his huge straw hat on his shoulders and his rosary dangling in front of his knees.

He nodded up at old Teresina; eighty years old and spinning at a high window under the gateway; she would let him go and play his violin there in her little dusky den, among the ropes of onions and the strings of drying tomatoes, and with the one little square lattice looking out to the bold mountain of the high Albano range that rises above Artimino and Carmignano, and takes all the rose of the dawn, and all the purples of the storm, and wears them as its own, and has the sun go down behind it and the star of love rise from it.

Then he ran up the little dark stairs into the room where she lived; a bright old soul with many daughters and sons and grandchildren scattered over the place; a good spinner and good plaiter still, though nigh eighty years old, she had spent all her years here under the western gate, seeing the harvest waggons and the grape barrels come and go for nearly three−fourths of a century; she could remember the French fellows with Murat riding through; she had sat at her window and watched them; she had just married then; she had seen the sun sink down over the mountains calm and golden, or red and threatening, every night of her life; and had never slept elsewhere than here, where the warders had lighted their beacons and pointed their matchlocks in the old days long before her, when the news come that the Pisans were marching from the sea; the Lastra was her world, but it had been wide enough to make her shrewd and keen of sight, and happy enough to keep her kindly of temper and of quick sympathy with youth and childhood.

Of the child Signa she was very fond; she liked to be woke in the dark mornings by his fresh voice carolling some field song of the people as he went out under the gateway to his work. And she was one of the few folks who liked Bruno better than his gentler brother.

"I have seen them both with their bullcocks when they were lads," she would say to her neighbours. "Bruno made his do a hard day's work, but he fed them well and never galled them, and the beasts loved him. Lippo would hang his with tassels and flowers, and pat them if people were looking! but he would prick them twenty times an hour and steal their fodder and sell if for a penny and play morra. Do not talk to me! the fierce one for my money!"

So when Signa ran in to her and told her the story of the violin, not very coherently, mingling the tinman and the little Christ and the gold pieces and the marble bishop all together in an inextricable entanglement, Teresina was sympathetic and held up her hands, and believed in the angels and wondered at the beautiful gift with all the ardour that he could have desired, and said of course, to be sure he might keep it there; why not? and play it there too, she hoped, and opened for its safer concealment the heavy lid of a great chest she had in her chamber; one of those sarcophagus−like coffers, which the Middle Ages made in such numbers and ornamented with such lavish care; this one was of oak wood, very old; and a hungry connoisseur had told her that it was of the workmanship of Dello and had offered her any money for it; but she had told him that Dello, whoever he was, was nothing to her, and that the chest had held her bridal linen and now held her cere−clothes already, and all of her own spinning, and would hold her granddaughters' and great granddaughters' after her, she hoped.

So the chest, whether of Dello or not, remained in its corner, and she opened it and let Signa lay his Rusignuolo in it on her bridal sheets, and her shroud, that she had finished last winter and was very proud of, and helped him cover it with the dead rose−leaves and the sprigs of lavender, which she had put there to keep moth away, and the bough of cypress which she had laid there to bring good luck.

So Signa, quite sure that all was safe, went away quite happy and shouldered his kreel again, and went towards Lippo's house.

Signa turned up by the old shrine that has the grey wood door and the soft pink colour and the frescoed seraphs by the high south gate, and mounted the paved steep lane to Lippo's house.

There was a little gossipping crowd before it; old Baldo with his horn spectacles shoved up on his forehead, and Momo the barber, who had a tongue for twenty, and Caccarello, the coppersmith, and several women, foremost of whom was Nita screaming at the top of her voice, with both hands in air in gesticulation, and Toto beating the drum tattoo with a metal spoon on a big frying−pan as a sort of chorus to his mother's cries.

Whilst still he toiled up the lane concealed from their view by the burden of cabbages, he caught her flying sentences, scattered like dry peas rolling out of a basket.

"Two hundred francs in gold! given him, all for his peaking little face, and thrown away−−thrown away−−thrown away on a wretched creaking thing that Tonino kept amongst his nails and his keys! and never a centime brought to us! to people that took him out of the water like a half−drowned pup and have spent our substance on him ever since as if he were our own. Oh, the little viper!−−fed at my breast as he was and laid in the cradle with my own precious boy! Two hundred francs all in gold!−−all in gold! and the horrid little wretch squanders it on a toy with a hole in it for the wind to come out of, squeaking like a mouse in a trap. But there must be law on it−−there must be law! that brute Tonino could not claim a right to take such swarms of money from a pauper brat!"

"Nay," said the barber. "Tonino tells us he swore his conscience was hair on end at such a thing. But when a man has a knife at his throat−−"

"I saw the steel touch him, so he shivered," swore Caccarello, the coppersmith.

"And the fiddle was worth a thousand francs. It was a rare Cremona," whined the barber. "It is poor Tonino that is cheated−−near as bad as you, dear neighbour!"

"But the money was not the little brat's, it belonged to those who nourished and housed him," said a fat housewife, who often gossipped with Baldo over a nice little mess of oil and onions.

"That, of course," said Caccarello. "But Lippo is so meek and mild. He has cockered up that flyblow as if it were a prince's lawfully−begotten son and heir."

"Lippo is a heaven−accursed fool," said old Baldo, with a blow of his staff−−he was never weary of telling his opinion of his son−in−law−−"but he is not to blame here. He never could have fancied that a little beast would come home with the price of a prime bullock and go and waste it on a fiddle without a thought of by your leave or for your leave, or any remembrance of all he owed in common gratitude for bed and bread. The child could be put in prison, and so he ought to be; what is a foundling's gain belongs to those that feed him. That is fair law everywhere. If Lippo were not daft he would hand the boy over to the law and let it deal with him."

"Bravo!" said the little crowd, in chorus; for Baldo was a well−to−do old man and much respected, wearing a silk hat and velvet waistcoat upon feast−days.

"Ay, truly," said Nita, stretching her brawny brown arms in all the relish of anticipated vengeance, while Toto beat louder on his frying−pan, and called in glee:

"And you will shave his head now, mother? and give me that gilt ball of his to sell? and when his back is raw as raw, you will let me rub the salt in it?"

Nita kissed his shaven crown, forgetful of the character for goodness that she had been at such pains to build up before her townsfolk; but Lippo, mindful of his fair repute, reproved him.

"Only a little wholesome chastisement: that is all we ever allow; you know that, my son."

And Toto grinned. He knew his father's tricks of speech.

The neighbours thought nothing of it; take a brat off the face of the flood and bring it up out of charity, and then see it squander the first money that it touched upon a fiddle, without so much as bringing home a farthing! They were unanimously of opinion that it would have provoked a saint into exchanging her palm−sheaf for a rod of iron.

A fiddle too, that Tonino swore was worth a thousand francs, if one, and a purest old Cremona; as if an oat pipe cut in the fields were not good enough for this little cur picked out of the muddy water! And then they all of them had children too; pretty children, or, at least, children they all thought pretty, and where was ever a painter found to give them money for their faces?

Money was scarce in the Lastra, and popular feeling ran strong and high against Signa for having ventured to have a piece of good fortune fall upon him. If he had brought it home now and put it in Lippo's strong box and Lippo had given them all a supper with it, and played a quarter of it away in morra or draughts, as no doubt he would have done, then, indeed, they might have pardoned it. But a fiddle! and not a single centime for themselves.

"Punish him I will," murmured Lippo, goaded to desperation, but thinking woefully of what his brother would say, or worse still, do, on his own skin and bones. "Still, he is such a little thing, and saved by me, as one may say−−not that I take merit. It is a horrible thing−−all that good gold squandered on a fiddle, and we robbing our precious children nine long years to feed a bastard deserted by those that had the right; and yet, dear friends, a child no older than my Toto−−"

"Maudlin ass," quoth Baldo in high wrath, while the barber said that Lippo was too great a saint to live, and the others answered that such goodness was beautiful, but Lippo must look at home; and all the while Nita screamed on to the night air, bewailing.

Signa heard, as he laboured up the hill beneath his load of cabbages, the angry voices rolling down the slope and drifting to the Madonna sitting with the glory round her head behind her little wooden wicket.

The poor Madonna often heard such words. When they had spoken them worst they gave her flowers.

Signa heard. What had he done? That they had power to put him in prison he never doubted. They had power to beat him−−why not to do anything else?

His limbs shook, and his heart sank within him. Yet one great thought of comfort was with him−−the fiddle was safe under its rose−leaves and its lilac mint−flowers. Teresina would not let it go.

He understood that the story of his buying the violin had run through the Lastra, gathering exaggerated wonders as it went. Indeed, if only he had thought a little, he would have known that the scene at the tinman's shop by the archway never could pass without being talked about by the dozen idle folks who had had nothing to do but to watch it.

But even Bruno had not thought of that. Italians love secrets; but they bury them as the ostrich buries her head.

Toiling up under his overshadowing cabbages, and in the dusk of the evening, they did not see him. The loud shrill voices thrilled to his very bones.

"Let me get at him!" thundered old Baldo, who echoed his daughter always. "Two hundred francs! The little brute! And he owes me that for lodgement! Oh, Nita mine! now see what comes of taking nameless mongrels −−"

"Two hundred francs!" moaned Lippo, his voice shaking with a sort of religious horror, "When he might have brought half to my wife, who has been an angel of mercy to him, and spent the other half in masses for his poor dead mother's soul, which all the devils are burning now!"

"That is the thought of a good man, but of an ass!" said Baldo bluntly. "They should have come to your strong box and mine, son; and as many francs as there were shall he have lashes!"

"Let me get at him!−−let me get at him! Oh, the little snake that I suckled at my breast, robbing my own precious child for him! Two hundred francs! two hundred francs! A year's rent! A flock of sheep!−−wine to flood the town!−−waggons of flour!−−ten years' indulgence!−−half this world and all the next, why one might buy for such a sum as that! And flung away upon a fiddle−case! But to prison the child shall go, and Tonino must disgorge. Let me only catch him! Let him only come home!"

Signa, in the dark upon the stones, looking up, saw this excited crowd, with waving hands, and fists thrust into each other's eyes, and faces glowing in the light of the gateway lamp, and voices breaking out against him and blaming Bruno.

They were ready to fling him bodily into the Arno.

He was shy, but he was brave. His heart sickened and his temples throbbed with horror of the unknown things that they would wreak upon him. But he lowered the load off his shoulders, and darted up the paved way into their midst.

"It is all untrue," he panted to them. "It was only forty francs, and Bruno had nothing to do with it, and the little Gesu of Perugino sent me the money for my own, and selfish it might be, I know; but that I have asked God; and beat me you may till I am dead, or put me in prison, as you say, but it was all my own, and my wooden Rusignuolo is safe, and you cannot touch it, and −−"

A stroke of Nita's fist sent him down upon the ground.

He was light and agile. He was on his feet in a second. All the wrongs and sufferings of his childhood blazed up like fire in him. He was a gentle little soul, and forgiving; but for once the blood burned within him into a furious pain.

Stung and bruised and heated and blinded by the blows that the woman rained on him, he sprang on her, struck her in the eyes with all his force, and tearing himself out of the score of hands that clutched at him, he slipped through his tormentors and fled down the slope.

"I will tell Bruno! I will tell Bruno!" he sobbed as he went; and while the women surrounded the screaming Nita, who shrieked that the little brute had blinded her for life. A solemn silence fell upon the men, who looked at Lippo. If Bruno were told, life would not pass smoothly at the Lastra.

That minute of their hesitation gave the child time for his liberty. When Lippo and the barber pursued him, he was out of sight, running fast under the shadow of the outer walls, where all was silent in the dusk.

"This comes of doing good!" groaned Lippo to the barber.

CHAPTER XIII.

SIGNA ran on under the walls where the men make ropes on the grass, but where it was all deserted now.

He had never known what passion was before. He had borne all ill−usage as his due. He had let himself be kicked and cuffed as a gentle little spaniel does, only looking up with wistful eyes of sorrowful wonder.

But now the fury of a sudden sense of unbearable wrong had boiled up in his veins and mastered him, and was hissing still in his ears and beating still in his brains.

A sense of having done some great crime was heavy on him. He knew he had been very wicked. He could feel himself striking, striking, striking, and the woman's eyeballs under his hands. He might have killed her for anything he knew. To his vivid little fancy and his great ignorance it seemed quite possible. And yet he had borne everything so long, and never said a word, and lain awake so many nights from pain of bruises.

Could anybody be very angry with him for having lost his temper just this once?

Bruno would not−−that he knew.

He heard the steps of Lippo and the barber and the mutterings of their voices pursuing him. He ran as if he had wings. A great vague terror of hideous punishment lent him the speed of a gazehound. He doubled the walls at headlong speed, his bare feet scarcely touching the ground, and darted in at the door of old Teresina's dwelling in the western gateway. By heaven's mercy she had not drawn the bolt.

The old woman was in her short kirtle, with the handkerchief off her grey knot of hair, getting ready for going to bed, with one little lamp burning under a paper picture of the Nativity.

Signa ran to her, tumbling over the spinning− wheel and the dozing cat and the huge brown moon−like loaf of bread.

"Oh, dear Teresina! let me hide here!" he cried in his terror, clinging to her skirts. "Lippo is after me. They are so angry about the violin, and I have hurt Nita very much because she knocked me down. Hide me−−hide me quick, or they will kill me or give me to the guards!"

Old Teresina needed not twice telling. She opened the big black coffer with the illuminated figures, where she had hidden the violin inside, and motioned the child to follow it. The coffer would have sheltered a man.

She left the lid a little ajar, and Signa laid himself down at the bottom with the old−world smell of incense and spiced woods. His wooden Rusignuolo was safe; he kissed it, and clasped it to him. After all, what did anything matter, if only they would leave that to him in peace?

"Lie still till they have been here to ask for you," said Teresina; and she tied her handkerchief over her head again and began to spin.

In a few minutes there was rapping on her door.

Teresina put her head out of the window, and called to know who was there.

"It is I−−Lippo," a voice called up to her in answer. "Is the little devil with you? We have loved him as our own, and now he has half murdered Nita−−Nita that fed him from her bosom and treated him inch for inch like Toto all these years! Here is Papucci−−he will tell you. Is the boy with you?"

"I have not seen him all day," said Teresina. "I thought he was on the hills. Come up, good Lippo, and look, and tell me more. The child has a sweet pipe, but heaven only knows where the devil may not lurk. Come up, Lippo, and tell me all. You make me tremble."

"You work late, mother," said Lippo, suspiciously, tumbling up the stairs into the chamber.

"Aye. Lisa's bridal is on S. Anne's day, and there is next to no sheeting. A granddame must do what she can for the dower. But tell me all−−all−−quick, dear! How white you look, the saints keep us!"

"White! With a little viper nurtured nine years stinging you, and a dear, good wife blind, I daresay, for life, who would not be white?" wept Lippo, glancing sharply through the shadows of the room. "And of course you must have heard−−two hundred francs and a beastly fiddle! and it is enough to bring the judgment of Holy Church −−"

"I have heard nothing," said Teresina, with her hands uplifted in amaze. "Sit down and tell me, Lippo and

Pupucci too; you look ready to drop, both of you. Two hundred francs! Gesu! why, it would buy up the whole of the town! And a fiddle−−ah, now I think of it, the dear naughty little lad was always sighing for an old thing in Tonino's window that he had played on once."

"If I could find him or it I would break it in shivers over his head," said Lippo, forgetting his saintly savour. "I am a meek man, as you know, and a merciful, and never say a harsh word to a dog; but my dear wife blind, and all that money squandered, and Bruno, if that little beast is gone to him, ready to smash every bone in my body! It is horrible!"

"Horrible, truly," gasped Teresina. "It is like a green apple to set one's teeth on edge. But tell me the tale clear; how is one to understand?"

They told her the tale, both in the same breath, with every ornament that imagination and indignation could lavish on it: death may be imminent, time may be money, a moment lost may mean ruin or murder or a house devoured by flames; but, all the same, Lippo and his country−people will stop to tell their tale. Let Death's scythe fall or Time's sands run out, they must stand still and tell their tale.

The story−tellers of the Decamerone are true to nationality and nature.

And while they told it Teresina trimmed fresh her lucernata, and made the wick burn so brightly that there was not a nook or cranny of the little place in which a mouse could have been hidden unseen.

"But you never will go after him to Bruno's," she said, when the narrative was done, and all her horror poured out at it in strongest sympathy. "The child is half−way there by this time, and Bruno takes part with him right or wrong−−you best know why−−and he is so violent; and at night, too, on that lonely hill; there might be mischief."

"Aye, there might," said Papucci, with a quaking in his voice: she knew her men.

"No fear of that," said Lippo, with a boast; "Bruno is fierce, we all know his fault−−dear fellow, the saints change his heart! But with me−−oh, never with me."

"For all that he shook you once many years ago when you beat the child all in justice and good−meaning−−shook you as a big dog does a little one," said Teresina, with a nod of her head and a twinkle in her eyes. "I would not go nigh him, not to−night; you must think of your good Nita and all those children. With the morning you shall be cool, both of you. But Bruno on that hill, in the dark−−I should not care to face him, not on ill terms. You have your family, Lippo."

"But if we leave it till the morning −−"

"Well, what harm can come? The child's sin is the same, and Nita can have law on him; and, about the money, Bruno, of course, must hear reason, and give up the fiddle, and let you get the whole sum back. Tonino would see the justice of that: you have reared and roofed the child; all his is yours−−that is fair right. But if you cross Bruno, of a sudden, in the night −−"

"There is reason in what you say, mother," assented Lippo, whose heart was hammering against his ribs in mortal terror of confronting Bruno.

And after a little while he went, glad of an excuse to veil his fears from the loquacious barber.

"Tell Nita I shall see her in the morning, and how sorry I am, because I loved the lad's little pipe, and never thought he had such evil in him," said Teresina, opening her door to call the valediction after them down the stairway. Then she came and opened the lid of the coffer.

"He is gone now−−jump out, little one."

"Oh, why did you keep him?" cried Signa, looking up as if he were in his coffin. "I thought he never would go, and I was so afraid. And have I hurt her so much as that, do you think?"

"As if your little fists could bruise a big cow like Nita−−what folly! I kept him to send him away more surely. When you want to get rid of a man, press him to stay; and if you have anything you need to hide, light two candles instead of one. No, you have never hurt Nita. Take my word, she is eating an onion supper this minute. But there will be trouble when Bruno knows, that I do fear."

Signa sat up in the coffer, holding the violin to his chest with two hands.

"Am I a trouble to Bruno?" he said thoughtfully.

"Well, I should think so−−I am not sure. The brothers are always quarrelling about you. There is something underneath. You have never complained to Bruno?"

"No. Georgio told me Bruno might kill Lippo if I did, and then they would hurt Bruno−−send him to the galleys all his life; so Georgio said."

"Like enough," muttered Teresina. "But you cannot hide this, little one. All the Lastra will talk about it."

"And there will be harm for Bruno?"

"He will be violent, I dare say−−he always is. Bruno does not understand soft answers, and Lippo is all in the wrong; and then, of course, Bruno must learn at last how they have treated you. It will be a pasticcio."

Teresina sat down on her wooden chair, and twitched the kerchief off her head, again perplexed and sorrowful; to make a pasticcio−−a bad pasty−−is the acme of woe and trouble to her nation.

"Can I do anything?" said Signa wistfully, sitting still in the open coffer.

"No−−not that I see−−unless you could put yourself out of the world," said the old woman, not meaning anything in particular, but only the utter hopelessness of the matter in her eyes.

Signa looked up in silence; he did not miss a word.

"No, there is nothing to be done," said Teresina, in anxious meditation. "Bruno will get into trouble about you−−I have always thought he would. But that is not your fault, poor little soul! There is something −−. Lippo is a fox. He plays his cards well, but what his game has been nobody knows. Perhaps he has made a mistake now. Bruno must know they have ill−used you. That comes of this money. Money is god and devil. Why could that painter go and give you gold?−−a bit of a thing like you. Any other man than Bruno would have put it by to buy you your coat for your first communion. But that was always Bruno−−one hand on his knife and the other scattering gifts. For my part, I think Bruno the better man of the two, but no one else does. Yes; there must be trouble. Bruno will break his brother's head, and Lippo will have law on him. You might go to Tonino and get him to take the fiddle back; but then it was only forty francs, and Lippo will always scream for the two hundred that the fools have chattered about; that would be no good. Oh, Dio mio! If only that angel at the Certosa had not sent you anything. Angels stand aloof so many years, and then they put their finger in the dough and spoil the baking. May they forgive me up above! I am an ignorant old woman, but if they would only answer prayer a little quicker or else not at all. I speak with all respect. My child, sleep here to−night, and be off at dawn to Bruno. Sleep on it. Get up while it is grey, to have the start of Lippo and his people. But sleep here. There is a bit of grass matting that will serve you−−there, where the cat is gone. And I will get you a drop to drink and a bit of bread, for tired you must be and shaken; and what the Lastra see in Lippo to make a saint of baffles me; a white−livered coward and a self−seeker. He will die rich; see if he do not die rich! He will have a podere, and keep his baroccino, I will warrant, before all is done!"

She brought the child the little glass of red wine and a big crust; he drank the wine−−he could not eat−−and laid down as she told him by the cat upon the matting. He was so unhappy for Bruno; the Rusignuolo scarcely comforted him, only every now and then he would stretch out his hand and touch it, and make sure that it was there; and so fell asleep, as children will, be they ever so sorrowful.

He woke while it was still dark, from long habit, but the old woman was already astir. She made him take a roll and a slice of melon, as she opened her wooden shutter and looked out on to the little acacia trees below, and the big mountain, that was as yet grey and dark.

"Get you up the hill, dear, to Bruno, and out of the house before the men are about underneath with the straw," she said to him. "and I do not know what you can say; and I misdoubt there will be ill words and bad blows; and it has been said for many a year that Bruno would end his days at the galleys. I remember his striking his sister once at the wine fair in Prato−−such a scene as there was−−and the blood spoiled her brand new yellow bodice, that was fit for the Blessed Mary−−speaking with all respect. There is Gian undoing his big doors below−−every place is full of grain now. Run, run, dear little fellow, and the saints be with you, and do not forget that they love a peacemaker; though, for the matter of that, we folks are not like them−−we love a feud and a fight, and we will prick our best friend with a pin rather than have dull times and no quarrel. Run off quick, and take the melon with you."

He did as she told him, and ran away. She watched him from the little square window over the carnation pots. She was a good soul, but she could not help a thrill of longing to see how Bruno would down into the Lastra like a brown bull gored and furious.

"Only the one that is in the right always gets the worst of it," thought Teresina (who had seen her seventy years of life), as the last star died out of the skies, and she turned from the lattice to scrub out her pipkins and pans, and fill her copper pitcher with water, and sweep the ants away with her reed besom, and then sat down to spin on at Lisa's bridal sheeting, glancing now and then at the mountain, and wondering what would happen.

What would happen?

That was what tortured the little beating heart of Signa, as he ran out into the lovely cold darkness of the dawn, as the chimes of the clocks told four in the morning. He held his slice of melon and bread in one hand, and clasped the violin and its bow close to him with the other. A terrible sense of guilt, of uselessness, of injury to others, weighed on him.

Even Teresina, who was fond of him, had confessed that he was a burden to Bruno, and a cause for strife at all times, and no better. Even Teresina, who was so good to him, had said that he could do nothing unless he could get himself out of the world.

The words pursued him with a sense that the old woman would have bitten her tongue through rather than have conveyed into the child's mind−−a sense of being wanted by no one, useful to no one, undesirable and wearisome, and altogether out of place in creation.

He was old enough to feel it sharply, and not old enough to measure it rightly. Besides Nita and Toto and Georgio and all of them, had told him the same thing ten thousand times: what was said so often by so many must be true.

To kill himself never entered his thoughts. The absolute despair which makes life loathsome cannot touch a child. But he did think of running away, hiding, effacing himself, as a little hare tries to do when the hounds are after it.

He would go away, he thought; it was his duty; it was the only thing he could do to serve Bruno, and he was ashamed of himself, and so sorrowful; and perhaps people might be kind to him on the other side of the mountains where the sun came from; perhaps they might when they heard the Rusignuolo. Other boys decide to run away for love of adventure or weariness of discipline, but he resolved to run away because he was a burden and brought wild words between two brothers, and was good for nothing else.

The curse of granted prayers lay heavy on his young frightened soul. The thing he had desired was with him; the thing that he had thought was sweeter than food or friends or home, or anything; and yet his feet were weary and his heart was sick from the woe which it had brought upon him.

"Still it is mine−−really mine!" he thought, with a thrill of happiness which nothing could wholly stifle in him, as his hand wandered over the strings as he went, and drew out from them soft sighing murmurs like the pipe of waking birds.

Meanwhile he was quite resolute to run away; down into Florence, he thought, and then over to where the sunrise was. Of the west he was afraid; the sea was there, of which he had heard terrible things in the winter evenings, and the west always devoured the sun, and he supposed it was always night there.

"I will just bid Gemma good−bye−−just once," he thought, running one, stumbling, and not seeing his way, because his eyes were so brimming with tears; but sight did not matter much. He could find his way about quite safely in the darkest night.

The gates of the great gardens were open, for the labourers were already at work there, and he ran into the shadowy, fresh, dew−wet place, looking for her.

If he could find her without going to the cottage, he thought, it would be best, because her father might have heard and might detain him, thinking to please Bruno.

He was not long before he saw her. Out of bed at daybreak, as birds are out of their nests, lying on her back in the wet grass by the marble pond, where the red Egyptian rushes were in flower, and muching the last atom of a hard black crust which had been given her for her breakfast, while the big water lilies still were shut up, and the toads were hobbling home to their dwellings in the bottom of the tanks.

Gemma was one of those beautiful children, who, in the land of Raffaelle, are not a fable. As they grow older, they will lose their beauty almost always; but the few people who ever had time to look at Gemma, thought that she would never lose hers.

No doubt there was some strains of the old Goth or of the German blood in her from the far times when Totila had tramped with his warriors over the ravaged valleys, or Otho had come down like a hawk into the plains. She was brilliantly fair; as she lay now on the grass on her back, with her knees drawn up and her rosy toes curled, and her arms above her head, she shone in the sun like a pearl, and her face might have come out of Botticelli's choir, with its little scarlet mouth and its wonderful bloom and its mass of lightest golden hair cut short to the throat, but falling over the eyes.

"Gemma, I have brought you some more breakfast," he said to the pretty little child.

She threw her arms round his neck, and set her pearly teeth into the melon. The bread followed. When she had done both she touched his cheek with her finger.

"Why are you crying?"

"Because I am no use to anyone. Because I bring trouble on everybody."

Gemma surveyed him with calm, serious eyes.

"You bring me good things to eat."

That was his use; in her eyes there could be no better.

The tears fell down Signa's face; he sobbed under his breath, and kissed Gemma's light curling locks with a sorrow and force in his lips that she did not understand.

"I think I will go away, Gemma," he said, with a sort of desperate resolve.

Gemma, who was not easily excited, surveyed him with her blue eyes seriously as before.

"Where?"

"I do not know."

"That is silly."

Gemma was a year younger than he. But she was not vague as he was, nor did she ever dream.

"I will go away, I and the Rusignuolo," said Signa, with a sob in his throat. "It is the only way to be no burden−−to make peace."

Gemma pushed a lizard with her little rosy toes.

"Mimi does not bring me so much fruit as you do," she said thoughtfully. Mimi was a neighbour's son, who was nine years old, and worshipped her, and brought her such green plums and unripe apples as his father's few rickety trees would yield, by windfalls. She was wondering how it would be with her if she were left to Mimi only.

"Perhaps I will get you beautiful golden fruit where I go," said Signa, who always unconsciously fell into figures and tropes. "The signore in the monastery said my mouth would drop pearls. I have seen pearls−−beautiful white beads that the ladies wear. They are on the goldsmith's bridge in the city. When my lips make them you shall have them round your curls, Gemma, and on your throat, and on your arms; how pretty you will be!"

He was smiling though his tears, and kissing her. Gemma listened.

"With a gold cross like Bice's?" she said, breathlessly. Bice was a rich contadina who had such a necklace, a string of pearls with a gold cross, which she wore on very high feasts and sacred anniversaries.

"Just like Bice's," said Signa, thinking of his own woe and answering to please her.

Gemma reflected: pushing her little foot against the wet gravel in lines and circles.

"Run away, at once!" said she suddenly, with a little shout that sent the lizards scampering.

"Oh, Gemma!" Signa felt a sting, as if a wasp had pierced him. Gemma loved him no more than this.

"Run away, directly!" said the little child, with a stamp of her foot, like a baby empress.

"To get you the pearls?"

Gemma nodded.

Signa sat still, thinking; his tears fell; his eyes watched a blue and grey butterfly in the white bells of the aloe flower. He could not be utterly unhappy, because he had the violin. If it had not been for that −−

"Why do you not go?" said the little child fretfully, with the early sunbeams all about her little yellow head in a nimbus of light.

Signa got up; he was very pale; his great brown eyes swam in a mist of tears.

"Well−−I will go−−I have got the Rusignuolo. Perhaps it is not true what the signore said−−but I will go and see. If I can get pearls−−or anything that is good−−then I will come back, and the Lastra will be glad of me, and I will give everything to the Lastra, and to Bruno and you. Only, to go away−−it will kill me, I think. But if I do die, I shall be no burden anymore then on anyone. And if the signore spoke truth, and I am worth anything, then I will be great. When I am a man I will come back and live here always, because no place can be ever so beautiful; and I will make new gates, all of beaten gold; and I will build the walls up where they are broken; and I will give corn and wine in plenty everywhere, and there shall be beautiful singing all the night and day, and music in all the people's homes, and we will go out through the fields every morning praising God; and then Signa will not be old or forgotten any more, but all the world will hear of her−−"

And he went, not looking back once at the rushes and the water−lily and the little child; seeing only his own visions, and believing them;−−as children and poets will.

But Gemma, pausing a moment, ran after him.

"Take me, too!"

"Take you−−away?"

"Yes. I want to go too."

Signa kissed her with delight.

"You are so fond of me−−as that?"

"Oh, yes; and I am so tired of black bread, and Mimi's plums are always green."

Signa put her away a little sadly.

"You must not come. There is your father."

"Yes. I will come. I want to see what you will see."

"But, if you should be unhappy?"

"I will come back again."

Signa wavered. He longed for his playmate. But he knew that she wished a wrong thing.

"I cannot take you," he said, with a sigh. "It would be wicked. Palma would cry all the day long. Besides, I am nothing−−nobody wants me. I go to spare Bruno pain and trouble; that is different. But you, Gemma, all of them love you."

"Let us go," said Gemma, putting her hand in his.

"But I dare not take you!"

"You do not take me," said Gemma, with a roguish smile, and the sophism of a woman grown. "You do not take me. I go."

"But why? Because you love me?"

Gemma ruffled her golden locks.

"Because they give me nothing to eat."

"They give you as much as they have themselves."

"Ah! but you will give me more than you have," said Gemma, with the external foolishness and internal logic of female speech.

Signa put her away with a sigh.

"Perhaps I shall have nothing, Gemma. Do not come."

Gemma stopped to think.

"You will always get something for me," she said, at last. "Take me−−or I will go and tell Bruno."

Signa hesitated, and succumbed to the stronger will and the resolute selfishness of the little child: they are more often feminine advantages than the world allows.

"You will be angry with me, Gemma, in a day, if I let you have your way," he said, hanging his head in sad perplexity.

Gemma laughed: she was so pretty when she laughed; Fra Angelico would have delighted to paint her so.

"When I am angry, I am not dull," she said, with much foresight for her own diversion. "The boys slap me back again. But you never do. Let us go−−or I will run up and tell Bruno."

"Come, then," said Signa, with a sigh; he knew that she would do what she said. Gemma, nine years old, was already a woman in many ways, and had already found out that a determination to please herself and to heed no one else's pleasure was the only royal road to comfort in earthly life.

And she was resolved to go; already she had settled with herself what she would make Signa do, shaping out her projects clearly in the sturdy little brain that lived under her amber curls.

She was thought a beautiful child, but stupid; people were wrong.

Gemma lying doing nothing under a laurel bush, with her angelic little face, and her stubborn refusal to learn to read, or learn to plait, or learn to spin, or learn to do anything, was as shrewd as a little fox club for her own enjoyments and appetites. She lay in the sun, and Palma did the work.

"We will go to Prato," said Gemma, all smiles now that her point was gained.

"I thought−−Florence," said Signa, who, in his own thoughts, had resolved to go there.

"Chè!" said Gemma, with calm scorn. "Boys never think. You would meet Bruno on the road. It is Friday."

Friday is the market day, when all fattori and contadini having any green stuff to sell, or grain to chaffer for, or accounts to settle with, meet in the scorch of the sun, or in the teeth of the north wind, in face of Orcagna's Loggia; a weather−worn, stalwart, breezy, loquacious crowd, with eyes that smile like sunny waters, and rough cloaks tossed over one shoulder, and keen lips at close bargains either with foe or friend.

"And there is a fair at Prato," said Gemma, "I heard them saying so at the millhouse−−when I took Babbo's grain."

"But what have we to do with a fair?" said Signa, whose heart was half broken.

Gemma smiled till her little red pomegranate bud of a mouth showed all her teeth, but she did not answer him. She knew what they would have to do with it. But he−−he was dreaming of gates of inlaid gold for the Lastra.

What was the use of talking any sense to him? He was so foolish: so Gemma thought.

"Prato goes out−−to the world," she said, not knowing very well what she meant, but feeling that an indefiniteness of speech was best suited to this dreamer with whom she had to do. "And if you want to get away you must go there at once−−or you will have Bruno or Lippo coming on you, and then there will be murder; so you say. Come. Let us run across the bridge while we can. There is nobody here. Come−−run."

"Come, then," said Signa, under his breath, for it frightened him. But Gemma was not frightened at all.

It was now five.

The great western mountain had caught the radiance of the morning shining on it from the opposite mountains, and was many−coloured as an opal; the moon was blazing like a globe of phosphorous, while the east was warm still with rosy light; all above them, hills and fields and woods and river and town, were bathed in that full clear light, that coldness of deep dew, that freshness of stirring wind, that make the earth as young at every summer sunrise in the sough, as though Eos and Dionysius were not dead with all the fancies and the faiths of men, and in their stead Strauss and Hegel reigning, twin godhead of the dreary day.

She took his hand and ran with him.

Signa's tears fell fast and his face was very pale; he kept looking back over his shoulder at each yard; but the little child laughed as she ran at topmost speed on her little bare toes, dragging him after her down the piece of road to the bridge, and across the bridge, and so on to the hillside.

"I know Prato is the other way of the mountains," said Gemma, who had more practical shrewdness in her little rosy finger than Signa in all his mind and body. "I have seen the people go to the markets and fairs, and they always go up her−−up, up−−and then over."

Signa hardly heard. He ran with her because she had tight hold of his hand; but he was looking back at the gates of the Lastra.

No one said anything to them. On the north side of the bridge no one had heard the terrible story; and if they had heard, would not have had leisure to say anything, because it was threshing time, and everybody was busy in one way or another with the corn−−piling it one the waggons, driving the oxen out to the fields for it, tossing it into the barns or the courtyards, banging the flails over it, or stacking the straw in ricks, with a long pole riven through each to stay the force of the hurricanes.

When the country side is all yellow with reaped grain, or all purple with gathered grapes, Signa people would not have time to notice an emperor; their hearts and souls are in their threshing barns and wine−presses. When they are quiet again, and have nothing to do but to plait or to loiter, then they will make a mammoth out of a midge in the way of talk, as well as any gossippers going.

CHAPTER XIV.

THERE were many mules, and horses, and carts, and men, and women, and asses rattling out over the cross roads from the many various villages and farms towards Prato.

In the ways of the Lastra itself dust was rising as the noisy ramshackle baroccini were pulled out of their stables and got ready with any poor beast that was at home. The cattle had all been driven over in strings the night before from every part of the country, lowing, whinnying, and bleating as they went.

The road over the hill was thick with dust, and trampled with traffic as the children climbed it, and many a rope−harnessed horse and crazy vehicle flew by them in a cloud of white powder, the driver shrieking, "Via, via, via!"

"We shall be seen and stopped," said Signa, shrinking back; but Gemma pulled him onward.

"Nonsense," she said, steadily. "They do not think about us; they think about themselves and the fair; and where they will drink and eat, and how they will cheat."

Gemma dwelt under the lemon leaves of lonely Giavola; but her experiences of life had been sufficient to tell her, that when your neighbour is eating well and cheating comfortably he will usually let you alone.

She would not let him go back; she kept close hold of his hand, and trotted on her rosy, strong little feet that tired no more than do a mountain pony's.

She was right in her conclusions. The carts rattled by and no one took any notice of them. Two children running by the wayside were nothing uncommon, that anyone should remark on it and reflect about it; and one or two people who did look at them and recognise them sup− posed that they were going somewhere on some errand for Sandro or for Bruno.

They went along unmolested till the sun rose higher and the glittering heavy dews began to pass off from the earth as the day widened.

They descended the hill and proceeded along the straight road of the plain; the great line of the northern mountains unrolled before them in the morning light, with airy grey summits high in the clouds, and the lower spurs purple with shadow, and here and there the white gleam of a village dropped in a ravine, or of a little town shining at the foot of a bold scarp. Monte Morello rose the highest of all the heights, looking a blue, solemn, naked peak against the radiant sky, keeping the secrets of his green oak forests and his emerald snakes for such as have the will and strength to see him near. Beyond, in the distance, far behind the nearer range, were the fantastic slopes of the mountains by the sea, that saw the flames of Shelley's pyre rise on the solitary shore. They were of faint rose hue, and had a silvery light about them. Signa looked at them; they seemed to him like domes and towers.

"Are those temples, do you think?" he said, in an awed voice, to Gemma.

Gemma looked, and put her finger in her mouth.

"Perhaps they are the tops of the big booths at the fair."

"Oh, Gemma!" he said, with pained disgust, and would have loosened his hand, but she held it too close and tight.

"If they are booths, we shall get to them in time," she said.

"I would rather they were temples, though we might never get to them," said he, with heat and pain.

"That is silly," said Gemma.

What use were those temples that one never got to;−−or of any temples, indeed? Nobody ever fried in them, or made sweetmeats.

That is what she thought to herself, but she did not say so aloud. He was so silly; he never saw these things; and she wished to keep him in good humour.

In time they reached Poggio Caiano: they were used to run along dusty roads in the sun and did not tire quickly. They could both of them run a dozen miles or more with very little fatigue, but it was now seven in the morning.

"I am thirsty," said Gemma. "I should like some milk. Ask for it."

There was a cottage by the side of the road with wooden sheds and cackling hens, and bits of grass land under shady mulberries. She saw two cows there. Signa hung back.

"We have nothing to buy it with−−nothing!"

"How helpless you are," said Gemma, and she put her pretty golden head in at the cottage door. There was a brown, kindly−looking woman there, plucking dead pigeons.

"Dear mother," said Gemma, coaxingly, "you look so good, could you give us just a little drop of water? We have been walking half the night. Father is gone to Prato with a string of donkeys to sell, and we are to meet him there, and were are so−−oh, so thirsty!"

"Poor little souls!" said the woman, melted in a moment, for all Italians are kind in little things. "My child, what a face you have−−like the baby, Jesus! Step in here and I will get you a draught of milk. Is that your brother?"

"Yes," said Gemma.

"Oh, Gemma! to lie is so wicked!" murmured Signa, plucking at her ragged skirt.

"Is it?" said Gemma, showing her pearly teeth; "then everybody is wicked, dear; and the good God must have his hands full!"

The woman brought them out two little wooden bowls of milk.

Gemma drank from hers as thirstily and prettily as a little snake could do. Signa refused his. He said he did not wish for it.

"Perhaps you are hungry," said the woman, and offered them two hunches of wholesome bread.

Signa shook his head and put his hands behind his back.

Gemma took both.

"You are so kind," she said, winningly, "and we are hungry. My brother is shy, that is all."

"Poor little dear!" said the good housewife, won and touched, so that she brought out some figs as well. "And you have been walking far? and have so far still to go? Your father is cruel."

"He is very poor," said Gemma, sadly, "and glad to get a copper driving the asses. We come from Scandicci, a long way."

And then she threw her arms around the woman prettily, and kissed her, and trotted on, hugging the bread and figs.

The woman watched them out of sight.

"A sweet child," she thought. "If the good Madonna had only given me the like!−−ah me! I would have thanked her day and night. The boy is handsome too−−but sulky. Poor babies, it is very far to go."

And she called Gemma back and kissed her again, and gave her a little bit of money, being a soft−hearted soul and well to do herself.

"Is it wicked to lie?" said Gemma to Signa, showing her white little teeth again. "But, look!−−it does answer, you see!"

"I cannot talk to you, Gemma," said the body, wearily; "you are so wrong, you grieve me so."

Gemma laughed.

"And yet it is me you always want to kiss−− not Palma. Palma, who never tells a lie at all!"

Signa coloured. He knew that that was true. He went on silently, holding the violin close to him, and not giving his hand to Gemma any more. She did not try to take it; it was too far for him to turn back.

They came to the royal gardens of the palace where once Bianca Capella reigned and was happy, and studied her love philtres and potions for death's sleep. Some great gates stood ajar; there were the green shade of trees and shadows of thick grass.

"Let us go in," said Gemma; and they went in, and she sat down on the turf and began to taste the sweetness of her figs.

Signa stood by her, silent and sad. She was so wrong, and yet she was so pretty, and she could make him do the things he hated, and he was full of pain because he had left the Lastra and the hills, and went he knew not whither.

"What are you doing there, you little tramps! Be off with you," cried one of the gardeners of the place,

espying them.

Gemma lifted to him her blue caressing eyes.

"Are we doing wrong? Oh, dear signore, let us stop a little, just a very little; we will into stir from here; only we are so tired, so very tired, and in the road it is hot and dusty and the carts are so many!"

The gardener looked at her and grumbled, and relented.

"If you do not stir you may stop a little while−−a very little," he said at last. "Where have you come from, you baby angel?"

"From Scandicci; and we go to Prato."

The man lifted his hands in horror, because Scandicci was a long long way, away upon the Greve river.

"From Scandicci! Poor children! Well, rest a little if you like."

And he left the gate open for them.

"Have you beautiful flowers here?" said Gemma, softly, glancing through the trees. "I do love flowers!"

She did not care for a flower more than for a turnip, living amongst gardens always, as she had done. But she knew flowers went to market, like the butter and the eggs.

"Do you? You are a flower yourself," said the gardener, who had had three pretty children and lost them. "What are you going to do, you and your brother?"

"We are going to play in Prato. We have no father or mother. He makes the music and I dance," said Gemma, who, though without imagination of the finer sort, could ring the changes prettily in lying.

"Poor little things; and what are your names?"

"I am Rita; and he is Paolo," said Gemma. "Do you think you could give me a flower−−just one−−to smell at as I go along?"

"I will see," said the man, smiling.

Signa stood by mute, with a swelling heart. He knew that he ought to stop her in her falsehoods, but he was afraid to vex her and afraid to lose her. He listened, wounded and ashamed, and feeling himself a coward.

"Why do you do such things, Gemma?" he cried, piteously, as the gardener turned away.

"It is no use telling you, you are so silly," said Gemma; and she ate fig after fig, lying on her back in the shade of the trees where once Bianca and Francesco had wandered when their love and the summer were at height; and where their spirits wander still at midnight, so the peasants say.

In a little time the gardener returned, bringing with him a basket of cut flowers.

"You may like to sell these in Prato," he said to the child. "And you will find a peach or two at the bottom."

"Oh, how good you are!" cried Gemma, springing up; and she kissed the flowers and then the brown hand of the man.

"You have but a sulky companion, I fear," said the gardener, glancing at the boy, who stood aloof.

"Oh, no! He is only shy and tired. What is this great house?"

"It is a palace."

"Are there people in it?"

"No. Only ghosts!"

"Ghosts of what?"

"Of a great wicked woman who lived here; and her lovers. She was a baker's daughter, but she murdered many people, and got to be a duchess of Tuscany."

"Did she murder them to be a duchess?"

"They say so; and to keep her secrets!"

Gemma opened wondering eyes.

"And she walks here at night?"

"By night; not that I can say I have ever seen her myself."

"I should like to meet her."

"Why?"

"Perhaps she would tell me how she did it."

The gardener stared,−−then laughed.

"You pretty cherub!−−if you have patience, and grow a woman, you will find out all that yourself."

"Come away," said Signa, and he dragged her out through the open gates.

She turned to kiss her hand to the gardener. Signa dragged her on in haste.

"A rude boy that," said the man, as he shut the gates on them.

"They are flowers worth five francs!" said Gemma, hugging her basket of roses; "and you think it is no use to tell lies?"

"I think it is very vile and base."

"Pooh!" said Gemma, and she danced along in the dust. She had got a basket worth five francs, bread and fruit enough for the day, and some copper pieces as well; all by looking pretty and just telling a nice little lie or two.

He seemed very helpless to her. He had got nothing.

"It is very hot walking," she said, presently.

"Yes," said Signa. "But we are used to it, you and I."

"I hate it, though."

"But we must do it if we want to get to Prato."

"Must we?"

She thought a few minutes, then looked behind her; in the distance there were coming along a baroccino and an old white horse.

Gemma gave a sudden cry of pain.

"What is it, Gemma, dear?" cried Signa, melted in a moment and catching her.

"I have twisted my foot on a stone. Oh, Signa, how it hurts!"

She sat down on a log of wood that chanced to lie there, and rubbed her little dusty foot dolefully. Signa knelt down in the dust, and took the little wounded foot upon his knee and caressed it with fond words. He could see no hurt; but then no one sees sprains or strains till they begin to swell.

"Oh, Signa, we never shall get on! It hurts me so!" she cried, and sobbed and moaned aloud.

The cart stopped; there were old people in it coming from the city itself, people who did not know them.

"Is there anything the matter?" cried the old folks, seeing the little girl crying so bitterly.

"She has hurt herself," said Signa. "She has twisted her ancle or something, and we go to Prato. Oh, Gemma, dear Gemma, is it so very bad?"

Gemma answered by her sobbing.

The old man and woman chattered together a little, then seeing the children were so pretty and seemed so sad, told them there was room in the cart; they themselves were going to Prato−−there were eight miles more to do; the boy might lift the girl in if he liked.

Gemma was borne up and seated between the two old people; Signa was told that he might curl himself, if he would, on the rope foot−place of the baroccino, and did so. The white horse rattle onward.

"You are a pretty boy, too," said the woman to Signa. "Why do you not talk to one?"

"I have nothing to say," he murmured.

He would not lie; and he could not tell the truth without exposing Gemma's pretty fables.

"You are more sulky than your sister; one would think it was your foot that had been hurt," said the old woman.

It was the third time in half an hour that, through Gemma, he had been called sulky. He hung his head, and was mute, taking care that Gemma's ankle should not be shakened as they went.

The way seemed to him very long.

He could see little on account of the dust, which rose in large quantities along the road, for the weather was dry and the traffic to the fair was great. Now and then he saw the purple front of Monte Morello and the towers of Prato, lying underneath it to the westward, and farther in the dark quarried sides of the serpentine hills, with the crimson gleam of jasper in the sun; and, much father still, Pistoia; that was all.

Signa took her foot between his hands, and held it tenderly, so that the jolting should not jar it more than he could help.

Her sobs ceased little by little, and she chattered softly with the old driver, telling him that she was going to Prato to sell flowers, and her brother to make a few coins by playing if he could; they had no father or mother. She cried out a little now and then, when the cart went rougher than usual over a loose stone.

"Are you in such pain, dear? Oh, if only I could bear it for you!" said Signa; and the tears came in his eyes to think that she should suffer so much.

"It is better; do not fret," said Gemma, gravely; and the old woman in the cart thought what a sweet−tempered child it was, so anxious to be patient and not vex her brother. For Gemma had the talent to get credit for all the virtues that she had not−−a talent which is of much more use than any real possession of the virtues ever can be.

The eight miles were very tedious and mournful even to Signa; he was full of sorrow for her little bruised foot, and full of care for her future and his own, and full of reproach to himself for having let her come with him.

"Whatever will come of it−−all is my fault," he thought, tormenting himself whilst the white horse trotted wearily over the bad road, and the clouds of dust blew round them and obscured the green sunny valley and the shining Bisenzio river.

Gemma, moaning a little now and then, leant her curly head against the old woman's knee, and before very long fell fast asleep, her long black lashes sweeping her rosy cheeks.

"The innocent lamb!" said the woman, tenderly, and covered her face from the sun and from the flies.

When the cart stopped at the south gate of Prato, the old woman woke Gemma softly:

"My pretty dear, we cannot get the things out without moving you, but if you will sit a bit in the shade by the wall there, we will take you up again in a minute, and put you where you like; or maybe you will stay with us and have a taste of breakfast."

Her husband lifted Gemma with much care down upon the stones, and set her on a bench, Signa standing still beside her.

"What is to be done, Gemma?" he said, with a piteous sigh. "Tell these good people the truth, dear, and they will take care of you, and drive you back again to Giovoli, I am sure. As for me, it does not matter."

"You are a grullo!" said Gemma, with calm contempt, which meant in her tongue that he was as foolish a thing as lived. "Wait till they are not looking, then do what I do."

Soon the man and the woman had their backs turned, and were intent on their cackling poultry and strings of sausages.

"Now!" said Gemma, and she darted round a corner of the gate, and ran swiftly as a young hare down the narrow street, clasping her flower−basket close to her all the while.

"But you are not lame at all!" cried Signa, stupefied, when at length, panting and laughing, she paused in her flight.

Her azure eyes glanced over him with a smile of intense amusement.

"Lame! of course not! But we wanted a lift. I got it. That was all."

"Oh, Gemma!"

He felt stunned and sick. He could only look at her. He could not speak. He thought the very stones of the street would open and swallow her for such wickedness as this.

Gemma laughed the more to see his face. She could not perceive anything amiss in what she had done. It had been fun to see the people's anxiety for her; and then they had been carried the eight miles they wanted:−−how could anything be wrong that had so well succeeded?

Gemma, with her little plump bare shoulders and her ragged petticoat, reasoned as the big world does:−−Success never sins.

Signa could not laugh. He would not answer her. He felt wretched.

"You are a kill−joy!" said Gemma, pettishly, and sat down on a door−step to tie up her flowers and consider what it would be best worth her while to do.

She decided that it was of no use at all to consult him. He was full of silly scruples that grew naturally in him, as choke−grass in the earth.

"It is very nice to be away from everybody," said Gemma, sorting her flowers, and looking about her with keen pleasure in the sense of liberty and strangeness.

"Oh, Gemma! It breaks one's heart," murmured Signa, while the water swam in his eyes. He thought his heart was broken. He felt powerless and utterly wretched. A companion who would have clung to him and needed his protection and his aid would have aroused his courage; but Gemma's hardihood and dauntlessness and reckless wrong−doing only seemed to crush him and bewilder him till he felt like any frightened kid lost upon the mountains.

When she rose, he rose also, and crept after her spiritless and weary.

The bold craft of her practical mind and her little merciless words of worldly wisdom beat into impotency all

the finer impulses and higher intelligence of his own. Moral impudence scourges spiritual beauty till it is cowed like a whipt dog.

Gemma, for her part, was indifferent; she felt herself the master−mind of the two; she was perfectly happy seeing strange things, and not knowing what new turn fortune might not take any minute; she thought of Palma hoeing and toiling amongst the cabbages at home with scornful pity, and said to herself, "how nice it is to be away and not have a soul to scold one!" When they came in sight of the cathedral and the belfry, Signa, moved to sudden interest, pulled her skirt.

"Let us go and see the sacra cintola," whispered the boy, for he was a devout little fellow, and had heard all his days from all the country−side of the wonders of the holy girdle that Prato enshrines.

"What will the sacra cintola do for us?" said Gemma.

"Nothing," said Signa, sadly, "nothing−−now we have told so many lies."

"The girdle would not have had that cart," said Gemma, with a smile that would have been a grin only she was so pretty; and she let Signa draw her onward to the square where the Duomo stands, because, as she thought to herself, there would surely be the most people there, it being the hour of high mass−−people always made themselves safe with heaven before they began to jump about and eat and drink.

"Look!" said Signa, forgetful one moment of his woes in his delight at looking up at the great duomo of which so many legends were rife in the country−side. "Look! Gemma, look! There is Donatello's pulpit, where they used to show the girdle to the people on the feast days; Donatello you know, who once was only just a poor boy like me, and lived to make the marble speak; the signore at the Certosa told me so; do you think they ever will talk of me hundreds of years after I am dead and gone, as they do about him? Oh, I think they will, because the music does last like the stone, though no one can touch it and feel it like the stone−−and I am sure one day I will make some music that they will care about. Oh, Gemma, you are not looking−−just see those beautiful children up there, all in the marble, with the white flowers! And where is the mark of the man's hand that was cut off for sacrilege, you remember? Teresina has told us about it so often!−−it was thrown up in the air, you know, and the blood of it made a spot like an open palm on the grey wall up above, that is always, always there; only surely the angles might wash it out now; he must have suffered so much, and been so sorry by this!"

And Signa, trembling at his own vivid imaginations, stood still, gazing up and trying to see the blood−stain amongst the black and green serpentine of the inlaying above Lucca della Robbia's Virgin, with her S. Stephen and S. Lawrence. The story was so real to him, he could see the wicked monk going round and round in the aisles, in the dark, with his stolen treasure, unable to find his way out, and believing himself on the road to his own monastery, and so striking the panels of the great door, and crying, "Open, open!" and thus calling down detection and chastisement with his own voice. He could see it all, and he stood gazing up and looking for the blood−stain above Donatello's happy snow white children, till he trembled all over with the awe and fever of his own visions. Gemma, not heeding at all and quite indifferent to the sacred girdle, since it was nothing pretty to put on herself, sniffed with her dainty little nose the various fumes of frying and stewing that came from the open doors and windows of the houses in the square, and decided with herself that it was high time to get something more to eat.

It was noon, and breakfast was being prepared everywhere, and a slice of smoking kid or a taste of boar stuffed with prunes were more to her taste than all the stone children of Donatello. She had known what such dainties meant at fairs at Signa and Impruneta, whither she had occasionally been taken by kindly baby−loving women who pitied her because she had no mother.

She pondered a little; smelling the fragrance of the soup pots, whilst the crowds of people let loose from high mass, like boys from school, filled the piazza, laughing, buzzing, chattering, pushing, loitering, with the broad bright sky cloudless above their heads.

Gemma went and looked wistfully in at an open arched entrance of a fruit shop; beyond, she saw a kitchen with a plump motherly woman in an orange kerchief, who was just taking off the fire a frying−pan full of bacon and lard, browned and ready for eating.

"Might I just lay my flowers here in the shade one moment or two?" said little Gemma, timidly slipping her basket on to the stone slab under the cool wet leaves that kept the strawberries fresh. "Might I just leave them here one moment with you, they will all fade away in the sun?"

"Certainly, my pretty one," said the woman. "But where do you want to go?"

Gemma looked very shy and sad.

"Only−−to see−−to buy−−a little bit of bread. I have a centime, and I am so hungry −−"

"When did you eat last?"

"Yesterday at noon. Mother is just dead, and there was no more bread in the house, and no money."

"Poor little soul!" cried the good woman, with her charity alive in a second; human charity is a match that will strike light very quickly, only it will go out again very nearly as rapidly. "Poor little sweet soul!"

"It shall never be said that I turned a hungry child empty away. Come in and eat your fill. There is only my husband; and we are half famished too, for there has been no getting a mouthful were it ever so, so busy as this morning has been; there is scarce a stalk of fruit left, as you see, already. Come in, you pretty morsel, and eat for two."

Gemma did eat for two, taking no remembrance of Signa outside by the cathedral in the sun. He was well enough with his Donatello and his nonsense. Meanwhile she stuffed her little round mouth full of crisp, brown, savoury bacon, and swallowed her little glass of blue wine, and picked as many bigarreau cherries as she chose, and touched to the quick the hearts of her host and hostess, who were childless.

They only let her go again with many promises that she would return, which indeed she gave willingly, with every intention of keeping them if she found nothing better to do. When she had got her flowers and ran out again to look for Signa, she could not find him. That dismayed her, because he was her mine of money. She pondered a little, selling some flowers in the square meanwhile, because, as she reflected, however sorry one may be, pence are not the less sweet−smelling for that; then reasoned with herself that such a silly as he would be sure to be inside the cathedral dreaming about the sacrilegious monk; and there, in truth, did she find him, sitting on the lower step of the high altar, with the bronze crucifix above him.

Signa was very pale from weariness and long fasting; but his eyes were full of brightness, and he was almost happy; someone had been playing on the organ somewhere unseen, the church being empty and the custodians dozing in noon−tide rest, and the noble silence around him and the deep coolness and the beautiful colours and fuzes so lulled him, and yet excited him, that he knew nothing of the flight of time.

"Are you not hungry?" said Gemma, pattering up and dipping her golden head in half impudent obeisance before the altar.

"Hungry? Oh, no!"

The word seemed to him almost like a sacrilege; yet he was hungry, only he had no leisure or sense for it.

"I am," said Gemma, knowing that her wants were the strongest levers to stir him into movement.

"Are you? I am sorry," said Signa vaguely, half remorsefully, yet almost incapable, in that beauty and holiness which were around him, of bringing his mind wholly to any ordinary daily thing. "Are you, dear? I am sorry. What can we do? But, oh, Gemma dear, can you feel very hungry in this place? Do look at the paintings. Fra Lippi did them, someone said. He was a monk, I think. And then look at those terrible grey faces and the tails like snakes−−they are meant for Sins, are they not? It frightens one, and yet it is so beautiful, all of it."

Gemma looked with a sort of scorn at the marble sphinxes with their serpent bodies on Mino da Fiesole's pulpit. They did not move her.

"Sins are pleasant. Those are ugly things," she said with a premature wisdom. "And I am hungry. Come out."

Signa went lingeringly, reluctantly looking back into the calm eyes of the sphinxes, and sorrowful to be forced out of that solemnity and stillness into the noise and the confusion of the fair.

"How happy the man must have been who made all those things," he said to himself, with a dim perception of the beauty of ages in which labour was done for sake of faith and country and God's will, and not for sake of gold alone.

Gemma jogged his shoulder.

"Do not go to sleep! Come close to me, and do what I ask you−−that is all."

Keeping tight hold of his violin and its bow, Signa obeyed her; the bright, prompt, unswerving will of Gemma always bore him away with it, without any volition of his own. The ascendancy of the unscrupulous will tells, in small lives as in great.

She led him through the flocking people, with the loud clanging bells and the hot sunshine above them.

The noble brown walls of Prato shut in that day a gay and noisy multitude. There were unusual attractions in the way of shows and travelling actors. The country folk had come in from the plain and from both sides of the mountains. The copper−smelters from the valley of the Bisenzio, the quarry−workers from Figlone, the

pottery−painters from Doccia, the straw−plaiters and red−cap makers of the town itself, the villagers from all the little places round about for twenty miles and more, all had contributed to swell the sum of the merrymaking throngs that put on their best, and ate and drank, made love and bought trinkets and shouted and sang under the frown of the old Ghibelline Castello and the prison that was once a Guelph Palace. There were booths in the streets, flags on the roofs, merry faces at the old grated casements; there was all the uproar of lotteries, charlatans, cheapjohns, and the players of puppets; asses brayed, children screamed, maidens laughed, mandolines twanged, kids and pigs were roasting whole in the streets, mounds of plums and cherries reddened the stones with their juice, barrels of wine ran in a hundred dark old kitchens and at many a quaint corner under a terra−cotta shrine in the wall; and above all the happy breathless turmoil rose bell−tower and cupola and fortress and monastery, and above them again the fair blue sky.

Gemma slipped in amongst the multitude, keeping one of Signa's hands in hers.

She watched her opportunity. There was a pause. One puppet−show had just ended; the tombola had not begun. She let go his hand.

"Play," she said, simply.

"Play!" echoed Signa, with his beaming eyes full of pain. "Oh, Gemma! how can I play! so wretched as I am, and away from the Lastra; and Bruno hating me, perhaps; and Nita blind; and all through my own wickedness!"

"Chè!" said Gemma, with serene contempt; "standing crying never mended a broken pot yet; Babbo says so a dozen times a week. I want some sweet cakes, and you have got to get them. How shall we keep ourselves if you do not play? It is all you are good for."

"How cruel you are!" sobbed the boy, his heart in revolt at his little tyrant, yet his courage weak against her.

"Oh, you silly!" laughed Gemma, and pulled his curls. "Let us dance, then−−do as I do−−dance the saltarello that old Maro from the Marches taught us last year−−that will make you merrier."

And Gemma began to dance herself, in the agile lithe postures that an old wandering fiddler had taught to the children of the Lastra; for Tuscany has no dance of its own except the droll trescone, which resembles the hopping of frogs.

"Dance, and play the tune!" said Gemma, imperiously, looking like a little white flower blowing up and down in the wind, as her white arms went up above her head, and her small naked feet twinkled on the stones.

Signa, by sheer instinct, obeyed her as a poodle would have done, making the tune come off the strings of his Rusignuolo, and moving wearily to her lithesome invitation, his head hanging down, and his feet feeling like lead, and the big tears coursing down his cheeks.

"Oh, the little love, let one look at her!" said a woman or two, and cleared a space; and others gathered about, and a ring was made, and one score of people, and then another, and then another, gradually grew together, and watched Gemma in the saltarello, which no busked maiden from the wet green woods of the Marches, and no Roman child under the vinehung loggia of a Trastevere winehouse, ever danced with more spirit or more grace.

Gemma was at home in the air, like a butterfly; and untiring she whirled around, and spurned the pavement, as if her little dusty toes had the wings of Mercury.

"Oh, the beautiful little angel!" cried the women, when at least she ceased, hot, and breathless, and panting, with all her yellow hair blown back; and they kissed her, and worshipped her, and loaded her with sweetmeats, and cheap trinkets, and playthings.

Signa stood apart, with swollen eyes and a swelling heart.

"What fun it is!" said Gemma to him, with her little skirt full of spoils.

Signa was silent.

"A sulky boy," said the women. "Is he your brother, my dear?"

"Yes, and he plays so beautifully," said Gemma. "He was too tired to dance well. Play, dear, play for these good kind people, who have given us such lovely things."

The words were simple, and she caressed him as she spoke, but in his ear she whispered: "Play, and get some money; or I will tell the guards, and send you back to Lippo."

Signa was helpless in her hands.

If he were sent back, there would be woe−−and the galleys for Bruno.

He obeyed her, and drew the bow across the strings, and played his old favourite Misero Pargoletto, of Leo, which he had played so many times, that it came to him by sheer instinct and habit. He could not play amiss, even

when he was not thinking what he did, his hands found the true place, and struck out the true music.

Insensibly, the sweet accustomed sounds soothed him, drove away his pain, and calmed his sense of desolation and danger.

Insensibly, he went on from one thing to another, and the melody gained on the people. They are sure judges of what is pure and excellent. Their ear is accurate; their feelings unerring. The little figure in their midst, with the sweet and serious face, and the small brown hands, that moved so perfectly, touched and won them. Muledrivers, copper miners, pottery−painters, peasants, townsfolk, merry−makers, gathered together, and listened to the child, till silence fell on the crowded square, and Gemma, seizing the moment, slipped in from one to another, holding out her little empty palm, and whispering, while her pockets were full of half−pence, and her ears were full of praises: "We are so hungry, my brother and I!"

CHAPTER XV.

AS it chanced that day Bruno heard nothing. He did not leave his fields, the week being the threshing time, and he having a man to help him whom he had to pay, and being anxious to do all his grain and stack the straw entirely before the Sunday. And down in the Lastra, Lippo, whose courage though not his wrath had cooled, found excuse to go up to his sheep who were ailing, and got out of reach of his wife's tongue, and spent the day in pondering how best he could compass the getting back the money without rousing the ire of his brother too hotly on his own person. He held Bruno by a chain indeed, but he had a foreboding that under too severe a strain the chain would snap, and he repented him of the impolitic passion into which his wife had hurried him−−nine years of prudence and hypocrisy had been undone in five minutes' rage!

It was eight in the evening. There was red still in the sky, but the sun had gone down. Bruno had set a torch in the ring in the wall of his stone stable, and was still threshing by its light with the peasant whom he had hired to help him. Unless they worked late and early there could be no chance of finishing the grain by the Sunday morning; and he wanted it threshed and done with, that he might have all his time for his maize and vines, and begin the ploughing forthwith.

The ruddy light gleamed on and off; the flails rose and fell; the floor was golden; the walls were black; the air blew in, fragrant with the smell of the meadow−mint in the fields and the jessamine that clung to the arched doors, and the stone−pines that dropped their cones on the grass above where the hill was rock.

Bruno was very tired and hot; he had worked all day on a drink of sharp wine from four of the morning, and had only stretched himself on the bench for an hour's sleep at noon. Nevertheless he went on belabouring the corn with all his will, and in the noise of the flail and the buzz of the chaff about his ears, he never heard a voice calling from outside, coming up the fields; and a child was standing at his side before he knew that anyone was there.

Then he left off, and saw Palma, Gemma' s sister.

"Do not come lounging here. You will get a blow of the flail," he said roughly.

"Signa!" panted Palma, who was crying. She had been crying all the way up the hill.

"If you want the boy he is in the Lastra. Get out of the way."

"Is he not here? We were sure they were here," said Palma, with a sob, knee−deep in the tossing straw.

"No," said Bruno, whirling his flail about his head. "Be off with you. I can have no brats idling here."

"But Signa is lost, and Gemma was with him!" said Palma, with wide−open black eyes of abject terror.

"Lost! what do you mean? The boy is somewhere in the Lastra, doing Lippo's work."

"No," said Palma, with a sob. "They were in the garden at Giovoli−−very early−−Mimi saw them−−and they went away together−−very fast−−over the bridge. And Babbo sent me to ask you−−he was sure that they were here. But old Teresina says that Signa must have run away, because Lippo and Nita beat him horribly−−about a fiddle−−I do not know−−and all the town is talking because Signa hit Nita in the eyes; and I know she was cruel to him always, only he never, never would tell you."

Bruno flung down his flail with an oath that made the little girl tremble where she stood in the gold of the corn.

"Stay till I come, Neo," he said quickly to the contadino working with him, and caught his cloak from a nail, and without another word or a glance at the sobbing child, strode away through his vines in the twilight.

Palma ran with him on her sturdy little legs, telling him all she knew, which was the same thing over and over again. Bruno heard in unbroken silence.

His long stride and the child's rapid little trot kept them even, and took them fast into the road and on to the bridge. At the entrance of this bridge Sandro met them: though the children were always together, Sandro knew little of Bruno, and was afraid of the little he did know. But the common bond of their trouble made them friends. He seized hold of Bruno as he went to the bridge −−

"Do not waste time in the Lastra. He is not in the Lastra. There was some horrid quarrel−−so they say, Nita

knocked the body down−−all about that fiddle and the quantity of money. The boy has run away, and my Gemma with him−−my pretty little Gemma!−−and a minute ago there came in Nisio with his baroccino; he has been to Prato, and he says he saw them there, and thought that we had sent them−−there is a fair. You can see Nisio; he is stopping at the wineshop just across. That was at four in the day he saw them. The boy was playing. Will you go? I do not see how I can go−−they will turn me away at Giovoli if I go−−all my carnations potting and all my roses budding−−and then the goat is near her labour, and nothing but his child to see to her or to keep the boys in order−−and what the lad could take Gemma for, if he would run away, though she was only a trouble in the house, and a greedy poppet always, still−−"

Bruno, before half his words were done, was away over the bridge, and had reached the wineshop, and had confronted Nisio−−Dionisio Riggo, a chandler and cheesemonger of the Lastra, who had a little bit of land out Prato way.

"You saw−−the boy−−in Prato?"

Nisio grinned.

"I saw Lippo's foundling in Prato. Is that much to you? Nay, nay! I meant no offence indeed. Only you are so soft upon the boy−−people will talk! Yes, he was there, playing a fiddle in a crowd. And the little girl of Sandro's−−the pretty white one−−with him. Only a child's freak, no doubt. I thought they were out there for a holiday. Else I would have spoken, and have brought them home. But they can take no harm."

Bruno left him also without a word, and went on his way as swiftly as the wind up to the house of Lippo.

Old Baldo was working at a boot at his board before his door. Lippo, who had just come down from the hills, was standing idling and talking with his gossip the barber. His wife was ironing linen in an attic under the roof, her eyes none the worse, though she had bound one up with a red handkerchief that she might make her moan with effect to the neighbours.

Bruno's hand fell like a sledge−hammer on his brother's shoulder before Lippo knew that he was nigh.

"What did you do to the boy?"

Lippo trembled, and his jaw fell. People came out of the other doorway. Old Baldo paused with his awl uplifted. Children came running to listen. Bruno shook his brother to and fro as the breeze shakes a cane by the river.

"What did you do to the boy?"

"I did nothing," stammered Lippo. "We were vexed−−all that money−−and nothing but a fiddle to show. That was natural you know−−only natural was it? And then the child grew in a dreadful passion, and he flew on my poor good Nita like a little wild cat, and blinded her−−she is blind now. That is all the truth, and the saints are my testimony!"

"That is a lie, and the devils are your sponsors!" shouted Bruno, till the shout rang from the gateway to the shrine. "If harm have come to the child, I will break every bone in your body. I go to find him first−−then I will come back and deal with you."

He shook Lippo once more to and fro, and sent him reeling against the cobbler's board, and scattered Baldo's boots and shoes and tools and bits of leather right and left; then without looking backward or heeding the clamour he had raised, he dashed through the Lastra to get home, and fetch money, and find a horse.

Old Baldo did not love his son−in−law. His daughter had been taken by Lippo's handsome, soft, pensive face, and timid gentleness and suavity of ways, as rough, strong, fierce−tempered women often are; and Baldo had let her have her way, though Lippo had brought nothing to the common purse. It was a bad marriage for Nita, the sole offspring of the old cobbler, who owned the house he lived in, and let some floors of it, and was a warm man all the Lastra said, with cosy little bits of money here and there, and morsels of land even, bought at bargains, and a shrewd head and a still tongue, so that he might be worth much more that even people fancied, where he sat stitching at his door, with a red cap and a pair of horn spectacles, and a wicked old tongue that could throw dirt with any man's or woman's either.

Lippo stood quivering, and almost weeping.

"So good as we have been!" he moaned.

"You white−livered cur!" swore old Baldo, who had been toppled off his stool, and was wiping the dust off his grey head, and groping in the dark for his horn spectacles, with many oaths. "You whining ass! Your brother only serves you right. It is not for me to say so. It is ill work washing one's foul linen in the town fountain. But if

Bruno break your neck he will serve you right−−taking his money all these years, and starving his brat, and beating it;−−pah!"

"And what would you have said if I had pampered it up with dainties?" said Lippo, panting and shivering, and hoping to heaven Nita's hands were in the starch, and her ears anywhere than hearkening out of the window.

"That is neither here nor there," said old Baldo, who, like all the world, detested the tu quoque form of argument. "That is neither here nor there. The pasticcio was none of my making. I said there were brats too many in the house. But you have got good pickings out of it, that is certain; and it is only a raging lion like Bruno, a frank fool, and a wrathful, and for ever eating fire and being fleeced like a sheep, that would not have seen through you all these years."

Lippo upset the stall again by an excess of zeal in searching for the spectacles, and prayed the saints, who favoured him, to serve him so that, in the noise of all the falling tools, his terrible father−inlaw's revelations might not reach the listening barber.

Rage in, wit out:−−Lippo sighed to think that his lot fell for ever amongst people who saw not the truth and wisdom of this saying.

He found the spectacles, and then gathered himself together with a sigh.

"My brother shall not go alone to seek the boy," he said with gentle courage and a sigh. "I thought the child was safe upon the hill, or else−−Harm me?−−oh, no! Poor Bruno is a rough man; but he owes me too much−−besides, he is not bad at heart−−oh, no! Perhaps I was hasty about that money. After all, it was the child's. But when people are poor, as we all are, and never taste meat hardly twice a year, and so much sickness and trouble everywhere, it overcomes one. So much money for a toy!−−for, after all, an old lute does as well. Tell Nita I am gone to look for Signa, and may be out all night."

"He is a good man, and it is a shame to treat him so," said the women at the doors.

Old Baldo picked up his waxed thread, and made a grimace to himself, as he went to his work again, with a lanthorn hung up above him on a nail. But it was not for him to show his daughter, or her husband, in the wrong. Besides, popular feeling, so far as it was represented in the lane between the gateway and the shrine, was altogether with Lippo.

He had struck a chord that was sure to answer. People who lived on black bread and cabbages, and had a good deal of sickness, and laboured from red dawn to white moonlight to fill empty mouths, were all ready to resent with him the waste of gold pieces on a child and a fiddle.

He knew the right key to turn to move his little world.

Good man as he was, he went down the lane with an angry heart, saying, as old Vasari has it, things that are not in the mass; but he said them to himself only, for he had a character to lose.

Under the light of the lamp that jutted out from the east gateway, where the old portcullis hangs, he saw Bruno. He was putting a little, rough, short pony into a baroccino, having hired both from a vintner, whose tavern and stable were open on to the street.

The baroccino was the common union of rope and bars and rotten wood and huge wheels, which looks as if it would be shivered at a step, but will in truth whirl unbroken over mountain−heights, and fly unsinking over a morass. The pony was one of those sturdy little beasts which, with a collar of bells and a head−dress of fox−tails, fed on straw and on blows, and on little else besides, will yet race over the country at that headlong, yet sure−footed, speed, which Tuscans teach their cattle, heaven knows how. Bruno had hired both of the vintner, to save the time that his return home would have taken him.

The street was quite dark. The lamp in the gateway shed a flickering gleam over Bruno's dark face and the brass of the pony's headstall.

Lippo's heart stood still within him with fear. Nevertheless, he went up to the place. He had a thing to say, and he knew he must say it then or never.

"Bruno, give me one word," he said, in a whisper, touching his brother on the arm.

Bruno flashed one glance at him, and went on buckling the straps of the harness.

"Are you going to quarrel with me−−about the boy?"

"As God lives, I will kill you if harm come to him."

Lippo shivered.

"But if you find him safe and sound−−boys are always safe and sound−−do you mean to quarrel with

me?−−do you mean to take him away?"

"If you have dealt ill with him, it will be the worse for you."

Lippo knew the menace that was in his brother's voice, though Bruno did not look up once, nor leave off buckling and strapping. And he knew that he had dealt ill−−very ill.

"Listen, Bruno!" he said, coaxingly. "He will tell you things, no doubt; children always whine. We have punished him sometimes;−−one must punish children, or what would they be? If you listen, he will tell you things, of course. Children want to live on clover, and never do a stroke of work."

Bruno freed his arm from his brother's hand, with a gesture that sent the strap he was fastening backward up into Lippo's face.

"You have hurt him, and you have lied, and you have betrayed me and cheated me," he said between his teeth. "I know that−−I know that! Well, your reckoning will wait−−till I have found the child."

Lippo's blood ran very cold. Concealment, he saw, was impossible any longer. If the boy were found, he knew that he would have scant mercy to look for from Bruno's hands.

"But hear a word, Bruno," he said; and his voice shook, and his fingers trembled as they clutched at Bruno's cloak, as the latter took the ropes that served for reins and put his foot on the step of the baroccino. "Just a word−−just a word only. Will you take him away? Will you cease to pay? Will you break our compact? Is that what you mean?"

Bruno sprang on the little cart, and answered with a slash of his whip across Lippo's mouth.

Lippo, stung with the pain of the blow, and goaded by a laugh that he caught from the vintner, who stood watching in his tavern doorway, sprang up also on the iron bar that serves as footboard to the little vehicle.

"Take care what you do!" he hissed in his elder's ear. "Take care! If you cease to pay−−if you take the child−−I will say what I said. I will make him hate you; I will tell him who he is; I will tell him how you stabbed his mother at the fair; I will tell him how you−−you−−you left her alone dead for the flood to take her, and maybe had murdered her, for aught I know. And see how he will love you then, and eat your bread. Now strike me again, if you like. That is what I shall say. And what can you do? Tell me that−−tell me that! Now go and ride out all the night, and think and choose. How weak you are!−−ah, ah! How weak you are against me now!−−how weak, with all your rage!"

Bruno struck him backwards off the step. The pony dashed away into the darkness. Lippo fell in the dust.

When the tearing noise of the wheels and the hoofs flying away into the night over the stones had died away, Lippo lifted his head to the vintner, who had raised him from the ground, and had poured some wine into his mouth.

"Good friend," said gentle Lippo, with faltering breath, wiping the dust and a little blood from his forehead; "good friend, say nothing of this−−it would only bring trouble on Bruno. I would have gone with him to find the boy, but you saw what his passion was. He thinks me to blame; perhaps I was. So much money thrown away on a toy of music for a child, when a pipe cut in the fields does as well, and it might have been laid aside for his manhood! And so much want as there is in the world! But never mind that; say I was wrong−−only do not tell people of Bruno. You know he is brawling always, and that gets him a bad name; and not for paradise would I add to it. He is too quick with his hands, and will take life, I always fear, one day; but this was an accident−−a pure accident only! Oh, I am well−−quite well; not hurt at all. And your wine is so pure and good."

And he drank a little more of it, and then went away home; and the vintner watched him, going feebly, as one bruised and shaken would do; and shook his head, and said to three or four others who came in for a flask and a turn at dominoes, that that beast Bruno had well−nigh killed his brother and driven over him; and that it would be well to give a hint of the story to the Carabineers when they should next come by looking after bad men and perilous tempers.

Getto una palma al mare, e mi va al fondo.
Agli altri vedo il piombo navigare."−−TUSCAN SONG.

I throw a palm into the sea: the deeps devour it.
Others throw lead, and lo! it buoyant sails.

VOLUME II.

CHAPTER I.

WHEN he reached Prato it was quite night. Most of the houses were shut up; but, as it had been a great fair day, there were lights in many places, and little knots before winehouse doors, and groups coming and going to the sound of mandolines, laughing and romping about the old crooked streets.

There was a bright moon above the old town where Fra Lippo once lived. The shadows of walls, and gables, and toweres, and roofs, were black as jet. The women and youths danced on the pavement, while somebody strummed a guitar for them. Thre was a smell of spilt wine and dead flowers. Some mountebanks, in scarlet and blue and silvery spangles, were coming down a lane, having finished their night's work, drum and fife sounding before them.

Bruno saw nothing of all this.

He only looked for a little, thin, pale face with big brown eyes as bright as stars.

He stopped the pony before a little osteria that was open, because some men were still playing draughts and drinking in its doorway, and bid them put the beast in the stable; and asked if they had seen a little boy and a girl somewhat younger, they boy having a fiddle with him, and long hair.

The people did not know; they had not noticed; scores of children and country−folks had been about Prato all the day.

Bruno left the pony and baroccino with them, and wandered out where chance took him. He had no acquaintance in Prato. He had only come there a few times to buy or sell, if there were a good chance to do either with profit.

But he inquired of every creature he saw for the children.

He asked the girls dancing. He asked the old man raking up the melon−rinds and fig−skins out of the dust. He asked the women barring up their casements for the night. He asked the lovers sauntering in the white, moon−lit midnight, with their arms round one another. He asked the dusky monk, flitting like a brown shadow from one arched doorway to another. But none could tell him anything; nobody had noticed; some thought they had seen a little fellow with a violin, but were not sure; one girl had, she knew, and had thought that he had played prettily; and remembered there had been a crowd about him; but where the child had gone, had no idea.

"He must be in the town," thought Bruno, and looked for him in every nook of shadow−−under arches or on the steps of shrines, thinking to find them curled up asleep, like kittens after play.

He tramped through and through the town, not staying for any rest or drink, footsore and heartsore, and putting away form him as best he could the dark perplexity of how he should tell the child the truth, without risking the loss of his affections; or, keeping his secret, save the boy from Lippo.

As he went pondering, with midnight tolling from the ancient bells above him, one of the mountebanks came to him down a dim passage−way, a rose−coloured and gold−bedizened figure, skipping in the shadows with a mask on, and a bladder that it rattled.

"Are you looking for two children?" it said to him through its grotesque visage. "I can tell you of him−−a little lad with a fiddle, and a pretty baby, white as a lily. They were here all day in Prato. And this evening Giovacchini, whom we call the Ape, took them both off with him to the sea. They went willingly!−−oh,they went willingly! The Ape's children always do; only they never know what they go to! Do you understand? The Ape has such a pretty cajolery with him. He would make the little Gesu off the very altars dance and play for him. But if you are their father, as I take it, follow them to Livorno, the Ape will take ship there at once. Follow them. For the Ape is−−not so pleasant when children once are out of sight of shore. You understand!"

And, singing, the mountebank, with his masked face grinning from ear to ear, rattling his peas in his gilded bladder, skipped away as he had come, too suddenly and swiftly for Bruno to stretch a hand to stay him.

"Is that true?" cried Bruno, with a great gasp. He felt as if a strong hand had gripped his heart and stopped its beating.

An old man, raking the fruit skins that revellers had left on the stones, looked up from his basket of filth.

"I daresay it is true," said he. "Why not? That man they call the Ape seeks pretty children, and catches some, and takes them off to strange countries, to go about and play and dance, or sell the plaster casts, or grind the barrel organs. I have heard of him. It is a trade, like any other. He always takes care that they go willingly. Still, if you be their father, and have no mind to lose them, best be off. He would be sure to go to sea at once."

"The sea! Where is the sea?" said Bruno.

He did not know, except that it was somewhere where the sun went every night.

"Go to Livorno. They have gone to Livorno safe enough. The Ape will be sure to ship with them, and he got a score more I warrant! Go to Livorno."

"Livorno!" the name told hardly anything to Bruno; it was where the fish came from, that was all he knew, and the river ran there; and now and then from it to Signa there would come some seafaring fellow home for a week to his parents or brothers, bringing with him tales of strange coutnries, and weeds that smelt of salt, and wonderful large shells; and such a one would put up in one of the chapels a votive−offering, picturing a shipwreck, or a vessel burning on the ocean, or a boat straining through a wild white squall, or some such peril of deep waters from which he had been delivered−−that was all Bruno knew.

Except into the great towns to sell or buy seeds or oxen, Bruno had never stirred from the hill he was born on, and to quit it had never entered his imagination.

To him, Livorno was as Nova Zembia or the heart of Africa is to denizens of wider worlds.

The contadino not seldom goes through all his life without seeing one league beyound the fields of his labour, and the village that his is registered at, married at, and buried at, and which is the very apex of the earth to him. Women will spin and plait and hoe and glean within a half a dozen miles of some great city whose name is an art glory in the mouths of scholars, and never will have seen it, never once perhaps, from their birth down to their grave. A few miles of vine−bordered roads, a breadth of corn−land, a rounded hill, a little red roof under a mulberry tree, a church tower with a saint upon the roof, and a bell that sounds over the walnut trees−−these are their world: they know and want to know no other.

A narrow life no doubt, yet not without much to be said for it. Without unrest, without curiosity, without envy; clinging like a plant to the soil; and no more willing to wander than the vinestakes which they thrust into the earth.

To those who have put a girdle round the earth with their footsteps, the whole world seems much smaller than does the hamlet or farm of his affections to the peasant:−−and how much poorer! The vague, dreamful wonder of an untravelled distance−−of an untracked horizon−−has after all more romance in it than lies in the whole globe run over in a year.

Who can ever look at the old maps in Herodotus or Xenophon without a wish that the charm of those unknown limits and those untraversed seas was ours?−−without an irresistible sense that to have sailed away, in vaguest hazard, into the endless mystery of the utterly unknown, must have had a sweetness and a greatness in it that is never to be extracted from "the tour of the world in ninety days?"

But Bruno was almost as simple and vague in belief as the old Father of History, and the idea of the earth he dwelt on was hardly clearer to him than to any Lake dweller in Lacustrine ages. Dangerous people called Francesi were in great numbers beyond that sea whose west wind sent the rain up, and the floods, and the fish; and in Rome God lived, or St. Peter did−−which was the same thing: so much he knew; he did not want to know more; it would not have done him any good, the priests said so.

Therefore, when he heard now that the children were gone to the sea shore, it was for him as if they had gone with any falling star into the dusky and immeasurable depths of night. But being a man who thought little but acted fast, and would have followed Signa into the fires of the bottomless pit, he did not tarry a moment, but flung his cloak over his shoulder, and prepared to go straight seaward.

"I will go get the pony," he said, stupidly, like a man stunned, and was moving off, but the old man raking in the dust stopped him.

"Nay: what good is a pony, forty miles if one? If the beast were fresh you would not be in time. The Ape is there by this time. Go by the iron way. So you wil get to the sea a little after sunrise."

"The iron way?" said Bruno, dully: the thought was new and strange and weird to him; he saw the hateful thing, it is true, winding every day through the green vineshadows underneath his hill, but to use it−−to trust to it−−it was like riding the horned Fiend.

"To be sure," said the old man with the rake and basket. "Come−−I will show you the way−−it is a good step−−you will give me something for charity."

"I might get a horse," muttered Bruno, and pulled his canvas bag out and counted his coppers and his little dirty crumpled notes.

He had not very many francs; twenty or so, that was all; just what he had taken in the market on the Friday before. He ahd never been away from home. He had no idea what travel might cost.

"No horse that you could hire would get by day−break to the sea," said the old man, who knew he would get nothing by his hiring a horse, but thought he might turn a penny for leading him to the rail. "Think−−you want those children−−and if you saw the ship just out of port and could not reach her−−would you forgive yourself? You would never see them again then−−never all the rest of your days. The Ape would take care of that. But go by the quick way. They will come through from Florence in a few minutes. I hear the clock striking."

Bruno shivered a little under his brown skin. Never to see the boy again!−−and what would he say to Pippa on the great day when all the dead should meet?

"For the boy's sake," he muttered: there was no peril or evil he would not have run the gauntlet of to serve or save the boy.

"Show me the way−−if it be the best way," he said to the old man, with that curious and pathetic helplessness which at times comes over men who, physically courageous, are morally weak.

"Yes, I will show it you. But you will give me something?" stipulated the rag−gatherer, shouldering his basket. Bruno nodded.

The old man hobbled on before him through a few crooked lanes and little streets, throwing quaint black shadows on the moon−whitened pavement with his rake and his rush−skip. Bruno followed; his brain in a dark confusion, and his heart sick for the danger to the boy.

When they reached the place by the Bisenzio Gate, the iron horse already was rushing in through the cool white night, flinging foam and fire as it came.

It seemed to Bruno as if ten thousand hammers were striking all at once. The showers of sparks seemed to him as from hell itself.

He would watch for thieves alone on the dark hillside in autumn nights. He could break in wild colts to the shafts and fierce steers to the yoke. He would stride through a hostile throng at a brawl, at a winefair, careless though every man there were his foe. He had the blood in him that has flowed freely from Monteaperto to Mentana. But he was afraid of this unnatural and infernal thing. His fancy was bewildered, and his nerve was shaken by it.

He was like a soldier who will face a mine, but shudders from a spectre.

"It is horrible−−unnatural−−unchristian," he muttered as the great black engine, with its trail of flame and smoke, stood panting like a living animal.

"But we must use the devil's work when it serves us. All the saints say that," said the old man, dragging him to the hole in the wall, and twisting his money out of the bag and getting him his pass in due exchange.

Bruno was like a sheep; he followed mechanically; dull with the ghastly fear of what had happened to the boy, and the vaguer personal terror of the unknown force to which he had to trust.

There were great noise, great shouting, hurrying to and fro; roaring of the escaped steam; lights green and red flashing in the dark.

Confused and uncertain, Bruno caught his bag out of the old man's hand, sprang in a hole that someone shoved him to; and felt himself moving without action of his own, with the sparks of fire dancing past his eyes.

"For the boy," he said to himself; and made the sign of the cross under his cloak, and then sat down as he saw others do.

If he went to his death it was in seeking the boy: he would meet Pippa with a clean soul.

The old man hobbled away chuckling. Bruno, true to his word, had given him a penny; but in his palm he held four of the dirty notes, each of one franc.

"I might have taken more," he said to himself, with self−reproach. "He never would have known. The saints send one folks in trouble!"

Bruno was borne on swiftly through the night.

With him there were a monk, a conscript, and two contadini with a basket of poultry between them, and two

melons in a handkerchief. An oil lamp burned dully overhead, throwing yellow gleams on the young soldier's boyish face, and the begging−friar's brown cowl, and the black brows of the sleeping peasant woman, and the green wrinkled globes of the fruit.

They rocked and thundered, and rattled and flew; the white steam and the rain of sparks drifting past the wooden window.

Bruno was like a man in a nightmare. He only dimly understood the danger assailing the boy. He had heard that men took children to foreign countries; tempting them with fair promises, and then grinding their little souls in the devil's mill. But it was all vague to him like everything else that was outside the lines of his vines, or beyond the walls of the Lastra.

Only a word of the rag−picker's haunted him like a ghost.

The man would take ship; and he, himself, might reach too late and see the ships sailing−−sailing−−sailing−−and never be able to overtake it or see the face of the child again.

The horror clung to him.

He sat gazing into the night; making the sign of the cross under his cloak, and muttering ever and again an ave.

"You are in trouble my good son?" said the monk.

"Yes, father," answered Bruno: but he said no more. It was not his way to take refuge in words.

A great dull tumult of horror was on him. The strange noise and swaying motion added to it. All the ill that ever he had done in all his life−−and it was much−−surged up over him. It was divine vengeance on his sins, he thought; he had not clean hands enough to save Pippa's child. He had been a wild, fierce man, and had never ruled his passions, and had struck rough blows when he should have asked forgiveness; and had been lawless in his loves, and had made more than one woman rue the day his wish had lit on her.

It seemed to him that it must be his sins which were pursuing him. For the little lad was so innocent; why should this misery befall them else?

His thoughts were all in disorder, shaken together, and whirling round and confusing him, so that all he could think of was that ship sailing away and he on shore, helpless:−−only now and then, in the midst of his pain, he thought too of his oxen, Tinello and Pastore:−−were they hungry?−−would the man to whom he had left them have wit to give them their suppers?−−would they bellow with wonder at not seeing him in their stable?−−if he were a minute late they always lowed for him, thrusting their great white heads over the wooden half−door.

So his thoughts went round and round, and the night train flew on with him past the shining river in its thickets of cane and acacia, and the grey hills silvery in the the moonshine, and the knolls of woodland with their ruined fortresses, and the vineyards that grew green where ruined Semifonte was levelled with the soil; and the silence of walled Pistoia holding the ghost of great Farinata; and Pisa with her cold dead beauty like a lifeless Dido on her bier; and so past the great dense woods and breezy heathery moorlands of the king's hunting grounds, till in the light of the moon a white streak shone, and the monk pointing to it said to them:

"There is the sea."

CHAPTER II.

IT was four in the morning.

On the long, low sandy lines of the coast, and on the blue waters, the moonlight was still shining. In the east the great arc of the sky; and the distant mountains, and the plains, with their scattered cities, were all rose−coloured with the flush of the rising day. Night and morning met, and kissed and parted.

Bruno went down to the edge of the sea, as they told him, and looked, and was stupefied. In some vague way the strange beauty of it moved him. This vast breadth of water that was so new to him, sparkling under the moon, with white sails motionless here and there, and islands, like clouds, and, in face of it, the sunrise, awed him with its wonder as the familiar loveli− ness of his own hills and valleys had no power to do.

He forgot the child a moment.

He crossed himself and said a prayer. He was vaguely afraid. He thought God must be there.

He stood motionless. The rose fo the dawn spread higher and higher, and the stars grew dim, and the moon was bathed in the daylight. A boat put out from the shore, and stole softly away across the gleaming blue, making a path of silver on the sea.

Bruno, like a man waking, remembered the warning of the ship: for aught he knew, the boat was a ship, and the child was borne away in it.

His heart grew sick with hear. He stopped the only creature that was near him on the way; a fisherman going to set his pots and kreels in the rock−pools to catch crabs.

"Is that a ship going away?" he asked.

The fisherman laughed.

"That is a little boat, going fishing. Where do you come from that you do not know a ship?"

"Has one sailed yet, since night? Away?−−quite away?−−not to come back?"

"What do you mean?" siad the fisherman. "If you mean the mail−ships or the steamers to Elba or Genoa−−no! Nothing will leave port till night. Some will come in. Why do you ask? Do you want to get away?"

The fisher glanced at him with some suspicion.

Bruno's eyes had a strange look, as if some peril were about him.

"You are sure no ship will go away?" he asked persistently.

"Not till nightfall," said the fisherman. "There are none due. Besides, there is a dead calm: see how these rowers pull."

And he trudged on with his lobster−pots and kreels. This man was in trouble, he thought; it was best not to meddle with him, for fear of getting into any of the trouble.

Bruno went on along the wharf.

The natural shrewdness of a peasant's habits of action began to stir underneath the confusion of his brain and the perplexity of his ignorance and his sorrow. In many things he was stupid, but in others he was keen. He began to consider what he could best do. That great wide water awed him−−apalled him−−fascinated him; but he tried not to think of it, not to gaze at it; he looked, instead, up at the moon, and was comforted to see it was the same that hung over the hills of Signa, to light the little grey aziola homeward through the pines. It seemed to him that he was half a world away from the quiet fields where Tinello and Pastore drew the plough beneath the vines.

But he had to find the boy;−−that he must do before ever he saw the Signa hills again. He pondered a little, passing along the wharves, then turned into a winehouse that was opening early for seafaring men, and ate some polenta, and drank, and asked them tidings−−if they could give any−−of a little lad with a violin, who had been stolen.

The tavern folks were curious and compassionate, and would have helped him if they could have done, but knew nothing. Only they told him that if the child had a pretty trick of melody, he would be nearly sure to be taken to earn money where the gay great people lived southward, along where he could see the tamarisk trees. If

he did not find the children in the old town, it would be best to go southwards towards noon.

He thanked them, and wandered out and about all the old, ugly, salt−scented lanes and streets and busy quays, piled with merchandise and fish, and lines of fortifications, and dull squares and filthy haunts, where there was the smell of salt−fish all day long, and the noise of brawling sailors of divers coutnries, and screaming foreign birds, and the strong odour of fishing nets and sails and cordage.

He heard nothing of the boy; but learned that a ship would go away to the coast of France at sunset.

So at noon, as they had told him it would be best to do, he went along the seashore, southwards, past the lighthouse and through the green lines of feathery tamarisks, that Titania of trees with its sweet breath, that is flower and forest, and spice and sea, and feather and fern, all in one, as it were.

To ask any public authority to aid him never occurred to him. He had been to often at feud with it in his wild youth to dream of seeking it as any help. Bruno and the guardians of order loved not one another. When he saw them at street corners with their shining swords and their soldiering swagger, he gave them a wide berth; or, if forced to go by them, passed with a fiercer glance than common, and a haughtier step, as of one who defies.

His heart was sick as he went by the shining water. The horror came on him that he had been misled. Neither mountebank nor rag−picker had been sure that the children had come to the shore. At best, it had been only a thought.

Bruno felt for his knife in his waistband, under his shirt. If only he could deal with the man who had taken the boy; and with Lippo.

His soul was black as night as he went along in the full sunshine, with the azure water glowing till his bold eyes ached to look at it.

He had never known till now how well he loved the child.

And if he had drifted away to some vile, wretched, sinful, hopeless life−−the life of a beaten dog, of a stage monkey, of a caged song bird,−−if he lived so and died so, what could he say in heaven or in hell to Pippa?

The sweet tamarisk scent made him sick as he went. The play of the sun on the sea seemed to him the cruellest thing that ever laughed at men's pain.

When he came amongst the gay people and the music, and the colour and the laughter of the summer bathers, and the beautiful women floating in the water with their long hair and their white limbs, he hated them all−−for sheer pain he could have taken his knife and struck at them, and made the sparkling blue dusky with their death. It was not only the child that he lost; it was his power to save his own soul.

So he thought.

He went through the long lines of the tamarisks a brown straight figure, with naked feet and bold eyes full of pain, like a caught hawk's, in the midst of the fluttering garments and the loosened hair, and the mirthful laughter and the graceful idleness of the bathers, whom Watteau would have painted for a new voyage to Cytherea.

Bruno did not notice what he was amongst. The Tuscan blood is too republican to be daunted by strange rank or novel spectacle. Whatever be its other faults, servility is utterly alien to it, and a serene dignity lives in it side by side with indolent carelessness.

Bruno went through these delicate patricians, these picturesque idlers, these elegant women, as he went through the poppies in the corn. They were no more to him.

He had come into the environs of the Ardensa, with the pretty toy villas glittering on each side of him, and in front the Maremana road, with bold brown rocks and sheep−cropped hills, going away southward to the marshes and to Rome; and on the sea, boats with wing−like sails, some white, some brown, and the coral fishers' smacks at anchor, and in the sunlight the violet shores of Corsica.

All at once his heart leaped.

He heard the notes of a violin, quite faint and distant, but sweet as the piping of a blackbird amongst the white anemones of earliest spring.

There were ten thousand violins and more in the world. He did not think of that. To him there was but one.

He made his way straight towards the sound.

It came from a group of tamarisks and evergreens set round a lawn some short way from the shore where the luxurious bathers, after their sea plunge, were gathered in a little throng, with all the eccentric graces of apparel that fashion is amused to dictate to its followers.

His heart leaped with surer joy as he drew nearer and nearer; he recognised the song that was being sung, a

rispetto of the people, strung to an old grand chant of the sombre Neapolitan Traetta; which Signa, having heard the air of it on the sacristan's organ, had played night after night on his little lute, sitting outside the door of Tinello and Pastore's stable, while the sun went down behind the hill.

Morirò, morirò, sarai contenta Più non la sentirai mia afflitta voce! Quattro campane sentirai sonare 'Na piccola campana a bassa voce. Quando lo sentirai 'lmorto passare Fátti di fuora, che quella son io Ti prego, bella, viemmi a accompagnare Fino alla chiesa per l'amor di Dio Quando m'incontri, fallò il pianto amare Ricòdati di me quando t'amavo Quando m'incontri, volgi i passi indietro Ricòdati di me quand'ero teco. I shall die, shall die; and thou wilt be content Thou wilt no longer hear my lamentation. Four bells will ring upon thine ear for me, And one small bell much lower than the rest! When thou shalt learn the dead is passing by, Come forth to see me, for that dead am I. I pray thee, love, come forth to come with me, Come to the church for the dear love of God; And when thou see'st me, gather bitter plants, And think of me in our dead days of love; And when thou see'st me, turn thy steps within, Think of me in the time when I was thine.Tuscan Rispetto Bruno knew nothing of the name of the air, but he knew the words, and with a great cry, he pushed his way into the brilliant circle.

The music ceased; the child looked up, he was standing in the midst of the graceful women and idle men playing and singing, with big tears rolling down his cheeks.

Gemma, with a scarlet riband in her short gold locks, and her hands full of sweetmeats, was run− ning from one to another of the listeners, taking all they gave.

"Signa!" cried Bruno.

The boy stopped a moment, lifting his great eyes in piteous uncertainty of what was right to do; then the impulse of affection, and of habit, and of home were too strong for his resolution of self−sacrifice; he sprang into Bruno's outstretched arms.

"O take me back, take me back, and Gemma too!" he sobbed; "and you will not hurt Lippo? promise me, promise me−−because they will hurt you; and that is why I ran away, for fear that I should bring you harm. But I am so unhappy. Gemma laughs and loves it all; but I−−O take me back to the Lastra, and they will tell me there if I have hurt Nita and ought to die. But promise me about Lippo first−−promise me!"

Gemma stood looking; the sea−wind blowing the scarlet riband in her curls; she pouted sulkily, and ate a sweetmeat.

"I promise you," said Bruno; his eyes were blind, his lips trembled; he held the boy in his arms and kissed him on the forehead. Then he set him down, and his hand went to his knife, and a sudden savage remembrance swept across his face, and darkened out of it all tenderness of emotion.

"Let me get at the brute−−point him out," he said, in his teeth, while his eyes glanced over the gathered people.

But there were only the languid idlers staring at him, and asking each other if it were a concerted scene to enhance the charm of the little fellow's playing. The man, Giovacchino, had disappeared at the first glimpse of the stalwart peasant coming on his errand of vengeance.

Had Bruno known what his face was like, he would have had but little chance of reaching him in the mazes of the tamarisk groves; as it was, pursuit was impossible. He took the two children by the hand, "Point him out, boy−−show me him," said he, breathlessly.

But Signa, bewildered, stared around, and could see nothing like his tempter.

"He is gone, I think," he whispered, clinging to Bruno's cloak. "He was not a bad man; he was very kind."

"He was very good, and I want him," said Gemma, with a flood of tears. "He has promised me pink shoes, and a coral necklace, and a little gilt carriage to ride in, and a harlequin toy that one can put on the floor to dance."

"What is it?" said the loungers. "Is it a comedy scene to make one admire the children in new parts?"

Bruno seized Gemma roughly, and took Signa by the hand.

"Let us get home," he said, and the rage died off his face, and a great serene thankfulness came on it.

He had back the boy.

Pippa would know he tried to keep his word. The man might go unpunished.

Signa clung to him mute and half out of his wits with the sudden wonder of this deliverance from the fate he loathed. Bruno to him had been Providence always−−as other children see the strength of godhead in their parent's care, so he in Bruno's. To feel that Bruno was there was to Signa to be ransomed out of death. He was speechless and dizzy with his joy.

The idlers under the tamarisks watched him, supposing it some portion of the programme of these pretty children, who had come upon the sands that morning; they boy, with a voice so sweet, that the child Haydn himself never sang more divinely those famous trilli for the famous cherries that in old age he loved to recall with such delight; and the girl with such a little face of grace, that she might have steeped straight down from any tryptich of Botticelli, or flown from any ceiling of Correggio.

"Where are you going to take him? Is the boy your son?" said one of the gentle people, who had been giving their money and their pretty trifles to hear Signa sing and play. "Do you know he is a little Mozart? What do you mean to do with such a genius as his? Not bury it? Tell me all about him. Where do you live?"

But Bruno flashed a dark glance of suspicion over the elegant throng, and answered nothing, only moved his hat in half defiant courtesy of farewell, and turned away, afraid that if he stayed some other means would be found by some one to take the child away.

His hand gripped Signa's firmly.

"Let us get home," he said.

Signa smiled all over his little pale startled face.

"To the Lastra!" he said, with a little sigh of sweetest self−content.

"What genius!" said the throng left under the tamarisk trees.

"What is genius?" thought Signa. "But anyhow if I have it, it will go with home with me. I did not get it here."

"Why do you cry, Gemma?" he said aloud.

Gemma hung back and stamped her foot, and sobbed with fury, letting all her gilded sweets and pretty treasures of painted paper, fall on the sand as she went.

"I will not go back; I will not go back," she said. "I want the pink shoes and the gilt carriage. We have nothing to eat at home, and you heard them all say I am so pretty. I want to hear them say it again. I will not go back; I will not!"

"But I am going, too," said Signa.

Gemma pushed him away and struck at him with her rosy little fists. But no one heeded her rage.

Bruno dragged her along without attention to her lament, and Signa for once was indifferent to her; he clasped his violin close, and he was going back to the Lastra; he was so happy, that it almost frightened him.

He seemed to have lived years since he had run along, with the angel's gift, by the Greve water three nights before.

Bruno went back straight to the winehouse in the town.

He asked them if they were hungry. They were not. The man who had decoyed them had fed them well; till they were out of sight of shore stolen children had nothing but goodness at his hands; the mountebank in scarlet had only said the truth.

There was a rough, kindly woman at the winehouse. Bruno gave her Gemma to take care of for the few hours that had to pass before they could get away to the Lastra.

Gemma was crying sullenly; she hated to go back; she wanted this pretty gay world that she had had a glimpse of, that was all ribbons and sweetmeats and praise of her prettiness; she hated to be taken to the bed of hay, to the crust of black bread, to the lonely garden, to the trouble of hunting hen's eggs, and killing grubs in the flowers, and beating sheets with stones in the brook with Palma.

Then he took Signa out into the open air. It seemed to him that what he had to say had better be said there. Betwee four walls, Bruno, hill−born and air−fed, felt stifled always.

The boy and he went silently down to the edge of the sea once more.

Signa was startled and subdued.

He felt as if he were a child no longer, but quite old.

He had known what it was to be adrift on the world, to gain money; to be heartsick for home; to hear that he had some great gift that other people wondered at; the contrast and conflict of all these varying emotions had exhausted him. And he was sorry too about Gemma. Gemma, who cried for a strange life, for a strange country, for a strange man−−Gemma, who cared more about a scarlet band in her curls, and a gilded box of sugar, than ever she had done for all his music or caresses.

Signa had had his first illusion broken.

He was no longer a child.

Fair faiths are the blossoms of life. When the faith drops, spring is over.

Amidst his great mute happiness at his own home there was a dull pain at his heart. He had found that beyond the mountains he was no nearer God.

Bruno watched in silence along the sea. They came at last along the level shore to a little creek, where the brown rocks cast deep shadows, where the water was in golden shallow pools, full of sea−weeds and sea−flowers; where the town was sunken out of sight behind them, and they were quite alone with the wide blue radiance before them in the splendour of the noon.

"Sit here," said Bruno; and threw himself down upon the rock. Signa obeyed him, letting his little brown leg hang over into the pool, and feel the cool sparkling ripples break against them.

Bruno watched him.

Even now the boy was not thinking of him.

Signa with dreaming eyes was looking out to the sea and the sky, and his hand was, by unconscious instinct, touching such soft minor chords on the strings of his Rusignuolo.

"What are you thinking of?" said Bruno, abruptly. He was jealous of theses far−away thoughts that he could never follow.

Signa hung his head.

"I do not know−−hardly. Only I wondered−−why does God make the earth so beautiful and men so greedy?"

His own thoughts were sadder and wider than this, but they were dim to him; he could not put them into better words.

"I supose it is the devil," said Bruno; he had no better reason or consolation to give.

Religion gives no better.

Signa shook his head. It did not satsify him; but he could find no better himself.

"It is the devil," repeated Bruno, who believed firmly in what he said.

And he watched the child anxiously; he was oppressed with his own secret; he hated himself because he had not had courage that night of the flood to bear poor dead Pippa to her grave, and tell the simple truth. The truth looked so simple now; so easy and so plain; he marvelled why he had been fool enough to hide it−−truth always has this vengeance soon or late.

None desert without seeing that she would have been their noblest friend. Only often it is too late when they do see it. Once driven away with the scourge of lies she is very hard to call back.

"Lippo ill treats you?" he said, abruptly, having resolved to rend the spider's web that he had let his brother weave about him.

Signa withdrew his gaze from the sea with a sigh. On that world of waters he saw such beautiful things: why must he be brought back to the misery of blows and hunger and ill words?

"You have promised me not to hurt him," he said, anxiously. "They said you would hurt him−−if you knew."

"And that is why you never told me?"

"Yes. And why I ran away."

"Tell me everything now."

The boy obeyed. Bruno listened. His face was very dark. He did not look up; he lay on the rock full length, resting his chin on his hands.

"I am sorry that I promised you."

That was all he said when Signa's little tale of childish woe and wrongs was ended. But there was a sound in his voice that told the child why they had said in the Lastra that Bruno, if he knew, would do that upon his brother which would take him himself to end his days in the galleys.

"But you have promised," said Signa, softly.

Bruno was silent.

He was a fierce man, and in his passion, faithless, and in his ways wild and weak at once, oftentimes. But he never broke a promise−−not even one made to the beasts in the yoke of his plough.

There was a long silence, in which the gentle ripple of the water sounded clear; the intense silence of noon when all things are at rest. After a while Bruno rose and lifted the child up, and set him between his knees, sitting on a great brown heap of rocks.

"You have been very unhappy?"

"Sometimes," said Signa.
"And were silent for fear of evil I should do?"
"Yes:−−for fear that they would harm you."
"You do love me then?"
"You are good to me."
"Would you love me if I did the evil?"
"Just the same."
"You would not be afraid of me?"
"No."
"How is that?"
"You would never harm me."
"But if I did a great crime?"
"I would hate that;−−but I would love you."
"Who teaches you all this?"
"I seem to hear God say it−−when I make the music−−I do not know."
Bruno was silent.

He put the boy from hm, and leaned his head on his hands. Then suddenly he spoke, not looking up; very quickly and any how.

"Listen, I want to tell you the truth. I have hid it because I was a coward−−at first from fear of trouble and of people's talk−−and of late because I wanted you to love me, a little, and thought you would not if you knew. Listen, dear. It was such a simple thing. I was a fool. But Lippo put it so. I must have been a coward, I suppose. Listen, I had one sister, Pippa, a young thing; pretty to look at, and idle as a lizard in the sun. I was rough always, and too fierce and quick. They tell you right to be afraid of me. I have done much evil in my years. I was always a brute to Pippa. I had a sort of hate of her. When the girl came my mother looked at none of us. I see her now−−a little brown baby laughing or crying all day long, and my mother thinking of nothing but of her. I see her now in the sun under the Pieta in the house door, her little red mouth sucking at her breast, and mother so proud and singing, and talking of the time when she would want her marriage−pearls. I hated her. No matter−−I knew it was a sin. I was rough and cruel with Pippa, grudging her all pleasure and all playtime, and when the mother died she had a hard time of it with me:−−yes, I know. And at a winefair she would dance when I forbade her, and mocked me about a woman−−never mind−−and I struck my knife into her. I should have killed her only the people held me back, and the knife turned on the busk of her boddice, and only stabbed the flesh. You see I was a brute to her. That is what I want you to understand. Well−−then−−one day she went away. I cannot tell where she went to−−no matter. And the years went by. And one night, the night of the great flood that you have heard us tell of−−Lippo and I seeking the sheep, came on a woman in the field. She had fallen down over the height, from that road we go on from the town up to the hill. She was quite dead. She had a child. We saw that it was Pippa. Then Lippo urged to me−−the sheep would drown; the girl was dead−−the town might say that we had murdered her; he thought it best to say nothing till the morning. We took you; we took the child. We left her there till morning. The river rose. It took her body with it. We never found it. Then Lippo urged again−−why say that it was Pippa? It would do no good. People would think we were ashamed of her, and so had killed her. We could not prove we had not. What use was it to say anything. The river had her. So I let it be. I was a coward. Then there was the child. Lippo would send it to charity. He had too many mouths to feed. But that I would not have. For Pippa's son. I got Lippo to keep it with his own, giving him half of all I got. He has had half and more. His children have fattened like locusts off my land. You never told me. I did for the best. Lippo has cheated me. Dear−−you are Pippa's son. I got to love you. I was afraid that you would hate me if you knew. I have been a coward. That is all. Will you forgive me?−−Your mother does, I think."

Signa had listened with breathless lips and wide−opened, startled, wondering eyes.

When the voice of Bruno ceased, he stretched his arms out with a bewildered gesture; glanced round at sea and sky one moment, then tottered a little, and fell in a dead faint:−−the long fatigue, the tumult of emotion, the peril and the pain that he had undergone, the wild delight of rescue and the hope of home, and now the story of his mother and her death, all overcame his slender strength. He fell, quite blind and senseless, down at Bruno's feet.

When consciousness came back to him his hair and clothes were drenched in the sea water; Bruno hung over

him tenderly as a woman; Signa lifted himself and gazed, and stretched his hand out for the violin, and saw Bruno, and remembered all.

"That was my mother!" he said, bewildered, and could not understand.

Bruno's eyes were wet with tears, salt as the sea.

"You do not hate me, dear?" he said, with a piteous entreaty in his voice. "I have tried to do right by you since. I think she is not angry, longer, if she knows."

"No," said Signa, dreamily; confused as though he had been stunned by a heavy fall.

"That was my mother?" he repeated, dully; he did not understand; the owls had never found him on the flood then; he had always thought they had.

"Yes; you are Pippa's son. I have tried to do the best. You do not hate me−−now?"

Signa put his arms round Bruno's neck.

"No. I love you. Take me home."

CHAPTER III.

IT was late in afternoon when they got back to the tavern by the wharves.

The child walked beside Bruno, very pale, and still, and sorrowful.

"You will not hurt Lippo?" he said once.

"I have told you no," said Bruno.

Then once he asked:

"Had I a father too?"

"No doubt, dear!"

"And why have I not his name? The other children have their father's name."

"How can we tell what it may be?"

He could not say to the child−−"You have no claim on it."

"And where is he?" persisted Signa.

"I cannot tell. I know nothing," answered Bruno, impatient of the theme. "Pippa−−your mother−−went away to some strange country. We never knew anything more. Girls do these things, sometimes, when they are not happy."

"Then my father may be−−a king?"

"A beggar more likely. Anyway a rogue. Why think of him?"

"Why a rogue?"

Bruno was silent.

"Your mother came back very poor, by the look of her," he said, after a while. "And sad she must have been, or she would never have thought of her old home."

Signa was silent too. Then he said, musingly.

"Perhaps he would care to hear me play. Do you think so? When Carlo Gerimino makes at home figures in wood,−−dogs, and mice, and birds, just what he sees−−his father is so proud, and promises to have him taught great things when he is old enough."

"Do not think of it, I tell you, dear," said Bruno, with impatience. "You have me. I will do all I can. Think of your Holy Child and your wooden bird; that is better far. He may be dead, and so that and want together drove her here. Anyway, it is of no use to vex your heart for him. We can never know−−"

"I thought the owls found me," said Signa, sadly, and dragged his little tired feet along, bewildered; while the old violin clangoured against him, and his head was bent, and his hair was hanging over his eyes.

He would have sooner chosen that the owls had found him. This sudden story, told in fragments, and never clearly, as was Bruno's way, oppressed him with a sense of mystery and sorrow.

Pippa's son? What did that mean!

He did not understand.

But he understood that he would live with Bruno always, and with Tinello and Pastore, and with the sweet wild hillside, all rosemary scented, and dark with the cistus, and the myrtle, and the pine, and that made him glad−−that comforted him.

"What beautiful things I shall hear all the day long," he thought; for when he was alone, where the leaves were, and the sky was above him, he heard such beautiful things, that it was the cruellest pity that they should ever be driven away by the rough noise of Toto's fretting, and Nita's rage, and the girls quarrelling, and the baby's screams, and the jar of the housework, and the creak of the pump−wheel, and the curses of old Baldo on the gnats and flies.

When they reached the sailors' winehouse by the wharf, the boy was so tired that he had almost lost all consciousness of anything that went on round him. But at a great rush of voices, and in the foul−smelling doorway, his dreamy eyes opened, and his dulled ears were started to attention, for he heard the woman of the

place calling aloud:

"And who could have thought? a casement no wider than one's thumb, as one may say? and how she could get through it passes me; the man must have helped her from outside. As the saints live, I took every care. I kept her in the little room at the back, that has the tamarisk in at the window, and shells, and seaweeds, to amuse her, and a beautiful picture of my husband's sister's son, of the Martyrdom of the blessed Lorenzo. And she had a good bowl of soup, and a roast crab, and a handful of figs−−eating for a princess−−and ate it all, every bit, she did; and then she seemed tired and sleepy, and no wonder, thought I, and I laid her down on the bench with a pillow, and just locked the door on her, and went about my work, and thought no more, because my husband is always a poor thing, and there are so many men coming and going, there is more than one woman can get through−−up at four, and to bed at past midnight, as I am. And then, looking out in the street , and seeing you coming with the little boy and the fiddle, I went to wake her up, and the room was empty, and some of the tamarisk twigs broken and tumbled down on the floor, so that, of course, through the lattice she must have gone, and the man must have been there to help her out. The window looks on a lane; there is nobody ever there; oh, he might have done it quite well, only so small as the hole is−−that beats me. And it is no fault of mine, that Our Lady knows; and why must you be leaving her with me? and you will pay me for the soup, and the crab, and the figs, because she has got them away in her stomach."

"Is Gemma lost!" cried Signa, with a piteous wail in his voice, that stopped the woman's torrent of phrases.

"Yes, dear; it seems so," said Bruno, in perplexity. "But we will find her for you. Do not cry, Signa, do not cry; you hurt me when you cry."

But to find her was beyond Bruno's powers. He traced her to the quay, led by a man; that was all he could hear.

They had gone in a smack that sailed away, bound for Gorgona, at three in the afternoon. Some sailors on the wharf remembered noticing a golden−headed, chattering, little child; she seemed so happy to be off; the smack was some strange one from some of the islands; no Livornese craft; it had come in the day before with pilchards; they supposed that the man had got the owner of it to give him a lift over water; no one had known that there was any need to interfere; they said that the father of the girl had better come and see: no one else could have any right to meddle.

That was all Bruno could learn.

They were quite certain the child with the red ribbon and bare feet had gone to sea; they showed him the distant sail, speeding fast over the waves, which were now freshened by a breeze that had sprung up; by the direction she was taking, they did not think that she was going to Gorgona; anyhow, no one would overtake her till long after nightfall.

Signa stood and sobbed his heart out by the sea.

Bruno pondered a little; he could do no good, and he had barely enough coins upon him to get home, and had no credit in this strange town, nor any friend; besides, who could tell, if Tinello and Pastore were well fed? They might be stolen−−heaven alone could tell; if the men threshing with him were not faithful, no one could say what evil might not happen, nor what ruin nor what blame the fattore might not lay upon him for his absence without a word. To stay another night away was impossible; he could do no good to Gemma, and would be penniless himself upon the morrow, and powerless to return.

He pondered a little while, then paid the woman at the winehouse for the crab and figs that she lamented over, and made his way back in the full red sunset heat by the iron way he hated, half−leading, half−carrying the boy into the waggon, where Signa wept for his playmate, till he wept himself to slumber, as the train, groaning, started on its way, leaving the brilliancy of the golden west and the blue sea, to plunge across the marshy wastes by Pisa, and traverse the green vine country, where the Ave Maria bells were ringing, and pause in the still twilit ancient towns, and so reach the hills above the Lastra.

It was quite dark when they reached the hill of Signa.

Bruno, quite silent, looked up with a longing glance to the purple lines of pine, where his vines were, and where Tinello and Pastore dwelt in their shed under the great magnolia tree. But before he turned his steps thither, he had to tell of Gemma's loss; he pressed money on her father, and sent him seaward, on the vague chance that what they had heard might be untrue; then holding Signa by the hand, he went straight down into the Lastra.

It was eight of the night.

Bells for the benediction offices were ringing from many chapel towers on the hills; single sonorous bells answering one another under the evening shadows, and calling across the hills.

The people were all about, idling at their doors, or in knots of three of four talking of the many little matters that make up the history of a country summer day. There was hardly a lamp alight. The moon had not risen.

But the men and women all knew Bruno as he came down into the midst of them with the stately tread of his bare swift feet.

A stillness fell upon them. They thought he came to take his brother's life most likely. They drew a little into their own doors, and others came up from passages and houseways.

"Where is Lippo?" he asked of them.

No one answered. But by an involuntary unconscious glance that all their eyes took, it was easy for him to see slinking away on the edge of the throng the slender supple figure of this brother.

"Wait there!" cried Bruno. "I shall not harm you−−coward."

Lippo paused; by some such fascinated fear as makes the bird stay to be done to death at the snake's will.

"People of the Lastra, I have something to say," said Bruno, standing still; a tall, brown, half bare figure in the gloom, with the boy beside him; all the people ran out to listen; men and women and children, breathless and afraid; what could he be doing with words, he, whose weapon was always straighter and swifter than any speech can be?

The voice of Bruno rang out loud and clear; reaching the open windows and the inner courts, and the loiterers at the gateways.

"I have something to say. I am a rough man. It is easier for me to use my hand, but I want to tell you,−−it is just to the child. You remember that I was bad to Pippa. I was cruel. I stabbed her, even; you will remember. She was a gay girl, but no harm. She forgave it all; she said so. We never heard of her: you remember that. She went−−that was all. That night of the flood we found her dead, Lippo and I; quite dead, under the bank by the sea−road; just above there. There was a child with her: this child. I left her alone in the night out of fear, and because of the shame of it, and for the sake of the sheep, and because they might have thought that we had killed her−−Lippo said so. At dawn I meant to go and tell the Misericordia, and go and bring her in and get her decent burial by holy church. I meant so: that I swear. But at daybreak the flood had got her. Now you know. It was of no use to say anything then−−so Lippo said. It was as if one had murdered her. But the good God knows how it came. I got Lippo to take the boy. I said that I would pay for him; give half I got for him−−always. I have done it. I thought the boy was happy and well fed. Sometimes I had words with him for the child's sake. But on the whole, I thought that all was well. For nine years Lippo has had my money and my money's worth. For nine years he has lied to me, and beaten and starved and hurt the child. For nine years he has lied to me, and cheated me. You know me. I would kill a man as soon as a black snake in the corn; but I have promised the boy. I lost the boy and found him by the sea. The saints are good. The child ran away because he feared that I should do ill on his behalf, and fall into the power of the law. For him I will let Lippo be. If it were not for the child, I would kill him as one kills a scorpion−−so! You know me. Go, tell him what I say. Though we live both for fifty years, let his shadow never fall between me and the sun; if he be wise. This is the truth. He has lied to me and cheated me. I do not forgive. Women and dogs may forgive. Not men. This very day the child might have perished body and soul. And what should I have said to Pippa before God's face when the dead rose? That is all."

He paused a moment to see if any one would answer there in Lippo's voice or Lippo's name. But the darkening groups, half lost in the night shadows, were all still; silenced by amazement and by fear.

Then Bruno turned, and with the boy's hand still in his, went through the western gateway, and up the road, beneath the trees towards the river and the bridge, homeward.

When he was quite lost to sight the outburst of tongues buzzed aloud, like swarming bees under the stars.

Was this the truth, indeed? and hid so long!

Bruno went on his way over the cloudy waters to his hills.

CHAPTER IV.

SO the truth was told at last.

And the Lastra, of course, after taking the night to consider, rejected it as a fiction.

When truth in any guise comes up from her well, she has the fate of Genevra, when Genvra rose from the tomb; every door is closed and bolted, and friends look her in the face and deny her.

In the Lastra, after the first surprise of Bruno's speech had passed away, there remained very few believers in his story.

Old Teresina, who had always said that he was the better man of the twain; and Luigi Dini, who had seen him at a deathbed or two, and thought he had a soft heart under a hard hide; and his friend Cecco, the cooper, who made casks and tubs under the line near the bridge, with the old workshop with the barred window, and the vine behind it; these three and a few women, who had loved Bruno in other years, and had sore hearts still, when they stopped working to think−−these did believe; but hardly anybody else.

At the time of his speaking, no one had heard him without belief.

There was that strong emotion, that accent of truth, which always cleave their way to the hearts of hearers, however hard those hearts be set in antipathy or opposition.

But after a while, feeling his way by little and little, and stealing softly into the minds of his townsfolk, Lippo, wandering about with his sweetest voice, and tears in his eyes, sighed and murmured that he would not speak; nay, let poor Bruno clear himself, if he would; he did not wish to say anything. He could clear himself. Oh, yes: as easily as you could split a melon in halves. People knew him. He was a poor man and of no account, but he had tried always to do good. He had been wrong; yes, that he felt; twice wrong in giving the shelter of his roof to his brother's base−born one, and then, again, in letting the infirmity of anger master him about all that good gold squandered on a squeaking toy. But in nothing else, so far as he could judge himself−−searching his heart. As for poor Pippa, heaven knew he had sought high and low, vainly, for years and years, and never could get tidings of any fate of Pippa's. There had been a dead woman and child found, but not by him; a woman Bruno had driven to her ruin; but, no, he would say nothing. The Lastra knew him and his brother both. Let it judge which spoke the truth. Only this, he swore by all the hosts of saints, no scrap of Bruno's money or morsel of food off Bruno's land had he or his ever touched in these nine years. The child he had taken in out of sheer pity, Bruno turning against his duty to it. But, there, he would say nothing. He was glad and thankful when some natural feeling had awakened in Bruno for the boy:−−who knew what good it might not bring to that poor darkened soul? If he wanted witness, there was Adamo, the wineseller, who had seen him thrown brutally off the shafts of Bruno's baroccino, and had heard his life threatened by him; but, there−−no−−he would say nothing. The neighbours knew him. As for gratitude, that no man might look for; but it was hard to be maligned after nine years' forebearance. But the saints had borne much more and never took their vengeance. In his own humble, poor little way, he would endeavour to do like them.

So Lippo, to the Lastra,−−softly and by delicate degrees; and such is the force of lying, a force far beyond that of truth at any time, that two−thirds of the town and more believed in him and pitied him. For, start a lie and a truth together, like hare and hound; the lie will run fast and smooth, and no man will ever turn it aside; but at the truth most hands will fling a stone, and so hinder it for sport's sake, if they can.

Lippo jeopardised in credit a few days, recovered ground, and, indeed, gained in the public estimation, with time; so very prettily did he lie.

The parish priest took his part, and that went far; and the counsel of the Misericordia did the same, and that went farther still.

Lippo, a good soul, who rarely missed early Mass, and often came to Benediction; who never did anything on holy days, except lie on his face in the full sun, and made his children do the same; who, if he was offended, kept a tongue of oil and lips of sugar; and who was almost certain to have all Baldo's savings, when that worthy should be gathered to his father's: Lippo, plausible and popular, and always willing to loiter and chatter at street corners

and play at dominoes and take a drink:−−Lippo had a hold on public feeling that Bruno never would have gained, though he had shed his life−blood for the Lastra.

Most people knew, indeed, that Lippo was a liar; but then he was so excellent a man that they respected him the more for that.

So Lippo recovered his standing, and even heightened it; and kept well out of the way of his brother; and was browbeaten by his wife within doors for the loss of all the gain the boy had been to them, but went to mass with her all smiles, and on feast−days with his children was a picture of felicity; and so no one was the wiser for what quarrels raged under the tiles of Baldo's dwelling by the Loggia.

And only old Teresina and Luigi Dini and Cecco and such like obstinate simpletons believed, or admitted they believed, that Pippa had been found dead on the night of the great flood.

Why should they have believed it? It is dull work to believe the truth.

Bruno in return bent his straight brows darkly on them, and kept his knife in his belt, and let them shout evil of him till they were hoarse in the market−place and wineshop.

He was hated by them just as Lippo was believed in; he was unpopular just as Lippo was popular.

"Well, let it be so," he said to himself. He was indifferent.

"Other folk's breath never made my soup−pot boil yet," he would say to the old priest of his own hillside, who would sometimes remonstrate with him on the misconstruction that he let lie on him. "They believe in Lippo. Let them believe in Lippo. Much good may it do to him and them."

But the old Parocco shook his head, having a liking for this wild son of the church, of whose dark, fierce, tender, self−tormenting soul he had had his true glimpses in the confessional, when Easter times came round and men of their sins disburdened themselves.

"But it will do you harm," said he. "The walnut−tree laughs at ants; but when the swarm is all over its trunk and in its sap, where the tree then?"

But Bruno bent his delicate dark brows, that made him like a head of Cimabue's drawing; and smiled grimly. If every man's hand were against him, he cared nothing: he had his good land to till, and the boy with him in safety.

If he could have wrung his brother's throat he would have been happier indeed. As it was, having promised the boy, he passed Lippo in the Lastra with such a glance as Paul might have given to Judas; and otherwise seemed no more to remember that he lived, than if he had been a dead snake that he had flung out in the road for the sun to wither.

"The same mother bore you," the priest would urge sometimes, "and you honour the same God."

"What has that to do with it?" said Bruno. "Though he were my father, I would do just the same. He cheated me."

"But forgiveness is due to all."

"Not to traitors," said Bruno.

And no one could move him from that faith. And Lippo would go a long way round outside the gates rather than meet the glance of his brother's in the narrow thoroughfares of the Lastra.

Though on the whole, good man, the neighbours pitying him, he was the better for the wrath of Bruno, especially since he was quicker than ever to answer to the Misericordia bell, and droned louder than ever his responses of the mass, being wise in his generation.

CHAPTER V.

SO the child went up to the hills with Bruno, and stayed there for good and all, with Tinello and Pastore, and the big magnolia tree, and the old gilded marriage coffer, and the hens and the chickens, and the terra−cotta annunciation, and the drying herbs and beans, and the big white dog from the Maremma marshes, and the palm blessed on Easter day.

He was not quite the same.

He would never be quite the same again, Bruno thought−−and thought aright.

The child's vision had widened, and his thoughts had saddened; and he knew now that there was a living world outside his dreams; and he doubted now that the skies would ever open to let him see the singing children of God.

And alas! though he cried his heart out for her, Gemma never returned.

Sandro came back without her, and cried a little for a week, but was not disconsolate, and on the whole found his nutshell of a house more tranquil without the little sulky, self−willed beauty. But Palma mourned her long; and her playfellow likewise.

Palma was sure that Gemma was dead. "She fell in the sea and was drowned: else she would come back," said Palma always, powerless to comprehend that any deliberate choice could keep her sister long away from her. She had loved Gemma with that extreme affection which a profoundly selfish nature often begets on a very generous one. She had sacrificed herself for Gemma twenty times a day with delight in the sacrifice. Any little treat, any better food, any morsel of fruit, she had always saved for Gemma; she had waited on Gemma as if she had been born a little negro, and the other a little princess; she had always taken Gemma's misdeeds on her own shoulders, and screened her, and served her in all possible ways. Gemma had been the woe and torment of her childish life; but she had never known it; Gemma had also been its idol. The shrewdness and the laziness of Gemma had taught her to make a scapegoat and a slave of Palma, when they had been mere babies. Palma had been happy in the servitude. She had firmly believed that Gemma had loved her in return; and so she had done, when she had wanted her.

"She is drowned; else she would be back," said Palma, to all attempts of others at consolation, and she hid a little scrap of black ribbon, all she could get, about her little brown throat, and having saved up a penny, by great toil, with centime pieces, took it to the priest of the church above Giovoli, and, sobbing, intreated him to say a prayer for Gemma's soul. The old man put back her penny, and forbore to smile, and said a mass for nothing−−being touched.

What might be Gemma's fate, no one could tell; children were kidnapped−−so they said in the Lastra; and borne away to carry plaster statues, or skip on a strained rope, or play in circus−tricks, or wander with a monkey, and were beaten if they returned to their masters with too few coins at night−−so they said; and the Lastra was sure that his would be the fortunes of lost Gemma. But Signa, full of agonized remorse for her, still felt in his own heart that it was likelier that some way Gemma would not suffer very much. "She will always suck the orange herself, and fling the peel in some one else's eyes," said Bruno, when he spoke of her; and Signa, though he resented the saying, and would not assent to it, knew in his heart that it was true.

"I was so wicked to let her go with me!" said Signa often, in bitter self−reproach. But the good−natured Sandro did not reproach him.

"My dear," he said, "when a female thing, however, small, chooses to go astray, there is not the male thing, however big, that could ever hinder her."

Sandro never looked beyond his pots of pinks and beds of roses; but he knew so much human truth as that.

What Gemma had gone to, who could tell?−−wandering with little Savoyards and Roman image−sellers, or dancing with dogs and monkeys, in rainy streets of northern towns, or under the striped canvas of merryandrews' booths; that was what most of the children did who were tempted and taken over sea.

"Anyhow, wherever she is gone she is happy if she has got a bit of ribbon in her hair and a sugar−plum upon

her tongue, and she will get them for herself, I will warrant, anywhere," said Bruno, who could not have honestly said that he was sorry she was lost.

But Signa, when he said these things, cried so that he ceased to say them; and gradually the name of the sunny−headed little thing dropped out of memory except with Signa and Palma, who would talk of her often in their leisure minutes, sitting under the wall by the fountain watching the old speckled toads come and go, and the chaffinches preen their white wings, and the cistus buds unfold from the little green knots, and the snakes' bread turn ruby red till it looked like a monarch's sceptre dipped in the bloodshed of war.

Whenever at night the storm howled, or the snow drifted over the face of the hills in winter, Signa would tremble in his bed, thinking of his poor lost playmate, as she might be at that very hour homeless and friendless on the cruel stones of some foreign town. His imagination tormented him with vision and terror of all the possible sufferings which might be falling to her lot.

"It was my fault−−it was my fault," he said incessantly to himself and everyone; and for a long time utterly refused to be comforted. When the great day of his first communion arrived, and he went, one of a long string of white−clad children, with his breviary in his clasped hands, and little brown shabby Palma behind him with the other girls, Signa felt the hot tears roll down his cheeks, thinking of the absent, golden−headed, innocent−eyed thing, who would have looked so pretty with the wreath of white wild hyacinths upon her head.

"The boy is a very lamb of God; how he weeps with joy at entering the fold," thought the good old Parocco, from the hills, looking at him.

But Signa was thinking of Gemma.

"Dear love, do not fret for her," said Tere− sina, that very day, after the service of the church, in her own little room over the Livornese gate, "never fret for her. She is one that will light on her feet and turn stones to almonds always; trust her for that."

But Signa did fret; though he knew that they were right.

And he had lost his own mystery and wonder for himself. He was nothing strange that the owls had found in the soft night shadows and dropped down at the gates of Signa, as he had always thought.

He was only Pippa's son.

Poor Pippa! She was not dear to him. He could not care for her. When he went along the sea road he had no instinct of remembrance of the night that he had lain against her breast and had had his cries hushed upon its aching warmth.

Just Pippa's son, as Toto was Nita's−−this was all?

That the angels had breathed upon him and said to each other, "Let this little soul see light," and then had dropped him softly on the waters, and so the white wise birds had found him and borne him to the Lastra, there to grow up and hear aobut him the music of the heaven he had been sent from−−that had been intelligible to him, and had seemed quite natural and beautiful and true.

But Pippa's son, as Toto was Nita's!

This was pain to him and perplexity. It made all dark.

A child's feet are bruised, and stumble on the sharp stones of a hard, physical, unintelligible fact.

He was much happier, in truth, than he had ever been: unbeaten, unstarved, unpunished; with only the free, fresh, open−air toil to do; and the man's strong affection about him for defence and repose; and often allowed to wander as he would and play as he chose, and dream unhindered as he liked;−−his life on Bruno's hillside was, beside his life in the Lastra with Lippo, as liberty by slavery, as sunshine by rain.

And yet a certain glow and glory were gone out of his day for him; because of the truth about himself which to himself was so much less easy of understanding than the vaguest fable or wildest miracle would have been.

Pippa's son!−−no brighter born or nearer heaven than that.

It was his faith and fancy that were bruised and drooped like the two wings of some little flying bird that a stone strikes.

The boy had something girlish in him, as men of genius have ever something of the woman; and all that was gentlest and simplest in him suffered under the substitution of this harsh, sad history of his birth, for all his pretty, foolish faiths and fancies.

But in all the manner of his life he was much happier.

In the country of Virgil, life remains pastoral still. The field labourer of northern countries may be but a

hapless hind, hedging and ditching dolefully, or at best serving a steam−beast with oil and fire; but in the land of the Georgics there is the poetry of agriculture still.

Materially it may be an evil and a loss−−political economists will say so; but spiritually it is a gain. A certain peace and light lie on the people at their toil. The reaper with his hook, the plougher with his oxen, the girl who gleans amongst the trailing vines, the child that sees the flowers tossing with the corn, the men that sing to get a blessing on the grapes−−they have all a certain grace and dignity of the old classic ways left with them. They till the earth still with the simplicity of old, looking straight to the gods for recompense. Great Apollo might still come down amidst them and play to them in their threshing−barns, and guide his milk−white breasts over their furrows,−−and there would be nothing in the toil to shame or burden him. It will not last. The famine of a world too full will lay it waste; but it is here a little while longer still.

To follow Tinello and Pastor e as they ploughed up and down the slanting fields under the vines, dropping the grain into each furrow as it was made; to cut the cane and lucerne for the beasts, and carry the fresh green sheaves that dripped dew and fragrance over him as he went; to drive the sheep up on to the high slopes, where the grass grew short and sweet, and the mosses were like velvet under th esotne pines, and lie there for hours watching the shadows come and go on the mountians, and the bees in the rosemary, and the river shining far down below; to load the ass and take him into the town with loads of tomatoes or artichokes or pumpkins or salads, as the season chanced to be, and ride him back amongst the hills, dreaming that the "cucco" was a war−horse, and the pines the serried lines of spears, and he a paladin, like Rinaldo, of whom he had read in an old copy of the "Morgante Maggiore" that lay in the sacristan's chest in the Lastra, the sacristan holding it profane but toothsome versifying; to keep watch over the grapes near vintage time in the clear moonlit nights when the falling stars flashed by scores across the luminous skes, and see the day−dawn rise and the sun mount over the far Umbrian hills, and wake all the birds of all the fields and all the forests into song; to pluck the grapes when they were ripe, with the bronze leaves red and golden in the light, and load the waggon and dance on the wine−press till his feet were purple, while all over the hillsides and along the fields by the water far and near the same harvest went on, with the echoes of the strife and the play and the laughter and the bursts of song making all the air musical from the city to the sea;−−this was the labour that he had to do, with kindly words and with easy pauses of leisure, the passing of the months only told by the change of the seeds and the fruits and the blossoms, and by the violets and the crocuses in the fields giving place to the anemones and the daffodils, and they to the snow−flakes and the narcissus, and they to the scarlet tulip and the blue iris, and they to the wild−rose and the white broom, and they to the traveller's joy and the yellow orchid, and so on through all the year, with as many flowers as there were hours.

The life on the hillside was full of peace for him, and wholesome labour and innocent freedom and all those charms of this country of sight and scent and sound which either are utterly unknown, unfelt, incomprehensible, or are joys strong as life and fair as children's dreams; for men and women are always either blind to the things of earth and air, or have a passion for them: there is no middle−way possible.

You shall know "the hope of the hills" in its utmost beauty, or know it never.

Signa did know it, small creature though he was, and wholly untaught; and the joy of the hills was with him day and night whilst he dwelt here so high in air, with the deep mountain stillness round him and the sky seeming nearer than the earth.

Weeks and months would go by, and he would not leave the hillside for an hour, having no other companions than the little wild hares and the gentle plough−oxen and the blue jays that tripped amongst the white wakerobins, and the sheep that he would drive up under the beautiful red−fruited arbutus thickets, while far down below the world looked only like a broad calm lake of sunshine−−like a sea of molten gold.

The child was tranquillised, though he was saddened, by that perfect solitude.

It was the most peaceful time also that Bruno's life, tempestuous though monotonous, had ever known.

Since he had lost the boy, he had come to know as he had never done before the full force of his great love for him. Signa was not to him only a creature that he cared for with all the strength of his nature, but he was like a soul committed to him straight and fresh from the hands of God, by care of which, and by all means of self−devotion and self sacrifice, he was to redeem his own soul and to secure an everlasting life.

He did not reason this out iwht himself, because reasoning was not the habit of his mind; but it was what he felt every time that he bowed his head before an altar or knelt before a crucifix. He prayed, with all his heart in the prayers, that he might do the best for the lad in all ways.

Most days he went on bread himself that he might be able to give meat twice a week to the growing boy. He went to the fairs in the early day, and left them as soon as his traffic was done; so that he might not spend money in roystering, and get fighting as of old. He looked away from women, and strove not to be assailed by them; so as to waste his substance on their tempting. He laboured on his fields even earlier and later than he had ever done, to make them produce more; and so have means to get little trifles of pleasure or better nourishments for the boy. He grew more merciless at bargains, harder in buying and selling; he gave no man drink, and flung no feast−day trinkets into women's breasts: all the Tuscan keenness became intensified in him−−he laboured for the boy.

Folks said that, losing his open−handedness, he lost the one saving grace and virtue he had had in him: he let them say it−−if he were pitiless on others he was no less so on himself. He combated the devil in him−−what he called the devil−−because he could not let the devil loose to riot in his blood, as he had used to do, without lessening the little he had, and that little would be the all of Pippa's son.

Now that Signa was under his roof and always present with him, his love for the boy grew with each day. The sort of isolation in which his ill−repute and evil tempers had placed him with his countryside, made the companionship and the affection of this little human thing more precious than it would have otherwise been.

And as Lippo's story obtained footing more and more in the Lastra, and the taverner's tale of how he had struck Lippo off the cart under the pony's hoofs spread and took darker colours, men and women looked colder than ever upon him, and avoided him more and more. Why should they not?−−since now he never bought their absolution with a drink and the cards for the one sex, and bold wooing and free money for the other.

So the years rolled quietly on, without incident and with no more noteworthy memory in them than the excellence or the paucity of the vintage, the large or small yield of the Turkish wheat, the birth and the sale of a calf, the dry weather and the wet.

Only to Bruno a great aim had been set, a great hope had arisen.

Before he had worked because he was born to work, now he worked because he had a great object to attain by every stroke that he drove into the soil, by every heat−drop that fell from his brow like rain.

There was a little piece of ground on the hillside which was much neglected−−a couple of fields, a strip of olives, and a breadth of wild land on which the broom and myrtle only grew. It ran with the land which Bruno farmed, and he had often looked at it longingly.

It was allowed to go to waste in a great degree; but Bruno knew the natural richness of the soil, and all that might be done with it; and it had the almost priceless advantage of a water−course; a mountain−fed rush−feathered brook, running through it. To own a little bit of the land entirely is the peasant's ideal of the highest good and glory, everywhere, in every nation. Nine times out of ten the possession is ruin to themselves and the land too. But this they never will believe till they have tried it.

It was Bruno's ideal.

All the other land of the hillside was the duke's, his padrone's; that he never thought of possessing any farther than the sort of communism of the Tuscan husbandry already accorded it to him. But this little odd nook always haunted and tempted him to passionate longing for it.

It belonged to a carver and gilder down in the city. It was said that the man was poor and incapable, and often in difficulty. Bruno, who was not a very good Christian in these matters, used to wish ardently that the difficulty might drift as far as bankruptcy, and so the morsel of soil come into the market.

For he had an idea.

An idea that occupied him as he drove Tinello and Pastore under the vines, and looked across at those ill−tilled fields, where the rosemary had it nearly all her own way, except where the bear's berry and the wild cistus and the big sullen thistles, and the pretty little creeping fairy−cups disputed possession. An idea that grew more alluring to him every night as he smoked his pipe before sleeping, and watched the first ripple of moonlight on the little brook under the brush−reed, the gardener's rush, and the water−star.

It so grew with him that one day he acted on it, and put on a clean blue sht, and threw his best cloak over one shoulder with the scarlet lining of it turned back; and, being thus in the most ceremonious and festal guise that he knew of, he went first to his own fattore, who was a good old man and his true friend, and then took his way straight down in to the city.

A few weeks later Tinello and Pastore were driven through the rosemary and turned it upside down, and a pruning−hook shone among the barren olives, and a sickle made havoc amongst the broom−reeds in the little

brown stream, and the gardener's rush was cut too to tie the broom−reeds up in bundles.

There was no one there to see except a neighbouring peasant or two, who knew Bruno of old too well to ask him questions; and the fattore, when he rattled up−hill in his little baroccino, knew what was doing, and stopped to look with approval.

But when rumours of it in time filtered down the hillside to the city market−place−−as rumours will, trickling through all obstacles like water−−and busybodies asked the carver and gilder in his dusky shop in the shadow of the Saints of Orsanmichele, whether it were true that he had sold the land or not, the man said, "No," and said it angrily.

"How could any man," he asked, "sell any place or portion of his own in this now−law− beridden country without his hand and seal and all his goods and chattels and his price and poverty being written up and printed about for any gaping fool to read?"

Which was true: so the busybodies had to be content with conjecture; and Bruno, with whom the busybodies never meddled any more than dogs do with a wasps'−nest, worked on the little nook of land at his odd hours, till the rosemary dared show her head nowhere, and the brook thought it only lived to bear brooms for the market.

This addition made Bruno's work more laborious than ever; but then it was of his own chioce if he did so, and no affair of anyone's. Besides, no one except its own peasants ever concerned themselves with what went on upon this big, bold, lonely hill, with its lovely colours and fragrant smells, that had the sunset blaze over it every night in burning beauty in weather serene, or dark with storm. It was his fattore's business only, and his fattore was content.

And the carver and gilder was so, down in the city by Orsanmichele; for every month on a market−day he had a little roll of much−soiled bank−notes, and these were so rare to him thay they were thrice welcome. Whatever else Bruno's secret might be, he kept it−−with a mountaineers silence, and a Tuscan's reticence.

Tinello and Pastore turned the first sod of this bit of land in the month when Signa was found and Gemma lost; and Bruno always took an especial pleasure in sending the boy to work on that little brook−fed piece of the hill rather than on any other.

He himself never neglected his own acres; but he took a yet greater pride in this small slope, which he had made golden with corn; and those old rambling trees, which he had made bear as fine olives as any on the whole mountain side.

On great feast or fast days−−when even Bruno, who was not altogether as orthodox as his Parocco said he should be, in being useless on the hundred odd days out of the year that the Church enjoins, let his plough, and spade, and ass, and ox be idle−−he would, as often as not, saunter down into this nook, taking the boy with him; and for hours would loiter through the twisted olive boughs, and sit by the side of the pretty, shallow, swift water running on under the sun and shade, with the tall distaff canes blowing above it, with a dreamy pleasure in it all, that he never took in the land, well as he loved it and cared for it, where his father's fathers had lived and died, ever since Otho's armies had swarmed down through the Tyrol passes, and spread over the Lombard and the Tuscan lands.

"You are so fond of the these three fields. Why is it?" said Signa, one day, to him, when they walked through the green plumes of the maize that grew under the olives.

"They were barren; and see what they are now. I have done it," answered Bruno.

And the boy was satisfied, and cut the brook reeds into even lengths, sitting singing, with his feet in the brook and his face in the sun.

He thought so little about these things: he was always puzzling his brain over the old manuscript music down in the sacristy in the Lastra. Whenever Bruno let him go off the hillside he ran thither, and sat with his curly head bent over the crabbed signs and spaces, sitting solitary in the window that looked on the gravestones, with the ruined walls and the gateway beyond, all quiet in the sunshine.

The music which the old Gigi had most cared for and copied, and gathered together in dusky, yellow piles of pages, was that which lies between the periods of Marcello of Venice, and Paësiello, and which is neglected by a careless and ingrate world, and seldom heard anywhere except in obscure, deserted towns of Italy, or in St. Peter's itself.

There was no one to tell Signa anything about this old music, on which he was nourished.

The names of the old masters were without story for him. There was no one to give them story or substance;

to tell him of Haydn serving Porpora as a slave; of Vinci, chief of counterpoint, dying of love's vengeance; of Paësiello gathering the beautiful, savage, Greek airs of the two Sicilys to put into his operas, as wild flowers into a wreath of laurel; of Cimarosa in his dungeon, like a blinded nightingale, bringing into his music all the gay, rich, elastic mirth of the birth country of Pasquin and Polichinello; of Leo marrying the sweet words of Metastasio to sweetest melody; of the dying Mozart writing his own requiem; of the little scullion, Lully, playing in the kitchen of the Guise the violin that the cobbler had taught him to use; of Stradella, by the pure magic of his voice, arresting the steel of his murderer on the evening stillness of San Giovanni Lateranno; of Pergolese breaking his heart under the neglect of Rome, while Rome−−he once being dead−−loved and worshipped him, and mourned him with bitter tears, and knew no genius like his; of Jacopo Benedetti, the stern advocate, leaving the world because the thing he loved was slain, and burying his life in the eternal night of a monk's cell, and as he penned his mighty chaunts, and being questioned wherefore, answering weeping, "I weep, because Love goes about unloved."

There was no one to tell him all these things, and make the names of his dead masters living personalites to him. Indeed, he knew no more than he knew the magnitude of the planets and distance of the stars, that these names which he found printed on the torn, yellow manuscripts, a century old or more, were of any note in the world beyond his own blue hills.

But he spelt the melodies out, and was nourished on them:−−on this pure Italian music of the Past, which has embalmed in it the souls of men who followed Raffaelle, and Mino, and Angelico, and Donatello, and who breathed in all the mountain−begotten and sea−born greatness of "il bel paese Ch'Appenninen parte e'l mar circonda, e l'Alpi"−−men who were as morning stars of glory, that rose in the sunset of the earlier arts.

CHAPTER VI.

"YOU never come to the garden now," said Palma. "You are always in the sacristy."

"The music is there, and Gigi will not let me bring it away," said Signa.

"But what do you want with that music?" said Palma. "You make it so beautifully out of your own head."

Signa sighed.

"I learn more−−playing theirs. You like my music; but how can I tell?−−it may be worth nothing−−it may be like the sound of the mule's bells, perhaps."

"It is beautiful," said Palma.

She did not know what else to say. She meant very much more than that.

Signa was fifteen now, and she was the same.

Palma was a tall, brown girl; very strong, and somewhat handsome. She had her dark hair in great coils, like rope, round her head; and she had an olive skin, and big brown eyes, like a dog's. She had a very rough poor gown, far too short for her, and torn in very many places; she wore no shoes, and she worked very hard.

She was only a very poor common girl; living on roots and herbs; doing field work in all weathers; just knowing her letters, but that was all; rising in the dark, and toiling all day long till nightfall, at one thing or another. And yet, with all that, she had a certain poetry of look in her−−a kind of distant kinship to those old saints of Memmi's on their golden grounds, those figures of Giotto's with the fleur−de−lys or the palms. Most Tuscans have this still−−or more or less.

With the rest and food that Bruno allowed to him, and the strong hill air, which is like wine, Signa, from a little, thin, pale child, had grown into a beautiful youth: he was very slender, and not so strong as the young contadini round him; but the clear, colourless brown of his skin was healthful; and his limbs were agile and supple; and his face had a great loveliness in it, like that of Guercino's Sleeping Endymion. And his empress of the night had come down and kissed him, and he dreamed only of her; she was invisible yet filled all the air of heaven; and men called her Music−−not knowing very well of what god she comes, or whither she leads them, or of what unknown worlds she speaks.

It was a noon, and Palma had snatched a moment of leisure to gnaw a black crust, and to sit under the south wall, and to talk to Signa, who had come for melon−seeds for Bruno.

She loved him dearly; but he did not care very much for her. All the love he had in him outside his music he gave to Bruno.

Bruno he had grown to love strongly since the story by the sea; he did not wholly understand the intense devotion of the man to himself, but he understood it enough to feel its immeasurable value.

With Palma and him it was still the same as it had been on the night of the white currants and green almonds. He kissed her carelessly and she was passionately grateful. They had been playmates, and they were often companions now.

Only he thought so little about her, and so much of the Rusignuolo, and the old manuscripts in the Misericordia Church.

And Palma knew nothing; which is always tiresome to one who knows something, and wants to know a great deal more, as Signa did. The lot of an eager, enquiring, visionary mind, cast back on it own ignorance, always makes it impatient of itself and of its associates.

The boy felt like one who can see amongst blind people: no one could under stand what he wanted to talk about; no one had beheld the light of the sky.

Palma indeed loved to hear his music. But that did not make her any nearer to him. He did not care for human ears.

He played for himself, for the air, for the clouds, for the trees, for the sheep, for the kids, for the waters, for the stones; played as Pan did, and Orpehus and Apollo.

His music came from heaven and went back to it. What did it matter who heard it on earth?

A lily would listen to him as never a man could do; and a daffodil would dance with delight as never woman could;−−or he thought so at least, which was the same thing. And he could keep the sheep all round him, charmed and still, high above on the hillside, with the sad pines sighing.

What did he want with people to hear? He would play for them; but he did not care. If they felt it wrongly, or felt it not at all, he would stop, and run away.

"If they are deaf I will be dumb," he said. "The dogs and the sheep and the birds are never deaf−−nor the hills−−nor the flowers. It is only people that are deaf. I suppose they are always hearing their own steps and voices and wheels and windlasses and the cries of the children and the hiss of the frying−pans. I suppose that is why. Well let them be deaf. Rusignuolo and I do not want them."

So he said to Palma under the south wall, watching a butterfly, that folded was like an illuminated shield of black and gold, and with its wings spread was like a scarlet pomegranate blossom flying. Palma had asked him why he had run away from the bridal supper of Griffeo, the coppersmith's son,−−just in the midst of his music; run away home, he and his violin.

"They were not deaf," resumed Palma, "But your music was so sad−−and they were merry."

"I played what came to me," said Signa.

"But you are merry sometimes."

"Not in a little room with oilwicks burning, and a stench of wine, and people round me. People always make me sad."

"Why that?"

"Because−−I do not know:−−when a number of faces are round me I seem stupid; it is as if I were in a cage; I feel as if God went away, farther, farther, farther!"

"But God made men and women."

"Yes. But I wonder if the trapped birds, and the beaten dogs, and the smarting mules, and the bleeding sheep think so."

"Oh, Signa!"

"I think they must doubt it," said Signa.

"But the beasts are not Christians, the priests say so," said Palma, who was a very true believer.

"I know. But I think they are. For they forgive. We never do."

"Some of us do."

"Not as the beasts do. Agnoto's house−lamb, the other day, licked his hand as he cut its throat. He told me so."

"That was because it loved him," said Palma.

"And how can it love if it have not a soul?" said Signa.

Palma munched her crust. This sort of meditation, which Signa was very prone to wander in, utterly confused her.

She could talk at need, as others could, of the young cauliflowers, and the spring lettuces, and the chances of the ripening corn, and the look of the budding grapes, and the promise of the weather, and the likelihood of drought, and the Parocco's last sermon, and the gossips' last history of the neighbours, and the varying prices of fine and of coarse plaiting; but anything else−−Palma was more at ease with the heavy pole pulling against her, and the heavy bucket coming up from the water−hole.

She felt, when he spoke in this way, much as Bruno did−−only far more intensely−−as if Signa went away from her−−right away into the sky somewhere−−as the swallows went when they spread their wings to the east, or the blue wood−smoke when it vanished.

"You love your music better than you do Bruno, or me, or anything, Signa," she said, with a little sorrow that was very humble, and not in the least reproachful.

"Yes," said Signa, with the unconscious cruelty of one in whom Art is born predominant. "Do you know, Palma," he said suddenly, after a pause. "Do you know−−I think I could make something beautiful, something men would be glad of, if only I could be where they would care for it."

"We do care," said the girl gently.

"Oh in a way. That is not what I mean," said the boy, with a little impatience which daily grew on him more, for the associates of his life. "You all care; you all sing; it is as the finches do in the fields, without knowing at all what it is that you do. You are all like birds. You pipe−−pipe−−pipe, as you eat, as you work, as you play. But

what music do we ever have in the churches? Who amongst you really likes all that music when I play it off the old scores that Gigi says were written by such great men, any better than you like the tinkling of the mandolines when you dance in the threshing barns? I am sure you all like the mandolines best. I know nothing here. I do not even know whether what I do is worth much or nothing. I think if I could hear great music once−−if I could go to Florence−−"

"To Florence?" echoed Palma.

It was to her as if it were a thousand leagues off. She could see the gold cross, and the red roofs, and the white towers gleam far away in the plain against the mountains whence the dawn came, and she had a confused idea that the sun rose somehow out of the shining dome; but it was to her like some foreign land: girls live and old women die within five miles of the cities, and never travel to see them once; to the peasant his paese,−−his hamlet,−−is the world. A world wide enough, that serves to hold him from his swaddling bands to his grave clothes.

"To Florence," said Signa. "There must be great music there. But Bruno will never let me go. If there be vegetables to take to the city, he takes them himself. He says that cities are to boys as nets to birds."

"But why?" began Palma, having eaten her crust, and with her hands braiding the straws one in another.

But Signa pursued his own thoughts aloud:

"There is a score of a man called Handel in the church. It is part of what they call an oratorio; a kind of sacred play, I suppose, that must be. It is marked to be sung by a hundred voices. Now, to hear that−−a hundred voices! I would give my life."

"Would it be better than to hear some one singing over the fields?" said Palma.

Signa sighed.

"You do not understand. The singing over the fields, yes, that is beautiful too. But it is another thing. Some one has scribbled in old yellow ink on some of the scores. In one place they wrote, 'The Miserere of Jomelli, sung in the Sistine this Day of Ashes, 1752; fifty−five voices, very fine.' Dear! To hear that!−−it must be to singing in the fields like the lightning on the hills to a glowworm."

"The lightning kills," said Palma, meaning simply what she said, and not knowing that she pointed a moral in metaphor.

"I must go back with the seeds, Palma," said the boy, rising from under the old south wall.

He was not vexed with her, only no one understood−−no one, as he said to the Rusignuolo, when he went home with the basket slung at his back, playing the violin as he went over the hills, as his habit was, while the little children ran down through the vines to listen, and the sheep stood on the ledges of the rocks to hear, and the hollowed crevices gave the sound back in faint, sweet, faithful echo.

Palma, plaiting as she walked, went to her father's cottage, and laid her straw aside, and twisted her short skirt as high as her knees, and went down into the cabbage bed and worked; hard labour that made her back bend like an osier, and her brown skin wet with heat, and her feet cold and black with the clinging soil.

He lived in the air like a white−winged fringuillo; and she in the clods like a poor blind mole.

"We are nothing to him, anyone of us," she thought, and a dew that was not a raindrop fell for a moment on the crisp green cabbage leaves.

But she hoed and weeded and picked off the slugs, and scolded herself for crying, and laboured ceaselessly all the afternoon over the heavy earth; and then put a pile of the cabbages into a great kreel, and carried it on her back into the Lastra, and sold it for a few coppers; and then went home again to make her brother's shirts, and draw the water that filled the troughs of bark that ran across the plot of ground, and clean her poor little hovel as well as she could with five boys and a pig and hens and chickens always sprawling on the floor; and when the sun set, washed the mud off her limbs, and climbed the rickety ladder into the hole in the roof, where her straw mattress was, with two bits of wood nailed in the shape of a cross above it.

Palma worked very hard. In winter, when the bitter mountain wind was driving everything before it in a hurricane whose breath was ice, she had to be up and out in the frosty dark before day, no less than in the soft dusk of the summer dawns. She had all the boys to attend to and stitch for; her father's clothes to make; the cottage to keep clean as best she might: she had to dig and hoe, and plant the slip of ground on which their food grew: she had to help her father often in the great gardens: she had to stand on the square stone well, and draw the water up by the cord and beam, which is a hard task even for a man to do, long together; and, finally, in all weathers, she had to trudge wherever she was wanted, for the good−natured Sandro was as lazy as he was cheery,

and put labour on what shoulders he could, so only they were not his own.

If ever she had a minute's leisure, she spent it in plaiting, and so got a few yards down a week, and a few coppers to add to the household store; for they were very poor, with that absolute poverty which is often glad to make soup of nettles and weeds; frequent enough here, and borne with a smiling patience which it might do grumbling northern folk, whose religion is discontent, some good to witness if they could.

This was Palma's life always; day after day; with no variety, except that sometimes it was cabbages, and sometimes lettuces, and sometimes potatoes, and sometimes tomatoes; and that when the sun did not grill her like a fire, the north wind nipped her like a vice; and when the earth was not baked like a heated brick, it was a sodden mass that she sunk into like a bog. This was always her life.

Now and then she went to a festival of the saints, and put a flower in her rough black braids as her sole means of holy−day garb; and twice a year at Ceppo and at Pasqua tasted a bit of meat. But that was all: otherwise her round of hours never changed, no more than the ass's in the brick−kiln mill.

Nevertheless she put up her cross above her bed, and never laid herself down without thanking the Heavenly Mother for all the blessings she enjoyed.

The State should never quarrel with the Churches. They alone can bind a band on the eyes of the poor, and like the lying watchmen, cry above the strife and storm of the sad earth, "All's well! All's well!"

Palma never thought for a minute that her lot was a hard one. Her one great grief had been losing Gemma. Under all else she was happy enough; a brave, and cheerful, and kindly girl, and with no evil habit or coarse thought in her; and pure as Una, though she had to stand on the well− edge with bare arms and legs, gleaming like a bronze in the sun, and the wind blowing her poor thin skirt like a leaf.

Meanwhile the boy went up the hillside thinking not at all about her.

He was thinking of an epitaph he ahd seen in an old book the day before−−an epitaph from a tomb under an altar of St. Simon and St. Jude in Rome:−−

"JOHANNES PETRUS ALOYSIUS, PALESTRINA MUSICÆ PRINCEPS."

He was thinking how beautiful a thing it would be to die, if one were sure of having "Musicæ Princeps" written above one's rest under the golden glory of St. Peter's dome.

He was no longer content, like the boy Haydn, over a wormeaten clavecin−−content with the pleasure of sound and of fancy, and pitying kings because they were not as he.

He was no longer content thus.

The desire of eternal fame−−the desire of the moth for the star−−had entered into him.

He had no thought to be unkind to those he lived with; but he became so, innocently and unwittingly.

All his mind and heart were with those crabbed manuscripts in the sacristy, and with the innumerable harmonies and combinations thronging in his brain. He wanted to learn; he wanted to understand; he wanted to know how others had been able to leave to the world, after their death, those imperishable legacies of thought and sound. He could only dream uselessly; puzzle himself uncertainly; wonder hopelessly: he thought he had power in him too something great, but how could he be sure?

Meanwhile he was only a little peasant riding out with the barrels of wine, pruning the olives, shelling the maize, driving the cow up to her pasture under the pines. And Bruno said always, "when you come after me"−−"when you are a man grown and sell corn in the town market yourself"−−"when you are old enough to go in on a Friday and barter"−−and ten thousand other phrases like these, all pointing to one future for him as the needle points to the pole.

The boy was heavy hearted as he went up the hills.

Sometimes he was ungrateful enough to wish that Bruno had never followed and found him on the sea−shore; that he had wandered away with Gemma into the dim tangle of an unknown fate. All his affections clave to the beautiful mountain world on which he lived; but all his unsatisfied instincts fluttered like young birds with longing for far flight.

Sometimes he wondered if there were any great man whom he could ask−−and was vexed that he had lost the little bit of paper by the waterside the night he had run from the Lastra. It might have been of use−−who could tell?

"Are you tired?" said Bruno, that evening. "You should not tire. At your age I could walk from here to Prato and back, and never a bead on my forehead nor a muscle weary."

"I am not tired," said Signa. "I was thinking."

"You are always thinking. What good does it do?"

"I was thinking:−−ever so many hundred years ago, down in the city, I have read that three men, a Corsi, a Bardi, and a Strozzi, found poet and composer, musician and singers, all themselves, and gave the city an opera in Palace Corsi; the second it ever heard. Are there any nobles like that now?"

"I do not know. And how can you tell what an opera is?"

"I can fancy it. Gigi has told me."

"An opera is a pretty thing. I do not deny it," said Bruno, too true a son of the soil to be deaf to the charms of the stage. "When I was a youngster; indeed always before−−before I had more to do with my money−−I was for ever going down to get a standing−place in the summer theatre: the women round you, and the fine music, and the big moon overhead−−oh, yes, I used to care for it very much; but after all they are follies."

"Would you let me go−−and hear one?"

Signa's eyes lit, all the paleness and fatigue went out of his face, he looked up at Bruno as a spaniel at his master.

"What for?" said Bruno, sharply. "If you want merrymaking, they dance every night down at Fiastra, the girls and the boys."

Signa's face fell; he went without a word into his own little bedchamber.

To jump about in the droll Tuscan rigadoon, and to whirl round plump Netta or black Tina−−that was not what he wanted. But how could Bruno understand?

He could hear the sound of the bell from the roof of the Fiastra farm, calling the dancers along the hillside, but he shut his door and sat down on his bed and took out his violin.

After all, it was the only thing that could understand him.

His small sqaure casement was open; clematis flowers hung about it; the vast plain was a vague silvery sea, full of all the beautiful mysteries of night.

He played awhile, then let the Rusignuolo fall upon his knee and the bow drop. What use was it? Who would ever hear it?

The fatal desire of fame, which is to art the corroding element, as the desire of the senses is to love−−bearing with it the seeds of satiety and mortality−−had entered into him, without his knowing what it was that ailed him.

When he had been a little child, he had been quite happy if only the sheep had heard his music, and only the wandering watercourse answered it. But now it was otherwise. He wanted human ears to hear; he wanted all the millions of the earth to sing in chorus with him.

And no one of them ever would.

The power in him frightened him iwth its intensity and its longing: his genius called on him as the Jehovah of Israel called on the lad David: and, at the summons of the solemn unseen majesty, all the childhood and the weakness in him trembled.

He sat quite quiet, with the violin upon his knee, and his eyes staring out at the starry skies.

The heavens were brilliant with constellations: Red Antares flamed in the south; the Centaur lifted his head; and radiant Spica smiled upon the harvest. The moon was at the full, and all the sky was light, but it did not obscure "the length of Orphiuchus large," nor the many stars held in the Herdsman's hand, nor the brilliancy of Altair and Vega.

Bruno, working out of doors under the house−wall, heaving up the buckets from the tank, and watering his salad plants in the evening coolness, noticed the silence. He was used to hear the sweet sad chords of the Rusignuolo all the evenings through, outstripping the living nightingale's song.

"Perhaps he is beginning not to care for it," he thought; and was glad, because he was always jealous of that thing, for whose sake the boy was so often deaf and blind to everything around him.

"When he knows what I have done," thought he, letting the bucket down in to the splashing water, that glittered like a jewel in the starlight. "When he knows all I have down, and sees his future so safe, and feels the manhood in him, and knows he will be his own master, then all these fancies will go by fast enough. Strong he never will be perhaps, and he will always have thoughts that no one can get at. But he will be so happy and so proud, and his music will just be a toy for him−−nothing more: just a toy, as Cecco's chitarra is when he takes it up out of work−hours. He will put away childish things−−when he knows the saints have been merciful to me."

And he stopped to cross himself, before he took up the rope and drew up the pail and flung the water over the rows of thirsty green plants.

The saints had been merciful to him.

All things had thriven with him since the day he had told the truth in the Lastra. The seasons had been fair and prosperous. The harvests large. The vintage propitious. There had not been one bad year, from the time he had taken the boy home in the face of his neighbours. Everything had gone well with him. It seemed to him that every grain he had put into the earth had multiplied a millionfold; that every green thing he had thrust into the mould had brought forth and multiplied byeond all common increase.

He had laboured hard, doing the work of three men; sparing himself no moment for leisure or recreation; crushing out of himself all national inborn habits of rest, or of passion; denying himself all indulgences of the body; toiling without cessation when the hot earth was burning under the months of the lion and scorpion, as when the snows drifted thick in the ravines of the Apennines. And now his reward was almost at hand.

He almost touched the crown of all his labour.

He thanked the saints and crossed himself, then flung the last shower of water over his plants, and went indoors to his bed with a heart at ease.

"He is tired of his toy; he is not playing," he thought, as he closed the household bars and beams against the sultry lustre of the night, and set his old gun loaded against his side, and threw his strong limbs on his mattress with a sigh of weariness and a smile of content.

After all he had done well by Pippa's child:−−in a very little while he would have bought the boy's safe future, and housed it from all risks, so far as it is ever possible for any man to purchase the good−will of fate.

The saints were very merciful, thought Bruno; and so thinking fell into sleep with the stillness and the fragrance of the summer night all about him in the quiet house.

CHAPTER VII.

FOUR months later, on a Sunday morning, Signa and he walked to their own parish church over the ploughed land for early mass.

The bells were ringing all over the plains below. Their distant melodies crossing one another came upward on the cool, keen air.

The church was exceeding old, with an upright tower, very lofty and ruddy coloured, and with an open belfry that showed the iron clapper swaying to and fro, and the ropes jerking up and down, as the sound of the tolling echoed along the side of the hill.

The brown fields and the golden foilage sloped above and below and around it. A beautiful ilex oak rose in a pyramid of bronzed foilage against its roof. The few scattered peasant who were its parishoners went one by one into the quietness and darkness and stillness. The old priest and a little boy performed the offices. The door stood open. They could see the blue mountain side and the vines and the tufts of grass.

Bruno this morning was more cheerful and of more gaiety of words than the boy had ever seen him. His character was deeply tinged with that melancholy which is natural to men of his country, where their passions are strong, and which lends its dignity to all the coutenances of Sarto's saints, or Giotto's angels, of Fra Bartolemmeo's prophets, or Ghirlandaio's priests, countenances that anyone may see to−day in the fields of harvest, or in the threshing−barns, anywhere where the same sun shines that once lit the early painters to their work.

Bruno kneeled down on the bricks of the old hill church with the truest thanksgiving in him that ever moved a human heart; one of the desires of his soul had been given him; going through the fields he had thought, "Shall I tell him yet?−−or wait a little." And told himself to wait till he should get the boy down to the borders of the brook quite in solitude.

With labour he had compassed the thing he wished. He had made the future safe by the toil of his hands. He was happy, and he blessed God.

Kneeling on the red bricks, with the moutain wind blowing over him, he said to himself:

"I think Pippas must know. The saints are good. They would tell her."

He breathed freely, with a peace and joy in his life that he had not known since the dark night when he had let the dead boy drift out to the sea.

A sunbeam came in through a chink in the stone wall, and made a little glow of silvery light upon the pavement where he knelt. He thought it was Pippa's answer.

He rose with a glad light shining in his eyes.

"We will not work to−day," he said, when the office was over.

Usually he did work after mass.

They went home, and they had coffee and bread. Coffee was a thing for feast days. He went outside and cut a big cluster of yellow Muscat grapes, growing on his south wall, which he had left purposely when he had taken all the others off the vine for market.

He laid them on Signa's wooden platter.

"They are for you," he said. "It is fruit for a prince."

Signa wanted to share them with him, but he would not. He lighted his pipe and smoked, sitting on the stone bench by his door under the mulberry. Under his brows he watched the boy, who leaned against the table plucking his grapes with one hand, and with the other making figures with a pencil on the paper.

Signa's lithe, slender limbs had a girl's grace in them; his shut mouth had a sweet sereneness; his drooped eyelids had a dreamy sadness; his lashes shadowed his cheeks; his hair fell over his forehead; he was more than ever like the Sleeping Endymion of Guercino.

But he was not asleep. He was awake; but only awake in a world very far away from the narrow space of four walls in which his body was.

"You look like a picture there is in the city," said Bruno, suddenly, who had stalked through the Tribune as contadini do. "The lad in it has the moon behind him, and he dreams of the moon, and the moon comes and kisses him−−so Cecco, the cooper, said−−and never of another thing did the boy think, sleeping or waking, but of the moon, which made herself a woman. Is the moon behind you? You look like it."

Signa raised his head and his long dusky lashes; he had not heard distinctly; he was intent upon the figures he was making.

"I have never seen the city," he said, absently; "never since I used to run in, when I was little, after Baldo's donkey."

"What are you doing there?" said Bruno, looking enviously at the pencil; he was envious of all these unknown things, which he always felt were so much better loved by the boy than ever he was or would be himself.

Signa coloured to his curls.

"I was writing−−music."

"Write music! How can you write a thing that is all sound? You talk nonsense."

"I think it is right," said Signa, wistfully. "Only I cannot be sure. There is nobody to tell me. Gigi thinks it is correct−−but impossible. He thinks no one could ever play it. I can play it. But then I hear it. That is different."

"Hear the paper? You get crazed!" said Bruno. "Dear−−you get too old to dream of all this nonsense. Your Rusignuolo is a pretty toy enough, and you play so that it is a joy to listen to you. That I grant. But it is a childish thing at best, and gets no man his bread. Look at the old beggar Maso who wanders about with his flute. Music has brought him to that pass."

"The beggar Maso says that men, by music, have been greater than kings," murmured Signa, with his eyes dropped again on his score.

"Then he lies, and shall get a crust at this door no more," said Bruno, in hot haste.

For the world was a sealed book to him, and music a thing universal but of no account, like the meadow−mint that sweetened the fields; a thing of a shepherd's pipe, and a young girl's carol, and the throats of the villagers at Passion week masses, and the mandolines of lovers and merrymakers going home on S. Anna's Eve through the vines after dance and drink.

Signa sighed, and bent his head closer over his paper. He never disputed. He was not sure enough of the little he knew.

"You like it better than the grapes," said Bruno, with vexed irritation. He had saved the grapes two months and more with the thoughts of Signa's pleasure in them always at his heart. It was a little thing−−a nothing. But still−−

Signa folded up his paper and ate his grapes, with a flush almost of guilt on his face. All his soul was in the concerto that he was writing.

He had found his own way through the secrets of composition by instinct−−for genius is instinct, only a higher and stronger form of it than any other. The sacristan knew a little−−a very little; but that little had been enough to give the boy a key to the mysteries of the science of sound.

Who can think that Raffaelle would have been less Raffaelle, even though Sanzio had been a breaker of stones, and Perugino a painter of signs?

Genius is like a ray of the sun:−−from what it passes through, it will take its passing colour; but no pollution of air, of water, no wall of granite, no cloud of dust, no pool of mire, will turn it back, or make it less the sunray.

Bruno blamed himself that he should have said a hasty word. The fire ran off his tongue unawares. When all his heart and mind wre full of the boy, he felt impatient to see that blank paper−−those dots without meaning−−raised in rivalry with him, and outstripping him.

"Dear," he said, very gently, and putting his hand on Signa's shoulder; "come down to the brook with me, will you? I have something to say; and I talk best in the air, though talk is no great trick of mine at the best."

Signa rose obediently−−he always obeyed. But, by sheer habit, and reached down the Rusignuolo from the top of the chest.

Bruno saw, and his brows drew together.

"Always that thing!" he thought; but he said nothing.

They went out into the air.

The little book was brimming from the autumn rains; it is these little brooks that bring about the great floods. The reeds and rushes were blowing merrily: no one cut them this time in the year. Red−breasted chaffinches were

bathing and chirping. Fir−apples were tossing down in the ripples. The grass was bright with the cups of the autumn anemones, in all colours. Robins were singing in the olives; and, higher, a cushat cooed.

Bruno stopped and looked at it all, with a smile in his eyes;−−a smile proud and full of peace.

"Sit here, dear," he said, pushing the boy gently down on a large boulder of brown stone.

He remained standing still, with always the same look in his eyes.

He laid his hand on Signa's shoulder. His voice, as he spoke, was low, and very soft.

"It is sixteen years to−day since I found you by your mother. She had her arm round you. You had your mouth at her breast. She was dead. It was the night of the great flood. Sixteen years ago, dear. You must be seventeen now; for they said−−the women who knew −−that you looked a year old, or more, that night."

"Yes?"

Signa lifted his head and listened. All this he knew, and it had always a certain sharp pain for him.

"Yes," said Bruno, and paused a moment. "Sixteen years. The first nine went all wrong. But I thought I did well. I think Pippa sees you now−−and is content−−and quite forgives. You are a pure, good, frank boy, and fair to look at; and have no fault, if one may say so of any mortal thing. God knows I do not speak in idle praise; no, nor in vanity. You are as nature made you. But your mother would be glad. Now, dear, listen. When one is seventeen, one is not a child any more; one begins to labour for oneself, to think of the future! At twelve I was more a man than you are now, indeed; but that−−so best−−so best−−so best! Keep young. Keep innocent. Innocence does not come back: and repentance is a poor thing beside it."

Signa listened, with earnest upraised eyes, his feet hanging in the fast, brown water, the vioin lying by him amongst the anemone flowers and the brown plantain stems.

"I have been tormented for your future," said Bruno. "Yes; very often. For if I die to−morrow, I have thought what would become of you?−−and I had nothing to leave! And you−−oh, you labour well and cheerfully for me, dear. I do not mean that; but for others, there are stronger lads, and hardier; and who like field toil more, and do not dream at all. And you do dream−−too much. I have been tormented often, when I have been roofing the stacks, and have thought−−just a fall and a blow on the head for me, and where would the lad find a home?"

Signa laid his cheek against the hand that rested on his shoulder−−a long, brown, sinewy hand, good to grasp a weapon or wield a flail.

"For you see," went on Bruno, his eyes shining as they glanced down on the boy's face, and then at the old olive trees and the brown fields corn−sown, "while that treacherous beast was draining me, I could hardly keep myself together; much less could I well lay by for you. A few francs in an old bag, at the end of a year, that was all, do what I would. But I had often looked at these three fields and the olives. If I could get them for my own, I thought; but it was hopeless. What could I do, with the snake coiling and sucking always, and all his brood? But when I got you safe that day, away from the Lastra and Lippo, and I was all my own master, then I said to myself−−it is possible, just possible! So I went first to the fattore, and got his consent, and showed him my plans, and he had nothing against them; and then I went down into the city and saw Baccio Alessi. Oh, you do not know. That is that ass who let the thistles he ought to sup off choke up all this good soil. I went straight in to Baccio−−the fool was gilding a frame−−and I put straight before him: all I would give and do. I found he was half willing to sell; wanted three thousand francs−−for me, he might as well have said three millions! I could not get it anywhere, even Savio would not lend it, though I would have worked it out−−somehow. But I laid my plan before Baccio; we both cunning as rats, and slow and sure; and at last we came to terms, hammering away at them for days and days. I was to have the land to farm, in the way that seemed best to me; and I was to give him half I got off it for ten years, and two hundred and fifty francs a−year as well, paid monthly; and at the end of the ten years the ground was to be mine−−mine−−mine!"

Bruno stopped; his breath came quickly; his hand tightened on the boy's shoulder.

Signa looked up, listening; but calmer than Bruno had fancied he would be. To him it was such a gigantic thing, and so marvellous; he wondered the boy could hear it and keep so quiet and sit so still.

"You know all I have done to the land," he pursued. "You can see. You are farmer enough to judge that, my dear. But I have never neglected anything on the old soil−−no, Savio says that. He is quite content that it is as it is. He praises me to the padrone; only the padrone is so gay, and young; it is not matter to him. Now when that fool Baccio yonder saw what his half became, and all I got out of his ground, he was for being off his bargain. Of course. But I have him tight, hand and seal, and good testimony to it. A Tuscan is no bird to catch with chaff. He

was grieved in his soul, I can believe, when he saw all the land would give. But that of course was no business of mine. Now this last summer−−the saints are good to one−−Baccio, who is a shiftless dolt, and leaks on all sides like a rust−eaten pipkin, got deeper and deeper into his troubles, and was as well−nigh being sold up by his creditors as a man can be to deep head above water at all. Now, dear, you have never been stinted for anything? No? You have had all the food you wished for, and all the leisure time you wanted, and I do not think you have ever had a narrow measure of anything? Nevertheless, I saved money. When Savio had taken his dues, and Baccio had had his month's portion, I was always able to put away something in that old copper pot, that I slip in the chimney, where nobody ever would look for it; not even a magpie. So, when I heard the fool was so nigh his rope's end, I counted my money. I had six hundred francs, and there were two years to run under Baccio. I went down and saw him. I told him I would give him the money down if the land were made mine at once. The poor devil sprang at the chance. He thought the money would help him over the bog of his debts; and he knew in a month or two, if I did not have his bit of land, the creditors would take it, and divide it between them. So he asked nothing better than to do what I wished. He had lost the courage to higgle. I paid him the money down on the nail, and the notary made the ground over to me, for ever and ever. Do you understand, dear? It is mine!"

Signa smiled up in his eyes.

"How glad I am−−if you are glad!"

"If I am glad!"

Bruno looked at him bewilderedly. Was the lad stupid or blind, that he did not know−−that he did not guess? and with those three fair fine fields of wheat, and those good olives round him in the sun as plain and as fair to be seen as the gold disc round the head of the Gesu child on the altars?

"Glad!" he echoed; "be glad for yourself, too, dear. Do you not understand? What is mine is yours. I have worked the land for you. It shall be your inheritance, Signa. No, rather, when you are of age, my dear, I shall make it over to you, in your own name, and then you will be your own master, Signa. Your own master−−do you understand?"

Signa sprung up and threw his arms round the man's brown neck.

"You are so good−−so good! To care for me like that; to think so much; to work so hard. Oh! What can I do in answer?"

Bruno was silent. He was always ashamed of emotion, and he was vaguely disappointed. What the boy felt was gratitude, not joy; not, in any way, the great enraptured pride of possession, which Bruno had expected would have filled his young heart to overflowing.

For seven years he had toiled night and day, and denied himself all rest of the body, or pleasure of the senses, that he might make this one portion of mother earth his own. And now, the boy loved him for his love indeed; but for the gift−−did he care for it? Not so much as he did for the gift of a blank sheet of paper to scrawl signs on. No one tithe as much as he had cared for the gift of the old brown wooden Rusignuolo.

He put Signa gently away from him, and sat down also by the side of the singing brook.

"You do not quite understand," he said, and his voice had a changed sound in it, and his throat felt dry. "Dear, you are seventeen, as I said, and it is time to think of the future. Now that is why having this land makes me so much at peace. Do you not see? It will be all your own; and on it alone a man could live. Oh, yes, live well, if we build up a little house on it, and the stones lie so near hereabouts, and Savio would get me leave to take them, and there is a brambly corner there by the last olive. But that is not what I am thinking of; I daresay I shall live to be old; I am tough as an ox; and threatened men never die, they say, and so many would like to stick a knife in me; still, anything may happen. And now, what I mean is this: this land shall be yours, your own entirely, as fast and as sure as the notaries can bind it; and then, when I do die, you learning to be a good husbandman, and having all the produce of your own fields to do as you like with, and so getting to care for the work as you do not yet, because you are so young, Savio will let you stay on in my place in the old cottage, where your mother was born; and you will marry, and have children, and grow a rich contadino−−and there is no better life under the sun, no, not anywhere; and so your future is safe, my dear, do you see, and that is why I thank God. Because I have lain awake many an hour, saying to myself if I should die to−morrow, or be killed in a brawl, what would the boy do? But now you are safe, quite safe for all your life long, because you have your own bit of land to live on, and get your bread out of, and that is the sweetest thing that the world holds for any man; and so I bless the saints that they have let me get it for you, and−−and I think Pippa knows."

His voice fell low, and he uncovered his dark curly head, and made the sign of the cross on his breast. The boy kissed his hand−−but was quite silent.

CHAPTER VIII.

"IS it not good, Signa?" said he, after he had borne the silence a little time with no answer but the cooing of the dove in the cranberry bushes.

Signa laid his head against Bruno's arm, as a girl would have done.

"You are good!"

"No, I was never that," said Bruno, with some of his old roughness. "But the life for you will be good. The best the world holds−−owing nothing to any man, and all to the work of one's own hands and the good black mould that feeds one's hunger all one's years, and covers one's nakedness when one is dead. Ah, dear! I think you are so young you do not see how great a thing it is to set your foot on a bit of earth, and say "this is mine!" A king cannot say any more. Only, the king puts dead men into it, and we put the seed that is life."

Signa was silent. He was thinking that he knew a greater thing: to be king in a realm that conquerors cannot assail, in a world that the lives around cannot enter.

He was oppressed and frightened by this, which Bruno had meant should be the crown and joy of his sum of seventeen years. It was as if the weight of the earth bestowed on him was heavy on his heart.

To get rich−−to marry−−to have children. The common ideal of human kind appalled the pure and lofty fancies of the boy.

To live and die a tiller of the soil, the common lot of the common mortal, terrified the young soul which had believed itself the care of angels.

He felt as if a great chain had been flung round him, fastening him down on to the hillside. And yet what could he say to this unchangeable unselfish devotion which had thought to benefit him?

He sat and looked at the brown running water, as it rippled over his feet and the wind blew among the rushes. He loved every rood of the land, and every cloud−mist that floated over it, and every little humble flower that helped to make the soil beautiful; he loved the great dusky pinewoods above his head and the old roofs and towers by the river in the plain far below; he loved the roads he had run on with a baby's feet and the blue mountains that he had worshipped with a poet's heart; he loved them all with passion and fidelity.

And yet this future, of which Bruno spoke as a supreme mercy of heaven, oppressed him with a deadly sense as of imprisonment.

Bruno watched him, and saw nothing of what he felt; he only saw the troubled shadows that had come instead of the cloudless sunshine which he had thought to see dawn on the boy's face. He was struck dumb with amaze−−he was mortified to the quick; he was nearer to rage against Signa than ever he had been in all his life.

What could it mean?

He had given the boy a priceless gift−−a treasure that moth could not eat nor rust cor− rupt; he had made safe his future at the cost of seven years of incessant toil and unending self−denial. And this was all−−silence! only silence! as though he had said to the child, as Abraham to Ishmael "Arise, and depart from me."

He had come down to the side of the brook at peace with heaven and all men; he had rejoiced with the pure joys of an unselfish sacrifice and of a duty fulfilled; he had counted for years on the pleasure of this one moment; he had said to himself ten thousand times, ploughing in the rain and wind or rising in the stormy dusk of winter dawns: "How happy the boy will be!−−how happy!"

And now the gift was given, and Signa sat silent, watching the brook run by them.

He thought it must be because Signa did not understand.

He spoke again, twisting the rushes to and fro in his right hand.

"Look here," he said; "perhaps you do not see. I think you are not glad. It is strange. What other lad−−Do you know all it means to have a bit of land of your own? You cannot, I think. It means freedom. You would be a poor man with only this, that I know; but you would never need to starve, and you would be always free. No beggar and no bondsman−−always free. Do you understand what this means? You are seventeen. Some day you will see a girl you want. Listen. When Pippa was but a child−−not twelve, I think−−I loved a woman−−not the first I

loved, nor yet the last, may heaven be merciful to my sins! but the best−−yes, the one I loved the best. The girl was poor, a daughter of many; her father a shepherd up above there. She was called Dina. I think she was not handsome; but she was like a wild rose−−yes, just like that; a thing you could not be rough with; a thing that all the air round her sweet. I loved her best of all. Well, well; you do not know. You will know. If I had married her, all would have gone right. She could keep me from fair and fray, from riot and quarrel, as none of the others ever could. I would have married her. But I was one among many, working on the same soil. My father said, 'How bring another mouth, when there was not enough for the mouths there were? There was not room for a mouse the more in the old house.' Dina had nothing but the poor rough shift and gown she wore. He would not hear of it; so I never married Dina. We met by stealth up in yon pines. We loved each other. Trouble came. You are too young. Never mind. Dina died of it in the end, a year later−−that was all. And there was no soft little white soul between mine and the devil any more. I let myself go to all the evil that chose to come in my path. I stabbed and cursed and gambled and rioted, and made men afraid of me and women rue me. If I had married Dina−−I never saw any other woman that I cared to marry; nay, I would have given none the place that ought to have been Dina's. Sometimes I go up and look at where she lies still, in that little square place with the white walls round it, right up there under the pines, where you see the cloud now−−that cloud that has come down and past the mountain. Yes, up there. Sometimes I can feel her arms about my throat, and feel her kiss me still. I never think of any of the others. Buy you do not understand. What I meant to say was, if I had had a little piece of land like this, and had not been one amongst so many, I should have married Dina, and she might not have died. God knows, at least, I should not feel it in the way I feel it now, that it was I who brought her death on her; and I should have lived with cleaner soul and straighter steps, I think. Now you, dear, you are a gentle boy, and tender of nature, and will love some girl more innocently than I ever did. And when we have built your little house,−−just see how it will stand, with the sunrise always in face of it, which will please you so; and that curve of the hill to keep it from the northerly storms,−−why, then, I say, you can bring home any honest, pretty maiden that you take a fancy to, and need not ask my will nor anyone's, but can live God− fearing and wholesomely all your days, instead of being cast adrift on lame chances and blind passions. For you are not very strong, my boy, and a tranquil life will be the best for you; and then, when death does come to you, and you see your mother face to face at last, why, then you will say to her that I kept you out of hell, though I could not keep myself. And I shall not mind hell, dear. No! Let it burn me as it may, if only they leave me just a little light, so that I can look up and see you happy by God's throne−−you and my poor Dina. A man can be a man in hell, I think."

His voice ceased.

What he spoke of was no metaphor to him, but dark dread truth, as sure to come to pass as night to follow day.

Signa looked, half fearfully, up into his face. What could the boy say?

He only vaguely understood all that the strength and the weakness, the sternness and the tenderness, the force and the frailty of the man's soul wrestled with and overthrew. He only felt the dead weight of a future that appalled him, being forced on him by the hands that were stretched out to give him blessing.

A bitter sense of his own cruel thanklessness, and of his impotence to make himself more thankful, choked up in his heart all other emotions.

He was mute a little while, his chest heaving and his eyes burning with an insufferable shame of his own ingratitude. Then all at once he threw up his head, and spoke with the desperate pain of one who feels himself most utterly unworthy, yet is carried out of himself by the force of a passion stronger than his will.

"What can I say?" he cried. "Oh, how good you are to think so of me and never once of yourself! And any other boy−−oh, yes, I know−−any other than I would be so happy and so proud. You must hate me, because I am so thankless. No−−not thankless in my heart. Most thankful−−only it is not what I want. It sounds so vile to say so; and you toiling and saving, and thinking only of me and of my future all those years. But one is as one is made. You know the rose could not live the water−life of the rush, the dove could not burrow in the moss and sand like the mole. We are as we are made. We cannot help being rose or rush, dove or mole. Something does it for us−−God they say. Only one wonders. You must hat me, so cold as I seem, and so base and so callous; and you thinking only of me all these years, and giving up your life for mine. But it is better to tell you the truth, and you will try and forgive it, because I cannot help it. It is stronger than I am. I do not want any land nor any girl. I do not want to be a contadino always, living and dying. I should do no good. I love this hillside−−ah, dearly! I would spend all my life upon it. But then not in the way you wish. Only when I should have learned all I want,

and should come home here for ever and ever, and watch the sunrise, and make music all day long that should go away to all the ends of the earth and take the name of Signa with it, and make it great everywhere in men's mouths. But to stay here now and always−−never knowing anything, never hearing a mass sung, nor a cantata placed, nor an opera given; never doing anything except put the grain in and reap it, and dig round the olives and trim them−−oh, I would rather you would throw me in the brook, and fling stone on me till I should be dead. When I take the cattle out, I do not think of them−−I think of the music that is always about me, all around me, everywhere. I love the land, but it is because of its beauty I love it; of ploughing and weeding, and watering, and stacking−−I help you because I ought to do it; but my heart is not in my body while I do do it. My heart is with the birds, with the clouds, with the stars−−anywhere−−but never in the labour at all. If I were alone here in other years, as you say, I should let the briars and the rosemary eat it all up as Baccio did. Oh listen, do listen, and do not be angry. What I want to do is to learn; to hear beautiful things, and see if I cannot make more beautiful things myself. I have heard that there are schools of music, where one can know what one is worth. I play the old great things the great masters wrote, and when I play them, then my heart is in my body, and my soul seems to live in my hands. I cannot help it. The only thing I care for in all the world is music, and I do think that God has meant me to give my life to it for the world. You remember what that stranger said when I sang to him when I was only a child. I do not want my mouth to drop pearls. I do not want gold, or pleasure, or comfort. But if I could go away where I could learn. I have written−−but I do not know what it is worth. If I could go away where I could hear great things, and study them, then I think I could make you proud of me−−then I think I could honour the Lastra. Oh, listen, listen, listen! I am not thankless, indeed. But what I want is to have the beautiful things that I hear live after me. I would die a thousand deaths, if it were possible, so that only I could give life to them, and know that the world would say, 'He was only a little lad−−he was only Signa−−but his music was great.'"

Then his voice ceased quite suddenly, and he dropped his face on his hands and trembled. For he was afraid of the fruit of his words; and his unthankfulness made his soul black and loathsome in his own sight.

At the first phrase Bruno had sprung to his feet, and had all the while stood looking down on him, not breaking in upon him by a breath or by a sign. Only over his face there had come the old darkness that had been banished so long; his eyes under the straight black line of his brows had the old murderous fire in them.

He listened to the end.

Then he set his heel on the violin which laid on the sedges at his feet and stamped it down again and again as if it had been a snake.

"Accursed be the toy that has bewitched you−−accursed the gold that bought it, and the man that gave−−!"

The bruised wood cracked and broke under his heel; a single string snapped with a shrill, sad, shivering sound, like the cry of some young thing dying. The boy sprang erect, his fair face in a blaze of wrath and horror, his slender hands clenched. For a moment they looked at one another;−−a sullen gloom set in the man's flaming eyes; a wild reproach and a hopeless defiance in the boy's.

Then Signa's arms dropped, and he flung himself on his ruined treasure−−covering it with kisses−−weeping as girls weep.

Bruno looked down on him, and the fierce scorn on his face deepened, and he laughed aloud.

Mourn in despair for a broken plaything, and slay without a thought a love that would burn in hell through all eternity to serve him!

Without a word he turned and went up the mountain−side.

The boy lay face downwards in the grass, sobbing, with the shattered wood under his quivering lips.

Bruno never looked back.

CHAPTER IX.

IT was night when Signa crept back from the side of the brook to the house.

The sun had left a stormy red over the mountains. In the valley it was raining heavily. Wind blew from the west. The bells were ringing for the benediction through the dense violet−hued vapours.

The poor peasant who most often aided Bruno on his fields was putting up the bar before the oxen's stable.

He turned his lanthorn to the boy, and nodded.

"You will be up by dawn, Signa−−will you? It is too much for me to do alone."

The boy stopped, shading his face from the lanthorn lest the man should see his swollen eyelids and his pallid cheeks.

"Is Bruno gone?" he asked.

"Yes. Did you not know? But, there; he never says anything. It is his way. How your voice shakes. You have got a chill. Yes. He came down from the mountains an hour ago and told me he should be away a day−−two days; perhaps more;−−would I sleep in the house and see to the things? No offence. But you are no more than a baby. Mind, the guns are loaded; and leave the wine where I can get it easy if you go to bed."

Signa locked himself in his little room, heeding neither the guns nor the wine.

All night the rain beat against his lattice and the winds raged over the roof. All night he tried by the light of a feeble little lamp to mend his shattered Rusignuolo.

It was quite useless. The wooden shell he could piece together well enough; but the keys were smashed beyond all chance of restoration, and for the broken silvery strings there was no hope.

The Rusignuolo was mute for evermore. As mute as a dead bird.

Signa never slept, nor even undressed. He sat looking at the violin with a sick dead apathy of pain.

He watched by it as a living bird will watch by the dead one which has been its comrade in song and flight, and never more will spread wing with him or praise the day beneath the summer leaves.

When the morning came and the peasant flung a shower of pebbles at his shutter to rouse him, he was still sitting there, tearless and heart−broken, with the fragments of the Rusignuolo before him.

The habits of his life were strong enough to make him rise and dip his head in water and shake his hair dry, and go down and help the man in his stable and field work. But, first he laid the violin reverently, as though he buried it, in a drawer, where his rosary and his communion ribbon and his book of hours and his little locket were all laid with sprigs of fir and cypress and many rose leaves to keep them sweet. His face was very white: he had a scared, appalled look in his eyes, and he hardly spoke.

The peasant asked him if he had seen a ghost in the night?

Signa shook his head; but he thought that he had heard many−−ghosts of his silent melodies, ghosts of his dead dreams, ghosts of all the gracious, precious, nameless, heaven−born things that he and the Rusignuolo together had called to them from the spirit−world; from the shadows and the storms, from the stars and the sun.

The long, dreary, dull day dragged out its weary length. It had ceased to rain, but the valley was hidden in vapour. He could not see the river or the villages, or the distant gleam of the golden cross. Dusky mists, white and grey, floated along the face of the mountains, and rose like a dense smoke from the plains.

He helped the peasant all the day, his own peasant training teaching him by instinct to labour whilst he suffered. He fed the beasts and plucked up the beet−root, and drew water and stacked wood, and did whatever the man told him to do.

No one came near. The hillside was still as a grave. The fog drifted beneath it, and hid the rest of the world. He and the man worked on alone. The oxen lowed in the byre, missing their master. The screech−owl finding it so dark began to hoot. A great awe, like that of the sight of death, weighed upon Signa.

He feared every thing, and yet he feared nothing.

The Rusignuolo was ruined and voiceless.

It seemed to him as if the end of the world had come.

He went up the stairs and looked at it often. No tears would come to his eyes; but his heart felt as if it would burst.

Never again would it speak to him.

Never!

A dull aching hatred of the man who had done this evil rose up in him. Hatred seemed like a crime−−after all that he owed to Bruno; but it was there.

He was unutterably wretched.

If there had been anyone he could have spoken to, it might have been better; but the only thing that had ever understood him was dead−−lying mute and broken amongst the rose leaves.

He could only work on silently with his heart swelling in him, and let the horrible grey hours come and go.

The peasant wondered fifty times, if once, where Bruno could be gone. Bruno, who, for forty−nine years, never had set foot off his own hill and valley, save that once to the sea.

But Signa answered him nothing. He did not care. He did not ask himself. If Bruno were dead−−the Rusignuolo was dead. It would be only justice.

The boy's heart was cold and numb.

The Rusignuolo was dead, and all his hopes and all his dreams and all his faiths dead with it.

"Why did he take me out of the flood?" he thought, as he looked down in to the dull vapours of the great rain−clouds that hovered between him and the plain.

There is a silence of the mountains that is beautiful beyond all other beauty. There is another silence of the mountains that is lonely beyond all other loneliness.

The latter silence was about him now with the world of water and mist at his feet; that dim white grey world in which he might have drifted away with his mother−−but for Bruno.

"Why did he save me, then?" he thought. "If he must kill all that is worth anything in me now?"

And his heart grew harder against Bruno with each hour that went by, and brought the wet, oppressive, sullen evening round again, with the wind loud amongst the pines.

The boy looked out through the iron bars of his open lattice into the cold still night, full of the smell of fallen leaves and fir−cones. The tears fell down his cheeks; his heart was oppressed with a vague yearning, such as made Mozart weep, when he heard his own Lacrimosa chanted.

It is not fear of death, it is not desire of life.

It is that unutterable want, that nameless longing, which stirs in the soul that is a little purer than its fellow, and which, burdened with that prophetic pain which men call genius, blindly feels it way after some great light, that knows must be shining somewhere upon other worlds, though all the earth is dark.

When Mozart wept, it was for the world he could never reach−−not for the world he left.

With the morning Palma came up; the same weather lasted, but weather did not matter to her. She came for sticks and gorze for her firing, which she could glean above on the wild ground. Usually Signa helped her. Now he murmured that he had too much to do, and let her go up under the trees alone in the falling rain.

What was Palma to him, or any living thing? the Rusignuolo was ruined.

He sat on the low stone wall with the rain on him, and left all his work undone.

The absence of Bruno weighed on him with a vague sense of misfortune and fear, and yet he did not wish him to return; he wished him to keep away−−always, always, always, he thought; how should he bear to see the man who had slain his Rusignuolo, and how could he ever avenge it on the man who had given him bread and shelter and love, and almost life?

The boy's heart was sick with sorrow, and the first bitterness of wrath that had ever found resting−place in him.

He wished that he were dead−−he wished that he had never lived.

Palma came down from the higher ground under the ppines, with a sack of fir−apples on her shoulders, and a great bundle of dry boughs and brambles balanced above it on her head. Her feet were black with the moss and mud; her wisp of a skirt was clinging to her, wet through; her brown face was warm with work. She stopped by the wall.

"Is anything the matter?"

Signa shook his head; he could not speak of it.

"Cippone told me Bruno was gone away," she said, meaning the man in the field: 'Is that true?'"

"Yes, it is true."

"Then there must be something."

Signa was silent; sitting on the wall with his wet hair blowing about him.

Palma rested her sack and her faggot on the stone parapet, and looked anxiously in his averted face.

"Dear Signa, do tell me."

"It is nothing," said Signa, slowly; "only he is a brute−−he kills what is greater than himself; and I hate him."

"Oh, Signa!"

The girl's sunburned cheeks grew ashen: the slowness and coldness of his answer frightened her more than any outburst of wild grief or rage would have done. It was so unlike him.

"I hate him," said Signa. "Palma, see here. He pretends to love me, and he breaks my Rusignuolo, and he breaks my heart with it; and he thinks he loves me, both body and soul, because he buys a bit of land and bids me live on it all the days of my life, and dig, and sow, and plough, and hew, and draw water, and lead a life like the oxen's−−no better: he calls that love. To do with me exactly what he wishes himself! To make a mule of me−−a mule−−a stupid plodding thing, mute as the stones: he calls that love."

"Oh, Signa!"

She could say nothing else. She was so amazed and so aghast, that all her love of the soil as a Tuscan, and all her instincts of class and of custom as a peasant, were roused in horror at him. Only she was so fond of him. She could not think him wrong. She had a true woman in her−−this poor brown girl, who went half naked in the wind, and bore her burdens on her back like any beaten ass.

"'Oh, Signa!'" echoed the boy, impatient of her tone, tossing his wet hair out of his eyes. "Oh; no doubt you think my gratitude is as poor as his love. No, it is not. If it had been anyone else,−−I am only seventeen, and not strong, they say, but I would have found some way to kill what killed my Rusignuolo. Oh, I know he took me out of the flood−−off my dead mother's breast, and has been good−−very good, and I have loved him. But now, because I cannot promise him to live as he lives; because I cannot choke the music out of me; because I want to go away, and see whether what I do is worth anything or worth nothing, because I feel I could be great as Gigi says that Paësiello, and Palestrina, and Pergolese were; now he turns against me, now he is a brute, now he breaks the violin under his heel as if it were an empty husk of maize! And then he calls that love; and you look at me in horror, as if I were some heartless thing because I would sooner any day have my lute than such a love as that;−−to set its foot upon my throat and keep it mute, as the kite sets his claw into the thrush's!"

He spoke with vivid, tremulous, petulant passion; the first passion that had ever convulsed the tender, dreamful youth of him; all the colour flushed back into his face, his mouth quivered, his eyes flashed fire through the rain.

Palma listened with a great terror in her. But she was a brave girl, and swift to reason and to see the right.

"Is your gratitude so much more real than his love?" she said, quickly; and then was sorry that she had said it, fearing it too harsh.

Signa winced a little, struck home by a sudden consciousness.

"You cannot buy gratitude," he said, angrily. "I was grateful, heart and soul, and I would have died for him two days ago. But now, he has forfeited all that. I hate him−−I hate him, I tell you!"

"Does a moment's rage outweigh sixteen years' care so soon?"

"He broke the Rusignuolo," said Signa; and his fair mouth, set with a stern serenity, gave him for the moment almost the look of manhood.

Palma looked at him, and thought how beautiful his face was; her eyes filled with tears.

"What do you want?−−To go away?"

"To go away now, that I may come back great."

"Are people happier that are−−what you call great?"

"Happy! that I do not know; perhaps not. I daresay not. What does that matter? It is not to have lived in vain. Not to be put under the sod like a dead horse. Not to be forgotten while there are men on earth. It is to do the thing one has it in one to do; to see the sun always while other people stare at the dust. It is−−it is−−oh what is the use of talking. You never would know, you never understand."

"No, dear," said Palma, with a sigh; "and what does Bruno want of you?"

"To live as he does. To be a contadino always. He has bought that bit of land for me by the brook, you know it; he would give it me for my own; and when I am a man I am to live there, and take some girl to be my wife, and so be safe, as he calls it, and happy, as he thinks! That is what he has laid out for me. That is what he wants."

Palma coloured to the roots of her dusky rippling hair, and then grew very pale, as pale as her olive skin could be.

"And all that does not please you?"

"Please me! Oh, Palma, when one has the song of the angels always in one's ears!"

His mouth trembled, his voice faltered; how could he say what was in him; the force greater than himself that drove him on? the futile despair at his own powerlessness to alter his fate, which made him heartsick at this future, which they all thought so fair?

Palma did not understand. A sickly pain settled over her; a sense of isolation and of immeasureable distance from the other life which had grown up with her own amongst the flowers of Giovoli.

Besides, to have a bit of land, and dwell on it and die on it; that seemed to her, as it had seemed to Bruno, the very sum and crown of human desire.

The "sublime discontent" which stirred in the young soul of Signa was as far from any range of her vision as were the angels' songs he said he heard.

She believed in the angels indeed; but for her they were mute. For her they ever abode beyond the great white clouds, invisible and silent.

She did not speak for a little time. Then she rose, and left her sack and her faggot on the wall.

"It is true, dear. I do not understand. I am stupid, I dare say. I will just go in and see if there is anything to do in the house. I can stay a very little while. I have everything to do at home. Father is so busy taking the lemons indoors."

Signa let her go. He was looking through the still falling rain at the mountains, where he could no longer see the sunrise, and at the plain where the golden cross was still behind the mist.

When he had had the Rusignuolo with him, he had never cared whether there were rain or sun.

Palma went into the house, and, like the laborious and cleanly creature that she was, found much to do with broom and pail and duster; made a fire underneath the cold soup−pot, cut fresh vegetables into it, and scoured out the pots and platters of the daily use which were lying foul about the place. She was accustomed to such work, and could get through it quickly.

She worked hard and fast, the tears swimming in her eyes all the while. She did not know very well what ailed her. She only knew that Signa wanted to go away. That the life, which seemed so natural and so good to them all, was a thing impossible to him.

She loved him better than all her brothers; and it had hurt her curiously to hear him talk with such scorn of the little house that Bruno would have built for him on the hill by the brook, and of the girl that in time might have dwelt with him there in the face of the great glad sunrise.

It was not that she thought she could have been chosen to be that girl−−oh, no!−−never− theless it hurt her with a dull and confused pain. Besides, she felt that he was wrong; and she did battle with herself whether she ought or ought not to tell him so.

She decided to tell him. Signa seemed to her sturdier, stronger, lower nature, like some beautiful, delicate shy song−bird, that a rough word would scare and drive away like a shower of stones. He was so unlike them all. To Palma, who only saw her cabbages, and her broom, and her water−bucket, those eyes of his, which were always looking upward, and seeing such beautiful things in the clouds and the sunbeams, seemed like those of a young saint.

If the church had made him "beato" she would not have been astonished; she would have worshipped him honestly, and besought his intercession with God whom he was always so near.

And, yet, now she knew he was in the wrong, and she wrestled with herself, scouring out the metal pans, whether it were her bounden right to tell him so, or whether she might without cowardice hold her peace. And perhaps he would only laugh her to scorn; she knew she was stupid, except just for this rude hand labour, and that she knew nothing at all, not even her letters all through; and that she had never seen anything except this green hill and the walls of the Lastra;−−while Signa knew so much−−so much!−−and had been as a child to the city and to the sea, and now could tell one so many things about the old walls that for him had tongues, and the ways of

the birds and the beasts on the mountains; and had read all the lives of the saints, and could see right away into heaven when he had the dream−look in his eyes−−so she thought.

Nevertheless, being a brave girl, and with a resolute heart, her conscience would not let her keep mute. When she had done the house up tidily, and even put a new sprig of bay under the Madonna, she went out into the air; the rain had ceased, but the white mist was hanging everywhere. Signa still sat looking down into the vapours of the plain. She touched him timidly.

"Dear, do not be angry with me; but I want to say one word. I am not clever, I know. But the priest says, when one is very clever one does not see simple things so straight. I do not know. I want you to think. Of course you can judge better than I. But−−do you do rightly by Bruno? He has been so good, and given up so much, and hoped so much: is it not just a little hard that you should be so longing to leave him? Perhaps he does love you selfishly. But is not your want to get away selfish too? He has been cruel. Oh, yes! that is certain. But then no doubt he was in pain: he hardly knew what he did. If I were you, I would try and do what he wishes. Yes, I would. You would have had no life at all if it had not been for him. Is that nothing? I would try if I were you."

Then, afraid of what she had said, and afraid of being late at her home, she took up her sack and her faggots, and went away into the rain−fog, down the rough side of the ploughed land, over the yellow and brown leaves fallen from the vines.

"She does not know. She knows no more than the mules or the stones know," thought Signa, while she ran on with firm, fast feet, and the boughs like a dark cloud over her head.

Genius lives in isolation, and suffers from it. But perhaps it creates it.

The breath of its lips is like ether; purer than the air around it, it changes the air for others to ice.

The day went on, and Bruno did not return. The peasant pondered and wondered, but had the soup and the wine and stayed and saw to the fields and the cattle.

Signa wandered up into the woods, and waited there till nightfall. The rain had passed away, but there was no sun.

The brow of the hill is very wild. A great breadth of gorse and myrtle, with huge stones scattered over it, and thousands of sea pines standing bold against the sky. Here in spring and summer the nightingales sing in countless numbers.

He had so often taken his violin up there and played in concert with them, echoing and catching all their notes.

It seemed to him terribly silent now.

Palma's words pursued him into that cool grey silence.

She did not know: she was so stupid: and still she had awakened his conscience.

Conscience and genius−−the instinct of the heart and the desire of the mind−−the voice that warns and the voice that ordains: when these are in conflict it is bitter for life in which they are at war; most bitter of all when that life is in its opening youth, and sure of everything and yet sure of nothing.

The boy threw himself downward on the wet earth, and leaned his cheek on his hands, and gazed into the dim watery world underneath him, where all the distant towns and the pale villages began to gleam, whitely and faintly, like little clouds on the dark greyness of the plains, and the dull blue and black of the mountains, which rose like ramparts of iron in the east and north.

The girl was stupid−−so stupid that everyone knew she had nver learnt her alphabet even−−and yet he felt that here she had seen and had spoken aright. That he felt.

Signa had had few moral teachings in his seventeen years of life.

There is virture on these lonely hillsides, but it is virtue, self−sown, wind−drifted, like the wild pomegranate bushes, and the wild peach trees.

No one had taught him what was right or wrong, so long as he observed all the rules of the church, and did not blunder against any civil law. So far as he had been told, he had goodness enough to make his peace with heaven. But the boy's own mind had clearness and simplicity in it, and went by instinct to a higher sense of right and wrong than any he had been ever taught−−as Palma's did likewise; Palma, who trotted in the mud or dust all her days, and whose brain was all dulled with small cares as with cobwebs.

He knew that she was right.

That he was thankless and selfish; that the hate which throbbed sullenly in him was almost a crime; that a wolf cub, fed and housed and cared for as he had been, would have had more gratitude than he.

He knew that she was right.

That his life ought to be offered to the man who had done all for it; that his long debt ought to cancel an hour's wrong; that since he had no other way or means of payment save obedience, he should obey−−even to the sacrifice of all his dreams, even to the crushing out of all his soul.

He lay chest downward underneath the pines, and gazed in the misty depths belows, and felt the hard sharp pain of his consciousness of right gnaw at him with her remembered words. He could see the line of his olive trees and the fields where he was to labour all his life long, facing the sunrise.

He was wise enough to know that he could not have both lives. That as he grew to manhood he must cease to be either peasant or musician; that he must renounce one thing or the other. He had lived too much on the soil not to know the ruthless toil of hours and the ceaseless patience and purpose which the soil, ere it will consent to repay him anything, exacts from the husbandman.

He knew that he must choose, now and for ever.

It was the old common choice between bodily need and spiritual desire; only for him the lower need was the one linked with duty, the higher need was the one linked with sin.

He lay and gazed at the dark fields that were to be his own, and the brook that glimmered like a glow−worm under its dusky rushes. And it had been there that the violin had been broken and al its melody silenced for ever and aye!

It froze his heart against the little spot. He hated that shallow water which could sing on and on and on, where the greater music had been hushed into dumbness.

It seemed like a parable to him.

Just as the violin had been stricken mute there, so would be the powers in him. Just as the silver string had snapt, so would his heart break by that cruel streamlet. He saw himself growing older and older, living on and on, with the music dying in him every day and every year, a little more and a little more.

He saw himself as he would be on that land that looked to the morning light:−−spending his breath in shouting call−words to the panting oxen; spending his strength in sowing and in reaping the sum of his daily bread; touching his lute perhaps at evening with dull tired hands, that others might dance under the olive boughs.

What use would the morning light be to him then? What would it say to him? He would only be able to look on the black earth he turned, as it dawned; he would only grow to loathe the little song birds, awakened by its beams, because they would be free and he never. He lay looking down and thinking and seeing himself thus−−as he would be−−in all the years to come.

His eyes were dry, his face was calm, the coldness that had frozen about him in the night, when he had watched by his ruined Rusignuolo, never changed. It was as if all his boyhood had perished in him with that lost music.

The struggle was hard in him. All the longing of his soul wrestled with the consciousness of duty which the speech of the girl had stung into life. He knew that he ought to forgive. He knew that he ought to obey. All the earth and all the air aorund him spoke to him of this man's exceeding love. He looked down on the river from whose flood it had rescued him. He looked down on the roof under whose shelter it had harboured him. He looked down on the old grey gateway beside whose shadow it had faced calumny and forgiven treachery for his sake. He looked down on the old dark trees beneath whose foliage it had toiled for him in endless labour from daybreak to nightfall, in light and in darkness, through sixteen years.

And he let the blow of a moment's passion sweep it all away as thought it had never been. Mighty and enduring as granite, it was to him dissolved in a second of time like an image of snow.

He wrestled with himself for this. He strove against the hardening of his heart. He struggled to change himself; to forgive; to obey.

It was of no use.

With the music from the broken strings, gratitude and affection had passed out of his heart, and left a dead silence there. A silence in which his conscience indeed spoke; but spoke in vain.

When the Ave Maria tolled dully under the mists of the plain, he got up slowly, and went slowly homeward.

His mind was made up: he would not live on in his body slaying his soul.

"He killed the Rusignuolo," he said to himself. "He would kill me."

And he resolved to live his own life; how or where he knew nothing; only by his own means and in his own

way, no longer eating the bread of the man who loved him indeed, but who hated his genius, and who wished it to perish.

"What one can do is sweeter and dearer than what anything is," he thought to himself, with the terrible self−absorption of the artist in his art;−−terrible,−−because ever fore−doomed to die in agony soon or late, under some human passion that avenges the rejection of humanity.

And he went slowly down the hill−side home, losing sight of the brook and the olives, for it had grown quite dark.

The house was silent. The shutters were closed. The dog was mute. He lifted the latch of the door and entered.

There was the glow from a lighted lamp upon the stone of the floor.

In the light stood Bruno.

He came forward and bowed his head before the boy. He said:

"Forgive me."

CHAPTER X.

THAT night, when Signa had gone to his bed of hay, and had fallen asleep there, with the tears left wet upon his lashes, Bruno sat still and lost in thought, with his head sunk upon his breast.

The boy must go.

That was sure. That was plain to him.

Signa had begged to stay and do his will in all things−−meaning what he said. Touched into passionate repentance of his own hardness of heart by this noble remorse which had bent the strength of the man before him, he had vowed in uttermost sincerity of purpose to live and die on the hill−side. Bruno, a suppliant before him, had awed and ruled him; as Bruno, a master tyrant over him, never could have done.

When he had been embittering his soul against the love that saved and sheltered him, that love had been returning to him, bringing the fierce, proud, stern soul of the man into supplication before him−−him−−a child, a debtor, a beggar, an ingrate!

The sharpness of the contrast had stung him to the quick.

At the first words of Bruno he had fallen on his neck in passionate contrition.

His thankless, oblivious, selfish passion had seemed vile to him as a crime.

"Forgive me," Bruno had said.

But the boy had known that the forgiveness needed was for himself.

That passion may be an infirmity of man; but that ingratitude is a curse of hell.

"I will do what you wish," he had vowed, in all the breathless eagerness of his repentance. "I shall be happy−−so happy! I will never go away−−never, never! Let my foolish dreams die. They are not worth a moment of sorrow or regret to you. I shall be happy here−−so happy!"

Bruno had smiled; but it was a smile whose tenderness had half appalled the boy.

"My dear," he answered; "later we will talk of that. I sinned enough against you; I will try to do right−−henceforth."

And when it was midnight, and the boy slept in the little corner chamber with the blessed palm−sheaf above his head, Bruno sat still and pondered−−how to do this right.

Passion had mastered him. The old brutal, swift, savage, unthinking rage, which had done so much evil in his day, had burst out like a smothered flame, and for the first time had smitten the living thing in which all his affections and all his atonement centered. When he had struck his heel down on the Rusignuolo, it had seemed to him as if he were crushing out the devil that was tempthing the boy from his side into all the evil of the world. All his own great love and uncounted sacrifice had been as nothing beside a plaything of wood, a toy of sound and wind!−−it had seemed to him as if he gave a kingdom and got back a stone.

In the fury of his pain, all that was worst in him had surged up from its long sleep and broken its bonds. He let all the evil in him loose. He went down into the city and plunged into all the licence that he had sternly shunned so long. He came out from the riot of it cooled and in his right mind, like a man who awakes from the heavy sleep of drugs. Three nights had gone by; he hated himself; he thought of the boy without bitterness and with longing; he felt as if he were not worthy to meet the clear eyes of a child.

He went, in the dull grey rain of the afternoon, into a little dark chapel in the oldest quarter of the city, and kneeled down in the black shadow of it, and confessed his sins. It was his duty, he thought; he had been reared so. He believed that he purified his soul.

He was vile in his own sight.

In his remorse, the broken Rusignuolo seemed to him−−no less than it had seemed to Signa, mourning it on the hillside−−a human thing, with a voice from heaven in it, that he had hurled into death and silenced by a deed as cruel as Cain's.

He went homeward, along the familiar road, with the Ave Maria bells ringing through the fog. As he went, he

struggled hard with himself. He hated this madness, as it seemed to him, which had taken possession of the boy. He hated it at once with the jealousy of an affection which beheld in it an irresistible rival, and with the superstitious fear which an uneducated intelligence has of an incomprehensible mental power.

Bruno was of the same stuff as the men who in earlier ages burned the magic out of creatures whom they believed bewitched, and thought the ruthless torture that they dealt a righteous service both to God and man. In his sight, it was a sorcery which enthralled Signa, and made him blind to all the peace and safety and plenty and sweetness of the life upon the hills.

But, with the bating of his fury, the calmness of reason had returned to him. It was a sorcery−−that he thought; but it was one which there was no combating−−that he saw also. He saw that it would only be possible to stifle it, by destroying the very core of the boy's life.

He might keep his hand on the throat of his nightingale−−true; but, under the pressure, the life would go out with the song.

Though to him this strange absorbing instinct which killed all other was beyond any possible comprehension, Bruno, by the force of his love for the lad, knew that he must let him go, or see him fade away into a hopeless and joyless creature, for ever beating and thirsting to be free.

As he went along the road in the rain which he never felt, under the sound of the bells which he never heard, he thought, and thought, and thought−−tearing the selfishness out of his heart with the same haste and rage as in other years he had hurled oaths or stricken steel at those who had offended him.

To do right by the boy.

That had been his first intent, his sole desire, since, driving his cattle out on the day after the flood, he had made his mute promise to dead Pippa.

But, what was right?

He did not know. His reason as a man told him that, the strong instincts of the brain being stifled, the boy would fall into a feeble, worthless, and unhappy thing. His ignorance as a peasant made him fear, with all a peasant's dread of the unknown and the unseen, the world into which Signa pined to soar away, and the art which usurped all his desires.

Music!−−well, what was it? Just a thing that came to every flute−voiced girl carrying her linen to the river's brink, every lithe−fingered shepherd or ox driver who, when his work was done, thrumbed on a mandoline before the cottage door.

This power which took empire over the boy and drove him from all paths of custom and of duty, and made him happy with a few signs upon a piece of paper;−−that was beyond all sense and meaning to him;−−a horrible exaggeration and distortion of an innoccent thing, such as men sent who had the evil eye.

Which would be right?

To burn and stamp this madness out of the young soul?−−or to let it have its way and trust to heaven?

If only he knew!−−

In the Lastra the lamps were burning. There was a funeral going through the gates; the bier borne by the brothers of the Misericordia.

Unconsciously, from habit, he stood still and crossed himself, and uncovered his head. When it had passed a thought had come to him.

He entered the church where Luigi Dini was putting out the lights after benediction. Bruno went up to him without greeting.

"Old Maso told the lad men by music have been greater than kings. Is that a lie?"

The old sacristan was used to him, and took no offence.

"It is a truth," he answered.

"Can the lad be great?"

"I think so."

"But is that happiness?"

"No."

"What is the use of it then?"

"It is what is not happy that speaks to men of God. Happy men think of their coffers−−of their children−−of their bodies−−of their appetites: they are content with all that."

"You have known a great man?"

"Never out of books."

"And happy men?"

"Yes; they were three parts fool, and the rest rogue."

Bruno was silent: he wanted to be as God to the lad. He wanted to give him endless daylight and ceaseless peace. He wanted to be his fate; and stand always between him and pain and sorrow and accident and the calamities of earth.

The old man looked up at him, and understood his thought.

"You cannot do it," he said, answering what was not spoken. "It is not given to any life to be the providence of another."

The veins swelled on Bruno's forehead: a heavy sigh broke from him: he was never a man to let another know the thing he felt, but now pain mastered him−−the miserable pain of irresolution and of uncertainty, and of that sense, beyond all others oppressive, of combating in the dark an unseen and unmeasured force.

He stretched his hands out with an unconscious gesture, as of a blind man seeking guidance.

"Look: you know the boy as well as I. Better maybe. For his soul is dark to me. He is higher than I. It is as when a bird goes up−−up−−against the sun. You cannot follow it. There is too much light where it is gone. I only want to do the best. For me it does not matter. You see I have got the bit of land for him; the land on the mountain; I have made it good land and rich, and it is a safe provision for him all his days. But, then, when he breaks his heart at thoughts of it, and is crazed to learn and talks of being great−−if only I could tell what to do? Perhaps it is a boy's whim, and to do right one should be hard with him and rough, and stamp it out, and seem cruel now, and he would be thankful in a few years' time? And then again, if one made a mistake−−if one did the wrong thing−−if he sighed and fretted, and wanted what he had not, and were never content, and fell away to feebleness and uselessness−−how would one forgive oneself−−ever? How can I tell? I do not understand. If, at seventeen, they had said to me, 'There is a bit of good land all for you; all your own, and you beholden to no man, and working all for yourself, and sharing with no master;' I should have been mad with joy and pride. I should have seen nothing but my corn and my grapes. I should have thought I was better off than anyone else in the wide world. Why should it not be so with him? I do not understand. He is Pippa's boy. He has our blood in him. He should love the soil. He did not get his dreams from Pippa. If one only knew;−−for me it does not matter. I will cut off my right hand if that will serve him; if that will keep his soul here and hereafter. But what he wants seems madness. Is it a devil that lures him? Or is it an angel calls? How can one know? I want to do the thing that best will serve him. But how to find it? Tell me, if you know. Do not think of me. For me it does not matter."

He ceased, and leaned his hand on the rail before the dark altar on which the last light had just sunk out; the rail shook with the trembling of his strong nerves; his head dropped upon his chest.

The old man looked at him a moment.

"You will be lonely if he go−−it is not fair to you: you have done all for him all his life."

Bruno gave an impatient gesture.

"I say−−for me it does not matter. I can live alone. Answer for the boy−−as if I were dead, and there were only him to think of−−for his good."

"Then I say−−let him go."

Bruno was silent. He breathed hard.

"Let him go," repeated the sacristan. "I never knew a great man. No. My path did not lie that way. But I did know one, a man that might have been great. Truly great, I think. It was when I was a lad. He was a little older than I was. He travelled with the first little troop that I belonged to then; singers, and actors, and musicians, all of us, going from town to town as the fairs, and the feasts, and the carnival, and the vintage, fell. You have heard me talk of it. He was the son of a poor organist, and was himself a violin−player, hardly more than a boy, just keeping body and soul together; he played divinely, and he wrote beautiful things just as your boy does now. People would weep to hear him. It was like nothing mortal. He had an old mother, widowed, and a little sister in Perugia. They lived wretchedly. He sent them every coin that he could get. He stinted himself. One night while he was playing he fainted. It was only hunger. Hunger is so common. The world is so full. He used to dream of greatness, just as your lad does. And indeed the things he made were perfect, only he had so little time; and never had any chance to get them heard. One day he had a letter from his mother. His grandfather, a hard man, who had

denounced her for her marriage, had relented and had offered to take home my Claudio into his house and way of business, on condition that he should touch no note of music ever again. The old man was a money−changer and banker in the north, sharp and keen, and hard as any stone. The mother and the little sister implored him; they starved for all that he could do; and here were peace and plenty, only waiting for his will. They wrote and wrote and wrote; then at last they came. They wept, and raved, and entreated, and reproached. They wore him out; he yielded. 'It will kill me,' said Claudio. 'But if it must be−−for them−−' That night he burned all he had ever written. It was to him worse than any murder. He believed that he killed his soul. He suffered hideously. Death seemed to pass over him as the flames took his music. 'No one will ever hear it now,' he said. And he smiled. I suppose they smile like that in hell, thinking of what they have to see, and of the heaven they will never see. He went. The mother and the little sister were happy. They had enough, and more than enough. 'Claudio will be a rich man,' they said to me. They rejoiced in their success. They thought they had done rightly for him as well as happily for themselves. When a year and a little more had gone by I got a message begging me to go to Claudio in Trieste. I was with a theatre in Verona at the time. I did not know how too it; but I felt that I should never see his face again unless I hastened. I crossed the sea. I found him dying. 'I did my best,' he said to me. 'Indeed I did my best. But I died when they killed the music in me. My body has dragged on a little longer, but I died then.' Then he asked them to let me sing to him; he had kept his vow; he had never played or heard one note. The mother and the sister were there weeping. The old man said, 'Yes: he may have what he will now.' I sang to him−−as men have sung masses burning at the stake. For I loved Claudio. The dying life flamed up in him as he heard. It came back for one moment into his veins, into his eyes, into his soul. He raised himself with such a look upon his face−−ah! such a look; if there be angels indeed they must look so!−−and he lifted his voice, and sang with all the strength and beauty of his youth returned to him, the Eterno Genitor, the chant that Metastasio died singing. One moment−−but a moment, so it seemed−−the glory of the song brought his life back. Then his voice dropped−−all suddenly. His mother raised him. He was dead. The old man cried to heaven to take his gold and give him back the boy. But heaven does not hear these prayers, or will not answer them. They told me later he had laboured at the desk with patience, and with constant effort; but it had killed him. When the old man had relented, and would have made him free in his own way, it was too late. If you blind a bird you cannot give sight and liberty again; nay, if you beseech God ever so, even He cannot do it. There are things that done, cannot be undone, by God or by man. His mother lived out her days a rich woman. His sister had a large inheritance, and wedded wealthily. But it had been bought with Claudio's life, and who shall say what the world did not lose? That is true. He was my friend. It was fifty years ago−−all that. Claudio would be old. But the look that was in Claudio's eyes is in your boy's. And I think−−I think−−if you keep him here, and deaden his soul in him, that his fate will be too, the same."

Bruno made no answer.

He stood still with his head bent by the side−altar, in the glooom of the church that was only lightened by the brazen sconce that the old man carried in his hand. He had not lost one word; his breath came slowly and loud; he did not understand: he did not know what it was that this dead lad and this living one loved beyond ease and safety, and friends, and peace, and daily bread. He did nto understand one whit the more, but he saw what he must do.

He turned with a heavy sigh like a man who stoops to take up a great burden on his shoulders and walk on with it.

"Good−night!" he said, simply, and he went through the little dark church lost in thought, and out into the starless, misty night.

Luigi Dini went up the wooden stairs into the room where the brethren keep their robes and masks.

"He will let the boy go," he said to himself.

The bell had rung for succour for a peasant who had been flung from a mule−cart on the road going to Sta. Marià; some brethren were busily fastening their cloaks while others got out the black stretcher to go and fetch the wounded man. Amongst them was Lippo, ever foremost in good works.

As Lippo drew the hood over his head he was telling his neighbour how his brother Bruno had lent money out for several years on hypothec to the poor wretch Baccio Alessi, the gilder, in the city, on the fine little piece of land under Artemino, that ran with what he farmed; and of how poor Baccio, being close driven by unlooked−for calamity, and the cruelty of creditors who had no mercy on a hard−working creature, had been in direst need, and

Bruno, seeing good his time, and taking advantage of necessity, had foreclosed and drawn his claim so tightly and so suddenly, that Baccio Alessi had no chance or claim, and so the land had passed to Bruno;−−who, as he once had wasted all his substance on evil−living and light women, now would make soup out of pebbles and milk a mill−stone for the sake of his ill−begotten darling whom he had foisted on the memory of poor Pippa.

"He will let the boy go," thought the old man, while Lippo, mourning over his brother's hardness of greed and the poverty of poor Baccio in the city, drew his cowl close and hurried away to help raise the the half−dead peasant; and Bruno, solitary and musing, went up into the darkness and the silence of the hills.

"The boy must go," thought Bruno, as he flung his cloak across his mouth against the watery cold, and ascended the sea−road in the teeth of the wind from the northward.

The outer world was a black and empty space to him. The cities were whirlpools of vice, into which the young were caught as in nets. The only life that he could comprehend, or could believe to be of any worth, was the life of the husbandman living and dying under one roof. In the dreams that made the future beautiful to the lad he himself had no belief. In the greatness that the lad aspired to he saw no reality and no excellence; but only a vague dark chimera of folly that would lead down, down, down, into a bottomless abyss.

He had no consolation of hope.

He had no fond simple belief in some impending though unknown good, such as mothers who love their sons without comprehending them, are solaced by when their children leave them.

To him all beyond was rayless, meaningless, comfortless.

He had said truly; he did not understand.

He only knew that the boy would perish here like the dead Claudio; and so must go.

The rest was with the future. The silent, dark, inexorable future, which he burned to tear asunder as Milo tore the oak, and see the heart of it and the secret; no matter what they were.

All he did know was that he himself was nothing in the life that owed him all.

The boy must go:−−go to forget the sweet hill−side, the hand that gave him daily bread, the old straight wholesome ways, the old clean simple paths, the old innocent natural affections; go to forget them all; go to get drunk on this strange madness of unrest; go to be possessed of this fever of desired greatness.

Bruno cheated himself with no false faiths.

If the boy went now he went for ever.

His steps indeed might return, but the heart and the youth, and the love of him never. If he went to the world and to fame and to art, these would hold him for ever. Bruno knew none of the three, but this he felt. No baseless hopes, no lingering blindness duped him.

Nevertheless he knew that he must go.

Go, whilst he himself stayed to labour for him, and get out of the soil the means for him to pursue the things he wished, and change his visions into reality if such things ever were done in the world; and keep here roof and house and refuge for him, if so be that he should never find his dreams come true, but should return sickened and bruised with effort and with failure.

The boy must go: this was his own portion; to labour here, and get the gold together that would give this young thing wings.

He did not think of that with any regret.

It was to him natural. He had of late years so bent all his energies and all his endurance into working for the good of the boy, that to continue doing this was nothing that seemed to him generous or strange. It was what he had always said to himself that he would do for Pippa's son.

So he went home to his hills.

The morrow would be All Souls Day.

It was late in the afternoon. He went out of his way to the little church of his daily worship.

Vespers were just over. The old priest was in his sacristy. Two or three peasants were coming out. The little, dark church was being hung with veils of black, here and there, by the sacristan; and a woman, who wept as she worked, was putting up some branches of everlasting flowers−−her lover had died in the harvest time.

Bruno went into the sacristy, and laid some money down on the table.

"For Pippa's soul−−to−morrow!"

The old priest gave him his blessing; he dwelt on the same hillside, and believed in the story of Pippa.

Bruno went out into the twilight.

"She will know I keep faith with her," he said to himself; and then entered his dwelling−house, and stood before Pippa's son, and said−−"Forgive me!"

When many hours had gone by, and the boy was at rest, Bruno sat on, with his solitary lamp burning.

He sat motionless while the night waned; not sleeping; wide awake, but half paralyzed as a man under gunshot pain.

He was at peace with himself; at least, he had that deep, sad peace−−sad as death−−which follows the surrender, for another's sake, of all the hopes of life.

The calm of a great repentance, and of an unflinching self−sacrifice were with him. The cold funeral meats wherewith Duty feeds her faithful.

But a great loneliness weighed on him, and closed round him. He felt that he had given a kingdom, and got back a stone.

Like all generous natures, he had poured out his gifts unthinking, ungrudging, and without measure.

His hand were empty, and his heart was desolate.

That was his reward.

It is a common one.

The night wore on; the intense chilliness of coming dawn came into the house like ice; the cock crowed from the stable. He rose and went into the inner chamber, where the boy was; it was only parted by an archway from the common room.

Signa lay asleep, his head upon his arm, his face turned upward. Bruno lowered the lamp, shading it with one hand, so as not to awaken him. Its light fell on his soft young limbs, on his thick lashes, on his beautiful mouth. Bruno looked at him long. Then two great tears gathered in his own eyes, and fell down his cheeks slowly, like the great rain drops that follow storm.

He stood silent for awhile; the lad slept on, unconscious; then he set down the lamp, and blew the flames of it out, and, without noise, unbarred his house−door, and went into the open air and began his labour for the day.

There was a strong wind blowing from the north. Rain was falling. It was dawn−−but dawn without the sun.

He yoked his oxen; and alone and in the darkness he began the day.

CHAPTER XI.

WHEN winter came, Bruno dwelt alone in the old house on the hills; and Signa studied music in the schools of Bologna.

CHAPTER XII.

IN the fair bright weather of the spring, when the virgin gold of the daffodills was scattered broadcast everywhere, an old man with white hair and horn spectacles hobbled over the stones by the south gate to the post for a letter, and got it, and went and read it in the shade by the shrine of Our Lady of Good Counsel, and then took his way through the Lastra to go across the bridge towards the great hills.

As he went under the west gateway, an old woman put her head out over a window−board that had roses on and some hyacinths not yet in bloom.

"Is he well?" she cried down into the street.

"Quite well," said the old man, looking up; and went on between the budding trees.

Before he reached the bridge, a girl raced down the sloping fields, all green with corn. She had great knots of scarlet windflowers and white snowflakes, that she was tying up for market, in her hands. Her feet were wet, because she had been standing in the brook to get the flowers; she had a pitcher slung at her back; her heart beat so high and her breath came so fast that the lacing of her ragged bodice broke.

"Is he coming back?" she asked, and her great black eyes shone like stars.

"Coming back!−−no!" said the old man, with a smile. "He must never come back now, Palma. That would never do."

The girl turned and went away up the fields slowly, letting the snowflakes drop.

The old man went on up the sea−road.

There was the lovely afternoon light everywhere; all the soil was radiant with leaf and blade; the river was a sheet of gold and green shining like the lizards; the air was so clear that on the highest and farthest heights the smallest dwelling gleamed, white as any pearl, and each tree told; near at hand, along the footpaths, every tuft of grass had the rich ruby and purple of the anemone in it, and the fresh odours of the violet; while the daffodils were tossing everywhere above the short green wheat. But the sacristan looked at none of these things.

He was old.

An hour and more's sturdy laboured walking brought him midway on the great hill, with the stone−pines on its summit, and the blue mountain in its rear. A west wind was blowing sweetness from the firwoods and salt from the sea. A man was at work in the beanfields that ran under the olives.

He straightened his back and looked up, shading his eyes from the sun. Then he saw the open letter, and made an eager stride forward.

"Is he happy?" he asked.

"This is the love that loves best," thought Luigi Dini. And he sat down in the shade.

"Is he happy?" Bruno asked, resting his hand on his hip, under the olive boughs, in the March afternoon.

And the old man answered him truthfully from the letter that was a sealed book to Bruno, "Yes−−he is happy;" and read him what the boy said.

Bruno looked at the piece of paper with longing eyes. He wished that in his own boyhood he had learned to read, instead of wading amongst the canes, and climbing for nests of birds, and scaling convent walls to get the grapes, and romping and dancing with every girl he could whenever a mandolin was playing.

Signa wrote the truth; he was happy.

He had a little room in the roof. He heard the clanging of the coppersmiths' hammers all day long. He missed the freedom of the hills, as all hill−born creatures shut in cities do. The fare he had was meagre and untempting. To the people whom he was with he was a little peasant, a little student, nothing more; they were too busy to heed him further.

The town was very dark, very chilly, very oppressive; with the furious alpine winds driving through it, and the high arcades shutting in the blackness of the shadows, and the bitternes of the cold, it was like a vast tomb, after the radiance of the sunset and the sunrise from the mountains beyond the Lastra.

Physically he suffered much in his new life. Like Rossini, he had to study his score in his bed, to keep his

hands from being numbed to ice. When he went out in the gloom of the streets, it seemed to him as if noon were night. He fainted twice from hunger and the stifling sense of want of air in the class−room of the academy. He did not know how to breathe, being shut for ever within four walls−−he who had been used to dwell on the high hills with the sheep, and wander through the thyme and the gorse like the kids.

Other lads mocked him for a thousand things−−for his girlish beauty; for his gentle ways; for his coarse−spun shirts; for his horror of hurting any creature; for his innocence of mind; for his long thick curls; for his hatred of shoes, which he would fling off the moment that he wanted to run fast;−−for a thousand things that made him at once so wise and so foolish, so childlike and so thoughtful; while they were town−bred world− worn young scholars, who knew everything and meditated upon nothing.

He suffered much in many ways.

Yet he wrote no lie when he told them he was happy. He was happy, though always lonely, and sometimes frightened, and very often persecuted. He was happy, looking upward at the face of the St. Cecelia. Happy, learning all that the great professors of his chosen art would teach him. Happy, in his own little attic, that he would fly to for refuge, as a bird to its nest, studying with all the powers of his mind the themes that had been given him to comprehend or to compose; happiest of all, when they ordered him a sonnet of Metastasio, or an ode of Guisti, to be set to music in a dozen different ways, and he could let all his subtlest combinations and wildest fancies have full play, and, sitting in the little dark garret, heard again the "beautiful things" that he had used to hear on his own mountains, till it seemed to him that the Rusignuolo was with him once more.

"I am as happy as ever I can be," he wrote, not thinking how cruel the words might sound; and wrote the truth.

For cold and hardship did not hurt him much or seem great things to bear upon his training in the house of Lippo. And mockery wounded him little, because he heard so little what they said, being always dreaming; and those in authority over him praised him for his docile ways, and found his talent great; and many women were kind to him for the sake of his fair face with its beautiful amorous−lidded eyes that never yet had found a woman beautiful; and he believed in his own fate.

Who can do this, is happy.

When life is still a coin unspent, it looks of purest gold, and bears on it, under a bough of laurel, the figures of Victory and of Love. But when it is paid away and gone for ever, its poor change left from it is of base metal. Even if other men still see stamped on its alloy the Victory or the Love within the garland, we who hold the poor coin in our own hands know that the figures struck on it are those of Failure and of Falsehood, and that the laurel−wreath was copied from a faded knot of fennel.

Signa, whose coin was still unspent, wrote truly, "I am happy."

Meanwhile another suffered greatly to give him happiness.

Bruno, a poor man as the world measures such things, had always been a rich one in his own esteem. The Lady of Poverty of S. Francis had been a mistress with whom he had never quarrelled.

True, he had to labour in all hours and all weathers; he had to be content with rough bread and onion−soup most of his days; he had to be abroad in the driving hailstorms as in the scorching sirocco.

But all things are measured by habit and weighed by comparison. Beside such a man as Sandro Zampetti or the poorer peasants on his own hillside, Bruno was almost wealthy, having no need to stint himself for wood or oil or wine, having those fine cattle of his own, and having, whenever he had cause to go down into the city, loose money in his pocket, more or less, for drinking with a friend or idling with a woman. He had never thought of himself as a poor man since becoming, at his parents' and his brother's death, the only owner of the old house he and his forefathers had been born in; to have a roof over him and food enough, and to be debtor to no man for anything−−that seemed to him wealth.

Perhaps the world was happier when the bulk of its people thought so also.

But now, for the first time in all his life, the check and gall of poverty pressed on him−−the chain which rivets to the soil those who gain their bread from it was for the first time heavy about his feet.

He had to send the boy from him; he had to let him go and live alone; he had to trust blindly that all was well. He could not stir. He could not go and see for himself. He could not move and dwell wherever the thing he loved might drift. He had to stay there, and turn the same sods and prune the same trees day after day, month after month, year after year.

For the first time he realised the one supreme good of money−−that it gives wings to men.

When the heart of a man or woman is where the feet are, wings are not needed; but when the heart goes longingly far away, and the feet must still abide on the same spot, then the simplest and hardiest yearns for flight.

Gold is the talaria of Hermes.

Bruno, who knew nothing of Hermes, but saw the winged figure painted in a thousand places and modelled in a thousand ways in the friezes of old villas and the streets of old towns, longed for such plumes to his ankles that he might bridge space and see the boy. But freedom and travel were as impossible to him as those feathered sandals. He had to stay treading his fields from dawn to nightfall. For the first time as he followed his oxen he felt as if the clinging sods were weights of leaden fetters.

Still he worked more than ever.

As it was, he could scarcely make ends meet. It was a very different thing to keep the boy where food and drink, light and fuel, all came off the soil, costing nothing; and to keep him far off in a city where every crumb called for a coin.

Luigi Dini, indeed, whom he had sent with him, had put the lad with people that he knew−−good, honest, simple−living souls, who gave him a room under their roof for little in the grand square where the Guardamorta of Dante is, and where the coppersmiths and market−folks wrangle and tussle all day long.

But to maintain him thus, and meet the cost of his studies too, drained dry the leathern sack in which Bruno, when his accounts were squared with his master, put his surplus. All that came from the bit of land which had been Alessio's he counted as the boy's, and put aside for him entire, and sent to him as it was wanted. But that was not sufficient; and to obtain all that was needed Bruno had to stint himself down to the leanest portion that a man can live on even in this land of his where hard handlabour is often cheerfully wrought from daybreak to evensong on a piece of blackened week−old bread.

His beasts he would not stint, not even for Signa. His oxen were to him fond fellow−labourers and friends. But himself he denied all except the sheer necessities of life; and the grey came into his dark hair, and his strong, slender, erect frame grew leaner still, and he never went down into the city save early in the forenoon of a market morning, lest temptation should assail him and he should spend a coin on his own appetites or wishes. His life was going away from him with no sweetness in it and no love and no pleasure. But he did not think of that. It did not matter.

Two years went by−−swiftly to the boy, leaping from height to height of his great art, and feeling nothing of poverty or privation, because always living in impersonal desires, and always dreaming of the future time, and always hearing the music of the spheres above all the bray of voices and the clang of metal and the tumult of footsteps in the streets around him.

But very slowly to Bruno.

To rise in the dark; to toil all day; to lie down for the heavy dreamless sleep of bodily fatigue; to wrestle with storm and drought and blight and hurricane; to chaffer for small gains; to follow the oxen up and down and to and fro; to go tired into an empty house and eat an un− shared loaf and go to a joyless bed;−−this was his portion.

There was nothing in it to give wings to time.

One day succeeded another without change, and the tale of one month was as the tale of another. It was the life of a beast of burden−−nothing more. He had always thought no life could be better; but it was oppressive to him now.

Other men laboured for their children, or had that dusky settle by the wood embers made bright by some fresh−faced, new−wed maiden. But he was all alone−−alone with the thought of dead Dina on the mountain height and Pippa's body drifted to the sea.

Men would have little to say to him−−they were Lippo's friends.

He lived in almost absolute solitude. Sometimes it grew dreary, and the weeks seemed long.

Two years went by−−slowly.

Signa did not come home. The travel to and fro took too much money, and he was engrossed in his studies, and it was best so; so Luigi Dini said, and Bruno let it be. The boy did not ask to return. His letters were very brief and not very coherent, and he forgot to send messages to old Teresina or to Palma. But there was no fear for him.

The sacrsitan's friends under whose roof he was wrote once in a quarter, and spoke well of him always, and said that the professors did the same, and that a gentler lad or one more wedded to his work they never knew. And so Bruno kept his soul in patience, and said, "Do not trouble him; when he wishes he will come−−or if he want

anything. Let him be."

To those who have traversed far seas and many lands, and who can bridge untravelled countries by the aid of experience and of understanding, such partings have pain, but a pain lessened by the certain knowledge of their span and purpose. By the light of remembrance or of imagination they can follow that which leaves them.

But Bruno had no such solace.

To him all that was indefinite was evil; all that was unfamiliar was horrible. It is the error of ignorance at all times.

To him the world was like the dark fathomless waste of waters shelving away to nameless shape− less perils such as the old Greek mariners drew upon their charts as compassing the shores they knew.

He had no light of knowledge by which to pursue in hope or fancy the younger life that would be launched into the untried realms. To him such separation was as death.

He could not write; he could not even read what was written. He could only trust to others that all was well with the boy.

He could have none of that mental solace which supports the scholar; none of that sense of natural loveliness which consoles the poet; his mind could not travel beyond the narrow circlet of its own pain; his eyes could not see beauty everywhere from the green fly at his foot to the sapphire mountains above his head; he only noticed the sunset to tell the weather; he only looked across the plain to see if the rain−fall would cross the river. When the autumn crocus sank under his share, to him it was only a weed best withered; in hell he believed, and for heaven he hoped, but only dully, as certain things that the priests knew; but all consolations of the mind or the fancy were denied to him. Superstitions, indeed, he had, but these were all:−−sad−coloured fungi in the stead of flowers.

The Italian has not strong imagination.

His grace is an instinct; his love is a phrenzy; his gaiety is rather joy than jest; his melancholy is from temperament, not meditation; nature is little to him; and his religion and his passions alike must have physical indulgence and perpetual nearness, or they are nothing.

Bruno, who had strong passions and blind faiths, but who had no knowledge and no insight, was solitary as only a man utterly ignorant can be solitary. But he never complained even in his own thoughts: and he never attempted to seek any solace. He had set himself on absolute self−sacrifice, and he went through with it, as thousands and tens of thousands of his own countrymen have done before him in the old days from Chrysostom to Francis, in the monasteries that rise majestic amidst the brown wastes of the sun−burned plains, and crown the emerald radiance of the hill−throned vines.

He was in the fields all day, having a crust of bread in his pocket, and a flask of his own wine under the hedge. He went indoors only when it was quite dark, and was at work again before any gleam of sun showed over the Umbrian mountains. Nothing broke the monotonous measure of his time. Nothing relieved the constant strain of toil. He thought that he grew old. But it was only that his weeks and months had the dulness and the barrenness of age.

Climbling the steep vinelands, reaping in the sun, driving his oxen, working among the bare boughs in the teeth of the north wind, he thought always of Signa, far away there in the unknown city amongst the unfamiliar people.

Did Signa think of him?

He wished that he could know.

The boy's letters were few; but then that was because their postage cost money, and every centime was of value. Luigi Dini read them. They had always messages, tender, thankful, affectionate.

But that was not much.

Bruno knew that the boy's soul and heart and fancy had long left him, and soared into a world that he himself could no more reach than he could reach the star Sirius shining over the reapen fields in the hot nights. He doubted if remembrance had much hold on this child, who when with him and beside him had always been dreaming of the future. He did not reason about it. Only he said to himself:−−

"It is as if he were dead."

But as, had the boy been dead, he would have spent all that he possessed on masses and prayers to ransom his soul and purchase heaven for him, as he would have fancied that he could do, so he toiled now, and with as little thought of recompense or remembrance.

"It is as if he were dead," he said often.

"Nay, nay!" the old man would urge to him. "He only lives a stronger life, that is all, on his own wings, as full−fledged birds do. The world will hear of him. He will be fortunate, I think. He will do something great. He has true genius. Then he will come to you and say, 'I should have been a little hungry homeless goatherd all my years had it not been for you. All that I am, and all that I do, and all that men praise in me, I owe to you.' That is how he will come back one day."

But Bruno shook his head, and worked on amongst his vines and wheat, not lifting his eyes up from the soil.

"What will be, will be," he said, curtly.

But he did not deceive himself, nor did he even desire to be much remembered.

Remembrance of himself would mean, for the lad, failure.

CHAPTER XIII.

MEANWHILE Lippo, munching tomatoes stewed with garlic, in the warm weather with his casement open to the evening air, said to his wife:

"Nita, I met a man in the city to−day who has come over from Bologna upon busines. He told me that old Dini's boast is not untrue−−that the boy of Bruno's is doing well at the Music School, and that people say he is clever, and he gains quattrini singing in the churches−−only Bruno does not know that. The man knew, because his own son is at the great School, having a good bass voice that they think to make something of in a year or two. It is a good thing that we never stinted the lad, and that all the Lastra said how good we were to him, and always let him go to mass, and never a clean shirt for Toto but there was one for him too. If ever the lad should do anything that the world talks about (not that I think it likely, an idle, dreaming brat), still, if ever it do come to pass, people will know we have fair claim on him, and nobody could say that if he neglect us that it would be other than rank thanklessness. Not that what we did, we did for gain. No, never! But they do say those singing men and women make rare fortunes. Or if he write for the theatres and the churches−−there is the man of Pesaro that wrote the 'Gazza Ladra' and the 'Otello'−−I have heard them scores of times down in the city, he lives still, or did quite lately; and such a fuss with him as kings and queens and other countries make−−if it should be ever so with the dainty boy of Bruno's−−well, we did our duty by him, wife. That we can say honestly."

"Aye, that we did!" said Nita, with a grin on her wide angry mouth, scarlet as the tomato that she ate.

Nita was a rough woman and a masterful, and could lie when need arose with all the stubborn− ness and inventiveness that could be desired from any daughter of Eve. But she could not take the daily pleasure that her lord did in keeping up the lie all the day long in her own household, when all need was over, and not a creature there to be the dupe of it.

"We did our duty by him, and very few there would have been who would have taken pity on Bruno's base−born, and brought him to a sense of what he owed to it," said Lippo, pushing his emptied plate away with a sigh.

He had talked himself very nearly into the belief that the boy was Bruno's, and his own charity just what he had told the neighbours. He had said it so often that he had nearly grown into the belief that it was true.

"I was thinking," he added, timidly, for he was always timid before Nita, since who could say how she might persuade Baldo to leave his money? "I was thinking−−after all, he is our blood, though not come rightly by it−−what do you say if we were to send him a little basket of figs and the like when this man goes back to Bologna? It would be just a little remembrance, and show one bore no rancour against him for that fit of passion when he blinded you."

"Wait till he has written his opera," said Nita, with her mouth still in an angry laughter. "You are a shrewd fellow, Lippo. But sometimes you are too over−fond of counting your chickens before your hen has even laid an egg. Figs are figs, and fetch five centimes each till August comes. And clever boys are like lettuces: in much sun they run all to seed. Your precious brute Bruno gives the lad all sun. If I had him−−"

"Ah!" said Lippo, with a smile and sigh together, and girded up his loins and went intohe street to see who was inclined to play a turn at dominoes; and told the barber and the butcher that the poor boy Signa was trying to do right in Bologna, and was studying hard.

"Oh, I bear no ill−will. We are all poor creatures; where should we be at our best unless the saints were there to intercede for us?" said he, with gentle self−deprecation, when they praised his kind way of speaking. "Oh, I bear no ill−will; Bruno is hard, and always unjust, and the greed of getting gold grows on him; but some day he will see the wrong that he has done. I can wait. It is sad to live ever in estrangement, but when one knows one's innocence and good intent−−and the poor lad truly never was to blame. He was encouraged in rebellion and ingratitude. I have sent him a trifle of money by a man that is going to Bologna; he is in little difficulties, so they tell me, and one does not like a boy to suffer for his elder's fault. Besides, now he has left, he sees who were his true friends. Bruno dotes on him; oh, yes, in a mad fashion, but hoards for him, and presses poor men he lends to,

as he did to Baccio−−poor Baccio Alessio; he is in the Bargello for another debt! and all his children starve! it is not the way to bring a blessing on the lad. So I have a mind to tell Bruno, only he is so violent, and never speakes to me, being ashamed no doubt. But all that is not the lad's fault. Nor would one visit it."

And Lippo sat down to his dominoes, and was so pleased with himself that he cheated a little more than usual by way of self−reward. He never cheated greatly, because he knew that to cheat a little every evening, with success and undetected, is much more productive and more prudent than to cheat with a big audacity, that reaps one golden harvest and then is found out, and so for ever ended.

"You will call him 'nephew' if he should write for a theatre, and get paid?" said old Baldo, looking up at him through his spectacles, as he returned, with some loose notes in his pocket, of which he would not speak to Nita.

"Blood is blood, without the Church or notary, that I do think," said Lippo, gently; he liked these vague well−sounding phrases that pledged nothing.

Old Baldo chuckled and smoked a second pipe. Baldo settled within himself that he would let all his savings and his snug little purchase of land above Giovoli go unrestricted to his daughter; her husband, he saw, was not a man to waste money or opportunities, poor−spirited fool though the cobbler thought him, as he heard Nita's voice saluting his return to bed with a shower of invectives, that rolled through the open casement on the night stillness up to the Pisan Gate.

"My dear," he heard Lippo's soft voice answer. "My dear, I have only been to drink a cup of coffee with the good canon. When he was so gracious as to do me so much honour, how could I say no?"

Baldo chuckled.

He did not like Lippo; he was impatient of him, and contemptuous of him, but he felt a sort of respect for him, nevertheless, as he listened where he sat on the porch.

Anyway, Lippo was a safe man to leave one's money to, and all one's little outstanding crop of bad debtors.

He might be poor−spirited−−no doubt he was. A bold opponent might wring his neck like a chicken's. But such pretty, neat, ready−lying as this would stand him in better stead than all the high spirit in the world; which, after all, only serves to get a man into hot water in this life and eternal fire in the next.

Baldo put his pipe out, and nodded to the barber, who was taking his neighbours' characters away by lamplight under the Madonna of Good Counsel, and double−locked his house−door, and carried his stout old body to his bed.

"I used to wish she had married the other one," he thought, as he laid himself down. "But he would have throttled her in a fit of passion; he would never have kept her quiet with the Canon's cup of coffee. And he would never have got in for me all my bad debts. He would have burnt my ledgers as soon as I was dead. He is a fool. I am glad she married the clever one."

CHAPTER XIV.

NEARLY two years had gone away.

It was a still night at the end of September. It was on the eve of the vintage.

The vines lie open everywhere: to the roads, to the streams, to the mule−tracks, to the bridle−paths, over the hills, down by the water under the cypresses, against the old towers, anywhere and everywhere, climbing like gipsy children, and as little guarded.

Only when they are quite ripe, then the peasants keep watch with their guns at night; the gipsy children have grown as precious then as little queens. Over the dark and quiet country shots echo every now and then; perhaps it is a bird shot, or a dog, or, a fox, or nothing at all, or perhaps a man−−it matters little; if he were stealing the grapes he deserves his fate, and living or dead will never complain.

Bruno, like others, loaded his gun and watched abroad in these latter weeks when the vintage was so near.

In September, summer has the day, but autumn takes the night. It was the twentieth, and after sunset was cold. He wrapped his brown cloak round him, and with his white dog walked to and fro the grass paths of his vines, or sat on the stone bench outside his house while the hours wore away.

On the morrow they would all begin to gather; nearly everybody in the Signa country, at the same time and moment. Then the winepresses would run over in the shade of the great sheds, and the oxen would munch at their will the hanging leaves unmuzzled.

It would be an abundant vintage, and wine in the winter plenteous and cheap; there was joy in all the little households scattered over the mountains and the plains, behind the gold of their stacks, and under the blue of their skies.

The hours wore away. The clock of the vil− lage church midway on the hill told them with its sad dull sound; all clocks and bells sound mournful in the night. There was no wind; but the smell of the ripened fruit, and of the stone−pines, and the balm firs, was strong upon the air. The moon was a slender crescent, just resting on the black edge of the mountains before it sank from sight. The turf was pale in the shadows, with the faint colours of the leafless colchicum, and the blush hues of the mitre−flowers. The screech−owl hooted with joy high in the tops of the trees. The bats wheeled, like brown leaves blown about on a wild breeze. Bruno sat in the fragrant cold darkness, with his old gun resting against a hive, and stretched before him the dog.

He sat thinking of the yield of the morrow, out alert for every sound. It was so lonely here that theieves were likelier to be daring than in any place with aid nearer, within call; but on the other hand, there were no tramps from the towns, nor idlers from the beggar−haunts; it was too high to be traversed, or even known to such as these. He had had frays with poachers thrice in all the years he had lived alone there; that was all; and each time they had been worsted, and had fled with his good swanshot in their flesh.

As he sat now, when it was past midnight, and the moon had vanished behind her mountain, withdrawing her little delicate curled golden horn, as if to blow with it the trumpet call of morning, he heard steps coming up the steep ascent of his own fields, and the fallen leaves rustling and crackling. The dog sprang up, barking. Bruno pointed his gun.

He did not speak; it was not his way; if they came there after an evil errand let them get their measure, and be paid for it. He waited.

It was too dark to see anything. It was of no use to fire aimlessly into the cloudy blackness of the clustered vines.

The steps came nearer, the leaves rustled louder. He lifted his gun to his shoulder, and in a another second would have fired at the wavering shadow that seemed to move the boughs; when suddenly the dog's wrath ceased; it sprang forward with a yelp of welcome, leaping and fawning; he paused, afraid that he might fire on the dog, angered with the beast and astonished; the dog bounded into the darkness, and out of the darkness there came a slender swift figure, graceful from the vines, as the young Borghese Bacchus.

Signa stretched his arms out.

"Do not fire! do not fire! It is I!"

Bruno threw his gun upward, and shot the charge off in the air, then with all his soul in his eyes, caught the boy in his strong hands.

"Oh, my dear! oh, my love! I might have killed you!"

All the great silent longing heart of him went out in the tenderness of the words.

Till this moment he had hardly known how he had longed to see the face of the boy.

After a little he drew Signa within the porch, and went and lighted a lamp, and brought it out, and let its rays shine on the lad from head to foot; and looked at him again and again and again, with his own dark oxlike eyes, dim and yet luminous, with all his heart shining out of them, while he never spoke a word.

Signa had changed but little, except that he had grown tall, like a young acacia tree; he was very pale, and very thin; he looked fatigued and weak; he had all the soft grace of his nation; his limbs were beautiful in shape, though very slender; his throat was like a statue's, and his delicate head drooped always a little downward, like a flower on a bending stalk.

He was more than ever before like the Endymion of the Tribune.

The moon had kissed him. With earth he had nothing more to do. His eyes seemed to say−−

"Why keep me here?"

Bruno felt it−−dimly.

"Your body is come back," he said, sadly. "But−−"

He did not end his phrase. He knew what he felt. But he knew hardly how to say it.

The sould would never come back: never.

"Yes, I am come back," said Signa, with a smile, answering the words and not the thought. "I would not write. I walked all the way to save the money. I thought I should have been here before dark. Have I seemed thankless? What can I say? You have given me more than life. You have given me life eternal."

"Hush! Come in and eat. You look weak, come in."

Bruno−−someway−−why he did not know, could not bear the boy to thank him. He gave all his own life for the boy's−−just that−−no more, no less. But he could not bear to speak of it.

Leaving the vines to any chance of theft, he took Signa within and heaped for him such rude fare as his house held; bread and wine, and some fine fruit that had been meant for the market. He watched him at the meal with fond eyes, as a mother might have done, but he spoke little. His heart was full. He was so happy.

The boy had walked all the way to see him; only to see him!

He had not forgotten. He had needed nothing. He had only come back from remembrance and affection. The moment paid Bruno for all the twenty long months of solitude and toil.

"You wanted to see me, and you walked all the way!" he said, over and over again; those words and nothing more. It was so incredible to him, and yet so natural. He was grateful, as liberal natures are to those who owe them all things, and pay them with an hour's tenderness.

Signa coloured a little and looked away.

"Yes, I walked; what of that? It was so long a time−−to see you and the Lastra−−"

Then he touched Bruno's hand with his lips, in soft caressing grace.

"It was good of you," said Bruno, simply, and the tears stood in his eyes. The boy had loved him always−−never forgotten−−had walked all the way only to see his face again!

The seventeen years of labour and of sacrifice and of forethought and of shelter all rolled away from his recollection; he had done nothing, so it seemed to him; and it was he who was Signa's debtor. Generous natures wrong themselves as much as others wrong them.

"If you had sent me word you should have had the money to travel; I would have got it somehow," he said, resting his elbows on the table, and still gazing at Signa, while the brass lamp burned between them, its wick wavering in the draught. "I did not ask you, dear−−no−−Luigi Dini said that you were best left undisturbed, and I said, let him be till his heart speaks−−till he remembers and wants to come. Ah, dear, it is more than your body that comes back−−it is your heart too."

"Surely," murmured Signa, but the colour rose a little again in his pale cheeks, and he drank off his wine quickly.

"You have walked far to−day?"

"Only from Prato: and through Carmignano−−I thought of Gemma. Nothing is ever heard of her?"

"Nothing. Palma is well−−a good girl, as good as gold."

"Poor little Gemma!" said Signa, with a sigh; he could not quite forget the pretty golden−headed sullen little temptress that had made him play and dance that fair day on the stones of Prato.

"If she be alive she is bad. You cannot change a gnat to a bee," said Bruno, briefly. "And, dear, do tell me of yourself−−there is so much to hear−−you have been happy?"

Signa's eyes shone like Endymion's lifted to the moon.

"Happy!−−that is so little. It is much more than that."

"But the people are good to you. You want for nothing? You have all you wish?"

"Oh, no, I want for nothing. Perhaps, I am hungry sometimes and cold;−−the other lads laugh, the masters blame;−−the bread runs short, the shirts are worn out, the women say so−−what does it matter? It makes so little difference. While one has strength enough, and can have faith in oneself−−one has the future. What do the little things signify? One does not notice even−−"

Bruno was silent. He did not understand.

"The angels speak to him, I suppose," he thought.

"Is the Lastra changed?" said Signa, "I cannot give it gates of gold−−not yet."

"How should the Lastra change?" said Bruno, to whom it was immutable and eternal as the mountains.

"I do not know, " said Signa. "Only I am so changed that it seems to me everything else must be so too. It is as if I had been away a thousand years."

"You were so sad of heart for us."

Bruno's face lightened with a deep unspoken gladness. All this while that he had been resigned to be forgotten, the boy had longed for his old home, and now had tramped on foot two hundred miles and more to clasp him by the hand!

Signa answered with swift questions of a score of things: Tinello and Pastore, and Teresina at the gate, and the harvest, and the flowers of Giovoli, and the old priest on the hill, and the things and people of the old life he had left.

Himself he knew that he seemed to have been parted from them a thousand years, not for his regret or for his sorrow, but for the immeasurable distance of thought and knowledge that divided him from them all; from that hopeless sense "they cannot understand," which yawned in an unbridged gulf of difference between himself and them.

"And to−morrow we begin to gather," said Bruno, replying to him. "It will take two days or more. The grapes are very fine; the last rains swelled them so. You will see all the people. There is not one dead. They will be so glad. No doubt you thought of vintage when you chose the time? It was well chosen."

"I did not remember," murmured Signa, glancing at the brown knapsack that he had put away in one corner. "But as I came along I noticed the vines were ready; and by Carmignano a woman gave me a ripe bunch. You will be busy then all the week?"

"But you will stay the week, and more?"

"If you wish."

He leaned his head on his hand; he spoke wearily; his face flushed a little with the same uneven changeful colour.

"You are tired, dear," said Bruno, tenderly. "From Prato;−−it is a long way for you. Very long. And the nights cold. You look to have so little strength. You must have overworked yourself. Go to your bed, dear. That will be best now. We shall have time to talk; and it is selfishness to to keep you up; and with your eyes so sleepy. Look, you see the bed is ready. I have always kept it so. Quite ready. For I said who knows−−he may get tired of the city or of his learning, and come back without one's knowing. Only I did think you might forget;−−and you have not forgotten. The people will be so glad; and you will play to them."

"And if ever you should tire and should be of a different mind," he added, setting down the lamp by the little bed. "They say boys do change−−dream of great things, and of learning, and then see the cities a little, and the hollowness and labour of it all, and grow content to return into the old quiet ways, and leave the world to its own burdens−−they say so, men who know. Well, if ever it should be so with you, or if it be so now, why there is your bit of land by the brook always ready for you as this bed is, and getting better and better every year, and yielding

more. A safe place for you, and daily bread, and the house we would build in no time−−that is, you know, if ever you should change and wish for it. There it always is. A solid bit of land:−−if you should ail anything or be disappointed, or see with different eyes; that is all, dear. Good night, and the saints keep you. And it was good of you to think of me, and to walk all the way."

Signa was too tired to hear the words very clearly, and was ready to stretch himself wearily on the little familiar mattress over which Bruno had been careful to set the blessed palm of the previous Easter. Bruno left him and took his gun again and went out into the moonless night to continue his watch of the vineyard.

But all the sky seemed light to him.

The boy had wanted to see him, and had walked all the way! He was quite happy as he sat in the silence and the darkness. A great hope was warm around his heart. The boy had come back.

That proof of love was so precious to him that all his years of toil were effaced by it and all his solitude glorified.

Who could say that the old ways and the old habits, and the native air and the native soil, and the freedom of the high hills, might not have some sweetness in them after all, and roost at home those young, tired, wandering feet? It was possible at least.

Bruno crossed himself where he sat, with the musket resting at his knee, and thanked the Mother of God. He thanked her. He would not pray for anything. He would not ask for anything. He was content,−−quite content.

The boy had come back. That was enough.

"Only to see me; only just to see me!−−and walking all the way!" he repeated to himself while the hours wore away.

Dawn came very soon.

It seemed to Bruno that it had come when the last gleam of the moon behind the mountains had shone on the face of Signa, with the red vine−leaves against his forehead.

CHAPTER XV.

WITH the sunrise the vintage began.

Signa opposed nothing; but entered into all the work and pleasure as if he were the little fellow who had run home with his Rusignuolo seven years before. There was an effort in it all; his heart was not in it; in his eyes there was the old far−away wistful look; and, at times, he fell into abstraction and silence. But Bruno was too incessantly occupied to notice these shadows on his sunshine. The boy was home again; that was enough. When he saw Signa's slender brown hands pulling down the grape clusters, and heard his voice calling across the hillside to the men with the teams, he was content; so utterly content himself that it did not occur to him to dream that the youth could be otherwise. And he was very proud of him.

Proud of his soft grace, of his straight limbs, of his delicate, serious beauty; proud of that very something about him which was so difficult to define, but which seemed to separate him from all those around him as widely as the solitary gold−winged oriole differs from the brown multitude of the tree−sparrows.

Signa had learned other things beside his own art away there under the Alpine winds; he had studied all that he could, night and day, old lore and new;−−it was not very much, but to his old associates it seemed miraculous; they did not understand what it was, but they felt that this young scholar was a glory to them. One told another, and from all the country about, as far as the bridge of Greve, people came to see him and speak with him, and when the good priest challenged him in Latin, and he could answer with ease and grace, and when the head gardener of Giovoli, who was a Frenchman, spoke to him in his own tongue, and was fairly answered in it, Signa seemed to his old friends and com− panions something very wonderful−−a little fellow running barefoot and cutting food for the oxen only a day ago, as it seemed.

They said one with another that he could not have been Pippa's son;−−no, certainly, that was surer than ever,−−never poor Pippa's son;−−if Bruno's! Who knew? Bruno had been famous for his physical comeliness in his younger years. Who knew?−−patrician ladies had strange fancies sometimes; their contadini could tell rare tales of some of their love fancies.

So they gossiped going down the hill after seeing the boy in the cool evening shadows, or talking with him in the Lastra. At last it became settled with them; the human tongue, once beginning to jump, takes such grasshopper−leaps from conjecture to affirmation−−yes, that was the secret of it all, they said. Bruno had pleased some grand dame too well for her peace or honour, and this was how it came that hte boy had such tastes and such an air about him, and Bruno money enough to make a scholar of him;−−yes, that was how it was.

"We always knew it," said the women, with a sagacious twirl of their distaff; and added, that they could name the erring princess if they chose, but it was perilous work to light truth under great names; like thrusting burning straws under a hornets' nest.

As for Lippo he waited, hearing all they said; and then, by accident, was in the street close by the Livorness Gate as the boy came down old Teresina's stairs, and stopped with his gentlest smile before him.

"Dear; we rejoice to hear you do so well," he said, with outstretched hands, knowing his wife was safe over her linen, washing in the brook underneath the trees by S. Maria. "It is so sad. Bruno is hard to turn−−we are estranged. But is was all an error. I was too rough with you about that violin when you were little. Yes, that I feel; I have done penance for it often. But we were as good to you as we knew how to be, so poor as we were and with so many children. Indeed, we loved you always, and Nita nursed you. You and my Toto are foster−brothers. I never can forget all that."

Signa put out his hands.

"I forgive everything," he said gently. "When one is free and away, that is easy. But friends we cannot be; it would be unjust to Bruno. And I do not know that I do well. I cannot tell−−not yet. One may fail."

And he went on his way to the church of the Misericordia, the little dark church, where his first communion with the old masters of his art had opened to him the glories that lie in the science of sound.

Lippo went the other way, chagrined.

"I wish he would not say that he forgives," he thought; "it sounds as if one had dealt ill by him. I am glad I did not ask him to the house. Perhaps it is all moonshine what they say of him. 'One may fail,' he says. Fail in what thing I wonder? Nita was right. It is as well to wait, and be quite sure. Only, whatever happens, Nita nursed him. That he never can forget, if he should succeed in anything and get a name."

For Lippo, like many others before him, held that a life that rises from obscurity to triumph should look back in grateful obligation to those who, when it was in obscurity, did their best to keep it there.

The stone in the mud cries to the butterfly against the clouds, "Come down and kiss me, for when you were a grub I did my best to crush you: is not that a link between us?"

"We will go down to Fiastra," said Bruno, on the third evening, when all the grapes were gathered in. It was so the old farm−house was called where all the hillside danced at vintage time. The bell was ringing from its roof; an old bell that had on its copper−−"Lavora: et noli contristari," and had been cast in the tenth century or earlier.

They were rich peasants at Fiastra. They had cattle and horses of their own. They had a wide rambling dwelling−house with immense halls and large lofty chambers. There was a great stone court−yard in the centre; the house ran round three sides of it; the fourth side was open to the hill−slope, with all the landscape shining through a screen of pines. They had a numerous family of grown−up sons and young daughters. All through the vintage month, while the maize was being picked, they used to dance there, and ring the bell above the roof and bring all the contadini above and below within hearing up and down to the merriment. The youths and the maidens shelled the Indian corn, and romped and jested and made love; when night fell, some one played on a mandoline; perhaps there was a pipe or a flute, too, and sometimes some wandering musician had a tambourine. They whirled and jumbped about to the rattling music, while the old people smoked or spun, and the babies tumbled with the dogs, with the yellow maize lying in a pile and the calm night skies above, and the hill−side shining white in the starlight through the colonnade of the graceful serious pines. They had done this in the old house for centuries, always, as maize harvest and vintage came round; prosperous folks, honest, simple and gay; generation succeeding generation, without break, and changing in nothing.

There still are many such in this country. Soon there will be none. For Discontent already creeps into each of these happy households, and under her fox−skin hood says: "Let me in−−I am Progress."

They had always gone down to Fiastra. It was the custom on all the hill−side. But since Signa had been away, Bruno had had no heart to go there; the lads and the girls were so merry and so happy in their manner of life; it had made his heart ache the more; why could not Pippa's son have been so?

But now all was well again. It was different. The boy had come back. "Walked all the way!−−just to see me!" Bruno had said to each neighbour that day, going out of his habit of silence in the gladness of his soul.

It was early; they were still shelling the last maize; the bell was just beginning to sound; girls were trooping in, in their work−a−day dress; but each had their little strings of pearls round their throats. Palma, who came amongst them, had no pearls. She was not so much even as a contadina. She felt very brown and rough and unlovely beside the grace of Signa. She oculd not keep herself form thinking how Gemma would have looked if she had stayed there and had lived; how pretty, though having no ornament but her bright glancing hair and her wild−rose cheeks.

Palma took a portion of corn and shelled it, sitting apart on a bench. She was not content like Bruno.

"His body has come back, but not his heart," she thought: "and his feet will soon wander again."

"Will you not dance with me, Palma?" he asked her, when they touched the mandoline.

Palma looked up and smiled; but she shook her head. She danced like all the rest at other times, but this night she could not; she seemed to herself to have suddenly grown coarse and heavy, and to have her feet shod with lead. To be fit for him, she thought, one wanted butterfly's wings and a face like a flower's−−a face like what Gemma's would have been, if Gemma had been dancing there.

Bruno stood with the elder men and talked of the vintage and the new wine, smoking their pipes under the eaves of the house, where a great walnut tree touched the red tiles.

But all the time his eyes followed Signa.

He thought, "He enjoys the old life; he is happy in it; he will not go away again."

Palma sat and shelled her maize and watched him too, as he threw his light limbs about in the careless gestures and joyous bounds which here, without order or figure, do duty for the western saltarello and the tarantalla of the south.

But Palma thought:

"He does it to please them; he does not care; he is thinking of other things; he wants to be away."

For Palma noticed that his laugh ceased quite suddenly very often, as the laughter of one who at heart is not gay; she noticed that he hardly looked at the brown buxom maidens whom he whirled round in the measures, but often looked away through the stems of the pines to the starlit country, as if the tall straight trunks were the bars of a cage; she noticed that when he paused to take breath and came and sat down beside her and some other girl, though his mouth smiled, his face was grave, and though his words jested, his attention wandered.

"He sees the old ways are good, and that there is no place like home," thought Bruno.

But Palma thought:

"He loves us all still; but he is tired of us. We are dear to him still; but we are wearisome to him, and he would like to be away."

For Bruno deceived himself, because he had hope; but Palma having no hope, had no deception.

After a time, they were fatigued with their romps and their dances, and all rested awhile; cracking walnuts, eating almonds, whispering, joking, bandying love nonsense, with the stars over their heads, and the old dark house behind them, with rich bits of colour here and there in the men's blue shirts, in the girls' red petticoats, in the children's brown limbs, in the broad gold of the sunflowers, in the glazed terra−cotta of the Ascension above the house−door, in the scarlet kerchiefs hanging from a casement, as the light of the stars or of the lamp in the doorway fell fitfully on them.

Signa sat apart under the walnut tree; he had forgotten where he was; he was thinking of what was dearer to him than any man or woman. He started as they spoke to him.

"Signa! Signa!" the girls cried. "Have you left your heart in Bologna? Why are you dreaming there? Come, sing us something. Let us see if your grand learning has made your voice any sweeter? You have not played a note."

"Sing? here?" he asked, lifting his head in surprise.

His thoughts had gone so far away.

Bruno put his hand on his shoulder:

"Sing or play. Who should care to hear you, if not your old friends here?"

Signa had the habit of obedience in him; he never disputed any wish of Bruno's. He took a mandoline from the old fellow who was thrumming it for the dancers; a grey−headed farmer, seventy years old, who, nevertheless, could string a dance tune together as prettily as any one, and liked to see his grand−daughters skip about like kids.

No one can make much music with the mandoline, but there is no other music, perhaps, which sounds so fittingly to time and place, as do its simple sonorous tender chords when heard through the thickets of rose−laurel or the festoons of the vines, vibrating on the stillness of the night under the Tuscan moon. It would suit the serenade of Romeo; Desdemona should sing the willow song to it, and not to the harp; Paolo pleaded by it, be sure, many a time to Francesca; and Stradella sang to it the passion whose end was death; it is of all music the most Italian, and it fills the pauses of the love songs softly, like a sigh or like a kiss.

Its very charm is, that it says so little. Love wants so little said.

And the mandoline, though so mournful and full of languor, as Love is, yet can be gay with that caressing joy born of beautiful nothings, which makes the laughter of lovers the lightest−hearted laughter that ever gives silver wings to time.

Signa took the mandoline and struck a few broad sweet chords, sitting under the heavy shade of the walnut leaves, with the pines and the starlit valley before him; just a few chords in the minor key; sad and soft, and almost solemn.

Then he sang.

He sang the old Misero pargoletto of Leo, which they had heard him sing a thousand times when he was a little fellow driving the sheep, and then he sang the Tu che accendi of Rossini's Tancred, born from the lagunes of Venice, and known wherever a note of music has ever been heard; and then he paused a little, while the young men and the girls filled the air with their chiming voices that echoed the delicious familiar cantilena, in a chorus that vibrated through the pines and up to the skies, as if a thousand nightingales were singing; and then with a few sadder chords, sweet and almost solemn, he passed on to music that they did not know, airs that were quite strange to them, grave recitatives and sweet lovers' serenades and grand airs of prayer and sorrow, and ritornelli,

light as thistledown, and cathedral chants as solemn as death; they were all his own, with the freshness of a genius in them that had invigorated itself from study, but had borrowed nothing and retained its own originality, as the flower takes fresh colours from the bees, yet is a flower still, and never is a bee.

"What is it?" they asked one another; for what with their own songs handed down from mouth to mouth and their little wandering theatres and their love of what is good in melody and the traditions of it, common in all households, these people know by ear so much that is ancient and beautiful; though they could not talk learnedly about it, and though the names of the masters are as Sanscrit to them.

"What is it?" they asked one another; but they soon ceased to whisper even that, and could only listen in rapt silence.

It was music that had a familiarity to them, inasmuch as it had something of the wild, fresh, hill−born fragrance of their own popular songs, with which they followed the bullocks and lightened the toils of seed−time and harvest. But, again, it was wholly unlike what they knew, having a purity and rarity in it. Something of the radiance of the old Greek music blended with the solemnity of the litanies and the misereri of the Renaissance of religious com− position; it was music in which the voice of the lover pleading to his beloved on the moonlit nights of vintage was blended with the cry of the desolate soul to stay the hand of the the God that scourged it; it was music true to that proufound canon of the Italian people: "La musicà è il lamento dell'amore, o' la preghiera a gli Dei."

They listened−−the girls leaning their arms on their knees, and their cheeks on their hands; the young peasants resting against the pine−stems, or stretched on the benches of stone; the old people drawn together underneath the lamps and the story of the Ascension, with their pipe−bowls cold with ashes, and their spinning−wheels ceasing to turn.

The very dogs were silent, and the little tumbling children, falling against one another, kept mute, with their curls intermingled, and their big bright eyes lifted upward.

The face of Signa was quite in shadow where he sat under the walnut branches; the mandoline lay motionless across his knees; he sang on, and on, and on, as the young David might have sung to the madness of Saul.

He had forgotten all that surrounded him, his soul was in his music.

When his voice ceased quite suddenly, he looked at the people about him; the women were in tears, the men listened breathless; there was a moment's silence, then they sprang to their feet, all of them with one accord, and flung themselves on him, and kissed his hands, and his hair, and his clothes, and his feet, and shouted, and laughed, and cried, and lifted him up on their shoulders, and called otu to the moon just sinking−−

"Look at him! look at him! Our own little Signa, and yet as great as this! Oh, the beautiful music! Did the angels teach it to you, dear−−the angels you used to see?"

Bruno alone stood apart, and Palma sat in the shade of the high house wall.

When they let him go at last that night, he smiled on them, standing bareheaded in the shadows:

"You are the first to praise me−−I will always think of that."

Then he broke loose from them and went quickly away, forgetting everything. For his heart was beating loud, and, his eyes swam, and the faintness of a great emotion made the hill−side reel before him for a moment. He wanted to be alone. They were only peasant people−−farming−men and girls from the fields−−but if they were moved like that, would the world be wholly indifferent?

He climbed up the steep path towards Bruno's home, and sat down under one of the pines and thought. The old house of Fiastra was below him, he was out of the hum of the voices, but he could have heard dance music had there been any. He was glad it was all silent−−he was glad they could not dance again−−so soon.

There was no sound anywhere around him.

Far down below the lights of the Lastra glistened; above were the fields and the woods and the blue mountain crest. This was his home. He loved it. Nevertheless he said to himself: "Every day here is a day lost. How shall I tell it to Bruno?"

Bruno−−who to every man he met, and to every woman coming through the vines, had said always, with such pride in his voice, "He has come back −−he has walked all the way only to see me−−only just for that!"

And Signa never heard him without a rush of blood to his cheeks and a rush of shame to his heart,−−knowing that it was not so.

He had not been there long before a step crushed the fallen leaves and fir−needles, a step ascending with swift,

elastic, even tread, the tread of feet that have never been trammellled in leather.

"Dear, are you there?" said Bruno's voice.

Signa rose and met him. They went upward together.

The old house of Fiastra was shutting itself up for sleep; the people were breaking up and going homeward; going without their usual twitter of flute and thrilling of mandoline, and without their usual jests and laughter, talking in low murmurs of the wonderful boy, who yet was their own little fellow−−the little fellow that had been hungry, and footsore, and beaten, and made a mock of so many years, in the house by the Mother of Good Counsel.

The heavens were brilliant. Coma Berenice was setting northward, and above the sea mountains Arcturus shone in full splendour, soon to pass away. Perseus gleamed bold on his white field of light: he had been shooting fire−arrows half August through the sky, and now was still. Very low down, eastward and southward, as though watching over Rome, the strange lone star Fomalhaut hung in its mighty solitude. Orion still was hunting in the far fields unseen.

"Was that all out of your own head?" said Bruno abruptly, as they mounted together under the pines.

"My own music? Yes."

"It is very fine," said Bruno, and was silent. His voice had lost its happy and hopeful intonation.

"Ah, if only I were sure," said Signa.

"It is very fine," repeated Bruno.

He knew it. He could not have told why. He had heard, like all his countryfolk, the gay grace of Rossini and Cimarosa, and the grave grace of Donizetti and Bellini, in the little dusky crowded theatres of the populace down in the city, in all the seasons of autumn and carnival. It was only a pastime to him; a sport not fit to fill the life of a man. Music was like the grass−−it grew everywhere. That was what he thought. But he knew that the songs of Signa were beautiful−−knew it by the wet faces of the women, by the shining eyes of the men. And his heart was heavy with fear.

"Do they not tell you it is fine where you study?" he asked. "They must know there."

"Some do," said Signa, and then he hesitated, and his lips were mute.

"It is what you care most for−−still?"

Signa drew a heavy breath.

"Ah, it is all I live for! Did I not say you have given me more than life−−life eternal."

"What will be will be," said Bruno, with the old gloom deepening on his face. "It is not I, nor anyone. It is just that,−−the thing that is to be."

"Fate," said the boy.

"Perhaps that is what you scholars call it," said the man. "It may be the great God, it may be the Devil."

"May it not be ourselves," said Signa, "or others?"

Bruno did not answer. His face was dark. He had neither mind nor mood to unravel thought, or unweave the subtleties of fancy. What he felt was that there was a force stronger than he, and always against him. It did not matter what it was called.

They walked on in silence slowly. The moon was gone, but all the stars were shining, and there was a little tremulous light on the moss under their feet. Signa stopped and lifted up a stone that had fallen across a few sprays of cyclamen, and raised up the drooping delicate pink heads of that most lovely and tender of all blossoms.

"Look!" he said. "My music was the cyclamen−−circumstance was the stone; what my hand does for the mitre−flower, you did for my music and my life. I cannot call that Fate. It is something much warmer and much more beautiful to me."

"You talk like a poet," said Bruno, roughly. "I am an unlearned man. I cannot follow figures."

Signa threw the stone away, and went on without saying more.

When they had got to the house Bruno struck a match and lighted his brass lamp.

"Good night," he said, and would have gone to his bed, but Signa stopped him.

"I have something to say," he murmured. "Could we talk now? Something I came all the way on purpose to say−−it could not be written."

"Ah!" said Bruno.

He sat down on the settle by the cold empty hearth. He drew his hat over his eyes. A dull, weary shadow was

on his face. It seemed to him as if a knife went to his heart.

And he had said all through these three days to the people, "He has walked all the way to see me−−only just to see me!"

"Let us hear it," he siad, and set down the lamp. He could not tell what it could be; but before he heard it all his hope died in him. The boy had not come for him, and the old life would not hold him.

Signa remained standing, leaning against the marriage−coffer.

"My music that you heard to−night," he said, softly. "That is from an opera I have written. The first−−the only one. I have called it 'Actea.' Oh, you do not know; the story does not matter. She was the love of Nero, an Emperor of Rome, and she a slave. I have studied hard. Yes, indeed. It is not to praise myself. It was a happiness−−no pain. If only one could learn more; but the nights and the days seem so short; even with sleeping only four hours. I have made all the opera myself. The music, of course, but the story of it and the words too−−all the libretto. I would not speak to anyone of my idea, and if one be at all a musician, one should be just a little also of a poet; enough for that. There is the jealousy of Actea and Poppea, and the triumphs in the Circus Agonistes, and the marytrdom of the Christians, and Nero harkening to the harping of Terpnos, and the death of Nero, and then Actea all alone by the grave; but you heard some of the music, all is said in that; I know that it is good. The great Father Polidria says so. He even says it is great. But it will not please the world; that is what he says. He thinks that 'canterello' began with Rossini, who was great, and who had much else besides; and has descended to all the little composers that are reigning now, and who have nothing else besides, and, in so descending, has increased and grown worse, and has corrupted the ear of the people, so that they only want noise and glitter, and care nothing for true harmony or pure cadence. Perhaps it is thus. He should know. He says that the people in all the nations have lost their critical faculty and their understanding, and that even in opera seria they now desire as much jingling and noise and spectacle as in the buffa. And so he thinks that my Actea' would fail, because it has too much of Pergolese in it."

Bruno interrupted him:

"Tell me what you want; what you come for? I cannot understand all these long words."

"I am so sorry," said Signa, with the soft contrition of a chidden child. "I am always thinking of it; always talking of it; I forget−−I must tire you; but I hardly know what you will say, what you will think−−listen. All my soul, all my life, is in the opera. If only it could be heard I feel sure that it would make a great fame for me, and that is what you wish, is it not? You would not have me live and die an obscure musician, writing for little theatres or teaching song in the cities? Oh, no! Oh, my God, no! It would be better to work in the fields here for ever."

Bruno's teeth shut close together.

"I begin to understand−−go on."

And sitting under the eaves of Fiastra that night, watching the young men and the maidens dance together, he had said in his heart, with security, "He is content. The old ways will hold him!"

"You know," said Signa, still leaning against the old gilded coffer, with his face in the glow from the lamp. "An opera to be known must be heard on some stage; and it must be a great stage: and the rendering of it good, or the music will have no chance to be great in the world. I have said nothing to you, because I hoped so much to send you word of some great victory for it, all in a moment, while you were thinking of me as only a little scholar. But the 'Actea' was finished in spring, and I managed to travel to Milan,−−never mind how, walking most of the way,−−and there I played from it, and showed it to many directors that come to the city, the score of it is in my knapsack there, and they have all wondered at me, and called me Mozart, and said that the music was good, some even said great; and the death chant of the Christians, and the grave song of Actea, they said were sublime. But they were all afraid of it. They all thought it too serious, too passionate, too thoughtful. I suppose it has not 'cantarello' enough. They said it would cost much, and would almost certainly fail to please. They are afraid of their money−−afraid to spend it, and not to see it again. It is that everywhere, money. It has half broken my heart. To hear them say that it is beautiful, they all grant that, and yet to find not one there that will have the courage to give it to the world! I have seen them, of all nations, and it is always the same. 'You are a young genius, you are a Mozart,' they all say. Oh heaven! how would ever anyone have known of Mozart if they had all dealt with him as these men deal with me!"

Bruno looked up.

"Poor lad!" he muttered; the thought of Signa, suppliant and repulsed, moved him; he hated the music that thus enchained the boy's soul; but he hated as much those traffickers in the labour of the brain, who had made him suffer.

Signa went on full of his own thought.

"They told me I should take a homelier theme, with tragedy in it, like the Gazza Ladra; as if the meanness of the plot were not what destroys the beautiful music there! They were all afraid of my Actea. Oh, you do not know what I have endured. The hope of it, the despair of it, the waiting, the longing, the beseeching, the thinking every time 'Here is one who will understand;' and then always the smae disappointment at the end. I have been sick with the pain of it, mad with it; but you must not think that I lied to you when I said I was happy. I have been happy always because I believe in my genius; I do believe in it against everything. It is not vanity. I love the opera; but I love it as if God gave it me. It comes out of me just like the song out of the bird. No more. All the summer I have toiled after these men, one or other of them; the city of Milan is full of them; getting singers, and players, and melodies for their theatres, all over the world, for the next winter. I have lost weeks and months waiting, waiting, waiting; and often all day without a bit of anything to eat, because they do not think−−those people−−or because they do and know one is so poor. I suppose they never want for food themselves, and so forget."

"You never told us."

Bruno's voice was husky: his face was dark with troubled pain. When he had thought this young life so happy and so tranquil and so safe, it had been in conflict and torment, beating against the buffets of the world. He was bewildered; he had a dull sense of having failed in all that he had done; failed utterly.

"Oh, no, what was the use?" said Signa, "It was no fault of anyone's: things are so, if one have not money. You gave me all you could. I thought the 'Actea' would be taken at once. I thought that I should send you word of my triumphs while you were still all thinking me a little useless scholar. But it was not to be. If they could say that I wrote ill, I could bear it. Yes, I would tear it all up and think the failure was in me, and study more, and do better; but they cannot say that. The work that I have done is good. The coldest of them own it. Oh, heaven! it is that that breaks my heart: all my life is in it. I would die this hour, oh, so gladly, if I could be quite sure that my music would be loved, and be remembered. I do not know: there can be nothing like it, I think:−−a thing you create, that is all your own, that is the very breath of your mouth and the and the very voice of your soul; which is all that is best in you, the very gift of God; and then to know that all this may be lost eternally, killed, stifled, buried, just for want of men's faith and a little gold! I do not think there can be any loss like it, nor any suffering like it, anywhere else in the world. Oh, if only it would do any good, I would fling my body into the grave to−morrow, happy, quite happy; if only afterwards, they would sing my songs, all over the earth, and just say 'God spoke to him; and he has told men what He said.'"

His hands clenched as he paused, his eyes burned, his face changed, and his mouth quivered; the madness of a great passion was in him−−the pure impersonal hero−passion of genius, which only reigns absolute in earliest youth, and whose death−note is human love.

Bruno looked at him darkly, drearily.

This was the boy that he had thought had walked all the way only to look on his own face, and that he had thought had only cared for his old home, and come to live for ever on the calm hillside! What could he understand of this impassioned spiritual pain?−−he was like a man watching a delirium that raves in an unknown tongue.

Bewteen them there was that bottomless chasm of mental difference, across which mutual affection can throw a rope−chain of habit and forbearance for the summer days, but which no power on earth can ever bridge with that iron of sympathy which stands throughout all storms.

"I cannot follow−−all that," he muttered, wearily. "You go beyond me. No doubt you are born for greater things than I know. It is dark to me. But you came here for something−−some wish, some aid,−−tell me that. Perhaps I can help you. But I am ignorant. I cannot understand all that you say. Tell me the thing you want. I am better at acts than at thoughts."

Signa, recalled to himself, hesitated a moment: then he spoke, with the colour changing on his bent−down face.

"Well−−all the hot months I have waited on these men. Waited and waited, all to no good. They are all afraid. Perhaps they think in their hearts that a boy like me−−yesterday a peasant, and still with my shirts in holes, and only nineteen years old−−perhaps they think I never can be really worth the great world's hearing. Anyhow−−they

refuse. All refuse. 'Have it played in your own country, and then we will see,' say the foreign ones. 'This country is too poor to risk uncertain ventures in it,' say our own people. It is always some excuse. Some way they are afraid; of me or of the music. And then no one cares very much to risk new music. The theatres fill with the Ballo in Maschera and the Cenerentola, and all the rest. They only want them to fill. That is all. Nothing is to be done with them. 'Comte Ory brings me as much as your Actea would were it successful,' said one director to me. 'And I have all the Comte Ory decorations, and all the singers know it by heart; why should I risk what might be half my ruin?' For music they do not care, these men. No more than the men who sell wine in the wine−shops care for the beauty of the vines. But now−−only I do not know what you will say, you will think me mad;−−now, last week in Milan, I have found a director who would take the Actea. Yes, take it, and bring it out in Carnival in Venice. In Venice−−where they made Rossini's fame, and sang the Ti riverdo even in the courts of law! I do not know whether he is a good man or a bad. But I would have kissed his feet. For he believes in the Actea−−"

"Well?" said Bruno, as he paused.

Signa's face flushed hotter, then grew very pale.

"He will bring it out, this coming Carnival!" he murmured. "Only, as the risk is great, he says−−he must have from me, before he does commence it, three thousand francs, one half the cost of it on his theatre."

"From you?" Bruno looked at him, doubting his own senses.

"From me, yes," said Signa, and faltered a moment, and then threw himself at the feet of Bruno, with that caressing, suppliant grace of action which makes an Italian bend his knee as naturally as a flower stoops before the wind.

"Oh, listen! You have been so generous, so good, so long−suffering−−it is a shame to ask for more, to trespass further. Yes, I know. But, oh, listen to me, just this once again. What is the use of life in me if I cannot make men hear my music? I feel I am strong; I feel I am right; I feel what I do is great−−only I have not the means of success in this world. Just see a skylark, the bird that mounts, mounts, mounts, ever singing; if it had a stone at its feet it could not mount, and so it could not sing, and yet its song would be in it just the same, and it would break its heart because it had to be mute. I am like the skylark:−−only the stone with me is poverty. You see they have all had some little money. Mozart had his father's help, and Haydn Prince Esterhazy's, and everyone of them, some little thing just to loosen the stone off their foot as they rose first;−−and once risen, then no lark wants anything more than only just the air and his own two wings. Now−−oh, I know it is so much to ask, and in a way it is shameful; but you love me and I have no one but you. Now−−that land you bought for me, you send me the worth from it always, and you mean to sign it away to me when I am of age, and you would like me to live on it for ever. Now−−now−−would it be impossible; would it be wicked in me to pray for it;−−would you sell it at once, sell it straight away to whoever would buy it, the fields, and the olives and all; and give me the money for the Actea? Ah, my God!−−do do it! My life is worth nothing to me, and what should ever I do with the land? It is yours I know, and I have no right yet;−−but if you do still mean to give it to me, let me have the value of it now−−now, for the Actea, and deliver me out of this torture and give me a chance to be great. Ah, my God, do hear me!−−it will be as if you ransomed me out of hell!"

His head dropped on his hands; he sobbed aloud; he knelt still at Bruno's feet, but all drooped into himself like a crushed flower. He was ashamed of his own prayer; and yet the passion of his longing shook him from head to foot. What use were the land, and the olives, and the rush−shadowed brook to him? What he wanted was fame eternal.

Bruno was silent.

This was why the boy had come back.

After awhile Signa lifted his head timidly and glanced upward. Bruno's face told him nothing: it was dark as a tempest, and, under all its bronze hue, pale; but it said nothing: it was like a moonless night.

The boy was afraid. He thought there would break upon him an outburst of such rage as had shattered his lost Rusignuolo.

But none came. Bruno was quite calm and was mute.

"Will you do it?" said Signa, with a great fear at his heart, touching the man's brown hands with a soft, shy supplication like a girl's. "Will you do it? See, you are so strong, so good−−you think so much of my body and my peace, and my happiness; which all are as nothing to me: wil you help me to save my soul? will you help me out from this death in life? Dear God! if you knew−−"

A terrible hopelessness seized him and stopped his prayer on his lips. Bruno's face was so dark and so still: there was no response in it. A ghastly despair froze the boy's beating heart.

How could he ever make this man understand−−this man who knew nothing−−this man who followed his oxen, and reaped his corn, and was content?

Bruno rose.

"I will think of it," he said, slowly; and his voice in the darkness and the stillness of the lamplit house, sounded deep and hollow, as a brave bell that is broken will sound. "I will do it−−if I see if for your good. I must think."

Then he went out into the night air and drew the house door behind him, and the boy heard the echo of his footsteps passing away upward to the higher hills.

He knew that his prayer would be fulfilled. He did not know that for one single instant, as he had knelt there, Bruno could have struck him down and stamped his life out with as passionate a hate as he had once stamped the music out of the broken violin:−−one instant in which the heart of the man had risen and cried against him:

"I have given you all my life−−and you bring me back a stone."

The next day early Bruno went down into the Lastra. He went to the sacristy of the Misericordia.

"Write to this man of Venice," he said briefly. "Have it all in black and white: what he has said, what he will do."

Luigi Dini looked up astonished.

"What! He has told you! You mean−−?"

"We can speak of it when the answer comes. Write," said Bruno, and went out into the tender sunshine and through the merry ways of the Lastra, that were overflowing with gathered grapes and laughing faces, down into the city, to the house of the notary who had served him in the transfer from Baccio Alessi, the carver.

"I may wish to sell my land−−that land−−in a little while," he said. "If you find an honest man at a fair price, tell me."

The notary looked up as the sacristan had done.

"Sell the land! The land you were so proud of! What can that be for?"

"That is no concern of any man's. When you find the bidder tell me," said Bruno, and went into the great square, where, the day being the market−day, all the men from the villages and the villas were chaffering together with sonorous resonant voices, raised high in dispute or discussion.

"Bruno is going to do some evil thing," said the other men, seeing the look upon his face. They had been used to tell danger from the dark− ness of his face, as storm from the cloud−crown of Monte Morello.

But he did no evil. He trafficked with them, driving his bargains closely, and giving few words to all, with the glaive of Perseus and the bronze head of the Medusa above him in the shadow of the arch.

When the day was ended, he entered the baptistery, and prayed there in the twilight.

Then he crossed the river, and went out of the gates homeward.

More than one man, going by with swift wheels and little jingling bells, and flying fox−tails at the pony's harness, stopped and offered him a lift; but he shook his head, and strode on along in the dust.

It was the twenty−fourth hour−−the close of day−−when he reached the foot of his own hill. The sun was just going down behind the great mountain and the sharp peaks that lie between the valley and the sea. It was nearly dark when he had mounted high enough to see his own roof above the olives.

He passed Fiastra.

The bell that said, "Lavora: et noli contristari" was ringing loud.

On the path above there was a little tumult of young men and girls running merrily one on another to reach the open gates. They had torches with them, flaming bright in the dusk, and branches of fir and boughs of the vines that they tossed over their heads; they were shouting and leaping, and scampering, and singing in chorus. As they drew near the farmhouse, they called out to the people within:

"We have brought him down!−−we have got him! We will make him sing−−our own little Signa, who is going to be so great!"

Four of the youths had Signa aloft on their shoulders. They had sought him out where he was moping in solitude, as they termed it; and had besought him and besieged him with airy laughter and fervent entreaty, and a thousand appeals and reproaches of old friends to one who deserted them; and he had not been proof against all

that kindly flattery, all that tender supplication, which had the honey in it of the first homage that he had ever known; and they had borne him away in triumph, and the girls had crowned him with vine leaves and the damask roses that blossom in hazel and grape time, and danced round him in their rough, simple glee, like the peasants of Tempe round the young Apollo.

Bruno drew back into the shadow of the pines, and let them pass by him. They did not see him. They went dancing and singing down the steep grass paths, and under the archway, into the courtyard of Fiastra.

It was a quaint, vivid, pretty procession, full of grace and of movement−−classic and homely, pagan and mediæval, both at once−−bright in hue, rustic in garb, poetic in feeling.

Teniers might have painted the brown girls and boys leaping and singing on the turf, with their brandishing boughs, their flaring torches, their bare feet, their tossing arms; but Leonardo or Guercino would have been wanted for the face of the young singer whom they carried, with the crown of the leaves and of the roses on his drooped head, like the lotus flowers on the young Antinous.

Piero di Cosimo, perhaps, in one of his greatest moments of brilliant caprice, might best have painted the whole, with the backgrounnd of the dusky hillside; and he would have set it round with strange arabesques in gold, and illumined amongst them in emblem the pipe of the shepherd, and the harp of the muse, and the river−rush that the gods would cut down and fill with their breath and the music of heaven.

Bruno stood by, and let the innocent pageant pass, with its gold of autumn foilage and its purples of crocus−like colchicum.

He heard their voices crying in the court: "We have got him−−we have brought him. Our Signa, who is going to be great!"

He stood still a little while: then he went up to his own home, and lit his lantern, and foddered his cattle, and worked in his sheds. He was too far off from Fiastra to hear any sound of the singing, but every now and then the wind, which blew that day from the south−east, brought upward the bursts of applause, the enthusiastic shouts, that succeeded the intervals of silence; mere murmurs as the wind brought them; but to Bruno they sounded like the echo of the clarion of Fame, crying aloud to him from the great world, "He is mine."

It was late when Signa returned, brought back by the young men, who left him with caress and with gratitude as to a creature far above them, and went away singing low amongst themselves in chorus the greatest air that he had written, the chant of the dying Christians, which had in it all the majestic magnificence of the "Rex tremendæ majestatis," and all the pathetic resignation of the "Huic ergo parce Deus," of Mozart's "Dies Iræ."

Signa stood on the threshold and listened to the broad, regular periods, the sonorous pathetic rhythm of his requiem, as the voices rose and sank, and grew fainter and fainter, as the steps fell away down the hillside.

They were only peasants, only labourers of the flail and the furrow; but they could sing whatever took their ear with unerring truth and time. It was the first time that ever he had heard any music of his own upon the mouths of others: it was the first time that any of that sympathy, which is the sweetest part of public homage, had ever come to him:−−he stood and listened with a tumultuous pleasure swelling at his heart, and a delicious sense of power on the lives of others stirring in him.

"It will live," he murmured to himself, as he listened there on the threshold until the voices died into silence, as the young men went on their several ways to their own homesteads, and parted.

Bruno was working still in one of the sheds, his lantern burning beside him. He had been sifting grain, stacking wood, cleaning wine casks, with the white dog watching him and the night wearing away.

Signa went within, and stood by him a little timidly. He had not seen him that day, save for a few moments in the early morning.

"You did not come to Fiastra to−night," he said gently, not knowing well what to say.

"No," said Bruno, without lifting his head, whilst he piled the brush−wood.

"Are you angry with me?" said Signa, with the child−like way that was natural to him.

"No," said Bruno, but he worked on without raising his head.

Signa's mouth quivered a little. He knew that he had done no wrong, and yet he was not at peace with himself.

"Perhaps I am very selfish to ask so much," he said, hesitating a little as he spoke. "I know I have no right; I know I have no more of my own than the dog there. But, indeed−−indeed−−what use would the land be to me? what joy would it bring me? And you are so good."

Bruno paused in his labour a moment.

"I said: I must think. Let it be. Wait a week−−then I will tell you. I do not know that you are selfish. It is I, more likely. I will do what is for your good. Only leave me in peace. Do not talk."

And he lifted more wood.

Signa stood by him sadly. He was not satisfied. He knew that he had gained what he wished, that his desire would be given him. But his victory brought a sense of pain and of wrong− doing, as victory over a noble foe does to a soldier.

Bruno could never measure the height of the boy's intelligence; the boy could never measure the depth of Bruno's nature. In some ways they were for ever both strangers one to the other. Between human creatures it is often so.

As he stood there, confused, troubled, mute, Bruno looked up with a gesture of impatience, and laid his hand on the lad's shoulder, but gently, for since the day of the broken Rusignuolo he had sworn to heaven never to be ungentle with Pippa's son.

"I am not angered," he said. "But leave me alone. Go with your friends; sing, dance, be caressed, take your pastime; enjoy yourself, dear, while you can. Do not think that you have hurt me; only leave me alone. It is not a thing to be done in a day. But you may trust me. What is best for you, that I will do: only I will not talk of it."

He thrust him gently out of the shed into the night air against the open house−door.

"It is late. Go to your bed."

CHAPTER XVI.

SIGNA went, and climbed up to his own room, and opened the old drawer and looked at his broken violin lying where he had left it, with its rosemary and its sprigs of cypress, as if it were a dead thing in a coffin.

"Perhaps the world will prize you some day," he thought, "as it does the old wooden shoe of Paganini."

He was happy because he had faith in himself, and hope; almost as happy as when the fair angel had given him the Rusignuolo; but he had a heavy sense amidst his joy of having sinned against Bruno.

He only partly understood the pain that he had dealt. He only dimly saw how the man who had believed that his return had been one of affection was wounded to the quick by the revelation that ambition and personal desire and immediate need had been the sole impulses moving him. He only very vaguely comprehended that to ask Bruno to give up the land which he had slaved for seven years to gain, was to shatter at a blow all the pride of his days, all the hope of his life.

The great genius overmastering him was like a cloud before his eyes. If he were cruel to Bruno, he was cruel unconsciously; as he was cruel to his own body in inflicting on it hunger and cold and all corporal ills whilst he followed the spirits that beckoned to him.

If he asked Bruno to give up much, he himself was ready to give up everything. If it could have been said to him, "Die now, and your music shall live," he would have accepted the alternative without a pause, and gone to his death rejoicing.

It was the sublime fanaticism of genius, which, like all other fanaticism, is cruel. The desire for glory had entered into him, as yet impersonal, but none the less all−absorbing and dominant.

Once he had been content to have leisure and rest, to hear the "beautiful things" of his fancy. Now he had no peace unless he could repeat them to the world of men:−−as at first the lover is content with the perfect possession of his mistress; but, when this has been enjoyed awhile in secret, grows restless for the world to know the joy that crowns his passions.

The days passed away with him in a fever of unrest, eating little, sleeping little, vaguely consoled and elated by the homage his old comrades gave him, but missing much of the beauty of autumn, because the unrest of ambition was in him. The little mitre−flower would not tell him half the things it had whispered him in his childhood, and the great winds wandering amongst the pines had lost much of their melody for him. He was always thinking−−"Will they kill my soul in me? Shall I die unheard and unknown?"

Palma came up no more to Fiastra: she stayed down in her father's house, washing, mending, ironing, scrubbing, hoeing, toiling.

"I am nothing to him," she said to herself. "If I had been Gemma, he would have made his songs about me."

Signa strayed sometimes into Giovoli, indeed, as he went to old Teresina's and other places that he had known; but he was always thinking, thinking−−always absorbed; sometimes seeming to listen, and then writing music on any scrap of paper from his pocket, and at other times singing over softly to himself the recitatives and the airs of his 'Actea.'

The two weeks of uncertainty were torture to him. His hope and fear were in equal portions, and each possessed him by turns to all exclusion of the other.

"I thank heaven, lad, you did fail at the school of design in the city, and came home to make honest tubs and churns and buckets," said Cecco, the cooper, to his own youngest son, in the workshop with the vine behind the barred window.

They all had a dim sense that Signa was going to be great; but they most of them thought it a bad thing, and pitied him, and pitied Bruno for not having a good, strong, contented youth, who would have helped him with the land and held it after him.

As for Bruno himself, he never spoke to any man of the boy or of the land.

Letters came and went. Luigi Dini and the notary, who was a good man and kindly, puzzled the matter out together, and dealt with it cautiously and carefully. Weeks went by with all things unsettled. At length the

sacristan called Bruno down into the Lastra, and said to him:−−

"The man of Venice is an honest man. There is no fear. If the half of the cost is be paid, he will produce the work in carnival and do it all justice. There is no fear. He will not say it will succeed, but he will give the test. He is a true man, as such men go, living by their own wits and the brains of others."

Bruno shaded his eyes with his hand a few minutes; then he nodded his head to the old man, and drove to the city, and said to the notary, "Sell the land."

The notary had some time before found with ease a man who was willing and able to buy−−money down, with no faltering or pilfering.

"The deeds shall be ready by the week's end," he said now; and he sent and called in the buyer, a stranger to Bruno and a dweller in the city; and they shook hands on the bargain, and it was concluded beyond the possibility of change.

Bruno did not speak once.

"Does he sell under pressure of debt, that he looks so dark? It is whispered about," said the buyer.

"Then a lie is whispered about," said the notary. "He sells because he chooses to sell. And it is his way to look like that."

But the notary thought to himself, "The man is a fool. The boy has a pipe like a chaffinch, and so the good land is to go in a puff of sound. The boy must be his own, or he would never do so foolishly."

For the notary, though he dealt with the letters to and from the city of Venice because he was paid to do so, and it was no business of his, was sincerely sorry that the solid soil was being bartered away for a lad's silly dream, and was sorry, moreover, for Bruno.

"It will all end in vapour, and the boy will die in a garret. It is always so," said the notary, though his own dwelling−house was close against a wall on which was written "Qui nacque Cherubini."

Bruno returned to his own hills in the stormy autumnal evening, and entered his own house.

Signa was sitting by the oil−lamp writing music. He seldom did any other thing. His hand on the dark oak table was white and small as a girl's; his cheeks were flushed with a feverish colour; he looked weak, and he was very thin.

Bruno went up behind him and laid both his hands on his shoulders. He did nt care for the boy to look up at his face.

"Dear, it is done," he said gently. "You have got your desire. Your music will be heard in the winter. Ask Luigi Dini the rest."

Then he left the room and locked himself in the loft above the stable of Tinello and Pastore. He could not trust himself to speak more. All the night he had no sleep.

He went out again before daybreak, while the stars were still shining.

He went out and upward to the little brook rushing away under its reeds, to the three little fields corn−sown, to the narrow grassy paths under the gnarled olives.

Kings leaving their kingdoms have suffered less than he, losing this shred of land.

Nine years he had laboured on it, giving it the sweat of his brow and the ache of his limbs, and all the stolen hours that other workers give to rest or pleasure; and now it was going from his as sand runs out of a glass.

All the toil was over and useless. All the nine years were passed like a breath of smoke, and left no more tale or worth.

He sat down by the edge of the bright shallow water. It was now close upon daybreak. No sound stirred, upward or downward, on the great hill.

He was quite quiet. He had the dull dark look on his face that had come there when the boy had first asked this gift at his hands. He said to himself, that what befell him was just. On that spot by the rippling burn he had shattered the boy's treasure: it was only meet now that he should lose his own.

He did not waver. He did not repine. He made no reproach, even in his own thoughts. He had only lost all the hope out of his life and all the pride of it.

But men lose these and live on; women also.

He ahd built up his little kingdom out of atoms, little by little; atoms of time, of patience, of self−denial, of hoarded coins, of snatched moments:−−built it up little by little, at cost of bodily labour and of bodily pain, as the pyramids were built brick by brick by the toil and the torment of unnoticed lives.

It was only a poor little nook of land, but it had been like an empire won to him.

With his foot on its soil he had felt rich.

He had wondered that men lived who spent their souls in envy.

It had been his ambition, his longing, his dream, his victory: labour for it had been as sweet to him as the kisses of love; and when he had made it all his own, he would not have changed places with princes or with cardinals.

And now it was gone−−gone like a handful of thistledown lost on the winds, like a spider's web broken in a shower of rain. Gone: never to be his own again. Never.

He sat and watched the brook run on, the pied−birds come to drink, the throstle stir on the olive, the cloud shadows steal over the brown, bare fields.

The red flush of sunrise faded. Smoke rose from the distant roofs. Men came out on the lands to work. Bells rang. The day began.

He got up slowly and went away; looking backwards, looking backwards, always.

Great leaders who behold their armed hosts melt like snow, and great monarchs who are driven out discrowned from the palaces of their fathers, are statelier figures and have more tragic grace than he had;−−only a peasant leaving a shred of land, no bigger than a rich man's dwelling−house will cover;−−but vanquished leader or exiled monarch never was more desolate than Bruno, when the full sun rose and he looked his last look upon the three poor fields, where forever the hands of other men would labour, and forever the feet of other men would wander.

CHAPTER XVII.

ON the morrow, the notary in the city saw duly signed and sealed and attested the deed which gave the land by the brook on the hill, that is called Artemino, over, from Brunone Marcillo, to one Aurelio Avellino cheese−seller, in the street of the Red Gate in fair Florence.

CHAPTER XVIII.

IT was a winter's night in the Lastra.

The cold had been severe. It was the first month of the young year. Snow was resting on the barbecane and watch−towers of the Porta Fiorentina and on the ledges and battlements of all the old walls. It melted every morning when the noon sun touched it, but it lay there every night. The villas were all deserted. The nobles were down in their palaces in the city. The little churches rang their bells regularly over the barren solitary country, like soldiers firing over a forsaken field. The rivers were swollen, but had not overflowed; every little thread of water was swelled into a brook, and every hill−fed brook into a torrent. The people were hard pressed at times for food and oil. There was a good deal of suffering in the little homesteads: most of all in those set high on the hillsides and the mountain crests, that were swept by the bitter fierce winds from the north, wehre the dwellers could see no faces save those of their own households, until spring should have come and made the mule−tracks passable again.

Even down in the Lastra things were not very bright; for the people are poor, and the taxes are many.

It was high carnival in the great towns, but they had not much to do with that. Now and then some groups of men and girls went down to join the mummery in the city with masks on and ribbons fluttering, and came back white, not with snow, but with the flour−pelting; and for the nidnight fair, under the gallery of the Medici, the contadini dressed up their wine barrels in quaint guise, and the straw plaiters took their prettiest baskets and tassels and hats and toys, and the best looking maidens went down with the best winter fruits, to stand and laugh behind the flaring torches under the evergreens and the flags, and, perhaps, have a waltz and a scamper down the broad pavement, with the stars shining above and the tambourines and cymbals clashing, and the Vecchio Tower frowning on the pastime and the blaze.

Otherwise the Lastra had nothing to do with carnival, except that now and then it put a fat goose in its pot, or munched a bit of toothsome strong bread from Siena, or ahd a set of strolling players in the old Loggia that used to be a hospital in the days when Antonino preached charity as the saving of men, and uprooted his damask rose−trees in the eternal antagonism of Theology and Nature.

It was a winter's night in the Lastra.

It was the first night of the midnight winefair in the city and the noisiest folks were away. In the wineshop, however, of one, Sanfranco, a good merry man and a son−in−law of old Teresina, a score or more of people, men and women, were gathered.

The great wooden nail−studded doors of the arched entrance were shut to against the driving wind. The oil wicks flamed brightly, though they could only dimly light up the dark−vaulted cavern−like entrance room; but long branches of trees flamed on the dogs, and Sanfranco sold good wine, and his wife was a popular soul and made the best maccaroni in the commune, and a bough outside his door always showed that hunger as well as thirst might be allayed within.

At the moment no one was eating or drinking. The straw−covered flasks stood about unnoticed. The pipes had grown cold.

Old Teresina, who was at supper with them, had her distaff idle and both hands on her knees, as she strained her ears to hearken. Men and women sat and leaned around in various postures, but all with the same stillness and intentness, listening. Sanfranco himself forgot to chalk the scores of the night; and his wife, for once, let her frying−pan frizzle itself into blackness. They were all gathered together in absorbed attention.

The sacristan of the Misericordia sat in their midst: his spectacles were on his nose, his three−wicked lamp burned close at his elbow: he had a newspaper in his hands, and other papers crumpled at his feet. He had been reading aloud sometime; his glasses were dim with mist, his voice faltered, and his sight almost failed him; for this was what he read:

"What shall we say of this child? For he is no more than a child. Rossini was twenty−one when Venice first welcomed, with one voice, his mighty 'Tancred.' This lad is even younger. We predict for him a fame even greater

than Rossini's. Since our grandfathers worshipped Cimarosa, there has been no parallel to the rapture of this city at the 'Actea.' The grave song of Actea is on every woman's lips to−day; the death chant of the Christian is echoed by every gondolier. All the air and all the waters seem full of this new music, which, to the most perfect freshness of fancy unites the severe grace and sonorous harmony of Durante and Pergolese. If it have a fault at all, it is too pure. It has the passions of faith, of heroism, of aspiration; it has not the passion of love; it belongs to the soul; it has passed by the senses. This is the result of youth. It is more divine than it is anything else. But its exquisite beauty, its truth to all the requirements of the noblest musical art, above all, its real sublimity of conception have carried all before it. There has been no such scene as that of last night in Venice since Rossini's Aria di Rizzi rose on every tongue. All the city was in tumult. Men and women wept like children. From the first act, which opens with the chorus of the gladiators, to the last, which closes on the grave of Nero, there was not for one moment doubt or coldness in the audience. Its reception was an ever−increasing tempest of delight. Men who had gone listless and even hostile were overborne and carried away by the universal enthusiasm. The young artist could not be found at the moment the opera commenced. When the second act had passed, and such a shout as might have wakened the very dead, shook the house from floor to roof, he was found hidden in one of the dark unused passages below the stage. He had fainted−−"

The old man paused; his voice was choked with emotion; he let the paper fall at his feet.

The men gave a deep glad cry; the women sobbed aloud.

"My pupil! yes, I may call him that," mur− mured Luigi Dini. "I taught him all he knew−−at first."

Then he took up the printed sheets, and went on with his slow measured reading,−−

"When at length he came before the people, he looked more like some beautiful pale young ghost of Desdemona or of Francesca, than like a youth who had fought his battle with the world−−and conquered. When all was over, the people got hold of him, clambering on the boards to reach him, and carried him aloft on their shoulders, and bore him out into the air, smothered with the flowers and the handkerchiefs of women. A whole fleet of gondolas accompanied him homewards. The great chant had caught the ear of the whole city. The nobles of Venice seized him, and bore him away to a brilliant feast. They sang it as they took him to his home. They sang it under the windows. They brought him out again, and again, and again. The night rang with their cheers, and with the echoes of his music. It was not until morning that anything like order or stillness prevailed. Like the southern poet who loved Venice so well, he awakes and finds himself famous. It is said that he is a little contadino, the son of a contadino also, in a village in Tuscany, and that all the study he has ever had has been a year or two in Bologna. It is said, too, that his friends are so poor, and he so penniless, that yesterday he had not a coin to buy himself a crust of bread. He calls himself only Signa."

Luigi Dini caught his breath a moment, and his withered lips quivered.

"They then pass on to speak of the music, critically, and in detail," he said, striving to seem calm. "You will not care to hear that. It is too long. But you see−−we were no idle dreamers, no mere weavers of cobwebs. You see−−my boy is great."

"My little Signa, that I hid in the coffer!" cried old Teresina, with the tears streaming down her cheeks, yet laughing in her joy.

"Little Signa, that Nita beat like a dog!" said her daughter, laughing and crying.

"Little Signa, that thought it such a fine thing to have a bowl of soup with the children on Sundays!" said Sanfranco himself.

"Little Signa, that we thought no better than a baby!" said his son, a strong, lusty, young blacksmith.

"Little Signa, that is only Pippa's son!" said Cecco, the cooper. "Only Pippa's son! and that baseborn."

"Little Signa no more," said Luigi Dini; "and baseborn? what does that matter? God has called him into the light of the world."

"Will he ever look back to us?" murmured the old woman, with the slow tears falling down on her hank of flax.

"Never mind. We will look up at him," said the old man, gently. "But I do not think he will forget. We do not think the stars see us in the daytime, but if we go down into a well, we see that they do, just the same: so will it be with him. The great light may hide him from our sight, but he will see us all the same."

They were all silent.

"Did he write anything himself?" said Cecco, the cooper, after a pause.

"He wrote, 'Tell Bruno,' and sent me all these papers. That was all."

"Bruno!" echoed the cooper, who was his friend.

They had none of them thought of Bruno.

"Poor Bruno," said the old man, sadly; he was thinking of the price that Bruno had paid for the night of victory in Venice.

"You cannot go up to him to−night," said Sanfranco; "the hill−paths are perilous."

"No. The post came so late too, from the state of the roads. I will go up the first thing in the morning."

"Perhaps he will be in here to−night. I think he went through to the wine−fair. I think he had to go−−yes, he said so."

"Yes, he said so," echoed Cecco. "But only to take wine to Savio's stall. He will not stay."

"Does he expect to hear this news at all?"

"Not at all," said the sacristan. "The man of Venice had dealt so ill with the lad, putting off, till here is nigh the close of the carnival. We began to think that he would cheat us utterly. He had a ballet that ran well. He did not care. No. Bruno had ceased to hope. 'What is done is done;' that is all he has ever said about it."

"It is a wonderful glory!" said the woman. "Read us again. Read us again, good Luigi."

And he read again, the story which already he knew so well by heart, that it mattered little that his eyes swam so often, and that the printed letters were wrapped in mist.

As he read this second time, the heavy iron−beaded door swung open, letting in a blast of bitter frosted air, that almost blew the lights out: a man came into the room, shaking snow at each step on to the red bricks, and muffled in his thick brown cloak, wearing it across his chest and his mouth, in the same fashion that Dante and Guido Calvacanti once did theirs.

It was Bruno.

His baroccino stood without, with the mule tired and cold, and the candle dark in the lantern that swung from the shafts. He had deposited the wine at Savio's stall, and had come away, leaving to others the riot, and dance, and glee, and jest, and mumming, and masking of the great carnival fair, under the arches of the galleries on the edge of the Arno.

In many a bye−gone year he had been the wildest there; with rough jests over the sale of the wine, and rough wooing of the women's torch−lit graces, and mad dancing with black dominoes and rainbow−hued maskers, while the drums and flutes had resounded through the great arcade till the daylight broke.

"Sanfranco, will you give me a light?" said he, coming into the midst of them with the rush of cold air; "mine is gone out, and the frost makes the hills bad driving."

Then his sight fell on the sacristan with the printed paper, and he glanced over all the faces of the others, and read them.

He strode up to the old man.

"There is news of him?" he said, under his breath, with passionate thirsty eyes.

"Yes, great and good news," said Luigi Dini; but his feeble voice was drowned in the deep shouts of the men, and the women's shrill cries, each eager to tell the tale the quickest, and to be the first.

"Great and good news!" they clamoured. "All Venice is mad for him, Bruno. He has taken the city by storm. The people have feasted him, and chanted him all the night long. Only think! only think! Just our own little Signa. Just Pippa's son−−as you say. He is great. He is famous. He has all the world after him. Only think! only think!"

Bruno stood in the centre of them, the snow falling in flakes off his garments, his eyes turning bewildered from one to another. Then he put his hand up before his sight, like a man blinded with a sudden blaze of light. It was so hard to understand. It was so hard to conceive as possible.

"Do they laugh at the boy? or at me?" he muttered, with the anger of a sudden suspicion awakening in the flash of his glance.

"No, no! No, no!" said Luigi Dini; "who would have the heart to make a mock of it? And what is there so strange? It is what we hoped and prayed for, only it passes beyond all our prayers. The lad is great−−yes, do not look so. The dear child is great, and his future is safe. God is good; and you sold the land not in vain."

Bruno dropped down on a bench that stood near.

"God is good," he muttered.

They were all silent. They could not shout and chatter and praise and wonder any more. There was that in his

intense stillness which overmastered and awed them.

Whether it were pain or thankfulness they could not tell. Whichever it was, it was beyond them.

Sanfranco was the first to speak. He touched Bruno on the arm.

"Stay here in the warm and let him read you the news−−such news! We have heard it twice over, but we can hear it thrice. I will see to your beast. Do not go back to the hills this rare night. We ought to have a bonfire on the roof of the big gate. Stay with us."

Bruno rose to his feet, still with that unsteady dazzled look on him like a man wakened by a blaze of fire.

"No," he said, absently. "No;−−see to the mule−−he is cold and lame;−−come away with me, Luigi. Let me hear−−all alone."

The old sacristan made a gesture to the others to be quiet and cease from their pressing; and gathered up all the papers.

"Yes. We will go to my quiet little room. It will be best," he said, and put his hand on Bruno's arm and guided him out of the doorway into the dark freezing night. It was but a stone's throw to the sacristy. Bruno went out like a blind man.

Sanfranco followed them, and put up the mule in his stable.

"One would think he was not glad after all," said he to his wife, returning.

"Nay, he is glad and thankful," said his old mother−in−law, who was clipping an oil wick. "If it had not been for his labour, who would ever have heard of the dear little lad? But−−look you−−the stars may see us in the day, as Luigi says, mayhap they do; but if a star were all one had to love, it would be hard work to feel the loneliness and the cold close in, and sit in the dark water of the well and only catch a glimpse of the star now and then shining ever so far away up in the light of the sun−−and we out of the light for ever."

"That is true, mother," said Sanfranco. "But you talk like a book."

"Nay, nay, never so;−−I talk sense," said the old Teresina. "But that is how it will always be with Bruno and Pippa's boy; just the well and the star;−−just the well and the star−−do you see?"

"I see," said Cecco, the cooper, who loved Bruno; and he emptied half a flask of wine.

The grey dawn came into the little room by the Misericordia Church, with the black crossbones and the memento mori everywhere about it, and beyond its lattice the old broken battlements and the dull winter skies.

He had it all read to him−−over and over again. He sat leaning against the table with his head on his hands.

He understood it all; he understood it−−the fame of the arts is that which is most intelligible to the peasants of this country, those descendants of the men who ran weeping and laughing before Cimabue, and filled the churches to hearken to the oratories of S. Philip Neri.

They understand it by instinct.

So did he. But it was still like a sudden blaze of flame, so close to his face that whilst he was dazzled by it his eyes were darkened and sightless.

Was he thankful?−−yes, he thanked God. God was good. So he said from the depths of his heart.

Living for the world, the boy was dead for him.

And yet he thanked God.

Time went away and he took no count of it. His feet and limbs were cold, but he had no sense of it. The little lamp paled and the chilly dawn came, but he had no perception that it was morning. He sat thinking−−thinking of this wonderful thing which that night had brought: of this distant city, where the little fellow who had run barefoot by his side was raised up as a prince amongst men.

Affection quails before the supremacy of art; as art in its turn cowers under the supremacy of passion.

The boy was dead to him; that he knew.

The old man who had sat quiet and patient, sleeping a little and waking up to warm hands over his little pot of ashes, touched him at last, almost frightened at the silence and the stillness with which he leaned there, with his head on his hands.

"The dear, good lad!" he said, softly. "He will write himself, 'princeps musicorum' after all;−−aye, we always said it;−−he and I dreaming here together, the old fool and the young one as they used to say. But do not lament for it, Bruno; I mean do not sorrow for ourselves. He will not forget. He is too true of heart."

Bruno shivered a little, waking to his first sense of the cold that had frozen around him. He rose: he smiled a little.

"I will pray that he may forget," he said, slowly. "When he remembers−−then he will have dropped down from this height. He was my lark. I broke his cage. Let him go up−−up−−up. Why should he fall−−for me?"

He spoke dreamily, and he had his hand before his eyes, with the same dull sense of confusion and of wonder which had come upon him when he had first listened to the news. He put out his hand and grasped Luigi Dini's in farewell.

"Tell him I have heard," he said. "Tell him I am glad. What money I can, I will send. There is nothing more to say."

Then he threw his cloak over his mouth, and went down the staircase through the little church that was quite dark. Luigi Dini fumbling with the keys, unlocked the door and let him out; he passed up the street towards the seaward gate, without remembering that his mule stood in Sanfranco's stable.

CHAPTER XIX.

WAS he thankless?

No. He thanked God.

God was good: so he said from the depths of his soul. Had not the boy his desire? But Bruno said, "God is good," as the Argive mother said it when, in answer to her prayer for their blessing, her sons were smitten down dead.

She did not doubt the goodness of her gods: nor did he that of his.

But as the woman's heart was rent in two by the fulfilling of her prayer, so was his now.

Some faint hope had been alive in him which he had hated because it was hope, which he had plucked at to pluck out from his soul as his the basest and meanest of crimes: some faint hope, cruel, irrepressible.

As he went, some men and women coming from the fair, merry and loud−tongued from wine, tossing their masks by the strings, and flinging white comfits and pellets of chalk one from another up against the closed casements and the iron bars, reeled against him as they passed and recognised him.

"Ah, Bruno, black Bruno!" they called to him, half drunkenly. "There is rare news of your little lad in the city, of Pippa's son, as you call him. A lion in Venice, a lion with wings! Such a fuss never was. The boy is a great man, just at one leap. Bravo! Why not? We will have his music down in Florence at Easter. If he be your own boy−−say so now. Claim him while you can get him. Another year he will be too fine to notice you−−oh, they are all the same, those sweet−throated brids, when they get a nest of gold and a bough of laurel to sing in−−che, che!−−he will be like the rest."

Bruno passed them without a blow or word. And yet men had often hurt him less, and all his blood had been in flame, and his steel had been in their flesh.

The maskers, laughing, dashed their chalk up at the grated casements, and reeled noisily through the still sleeping Lastra; he walked away over the bridge, with the mountain wind fierce in his teeth.

The solitary bell of his own little brown church was ringing for the first mass when he reached the hills above the farm of Fiastra, tolling sadly through the grey winter−fog.

He entered it, and prostrated himself on the stones.

There was no one there save the old priest officiating; the candles burned dully, the white mist had got into the church, and the vapours of it hung about the altar; the voice of the priest seemed to come from a cloud. Some sheep left out all night, forgotten by the shepherd, had crept in and lay huddled together at the foot of one of the pillars; the north wind blew loud without.

Bruno kneeled there in the dampness and the darkness and the bitter cold.

"O God, save the boy always," he prayed with all the might of his heart. "Do not think of me−−if I starve here−−if I burn hearafter−−it does not matter−−I am nothing. Only save the boy."

So he prayed again and again and again, with his forehead on the stones, and his heart going out to the great unknown powers he believed in with a mortal agony of supplication. The world was as a fiend to him that wrestled with him for the soul of Pippa's son. Of himself he could do nothing.

Would heaven be on his side?

Would the great quiet angels stir, and come down and have pity?

When the mass was over, and the old priest, thinking the church empty, had gone away to break his fast, the shepherd, seeing his strayed sheep, followed with his dog within the church doors, and found them sleeping together at the foot of the pillar; and found besides them a man stretched face downward, half senseless, in a trance of prayer.

"It is that tall, strong, fierce brute. We thought him made of iron!" said the shepherd, wondering, to his sheepdog.

CHAPTER XX.

THE next morning old Teresina, being a hale old body, and active, climbed up the slope to Giovoli, and told Palma the tidings.

The girl was hoeing amongst the frost−bitten ground, and digging out cauliflowers.

She straightened her back and listened, with her great eyes open in humid wonder, to the tale the old woman brought; a tale enlarged and glorified, as such narratives ever will be passing from mouth to mouth.

Palma could understand nothing of it; less than any of them. She had never been out of the Lastra. She had never been in any city, or heard any music except that at church and at the country merry−makings such as those at Fiastra. It was all obscure to her, terrible, incomprehen− sible. It was as if they had told her Signa had been made a king.

"Sure it was his heart's wish, so we ought to be glad," said old Teresina, when all her story was done.

"Yes, indeed," said Palma; but her head was in a whirl, and her throat was full. She knew, as Bruno knew, that living for the world, he was dead to them−−quite dead. All the country was talking of him: how should he remember?

"She is a stupid little mule," thought the old woman, angrily. "She feels nothing, she sees no greatness in it all−−she is only good to grub among her cabbages."

And she went away huffed, and thinking she herself had been a fool to walk all the way to Giovoli to tell her news.

Palma worked on amongst the hard sods, filling her hand−truck with cauliflowers, which her brother would wheel down to the market at the back of the Palace Strozzi.

She was always hard at work, in the open air in all weathers, and knowing no rest; for they were poorer than ever now her brothers grew so big; and, what with the mill tax, and the goods tax, and the tax at the gates for every scrap of eatable stuffs or inch of homespun cloth, the lives of the poor are terrible in this land, where all the earth runs over with plenteousness.

Hour after hour she hoed, and dug, and uprooted, and packed the green heads of the vegetables one on another: all the while her heart was like lead, and her tears were dropping.

"One ought to be glad; he would have broken his heart here; one ought to be so glad," she said to herself.

But gladness does not come for the commanding of it, nor at the voice of duty. She could not feel glad; she could only feel, "We shall never be anything more to him−−never any more."

Signa had been the one grace, the one poem, the one sweet gleam of leisure, rest, and fancy, in all the deal level of her laborious life.

All the rest was so dull, so hard, so unlovely; all the rest was just one constant uphill struggle for sheer life−−one ceaseless rolling of the stone of poverty upward every day, to have it fall heavy as ever back again with every night. Her father was idle, her brothers were quarrelsome; their needs were many, and their ways of meeting them were few; everyone leaned one her, everybody looked to her, everything was left for her to do and save: she had a nature that would have been happy on a very little, but she had no time to be happy; no one every thought she could want such a thing. All the loveliness about her always, from the blaze of sunrise over the hills to the mitre flower in the path between the cabbages, she had no time to note; if she had a moment to rest, she was so tired she could only sit down with closed eyes, heavily, stupidly, like an overdriven horse.

Signa alone had sometimes made her look up and see the daybreak, look down and see the cyclamen; Signa alone, with his smile and his song, and his dreams and his fancies, had brought her a little glimpse of that life of the perception and of the imagination without which the human life differs in nothing from that of the blinded ass at the grinding mill.

She clung to him quite unconsciously; he was the sole ray of light in her long dark day of toil: toil that no one thanked her for, because it was so simply her duty and her obligation.

She loved him with the simplest, tenderest, most innocent affection; and with infinite humility, because she so

seldom could reach the height of his thoughts or the stature of his mind. He was the one beauty in her life; he was so unlike all else that surrounded her; even when she knew him wrong, his error was more divine to her than others' right; the hope of him when he was coming, the memory of him when he had gone, had illumined for her so many days of joyless labour; when his life had gone quite out of hers she had been desolate, with a desolation the more absolute because no one guessed, or, guessing, would have pitied it.

And now at his victory she was not surprised. She could not understand it, but she had believed in him as he had believed in himself; and, so believing, had been sure that he would do the thing he wished.

Therefore the news had found her, and had left her, so quiet−−so quiet: only with a weight at her heart like a stone.

She knew, as she had known at Fiastra, his feet might return, but his soul never! She tried to make herself glad; she hated herself because she failed to rejoice.

"He would have broken his heart if he had not succeeded," she said to herself; and all the while she worked amongst the black earth whose chinks were filled with ice, and her feet were numb with cold, and her poor wisp of a woolen shirt was blown through and through by the north wind, and she tried to cheat herself and believe that she was glad.

When the cabbages were all packed, and the rest of the garden labour done, she went within a minute, and got out a little morsel of paper−money sewn within her mattrass, and stood and thought.

Years before it had been given her by her godmother; the only little bit of money she had ever had for herself; and she had been told by her father to spend it on herself; and she had saved it always from year to year, thinking, when she could get a little bit to add to it, to buy some stockings and shoes for mass days; for she was a little ashamed of her bare feet in the churches. But the other little bit she had never got yet; all that was made by her labour being always wanted for the black bread for the boys' mouths, of which, though she toiled ever so, there was never enough.

She had clung to the hope of getting it always, but day after day, year by year, the hope drifted farther and farther away, and the little scroll of a bank−note was all alone in the mattrass−−a yellow tumbled scrap of a few francs in worth.

Now she took it out, and meditated a moment, and then ran down into the town. It was with her as if she were weighted with some heavy burden dragging at her heart−strings with every step; yet with every step she said to herself, "I am glad; oh, dear Madonna, make me glad!"

She ran down to a nook in the town where there dwelt a man by name or nick−name Chilindro: a little old man of great repute in the place as a draughtsman, and whose business it was, for due payment, to make those coloured drawing which by the score adorn the Voto chapels; thank−offerings for great mercies, and propitiatory presents to the saints, where colour is lavish, and perspective unknown, and miracles commemorated in a primitive art that scorns all rule save that of the buyer's fancy.

Chilindro drove a good trade in his art: the peasants love these votive pictures, and believe in them beyond all other ways of pleasing heaven.

Does a man escape death by fire or water, does he fall unharmed from roof or rick; does a child pass through peril unscathed, or a mother hear her son is saved from shipwreck, or a loose horse in mad career pass without trampling on a prostrate creature;−−the miracle, if it have been wrought for pious souls, is drawn and painted, or a fitting print is coloured; and the Madonna, or the Saint invoked, beams out from flames or waves or clouds; and the record of the heavenly grace is carried up to some favoured chapel, and hung with thousands of others, to show that there still is gratitude on earth, and plead for further favours still from heaven.

Chilindro did not know how to draw, but that was no matter; in these pictures art is nothing, faith is all things; large splashes of red and blue, and the people taller than the houses, and the Madonna or the Saint always very prominent, that is sufficient. Chilindro was a good old man, and a great gossip, and had a high repute for holiness, and had painted the miracles of the Signa country for thirty years and more, till heavenly interpositions seemed no more to him than the dropping of an apple seems to any other man.

Palma climbed up to the attic against the south wall, where, when times were good and accidents were many, he spent his days, and took his orders, and put on his spectacles, and drew his wonderful wooden men and women, and his shipwrecks wtih gaping fish far bigger than the vessels, and his blazing hayricks with the Virgin sitting in the flames, and putting them out with the mere borders of her robe; for Chilindro, though he could not

draw a straight line, had a very great reputation, and people came from far and near to him, even from the shores of the sea, and the coasts of the marshes, where the little chapels, that crown the heathered rocks and path, amongst the rosemary over the blue waters, have so many of these offerings from seamen and seamen's wives, and the coral fishers and the trawlers who draw their daily bread from the deep.

Palma went up to the old man, in the dusk of the late winter afternoon, and drew out her piece of yellow paper.

"Is that enough for a good one!" she asked, with all her heart in her eyes.

The old man scanned it prudently.

"It depends on what you want; has your sweetheart been in trouble? Is that it?"

"No," said Palma, too utterly absorbed in longing to do right, to heed the jest or blush for it. "Look; I am not sure what it should be, but something that would please S. Cecilia. It is she who listens to all music, and sends beauty into it, is it not?"

"Aye, aye," said Chilindro, roughly, being not over−sure himself, and preferring fires and shipwrecks, which were all the Madonna's. "Aye, aye, go on, what do you want with S. Cecilia? I deal with no childishness, you know; that were profane."

Palma leaned both her hands on his table, and her heart was beating so, that he might have seen her rough bodice heave with it, only he was an old man and did not care for girls.

"Profane! oh no; no, no! It is the very life of his life. It is the only thing he loves. If you would do something very beautiful for her that would please her very much, and show her I am glad? Something that would please him too, if ever he should see it? I would take it up myself and pray with it, and so she would watch over him always. That was what I thought. This is all the money I have. I have saved it for years; meaning to buy shoes always. If it be enough, if you would make it do? then she would know how glad I try to be. Only I cannot−−I cannot−−not just at once."

Her voice choked in her throat; her eyes glazed imploringly at the old man, as though he held the keys of heaven; she had absolute faith in the power of what she strove to do; if she could have given her life−blood to get the picture, she would have given it willingly.

The old man scanned her curiously. She was too thin and ill−clad, and blown and beaten by the weather to have much beauty; yet she looked almost handsome, in her brown, rough, simple way, as she leaned there in the dusk over his board, with her great braids wound about her shapely head, and her breast heaving, and all her soul shining in her eyes.

"It is that boy who has made his fame in Venice," thought the old Chilindro, but he had seen too much of men and women to seem to know the thing they did not wish themselves to tell; he had painted votive offerings for road−brigands in his earlier days, and taken their money and asked nothing but what they chose to say: a still tongue, he held, being as gold to whosover has the wit to keep it safely tucked behind his teeth. His business was to make the pictures, not to turn people's memories and desires inside out; besides, he saw the story of the girl in her gleaming innocent eyes.

There were so many stories like it; without them half the walls of half the votive chapels would be bare.

He looked at her and at the paper note, then seemed to meditate.

"It is a low price−−and S. Cecilia: that is more difficult than the Madonna; she is more hard to please. Our Lady is everywhere. She is used to it. Still I will do my best, you being a young thing, and wishing it so much: only your price is low. Because you will want laurel, and harps, and the trumpet of fame, and all the rest; it is to get triumph for the youth and for his music that you wish?"

"Yes!" said Palma, with a sigh that shuddered her with an infinite pain. "Yes; triumph always, what he longs for−−triumph eternal, that shall live longer than he lives. That is what he used to say. Ah, you are good to do it for so little−−then they will know in heaven I am glad."

The old Chilindro was silent. he was used to see all woes and joys of human emotion. He was used to mothers, sisters, wives, daughters, mistresses of men, who came and wept and laughed and prayed, and were mad with rapture at the sweet sudden deliverance from death of some life that made the sum of theirs. But this girl moved him; she was so quiet, and yet there was such longing in her eyes.

Nevertheless, he took her money.

"I will do the picture, and you may come for it this time to−morrow," he said, as he raked up the little note

into his leathern bag. "But, that you are wise, I will not say. My dear, in failure they come back; in success, never."

"I know," said Palma.

"And you still wish the picture?"

"I will be here for it this time to−morrow; and you are good to do it."

Then she went.

Chilindro did no work that night, but went and gossipped: on the morning he did better for her than he did for most; he took a little wood−engraved head of Raffaelle's Cecilia, and left it undaubed by colour, and drew round it in his own clumsy fashion the laurel and the bay, and all immortal symbols, Pagan and Christian, twisted altogether, and lettered under with the little line "Hauritis acquas in gaudio."

He did not know very well why he wrote that in his flourishing gilded letters, but he thought it would serve its turn.

Then he put it in a plain black frame, which was a free gift, and could not have been claimed as portion of the picture.

It was much simpler than his flames and waves, his azures and his crimsons; and yet, somehow, he thought he liked it better than them all.

With the dusk of the day Palma came for it. To her, too, it seemed beautiful. She looked at it in silence, her hands crossed on her bosom, that he should not see how high it heaved.

"It is good of you to have done so much for me," she said, gently, and then took the picture and folded it under her ragged wooden shawl, and again went away, without another word.

Chilindro was disappointed.

"I wish I had made her pay for the frame," he thought, as his door shut upon her.

Palma, with the speed of a goat, ran up into the hills; she had so little time to spare; her brothers would be home by nightfall, clamorous for their dish of soup.

There was a little church high above Giovoli that she loved well; a little old brown tumbling church, where Signa and Gemma had often played with her amongst the old tombs in their babyhood, and sat with the sheep−dog up by the altar, wondering at the little stone children and the broken pieces of jasper and porphyry, and the blazoned S. Sebastian, with the arrows in him, up in the narrow window, cobweb−hung.

And sometimes Signa, with Gemma and her at his feet on the steps of the altar, had sung the chants he sang at matins and complin with the other choir children; and the sweet little flute−like voice of him had gone sighing out through the arched door to the sunshine, and away over the gorge and the rosemary, till it found the thrushes singing too, and was lost in the myrtle leaves with them.

She ran up the hill to this little church; there were no thrushes now, and the rosemary and myrtle were bare, and the savage north wind pierced her through and through, and the ice in the clefts cut her feet.

It was just open for evening service.

There were a few scattered huts and farms, whose peasants would steal into it sometimes, and sit down in the darkness and rest, if they did not pray. She went in and threw herself down on her knees in the corner nearest the altar. It was there that she meant to aske to have the picture hung,−−just there; where the old broken rail was still bright with the jasper, and where Signa had used to sit and sing.

"Oh, dear God! I am glad, indeed; I am glad!" she said, as she kneeled with her hand on the stone and the little picture close clasped against her breast. "Gemma is dead; and he is the same as dead to me. But Gemma is safe with you and the angels, and he has the thing that he wished. I am glad, indeed, I am glad. I would not have them back−−oh, no!−−only perhaps he will see the picture once, and then he will know I did what I could; then he will know.−−I am glad!"

CHAPTER XXI.

MEANWHILE Lippo, in the Lastra, read the news−sheets, and walked with meek pride among the idlers at the house−doors at the close of the working−day.

"Yes−−my nephew," he would say, with some new journal in his hand, out of which he could spell some fresh description of the successes of the Actea. "Dear boy! to see how great he is. And to think that if I, or rather my good father−in−law, had not advanced the money for that little bit of land, all this great talent might have been buried forever−−aye!−−it makes one proud to have been the humble means. But, indeed, in his babyhood, I foresaw the bent that he would have; you will remember; I always spared him to chant in any church they sought him for. I knew it was fine practice, and what young life can begin holier than by using God's gifts to praise His saints? It always brings a blessing. 'Put the child to work' people said always; but I, and Nita too, said, 'No; as far as we have aught to do with him, we dedicate him, as the parents did the little Samuel, to the sacred office of the Temple.' Only then Bruno interfered, and would not have it, because the church only gives but a few pence; as if it were pence brought the blessing!−−but that is all bygone. I wish to bury all remembrance of difference. Only poor Bruno is so hard and harsh. Oh, yes, it is all true! all printed here; the Syndic of Genoa sent him special entreaty to be present at the first representation in the Carlo Felice, and all the town was dressed with flags, and strangers flocking from all parts; it might have been a victory with half a million of men killed and wounded, for all the mighty rejoicing that there was. It does seem wonderful; and he such a little lad! But he does not forget us. No; he wrote to Nita yesterday, and sent a necklace of pearls for our Richetta, remembering she is sixteen years old to−day. Was it not pretty, and so grateful? But he knows who were always his true friends−−dear boy! Nita will show you the pearls if you go all of you upstairs. He is so fond of us, and we of him; only he cannot let it be seen when he stays here, because his first duty is, I always say, to Bruno; and we know what Bruno is."

And Lippo would go up the street, and murmur much the same at other houses in the short twilight of the shortening days; and his towns−folk listened, and ended in believing him.

True, some sceptic said that the pearls were old ones of his mother's that he had reset himself on the jeweller's bridge down in the city; and some of those malignant souls that keep long memories for the torment of their fellow−creatures, since most folks like to write their lives in sand, remembered one with another a little fellow, beaten black and blue, who had run hungry about all day on Lippo's errands.

But these were in a very small minority.

Baldo was a warm man, the Lastra knew, the Lastra felt itself being usually cold, so far as empty pockets go; and Lippo had got the bit of land upon the hill, and had added another little bit to it; and had moreover such a pretty way of lending money at convenient moments to his neighbours; and, when obliged to ask for it back again at inconvenient ones, sorrowed so and wept, and took high interest with such reluctance or such protestation of it, that the Lastra could not quarrel with him, nor object to seeing with his eyes.

Lippo grew daily into a power in the little place; and Bruno, all the Lastra knew−−and Signa−on−the−Hill knew, too−−had always been a dangerous, dark man, who kept his own counsel in churlish silence, whilst candid cheerful Lippo laid his heart bare as a good comrade should, and kept close thoughts in nothing.

The Lastra, like the world, did not mind a little lying; it was the life of gossip; but silence it would not forgive; silence was the highest sin and biggest.

And Baldo felt so much respect for him in consequence, and had so high an opinion of his judgment, that he gave his money for any scheme of investment or modes of purchase that his son−in−law proposed.

"Lippo had not a centime of his own," said the shoe−maker to his special gossips, "But then he knows how to plant a centime in the ground, so as to make it take root and blossom into hundreds. That is better perhaps than to be born with money−−to know the art of getting and turning about other people's. The miller gains more by the wheat than the farmer does."

It could hardly be said that Baldo ever liked his son−in−law. But he grew to be glad of him, and to believe in his good sense.

"Nature makes some folks false as it makes lizards wriggle," said he. "Lippo is a lizard. No dog ever caught him napping, though he looks so lazy in the sun."

Bruno had never known how, or knowing, never would have troubled himself, to please the people round him.

Lippo did know.

"It is no good to make your life into a bit of solid silver fit for goldsmiths, and shut it up in a cupboard: you will get no credit," he said to himself. "Make it into a dish of tomatoes, and put plenty of garlic in; and let every one put a finger into it, and lick his finger afterwards; then they will always speak well of you, and think they helped to cook the dish as well as eat it, and so will take a pride−−even when your plates are all cracked−−in you."

And Lippo always ate his tomatoes in public, and so was much beloved, and turned his vinegar to oil.

"I thought he was a ne'er−do−weel," said Baldo. "But I was wrong. For pretty lying, nicely buttered, and going down like a fig in a dog's throat, there is not his equal anywhere−−not anywhere."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE spring came in Venice.

There were flowers all the day long everywhere, and music all the night; the swallows and the doves were happy in the cloudless air; the sweet sea wind only blew softly enough to lift the hair of the women standing on the wet marble stairs to meet the boats of fish and of fruit.

It was the city of Desdemona, of Stradella, of Giorgione, of Consuelo. Signa lived in it as in a dream; this silence enfolded him like sleep−−sleep filled with the stir of birds' wings, the sound of waves, the sigh of the wind in the casements full of lilies, the murmurs of amorous whispers.

"Am I awake?" he would say to himself in this wonderful trance of slumberous delight, when all the air was full of his own melodies, and all the people's eyes turned after him.

Signa drifted on the tide of the city's praise and passion, like a rose dropped on a smooth flowing river. He hardly wondered. The women's touch and words would make him colour like a girl, and he submitted to them with a soft timidity, graceful as the bending of a reed in the wind. Otherwise he was quite tranquil. No glory and no beauty could be quite so glorious or so beautiful as those of his dreams.

To him who had dreamed of a triumph like Petrarca's and a grave like Palestrina's, who had dreamed of gates of gold for his Lastra, and all the nations of the earth for his singers; to him nothing could appear very startling or very great. True, he was only a little contadino, who still loved best his feet shoeless and his breast bare; a little rustic from the vines and the olives, happiest to sit in the sun and eat a slice of bread and a handful of fruit; but the native grace of movement and absence of self−consciousness made him as serene in a ducal palace as one the hillside at home, and less moved at a prince's compliment than at the shout of a boatman or a fruit−seller.

He came into the fame that welcomed him as a young heir into his heritage. It was nothing strange to him. He had looked for it so long.

"Only to long and dream, and give up all hope, and then to wake of a sudden and find the dream all true−−that is to be happy, indeed!" he would say to himself; and happy he was with the sweet, glad, thoughtless innocence of a child. So happy that he never thought to turn his steps backward to those who watched at home on the high lonely hill in the light of the setting sun.

Every day, indeed, he thought: "To−morrow I will go." But when the morrow became the present day, he still said−−"To−morrow!"

He was caressed, adored, feasted, sought, done homage to all through the city in the months of spring. In any other country there might have been a coarseness in the adulation, a vulgarity of fashion in the universality of praise which might have sated or nauseated him; but here, in the city that heard the serenades of Stradella and held the women of Tiziano, it was all one simple impulse of ardour, one unstudied outburst of rapture, one sweet natural inspiration answering his own as the whole forest full of song−birds answers the first morning singer at sunrise; and the days were one long festa, and the gondolas wafted him from palace to palace, and all women caressed him, from the bare−limbed fish−girl, standing in the surf of the Lido, to the jewelled lady leaning on her fringed cushions of silk.

Others beside the Moon leaned down to kiss this young Endymion.

He was so great a rarity to them; so innocent, so shy, and yet so full of grace; with all his peasant's simplicity and ignorance, yet so far away from them by that look in his eyes and that serious beauty of his fancies; so utterly unlearned in all the usage of the world, and yet so dreamfully calm amidst it all as if he were some young marble god that had been touched to life out from his sleep of twice a thousand years in Latin soil.

For he was dreaming of another opera.

He had the story of the Lamia in his head. The Venus Lamia of Athens; the young Greek flute−player, whose face is still seen on the carved amethyst in the library of the Louvre; she, who, in Alexandria, made captive, became the sovreign mistress of her conqueror, and by the magic of her music and her beauty, vanquished the victor of Ptolemy and changed death into love.

He knew very little of any other learning than his own sweet science, but here and there the old classic stories had beguiled him, and the "Lamia" had of all others pleased him; perhaps because the girl, who became a goddess by force of a man's passion for her, had been a high priestess of his own art, and by that art had changed death into love.

In the glad spring days, the music for his Lamia came to him as the butterflies came in on the sea breeze over the white lilies in his window. The Actea had been solemn with the gloom of wasted love and martyred courage; the Lamia as she came to birth was radiant with all the glory of young life.

He had read the story one day sitting on a boat's keel on the Lido sands, with his feet in the water and the white sea−birds above his head in the sunshine. He saw his Lamia in the waves of light that ebbed and flowed from the shining sea to the shining skies; saw her though he had never seen the amethyst; saw her with her pure Greek face and her passionate eyes and her floating veil and her fillet that marked her the priestess of melody−−the Lamia Aphrodite of Athens.

And the story haunted him, and the music came with it, and had all the passion in it that was in all the air around him, and yet not in his own heart; that women here breathed on his own young lips, and yet which left him so unmoved to it, as the sirocco goes over a lyre and leaves it mute.

The red sullen glow of old Nile, the white serene radiance of Athens, the brooding darkness of Egypt, the living rings of the dance chain of the Hormus, the palm−crowned virgins in the feasts of Hyacinthus−−all the faces and things gone from the earth three thousand years and more−−became living and visible to him. Actea had been but a shadow to him in his music; Lamia lived for him and smiled. Women wanted him to love them. He did not. But he almost loved Lamia.

"Shall I see her likeness living one day?" he thought; and his face grew warm.

It was the first time that any thought, save that of his music, had quickened the pulse of his heart.

"You do not care for us," said a young fisher−girl, with her beautiful bronze limbs thrown down by him on the sand, and with her hands stroking his hair.

Signa smiled.

"Oh, no! Why should I? I see creatures so much lovelier than any of you on earth."

"Where?" said the girl of the Lido.

"In the sun−−in the sea−−where the swallows go−−where the shadows are−−anywhere, everywhere. But most beautiful of all when I close my eyes, and play in the dark−−so softly; and then they come."

"Who come?" said the girl.

"Ah, who!" said Signa, and he smiled lying back on the sand, with his eyes on the blueness of the vault above him.

"Does no one love you at home?" said the girl.

"Only a man," said Signa.

"And the great ladies here? The princesses?−−that one with the blue and gold in her gondola, who seeks you so often?"

"She is−−a princess. And I, I am only a peasant, you know. At least I was yesterday."

"Then you do not love her; though she loves you?"

"No."

"And you do not love me?"

"No, dear."

"Then, what is it you love?"

"The things that I hear," said Signa. "And I will love the Lamia when I find her."

CHAPTER XXIII.

WITH the spring a little house was reared on the bit of ground by the brook; a little square, low house, of the grey stone that is quarried above; roofed with red tiles, and entered by a small arched door.

A peasant came to live in it; a very poor labouring man, who could hardly keep body and soul together; but he was enough for the work of the place. The corn was green and promised fairly; the olives and the vines were well set for blossom; the reeds and the rushes grew all the thicker for deep winter rains and some weeks of hard frost.

When the little grass paths between the fields were all white with the clusters of the sweet−smelling snowflakes, that are called in this country the churchbells of the spring, there came up on Sundays and days of Feast, a handsome, pensive−looking man; a black−browed, stout−built woman, with a red shawl and gold pins in her uncovered hair; and a tribe of riotous children.

Bruno, working in his cattle−shed, saw them.

They were Lippo and the family of Lippo.

They came up often, and brought a flask of wine with them, and rolls of bread and cold−meats, and would sit down under the olives and eat and drink, and see the children race about, and laugh very noisily, and seem the very soul and symbol of content;−−never quarreling by any chance whatever.

Bruno saw them through the trees. Their words could not reach him, but the echo of their laughter did.

They were friends of the cheese−seller no doubt. The cheese−seller never cared to come up thither himself; perhaps being so far away down in the city.

Bruno never spoke of it; and no one ever spoke of it to him.

Who would, must come. He was a stranger there.

Later on fell S. Mark's day.

Bruno was at work.

Since he had lost the land and the boy, he could not keep the saints' days holy; he could not lie idle in the sun; he could not endure the quiet of leisure. Unless he had always some toil to do, some effort to make, he felt as if he would turn sick or mad, or do some evil thing. In the dawn he would go to the first mass; that done, he laboured all the rest of the day till nightfall.

He was digging up his early potatoes and shaking the earth off the roots; it was a calm, bright day; there had been showers; the yellow water iris was pricking up in every runlet, and the little black velvet lily, that the city took for her arms and her emblem, was in the grass everywhere wherever he turned.

He did not strike them down with his spade now. Signa had cared so much for flowers.

He was working on the side of his farm that looked upward to the land he had lost.

There was a belt of fir−trees between him and it, and then a field of young barley, and then again another row of firs. Looking down on the black earth and the green plants of the potatoes, he did not see three men come through the trees and stand and look at him.

He only raised his head as a voice said his name softly.

Then he saw his brother Lippo, with his youngest child clinging to his knees, and beside him his two friends, Momo the barber, and Tonino the tinman.

"Bruno!" said Lippo, very softly.

Bruno struck his spade deep down into the earth, and struck his heel on it; and seemed as though he had not heard.

Lippo left the nearer belt of firs between his brother and himself. He stood a little distance amongst the half−grown barley. His youngest child, a girl of three years old, with a face like a little St. John, and a temper like her mother's, clung to him, dressed in fresh white clothes, and with a knot of red field tulips in her hand.

"Bruno−−dear Bruno," said he, softly. "You must see us often here. I thought I would come and tell you; you might hear it by accident and wonder. I thought you would be sorry for your land to go out of the family; once having been in it. So−−the name was Avellino's, I have known him long and well, a most good creature; but the

money was mine, and the land is transferred to me, you understand? I am a poor man, but I have a kind father−in−law, and when one has so many young ones, one tries to save and better oneself−−you understand? I thought you would be glad. And you wil see us often here; and if you will be neighbourly and brotherly dear Bruno, both Nita and I shall be most willing. The children might come in and cheer you, you so lonely here−−"

The self−satisfied, soft smile died off his face; the little girl hid hers and screamed. Yet Bruno had done nothing; he had only dashed his spade into the soil to stand erect there by itself, and stood with his eyes blazing upon Lippo's. Then by the mightiest effort of his life he controlled himself, and bent over the earth and dug again, stamping his foot down on the iron as though he stamped a traitor's life out with it.

Lippo waited with a vague and gentle appeal upon his face, and a look every now and then of gentlest wonder at his friends.

Bruno dug on, scattering the black ground right and left.

"Will you not speak, dear Bruno?" said Lippo, mournfully. "I thought to give you pleasure."

Bruno stood erect.

"Christ spoke to Iscariot−−and forgave him. He was the Son of God. I am a man. If you say one word, or tarry one moment, I will brain you where you stand."

Momo the barber and Tonino the tinman plucked back at Lippo's sleeve.

"Come away−−come away. He is possessed−−"

"Envy!" murmured Lippo, with a sigh, and let himself be led away back through the green and bending barley.

Bruno, leaning on his heavy spade, breathed loudly, like a man exhausted; the veins of his throat swelled; his bronzed face grew black with the rush of blood.

"Christ, keep my hands from blood guiltiness," he muttered. "I cannot!−−I cannot!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

DOWN in the Lastra at evening, Momo the barber and Tonino the tinman told the townsfolk how Bruno had threatened his brother's life for the second time:−−beware the third!

"We heard him ourselves. It is worse than Cain!" they said, in the merry little wineshop in the Place of Arms. "He squandered away his bit of land just to keep his boy in lewd living away in the cities; and good Lippo, to do the matter delicately, bought it back, only getting another's name, not to seem too forward or hurt him too much, and thinking only of saving his brother's credit, so that it should not pass to a stranger; and when he breaks this to him, so prettily−−oh, so prettily!−−and offers him love, and good will, and the children to keep him com− pany, the brute threatens to brain him;−−to brain him with the spade he worked with, and said that the Son of God should have done the same by Iscariot. It is too horrible! Lippo is a saint, else would he bid the guards of the law keep their watch over Bruno. This we heard with our own ears. This we saw with our own eyes."

And the wineshop echoed, "Worse than Cain!"

VOLUME III

CHAPTER I.

THE spring went by and the summer, and the tidings that came to the Lastra were always good.

The boy wrote now from here, now from there−−now from a mountain town, where his music was playing in a summer theatre; now from a lake palace, where some great prince had summoned him; now from the cities, where foreign directors were seeing him; now from the seashore, where great ladies were wooing him. He said so little; he was hidden from them in a golden cloud; they could scarcely follow him even in fancy. But he was well, he was happy, he was triumphant−−he wanted for nothing. They had to be content with that, and to imagine the rest−−as best they could.

All the northern country was echoing with his music, up to the edges of the Alps, and from the one sea to the other, and the boy was wandering, welcomed and praised and rejoiced over everywhere, and with his own melodies always ringing in his ears, as the gorgeous genius of the "Anacreon of Genoa" had been three hundred years before. This was all they knew, and they had to be content with it.

He was gone over the land like one of the improvisatori of the old times, with the sound of his "sweet singing" in herald of him everywhere; their lark had gone up against the sun; they could see him no longer; they had their work to do, the work that kept their eyes on the earth.

Bruno laboured on his lands, and went to and fro the markets, and toiled early and late in all weathers, and seldom spoke to any living thing except his dog or his oxen; Luigi Dini opened and folded the black robes of the brethren, and saw the sick and the dead carried by, and unclosed and closed the church doors, and thought that the days grew very long; poor merry Sandro died, quite suddenly, of a ball in his throat; and Palma had to sell her hair to a barber in the town to pay the grave, and to keep the boys and the roof over their heads as best she could, two of them earning something small, and three of them nothing at all; old Teresina fell down her wooden stairs and broke her leg, and could trot about no more as her chief pleasure had always been to do, but had to lie and look over the tops of her roses in the little square window, and only knew when the sun went down by the glow in the bit of sky that was all she could ever now see;−−the weeks and the months were very slow to all these, and the luxuriant summer only brought them heat and pain. They could not follow their lark, even in fancy; he was gone so high and so far; and though the summer had come for them, it was all dark and dust. But they were glad to think he was away against the sun−−glad all of them.

One morning Bruno went down early to the market in the city. It was August, and he had samples of his wheat with him. He worked hard; never looking over through the belt of pines to the brook under the rushes; worked as hard as he had done when he had worked with a great hope and goal before him; partly because it was the one habit of his life, partly because he so had least time for thought; and also−−although, indeed, the boy needed nothing now, and made his money for himself, and would have none sent to him−−because the time might come that he would want it.

"Di doman non si è certezza."

One never knew−−so Bruno said to himself, and laid by what he could in the old leathern pouch thrust behind a loose brick in the chimney corner, that had once held the purchase−money of the land that he had lost.

It was five in the morning; a morning cold with that fresh alpine clear coldness which precedes at daybreak the hottest weather for the noon, and refreshes the thirsty earth with its dense dews, that are as thick as rain. On the bridge he met a girl slowly toiling under a great burden of linen; she stopped as he passed her, and lifted her large eyes to him. She was very thin and very brown.

"Is it you, Palma?" he said to her; he could not refuse to stop: poor Sandro had been a good friend and kindly to the boy. "Is there anything I can do for you? You look ill?"

"No," she said, timidly. "I wanted to know−−Do you have any news of him ever?"

"All is well with him−−yes," said Bruno. "That Gigi sees−−sees in the printed papers. He has not written now−−not for some time. You see, it is not as if we could read what he writes or write ourselves. I daresay it seems to him as if we forgot, since we can never answer."

"He will not think that we forget," said Palma, and stood still with her great eyes clouded.

"No. But no doubt it seems as if we were all dead. It is to be half−dead in a way−−not to read and write−−I see that now. I used to think it only fit for poor pale fools in cities. Not a thing for a man−−unless one were a priest."

"But he knows we cannot write," said Palma, "and Luigi Dini does for us−−for you, at least. Perhaps it is he himself who does forget."

"Why not?" said Bruno. The thought was like an arrow in his heart, but he would never open his lips to blame the boy.

"Why not?" murmured the girl.

Why not indeed? They had nothing to do but remember;−−he had all the world with him.

"Good day," she added, and moved to take up the bundle of linen, that she had rested for a moment on the parapet of the bridge.

But Bruno looked at her curiously. He had seen her a score of times since the Lenten time when Sandro had died, but he had not noticed before that her hair was clipped short to her head like a young conscript's.

"What have you done with all your braids?" he asked.

"I sold them."

"What for?"

"To pay for my father's burial:−−it just paid it."

"I wish you had let me know, I would have paid. Poor child! I never noticed it before."

"That is because I tied a handkerchief on. The barber shaved my head quite close. Now the hair is grown just a little."

"You are a good girl. Can you manage to live−−any how?"

"Yes. We can just live. Franco and Beppo earn a little."

"But you must work very hard?"

"I have always done that. Why not?"

"But you are a pretty girl when you have your hair. You must marry."

Palma gave a quick shudder.

"Oh, no."

"And why not?"

She coloured to the bronze rings of her shorn curls.

"My brothers will want me many years yet; and then I shall be old."

She nodded to him, and went her way over the bridge, carrying the linen she had washed for the canon's housekeeper on the hill. Bruno walked onward: he thought little of the girl−−though he had always liked her for her courage and her industry−−he thought much of one of her answers: "Perhaps it is he himself who does forget." Yes;−−of course it was he himself; it is always the one who goes that forgets, always the one who is left that remembers.

No doubt the boy forgot them; why not? He said so to his own heart every day all through the long months when the letters came so seldom and the printed papers were so full of Signa's name and Signa's music.

He walked on trying to fancy what his boy looked like in all those strange cities amongst all those strange faces; trying to fancy how it was when the streets were thronged and the flowers were tossed and the theatres were besieged and the vivas were shouted: he had seen such nights of applause, such hours of homage himself in carnival times in his youth when Florence had found some singer or some musician in whom its heart delighted, and for whom its winter roses were gathered, and its voices uplifted in one accord.

But he could not imagine the boy amongst such nights as these−−Pippa's son−−the little delicate lad running with barefoot by him in the dust, and looking up through his curls to see if the heavens had opened to show him the singing children of God.

It perplexed him. He could not grapple with it.

All through the warm months, in the long oppressive evenings, with the thunder−clouds brooding overhead, or the sirocco driving the straw and dust through the gates, the old man had sat in the doorways and read out to all the many listening groups this tale and that, this history and the other, of the victories of Signa's music wherever it was heard, welcomed in every little city of the plains and every gay town on the shores of lake or sea as the

carnations were welcomed and the swallows and the nightingales;−−all through those months Bruno, hearing, had come no nearer to comprehension of it, no nearer than the vague dull sense that the world had got the boy and he had lost him.

He had grown used to it, as we grow in a manner used to any pain, wearing it daily as the anchorite his girdle of sharp iron; he was proud of it in his own silent way as the seamen on the shores of Genoa were proud when they heard how the old world had been forced to take an empire from their "Nudo nocchior; promettitor di regni." Proud when he went through the Lastra or down the streets of the city, and men who had long shunned him paused in his path to say, "and that young genius they talk so much of northward, is that indeed your boy?" and he answered, "yes: it is Pippa's son," and went his way. Proud so. Proud of the boy and for him:−−the little corncrake that left the fields to cleave his flight where eagles go.

But he could not comprehend it; could not realize that the little fellow so late singing his sequence at mass, with the other children, in holy week, with his ragged homespun shirt, and hungry stomach and sad eyes, could now have name and fame with other men, and be spoken of as they spoke in Florence of the great Cimarosa.

It was true, no doubt, and he was sure of it; and working in his field he thought of nothing else, and said for ever to himself, "if he has got his desire, what does it matter for me?" but still it was dark to him; there were times when the great oppressive weight of it lay on him as if he had been buried alive, and in his grave could hear the footsteps of the boy going away−−away−−away, farther and farther, always over his head, but beyond his reach and beyond his call for ever.

It was a stupid feeling, no doubt, born out of ignorance and emotion and solitude; but that was what he felt often−−often in the quiet lonely nights when there was no moon in the skies, and no sound on the mountains.

This day he walked straight to the city, and did his trafficking in the square before the heat had come, and while the shadows were still long on the steps between the white lions.

By noon these matters were done with by most of the men, for the weather was at its sultriest, and the shade of the cool arched granaries and winebarns in the country better to be desired than the scorching pavement. He went into the place of S. Maria Novella, having a last errand there to a harness maker; in the blinding sunshine of the unshadowed square there was a white slender figure, a boy's face, a gesture that he knew−−be− fore he could speak Signa had thrown himself upon his neck.

"It is I! yes it is I," he cried, "I have just come by the iron way that you hate so−−I thought I would walk, I thought I might meet you, being Friday. Ah, dearest, truest, best friend!−−all that I am you have made me; all that I may become will be yours!"

Bruno looked at him speechless. Once before he had rejoiced so greatly−−only to find his error. He dared not now be glad.

He gazed at the boy−−so changed and yet in so much the same−−the solitary sunlit square went round and round him like a whirlpool of white fire. The great stones seemed to heave and dance.

"I made sure now you had forgotten," he muttered; and stood stupidly like own of his own oxen when it has been very long in the dark, and is led out on a sudden into the full blaze of the noon.

"Forgotten. Did you think me lower than the beasts?" said Signa, and he kissed the man's brown hands.

"Yes, it is true," he added. "Yes, I was base not to come back long ago. But every day I said to−morrow, and every morrow brought some change, some wonder, some great thing to do or to hear; and so the summer has slipped away as the spring did. But forget!−−oh, never, never! What would I be now but for you?−−a starved and beaten thing in Lippo's house."

"Let us go in here," said Bruno, and he mounted the steps of the church with the white marble of it shining in the noonday sun, and went into the body of it where the light was like a great rainbow stretching from one stained window to another. There were a few people about it, some gazing at the pictures; some kneeling in dark corners.

Bruno drew him down the marble steps into the silence of the green cloister; there was not a soul there; the gate was left open, the guardian of the church dozed in the heat, sitting in the shade under the pillars.

In the solitude where only Giotto's faded saints and angels looked upon them, he drew the boy close to him and looked in his face.

"My dear, my dear! God is good!" he muttered. "I doubted it, aye, I doubted; God forgive my doubt. When that traitor took the land I could have killed him. God is good. My hands are clean. And the world has not taken you from me; men have not made you forget. Ah, our God is good. Let us praise him!"

He leaned against one of the columns with his face bent down on his arm; his bare chest heaved, his strong nervous limbs trembled; the hot sun poured in on his uncovered head, then silently he put his hand out and grasped Signa's, and led him into the Spanish Chapel, and sank on his knees.

The glory of the morning streamed in from the cloister; all the dead gold and the faded hues were transfigured by it; the sunbeams shone on the face of Laura, the deep sweet colours of Bronzino's Coena glowed upward in the vault amidst the shadows; the company of the blessed, whom the old painters had gathered there, cast off the faded robes that the Ages had wrapped them in, and stood forth like the tender spirits that they were, and seemed to say, "Nay, we, and they who made us, are not dead, but only waiting."

It is all so simple and so foolish there; the war−horses of Taddeo that bear their lords to eternity as to a joust of arms; the heretic dogs of Memmi, with their tight wooden collars; the beauteous Fiammetta and her lover, throning amongst the saints; the little house, where the Holy Ghost is sitting, with the purified saints listening at the door, with strings tied to their heads to lift them into paradise; it is all so quaint, so childlike, so pathetic, so grotesque,−−like a set of wooden figures from its Noah's Ark that a dying child has set out on its little bed, and that are so stiff and ludicrous, and yet which no one well can look at and be unmoved, by reason of the little cold hand that has found beauty in them.

As the dying child to the wooden figures, so the dead faith gives to the old frescoes here something that lies too deep for tears; we smile, and yet all the while we say,−−if only we could believe like this; if only for us the dead could be but sleeping!

Bruno sank on his knees on the bench by the west door, under the beautiful Bronzino that the shadows were so covetous of; where the word Silenzio is written on the wall.

In him the old simple blind faith lived, as it had lived in the hearts of the old painters, that had covered the stones here with their works.

He cried straight to heaven, and he believed that heaven heard him.

Holding the boy's hand in his, and with his head thrown back, and his eyes meeting the full sunrays that glanced from Bronzino's Christ to him, he blessed God, who had brought back the body safe and the soul pure.

Then his head sank, his forehead fell upon the back of the bench; he knelt silent many moments. He spoke to his God alone−−or to his dead; not even Signa heard.

CHAPTER II.

WHEN he rose he looked calm, and his eyes shone with the peace of a tranquil happiness.

"Let us talk here a little," he said, and they went out into the arcades of Giotto's cloister, where the mountain winds, and the autumn rains, and the fierce beating of the midsummer suns, have stripped the saints and prophets bare.

"And you are a great man!" he said, with a slow soft smile. "A great man! you−−Pippa's son−−my little cowherd and sheep boy! Forgive me, dear; it seems strange."

"Nay, the music in me is great; not I;" said Signa. "I am like the reed that the gods took to breathe through−−that is all."

"And that is pretty of you to say. But a man is known by his works, as a tree by her fruit; and yours are good. You were no dreamer, my boy, as we thought."

"But if you had not sold the land!" said Signa.

Bruno winced.

"Why talk of that? What is done is done. The land was for you; you were right to have it sold. I see that now, dear−−it was only hard at first."

"But who has it? You said a traitor."

"Lippo has it. He brought it secretly. Honestly as money goes−−but not fairly−−there is a difference. But why speak of these things. Never put back on your teeth a walnut that has the worm. Dear−−you think I have suffered. Do not poison your pleasure with that fancy. When the news came that winter night, I had more content−−for you−−than ever the land would have brought with it. I said, 'God is good.' God is good. He has given you your heart's desire; and you have come back safe; and have not forgotten."

He was leaning against one of the columns, the boy was sitting on the marble ledge where the graves are. Bruno looked down on him as the sun shone above his young upturned face. Signa was not much changed; his dress was all of white linen, but it was very simple; the sea, the travel, and the hope, and new glory of his life had warmed his cheek, and invigorated his limbs; that was all; but there was about him, and upon him, that immeasurable, indescribable alteration which raises up the childhood that dreams into the manhood that has accomplished; he was a boy still, but he was a boy who had fought his fight, and had conquered.

He was no longer Endymion sighing fitfully in a tormented sleep with vain desire; he was the Endymion who had held his divine mistress in his arms, and vanquished, and possessed her.

"Do not think of the land any more, ever again," said Bruno. "It was of use. That was all it could ever have been. It is for me now as I had never had it. That is all. Dear, tell me of yourself rather;−−you have so much to tell."

It was a noble lie.

The land was the cruellest loss of his life. Every time that the voice of his brother echoed up through the pines, every time that he saw the strange hands amongst the olive boughs and the river rushes, the longing of vengeance possessed him as ardently as in the moment of Lippo's first taunts, the sharpness of his loss was as poignant to him as in the hour when the had first said to the notary, "sell." But Bruno gave his gifts with both hands; he did not weight them with a millstone of appraisement.

Signa had so much to tell; days, weeks, months, could not have exhausted for him the story of his wanderings and his victories. He had lost nothing of his simple eager faith, nothing of his spiritual endless aspirations; only now, instead of dreaming of victory he had achieved it; now, instead of the passionate praises of genius, he had its passionate joys.

He told his story sitting under the arches of the noble cloisters, with the strong August sun making the marble warm like human flesh. It was the same story that Bruno had heard from the letters and from the printed sheets, month after month; but it only now took life and colour for him, it only now became an actual truth for him, heard from the boy's happy breathless lips, with the blue shining above the open court.

Signa was a great singer in the land, as Cimarosa had been in his, with his gay melodies caught from the threshing barns and the orange−gatherers and the coral−fishers and the vintage−dancers; as the poet Chiabrera had been with his mighty odes that echoed like the roll of battle; as the improvisatore Bernardo had been with his silver lute that held the Romans still as listening goats that circle round a shepherd's pipe:−−that he could understand now, wonderful though it was; now that the boy's eyes shone back to his, and the boy's own lips told him of cities and villas and seashores and mountain palaces, and the tumult of towns in summer nights, and the chorus of strange voices under his casement singing his own songs till the dawn broke.

He could understand it now; and though it took Pippa's son away from him−−quite away into a world where he himself could never tread−−yet he was proud of it and glad−−bewildered, but very glad.

"That you should be so great, you little thing!" he murmured, and smiled, thinking of the night coming in from the Certosa, when he had carried the child, worn−out and tired, as the owls cried and Signa dreamed of the Fair Angel.

To Bruno the boy was only such a little thing−−no more than a girl was, or a bulrush, or a willow rod in the stream.

And half the nation was chaunting his music, and the other half babbling of his name!

"The land did not go in vain!" he thought, with a thought that he would not utter aloud, lest it should seem a regret or a reproach; and then he rose and shook himself, with a glow of joy on his olive skin and a softened light beaming under his straight drooped eyes.

"Let us go, dear. Hark! The clock is striking. We have talked here three hours. I will get your baggage; you left it yonder−−yes? It is not fair to keep you from the Lastra. And you are tired, too, no doubt, and hungry. Will you sleep to−night on your own little hard bed, after lying under those great nobles' roofs? Do palaces smell sweeter than our hills? I think they cannot."

Talking so, with a quickness and abundance quite rare to him, that came with the proud overflowing of his silent heart, he went and sought the boy's small packages, and swung them over his shoulders and came out again into the hot sunshine smiling.

He was only a peasant, with bare feet and shirt open at his breast, and his face dark with many years of toil; but there was nobility about him, and dignity, and freedom.

Signa, who, though he had half forgotten, loved him, looked at the dark erect figure of him against the white marble and the blue sky, and thought the old painters might have painted him there in the chapter−house as the Shepherd King, the Re Pastore of Metastasio.

"Can you walk, dear? Oh, it is too far! I did not bring the cart to−day," said Bruno.

Signa laughed.

"Too far! The dear old, dirty, ugly road that I had to trot down in an hour after Baldo's beast! No; I should like to see every stone of it! And perhaps the people will know me. I think so."

So they went.

"You should have a chariot, like a young prince; and you walk as we do in the dust," said Bruno with a smile. He was so proud and glad. All jests seemed sweet.

"I love the dust. Does it not go to the Lastra?"

And he stooped and raised a little of the dust in his hand and kissed it and blew it away and laughed. He too was so happy. All trifles had their charm.

"Poor Palma asked for you this morning," said Bruno.

"Palma did? I have brought a trinket for her."

"A trinket! She sold her hair in Lent to pay her father's burying."

They went on along the road. It was dusty, noisy, unlovely, as it always is; with the people sitting out at their doors, and the smiths and the joiners and the coopers and the straw−plaiters all at work in the darksome open interiors.

Presently one woman clapped her hands.

"If that is not little Signa that used to live on the hill!"

And then a blacksmith stood and stared.

"What, Bruno Marcello! Is that your boy?"

And the contadini going by in their carts turned and looked and shouted.

"That is Signa, only he looks like a lordling all in his white and with shoes on!"

And they drove away and said in the gates of the Lastra:

"Signa is come home. He will be here in a very little; we passed him on the road."

But the road was long to Signa; for now one would speak, and then another would shake hands, and one man would fetch out a stoup of drink, and some girl would give him a fresh carnation; and what with one thing and another, and the gathering groups and the recognitions and the wonder and the eager greetings and the reluctant farewells, his path was made as slow as any young conqueror's going along laurel−hung streets in war−time; and by the time they came in sight of the shields on the Porta Fiorentina, it was nearly night, and the Ave Maria was sounding everywhere, and the lamps were beginning to be lighted.

In this country people gather together, like mosquitoes after a wisp of lighted straw, on the slenderest pretext, to follow and to watch, and to chatter.

There was a throng on his steps laughing, shouting, chattering, not knowing very well why they went, but vaguely fancying that he, since the world had made a king of him, must have grown rich, and would by and by throw some gold to the foremost.

There was a little crowd at his back, and out of the great east gate there came another crowd; there was a white−haired old man at their head; they had torches flaring red on the dusk; women ran with them and children; the deep voices and the shrill ones rose together−−they were singing his own Death Chaunt of the Christians. Luigi Dini, who led them, had taught it to them to sing as requiem in the Holy week of the past Lenten season.

When the peasants had driven in saying, "Signa comes," the old man had called his choristers together, and many young brethren of the confraternity, and had said to them, "Let us meet him with his own music−−there can be no welcome like that."

Signa stopped suddenly; his heart swelled, his eyes swam; he had had many a grander triumph, many a more radiant spectacle, many a louder−toned praise from bigger multitudes; but none had moved him like that little crowd in the fitful glow of the torches, those fresh, rough, untrained voices singing his own music in the dusk and the heat of the summer night−−at home.

They came out to meet him as a conqueror; and, only such a little while before, he had been a little child they mocked at for hearing the angels singing in the clouds, when for their ears only the crickets chattered in the corn.

He stood still while the torches tossed about him, and the strong familiar voices throbbed and thrilled upon the air; then he threw his left arm round Bruno's shoulders, and stretched his right hand out to the old man; and he looked at the brown well−known faces turned upward in the shadow of the old grey gate:

"Dear friends! what I am, these two have made me. The heavens would not have opened for me if on earth these two had not succoured me. When I am gone, will you remember that?"

In an after time the people said to one another, "What did he mean−−'when I am gone'?"

Then, standing outside the gateway there, and stretching in a long line through the Lastra, while every casement and every doorway had its cluster of eager faces, they all flung their torches in the air, and shouted vivas loud enough to stir the soldier soul of dead Ferruccio, sleeping far away; then, as the peasants had done above Fiastra before the world had heard of him, they lifted him on their shoulders; and, laughing and shouting and crying and leaping like young children in their pride and pleasure, they bore him away under the arch of the old gate, chaunting the chorus of the Christians, while from every dark doorway and every grated window heads were thrust and hands were offered, and in the small dull town just going to its sleep there was one universal outcry:

"It is little Signa come home!"

Up by the shrine of the Good Counsel, Lippo's window alone was dark.

And Palma, mending the great holes in her brother's shirts by the light of a solitary oil−wick while the boys were sleeping, knew nothing of the festival within the gates.

It was late ere they would let him go. They were poor people, all of them; working for their daily bread; but if he could have eaten gold that night they would have found means to change their loaves to it, they were so proud of him−−their little neglected, laughed−at waif and stray, to whom the grilli in the moonlit wheat had taught such sweet−toned singing.

They forgot that they had been rough with him,−−that they had kicked him about like a little lame dog−−that they had said all manner of cruel things to him and of the man who defended him: those who do wrong can so easily forget. But neither did he care to remember.

They were the people of the Lastra to him−−the people of his home.

That was enough.

They would carry him into Sanfranco's house; they would pour forth the richest wine that the country could yield; they would all touch him, all look at him, all have a word with him; they would come in one on another in an endless stream, with a ceaseless delight; they would pour question on question, wonder on wonder, and stand and look at him as if he were a young god come down on earth.

"And to think if I had not let him have that fiddle so cheap, the world might never have heard of him−−never!" said Tonino the tinman, looking in on the edge of the crowd, though he did not venture farther.

For not only the fly on the spoke praises to itself for the speed of the wheel, but the stone that would fain have hindered it, says, when the wheel unhindered has passed it, "Lo! see how much I helped!"

Signa, perceiving him in the dark without, looked over at him and smiled.

He did not care to remember his hurts. He was happy, and men all seemed to him brothers in the sunshine of God's peace, like the saints in the Spanish Chapel where he had prayed that day.

"When I was a little thing," he said to them, "I dreamed of gates of gold for the Lastra here. Gates of gold I never can give. But, if all go well with me, I will live and die amongst you here; and you will make my grave on the high hills, and you will sing what I have written when you bury me."

"Why does he talk of dying?" they said to one another. "His life is only just begun."

But Signa did not hear them. He was looking down on them with a smile; while his eyes were wet with tears.

He had looked like that when he had been a little child, and they had said, "Is it the angels he hears?−−nay, it is only the crickets in the corn that are humming."

It was late when they would let him go. Bruno had waited patiently, saying nothing to any soul, drawn back a little near the door, with the look of a great peace upon his face; but silent, because too proud and with too much scorn in him to say:

"You see that I spoke truth. And this is no young god−−this is only Pippa's son, whom you derided."

The crowd went with him out by the sea gate, and took leave of him till the morrow, kissing his hands and his clothes, and shouting and leaping around him, and bidding him be down at sunrise−−all the tables of the town should be spread for him.

He had refused to be taken homeward. He wished to tread with his own feet the lovely, familiar road. As the last of the throng left him, and Bruno and he were alone, in the moonless, sultry night of the hottest month of the year, the echo of the people's voices followed them, still singing the chaunt of the "Christians."

"Fame has only the span of a day, they say," murmured the boy half aloud. "But to live in the hearts of the people−−that is worth something."

"They love you now. Ten years ago they beat you−−ten years hence they will beat you again if the humour takes them," thought Bruno; but he said nothing. After all, he might be wrong.

There was a little light in a little hut by the wayside. Bruno looked at it.

"That is where Palma lives now," he said. "The other house went with the garden. She works late to−night−−there are so many boys."

"I will give her what I have brought," said Signa, and he paused and knocked at the door. "It is I−−Signa!" he cried aloud.

The girl unbarred the door, and flung it open. She did not speak, but her great eyes were alight with a fire like the leaping of the dawn, and she trembled from head to foot.

"It is I," said Signa, slipping into her hand a little packet. "Look−−you must wear this to please me−−to show you I did not forget. I will come and see you in the morning, dear. Good−night!"

He kissed her cheek, and went away.

Palma took the parcel to the light, and opened it; it was a string of carved coral beads and a cross.

"And I am so ugly, now! oh, so ugly! Oh, how cruel God is!" she cried, in a passion of anguish, and dropped her poor brown head on her hands; her head that was like a boy's.

She had never before thought it any pain to have given her brave black tresses to pay her father's grave; only a duty, so simple and natural, that it was not to be thought twice about in any way, and never to be lamented with self−pity; but now she could have wept her very soul out to have lost her sole treasure, to be so unlovely, so absurd, so shameful, to have given up her one crown and veil of womanhood.

"I am so ugly!" she moaned, sitting on the bare mud floor with the pretty coral necklace in her lap.

It was all the reward that her sacrifice brought her−−to know herself disfigured and discrowned, when Signa's eyes should fall on her with the morrow's sun.

She had never thought about herself, never taken any count whether she were lovely or unlovely, ill or well: in her laborious life filled to the brim with work that was never done, there was no time for any such speculation; she toiled all the day long and half the night without joy or pause, or recompense of any sort; honest and pure and loyal to her task by sheer instinct, as birds are clean, or leaves are fresh; never before with any thought of herself, all her life being merged in the lives she served; but now, for the first time, her heart cried out in sick rebellion.

God had made her ugly−−just as Signa came.

He, unwitting, went on with Bruno up the sea−road where his mother had stumbled to her death. There was hardly as breath of air, even on the hills. After a while, having reached a height, they paused and looked behind them. It was all a great sea of darkness, fragrant, but solemnly dark, like a mighty grave.

"And you love nothing but your music still?" said Bruno, suddenly. "Nothing? no woman? You would tell me?"

"No woman, no!" said Signa; and he spoke the simple truth. Yet in the gloom of the night his face grew warm. He had loved no woman yet; but, in his visions of late, the angels that came to him had all women's forms and women's faces as in the visions of the Paradise on Orgagna's field of gold.

As they stood and looked back into that soft impenetrable darkness, there came a fluttering line of light, which, undulating like a fiery snake, stole through the shadow up and up and up towards the clouds.

"What is that?" cried the boy, startled and unnerved after the homage and the wakeful fancies of the night.

"They are the torches," said Bruno. "A hill burial−−that is all. There are so many lights; it is some young thing dead."

"The torches came to meet me in triumph an hour ago," thought Signa, and a shiver went over him, and he ceased to look back.

The lights stole up the hillside towards some lonely tomb amongst the silence of the woods, then vanished, and all was dark.

CHAPTER III.

WITH the morning, Signa went down to see more quietly all his old friends of the Lastra. Passing, he paused by Palma's hut. She was at work in her garden, gathering tomatoes off the bushes before her poor little dwelling. She had tied the red woolen handkerchief over her head again. She hardly looked up as she thanked him for his gift.

"It is too magnificent for me," she murmured. "You know I am so poor always, and so ugly now; I have lost my hair."

"Who would not love you more, dear?−−knowing why you lost it," said Signa, kindly; for he knew the goodness of the girl, and was fond of her in his gentle way−−only she never could understand anything, not knowing her letters even, and being always at work like a little windlass that everybody's hand turns.

But Palma shook her head.

She did not know anything indeed, but the instincts of her sex moved in her and made her feel that no glory of a golden deed is so great a nimbus to a woman as the rays of a physical beauty.

"Indeed, you are never ugly, Palma," said Signa, to console her. "Dear, you have straight features and such noble eyes; you cannot be ugly, ever. And for the hair, that will very soon grow, and you must wear the necklace on feast days when I am gone, to show that you remember me."

Remember! Palma thought of the S. Cecilia hung up in the church above on the hill. She had meant to tell him it; she had dreamed always of leading him up there hand in hand, as they had used to go when they were children, and making him sit on the altar−steps where the jasper was, while she told him what she had done; but she was silent about it now that he was here. Someway she felt almost ashamed of it.

He had made his own fame; he had won his own victory; he did not want her help or S. Cecilia's. Perhaps he would only smile, she thought. She was not sure of the great use of the picture; all in a moment she had lost her faith in it.

He looked so full of grace, smiling there in the sunshine.

She glanced up at him, feeling as if there were whole worlds of distance between him and her. She could not have done him any good with her prayers up there in the dark; she could not have been wanted. She would have liked to tell him, but she felt ashamed.

"You work so hard, Palma," he said, leaning over the low stone wall.

"Yes; but I have always done that. It is not new."

"But the boys must help you, now?"

"A little; but they eat more than they earn."

"Did your father suffer much−−dying?"

"A great deal; it only lasted a day. He could not speak much, but he thought of Gemma; he kept looking at that little Jesus in wax that used to be so like her. He has seen her now−−in heaven."

"You are always sure she is dead?"

"Oh, yes! She would not have forgotten us so long as this, if she were living."

Signa was silent. He knew that to those who go, forgetfulness is easy; to those who stay, impossible.

"I never think she is dead," he said at last.

"Why?"

"Because she was so full of life; so sturdy, so mirthful; always in mischief too, and doing so well for herself: things like that do not die."

"Everything dies if God will it," said Palma. "For me, I am sure, she would not have forgotten if she were living. Sometimes I pray to her to make me a little sign from heaven, but she never does."

"She was like a cherub in heaven to look at," said Signa, who never quite had ceased to mourn his lost playmate or to reproach himself with her fate. After his music, he had most loved Gemma.

"Yes," said Palma, and stooped down her head over her hoeing at the weeds; she felt so ugly with her short,

ruffled, foolish, clipt curls, that made her feel like a shaven dog. She never had thought of her face before; of what it possessed or of what it lacked; but that morning, rising, she had looked at herself in the little square bit of mirror over the flour−bin, and had thought she was lean and brown and frightful.

"I do not believe she is dead," said Signa, again. "Sometimes, in the strange cities, I looked about in the women's faces to see if there may be one that might be hers. She would not alter. I should know her."

"You never will see her. She is dead," said Palma, with the obstinacy that is always in the peasant as in the mule.

She worked on amongst her tomatoes, gathering the bright scarlet balls into a skip. She could not tell him about her S. Cecilia.

He would only talk of Gemma all the while, if they were to go up there amongst the thrushes and the rosemary;−−besides, the change that was in him she felt more acutely than even Bruno had done. This beautiful young Endymion, whom the moon had kissed, could have wanted no help of hers. Her poor, little picture seemed to her so foolish, so humble, so small; the grace and greatness of his fame could not have grown out of her prayers in that little dark nook. All the year she had thought that it had, and had poured out all her heart in them. But now that she saw him, her hope seemed to her as stupid a thing as if a brown ant creeping by with a grain of corn had thought it filled the granaries of the world.

She was ashamed of her little picture that she had spent all she possessed to hang up there by the altar−rail, with the ruby light of the stained glass upon it whenever the sun went west. She did not dare to ask him go up to the hill with her and see it.

"I did what I could; but then he did not want anything done," she thought.

"She is dull and morose; she works too hard, poor girl," thought he; and he moved away. "Good day, dear, for a little; I will see you before I go."

"Go! −−you go again then?"

"Ah, yes! In a very little. It will be the autumn season soon. I go whenever the 'Actea' is played."

Palma looked up at him; straight in his face.

"And you are quite happy?"

"Quite."

"And you are really great?"

"Men say so. I do not know. I will be greater if I live."

"And Bruno lonelier."

She wished the words, when they were said, unsaid. Signa's face clouded a moment.

"That is not my fault," he said, slowly. "And no−−perhaps he will not be;−−when I am all that I dream of, and when I have gold in both hands, I will come back and live here on the hills, that I promise; and I will build a palace of marble that shall look east and west; and all the hungry shall be fed there, and all the footsore rest. And then, when there are any boys quite desolate, as I was, and dreaming beautiful things, as I did, and wanting help, and not knowing where to turn, then they will all come to me; and I will teach them, and we will sing together, and they shall be happy, and we will give our lives for the world; and men will love us, and through us love God: it will be like the 'Angeli' of S. Marco dwelling together with music, with the roses round them, and the sky above!"

He stopped; the cloud had cleared from his face; it was shining with a light that was sweeter than the sun's.

He was only a boy still; and the world had not dimmed his dreams with its breath.

Of all the innocent things that die, the impossible dreams of the poet are the things that die with the most pain, and, perhaps, with most loss to humanity. Those who are happy die before their dreams. This is what the old Greek saying meant.

The world had not yet driven the sweet, fair follies from Signa's head, nor had it yet made him selfish. If he had lived in the age when Timander could arrest by his melodies the tide of revolution, or when the harp of the Persian could save Bagdad from the sword and flame of Murad, all might have been well with him. But the time is gone by when music or any other art was a king. All genius now is, at its best, but a servitor−−well or ill fed.

Palma listened, looking up at that bright, strange light upon his face; not understanding at all with her mind, but wholly with her heart. The frozen pain in her melted.

She put her full basket back into the house.

"Will you come with me a moment?"

"Where?"

"To the old church, up yonder."

"Yes, dear."

She called to her little brother to mind the house, and took Signa up the narrow, winding paths, just trodden down in the grass by a few rare footsteps, going up amongst the vines and then amongst the olives, and then where the land grew wilder amongst the gorse. The vines were hung with grapes that touched them as they went; the wild peaches fell yellow at their feet; the blue radish−flower was in the grass like gleams of the sky reflected on the dew; big oxen, muzzled and belled, looked at them through the leaves.

"It is so beautiful!" said Signa, mounting higher and higher into the tangle of green and the network of sunbeams.

"Yes," said Palma. But she did not know it. She had not time. Amongst all its sad losses, poverty has none that beggars it more than its loss of perception.

They reached the old church, brown and solitary, with a few cypresses near it, and round it the sheep grazing; it had once been the chapel of a great villa, of which there was nothing now left but roofless arches and a wall where the rains of five hundred winters had not quite washed away the frescoes.

She took him in, and led him up to the pillar by the altar where the little picture hung.

"I bought it; I put it there," she said, timidly. "Perhaps it has done nothing, you know; perhaps you do not want it;−−but at least it could do no harm, and I have come and prayed here every little bit of time I had to spare. I am sure the saints love you−−without that or anything−−but it was all I could do. And when you were so far away−−"

Signa looked up at the column and understood it all. He stooped and kissed her, touched to the quick.

"Ah dear!−−how good to think of me. You bought it−−you, who toil so hard? Oh, Palma! I will try and find Gemma for you;−−I shall find her;−−something tells me so."

Palma sat down on the lowest altar step; she did not answer. If he had looked at her face he would have seen that it was very pale under the brown that the sun had scorched on it. But he did not look; he was looking up at the painted Sebastian on the roof, and thinking how bitterly Gemma had cried one day because he could not reach down the saint's golden arrows for her.

The sheep bells tinkled; the smell of the rosemary was sweet on the air; a bird sang, sitting on the old tattered mass−book.

"Gemma is in heaven," said Palma, and sat still and pale in the morning light.

Gemma!−−who had always been so much happier than she.

"Perhaps I shall find her somewhere in the great world," said Signa, softly. "And she will have suffered, perhaps, and sorrow have softened her and ennobled her−−it does, they say−−and made her soul as beautiful as her little body was. Think of that Palma! and then I would bring her home to the palace that I mean to build, and make her happy, so happy; and she would be in all my music, just as the sun is in all the flowers. Think of that Palma! Pray that it may come true. It would be like a story out of the 'Legend of Gold.'"

Palma was still very pale.

"You will see her in heaven," she said. "She was drowned in that sea, that I am sure."

But Signa shook his head.

"She is alive; that I am sure."

CHAPTER IV.

SIGNA went down into the Lastra and sat awhile with Teresina in the room over the sea−gate, and spoke with old friends−−of whom he found many, since they are flowers that grow fast in the soil of success−−and spent some hours in the sacristy, turning over, with curious emotion, the yellow scores and crabbed manuscripts which had once been written to him in an unknown tongue.

Then he passed down into the city.

He knew so little of it, scarcely more than if he had been a stranger. Bruno had held him back from it always.

He strayed into the galleries, quiet and deserted in the strong August heats, and saw the face of the Samian Sybil and the beauty of the Venus of Titian.

As he wandered down the corridor which holds the portraits of the artists painted by themselves, he paused before one which seemed to him, in a way, familiar. It was the head of a man still young; a head that had grace and power in it, but also levity and caprice. It was roughly painted in black and white.

"Whose head is that?" he asked the custodian dozing in the sun.

"A living painter's−−one Istriel."

"Of what country?"

"France. He is a great man there. He did that for us by order of the King."

"I have seen him somewhere; where does he live?" said Signa, and mused a little while; and then remembered the morning of the Feast of SS. Peter and Paul, and the gift of the Fair Christ.

"He lives in France, I suppose," answered the other. "But I think he is a great deal in Rome. I think he works there a great deal."

"What kind of things does he paint?"

"Women, for the most part, I believe. There is a picture they talk very often of just now; you can see a copy of it in the town: it is very fine−−a woman."

"A portrait?"

"Oh, no; just a woman dancing."

"I will see it," said Signa, and he went where the man directed him for sake of those two gold coins that had bought his Rusignuolo.

"Who knows?" he thought, "without those forty francs I might never have known more of music than to thrum on a lute to the sheep."

Who could tell? All Bruno's labour of eighteen years might have been of less use than two gold pieces tossed by a stranger.

He found the place where the copy of the great picture could be seen; a copy made by the painter's pupils, and shown for a little while by his permission, the original being in Paris. It was a picture of which all the world had talked two years before, whilst Signa was buried under the dust of study, and the darkness of poverty, and the disbelief of men.

The copy was alone in a small cabinet, hung with red, and lighted from the top; it was a full− length form of a woman dancing−−only that; on a sombre background of brown shadow.

Was it so beautiful?

He did not know. But he shaded his eyes as from too much sun. It dazzled him. The figure stood out form the darkness like a living thing; all the light was concentrated on the exquisite fairness and warmth of the supple body, on the head turned over the shoulder, on the upraised arms tossing castenets above; on the know of pomegranate buds above the ear; on the rounded limbs, lithe as reeds and white as snow; on the transparent scarf of scarlet, touched with gold, which was the only drapery. The figure bent a little backward, showing every curve and grace of it: the face was beautiful.

It was called, with the arrogance of a genius that knew its hold upon the world, "A Sister for the Seven Dancers of Herculaneum."

Signa stood before it blinded, stunned, confused.

No living woman had ever moved him as this dancer did. He gazed and gazed till, as the passion of the Spanish love−song says, "his heart's blood was drawn from him through his eyes."

And yet the picture hurt him.

Hurt him by the taint that there was upon its loveliness; as there is in that of the Venus Calipyge of Naples.

An old man, looking at the picture at the same time, spoke of it.

"Yes; it is a beautiful study," the stranger said. "I have seen the original. This is a fine copy. The artist has touched it here and there himself."

"It is not a portrait?" said Signa, timidly. He could not bear to speak of the picture, and yet he wanted to know more of it.

"Oh, yes, it is a portrait. Only you see that he has painted it in the old Greek manner−−the feet off the ground, no sign of earth, indeed; the figure floating, as if she flew. Yes, it is drawn from life. A girl−−a woman−−whom they call Innocence, in Paris."

"Innocence! And painted there!"

The old man smiled.

"Nay, Vitellius called his bear so. The wild beast shamed it less than does the woman, perhaps."

The next morning he said to Bruno,

"I have found the name of the man who gave me that money in the Lastra. It is Istriel. You remember my losing the paper in the rushes as I ran."

"What do you want with any man now?" said Bruno, jealously; "or with any man's help?"

"Nothing, indeed; but I should like to see him."

"I cannot see why you should think about him."

"Perhaps I never should have got beyond my little lute but for him."

Bruno gave an impatient gesture.

"We are what we are," he said, with rough fatalism. "It is no chance wind that blows the notes into the nightingale's throat, and the screech into the owl's; all that is settled beforehand."

Signa was silent. He did not say his thought aloud which was:

"I wish to meet this painter, because I want to know where he found her, or if he only fancied her−−that 'Sister of the Seven Dancers.'"

He said instead, "Come down into the city and see a picture of his."

"I cannot to−day," said Bruno, "because there is so much to do. Watering alone takes six hours in this dry weather; but to−morrow, perhaps, I can."

To−morrow he went. He did not know anything about any of the arts, but he was at home amongst them; they were familiar things to him: it is so with all his country−folk.

He stood and looked at it for some time; then he laughed a little.

"Yes; it is a beautiful−−wanton."

He had hit the blot on it.

Signa sighed unconsciously and restlessly. The picture beguiled him, bewitched him, and yet hurt him.

Bruno said, "Do not look at it too long; it will get into you−−like marsh fever;" and took him away.

When they were in the sun again in the streets, he added:

"If your baby Gemma were alive, that is just what she would be like."

"No! never!" said Signa, indignantly; he did believe she was living, but he looked for her always amongst the innocent maiden faces at mass in the churches.

Bruno laughed a grim laugh.

"Let us hope she is dead," he said. "Only the devil never cuts his very best flowers down early."

Signa did not answer.

"Your painter must be bred to spread the plague," said Bruno.

Signa did not ask him what he meant.

He went and found Palma.

"You do pray for Gemma's soul?" he said to her.

"Always," said Palma.

"Well, pray more, dear. Perhaps she needs it, who knows?"

"Oh, no; she is in heaven," said Palma. "Such a child−−and Christ so good."

"Well, never mind. Pray always."

"That is all he thinks I am of use for, to pray for Gemma's soul," thought Palma. But she reproached herself for the thought, as mean and base.

She had never ceased to love Gemma and mourn her;−−only she wished he would not talk of her, not so very much.

Signa wandered about the woods alone, and saw always before him, in the golden fires of the summer day, "The Sister of the Seven Dancers."

She banished the sweet veiled face of Lamia.

"Your painter should cut off his right hand: it is like the sun; it breeds corruption," said Bruno, who knew the force of the flesh and the devil, and had in him a fierce, scornful wrath against that picture which had burnt his boy's soul with its impure sorceries.

One day Lippo met him in the pine woods, no one being near.

"Dear nephew," said Lippo, softly. "We cannot meet. Bruno is implacable. He will never forgive what he thinks an injury. See here:−−I knew his little piece of land had to be sold to give your work a trial and a chance of favour. I said to myself: 'I have a kind father−in−law and good friends, shall I offer to lend the money?' But then I bethought me, 'Bruno would only answer with a blow.' So when it was quite sure the land must go, I said to an honest soul in the city whom I could trust, 'Go, buy it in your own name, and make it over to me; so the thing shall not wound my brother, and yet the piece of ground not go away from the family.' So said, so done. Dear−−I only hold the land in trust. I tried to explain to Bruno, but his head was full of traitors and of wrath; I could make no way with him. He would have brained me with his spade. But this I wish to say to you−−my children are dear to me, but justice is dearer still. If ever you wish the land back again, I will sign it over to you−−almost as a gift: I would say quite so; but, when one has so many mouths to feed, one is not altogether the master of one's purse. Dear−−be quite sure of this: I bought it, hoping to please Bruno; never to spite and vex him, as he thinks. Christ knows there is no venom in my heart. The other night, when you had such a welcome I was proud and glad; I should have come foremost amongst them, only Bruno is so violent, and I feared it might look time−serving. But, believe me, no one is prouder than I am, and Nita; she says fifty times if once, 'To think he is so great−−the little drowned baby that sucked with Toto!' Dear−−you have been made to think ill of us. It is a pity. And in your grand, famous ways in the future years you will not want us; that is true. Still, be sure our prayers go with you; and, though we are only poor folks toiling hardly in a little village, we shall not shame you, for we are Christians and we pay our way; and if you ever should desire back that little bit of land−−well, I look on it still as yours, and I never let the interests of my children bar the road of justice. No, that were to serve them with very narrow sight and worldly selfishness. Bruno has misjudged me always. Well−−the saints bore all evil and were patient. So must we. Dear−−farewell. If ever you dare brave my brother's wrath, and will like to look in on us, you will find frank welcome. But perhaps I am not right to ask it. Your duty is to Bruno before all things. Yes; to you he has been good. Farewell."

And Lippo went away quite softly through the pines.

Signa was moved. True, they had been unkind to him; but such wrongs fade fast in generous natures, and, where an impersonal passion reigns, personal injuries seem slight and are soon forgotten.

Perhaps Bruno had been harsh and too swift in his ire, he thought regretfully. Bruno's error was too great haste of temper and strength of hatred; that all the country knew.

"I wish they could be reconciled," thought the boy, and lingered on his way home wondering if there were any means to do it.

He hinted at forgiveness that night to Bruno.

Bruno set his heel down with a force that jarred the house.

"I do forgive as much as can be asked of any man;−−I let him be."

Meanwhile Lippo went homeward to his house by Our Lady of Good Counsel, pondering whether he could not prevail on Baldo to help him to acquire another acre or two of ground, quite near on the same hill, which rumour said would soon be in the market. Baldo had grown to have strong faith in the prudence and wisdom of his son−in−law.

"You will let the boy have back the land at what you gave for it!" screamed Nita, when her husband told of her of the things he had said; for she was a rough, impetuous woman, of fierce temper, and could never see an inch where he saw a full mile.

Lippo smiled, his gentle pensive smile.

"Nay, dear; that is a question for the future. The children's interests must not be forgotten; that were not just to them; and land rises in value every day, and money gets more scarce."

And he sauntered out into the warm, star−lighted streets.

He liked his game at dominoes.

"I have seen the dear lad," he said to Momo and Tonino and his other gossips. "I met him quite by chance. So tall as he is, and so graceful, and so like a young prince: one would not know him. His heart is full of love for us. He can− not show it. No. He would come to us; but I said to him−−I say always−−'Your duty, before all else, to Bruno.' I must say it−−knowing what I know. His duty is to him:−−as Toto's duty is to me. Oh, yes. He is a noble lad: spoiled in much; yes, but of a good heart. Bruno has not done ill in letting him have the land's money for his opera; I know it has paid Bruno back thrice over. Bruno has a clear head and a keen eye. They know that in the Square of the Signorià. Poor boy! Well−−I say poor−−perhaps stupidly, but it does seem so. Parted from us all, and ruled by Bruno; and, like all people that have genius, a baby, a simpleton, a mere piece of wax−−in worldly matters. All the country is ringing of him. It is a great thing to think: unless we had let him go the church functions and learn the plain−song and be so much with the sacristan in the organ loft, he might never have known all that there is in him; he might have been a little shepherd, barefoot on the hills−−yes, still. Throw your bread upon the waters;−−aye:−−perhaps come back to your own mouth it will not; but you will be blessed by it, someday. The dear boy!−−no doubt in his great world he will forget us all, why not? We are peasants, when all is said; and he will go to palaces. But then the good that we have done to him keeps with us like a cypress bough that never withers and drives the evil spirits far away. Dear boy!−−to think he is so great!−−and will be rich too; if, at least, his gold be left him, and his career well managed. That is the only thing I fear. Bruno loves him−−oh, surely, in his way. But then Bruno loves money too."

And Lippo sighed, and piled the dominoes in a little heap absently, and with a sad, nervous gesture−−thinking. The gossips shook their heads.

Lippo was so just a man: that all the town knew. Of such men is the kingdom of heaven. To be sure his window had been dark that night when all the Lastra was rejoicing; but that had only been good feeling in him. He had not liked to seem to claim the boy's remembrance−−when there was such great triumph too.

"We may remind those who fail, of us," said Lippo, with a gentle smile. "But we must be forgotten by those who succeed−−if they choose it shall be so."

"You are so good," said his neighbours; and began to mutter to one another that Bruno, when he had sent the boy to the great schools and sold the land for him, had only been sharper of sight and more prudent of forecast than ever−−yes.

And the Lastra was well content to think that, when it had welcomed so loudly the young hero of the Actea, it had left Bruno standing aloof, and had not noticed him−−not even when Signa bade them.

The lad stayed on till vintage came again and passed; correcting and perfecting his new music of the Lamia in the fresh hill air, in the sweet smell of the fruit; and now and then went down into the city, and stood and gazed at the dancer of Istriel, and drank in the impure sorcery of her, without knowing it.

"Your painter is like the sun; he breeds rottenness from beauty," said Bruno; who knew the force of the flesh and the devil, as he called it, and felt a sort of sullen scorn of this strange painter who spent his strength in giving enduring shape to the fleeting graces of wantons.

To Bruno it seemed a poor thing to fill a man's life.

Women were women−−to be toyed with if you would; but to pass your life painting in their own likeness their wiles of a moment and their postures of pleasure!−−that seemed to him poor pursuit enough. This painter was only a name to him, a vague shadow; but he felt a fierce wrath against him. But for the coins that had bought the Rusignuolo, who could tell?−−Signa might have dwelled contented in the peaceful husbandry of the hills.

For the iron was always in his soul. He was proud of his boy, and loved him, and knew that now Signa could never be other than he was; and so ceased to chafe at the unchangeable; and tried to make the best of an undesired

destiny. But, like Palma, it was all in vain that he brought his thank−offering, that he prayed to his gods, that he said a thousand times, "I am glad."

In his heart there was no gladness.

In his heart he lamented still and rebelled.

With the last day of vintage Signa spent his last hours on the hills.

The Actea was being given at the theatre of Como, and he had to go thither, and thence to Milan, where its music was yet unknown.

He had a sort of longing to buy that dancer of Istriel and take her with him, and look at her always; but it was impossible: despite his new−born fame and Lippo's fables he was poor; he made some money, but no more than was needed, for his costs of travel and his simple ways of living and the gifts that he loved to throw broadcast. He was famous, indeed; but he was only a boy, and had to deal with a shrewd world, and it cheated him. The world, like Lacedemonia, is fond of hounding into silence and exile its Timothei who dare to add new chords to its lyre of song; but it is unwise to do it, for its Timothei are so intent on stringing the lyre anew, and hearing the full, sweet sound of their fresh creation, that the world may empty their pockets unfelt, as it will, and unchidden. Its Timothei are its golden geese−−it should be content to pluck them; but it is not often so; seldom is it satisfied with doing less than what kills them.

It was very early in the morning.

There had been heavy rains at night, and there was, when the sun rose, everywhere, that white fog of the Valdarno country which is like a silvery cloud hanging over all the earth. It spreads everywhere and blends together land and sky; but it has breaks of exquisite transparencies, through which the gold of the sunbeams shines, and the rose of the dawn blushes, and the summits of the hills gleam here and there, with a white monastery, or a mountain belfry, or a cluster of cypresses seen through it, hung in the air as it were, and framed like pictures in the silvery mist.

It is no noxious steam rising from the rivers and the rains: no grey and oppressive obliteration of the face of the world like the fogs of the north; no weight on the lungs and blindness to the eyes; no burden of leaden damp lying heavy on the soil and on the spirit; no wall built up between the sun and men; but a fog that is as beautiful, for it has beams of warmth, glories of colour, glimpses of landscape such as the moon would coldly kill; and the bells ring, and the sheep bleat, and the birds sing underneath its shadow; and the sunrays come through it, darted like angels' spears: and it has in it all the promise of the morning, and all the sounds of the waking day.

Bruno's dwelling was lifted out of it, but it spread everywhere beneath; and the tops of the highest hills seemed to ride on it like ships upon a sea.

Signa paused and looked over the vast scene as he and Bruno came out into the air. He had to leave at eight of the morning for the northern lakes, trusting himself to that iron way and horse of fire which Bruno had never ceased to hate and to mistrust, through night and day for so many years he had heard the steam beast thunder dully through his valley, winding as the river wound.

They came out of the house after their meal of bread, which was all they broke their fast with, and stopped by mutual impulse under the old mulberry−tree by the porch.

Bruno had said nothing to dissuade him from departure. He had grown to see the necessity of their lives being perpetually asunder.

Signa could only come to him now and then−−that he saw; and the times of his coming must grow rarer and rarer, and the links of union between them fewer and fewer−−that he saw too. He never complained. He hardly regretted. He had known that it would be so, when he had broken the Rusignuolo. It was a dull, ceaseless, unchanging pain to him, but he said nothing. What was done, was done.

This young singer−−this young hero−−this young crowned dreamer of dreams, could by no miracle be brought back and be made into a peasant lad, and be contented with a labourer's lot.

If he ever returned to live here it would only be because the world drove him back with a broken heart; therefore Bruno said, in his dark corner in the church, to the unknown power that he worshipped: "Let him never be brought back−−never."

The world had his boy. Since the world would only part with him if it flung him bruised and ruined away,−−let the world keep him.

"After all it does not matter for me," said Bruno, and taught himself to think so.

Only a vague fear, a shapeless anxiety, haunted him always. He knew too little of any life beyond that of his own country side to be able to go with Signa, even in fancy, into these strange new lines of his fate. He was too ignorant, and mistrusted himself too much, to be able to tell the lad what it was that he dreaded. But in his heart he was full of trouble.

"All is well enough with him now," he thought. "But when the woman comes?"

For Bruno thought that the great world, since it was made up of men and women, must have the same fatality in it as the life he knew.

The woman makes or mars the man: the man the woman. Mythology had no need of the Fates.

There is only one; the winged blind god that came by night to Psyche.

So much Bruno knew.

A weight of longing and of warning was upon his heart. But he stood silent in the arched way of his house.

The boy seemed now so much wiser than he; had seen so many cities and men; had sown the seeds of his young brain and made already harvest;−−was great, though so young. What could he say himself?−−a man who knew nothing except to drop the wheat grain into the earth, and wait for sun and storm to make it multiply?

What came in his mind to say were a million confused things; he did not know how to sort them, and shape them into speech.

At last he did say, with the heavy gloom of parting on him:

"Woman is god or devil to man, as he to her. Dear, when you love a woman−−tell me. Will you tell me that?"

Signa smiled musingly.

"Oh, yes! I love my Actea and my Lamia. They are the real and living women to me. The rest are shadows."

"That will not last," said Bruno, curtly. "Your Actea and your Lamia will be the shadows soon."

Signa shook his head.

"Not to me. Mozart loved his wife; but it was not of his wife he thought when he was dying. It was of his requiem."

"You speak like a child," said Bruno; and they were silent.

It was of no use speaking: they did not understand each other. The boy knew the powers of art, of which the man was insensible. The man knew the powers of passion, of which the boy as yet was ignorant.

Bruno saw in the future a fate that wrestled with him for the soul of Pippa's son. It wore to him the likeness of that "Sister of the Seven Dancers" of the city of ashes.

To him she was a symbol: she haunted him; he hated her. She−−or her likeness−−would dispute the boy's life with him.

As he had hated the sorcery of the Rusignuolo, so he hated the vision of the unknown woman. What use were the boy's promise, the boy's faith, the boy's foolish proud confidence in the empire on him of his dreams? Bruno knew well−−a woman would look some day,−−just look;−−and all these things would be as vapours drifting before the break of day.

"Love kills everything, and then dies itself," he said, bitterly. "Or, perhaps, it does not die: then it is a flame, always burning, burning, burning, till the body and the heart are cracked, empty, shrunken potsherds. That is love."

Signa shuddered a little.

"You frighten me," he said.

"I wish I could," said Bruno.

And he knew that he could not: that, say what he would, some single look from a woman's eyes would undo it some day. He had never thought about it till he had seen that Dancer with the pomegranate blossom, in the town; but now he knew−−there would be a foe to him some day, that he would not be able to break under his foot, as he had broken the Rusignuolo.

His heart was heavy, standing there in the white cold mists of the daybreak.

To the boy, the future was a golden haze−−a mirage full of fair colours−−a certainty of national love and public praise, and sweet intoxication, and all the liberty of an untrammelled genius. To the man, the future was dark: he saw no way into it; he had not faith in it; he doubted the good faith of the world.

No doubt it was because he was ignorant. He had told himself so; but he had no belief in this fair fortune blown from the breath of other men.

"It is to plough and to sow in the sand−bed of the river," he said to himself. And it seemed to him that Signa mistook the shadow of a reed for the sword of fire of an archangel.

"If your great world should turn against you, should tire of you−−they say it is capricious−−your heart will be broken," he said, abruptly, with his hand on the lad's shoulder.

Signa looked up and smiled.

"No; the world cannot hurt me. My music has gone down into the hearts of the people. It will live there. Nothing else matters."

"But the world is changeable, I have heard."

"Fashion is−−the people are not. In Milan the other day they sang the same chants in the cathedral that St. Gregory composed five hundred years after Christ. Nothing can hurt me now. If the great world did not want me, I know my force now. I should go through the countries, teaching my songs to the people everywhere. Death itself would not hurt me very much, because, though dead−−they might forget me quickly enough, no doubt−−but the music would live, and my soul would live in it. What else do I want?"

"I cannot understand," said Bruno. "You talk as if you had no body to be pained or pleased. One would think you were a spirit−−to hear you. It is nonsense;−−if one kill a nightingale with a stone, then the song is killed too."

"Perhaps not," said Signa softly. "Perhaps a poet has passed and heard it, and sings the song over again to the world."

But Bruno did not see what he meant.

"One stones it, and it is dead; there is an end," he repeated, with a sick, heavy sense of peril upon him−−of what he did not know clearly; but it seemed to him that the boy walked with his head in the clouds and his feet in the quicksands.

He could not help it.

He could not guard Signa's steps, nor bend his eyes to earth. It was beyond him. He could only hope; and with Bruno, do what he would, his hope had always the drooped clipped wings of doubt.

They stood silent together; while the sun, behind the sea of snowy mist, shone golden in their faces.

"Dear," he said, at last, "you go away into a vast unknown world. I cannot help you, nor follow you; nor even warn you−−not to do any good. I know the things of the soil, as well as any man; but nothing else. No doubt you go to greatness, having won it for yourself already. And you so young! And I suppose nothing else would ever have contented you; so, it is best so. But there are things, I think, that will go hard with you−−one cannot tell; you have not suffered yet, and you seem all mind, just as a flower is all bloom. That will not last: you will find the beast in you some day−−even you. Dear, it is not for me to preach, or teach, or counsel anything. I have led a bad life often, and I know nothing. If I were to begin to talk, I might hurt you. One fears to handle your soul: it is like a white moth−−to me. What I want to say is just this. You know I promised your dead mother. What one says to the dead, one must keep faith to, more than to the living. The living can avenge themselves, but those poor dead−−Dear, will you remember? I want to meet your mother, face to face, on the Last Day; and to just say to her−−'This is your boy; I have done my best by him; he comes back to you with a pure soul; I have given my life for his.' Will you remember? You are far away from me always now; much farther than by miles. I can do nothing−−only hope and fear. If evil do assail you, think of that. Help me to keep my faith with Pippa."

Signa heard him,−−moved, subdued, perplexed.

The great shadow of Bruno's doubt fell also upon him.

Was there so much more peril in the world than he knew?

He bowed his head.

"I will try," he said, simply.

Bruno thought, "He does not say−−I will."

They left the house, and went down through the wet woods and the clouds that floated on the sides of the hills.

Before another hour, he was gone.

Bruno stood a little while alone on the edge of the iron rails, listening to the distant thunder of the steam, as the last curl of the smoke disappeared in the windings of the valley. The fog had lifted and passed away. Mountain and river and vineyard and homestead stood out clear in the morning light; his own hill rose above them all,−−the quarries shining in the sun, the bold pines piled against the brightness of the sky.

"It is a good augury," he said, to himself.

He tried to think so.

He retraced his steps up the cliff road, and went home alone, and yoked his oxen to the plough, and drove them up and down beneath the vines, as on the day when Pippa's body had drifted away on the face of the flood to the depths of the sea.

"It is a good augury," he said to himself, as the glory of the morning spread over all the earth beneath him.

But, though the sun shone, it seemed to him as if, on all the land and water, a great, empty, desolate silence had fallen.

All was so still.

He was alone.

"The birds do not sing after vintage," he told himself; and tried to think that it was only that.

CHAPTER V.

PALMA looked out of her cottage door, and saw the trail of smoke too−−going farther and farther away under the green leaves along by the river, round between the mountains. She watched it, shading her eyes; and turned slowly within into the house.

He had not thought to say a word of parting that morning; a kind, careless farewell, the night before, at the garden gate, when Bruno was by−−that had been all.

"Why do you cry, Palma?" said the youngest of her brothers, who was only twelve, and a cripple, with his small limbs mis−shapen and withered.

"Do you ask?−−with father not six months in his grave?" murmured Palma.

Her heart smote her as she said it. She was lying to the child.

She went about her daily work. It was for her as if she did it in the dark. But she did it, missing nothing−−not even slurring anything. There was so much to be done, with all those five boys, and two only of them earning anything.

Once in that long, laborious day she stole up−stairs, and looked at the necklace.

"He was thinking that he was buying for Gemma," she said, as she looked.

Later in the day, the eldest son of Cecco, the cooper, came and leaned over the wall as she worked. He was a cooper too, and a fine−built youth, and well spoken of in the Lastra.

"You will not think of it, Palma?" he said to her, with his brown eyes wistful and sad.

"You are good; but, no;−−never!" said Palma, and went on weeding.

What he wanted her to think of was himself. He did not mind her cropped hair, that would grow. He loved her industrious ways, her independence, her patience, her care of her brothers. His father was well−to−do; he would look over the absence of a dower.

"I shall not marry," said Palma, always.

And when the young cooper said, for the hundredth time, "You will not think of it?"−−in this warm, radiant, summer forenoon−−Palma only said, "Never!" and went on, stripping her tomatoe bushes of their fruit, and hoeing between the lines of her newly set cauliflowers.

She belonged, she said, to her brothers. So her living self did−−her body and her brain, such as it was; and her strong, laborious, untiring feet and hands. But her heart belonged to two other lives−−one dead and the other lost: the two lives that had been by hers in their childhood, in the moonlit lemon alleys of Giovoli, and the calm shadows of the old church of St. Sebastian.

Signa and Gemma were always together in her thoughts:−−one dead, the other lost.

Cecchino, the son of Cecco, could give her a good house in the Lastra, and a full soup−pot always, and a good store of house linen, and shoes and stockings, and a settled place in the world. Oh, yes; she knew. And his mother, who was a tender soul, had said, "He loves you, we will not mind about the dower, and you shall have my own self−spun sheets and my string of pearls." And they were all good−−good as gold. And Beppo and Franco, who foresaw help for themselves in this union, upbraided her always, and railed at her when the bread was too stale, or the sour wine ran short.

But Palma−−though she knew, none better, the worth of bread and wine in this life, and the use of a strong arm to bar the door against the Old Man Poverty whom the devil has given leave to hobble perpetually upon the earth and creep in at all cold hearths−−Palma shook her head, and would not even think of it, however Cecchino besought her.

"I will not marry you; I do not love you," she told him. And Cecchino urged that marriage should come first, love last, with women.

"Not so," said Palma. "That is to have the leaves bitter and the flowers leafless−−like the endive. But it is not only that. I will not marry. I will work for my brothers while they want it; and when they do not want me, I will go into a convent−−and rest so. That is what I mean to do−−Our Lady willing."

And Cecchino could not change her.

That was what she meant to do.

Rest so;−−a brown−faced, middle−aged woman, in a white coif, saying prayers in a little cell, on knees stiff from many years of toil, and going amongst the orphans and the poor, and tending dying souls−−that was how she saw herself in the future.

It did not appal her.

Any thought of marriage did.

In the convent she would be able to pray for Signa and for Gemma;−−and then in heaven she might see their faces.

Perhaps if she worked very hard and prayed very much, the Madonna might call her up quickly, and give her some grace of beauty, there, in heaven to be like them. Sometimes she hoped that, quite humbly; and never sure that she could merit it.

In the twilight of this day−−having laboured hard, and seen her brothers come and go, and smiled on them, and forced a cheerful laugh for them, because a dull house was bad for boys, and apt to drive them to the wineshops and the lotteries−−Palma stole up, foot−weary though she was, to the little church above the gardens of Giovoli.

She carried her little crippled brother on her back, because he fretted if he were left long alone, and set him down where the last gleam of sun fell, and gave him a few pebbles to play with, which contented him, because he was not very bright of brain.

Then she went herself and prayed in the nook by the column where S. Cecilia hung. She had lost faith in it, because he had seemed to have none. He had thanked her for her thought of him, but he had never seemed to think it possible that it could have helped him in any way to fame.

"Keep him safe in the world, and let him meet Gemma in heaven," she prayed; and said it over and over again, in passionate reiterated supplication, clinging to the pillar with her arms wound about it, and her forehead pressed against its cold grey stone.

She prayed there till the moon shone through the stained window on to the broken jasper; and the little cripple cried because the air grew cold, and he could not rise to catch the glow−worm alight upon the altar step.

She did not ask anything for herself.

Hard work for ten or twenty years longer, and then rest−−on the rough boards of a convent bed, and by the death agonies of beggars.

That was her future.

It did not affright her.

"Only keep him safe on earth,−−and her in heaven."

That was all she prayed.

She was sure the saints would hear her.

She came out into the moonlight, carrying the lame boy on her back, and with the glow−worm like a little lamp within her hand. She was almost happy.

Prayers, innocent and in firm faith, brought the benediction of their own fulfilment. She was sure of that.

CHAPTER VI.

IT was a sultry night northward.

There was a storm in the air, but it had not broken. The great lake was curled by the faintest of breezes. There was the smell of oranges−−leaf and flower and fruit−−upon the air. Little boats went sailing through the shadows. The constellations of the Winged Horse shone clear high up in the heavens, though all round the horizon the skies were overcast−−the Horse that has a star for his nostril, and that is plumed with strong desire, and that says to the poet, "Mount, and ye shall enter the realms of the sun with me, and ride also through the endless night where Persephone lies sighing."

Signa−−who did not know the stars by any name, but loved them as all dreamers do, and held them in that wistful awe which was with him one half the terror of a child, one half the wonder of a thinker−−was drifting in a little boat over the quietness of the water, and looking up at Pegasus.

They were giving his music at Como; and they were about the bring the Lamia out in Milan. He went where his music went, as the way is in this country. But the small strife of the theatres, and the contentious and envious revilings, and the men and women with whom he had to do were all painful to him: too rough, too real, too coarse for him. He broke from them whenever he could, and they had ceased to try and alter him; he was no more fit for their world, they saw, than a young nightingale for a gay brawling street. They laughed at him−−which he seldom knew, or knowing did not heed−−and let him live in his own fashion as he liked, and made their money out of him, and said all genius was no better after all than an inspired idiotcy, and he was such a boy: only a little peasant still, though he had so sweet a face and so soft a grace.

Signa was careless of them−−utterly careless.

He was so purely, naturally, innocently happy, that nothing could much stir or trouble him. All the noise around him was like the sound of a whirlpool to a child seated high on the rocks, who hears it, but only sees the silver seagulls and the sunshine. All the fret of their life could not hurt him; he saw only the dreams and the destinies of his own.

What was beautiful to him in those long months of wandering were not the pleasures which his associates found; he hardly cared even for the praise that made his pilgrimages triumphs. What was beautiful to him were the changing mountains, the fresh wide waters, the unknown old cities, the treasuries of lost arts, the noble churches, the silent monasteries, the lonely little towns that had all some wonder of stone or of colour; the delicious free sense, as of a bird's flight, with which he was borne from place to place, filling his brain with memories, as a child its hands with flowers, thinking each new one found still lovelier than the last.

He drifted now in his little boat: a fisherman rowed him from point to point along the shores. He had talked to the man till they were both tired; going with the current, little movement of the oars was needful; the man sat mute, thinking of his haul of fish of that morning; Signa lay back looking up at the radiance of Pegasus.

He did not know it as the constellation that belongs to all who dream of any art, but its stars shone down on him with a bright serene light, and he thought how they were shining too upon the water and the hills about his home.

His heart always went back to the Lastra.

His fondest fancy was of what should be the manner of his return to it; to raise works of marble like the palaces he saw, and live a great life in peace and pleasure, with a choir of young singers like himself around him, and the love of all the country with him.

He was so young still; such dreams were possible to him. His hands were filled with the fast fading laurels of earth, but he believed them the changeless asphodels of heaven.

The life of Rossini, had he seen it close, would have hurt him like a blasphemy.

To Signa−−reared in simple religious faiths, half pagan, half monastic, which were quite real to him−−victory was obligation.

God had given him his desire; so he thought. He said always to himself, "What can I render back?"

In so many things he was only a little peasant still.

The boat floated along, rocked gently on the liquid darkness.

He watched the stars, and dreamed, and dreamed, and dreamed, and seemed to see again, white upon the shadow, a statue he had seen that day at noon: the Love and Psyche of Canova.

Canova−−whose soul was dead when he moulded the lascivious charms of the Borghese Venus and the poor vulgar graces of the Dancing Girls−−has put all his soul into this marble.

For one moment, in his vision of the face of Love, he has reached the height where the Greek sculptors reign alone.

In the face of Love there is the very heaven of passion−−all its longing, all its languor, all its ineffable abandonment and yearning, all its ab− solute oblivion, which makes it live only in one other life, and would let the earth dissolve and the heavens shiver as a burnt scroll, and take no heed, so that "only from me this be divided never."

The boy had watched the statue long, with a strange sense of something missed in his own young years−−something unknown; and like a hot wind over him had come the memory of the dancing girl of Istriel.

He had hated that memory, yet there it came.

Her face effaced the softer face of Psyche: Psyche, who is not worthy Love in the marble, as in the fable of the lamp.

Floating along the shores of the lake he dreamed of the statue; only, do what he would, instead of Psyche he saw always the form of the dancer of Istriel. And the boy in his ignorance smiled, remembering the warnings of Bruno.

"What does he know?" he thought, "living on his hill there. All men love−−the lowest and the highest. One would be greater surely in all ways, not lesser−−if one loved."

For he did not know that Love will only reach his height by treading all other things beneath his foot. He did not know that Love lends a fire divine to human souls only by burning all their world to waste.

The boat paused at a bend in the shore, grated a little, and then was fastened to the land.

Signa leapt out with the fresh cool leaves smiting him sweet blows upon his eyes and mouth. They had reached the little village where he liked to sleep and see the dawn break over the lake better than to remain in Como, where the singers drank, and laughed, and quarrelled until daybreak, and thought it ill of him unless he joined them.

The boat went on to where the rower lived;−−Signa strolled a little on the shore. It was not late, and he could see the white−walled cottage where he had house room amongst its orange−trees and myrtles, and he wished to watch the storm which, country−born and hill−bred as he had been, he knew was rising, though the lake was still.

The village stood on a small creek: its woods and thickets went to the water's edge; it was a wilderness of roses. It had a little white church, with one bell; several huts and houses of peasants and fisherpeople; and a few villas that were sought by summer idlers and by rich strangers towards the early autumn time.

Signa walked on the edge of the water, his feet in roseleaves and fallen jessamine flowers: the shore was all a garden, wild or cultured according as the proprietor of the soil were poor or rich.

He wandered along till he lost sight of the roof of his own little dwelling, listening to the soft lapping of the little waves upon the stones and the splash of distant oars.

All at once he paused. He saw a statue in the water through the leaves−−at least, the thought it so.

It was the white figure of a woman, half clothed in close clinging draperies, which with her right hand she held upward to her knees; with the other hand she was gathering her hair into a great knot; her naked feet were in the shining water; her arms were bare too. She was quite still at the moment he saw her first, as though awaiting something; the moon had come out of a heavy cloud, and fell on her, so that she looked a piece of sculpture, white as Psyche was.

Then, tired of holding up her hair, she let it fall in a sudden shower, thrust the boughs of the wild roses apart, and stepped from the pebbles and the water on the shore. The movement brought her face to face with Signa.

He saw she was no statue, but a woman; young and living, and impatient of some delay; dripping with water, which ran from her hair and limbs in silvery rain, and made her white thin garments cling to her. She had been bathing in the solitude of her gardens, into which he unwittingly had strayed.

Signa stood still and gazed at her, too much amazed, too startled, too confused, to move or speak. His face

flushed with shame−−shame for himself and shame for her.

"Forgive me," he murmured; but his feet were rooted to the ground, his heart beat so loudly it seemed to him to fill the air. The woman−−all white there, with her shining limbs and shining hair tangled in the thickets of the roses, with her wet small feet like ivory upon the moss−−he thought it all a dream.

She had started, too; then she looked at him with a smile slowly uncurving the rose leaves of her close pouted lips. She was in no wise embarrassed. She stood looking at him with the moonrays full upon her, making the water−drops like pearls.

Then she laughed.

A pretty laughter pealing through the garden silence, she shook her hair over her like a veil, her white arms and bosom shining through it as through a golden network, like cobwebs in the sun.

Another woman ran quickly up to her with breathless excuse for absence, holding a scarlet shawl in her outstretched arms. She let it be wrapped round her, and turned away, looking at Signa through her hair.

"Stay there," she said to him; "stay there, and string a romance upon me. I am wet−−I was bathing. I will come back. Stay there!"

He stood there, stupefied and entranced, as she had bidden him; not sure, still, whether it were a woman indeed, or only a statue that his fancy warmed.

He was not sure that all was not a trick of his own imagination, and of the sudden shining of the moon out from the dark night.

He stood, bewildered and breathless, listening with throbbing pulses to every noise in the leaves and on the water. If she were a living creature, she had bade him wait.

For his life he could not have moved away.

He felt hot with shame for her if she were indeed a living thing.

Strange stories he had heard in the old folk−lore of the Lastra−−where people believe in many an eerie phase of the night side of nature−−came over him with a shiver. What human thing could have looked half so white? or could have borne his gaze without a blush? or could have laughed straightly in his face as she had done?

His brain was giddy, his heart beat high;−−he glanced up to find his stars, but they were gone−−the clouds had covered them. The rose−boughs rustled, the grasses seemed to thrill, the shallow water shimmered at his feet. Would she come back, or had she only mocked him? Was she like the beautiful white woman who cannot forget her crimes, but wakes from her grave and strays all night through the great forsaken gardens of the Medici? He shuddered as he thought−−he who had been reared where the people believe in the ghostly wanderings of Bianca Capella.

He longed for her back again, and yet he feared her. He strained his eyes to watch for her in the gloom, and yet he was afraid−−afraid as he had never been in his childhood going in the darkness over the lonely hill−lands peopled with the spirits of the dead, as peasants told him.

It might have been hours that he waited there, it might have been but moments; he could not tell which, he had no sense of time; but the moon was still shining when he saw her.

She came under the leaves of the orange−trees through the crossing rose−boughs to him; she was still wrapped in white−−some glistening thing with silver in it, like a spider's web that has caught the dew; her wet hair fell over her shoulders; her feet were shod in soft white furs; she had put a string of pearls about her throat, which gleamed a little as snow does as she moved; she came through the shining moonlit leaves, bending down towards him and smiling.

"I have come back. Why, how you look! I was too wet to stay. I know you−−yes. I saw you last night, and once before in Venice. Signa! Why, how you look!"

He fell at her feet, touching the hem of her white robe with tremulous timid hands, and gazing up at her with eyes of doubt and fear and adoration, because she was so wonderfully fair to look at, and yet he was afraid of her as of a creature not of earth and not of heaven, just such a lovely terrible thing as that which walked at midnight in the old green gardens of the Medici.

"What are you?" he murmured with the soft grace of a poet's homage. "You know me−−you? Oh, speak a little! Are you my Lamia, that I have dreamed of so often? Or are you Psyche that I saw at noon? You cannot be a living thing, you are too beautiful."

She stooped, and with her soft, cool hands ruffled the thick hair falling on his brow, and laughed and threw a

rose against his lips.

"Lamia! Psyche! They are dead: I live. Know you! Of course I know you. And when I saw you at Venice I was glad; only I said 'he shall not see me yet−−not yet.' And was it all mere chance to−night? I thought perhaps you knew, and came. No? Why, how you look! But, indeed, how should you know me? I was a little ragged thing. How well it was we ran away that fair−day, and how sad you were, and how you cried; and yet I made you play. Poor Signa!"

She, stooping still above him, put her fresh lips to his hair and kissed him on the eyes; and then she laughed again, and then again she leaned to kiss him.

But Signa had sprung upward to his feet.

His face was very pale; his eyes had horror in them and amaze.

"Gemma!" he muttered. "Gemma! Gemma!"

A cloud of anger gathered on the fairness of her face.

"Yes, I am Gemma. Well?"

"Gemma!"

He said the little familiar name again and again, stupidly, as a man says a charm, gazing upon her in the moonlight. He had looked for her among the poor maidens of the working world, amongst the crowds at mass; he had thought often of finding her lonely, longing for home, repentant of her flight, living in some little nook among the roofs, making her daily bread by some sad means; and he had dreamed of how he would raise her up and take her back and crown her with his laurels and make her glad, And this was Gemma.

This beautiful thing unshamed, who came to him wet from the water and laughed, with the moonlight on her wet, half naked limbs. This was Gemma.

She was silent. A great anger obscured the beauty of her face, but there was a touch of shame with it. Her hands tore a rose asunder and threw the leaves on either side of her. She had looked for the passionate rapture with which all her years were full: this mute rebuke in its gentleness smote her dully like a blow.

He stood looking at her with a dazzled, bewildered pain; he was not certain that he was awake; he thought of Palma, praying for her sister and sure she was with Christ.

"Gemma! Is it you, Gemma?" he murmured. "You were a little ragged thing−−you were so poor, and now you have those pearls about your throat. Palma was sure you were in heaven, but I said no. I always said that I would Hind you, only I thought so differently. I always hoped−−so lonely, so penniless, so sorrowful for them all at home; and then I thought how I would take you back, and we would love you all the better for the sorrows you had had. And now you are like this. Ah, God!"

His voice shook, his lips trembled; the words were all incoherent, confused, almost foolish; but she knew all he meant.

"Poor! lonely! sorrowful!" she echoed; and her azure eyes laughed back at him, though they had more rage than mirth. "You thought I should be that?−−I? Did I not get the things I wanted always? You forget."

"That is what Bruno said," he muttered; and was still.

"Bruno!"

She had forgotten nothing; nor had she forgiven anything, child though she had been.

When Bruno had dragged her off the sands by the sea away from the gifts and the praises of the great people, she had marked it in her thoughts, a thing to be avenged. Between the manhood of Bruno and her babyhood there had been always war.

"Your father died in Lent," said Signa suddenly. He did not know what to say. He fancied still she was some shadowy thing that mocked him in the moonlight, not Gemma living.

She looked grave and troubled for a moment.

"Died! He was not old?"

"No, he was not old."

He echoed the words unconsciously. He did not know what he felt. His heart seemed stifled. He caught her hands in his.

"Oh, Gemma! is it true? Oh, my dear, speak to me more! I never have forgotten you, Gemma. After my music I loved you best of anything; yes, better than Bruno, I think−−heaven forgive me! You were a little troublesome, cruel child, but you were−−Gemma. Oh dear, it cannot be−−you did not seem to have any woman's shame about

you just now looking at me in the water; and then those pearls, and all this dainty, delicate stuff like silver. Gemma, oh Gemma! tell me for the good God's sake, you are not a thing that your father can never meet in heaven? You are not−−lost to us all for ever?"

Her eyelids were dropped as he spoke, and there was not light enough for him to see the changes that passed over her face; anger, contempt, derision, trouble, amusement, all following one another; each and all moved in her by his simple words, but none reaching any depth.

She hesitated a moment how to answer him, he seemed to her so foolish−−oh, so foolish! and yet she did not wish for his disdain or his rebuke. She thought she would cheat him just a little while−−to see.

She looked at him with the old pouting anger on her lovely mouth, the anger he had known so well when the little child in the gardens of the Giovoli was thwarted in her whim.

"You are very quick to judge me ill," she murmured.

"Ah, dear, if I judge you wrong, may God heap coals of fire on my head. But what can I think, Gemma? Answer me; answer me truly. I could not hate you, Gemma, not if you were fallen to the vilest depths. Palma might. I do not know−−I could not. Oh, my dear, do tell me truly, what fate have you found in the world? What thing have you become? When they said that you were dead, I loathed myself for letting you have your way that morning, and so letting you drift to your own misery; but oh, my dear, my dear,−−if it should be with you so that death at its worst would have been better! I do not judge you, Gemma; only tell me−−tell me truth!"

He knelt down before her in his eagerness and pain; he held her hands; his face, as it looked up to hers, was white with fear and with anxiety.

She was so. lovely, too, above him in the shadows, with the rose−boughs caught against her and the wet gold of her hair touching the silvered orange−leaves.

"Am I not beautiful, Signa?" she murmured. "The rest? What does the rest matter−−for a woman?"

"Oh, God! Is that all you say?"

He rose again to his feet. Almost he hated her, this perfect shameless thing. And yet she was so beautiful. Looking at her, he shaded his eyes as from the sun or the heat of fire.

"Poor Palma!" he muttered. "Day and night she prays Christ for your soul."

"My soul!"

Gemma smiled−−a soft, slow smile.

Then she looked at him full in the eyes. She did what she would with any man, that way.

"You are too quick to judge. Come back to−morrow; to the house yonder. Now it is nearly morning. I am cold still after the water. I bathe by moonlight because a negress told me I should keep my beauty so; there is a charm in it. Good−night. Oh, you will come−−yes, I know that. No! Do not stop me. I am cold, I say. Good−night−−come back to−morrow."

She drew her white clinging clothes out from his grasp, and laughed a little; for indeed she was amused, though troubled, and put the orange−boughs aside and threw another rose at him and went: whither he could not see, the night had grown quite dark.

"Gemma! Gemma! stay!" he cried to her. "If you be Gemma, do not leave me so!"

But he called to her in vain. He was alone.

The first thunder of the coming storm rolled over from the mountains, a shrill wind blew on the lake water, the rain drops fell.

She left him to meet the tempest as he might. Wet through, he reached with difficulty the little cottage higher by the shore.

It was dawn; but the dawn was darker than the night had been.

The hurricane was severe, and the sullen lake wrecked more than one boat that in the moonlight had danced lightly on its smiling surface.

Signa did not even try to sleep.

He watched the storm.

CHAPTER VII.

THERE were thunder and lightning and wild north winds all over land and sea, even to the great plains on either side, the Apennines.

The storm travelled as far as the Valdarno, reaching there by morning, and men watched the rivers, fearing flood again, and farmers thanked the saints that maize harvest and vintage had been safely passed.

Palma, working in the fields for a small wage above upon the slopes, and driven to seek refuge from the violence of the weather, sheltered herself in S. Sebastian's little church, where the sheep also huddled together out of reach of the rain.

She was not afraid.

She told her beads and said her prayers as the blue lightnings flashed around her, and the winds howled.

"Dear God, keep him safe from harm," she prayed. "And let Gemma who is with you, where no storms come, watch over him."

CHAPTER VIII.

MEANWHILE, the woman of his vision let her people unclothe her, and she lay down in her white soft bed, and thought: the storm might beat without, she paid no heed to it; it might wreck boats, flood fields, kill birds and beasts and butterflies, send men and women homeless over ravaged farms−−but her it could not hurt. Why should she think of it?

She was amused, and yet there was disquiet at her heart.

She hated all the old dead time; hated the bare memory of it:−−of its hunger, of its cold, of its hardship, of her little naked feet, of her dirty, merry, kindly father, of her bed of hay, of her platter of wood. She hated it all; and it had sprung up before her suddenly till it all seemed alive.

She liked never to think of it−−never. It was for this that in Venice, seeing her old playmate the hero of the hour, she had left the city whilst still unknown to him.

And yet she had wanted to show herself to him.

"Chance shall choose," she said to herself, and when she had recognised him in the moonlight among the orange−leaves she had walked straight to him.

She was glad upon the whole; though ruffled, and disturbed, and angered, too, because of his strange way of taking things.

It made her lie awake and think of the old years, and the skill with which she, a little hungry ragged child, one amongst many, had got to have her beauty known all over many cities, and to have those big pearls−−big as linnets' eggs−−about her throat, when she was tired of her diamonds. But pearls best became her; that she knew. Older women have need of diameters to lend new lustre to dimmed charms; but she was fresh as any rose. And she was known as "Innocence." So she wore oftenest her big pearls, that no empress could have beaten; as her sister peasants away in Tuscany wore their little seed−pearls on feast−days amongst the brown hillfields.

Lying awake now, with the blue of her eyes just gleaming under her curled lashes, she thought of that fair day in Prato, and of the sunny tamarisk trees by the shore, and of her struggle from the window, and her hurry across the wharves, and her escape in the brown−sailed fishing−smack that her captor had bribed to take them over the open sea.

She thought of how she had laughed and danced and clapped her hands as the rough old boat spread its wet sail, and rocked and tore before the wind that rose as the day declined, and blew hot and hard from the south−east, while the man said to her, "No more black bread, my pretty pet: all cakes and fruit in the future."

It had not been all cakes and fruit at first.

When he was sure of her he beat her. She bit his hand through. He tumbled her amongst a score of other children, older and younger, and took them to northern cities, and sent them about, some on stilts and in spangles, some with white mice and music, some with little statues−−all thrashed, and starved, and made to do his bidding.

Her fate was what the Lastra fancied that it was, knowing how many children of this sort there are kidnapped, to shiver in the wet sad north.

But this endured only a very little while, with her.

She was so pretty. He knew her value. He would not leave her too hungry, or send her out in too cold weather. He knew that she was like a good wine, and would pay well for keeping.

One day, however, once more he beat her.

She darted into the street, and showed her little shoulders, and all the bruises, and sobbing drew a crowd grieved and indignant round her.

The crowd set on the man, and hounded him out of the town under a rain of stones; a good old woman took her home, weeping over her, and gave her a home.

That was three months after the fair at Prato, and took place in the town of Mechlin.

She lived there a few years like a little mouse in a sugar closet; the woman was aged, childless, and well off, keeping a lace shop in the midst of the beautiful, grave, quaint, grey little city.

She was petted, pampered, fed on dainties; she teased all the girls, and made all the boys slaves for her; she learned to read; she stole anything she wished for and could not get without stealing, and was either never found out, or else always forgiven; people said she had a face like the little Jesus.

Then she got tired. At Kermesse there came into the place a troop of players.

She went to see them.

The chief of them said to himself, "What a beautiful child!" and spoke to her a little later as she trotted to mass.

He tempted her to join them. She was too young to act, but she could sing a little. He said he would make pieces on purpose for her. She should just show herself; he said that would be enough. He painted the world and his wandering life in bright colours.

She pondered well, and weighed the matter, as her wont was, with solid sense, and no idle misleadings of fancy. She never dreamed. She only said to herself, "What is best for me?" and what she saw was best she chose.

If any one suffered by her doing, she said to them, as the ploughman to the flower, "Is it my fault that you grow in my way?"

Born in a little hut in the green leafy solitudes of a garden, she had been gifted at birth with the fine sense which leads straight to success: the sense of the paramount claims of self.

She pondered awhile till the players were on the wing; then she took a pretty quantity of the oldest and most delicate lace, some gold out of the till in the little shop, and all her clothes, and went with them, slipping out of the house at night whilst the old woman was sleeping.

"I can always go back if I want," she thought. "She will always forgive me anything."

And she ran out of the city to join her new friends outside the gates, with a heavy bundle but a light heart.

She was then thirteen.

The old woman who loved her, waking to her loss, would not believe that the child was to blame; and when people told her that the child had been seen going out of her own free will to the north, she would not credit them: robbers had taken the lace and the gold, and killed the child−−that was her certainty. And being old, and all alone, and taking it too much to heart, she was never able to leave her bed again, and in a few weeks died of it.

Meanwhile the child throve.

The people she had joined were gay and good−natured. and merry if not wise; and in their way well to do. They adored her. She did as she liked. For the lace she had taken no one molested her. She showed herself nightly in little bright laughter−loving towns and cities. She had little to do, still less to say; they looked at her: that was quite enough.

She had not talent of any kind; but she had a shrewd sense that to let her lovely baby face look like a little angel−s was enough: and it was so.

When she was nearly sixteen, the people went to play in the city of Paris. She said to herself, "Now!"

She refused to play with a true foresight−−she would not cheapen herself. She put her old white Flemish lace all about her like a cloud; she looked half like a cherub, half like a nun. She went and strayed by herself through gilded gates into the first public gardens that she saw.

It was summer, and the alleys were full of people; they all looked after her; she thought how good a thing it was to live.

The painter Istriel met her.

He was rich.

The players saw her no more.

After three months he painted her as "Innocence" looking with wondering eyes upon the world.

Nature gave her loveliness; Istriel gave her fashion.

Three years later he painted her as the sister of the Seven Dancers.

But by that time he had had many rivals.

He professed content. He cherished bitterest remembrance.

She had only used him. He had loved her.

To others he seemed to have passed from her lover to her friend indifferently; himself he knew that jealousy would never die in him whilst she had life.

She knew it too. It diverted her.

It never prevented her from smiling on whosoever most pleased her caprices and most lavished upon her the wealth she loved.

For the rest, she was at the height of her supremacy, and she never let it make her dizzy; she kept the calm, wise, steady judgment of her own advantage that she had possessed even when a little child; and she cherished her loveliness, studied her health, moderated her follies, and garnered her riches with a wisdom most rare in her world of pleasure.

Many lost fortune, many their senses, some few their lives for her.

Nothing of that kind stirred her for a moment.

The vainest could not flatter himself that he owed her smile to anything except his jewels and his gold; the vainest could not deceive himself that she had ever loved him.

She loved herself; just as much now that she had the world at her feet, as when she had been a little child, eating the white currants and green almonds in her nest of hay.

Love, though the highest selfish ecstasy, must yet have self−forgetfulness.

She had none.

She could enjoy. But she could not suffer.

"How much shall I tell him?" she thought, lying with half−closed eyes watching the lights flicker over the ivory and silver of her mirror.

Why should she tell him anything? Why should she see him? She did not want him. To her he would never be anything but Signa; the little, silly, dreaming fellow that had run about for her, and given up his fruit for her, and fallen into fault uncomplainingly for her sake. She had made him her stepping−stone to fortune; then had done with him: why not?

And yet now she had seen him, she did not choose to let him go.

He condemned her; he sorrowed over her; he rebuked her;−−he!−−who had been her little slave, running where she would, and doing her will in the summer dust of the Lastra.

With noon she was ready for him.

She was alone in the little lake palace.

It belonged to the painter Istriel.

When she wanted rest and seclusion she went to it, knowing how to keep her beauty fresh and render her favour more precious.

He was content that men should think his old ties with her not wholly broken.

He was now in the steppes of the North. He had visited her passing by. She always smiled on him. She was a little afraid of him.

Besides, she never turned any man against her; she only would have her own way always−−that was all. She wore her lovers as she did her jewels: some had their turn often, some seldom, some for ever waited for a day that never came−−but all were hers; she could shut them in the hollow of her rosy hand, as in the gardens of Giovoli she had held the butterflies.

She was never swept away on any strong tide; not even of caprice.

She kept her brain clear always.

She was not clever; but she had far sight.

She got all the best the world could give her, and was as calm amidst it all as a dormouse in its nest of wool. No one could quote a folly against her.

She walked wisely.

With noon they told her Signa had come there. She let him wait. She always let them wait. Waiting heightened the imagination and spurred expectancy. Besides she was never in any haste herself.

He had been shown into a little cabinet, which had statues in it and one great window looking on the lake.

He was standing when she entered.

He was very pale; he had been all daybreak on the shore, rendering what help he could against the storm which now had passed away entirely, and had gone southward.

They looked at one another a moment in silence; these two who had run together over the stony road, and ventured their little fortunes into the noisy press of Prato Fair.

Their fates had divided there, and yet the link of union never could be quite broken.

They looked at one another, remembering that hot, toilsome day when they had eaten their figs under the trees of the dead Medici; and when, in the tumult and the merriment of Fra Lippo's town, she had laughed at his tears, and pulled him by his curls and whispered, "I am hungry−−play−−get me some cakes so. Do you hear me? Play!" And he had played.

She looked at him and thought, "He is not changed one whit; he is the same; only a boy still."

He looked at her and thought, "Can she be Gemma? It is some goddess, dreamt of in the night."

They had run hand in hand across the plain to Prato. But there were worlds, centuries, all the heights of heaven, all the depths of hell, between them now.

She put her hands out to him.

"Signa−−dear Signa−−sit by me."

He took her hands and let them go.

"No. Tell me first."

She sighed a little.

"You used to love me, Signa."

"I loved a little child called Gemma−−yes!"

"And I am Gemma."

He was silent.

He would not sit by her. He was confused and blinded. Her loveliness lost nothing by the morning light.

But he felt to recognise her less than he had done in the dim shifting shadows of the night. She had no more in common with the little, sturdy, ragged, mischievous baby he had kissed in her bed of hay, than the butterfly seems to have to do with the chrysalis. He felt still that he must be in a dream; when he had fallen asleep over his score, in his half−starving student days, such dreams had come to him.

"If you are Gemma, indeed," he said with effort; "have you nothing to say of your own home; of your father, who died thinking of you; of your brothers, of Palma? Is that all forgotten? Do you never think?"

She would not let him see the anger in her.

"I was so young," she murmured. "Children do not think."

"No? Palma thinks. She said, 'Gemma is dead. Else she never would be silent all these years.' She prays for you"

"Is she in want of anything?"

"She wants everything. She works like a mule. But she would never take anything. Palma would be ashamed."

Gemma put out her under lip with the sullen contemptuous gesture of her infancy. But she answered him gently.

"Palma was always good. Yes−−I remember that. Poor Palma!"

"Gemma.−−if you be Gemma−−need Palma, for all your glory, be ashamed of you? Tell me: you said that you would tell me now?"

"Sit by me, and I will."

"No! not till I know whose roof I find you under, and why you are−−like this."

"What is it to you?"

"Nothing. Only, if you are a base woman I want to see your face no more. I loved you when we were two little children. It would hurt me like a sister's shame."

He spoke simply and directly the thing he felt; he was calmer than he had been in the sultry, moonlit night; he was cooled as the air was; he felt oppressed and pained, but it was with sorrow for the little child that had run with him in the dust and heat, not for the woman that faced him with her shining eyes.

Over Gemma's face rose a quick flush of anger and amaze; all her world envied her.

She had no sense of shame. Shame, like remorse, only visits women that are left alone.

Gemma played with all the glories of life, as a child with a ball of flowers.

She repressed the rage and wonder that she felt. She could assume what shape she would.

"If I were base," she muttered, "might I not need more tenderness? You are two narrow, Signa; and too harsh."

"I? Harsh?"

"I think so. You only love your music. You see nothing outside that."

He was silent.

Was he harsh? He did not mean to be so. He had said what he had felt. If she were no longer innocent, he wished to go away and see her face no more. He had meant no bitterness.

"You do not understand," he said, at last. "I blame no living thing; I am not wise enough. Only there are straight, simple things one feels about women like an instinct−−just as when one keeps one's honour clean−−do you not know? You see−−I have always thought about you; and reproached myself; and dreamed so much of finding you and taking you back to your own people; and when Bruno said, seeing the picture of a wanton dancer, 'That is what your Gemma is now, if she be living,' I almost hated him; it seemed to hurt me so; because, though you were wilful and liked your own way too well, yet I was sure you were too true and brave for that−−and would have thought of Palma. Dear, if your life is honest−−take my hand. If you be any man's wife, and come by all this luxury−and riches justly−−dear, I will beg for your forgiveness on my knees. But else−−what can I think?"

She was silent; a certain darkness fell upon her life. She was like the Syrian king; all the fairness and richness of her Palestine grew nought to her, because she was shut out from one little, narrow, lonely vineyard.

"What shall I say to him," she thought. "What shall I say, to keep him?"

She wanted to keep him, and yet her heart was hard and sullen with rage against him. He had lifted the golden apples in her basket of silver, and had scorned them; she was astonished and dully angered.

But she was never swept away on any impulse, not even on that of anger, which was the strongest with her.

She looked up at last, and saw his eyes watch her with a piteous tender eagerness, and he held out his hands to her.

"I cannot take your hands," she said; "no, not in fairness. And yet I am not to blame; not in the way you think. Signa, I owe you nothing. I need tell you nothing. Yet, because we were children together, as you say, I will tell you all the truth."

And then she built him up a tale of lies−−such as would touch him most. Poor Signa! whose face had paled if she had trapped a bird, whose heart had sorrowed for each kid that went to slaughter in the old times, when the Lastra and its green vine−ways had been the only world to both of them.

To Bruno and his people he was changed utterly. They looked up at him from the twilight of their ignorance and obscurity. To her he was changed in nothing. She looked down on him from the broad noon day on the heights of her prosperity.

For five full years, she had studied the full world of men; to her he was only a boy, a peasant, a dreamer, a fool−−inspired, perhaps; but only the greater fool for that.

Outside there was the shining beauty of lake, and wood, and mountain; within, the softly− shaded room, filled with paintings, statues, flowers. Gemma in her white robes of morning, dead white, such as made the fairness of her look like a rose set amongst lilies, turned a little from him, half lying amongst her cushions, and told him the story of her life from that day of the fair in Prato.

"Dear Signa, I was a little wilful selfish thing. I wanted to see a bigger brighter life than any we had upon our hills. The man persuaded me. He promised me all sorts of golden toys, and never−ending feast−days. Yes. He took me with him in that fishing smack. We were hidden in Genoa little while, then we went northward. We were treated like beaten dogs, once in his power. There were many other children. He sent us out in rain, and wind, and snow. To him it did not matter what we suffered. We sold images, or tumbled in the streets, or hawked flowers, or went with an organ. We wandered from town to town; all over the world sometimes, I think; we crossed seas often, and mountains; where I do not know; I was a little stupid thing. I was made black and blue with thrashing. Dear −−I was punished for my selfish fault; punished beyond all telling. Night after night I cried myself asleep, longing for you, and Palma, and green Giovoli. In a few years the man sold me to a set of player people, low comedians, who went about with a travelling theatre, and dressed me up in spangles, and whipped me to make me dance. Nay, dear! how pale you look. Oh, it is all over−−long ago. I had no talent. You know I never had talent as you had. Nature has made me so good to look at; it does not matter for the rest. I did not act well; I was just looked at, and of course I could jump and dance−−you will remember that. You recollect old Maro from the Marches teaching us the salterello, and you and I dancing it every minute that we could? And at the fair, how pleased they were, and you, with the great tears running down your cheeks all the while you danced it. Ah, yes, yes, yes! Signa−−it seems like yesterday."

She paused a little while; and turned her head away still further; his heart ached for her; he longed to take her bands, and kiss her lips, and say, "We will forget that any time has passed;" but a dark wall seemed to him

between them. He could not think of her, of this lovely woman in her wealth, as Gemma; little ragged rosy Gemma, pouting and laughing in his face in the Giovoli garden, because Tista had swung her so high, so high.

And even if she were indeed Gemma, as she said, and as her remembrance proved, what could he say to her−−until he knew?

The sense around him of her golden shame stifled him, and kept him mute. He felt as Palma would have felt. It was not this woman that he cared for; it was his little playmate lost on the sands of the Mediterranean sea.

"I was sold to these players," she said; "sold just as a monkey might be, or a goat that knew some tricks. They sold me in their turn to others. I was made into little Loves, and had wings, and looked pretty; or else danced in pretty costumes; we went here, and there, and everywhere; they treated me well, and I liked it. I knew no better. I had sweetmeats, and fruit, and fine words. It was all good enough, and merry enough, I thought. You know of old, if all went well, I did not want to look further; and indeed, what did I know? or what could I have done? A child all alone, and a thousand miles, they said, away from home! Amongst them I learned to read, and learned some few other things. I do not know much, except the world. That is so big a book, you know; one does not want another. Signa, try and understand. Do not be harsh; I was not great of heart, and near to heaven, as you were when you were a child; nor plodding, and honest, and loving the saints, like Palma. I loved−−myself. And wanted to enjoy. God made me such a weak and selfish thing. You know he makes bees and butterflies. Dear, I was in so bad an air; it reeked with shamelessness; if you had anything to sell, your body or your soul, you sold it, and spent the money; why not? they said. When I was sixteen they betrayed me; we were in Vienna, then; there was a woman that I trusted. Oh, it is a common thing; quite common. When I knew the thing that they had made me, I grew blind and reckless; I was turned to stone, only stone that shut a devil in it, as the marble shuts a toad sometimes, they say. He who had bought me, bought me stupefied, like any moth you kill with sulphur smoke; was rich and a great man in his way. He covered his new toy with diamonds and gold. I grew the fashion. You have fame. That is another thing. Fame is a comet burning itself with its own fire as it travels. Fashion is the wax−light in a ball−room. I like the ball−room best. You see space, and all the worlds set round about what men will call the throne of God, no doubt. But I−−"

She laughed a little: she had forgotten for the moment that she did not mean to let him see the truth of her−−not then; whatever afterwards might come.

He listened; his breath came brokenly; his lips were dry. He raised his head, and gazed at her, almost blankly.

"You can jest!"

The words recalled to her the thing she wished to seem to him.

"Yes. I jest; if you call that jesting. I saw a man once watch his house burn, the fire took his children, and made him a beggar; he laughed. So I laugh. Oh, my dear! they have not left me any heart−−to laugh or cry. I would say, I pray they have not; if I were you or Palma. But then I never had much. I loved myself, you will remember that. Such love is punished. So your priests say. Well, you see now how it was with me: sixteen years old; a chattel purchased; a decked slave; a ruined thing made glorious with gilding. I am not meek, I am not good. Signa, you knew me when we were both babies. You knew I had no mercy nor gentleness to others, even then. I saw myself base, by no fault of my own. I saw myself marked out with a brand, proscribed, outcast, whilst I was myself as innocent as any yearling lamb we ever played with on the hill at home. Well I did not drown myself. I was too full of life. I looked at my own face in the mirror, and I loved it. I could not give it to the water−rats to gnaw. You love your music. I love my loveliness. Why is one love, one vanity, worse than the other? Can you tell me? Nature put the rhythm into your brain. It put the beauty in my body. Well, why should the love of one be holiness in you, the other sin in me? But sin or not, I have it. If disease made me hideous, or accident, then I would kill myself with smoke or opiates, or some easy gentle means of death. Not otherwise. No; I did not kill myself when I knew the thing I was. Your women of romance do; but, for me, I shrink from being hurt; I hate the thought of lying underground and leaving all the rest to laughter in the sunshine. To cease to be−−it is horrible! Oh, not for you who think that death will set your spirit free and carry it straight to some great world where all your dreams made true are waiting you; aye, but for us? We have only our bodies, and we dread the worms. No; I did not kill myself. I took my vengeance, I made myself the loveliest thing the world has seen for ages. They all say so. Then I melted their hearts and broke them. I slew them with a hair of the dog that had torn me. Dear, do not judge me harshly. I took solace in the strength I had; such strength as women like me have; we share it with the snake and with the panther. Your God made snakes and panthers."

She paused; the boy was quiet; his chest rose and fell with painful breathing; his lips were cold and white; he was saying always to himself:

"Who was the man−−at first?"

For he felt as if for Palma, and for poor dead merry Toto, and for his own honour's sake, the avenging of her ought to be his own work and no other's; had he not let her go with him that day, a little thoughtless child, over the hill and plain to Prato?

He pitied her from the bottom of his heart.

He believed the tale she told.

And he was sick with the giddiness of one who falls through mountain air from some great height. He lost his footing. He lost his hold upon the dreams and hopes of life. He was cast down from the pure simple certainty which never asked: "And is there faith in heaven and is there love?" because he was so very sure of both.

And now he was sure of nothing.

"God makes snakes and panthers."

Yes; and God had let Gemma be made vile, with no fault in her, no sin or seeking of her own;−−so he thought.

He grew dizzy. He, who had said to Palma, for her sister's sake:

"Dear, pray always. Prayers are heard,"

"Oh, my dear! oh, my poor lost love!" he murmured, and bowed his young head upon her knees; his frame shook with pain and the shock of the first burning rage that had ever touched him.

He was bewildered. Horror possessed him. The simple, innocent affection he had kept for her shuddered and grieved for her, as a brother's would have done. He had kept Gemma in his fancy and his hope so pure, and safe, and strong. The darkness of this irreversible fate spread over her, and made her terrible to him. Signa had all the childlike belief in heaven that a child has in its father; this struck his belief at the roots. God was good, and yet let such things be! God was great, and yet would be for ever powerless to make this horror as though it had never been! There were things then that even God could not do? Signa stared helpless at this wreck of all his faiths.

She watched him, reading him as easily as she would have read gold letters on a white page.

By years their ages were the same, but she, in the world's knowledge, already was so old,−−so old; and he in his unworldliness and ignorance, was yet so young.

She knew the ways of men at their worst, their wisest, their best, their basest, and turned them over in her head as a child does the wooden letters of a mastered alphabet.

He of woman, knew hardly anything.

"You hear my story now," she said, with a soft sigh, at last. "Signa, you loathe me?"

He shuddered a little.

"From my soul−−I pity you."

A sort of loathing was in him for her, but how could he say that? Whatever she had become, she had once been the little Gemma that he had kissed in her rough bed of hay.

Her eyelids were cast down; he did not see the cold blue flame of anger burn in her eyes a moment as she heard.

She to be pitied! she who, in her arrogance and her loveliness, thought she had the world to play with as a ball under her foot!

She turned her eyes upon him.

"So, you will leave me? You mean that?"

He coloured to his throat.

"You live still, by choice−−in shame?"

She could have laughed aloud. She could have dashed her hand against his mouth. She could have killed him−−almost; but she said, turning her thee from him, like one in pain of which she is ashamed:

"What other life was left me? Fling wool in mud; do you blame the fleece that it grows black? I told you I took my vengeance. There was no other thing to do. You do not understand the world. I was so young, and men so cruel. Wrong made me all that I have been, but I am tired; oh, so tired, Signa; if you only knew! A world of lovers and not one single friend. The loneliest woman is not so desolate as I. Dear, I am vile, perhaps, and cold, and love luxury too well; and if I were born with any heart in me, have killed it. That is what they say. I think it is quite true. There is no love anywhere for me. Love for me is the imperial beast that kissed and slew. Love: I laugh

at the word, I dance on it, I spit at it. Judas loved;−−and that great empress who wallowed in the mire with her guards and slaves!. What did they call her? I never loved a living thing. How should I? The only love that I have ever seen is a devouring beast with fire in his entrails and slime upon his mouth. That is the only love that over comes to me. Dear, I am tired. When I saw your face last night, I said in my own thoughts, I will tell him all the truth; he is not as the others are; he was a baby with me in the old green garden ways; he will understand; he will have sorrow for me; he will be true to me, when all are false; he will be my saint, when all others are my swine; he will despise me, lament for me, rebuke me; yes, no doubt; but he will not leave me utterly−−for the sake of the old days when we were children. That is what I thought. Oh dear! I was unwise and you are wise. Fly from me, There is no common ground between us. You cannot see in me the thing you used to play with. I am only a base light wanton woman, without charm for you and without pardon either from you and from your God. Dear, you are right. To see more of me could only bring you pain or get you evil names. Pure dreams are your fair portion. Foul facts are mine. Leave me. I would not have you stay, though you are all of home or heaven that I shall ever see in life. Go and tell Palma not to plead to Christ for me. Her words are wasted. I am in hell, though living; let me be."

She rose as she spoke and pushed him from her with a gesture of farewell.

The consummate art of her took every hue and grace of nature; her face was pale and cold; down her cheeks tears rolled and dropped upon the laces on her breast.

She knew the chords to touch in him; she played on him as he could play on any lute or violin.

She stung the generous sweetness of his nature; she stirred all his tenderness of pity.

Had he been cruel and self−righteous in his instincts of disgust? Had he been unmanly and unfeeling; wounding a dishonoured woman, whose truthfulness had laid her open to his scorn?

A confused sense of being wrong to her oppressed him, and struggled with the natural impulse of his aversions, with his instinct never to look on her or be touched by her or hear the sound of her voice again.

A nature, generous and yielding, accused of meanness or selfishness, flew at a rebound to the unwisdom of self−sacrifice.

"I had no thought of myself," he murmured, pierced to the quick. "But between us there is such a gulf: what can I do? what can I say? I cannot see you lead this life, and come to you, and be in fellowship with the men who ruined you, or the men you fool? To me you are−−Gemma; it is as if you were my sister. It is horrible. I do not know what to say to you. It seems to me we cannot be together now."

"I said that you were right in saying so. Right−−for yourself. Go; who keeps you, Signa? Not I. Go."

She spoke coldly, sadly; he thought he heard in her the heart−sick resignation of a woman from whom all good is banished, yet who cleaves to it.

The tender, unthinking, unwise ardour of his nature carried him away; he dropped before her on his knees as if she had been any saint or queen. His sweet and passionate voice thrilled with emotion.

"If I can serve, I will not leave, you," he said. "Gemma, listen to me. You are heart sick of the wretched glories of your life. All the better nature in you is in rebellion at it. Leave it. Come home. You shall be to me as a sister. This horror shall be buried in our hearts. Throw your gold away; it brings the plague with it; strip your jewels off; keep nothing but the beauty that God gave you, and that you defile. Come back to the old hills, to the fresh air, to the green country ways, to the peaceful days and nights. Come back. Palma is there; she will love you still. Her arms are strong enough, her faith is firm enough, to lift you out of hell. Dear, fling this horror from you and trample on it, and leave men, and cling to God. I have some great− ness. I can make enough to keep you safe from want. You shall be to me ever as if you were a sister−−lost and found. This beast you talk of, and that in your madness you call Love, shall never reach you, nor hurt you there. Come home. Palma is poor and ignorant, working for a crust, but she is strong in courage, and wiser than us all. She will suffer, but she will help you always. I look at you; you blind me: I do not know you. You seem to me one of those lovely lying things that Satan made and sent into the wilderness to tempt the saints. But if you are not that−−if indeed you ever were the little Gemma that ran with me in the summer dust that day−come home. Oh, Gemma, Gemma! if indeed you are the little child I played with, joy there never can be for you, dear, nor hope on earth, nor any love of any honest man, I know; but Palma will not turn from you, nor I. It is too late to save your beauty from the lepers−−it is plague−stricken. God himself cannot change that−−but, Gemma, there is life beyond this life. I seem to speak so poorly, I cannot plead with you−−not as I would. But, Gemma, the soul in you is not dead. Cast off these riches

that are viler than all rags, and lead a straight and simple life, and trust the rest to God. Come home!"

He spoke in all his innocence, knowing no better.

A stray sunbeam shot across the shadow of the room, and fell on his fair upturned forehead and the misty radiance of his supplicating eyes. To him she was terrible; to him she was plague−stricken;−−almost he thought her, as he said, one of those beautiful accursed things the devil loosed on earth to tempt the minds of men in deserts, and sting their senses, and destroy their lives, and level them with the beasts that perish. Still,−−if he could save her? He prayed with her for herself, as in his childhood he had prayed for Satan to the angels, watching the sun shine beyond the Certosa towers.

She listened, her beautiful golden head bent down, her colour changing; do what she would, she could not keep the blood quite steady in her cheek. She was so deeply angered. Yet some pain smote her through all the jewelled armour of her tranquil self−content.

Had she lost something after all that poor dull women, plodding for their bread, lived with and died with?−−had she missed something in all her plenteous harvest, were it only a vain vague fancy, worth the having?

She had princes and heroes, all greatness, at her feet, and all the soft ease and peace and triumph that she craved;−−yet for one instant the whole world seemed to grow as nothing to her if she had this boy's scorn, this boy who had run with her over the brown fields of the hills through the autumn weather, when the crocus−cup and the dragon−weed had been the only gold they owned.

He was a fool; yet−−some fools stand near to heaven.

The tears scorched her cheeks. Not such tears as she had summoned at her will a moment earlier, fair tricks of studied arts; but quick, salt, bitter drops, that burned her as they fell.

They angered her. The rage in her grew as much against herself as him.

"He shall know no heaven but me," she said in her own heart. "He shall live on my kiss, and die because he loses it. He is a fool−−a fool!"

And yet−−were she but such a fool!

For the moment she would have given all her empire to have been no wiser and no guiltier than he.

He did not know. He only saw her cheek grow pale, her proud mouth tremble.

"You hear me?" he murmured; "you will come?"

She was silent mastering the rage within her and the new strange pain. The pain passed−−the rage lived. She said to herself:

"There is no honesty upon my lips. Well, he shall find some sweeter thing there, and get drunk on it."

She had meant to have sport with him. Well, sport with vengeance in it, was the finer pastime. It was his fault. Why should he speak of her as of a thing he scorned? To bring his babyish, monkish, womanish fancies here, of honour and shame, and heaven and sins:−−sick phantasies from dying peasants' psalters and priests' penance−tales in Lent!

She gazed down on him with serious eyes.

"No; I cannot come, Signa. You are good to me, but the things you dream of are not possible−−for me, at least. You do not understand. I should make Palma mad; she me. I could no more go back to the old ways of life than you to a herdboy's empty days. Things cannot be undone. When a tree is grown, you may cut it down and burn it, but you cannot make it back into the acorn or the chestnut that it sprang from first. Palma thinks me safe with the saints;−−so let her. For you−−you have your art, your fame, your certain growth of greatness. You can soon forget me. Dear, I fretted you and flouted you when we were children. That was all, I think, ever. It is but little to regret."

"It is because I have no words to move you, to awake your soul−−"

"If you were an angel from heaven you would say nothing that could change me. And do not think of any soul in me, Signa; I have none. Has the butterfly any? You are mad, Signa! I was an idle child−−I am an idle woman. I love ease, luxury, riches, beauty. I toil! I hunger and thirst, and spin and sew! I plod after the oxen in the furrows! I! You are mad! You are mad, I say!"

His colour rose.

"There would be no need to toil. It would be a poor and simple life−−yes; that is true. But I could make enough−−I shall make more each year. All that I have should be for you. And it is honest money. Gemma−−see, dear−−I have always thought of you, and dreamed of you, and meant to seek you out and take you back, and set

you in the midst of every greatness I could get. When the great ladies courted me, I did not care for them. I thought, somewhere there is a little girl with golden curls I used to kiss;––for I forgot that you grew old as I did. When men talked of love to me I would say nothing, but I used to think––"when I find Gemma." Dear, that is over now. I cannot love you. You are a thing lost to me now for ever. Men do not love such women as you are. You are divided from me for ever. But you still are dear to me as if you were my sister. I would not touch your mouth with any kiss, for you have sold its kisses; I would not take your hand in mine, for you have perjured it; I would not, starving, break a crust of yours, for you are sold for it. But I will labour for you all my life; I will set away each coin I get for you; I will never have any joy, or mirth, or love in all my years, that I may work the better for you, and the oftener give you more. Dear, do not think it will be hard for me. You know I was reared hardly. I can live on nothing; and I can pass by woman's love and all that delights and leads away men most, because, in truth, the only thing I love is my great art. In this I have been given so much, that I can easily renounce the rest. Dear, do not think that it will be anything to me. Men have lived so in monasteries––lived and died happily. Gemma, if you will come back––listen––I swear to you I will dedicate all my life to yours. There is the shame of you between us two for ever like a grave. But since you never can be anything to me more than the dead are, no other creature shall be anything––that I swear, too. Dear, listen! After God and my music, you are most dear to me––yes, even as you are. Let me work for you. Say you have no soul, as the rose has none; yet when a rose has blossomed with us who can throw it in the sewer? And you are wrong: a soul you have, for I have seen your tears. Oh, heaven! What word can I find to tell you how utterly I mean the thing I say? Gemma––if I had done right, and had refused to let you go with me that day to Prato, you would be living with your sister still,––an innocent, frank, happy, stainless thing; and I should love you, and you would be all my own. This misery is of my act. I let you go that day. Your shame has come of it; and I can never even kiss you, dear, because there is no honesty upon your lips. But take you out of your dishonour and save your soul, I can––I will. Gemma, come back; and let me give my life for yours. On earth you will not be happy, dear––nay, never. But hereafter––What can I say to make you trust me and believe?"

The words poured from his lips swill, eager, breathless, unconsidered, in all their unreason, their unwisdom, their nobility, their ignorance, their folly, their sublimity. All the narrow sim− plicity of the peasant, and all the boundless vision of the poet, met in him as he spoke. He meant, to their very uttermost, every syllable he uttered.

She was gone from him; she was to him a thing terrible and almost loathsome. He burned with shame for her shame. Yet she was dear to him. He was ready to give his life to ransom hers. To him sin was real, and hell and heaven. What he dreamed of was impossible; but in his sight it was possible. It seemed to him that the faith to do it was so strong in him, that it could not fail to work its own fulfilment.

She listened.

As far as she could be touched by anything, she was moved by his suffering. It was strange to her; it even amused her; but it touched her. Poor boy! He had always seen living things in lonely, wayside stones; and lamented for the birds and beasts, because the priests said there was no eternity for them; and heard so many voices, that none else could ever hear, in the silent marshalling of the clouds by night, and the low whimper of the autumn ruffled brooks. She remembered all those things. He had been always so foolish––always.

It amused her. Yet it hurt her a little––ever so little––very, very little––too.

"Who would have thought he would have taken it to heart––like that?" she thought. And she felt a sort of sullen jealousy in her. It was not for her that he suffered so much. Not for the real woman, as she knew herself. Not for the' beautiful cold wanton whom Paris had called Innocence. It was for the playmate that had run with him that summer day over the plains to Prato: it was for the imaginary thing, which she had built up before him with her words, and dressed in her apparel of soft lies.

She was almost jealous: as astrologists were of shapes their magic conjured.

"Signa, do not be so full of pain," she murmured. "It is no fault of yours."

"Yes: it is mine. I let you go with me that day," he muttered. "Oh, poor Palma!––thinking of you night and morning––thinking of you safe with Christ!"

His head was bent down upon her knees, otherwise he would have seen her petulant proud mouth curve in a little smile.

She stretched her hand out, and musingly touched the soft curls of his hair.

He shrank, as if the touch had burnt him. She saw the gesture of aversion. It set her heart harder on the thing

she meant to do.

"You shudder from me," she said, sadly. "Well, that is natural, no doubt. But it is better to lose you from the truth, than keep you by a lie. I tell a million lies. All women do. But there is something in your eyes that will not let one lie. What is it?"

Lying all the while, she kept her hand upon his curls, stroking them gently, till, magnetised by the contact, he no longer moved away or strove to resist that touch, but looked down with his cheeks on fire and his pulse beating.

"I do not understand," he muttered. "I see two simple ways−−one right, one wrong. I would save you with my life;−−I say, with my soul;−−only you laugh at that."

"Nay, I do not laugh; for you−−you are of the things God makes to live for ever−−if he makes anything. I laugh when you talk of soul or mind in me. A woman has a body and a face; no. more. She has ten years' grace with them and glory; then she is withered up and shoved aside, and there is an end of all. I would make the most of my ten years. What harm?"

He looked at her in a blank despair. How could he give sight to what was blind?−−how make her shamed for what she did not see?

"Leave me alone," she said. "What matter? It is but such a little while a woman lives. With the first wrinkle on her skin, she dies. As well fret for each rose that falls each time it rains, I tell you. Signa,−−why stay to pain yourself and me? You cannot change me. Go back to your own hills, and dream your music there, and pray to all the saints with Palma−−if it please you."

"Palma! What is she to me!"

He rose and stood irresolute, impatient, bewildered. Go−and leave her! He felt as he had felt in the garden of Giovoli, hearing her laughter on the other side of the wall as she was swung by other hands than his up in the golden fruit−boughs. His face was burning; his heart was beating; his brain was giddy; he had spoken in all the earnestness of pain and truth. It seemed to him that she must loathe her life. It seemed to him that she must hate herself. He had spoken in full faith. He would have surrendered up his future years to hers, and served her faithfully for ever parted from her.

But then she did not seem to see−−

The passion of his sorrow fell back from her as hot tears may fall back from the red smoothness of a rose−leaf.

She leaned backwards on the cushions of her couch; her hands were tightly clasped behind her head; her wide sleeves fell back from her arms to the shoulder; her face was turned upward, with her blue eyes watching him through half−closed lids; her small scarlet mouth was but half shut, her breath came through it evenly as a child's; she smiled a little.

It maddened him to look on her.

He could not stir one pulse of shame in her.

He could only−−leave her.

So she said.

Had he been older, harder, wiser, he would have left her then, without an effort to change the unchangeable, to pierce the impenetrable; or he would have tossed her away from him with such scorn, such force, such loathing, that, finding her master in him, the cowardice which sleeps in every woman would have awakened in her, and brought her trembling to his feet. But he was not old, nor hard, nor wise; his heart was weak with all the innocent affection of his childhood, and for the first time the loveliness of a woman made him blind and stupid. She was so much to him: she was Gemma, whom he had kissed a thousand times in babyhood, tumbling in the flower−filled grasses of the green hillsides; and she was also the first woman whose look sent fire through his veins. She was near to him by a host of sinless memories; and she was sundered from him so utterly by sins so vile.

The world held nothing for him but herself.

To cleanse her from her golden corruption, to shake her conscience from its drugged apathy, to tear her away from the companions of her life,−− to do all this and save her for the eternity that he believed in, the boy would have given up his own life and his own soul.

All in a moment his art perished.

When a human love wakes it crushes fame like a dead leaf, and all the spirits and ministers of the mind shrink

away before it, and can no more allure, no more console, but, sighing, pass into silence and are dumb.

She, lying back with her golden head on her clasped hands, watched him.

She knew all he felt.

"Leave me," she said, with a slow soft smile. "You have your music, and the saints that you believe in, and Palma, who will pray with you. Why do you stay here? Go."

"I cannot go−−not so."

She stung him with Palma's name; poor, stupid, unlearned, bare−foot Palma, treading the earth as the ox did and the mule.

"Gemma! have you no conscience in you; no pain, no sorrow, no revolt against your fate?" he said, suddenly. "Oh, my dear! have I spoken to the winds? Is it because my words are weak that what I plead for seems so too? Gemma!−−I cannot leave you to your fate. It is to leave you to drink poison as the very water of life, and to die a dog's death at the end of all−−a street dog's, kicked and cursed. You speak of Palma. How can I look in Palma's face, leaving her sister lost as you are lost? The very hills there would rebuke me. The very stones at home cry out. Oh, God! What shall I say? If He put no soul in you, how shall I?"

She listened to the generous, foolish, noble, senseless words. Some of them stung her like thorns; some of moved her with wonder. He seemed to her such a fool−−ah, heaven! such a fool. He spoke as children dream. Yet, innocently, he lashed her with a scourge of nettles; for he rejected her with all his infinite tenderness; for he spoke of her as of a lost, degraded, alien thing; for he would not see his kiss upon her lips.

She rose on an impulse of rage to send him from her for ever;−−he would not touch her! She, who saw princes sue and lords in feud for her, could have thrust her foot and spurned him from her presence in her fury at his innocently uttered scorn.

When the heart is fullest of pain and the mouth purest with truth, there is a cruel destiny in things which often makes the words worst−chosen and surest to defeat the end they seek.

Each added word of his hardened more and more her will upon the course that she had set herself; stung all her warmest pride, and made more sure his doom with her.

No angel from heaven, no miracle of light shining as in the steps of Paul, could ever have changed her much; but he, in all his innocence, struck the iron of her wilful vanity and beat it into sharpest steel.

She rose erect on to her feet and thrust back the white wooden shutters before the casement nearest her, and let the dazzling effulgence of the intense noonlight pour on her, and bathe her in it, and turn the fairness of her hair to molten gold, the whiteness of her flesh to ivory, the flush of her cheeks to opal fires; her beautiful limbs shone in it like marble, her hair streamed against it till it was like an aureola of heaven, the ruthless light glanced on her and searched her everywhere, and found no flaw. Flowers droop in it; children pale in it; birds flee from it; but she bore it in all its intensity, and was but the more glorious in it.

He gazed at her. She stood erect, golden and white against the burning sun.

"Look at me!" she cried to him. "Look!−−the light that kills all other things and pales all other beauties, does but make mine the greater. Look at me! The sun may shine on me, search me, pierce me, it can find no fault anywhere. Look−−look−−look! There is no blemish anywhere, I say−−no flaw the sun can find. And you talk to me of penitence and pain! You talk to me of poverty and shame! You talk to me of going back to penance in a peasant's hut, and letting rains and winds and snows beat on my body! Look at me! While I am this, you think I care for heaven? You are mad! Unlovely, loveless women may cling to priestly tales of it, as hungry curs hope, shivering, for a bone. I give it with an hour of myself. Gods−−if there be gods−−can do no more than!"

The mighty blasphemy of her superb vanity seemed to him to burn through the golden light she stood in, as lightning through the sunbeams.

With her arms uplifted in the exultation of her measureless arrogance, and her eyes with contemptuous challenge glancing through their amorous drooped lids, a sudden memory struck him.

He cried aloud, as if some mortal hurt were done him in the flesh.

"You were the dancer of Istriel! You are the creature they call Innocence"

She looked him in the eyes straightly and serenely, her golden head erect under the nimbus of the noonday light.

"Yes. Well, then?−−what of that?"

He gazed at her breathless; a great tearless sob choked him: then he fell down senseless at her feet.

When he came to himself he was alone upon a bed in a darkened chamber. The wind was blowing over him; he heard birds singing.

Long fasting, sleeplessness, and violent emotion−−all had made him lose his consciousness for awhile; his brain was giddy still, the light swam before his eyes; he rose and staggered to the glass doors which stood open, and put the outer shutters aside and out into the air.

An old negress stopped him; was he not too ill? Would he not wait? Her mistress−−At the last word he put her hurriedly aside and hastened farther out; it was the house of this woman whom her world called, as the emperor his desert beast−−Innocence. He could not stay in it; the air of it seemed to stifle him.

Without well knowing what he did, he traversed the gardens with unsteady steps, the sunshine reeling and dancing before his half−blind eyes; then, his limbs growing stronger and his sight clearer as the wind blew on him from the water, he pushed his way through the maze of flowering shrubs and thick−set orange−trees out of the gardens down on to the shore. He sat down stupidly in the shadow of a boat and leaned his forehead on his hands, and, do what he would, saw only her−−standing against the light.

She was the dancer of Istriel.

"Well, what of that?" she had asked him.

What of it, indeed. It made her neither better and no worse. It changed nothing. To have been the nude model of a painter was not more than to have been the willing wanton of the world.

Yet it seemed more hideous to him.

It brought her vileness home to him.

It seemed to write her shame on earth and sky as on a scroll for every eye to read.

This was a fancy; but the fancies of poets are their hell, when they cease to be their heaven. And they cease so soon.

The dancer of Istriel had been seen by all the nations of the globe; that lovely, voluptuous, smiling thing, with her red blossom and her floating feet, had looked all mankind in the face and made them wish for her; to the boy she seemed sold to the whole earth−−made harlot for all the peoples of the world.

Istriel's gold had bought his Rusignuolo. Istriel's gold had purchased Gemma.

He owed his fame−−she, her ruin−−to the same hand. So he thought. He exaggerated his own debt, and he shut his eyes against her lie, as such natures as his will ever do, to hurt themselves and keep their faith in their false gods.

Where was Istriel?

In an aimless, hopeless passion, he longed to find this man−−this man who had taken her in her youngest youth and drawn every curve and coloured every hue of her fair frame so cruelly, and sent it out to let the eyes of all men gloat on it in public as they would. The crime of the painter against her seemed to him viler than all seduction. It seemed to him the very brutality of license; the very crown of outrage. The seducer fed but his own eyes with the beauty he unveiled; this man had fed ten million ravishers' eyes with hers.

It was the first passionate agony of his life. He had suffered before; but then with hope underneath him, bearing him up like the wings of some strong bird. He suffered now as those do who suffer without hope.

All these years gone and Palma praying there in an undoubting faith, and all the while nothing on earth or heaven heeding; but all this vileness done beyond recall−−beyond repair.

Do what he would he could not change this thing the years had made her.

Cry as he would to fate, no means could undo what had been done.

Nothing could give him back Gemma−−little fair Gemma, with unstained soul, sleeping as the lambs sleep in the bed of hay. And yet the loveliness of her burned him like so much flame.

He hid his face in his hands and saw her always as he had seen her come cut from the waters in the dark night amongst the red roses.

"Go, write a romance on me," she had said to him. But he could no more have done it than he could have flown to the sun with the eagles.

His brain seemed dead in him.

He heard no longer sweet concord in the waters, and lisped numbers in the murmurs of the winds; he looked back at his self of yesterday and wondered where the power in him had gone; all in a moment his art and his fame and all his high desires seemed to grow as nothing to him.

He shut his eyes and saw the fair limbs of a woman slowly moving through the shadows; a mouth that smiled a little, a bough of dark leaves and ruby buds, against a snow, white breast:−−that was all he saw.

His art:−−where was it?

It seemed to him like a dead thing. A sudden sense of vast immeasurable loss fell on him.

He was terrified; he did not know what ailed him.

In most men and women Love waking wakes, with itself, the soul.

In poets Love waking kills it.

Nature had been always to the boy so full of sympathy and solace. Beaten and hungry and overtasked in his childhood, he had been happy the moment that he had escaped alone into the open air on the breeze−blown hillpaths, with the sighing of the pines above his head; nay, happy even if he could but be by any little narrow casement and see the line of the old town wall with the lichens and vetches clear against the sky and in their crevices the shining lizards sitting. But now mountain and lake and the autumnal glories of the woods could bring no consolation; they only seemed to him cruel; they had no heart in them, they did not care.

The hideous universal sentence of corruption for the first time seemed to him written over all the things of earth and air.

For she was vile.

How the day passed he never knew.

It rolled away somehow; the sky seemed like a sheet of fire; the sun for the first time burned him and hurt him; he saw nothing but the form of a woman.

The man who had his opera at the town sought him and said:

"Only think!−−they will play your Lamia at the Apollo in Rome in Carnival. Only think!−−and at San Carlo too. Here are your letters."

He stared at the speaker and thrust the papers away, and did not answer.

He hardly understood.

His music?

It had been his religion. He was dead to it now. All in a day his innocent spiritual joys were withered up in him. What use was it? It could not alter her.

In proportion to the absorption of any life in any art, so is the violence of its dethronement and oblivion of art when love has entered.

It seemed to him that every note in all the world might be for ever mute, and he not care.

It seemed to him that if they said he was a fool and let him die nameless and despised, it would be no matter to him.

For he loved this fair foul thing; only he did not know it.

After awhile mechanically he found his way into his own chamber.

It was late in the day. The little room was filled with flowers that the village women, proud of having the young genius in their midst, had placed everywhere about. He did not notice them. But at the intense odour he shuddered a little; they made him think of the garden ways of Giovoli.

Without knowing what he did he sat down to the piano which stood there.

He began to play.

A torrent of passion, a passion of tears, were in the music that he made with no sense of what he did; the abruptest changes from pain to rap− ture; the strongest and greatest harmonies; the most capricious transitions, the most bitter woe were in the sounds he drew; never in all his creations had he reached so great a height as now, when he created what he did not care to preserve, what he had no brain left to measure.

By sheer instinct his nature cried aloud against its pain in the art that was inborn in him as its song in a bird.

Then all at once he ceased and loathed it: what use was it? it was only a mockery; it could not alter her.

Some of those who followed him and worshipped him−−for he was never now without some of these parasites of success−−standing outside his door, listened breathless in ecstasy; one or two, when the melody ceased, ventured in and kissed his hands, and cried to him:

"You never were so great!"

He looked at them dully.

"What good is it?" he said to them; and he went into his inner room and barred the door against them.

What good was it?

He was scarcely more than twenty years old; he had a great future; he had put his name in all the mouths of men; he had all that, dreaming under the pines above Bruno's house the night when the violin was broken, he had thought would be worth purchase by a whole long life of toil and poverty and renunciation and neglect.

And all was unreal and useless to him now. It seemed as if his hands grasped ashes and his ears were full of the sound of empty winds mourning through desolate places.

He went out in the air again.

He could not rest indoors.

He shook himself free, with impatience, of his disciples who would fain have accompanied him, and spoken to him of the coming reception of his operas down in Rome. He got away by himself to the shore of the lake; to the still and sombre shadows of a long−deserted garden that had been his haunt in happier hours.

There are times when the weakness of humanity falls back broken and heartsick before the iron wall of unchangeable circumstance, as a beaten seabird falls back from the stone face of the cliffs.

It was so with him now.

"If only I could save her!" he cried in his heart: and in his heart knew that he could not; not though he were to give his soul up for her own. Legends tell of such barters. Life does not know them.

Gemma had been her own destiny. But such destiny was as immutable as though the gods of old had shaped it.

She had stained her white marble red. Signa knew that though the stone should be washed seventy times seven and bruised into a million fragments, the dust would be never white again, but blood red always,−−always.

He had uttered his real thoughts to Gemma: to him she was like one leprous−stricken. Her story had filled him with pity, but with horror.

Bruno had taught him to hold wanton women accursed. Bruno, who again and again had fallen in their snares, had always bade him hold them like the deadly mushrooms that men gather for bread and find are death. Bruno, fearing the softness of the boy's nature, had said always to him, "Poverty is bad, and hunger and sickness and sorrow and labour that has no end−−these are all bad−−but worse than any of these is it to be the slave of a woman who is unchaste."

He wandered all the day. It seemed to him as if it would never end. He saw nothing but the face of Gemma. The world which had seemed to him so beautiful was changed; heaven was cruel. It created loveliness only to pollute it and deform it afterwards.

Out of his dreams he was brought face to face with facts that sickened him. All the old landmarks of his faith were gone. All the happy hopefulness of his nature was crushed. He was bewildered and sick at heart. And through it all he could not thrust away the personal beauty of the woman. Her gaze, her form, her breath, her smile, her sigh:−−he could think of no other thing. It seemed to him as if she were in the air, in the clouds, in the water; her voice rang in his ears; she was so lovely−−and yet she was so vile;−−she was so much more than a woman and so much less.−−"If only I could save her!" he said to himself, and then could have flung his forehead on the rock remembering that there was no way to make her other than she was; remembering that to be torn from shame is not to become innocent.

"Oh, dear God,−−all Palma's prayers!" he thought. They had been all in vain, like so much futile breath spent on the empty air to unresponding space.

The mockery of it stung him, as if God himself were jeering as a man might do.

He looked up stupidly at the broad noonday skies. There was the same sun, the same earth, the same water; beyond the plains, on the hills that he knew best, men and women were leading the same life, drawing the wine from the presses, driving the oxen over the green sods, gathering up the ripe olives, with the bells ringing over their quiet world. It seemed to him so strange. Everything was unchanged except himself, and he seemed to have become old and tired, and full of pain.

Only one night before, there had been no happier living thing in all the human world than he; and now−−he wondered that the sun did not stay in its course, that the waters did not rise and cover the land, that all the flowers were not withered off the ground−−since sin so cursed the earth.

The hours rolled by; he did not count them. The long hot day burnt itself out as passing passions do. The boats came and went; the sun sank and the moon rose. His own stars−−the stars of the Winged Horse−−shone down in

the first faint darkness of the early night.

He sat lonely on the solitary shore, watching the breeze−blown water without sense of what he saw.

He could not understand the anguish that blotted out for him all colours of earth and heaven.

All life had been to him as the divining rod of Aaron, blooming ever afresh with magic flowers. Now that the flame of pain and passion burned it up, and left a bare sear brittle bough, he could not understand.

Love is cruel as the grave.

The poet has embraced the universe in his visions; and heard harmony in every sound, from deep calling through the darkest storm to deep, as from the lightest leaf dancing in the summer wind; he has found joy in the simplest things, in the nest of a bird, in the wayside grass, in the yellow sand, in the rods of the willow; the lowliest creeping life has held its homily and solace, and in the hush of night he has lifted his face to the stars, and thought that he communed with their Creator and his own. Then−−all in a moment−−Love claims him, and there is no melody anywhere save in one single human voice, there is no heaven for him save on one human breast; when one face is turned from him there is darkness on all the earth; when one life is lost−−let the stars reel from their courses and the world whirl and burn and perish like the moon; nothing matters; when Love is dead there is no God.

Signa sat by the wind−tossed lake waters.

He did not know what had killed his soul in him. He only knew that his music was no more to him than the sound of stones shaken in a shrivelled bladder by an idiot's hand.

Bruno was avenged.

"Give me to the worms; let only my music live!" he had said again and again in his one prayer to Fate. Now−−what use were his fame or his art to him? They could not undo what was done.

Achievement holds its mockery, no less than failure.

The evening deepened; the stars of Pegasus grew clearer; a lovely silvered radiance spread over the face of the waters and the sides of the mountains. He had no sight for it and no care. He sat where he had wandered; the hill thyme under his feet; gold−fruited boughs above his head; the lake before him.

Through the soft gloom a white form stole towards him, a rose against her lips, as silence has, to hide her smiles.

She came and watched him a moment, and then laid her hands on his bent head.

"You went away without a word to me," she said. "I have looked for you since sunset, Signa."

He trembled from head to foot and sprang erect, and stood and gazed at her.

She waited a little while, then sank on the rough stone seat hewn out of a fallen rock where he had sat.

"Well?" she said, softly. "Have you nothing to say to me?−−nothing?"

"What can I say?" he muttered. "I wound you, I hurt you−−or I seem a fool."

"A noble fool," she said. "Such fools as heaven is peopled with, if the saints' tales be true."

His face flushed with the joy of her praise,

Yet what was any praise of hers worth?−−what value any word?

Her words were as the tinkling cymbals of brass which lead men to destruction. Her beauty was bare to all the world as Phryne's on the canvas of Gerome.

He had been reared in the stern judgments of the old Dante temper which still lived in the recesses of the hills; the temper which flung the nude marble and the voluptuous image in the flames at Savonarola's bidding.

"Why did you go away−−so?" she said to him. "I left you for a moment with my women, and when I went back you had fled, no one knew where."

"Knowing what I know, your house stifles me."

"That is how you repay me for the truth. I should have lied to you."

"You have let him paint the truth in scarlet letters for all the world to read."

"Istriel? Oh, that is so long ago!"

"He was your betrayer?"

"What does it matter?"

"He was?"

"What does it matter, I tell you; I have forgotten him. He is far away painting in the Ukraine, waiting for the great snows, they say, to draw the forests and the wolves. Perhaps the wolves will eat him. Let him be. He painted

me in a hundred ways. The first thing he did was of me standing like a little saint holding a dove and with those white roses that we call of the Madonna; he named the picture Innocence; that is how I had the name."

"He is in the snow−fields you say−−now?"

"I heard so−−yes. What does it matter? What would you do if he were here?"

He only looked at her. His face was very pale; his great eyes had an answer in them that she understood.

She laughed a little to herself.

"You would kill him? Poor Istriel! Why? Since did not?"

"You would have done if−−"

"If I had been Palma?"

She laughed again; aloud this time.

"If you had been−−a woman−−as God made them."

"How is that? God made Eve−−if He made anything, Do not use phrases, Signa. You learned that of your priests. You will die in a monk's robes, after all?"

He turned from her with an inexpressible pain.

"Oh, my God! You can jest!"

"Why not, dear? All my life is a jest. It goes merrily like bells. You will not understand."

"I will not believe! You cannot be so base."

"In a man it were philosophy! why in a woman is baseness?"

"You play with words! if you be happy why say a few hours since you were in hell?"

A faint smile broke across her face. She banished it before he saw it there.

"You know women so little if you ask that. We are in hell one hour and in heaven the next. 'Flower of an Hour.' That is a woman. I am happy−−very happy−−when you will not make me think."

He looked up at her again.

"Ah I if you would but think;−−but let your conscience wake."

"We said enough of that," she interrupted him, with coldness. "To−day I answered you, once and for all. If you want conscience, and terror of the saints, and all you call true womanhood, you have it all in Palma−−whom you leave! As for me−−I told the truth to you, judging you other than you are. I thought that you were fair enough, tender enough, sinless enough yourself to stay with me a little for our childhood's sake, without reproach. I have lovers where I will. I have no friend. Because I am no hypocrite, and will not take up at a moment's bidding sackcloth and ashes, and say the seven psalms of penitence, you shudder and leave me to my fate. You have no patience, no reason, no compassion. You cast me off because I am not ready to go back to the old, hateful, bitter, famished life, and say my mea culpa at the feet of Palma. You are mad. And do not speak to me of sorrow. If you had sorrow for me you would say 'this woman is alone in all her wealth, desolate in all her power, without a heart to trust amidst a troop of lovers.' You would say:−−'there is a gulf between us, yes, and any word of love from her to me, or me to her, is now impossible; but I will serve her still. I will not forsake her because she does not pile the cinders of a false repentance on her head; I will have more faith in the latent strength of patient purpose to win her back from error.' That is what you would say−−were you, indeed, the gentle boy I thought you. But you are like all the rest who imitate the saints. Tenderness with you means flattered vanity; you speak of your gods and act but for yourselves; you think you arm yourself with virtue, but your strength is only your own self−love sharp−wounded and irate. You preach to me; you bid me leave my world: you say you best had never see my face again−−and why! Because you hate my sins? Ah, no! Because you hate my lovers!"

His face flushed scarlet; he sprang to his feet.

The brutal truth, which yet was only half a truth, and bore rankest injustice with it, pierced him to the quick.

There were honour, fair faith, and purity of intent in him, which flung off the words, in honest rage, as calumny. Yet, like all words that lay bare any truth, they had the electric shock of lightning in them. Passionate repudiation sprang to his lips; then paused there; he was silent.

Was it less her sins he loathed than those who shared them?

He searched his heart in vain; all seemed dark there. He stood indignant, yet abased. He knew her words a lie, yet were his own all truth? He did not know. He was a mystery to himself.

To himself; but not to her. She watched him, knowing each pang that moved him, knowing each doubt that stunned him and confused him. The lovers of her world, though often their passion was high and their emotions

violent, could give her no such sport as this young soul which had dwelt in solitude with art and God, and was bewildered in the maze of passions that she dragged it to, as any antelope caught in the hunter's toils, when the forest is ablaze with torches and alive with steel.

"You do me cruel wrong−−God knows," he said, simply; and so turned and would have left her then for ever.

He knew she wronged him; but how much−−how little,−−that he could not tell; he was sure no longer of himself; nor of anything human or divine.

"What!" she said slowly. "You cannot even forgive me, then?"

He sighed from the depths of his heart

"I do forgive you−−everything. But who is to know the thing you really are? You seem so vile and soulless, all one moment, and the next−−Ah, let me go! It kills me to be here. Perhaps I hate your lovers, as you say. Perhaps. Your brothers would."

A dark scorn gathered in her eyes. He−−who had felt her hand amongst his hair, and on his drooping brow−−could speak so!

"My brothers! they would be glad enough if I gave them gold to spend at loto, and new wine to drink, as far as I remember them, which is but little. They bit and pinched me; and I stole figs and nuts to bribe them with, if ever I wanted them. If you have no better thing to say, than quote my brothers!−−"

"Say what I will you quarrel with it. Gemma−−if you be Gemma; sometimes still I think you cannot be−−let me go."

"I am not Gemma. Gemma was a little stupid child, fed on black bread and tumbling with the pig. I am Innocence. The Innocence of Paris."

And she laughed.

The laughter was like ice; and made him shiver, flesh and bone.

What had she not known, what had she not done, what brutalities of license had not she bent to in willing bondage, what cruelties and luxuries of vice had she not tasted, invented, been prodigal of−−what memories had she not, what horrors must she not have steeped her fair white beauty in−−he thought of all that, hotly, dully, as a drunken man will think of things that for ever pursue him, and yet are always vague to him.

The moonlight was about her; the crimson amaranthus flung its tall feathers around her: some marble sculptures shone behind her in the dark leaves of olive and of orange. She was so perfect to look upon; no sculptor ever made a fairer Clytie for the God of Song; and what had her life been; what were her memories; what was her foul knowledge? She was like the casket of silver that held the ashes of death.

It broke his heart to look on her.

To others she might be only one fair false woman the more, gone the way that all loose women take. But to him she was the very ruin of earth, the very mockery of heaven.

He clasped her hands with a great cry: "Oh, Gemma!−−have you no pity!"

Had she any?

She looked at him, thinking for the moment that she would be pitiful, and let him go−−go, whilst there was yet time; while she could still become to him a thing seen in a trance, a phantom soon forgotten, a mere name; go, whilst the horror in him was stronger than the love.

He was only a score of years old; he heard beautiful things in his dreams; he was loved by the people and cherished; his future would be greater than his present; he had the semi−divinity of genius; he had the virgin gold of an unworn heart; he had the fond mad faiths of a poet: if she let him go there was still time:−−time for him to leave in peace, forgetting her, in his art, as a feverish dream of the night is forgotten in the breaking of morning.

Would she have pity? it was but one plaything forborne; one leaf of the laurel ungathered. But she had said to herself, "Palma shall die of want of him, and I will be his god."

She said it again in her heart.

As much of warmth as she could know, stirred in her towards him.

His beauty, his youth, his very innocence, had a charm for her, such as sated Faustina or wearied Messalina might have found in some fair boy captive from Judea, with the simple asceticism of the Galilean fishers in his soul. And then he rebuked her, shrank from her, condemned her: it was enough.

In the day of their infancy she had done with him as she chose; should he be stronger than she was now?

He cleaved to his art and his faith; well, he should forswear both.

He was a little shell off the seashore that Hermes had taken out of millions like it that the waves washed up, and had breathed into, and had strung with fine chords, and had made into a syrinx sweet for every human ear.

Why not break the simple shell for sport? She did not care for music. Did the gods care−−they could make another.

"Have I no pity?" she murmured. "Nay, you only dream−−dreams are pale, cold things at best−−learn with me to live!"−−and she drew her hands from him and passed them round his throat and inclined his head towards her breast, and brought his lips to hers.

"Have I no pity?" she said.

His life passed into her life. His soul went from him and became her own.

CHAPTER IX.

IT was a soft, clear winter in the country round the Lastra.

On Christmas−day the wind−flowers were still rosy and purple and snow−white in the grass of the fields; and, with the new year, the red roses blossomed behind the iron bars of the casements, and in the corn−fields the crocuses were thinking that it was already time to come through the earth. Girls plaited at the doors on the mild mornings, as if it were summer; and there was seldom a curl of wood−smoke on the air, except when the soup−pots were simmering.

Men coming and going from the city, and post−bags dropped as the letter−cart ran down over the bridge from the Upper town; brought tidings, in the soft, silvery weather, of the Actea and the Lamia.

In all the cities one or the other was being given; north and south, under the Alps, and by the seashore of Vesuvius, they were playing and singing the music of the young master, who called himself by the old, historic word of "Signa."

"What name will you take for the great world?" they had said to him, when he was still but a little scholar.

"Only Signa," he had said; and he signed all that he wrote so.

"My mother was the flood, and my father the owls," he said to himself; he liked best to have it so; dead Pippa was a pain to him; and her lover, whoever he had been, whether prince or peasant, had no hold on his thoughts. "I am Signa," he said, that was all his own; owing no man anything for it, nor the Church either. Signa, just as the walls were, and the gates and the bells and the woods and the old painted frescoes.

Everywhere they were playing and singing his music, and it had even echoed over the Alps, and spread itself northward and southward, in that victory of the lyre with which his country has so often avenged herself for the invasions of the sword.

His music was in the throats of the people.

In grim Perugia Augusta, in dark Bologna, in smiling Como, in grand Ravenna, in the City of the syrens, in the busy marts of Milan, in sombre obscure Etruscan towns, in mighty opera houses, in little solitary theatres, anywhere, and everywhere, the melodies of the Actea and the Lamia were ringing; they had the pure science which allures the cultured ear, and the potent sympathies which sway the multitudes; learned doctors followed their accurate combinations with delight in the solitude of the study, and boys and girls caught their sweet simplicity with rapture, and sang them to the woods and fields, as birds their love calls.

The Actea and the Lamia were sisters and rivals both at once; the Asiatic slave, with her crucified god and her murdered master, and the Venus of the flute, with her crowned passion and her divine honours, divided between them the adulation of the people.

Some found noblest the sacrificed love, some the victorious; some the dishonoured grave that held the world for Actea, some the imperial art that rendered Lamia stronger than her tyrant; but whether one or the other, or whether both together, the two stories, old as the cities of the world are old, fresh as love is fresh, took hold upon the souls of the people, and by the interpretation of his harmonies thrilled the world anew, as Rome had trembled when Actea had wept, and Athens when Lamia had stayed the lifted sword.

There is a chord in every human heart that has a sigh in it if touched aright.

When the artist finds the keynote, which that chord will answer to, in the dullest as in the highest−−then he is great.

Signa had found it.

Found it by the instinct which men call genius, not knowing what else to say.

To the quiet Lastra, with the corn springing about it, and the smell of the pines coming down on the wind, and the fishermen throwing their nets in the full waters, tidings of these great triumphs of the little fellow who had run barefoot amongst them, came every now and then; written in letters, spelled out of news sheets, and oftener still brought by the mouths of men coming from the little fairs of the towns, or the grain markets of the city.

They played the Actea in the city itself before Christmas,

The men and women of the Lastra went many of them down into the city to hear this wonderful music which Pippa's son had made: poor Pippa, who had always plaited ill. And many more, who could not go, heard of it on the market−days and brought back all the strange marvels of it that were told, and said how, at midnight on Christmas Eve, when the people sang all together in the cathedral, praising God for the past year, for the good and ill together, some solitary voice had lifted itself and sung the death song of the Christians, insomuch that the whole multitude was carried away as with one impulse, and chanted it together as by one voice, standing and beating their breasts with streaming eyes under the great dome, when the music had got upon them, so that no force could restrain them, but they had poured out under the midnight stars into the fresh air, and gone their various ways in various streams in the teeth of the northern wind, singing the hymn still in all the streets, and filling Florence with it, as it had been filled in the olden time with the litanies of Savonarola.

All that Bruno heard when he drove his mule through the little towns, or went down into the city to buy or sell; all that and much more of the same spirit in the winter−time, when he worked by lanthorn−light early and late, and the snow lay on the mountains between him and the sea.

Luigi Dini went and heard, and said his Nunc Dimittis in the great peace of his heart. He had loved Music, and had served her as the very humblest and lowest of her drudges; and it had been given to him to feed on his crumbs of knowledge, and refresh with his cup of the water of faith, this young High Priest had hers, this heaven−born Apollino.

Sitting in an obscure corner of the vast area of the Pagliano, the old man heard the thunders of applause, and saw the house filled from floor to roof, and listened to the grave song of Actea, and thanked fate which had let him live so long: few men can do as much.

"Will you not go and hear it?" he said to Bruno.

Bruno answered−−

"No."

"No! Not when the city rings with it?"

"Why should I? I have heard it−−long ago−−when he was a little child, sitting in the thrashed straw, plating on the old cracked lute I gave him. I had it all−−so long ago."

"A child's twitterings on a lute! You talk idly−−you know nothing of this."

"I know enough," said Bruno. For in his heart he still hated it, the art which had taken away Pippa's son. It was always his antagonist; always his conqueror.

But for that, Signa would have been so happy in the little house that would have been built by the brook where the rushes blew. So happy−−and safe always.

He and Palma worked in the short winter days, and got up in the dark and beat the black earth for their daily bread; and neither of them ever forgave this mystical passion which had usurped the life of Signa, and taken him from them to give him to the world.

Bruno worked early and late, because it had been his habit from his birth upward, and had so grown into him as to be a very part of himself. But he had lost zest in it. He had no longer any aim. The man, by temper open−handed, did not care to save for saving's sake, and the mere pleasure of seeing the money accumulate, as most men did; and Signa did not want his help. Signa earned his own money.

Life, without a central purpose around which it can revolve, is like a star that has fallen out of its orbit. With a great affection or a great aim gone, the practical life may go on loosely, indifferently, mechanically, but it takes no grip on outer things, it has no vital interest, it gravitates to nothing.

Bruno was too hardy and too used to the ways of labour to leave any labour undone or ill done; but the days were all stupid alike to him; he would have been content to have had no more of them. His crops, his cattle, his fruits, his oil ceased to fill him with pride, or to rack him with anxiety; a bad year or a good year was the same to him; he had no end to save for; there was Lippo in the three fields by the brook: and Signa wanted no help. The old gloom fell upon him; the old dark thoughts took possession of him.

The people on the hill saw that he worked harder than ever he had done before, now that he was once more alone. But they did not know that the joy had gone out of the work for him.

Before, Bruno had had that pride and pleasure in his daily labours without which labour is but as the task of the treadmill. In his comely stacks, in his even furrows, in his plenteous crops, in his cleanly vines, in his well−nourished beasts he had taken delight. His fields had been to him as a fair picture; his harvests as a stout

victory; he would have ploughed against any man to and fro the steepest slope with the same triumph in his skill as a Napoleon in his battles.

But now all that was changed with him. His work had lost that gladness in it which alone sweetens life's perpetual struggle. A sense of captivity had come over him. That large liberty which the breath of the mountains gives had gone away from him.

One market−day he had to stay later in the city over a bargain, which Savio had bidden him miss on no account; it was night before he could harness his little beast and think of moving homeward. It was Twelfth−night, and all the place was in a pleasant tumult. Carnival had come in that day, and everywhere there were laughter and lights and sport and jest, and at the corners of the streets masks were dancing.

Time had been when he had had full zest in that merry fooling; when he had come down in the dark evenings from his homestead, walking all the way, and spent the midnight in the masked riot, leaping round the bonfires and flying in the circles of the mad dancers, and then had gone up again, before dawn broke, to his oxen and his wheat−fields and his olive−pressing.

But those days were done for him; he passed through the mummers dark and silent, with never a look at them, with his cloak wrapped across his mouth. His errand took him past the great theatre; the lighted lamps gleamed on the printed word of Actea; a multitude was thronging in while the city clocks chimed eight.

Bruno halted a moment. He had said he would never hear it. A sort of hatred thrilled in him at sight of the gathering people: it was to fill their ears and to have his name in their mouths that Signa had foresworn the old safe ways of his mother's people.

So Bruno thought, at least, who did not know that genius is, at its best, but a slave, driven on by the whip of an imperious and incomprehensible obligation.

He had said he never would hear it, But at sight of that dense crowd pressing inwards, a curious impulse to go with them seized on him.

Without thinking much what he did, he entered too; drew from his pouch the price they asked him; and found himself carried onwards by the pressure into the body of the house.

He had been there once or twice in his life−−no more. It is the theatre of the people indeed, but peasants go to humbler ones, and Bruno, except on carnival nights, had never, even in his maddest years of youth, spent much time in the city. The Lastra had been his world.

He stood and leaned against a pillar as he might have done in a church, and the sweet, solemn harmonies of the overture thrilled through the immense space round him.

Look where he would there was a sea of human faces; the theatre was crowded, and there was not empty room left for a little child. A curious emotion filled him with pain and pride together. All this throng of living people was summoned by the magic of the boy whom he had lifted from the breast of his dead mother like a lamb from a drowned ewe. He had never realised before what thing it was; this power of the artist on the multitude; this power which is most the result of genius in proportion as it is least its object. As he watched the silent, breathless multitude such a power seemed to him like a sorcery.

He recognised the beauty of the music, but it was not that which moved him. It was to see all that wrapt intent throng of men and women ruled by the spell cast on them by the boy who, to him, was still only as a child: the boy who only a day before, as it seemed to him, had been a little thing carrying a lead of vine−leaves for the cattle, and happy if a crust of bread were given him to eat on the hill−side at noonday.

He stood and watched and listened; the rapturous applause, the tearful silence, the ecstasies of admiration, made his brain dizzy, and his heart throbbed. This was fame,−−to hold a mass of idle, curious, indifferent people in these trances of delight, in these rhapsodies of emotion;−−he understood it at last. Each wave of these great sounds seemed to lift the boy he loved farther and farther from him. The shouts of the multitude were like the noise of a sea tempest in his ears, bearing away from him and drowning the one innocent affection of his life. He realised his own impotence to follow or reach or do anything more to aid the life which had been swept out of his orbit. All in a moment Signa grew an inaccessible, unfamiliar, far−distant thing to him−−like any one of those stars which he looked up to at night, and which the priests said were worlds lying in the hollow of the hand of Deity.

"It is to be like a god," he said to himself, as the music pealed through the space around him, and held the

people quiet in the breathlessness of their delight. He did not wonder any more that Signa had refused to be content with beating the earth for his daily bread.

He heard two men close by him say:−−

"It is strange the boy himself should be away−−the first time any of his music is given here−−his own city, too, as one may call it."

"Aye: he is in Rome. They play the Lamia there in carnival."

"And there is a woman, so they say."

"There always is a woman."

The two men passed onward, laughing.

Bruno touched them.

"Sirs−−forgive me−−is that true?"

"Is what true?"

They looked at him in surprise; a contadino with his dark cloak about bird, and his careless defiance of attitude, and his look of the mountain and the weather.

"That which you said−−that 'there is a woman; that this is why he does not come?"

"All we know nothing," they answered him lightly. "So they say. So young as he is, and a lion everywhere, it is quite natural. But what can it be to you?"

"I am from his country," said Bruno, simply; he thought, perhaps, it would not do the lad good to say much more. "I come from the Lastra, if you could tell me anything of him?"

"Indeed we know nothing," said the men. "We never saw the youth; but everyone is talking of him; so they will gossip−−it may not be true. That is all; somebody said a woman kept him down in Rome−−some light woman out of France. But they would be sure to say so, true or untrue. Fame is a sugared paper; but it brings all wasps down on it. Nay, indeed, we know no more."

And with many asseverations and many excuses, as though he were a prince and not a peasant, courtesy being the common way of the country, the men went out through the crowd into the night air, and Bruno followed with the pressing throng.

"Some light woman out of France."

The words sung in his ear like a hornet's booming.

He went and harnessed his mule, and went back through the gay merry glittering streets, and over the river across dark Oltrarno, and so out into the solitary country.

He met scarcely anyone upon the way.

The high road was quiet as a bridle−path across the fields, and the Lastra was hushed, with fastened casements, and asleep.

The mule flew speedily over the level ground, and strained slowly up the steep hill road; the river shone−−the leafless plain was dark−−the night was very cold−−the skies were clouded−−a dark winter storm hung over where the sea lay, and hid the Lyre and the Cross of Cignus and the five stars, dedicated to the plumed steed which bears poets to their dreams, and lifts them to the highest height−−to let them fall.

"A light woman out of France."

The words went with him as a curse rings on the ear long after it is spoken.

What would she do with him? with that tender reed of his soul, which the gods had singled out from all its fellows, and taken away from the mountain brook of its birth to make into a flute for their pleasure?

Bruno drove on through the gloom up into the loneliness of his own hills.

He felt like one chained.

The life which had seemed to him the best of all lives grew into a prison cell. He was wedded to the soil; fastened down to one daily track; held fast as by a cord about his feet.

It had always seemed to him so well that a man should never stir from one nook−−should get his bread where his fathers got theirs−−should find his joys and his pains in one spot−− should live and die on the soil that saw his birth. Men who sought fortune far afield had seemed to him no better than the gypsies. Men who bore their reckless discontent for ever to fresh pastures had seemed to him base sons of a fair country. A narrow field was a world too wide for a man to do the duties of it, so his people had always said; dwelling here, and letting the centuries go by without bringing to them any change. Generation after generation, they had filled the graves that

the sheep cropped around the old brown church. He had always said, "mine will be there too," and been content.

Now−−all in a moment−−the hill−side that he loved narrowed to a prison−house. Other men were free to come and go, to follow the evil that they dreaded, and seek it out and combat it; but the peasant cannot stir.

The earth has fed him; the earth claims him. He is her son, but he is her bondsman too; as Ishmael was Abraham's.

All peril and all shame might encompass the young wandering life of Signa: and the man who had set himself to give his own life for it could no move to see the truth or wrestle against fate.

"A light woman out of France."

The words ran with him through the dark like furies chasing him.

It might not be true: it might be true.

It might be true: what likelier?

Signa, inspired of heaven, and amongst sharp human eyes a fool−−as genius always is;−−a giant in his art, an infant in his ignorance;−−what plaything costlier or more alluring to a woman?

He had the power of the Apollo Cytharaedus indeed over men; but in all other things, save his music, he was but a child; a child still half asleep, who looked at life with smiling eyes, and stretched his hands to it as to a sunbeam. What likelier than that a woman held him? and a woman worthless it was sure to be.

The heart of silver falls ever into the hands of brass.

The sensitive herb is eaten as grass by the swine.

Fate will have it so. Fate is so old, and weary of her task; she must have some diversion. It is Fate who blinded Love−−for sport−−and on the shoulders of possession hung the wallet full of stones and sand−−Satiety.

Bruno reasoned nothing so.

Only he knew the boy; and he knew Love; and he said to himself:

"Fate will come that way."

He had no hope; he felt that what the men had said was true. There was a woman yonder there in Rome.

Of course it might be so, and no harm come. Hurricanes pass; some trees stand and are the stronger for the storm; some break and fall for ever.

Or there might be no hurricane; only a sweet, mild, south wind that blew a little hotly for a space, and whirled him on it like a straw;−−no more.

But not to be there!−−not to know! Going through the winter night to his lonely house, Bruno felt as though the soil that he had loved as loyal sons their mothers, was a gaol.

His feet were lettered to it.

An alien force held the life that he had sworn to save, and might destroy it and he never nearer, but working like his beasts amongst the sprouting corn, from dawn to night, no freer than the beasts were.

Reaching the summit of the hill he looked back southward to the low mountains that lie between the plain and Rome.

The black clouds that folded the Winged Horse in their mists had now stretched thither; over those mountains there was darkness, but the stars were seen. Far away, above where they told him was the place of Rome the star Argol was shining clearer than all the rest.

Astrology and astronomy alike were nought to him; he could find his way by Polaris if wandering at night−−that was all: for the rest they were to him only veiled, nameless wonders that he never thought of: only this star he knew. Argol dreaded of Arab and Chaldean.

For on the night when Dina had died above there where the pines were, that star had shone alone, as it did now, when all the sky was dark.

And an old man, now dead, a shepherd, who had been a soldier of Napoleon in his youth, and had brought strange perilous faiths and fancies with him from the land of Egypt, had said to him that night when Dina had died:

"That is the Demon Star. We knew it in the desert. It means death−−or worse."

Bruno had known it always ever after; he knew it now. Argol was shining above Rome.

Men who dwell in solitude are superstitious. There is no "chance" for them.

The common things of earth and air to them grow portents; and it is easier for them to believe that the universe revolves to serve the earth, than to believe that men are to the universe as the gnats in the sunbeam to the

sun; they can sooner credit that the constellations are charged with their destiny, than that they can suffer and die without arousing a sigh for them anywhere in all creation. It is not vanity, as the mocker too hastily thinks. It is the helpless, pathetic cry of the mortal to the immortal nature from which he springs:

"Leave me not alone: confound me not with the matter that perishes: I am full of pain−−have pity!"

To be the mere sport of hazard as a dead moth is on the wind−−the heart of man refuses to believe it can be so with him. To be created only to be abandoned−−he will not think that the forces of existence are so cruel and so unrelenting and so fruitless. In the world he may learn to say that he thinks so, and is resigned to it; but in loneliness the penumbra of his own existence lies on all creation, and the winds and the stars and the daylight and the night and the vast unknown mute forces of life−−all seem to him that they must of necessity be either his ministers or his destroyers.

Bruno went on with a shudder in his veins−−beholding Argol.

He had released his weary mule from his burden and walked up the steep path between his winter fields, holding the drooping mouth of the beast. It was very cold in the hours before morning on the heights where he dwelt. There was ice on the roots of the pines where the rain waters had settled, and the north winds chased the great clouds around the head of the hill. His home was dark and silent.

When he had put the mule in the stall and thrown down hay for it, he entered his house with the cheerlessness of the place closing in upon him like a numbing frost. He paused on his threshold and looked back at the southward skies.

Argol was shining over Rome.

He set his lantern down before his crucifix that hung against the wall.

"Are you not stronger than that star?" he muttered to it. "I have tried hard to serve you−−are you not stronger?−−can you not save him?−−let the star take my soul if it must have one. My soul!−−not his. Do you not hear? Do we all cry−−and you are deaf? Let the star do its worst on me−−that does not matter. Do you hear?"

The crucifix hung motionless upon the wall. He had expected some sign; he knew not what.

Men had often been answered by such signs; so the priest told him; out of the lives of saints in the legend of gold.

But for him all was dark; all was silent. No voice answered him in his perplexity. Nothing cared.

Only through his open door he saw the blackness of the night and Argol shining.

CHAPTER X.

"DEAR Nita," said Lippo, this night, toasting himself over a little pot of charcoal, "do you know I met my old friend Fede in the city this morning; he has come from Rome."

Nita grunted an indifferent assent; she was sorting and numbering a pile of sheets and other house linen; her eldest daughter Rita was about to marry a corn chandler of Pistoia,−−a very good marriage, for the youth was rich and had a farm to boot, and Rita was of that turbulent temper, and had that strong love of theatres, jewellery, and gadding about, which makes a burden of responsibility that a mother prefers to shelve from her own shoulders to a son−in−law's, as soon as may be.

"Fede is doing well in Rome," said Lippo, loquacious and confidential as it was his wont to be, especially when he had anything in his mind that he intended to keep secret. "Only think! twenty years ago Fede was a poor lean lad here, glad to get a copper by the holding of a horse or running with a message; and now he is as plump and well−to−do a soul as one could want to see, with a shop of his own and good money in the banks, and a vineyard by Frascati−−all by knowing how to get old women to give their dingy lace up for a song, and coaxing ploughmen to barter old coins they turn up from the mud for brand new francs, and having the knack to make cracked pots and pans and pipkins into something wonderful and ancient! What a thing it is to be clever. But Providence helps always those who help themselves."

"What have we to do with Fede?" said Nita, who knew that when her lord praised Providence for helping others he generally had put his own spoon into the soup−plate.

"Oh, nothing−−nothing!" said Lippo, caressing his charcoal pan. "Only if ever we see any little old thing−−no value, you know−−a saucer or a pitcher or a cup or a plate that the old folks use about here,−−there are scores, you know; why we can give them nice new platters or jugs fresh made from Doccia, and take the old ones and send to Fede−−do you see? We shall do a good turn so to all our friends; to those poor souls, who will have new whole things to use instead of old ones, and to Fede, who deals in such droll antique thugs to the rich foreigners."

Nita's eyes sparkled.

"He will we us well for them?" she said, suspiciously, never having learned in all her years of marriage the fine arts and the delicacy of her lord.

Lippo waved his hand.

"Oh, my dear!−−between friends! Fede is the soul of honour. It will be a pleasure to look out for him; and, besides, such a benefit to one's poor neighbours, who will have whole, smooth, pretty china instead of the cracked clumsy pots that the silly English−speaking nations like to worship. I did say to Fede−−for one must always think of what is just in conscience before all else −−is it right to sell pipkins and pans for idols to the English? And Fede said that for his part, too, he had had that scruple; but that the English are pagans, all of them, always, and if they cannot get a pipkin to put on an altar under glass, fall on their knees before a big red book, like a mass−book, that they call a Pì−rage; no one knows what is in it, only by what they find there, or do not find, they smile or frown; some book of a black art, no doubt. So that the pipkin is the more innocent thing, because, when they got a pipkin, then they smile all round. So Fede says−−"

"But he will pay us well for anything we find," said Nita, always impatient of her husband's moral digressions; "Many old wives I know of have platters and jugs hundreds of years old and more−−if that is what they want−−such rubbish!"

Lippo waved his hands with a soft gesture to the empty air.

"Dearest!−−we are alone. It does not matter. I know your noble nature. But if any one were here−−a stranger, or the children−−they might think, hearing you, that our souls were basely set on gaining for ourselves. Praise be to the saints;−−we are above all need of that, now."

"With Toto spending all he does!" grumbled his wife, who, for her part, thought it very silly to waste such pretty periods when nobody was listening; why wash your face, she thought, unless you walk abroad?

"The pleasure," continued Lippo, as though she had not interrupted him; "the pleasure will be in doing two

good turns for one; to Fede, whom we have known all our lives−−good, thrifty, honest soul, and to our neighbours; just those dear old wives you spoke of, who will be made happy by nice new china in the stead of ugly cracked old pots, heavy as iron. And then there may be now and then a little matter of lace, too−−or a crucifix−−or a bit of old embroidery,−−anything that is very ugly and dropping quite to pieces pleases the foreigners. There is so much hereabouts; in the old farms and the dames' kitchen−nooks! But of that we will talk more. It is a new idea. Fede just spoke of it this morning. He said to me, 'There is much money to be made this way−−not but what I know you do not care for that−−only to serve me and your towns'−folks.' And so he took me in my weakest point!"

Nita grinned; marking her sheets.

She was a rough downright vigorous woman, with some sense of humour, and the delicate reasonings of her husband, when they did not rouse her wrath, tickled her into laughter.

She did not understand that he deceived himself with them almost as much as he did others; blowing round himself always this incense of fair motives till he believed the scented smoke was his own breath.

"It is quite a new idea," pursued Lippo, "and may turn out some benefit to ourselves and others. The other lads are all well placed, but Toto is a torment,−−nay, dear boy, I know you love him best of all, and so do I; perhaps, after my Rita, but his bold bright youth boils over at times. Oh, it is only the seething of the new pressed grapes; the wine will be the richer and the better by−and−bye;−−oh, yes. Still, love, there is no being blind to it; Toto is a cause for trouble. Now I see an opening for Toto down in Rome, with Fede. The dear boy does not love labour. It will just suit him well; sauntering about to find the pots and pans and lace and carvings, and idling in the shop to show them afterwards to the great strangers and fine ladies. And Fede will look after him and have a care of him−−a fatherly care; and Toto, in time, may come to have a vineyard of his own out by Frascati. And he will please the ladies,−−he is a pretty lad. Yes, Fede spoke much of it to me to−day. He wants just such a boy,−−and hinted at a partnership in trade hereafter. Of course the future always rests with God. We see imperfectly."

"It seems a nice easy trade," said Nita, tempted; "and lying must be handy in it; that would suit him. No one lies so nattily as Toto."

"Oh, my love!" sighed Lippo, "make no jests of the dear lad's infirmity; his sportiveness leads him into danger, and he is too quick of wit; it is a peril for young tongues,−−sore peril. But you mistake, indeed. This trade, as you call it, is a most honest one. It buys from some people what they do not want, to sell to some others what they long for; it helps the poor, and shows the rich innocent ways of casing their overflow of gold. Oh! a most honest trade; a trade indeed that one may even call benevolent. You cannot think that I would place your precious boy in any employ where the soul's safety would be imperiled for him. But to see well into this thing and judge of it, and study Fede's books, which he offers in the most candid way to show to me, it will be needful that I should run down with him to Rome."

"What! " screamed his wife, and let her sheets fall tumbling to the ground.

In all their many years of wedded life Lippo had never stirred from her roof for any journey; she had been a jealous woman, and he had given her cause for jealousy, though never means of proof that she had cause; besides, no one ever stirred from the Lastra from their life's beginning to its end, unless for some day out at Impruneta ass−fair or the feast of S. Francis in Fiesole, or the grain and cattle markets over the plain at Prato, or such another town. Folks of the Lastra never travel. It is not a Tuscan way.

"Fede goes down to−morrow, and I think it will be well that I should go with him," said Lippo, who was quite resolved to go, but never made a scene for anything, holding that rage and haste knotted your flax and never carded it. "It is a great opening for Toto, your father will see that; and I think the very thing that will be suited to the lad−−for, even you, my love, cannot deny that he is idler than one well could wish. It will cost very little,−−only the journey. I shall lodge and eat with Fede; that is understood. And then there is your aunt, my dear, the good old Fanfanni; I might look in on her at Assisi, passing; you have had ill news of her health, and she has no chick nor child, and what she has will be going to the Church, unless, indeed−−"

"Then it is I should go, not you," said Nits, hotly. "The Church! If she has any bowels for her own kin−−never! My father's only sister, and we with six sons and daughters! To the Church!−−oh, infamous! I will go with you, Lippo."

"Oh, my dearest, if you only could! But only ten days to Rita's marriage, and the young man coming here daily, and all the bridal clothes unmade; you never can be spared; it would not be decorous, my dear, and I shall

be back in such a little time. Three nights at most; and, as for your aunt's money and the Church−−my love, we must use no influence to hinder any sickening soul from making peace with heaven. For me, I shall not say a word. If she wish to leave it to the Church, she shall, for me. But, old and ailing and alone, it is only fit that one should show her that, though she quarrelled with your father in her haste, we bear no malice, and no coldness; that is only right; and, perhaps, if you put up some little thing−−some raspberry syrup or some preserved peaches−−just some little thing that I could take with me, it might be well−−to show we bear no malice. Dear, pack me a shirt or two, and a suit of clothes in case of getting wet; I need no more. And now I will go down and tell your father: he is so shrewd and full of sense. I never do anything without his counsel."

Lippo went downstairs, knowing that old Baldo would count out a score of dirty yellow notes to be rid of the lad Toto, or have the mere hope of being rid of him; and his wife grumbling and screaming and crying she was the worst used woman in the land, yet did his will and packed him up his things.

Nita believed she ruled her husband with a rod of iron; but, unknown to herself, she was bent by him into as many shapes and to as many uses as he liked.

A firm will, sheathed in soft phrases, is a power never resisted in a little household or in the world of men.

"After all, Toto will be miles away in Rome," she mused; thinking uneasily of many freaks and foibles which made the Lastra hot as an oven for her Benjamin, and many a bundle of good money wheedled out of her by false stories to be thrown away into the bottomless abysses of the tombola or the State lottery.

So she packed her husband's shirts, grumbling but acquiescent, and added little dainties for the old aunt at Assisi, and put with them a pictured card of the Agnus Dei, and then went out and told her neighbours that her lord was called away to Rome.

To Rome! It was as if she said, To the very end of the known world. It gave her a kind of dignity and majesty to have a husband travelling so far; it made her almost like a senator's wife; she almost began to think the Pope had sent for him.

So Lippo got his will and departed in peace, where any other man, less mild and clever, would have raised a storm above his head and gone away under a rain of curses.

Nita was a shrew, certainly, and Baldo a crabbed old curmudgeon, and both, when Lippo had married, had held their money−bags tight; but Lippo by good judgment and wise patience had got both Nita and Baldo under his thumb without their knowing it, and had the money−bags too; and yet he never said a harsh word−−never.

"The fool is violent," said Lippo. "If we can only fly and fume like angry dogs, why is our reason given us?"

Man was marked out from the brutes by the distinctive human faculty of being able to cheat his fellows; that was what he thought, only he never used any such word as cheat. He never used any unpleasant words. If driven by the weakness of mortality ever into any breath of anger, he confessed it to his priest with instant and unfeigned repentance. He was ashamed of it as an error of intelligence.

"If we sin with our body, perhaps we cannot help it; that is animal in us," he would say: "but to go astray with our mind is shameful. That is the human and divine part of us."

And he used his humanity and divinity with much skill for an unlearned man, who only knew the little world of his own birth−place.

And he journeyed now to Rome peaceably, keeping the real chief object of his journey to himself, and pausing at Assisi to see the old sick aunt, whom he so charmed with his syrups and confections and his disinterested religious fervour, that she made up her mind that Mother Church was, after all, as well off as a fat sitting hen, and determined to leave her savings, which made a nice little nest−egg, as her life had been long and prudent and laborious, to this good man and to his children.

"Though Baldo is a bad one," said she, shaking her white head.

Lippo smiled and sighed.

"Oh, a kind soul, only too bent on things of the mere passing world, and thinking too much that heaven is like the binding to a shoe−−the last thing to be thought of, and stitched on in a minute when you want."

"A bad one," said the old woman, thinking all the more evil of him from his son−in−law's gentle words; for Lippo, though he had never heard of a little crooked poet in the northern isles, knew, to perfection, the artistic way to "hint a fault and hesitate dislike."

And when he was gone, she hobbled straight to a notary's office in the town and made her testament, bequeathing a small sum for masses for her soul; but leaving all the rest to her grandnephews and nieces in the

Lastra, under their father's rule.

"Mother Church is plump enough without my crumb," she said to herself, "and never a priest amongst them all has ever thought to bring me a sup of syrup. They can give one eternal life, I know, but still when one's cough is troublesome−−"

So Lippo, dropping his bread on many waters by the way, journeyed discreetly down to Rome.

CHAPTER XI.

BRUNO lay down that night, but for an hour only. He could not sleep.

He rose before the sun was up, in the grey wintry break of day, while the fog from the river rose like a white wall built up across the plain.

It is the season when the peasant has the least to do. Ploughing, and sowing, and oil pressing, all are past; there is little labour for man or beast; there is only garden work for the vegetable market, and the care of the sheep and cattle, where there are any. In large households, where many brothers and sisters get round the oil lamp and munch roast chestnuts and thrum a guitar, or tell ghost stories, these short empty days are very well; sometimes there is a stranger lost coming over the pinewoods, sometimes there is a snow−storm, and the sheep want seeing to; sometimes there is the old roistering way of keeping Twelfth−night, even on these lonely wind−torn heights: where the house is full and merry, the short winter passes not so very dully. But in the solitary places, where men brood alone, as Bruno did, they are heavy enough; all the rest of the world might be dead and buried, the stillness is so unbroken, the loneliness so great.

He got up and saw after his few sheep above amongst the pines; one or two of them were near lambing; then he laboured on his garden mould amongst the potato plants and cauliflowers, the raw mist in his lungs and the sea−wind blowing. It had become very mild, the red rose on his house−wall was in bud, and the violets were beginning to push from underneath the moss; but the mornings were always very cold and damp.

An old man came across from Carmignano to beg a pumpkin gourd or two; he got a scanty living by rubbing them up and selling to the fishermen down on the Arno. Bruno gave them. He had known the old creature all his life.

"You are dull here," said the old man, timidly; because every one was more or less afraid of Bruno.

Bruno shrugged his shoulders and took up his spade again.

"Your boy does grand things, they say," said the old man; "but it would be cheerfuller for you if he had taken to the soil."

Bruno went on digging.

"It is like a man I know," said the pumpkin−seller, thinking the sound of his own voice must be a charity,−−"a man that helped to cast church bells. He cast bells all his life; he never did anything else at all. 'It is brave work,' said he to me once, 'sweating in the furnace there and making the metal into tuneful things to chime the praise of all the saints and angels; but when you sweat and sweat and sweat, and every bell you make just goes away and swung up where you never see or hear it ever again−−that seems sad; my bells are all ringing in the clouds, saving the people's souls, greeting Our Lady; but they are all gone ever so far away from me. I only hear them ringing in my dreams.' Now, I think, the boy is like bells−−to you."

Bruno dug in the earth.

"The man was a fool," said he: "Who cared for his sweat or sorrow? It was his work to melt the metal. That was all."

"Aye," said the pumpkin−seller, and shouldered the big yellow wrinkled things that he had begged; "but never to hear the bells−−that is sad work."

Bruno smiled grimly.

"Sad! He could hear some of them as other people did, no doubt, ringing far away against the skies while he was in the mud. That was all he wanted; if he were wise, he did not even want so much as that. Good day."

It was against his wont to speak so many words on any other thing than the cattle or the olive harvest or the prices of seeds and grain in the market in the town. He set his heel upon his spade and pitched the earth−begrimed potatoes in the skip he filled.

The old man nodded and went−−to wend his way to Carmignano.

Suddenly he turned back: he was a tender−hearted fanciful soul, and had had a long lonely life himself.

"I tell you what," he said, a little timidly; "perhaps the bells, praising God always, ringing the sun in and out,

and honouring Our Lady; perhaps they went for something in the lives of the men that made them? I think they must. It would be hard if the bells got everything; the makers nothing."

Over Bruno's face a slight change went. His imperious eyes softened. He knew the old man spoke in kindness.

"Take these home with you. Nay; no thanks," he said, and lifted on the other's back the kreel full of potatoes dug for the market.

The old man blessed him, overjoyed; he was sickly and very poor; and hobbled on his way along the side of the mountains.

Bruno went to other work.

If the bells ring true and clear, and always to the honour of the saints, a man may be content to have sweated for it in the furnace and to be forgot; but if it be cracked in a fire and the pure ore of it melt away shapeless? The thought went confusedly through his brain as he cleaned out the stalls of his cattle.

Down in the plain all the bells were ringing, the sweet peal of S. Giusto replying to the long full chime of Peretola from across the water, and all the other villages calling to one another over the wintry fields; some with one little humble voice, some with many melodious notes, while down in the hollow, where the city lay, the deep cathedral bells were booming, and all the countless churches answering; but Bruno on his hill heard none of these.

He only heard the winds moaning amongst the unbending pines.

He only heard the toads cry to one another, feeling rain coming, "Crake! crake! crake! We love a wet world as men an evil way. The skies are going to weep; let us be merry, Crock! crock! crock!"

And they waddled out−−slow, quaint, black things, with arms akimbo, and stared at him with their shrewd hard eyes. They would lie snug a thousand years with a stone and be quite happy.

Why were not men like that?

Toads are kindly in their way, and will get friendly. Only men seem to them such fools.

The toad is a fakeer, and thinks the beatitude of life lies in contemplation. Men fret and fuss and fume, and are for ever in haste; the toad eyes them with contempt.

The toads looked at Bruno now, and he at them. A soft thick rain had begun to fall. It scudded over the plain, and crossed the river, and came up the hill−side, dim and yet dense, stealing noiselessly, and spreading vastly, as if it were the ghostly hosts of a dead army.

Sometimes on the hill−tops, clouds would break that never touched the plain; sometimes in the plain it was pouring, while the hills were all in sunshine. Now mountain and valley had the rain alike.

Bruno worked on in it, not heeding, till the water ran off his hair, and his shirt was soaking. He did not think about it. He was thinking of what the men had said: "A light woman out of France."

All the evil in the world might be happening that very hour, and he would know nothing.

There was no way to move; no way to hear. He was like a chained dog.

"I am like the toads," he thought; "the whole city might burn to the ground, and they would croak in their pool, and know nothing."

But he was not like the toads, for he dreaded this fire, which he could not see.

It rained thus several days.

Bruno saw no one. He had his hands full with the birth of weakly lambs, in the wet ague−giving weather, that made the mossy ground under the pines a swamp. One or two nights he watched all night by a sheep in her trouble; with the great pines over his head, and the broken rocks strewn around. He worked early and late, seeing no creature, except the dumb lad he had as shepherd and the dogs. It was dark before four in the afternoons. He took his big lanthorn into the shed, and hewed wood, or ground maize, all the evening, with the heads of the oxen near him, over their half door. He felt as if he could not face the cold lonely kitchen and living room, with their empty hearths.

Do whatever he might, he looked across to where Rome was, and thought of the "light woman out of France."

The drenching rains hid Argol, with all the other stars. But he had seen it that once. It was enough. It haunted him.

Silently and uselessly he raged against his own impotence. Why had he not been any creature free to roam?−−a gipsy, a tramp, a vagabond, anything so that he could now have set his face to the south, and bent his steps over the hills.

The habits of his life were on him like so many chains. The soil held him as the flat stone holds the sucker of

leather. Change as possible never occurred to him. The peasant thinks no more of quitting his land than the sentinel his post. Come what may, there he stays.

Several of these days and nights went by; it rained always. There was no communication from village to village. A grey cloud overspread the whole great landscape.

Bruno worked as if it were bright harvest weather; and it went ill with some of his ewes, and tried him; but going and coming, rising and lying down, sitting in his sheep hut on the mountain side, and working the millstones by torchlight in the shed, one thought alone went with him, and racked him sore: was it true what they said of the boy in Rome?

At last the rain cleared; the roads grew more passable; the last lamb was born that would be born for some weeks; he put the mule in the shafts, and drove down into market with his sacks of potatoes. When he had done his business, a thought struck him. He went to the place near the Rubaconte bridge, where he had seen the dancing girl of Istriel.

The painting was gone. He asked them if they had any pictures of it; the things that the sun took? They had, and sold him one. It seemed to him very dear. It cost more than a flask of wine.

But he took it with him.

"What is that man, Istriel?" asked Bruno, of the seller of the copies, who was an old Florentine, and knew something of painters and their ways, and had been about the Villa Medicis in earlier years in Rome.

The man shrugged his shoulders.

"He is Istriel. That is enough to say. It is as when one says any other great name. It speaks for itself."

"Great! From painting wantons!"

"Tiziano painted them."

"He is not of our country?"

"No. Of France. But he often works in Rome. He has a palace there."

"I thought painters were poor? How should he live in a palace?"

"They are poor for the most part, and I think it is best for their pictures when they keep so. But he is not. He paints naked women so beautifully that all the world runs to see. Not to be bigger than your time is−−that is a wonderful secret to make you rich."

"I do not understand," said Bruno.

The man who had seen hundreds of students come and go out of the class−rooms and the painting−rooms, laughed.

"Oh, I understand−−because I see so much of them. They are all alike. They come with great bright eyes, and lean cheeks, and empty purses. They study our giants, they do beautiful things. No one wants them. They starve a few years, then they see what the world likes. They change, and paint wantons in silk clothes, or without, as large as life; or else, little rapiered mannikins, frilled and furbelowed, no bigger than a shoe−buckle. Then they make money. This Istriel has made more money than them all, because he draws almost with the force of our Michel Angelo, and colours with the softness of their Greuze. He is a wise man, too. He knows his age. I remember him well a student down in Rome. A handsome, gay, charming lad, with great genius. He might have done better things than his naked women. But I do not know−−very likely. He is right. They call him the new Tiziano, and he is at the head of his school, and can get its weight in gold for any picture. No man needs more."

"I do not understand," said Bruno, whom all these words only confused.

The old man chuckled, and nodded, and turned to other people to sell other photographs of the Sister of the Seven Dancers. For many a long year he had swept out the floors, and set the easels, and trimmed the palettes in the Villa Medicis, and had seen the young artists grow old, and knew how they grew to the greed of the world, as vines to the twists of the maple.

Bruno was perplexed. Painters had ever been to him mysterious religious men, who lived to the glory of God, and made church walls and monastic altars eloquent with sacred meaning to the common people. That was what he thought; he who, from the time when he had run with his father's mule to market, had trodden the streets of Del Sarto, and Giotto, and the Memmi brethren, and said his ave in haste in the cool summer dawns, in Or San Michele before the white tabernacle of Orgagna.

Istriel was nothing to him. Yet his soul rose in a sullen scorn against the man who had so fair a gift from heaven, and only used it to show a dancer bounding away over "the primrose path to the everlasting bonfire," and

taking the foolish souls of the young and the guileless with her.

Bruno would uncover his head before a Madonna or a Magdalen, and feel, without knowing why, that those who could make such things live on the pale plaster or the brown cypress wood, were men worthy of honour. But against the painter of Innocence, all the manliness and all the strength of his character, arrayed themselves in fierce contempt.

Going out of the street of the Archibusieri that day, he met Savio. The old man stopped him.

"So they expect your boy in the town to−night, for a great gala. What! Did you not know? Perhaps he meant to surprise you. He has done that before. No doubt he will come round by the seaway from Rome to Signa."

"It is possible," muttered Bruno. "He may be there now, then!"

"Like enough. I heard them saying in the streets something, I am not sure what, of a great festa for the court, and of the king, and of your boy being sent for. He would be sure to come by the sea, I think. Most likely he is already there. You had better go home. Besides, the lambs must not long be left."

"No," said Bruno, almost stupidly.

Was it possible Signa was so near as this, and all the gossip of the woman that held him was untrue? No doubt the boy meant to surprise him. Each time he had done so. Each time, when his letters had been few and brief, he had returned safely; glad and well and proud. No doubt what the men had said had been a folly; born of jealousy and disparagement, the twin parasites that feed on all success, and kill it if they can.

Bruno's heart grew light.

He did not stop to doubt or question. It seemed so natural. Nothing was likelier than that the lad, summoned for any fresh or special honour, would have had no space to write of it, but would have come round by the seaway to tell the tale of it, and give a brief glad greeting, and then pass down into the city. Nothing likelier.

Bruno left Savio, in haste, thinking of the boy reaching the hill thence by the early morning time, as he no doubt had done, and finding him absent. All these precious hours lost, too! It was now one o'clock. "Toccò" was sounding from all the city clocks. He met another man he knew, a farmer from Montelupo.

"Brave doings!" said the Montelupo man. "A gala night to−night for the foreign prince, and your boy summoned, so they say. No doubt you are come in to see it all?"

Bruno shook himself free quickly, and went on; for a moment it occurred to him that it might be best to wait and see Signa in the town; but then he could not do that well. Nothing was done at home, and the lambs could not be left alone to the shepherd lad's inexperience; only a day old, one or two of them, and the ground so wet, and the ewes weakly. To leave his farm would have seemed to Bruno as to leave his sinking ship does to a sailor. Besides, he had nothing to do with all the grandeur; the king did not want him.

His heart grew light again, and he felt proud as he heard the people talking in the streets, of how the princes had ordered this great night of Lamia; and how the theatre would be lit "like day;" and how standing room there was not to be had, no, though you could give all the jewels and gold and silver for it off the Jewellers' Bridge. He felt proud. All this stir and tumult and wonder and homage in the city was for Signa; princes seemed almost like his servants, the king like his henchman! Bruno was proud, under his stern, calm, lofty bearing, which would not change, and would not let him smile, or seem so womanish−weak as to be glad for all the gossiping.

The boy wanted no king or prince.

He said so to them, with erect disdain.

Yet he was proud.

"After all, one does hear the bells ringing," he thought; his mind drifting away to the old Carmignano beggar's words.

He was proud, and glad.

He stopped his mule by Strozzi Palace, and pushed his way into the almost empty market; to the place called the Spit or Fila, where all day long and every day before the roaring fires the public cooks roast flesh and fowl to fill the public paunch of Florence.

Here there was a large crowd, pushing to buy the frothing savoury hot meats. He thrust the others aside, and bought half a kid smoking, and a fine capon, and thrust them in his cart. Then he went to a shop near, and bought some delicate white bread, and some foreign chocolate, and some snowy sugar.

"No doubt," he thought, "the boy had learned to like daintier fare than theirs in his new life;" theirs, which was black crusts and oil and garlic all the year round, with meat and beans, perhaps, on feast nights, now and then, by

way of a change. Then as he was going to get into his seat he saw among the other plants and flowers standing for sale upon the ledge outside the palace a damask rose−tree−−a little thing, but covered with buds and blossoms blushing crimson against the stately old iron torch rings of the smith Caprera. Bruno looked at it−−he who never thought of flowers from one year's end on to another, and cut them down with his scythe for his oxen to munch as he cut grass. Then he bought it.

The boy liked all beautiful innocent things, and had been always so foolish about the lowliest herb. It would make the dark old house upon the hill look bright to him. Ashamed of the weaknesses that he yielded to, Bruno sent the mule on at its fastest pace; the little red rose−tree nodding in the cart.

He had spent more in a day than he was accustomed to spend in three months' time.

But then the house looked so cheerless.

As swiftly as he could make the mule fly, he drove home across the plain.

The boy was there, no doubt; and would be cold and hungry, and alone.

Bruno did not pause a moment on his way, though more than one called to him as he drove, to know if it were true indeed that this night there was to be a gala for the Lamia and the princes.

He nodded, and flew through the chill grey afternoon, splashing the deep mud on either side of him.

The figure of S. Giusto on his high tower; the leafless vines and the leafless poplars; the farriers' and coopers' workshops on the road; grim Castel Pucci, that once flung its glove at Florence; the green low dark hills of Castagnolo; villa and monastery, watch−tower and bastion, homestead and convent, all flew by him, fleeting and unseen; all he thought of was that the boy would be waiting, and want food.

He was reckless and furious in his driving always, but his mule had never been beaten and breathless as it was that day when he tore up the ascent to his own farm as the clocks in the plain tolled four.

He was surprised to see his dog lie quiet on the steps.

"Is he there?" he cried instinctively to the creature. which rose and came to greet him.

There was no sound anywhere.

Bruno pushed his door open.

The house was empty.

He went out again and shouted to the air.

The echo from the mountain above was all his answer. When that died away the old silence of the hills was unbroken.

He returned and took the food and the little rose−tree out of his cart.

He had bought them with eagerness, and with that tenderness which was in him, and for which dead Dina had loved him to her hurt. He had now no pleasure in them. A bitter disappointment flung its chill upon him.

Disappointment is man's most frequent visitor−−the uninvited guest most sure to come; he ought to be well used to it; yet he can never get familiar.

Bruno ought to have learned never to hope.

But his temper was courageous and sanguine: such madmen hope on to the very end.

He put the things down on the settle, and went to put up the mule. The little rose−tree had been too roughly blown in the windy afternoon; its flowers were falling, and some soon strewed the floor.

Bruno looked at it when he entered.

It hurt him; as the star Argol had done.

He covered the food with a cloth, and set the flower out of the draught. Then he went to see his sheep.

There was no train by the seaway from Rome until night. Signa would not come that way now, since he had to be in the town for the evening.

"He will come after the theatre," Bruno said to himself, and tried to get the hours away by work. He did not think of going into the city again himself. He was too proud to go and see a thing he had never been summoned to; too proud to stand outside the doors and stare with the crowd while Pippa's son was honoured within.

Besides, he could not have left the lambs all a long winter's night; and the house all unguarded; and nobody there to give counsel to the poor mute simpleton whom he had now to tend his beasts.

"He will come after the theatre," he said.

The evening seemed very long.

The late night came. Bruno set his door open, cold though it was; so that he should catch the earliest sound of

footsteps. The boy, no doubt, he thought, would drive to the foot of the hill, and walk the rest.

It was a clear night after the rain of many days.

He could see the lights of the city in the plain fourteen miles or so away.

What was doing down there?

It seemed strange;−−Signa being welcomed there, and he himself knowing nothing−−only hearing a stray word or two by chance.

Once or twice in his younger days he had seen the city in gala over some great artist it delighted to honour; he could imagine the scene and fashion of it all well enough; he did not want to be noticed in it, only he would have liked to have been told, and to have gone down and see it, quietly wrapped in his cloak, amongst the throng.

That was how he would have gone, had he been told.

He set the supper out as well as he could, and put wine ready, and the rose−tree in the midst. In the lamplight the little feast did not look so badly.

He wove wicker−work round some uncovered flasks by way of doing something. The bitter wind blew in; he did not mind that: his ear was strained to listen. Midnight passed. The wind had blown his lamp out. He lighted two great lanterns, and hung them up against the door−posts; it was so dark upon the hills.

One hour went; another; then another. There was no sound. When yet another passed, and it was four of the clock, he said:

"He will not come to−night. No doubt they kept him late, and he was too tired. He will be here by sunrise."

He threw himself on his bed for a little time, and closed the door. But he left the lanterns hanging outside; on the chance.

He slept little; he was up while it was still dark, and robins were beginning their first twittering notes.

"He will be here to breakfast," he said to himself, and he left the table untouched, only opening the shutters so that when day came it should touch the rose at once and wake it up; it looked so drooping, as though it felt the cold.

Then he went and saw to his beasts and to his work.

The sun leapt up in the cold, broad, white skies. Signa did not come with it.

The light brightened. The day grew. Noon brought its hour of rest.

The table still stood unused. The rose−leaves had fallen in a little crimson pool upon it. Bruno sat down on the bench by the door, not having broken his fast.

"They are keeping him in the town," he thought. "He will come later."

He sat still a few moments, but he did not eat.

In a little while he heard a step on the dead winter leaves and tufts of rosemary. He sprang erect; his eyes brightened; his face changed. He went forward eagerly:

"Signa!−−my dear!−−at last!"

He only saw under the leafless maples and brown vine tendrils a young man that he had never seen, who stopped before him breathing quickly from the steepness of the ascent.

"I was to bring this to you," he said, holding out a long gun in its case. "And to tell you that he, the youth they all talk of−−Signa−−went back to Rome this morning; had no time to come, but sends you this, with his dear love and greeting, and will write from Rome to−night. Ah, Lord! There was such fuss with him in the city. He was taken to the foreign princes, and then the people!−−if you had heard them!−−all the street rang with the cheering. This morning he could hardly get away for all the crowd there was. I am only a messenger. I should be glad of wine. Your hill is steep."

Bruno took the gun from him, and put out a flask of his own wine on the threshold; then shut close the door.

He stripped the covering off the gun.

It was such a weapon as he had coveted all his life long, seeing such in gunsmiths' windows and the halls of noblemen: a breech−loader, of foreign make, beautifully mounted and inlaid with silver; amongst the chasing of it he could see engraved lines: he could distinguish his own name and Signa's−−the one he knew the look of, having seen it so often on summons papers for mad deeds done against the petty laws of his commune; the other he knew because it was painted over the railway place upon the hill. He could decipher Bruno−−Signa; and he guessed the rest: a date, no doubt, and some few words of memory or love.

He sat still a little while, the gun lying on his knees; there was a great darkness on his face. Then he gripped it

in both hands, the butt in one, the barrel in the other, and dashed the centre of it down across the round of his great grindstone.

The blow was so violent, the wood of the weapon snapped with it across the middle, the shining metal loosened from its hold. He struck it again, and again, and again; until all the polished walnut was flying in splinters, and the plates of silver, bent and twisted, falling at his feet; the finely tempered steel of the long barrel alone was whole.

He went into his woodshed, and brought out branches of acacia brambles, and dry boughs of pine, and logs of oak; dragging them forth with fury. He piled them in the empty yawning space of the black hearth, and built them one on another in a pile; and struck a match and fired them, tossing pine−cones in to catch the flames.

In a few minutes a great fire roared alight, the turpentine in the pine−apples and fir boughs blazing like pitch. Then he fetched the barrel of the gun, and the oaken stock, and the silver plates and mountings, and threw them into the heat.

The flaming wood swallowed them up; he stood and watched it.

After a while a knock came at his house−door.

"Who is there?" he called.

" It is I," said a peasant's voice. "There is so much smoke, I thought you were on fire. I was on the lower hill, so I ran up−−is all right with you?"

"All is right with me."

"But what is the smoke?"

"I bake my bread."

"It will be burnt to cinders."

"I make it, and I eat it. Whose matter is it?"

The peasant went away muttering, with slow unwilling feet.

Bruno watched the fire.

After a brief time its phrenzy spent itself; the flames died down; the reddened wood grew pale, and began to change to ash; the oaken stock was all consumed, the silver was melted and fused into shapeless lumps, the steel tube alone kept shape unchanged, but it was blackened and choked up with ashes, and without beauty or use.

Bruno watched the fire die down into a great mound of dull grey and brown charred wood.

Then he went out, and drew the door behind him, and locked it.

The last rod rose dropped, withered by the heat.

CHAPTER XII.

FEBRUARY days are in the Signa country often soft as the May weather of the north.

The trees are setting for leaf, the fields are green, the mountains seem full of light; the birds sing and the peasants too, the brooks course joyously down the hills, the grass is full of snowdrops and the pearly bells of the leucoium, and millions of violets pale and purple; there are grand sunsets with almost the desert red in them, and cold transparent nights, in which the greatness of Orion reigns in its fullest glory, and, watching for the dawn, there hangs that sad star which we call the Serpent's Heart, and the Arabian astrologers called the Solitary One.

The stars were still out when Bruno with each dawn rose from his short, troubled, lonely sleep, and went out to his work as was his wont.

He worked early and late. There was nothing else for him to do.

He was consumed with impatience and anxiety, but he laboured on in his fields. To leave them never occurred to him. The sailor in mid−ocean is not more chained to one narrow home than Bruno was by habit and custom and narrowness of knowledge to his high hill tops.

A fever of desire to hear, to see, to learn, to make sure, consumed him. He ate his very heart away with the gnawing wish to know the worst. But Rome was as vague to him and as far off as the white moon that faded away over his pine−woods as the daylight waned to noon.

On his own land, in his own labour, he was a strong skilful man, able to cope with any labour and turn aside any disaster. But away from his own soil he knew nothing. Custom and ignorance hang like a cloud between the peasant and the outer world. He is like the ancient geographers of old, who feared to step off the shore they knew lest they should fall into an immeasurable, incomprehensible abyss.

Bruno would have walked through fire or plunged headlong in the sea to serve or save the boy; but the lack of knowledge paralysed him; Rome to him was far off as the stars; he could only work and wait, and rise in the dark coldness before morning, haunted with nameless fear, and counting the dull dead days as they dragged on, and meeting the old sacristan who said always, "he does not write;−−oh, that is because all is well; when young things are happy they forget."

Once or twice he took out a handful of money from off the copper pitcher set behind the chimney bricks, and went to his priest. "When we pay for masses for the dead it does do them good?" he said. "Hell if they be in it gives them up−−lets them loose−−is it not so?"

"Most certainly, my son," said the old pastor.

"Then can we not buy them for the living? There is hell on earth," said Bruno, and emptied out his handful of curled yellow notes, and looked at his priest with wistful pitiful eyes.

"Tell me what the trouble is," said the Par− roco, who was the best and kindliest of souls, and had always had a weakness for this sinner whom he had confessed and shriven every Easter for so many years.

"I am not sure what it is," said Bruno, and told him what he knew.

"Masses will do nothing, since there is a woman," said the old priest, sadly.

"Are women stronger than hell then?"

"I have lived seventy years; and I think so. But it is not a case for masses. Prayer for your lad I will say with my full heart's willingness. But put up your notes. I will not take them."

But Bruno would leave them on the little wooden seat of the sacristy. "Give them away in charity," he said; "perhaps heaven will remember it to the boy." And he would leave them there.

"We may get a soul out of purgatory, but a lad out of a woman's toils−−that is harder," thought the priest, but he only said, rolling up the notes: "I will make sick folks happier with them, Bruno, since you wish it. That can neither harm you nor him."

"Pray for him, never mind me," said Bruno, simply; and he left the little old red church, with its high crumbling tower, where the daws built, and the owls, and the beautiful blue jays.

It was a little solace to him that prayer should rise up there in the stillness of the hills, and pass out of the

narrow windows with the wind, and go up through the sunshine and the clouds to where they said God and the saints were. Who knew what it might do?

But it gave little rest to the anxious, troubled, heavy soul of the man. Nature had made Bruno for action; to pray, and hope, and trust, and wait resigned, was a woman's way; it was not his.

The bitter ferocity, too, with which he had broken and burned the gun had not passed away. With Bruno nothing passed. His passions were flames which burned their passage indelibly. He kept the secret of his pain in his own mind unspoken; but the rage with which he had destroyed what had seemed to him as insult−−as payment in base metal when the gold of remembrance and of affection was withheld−−that rage chafed in him always.

He never opened his lips to blame Signa. He never let any one in his hearing say they marvelled at Signa's forgetfulness of him. When any man said within earshot of him that it was strange that the boy should have passed a night in the city and never sent any tidings home, Bruno had answered him sharply: "The lad has great things to think of; he belongs to all the world now; not to one hill−top; when I complain of him others may do so too; till then let them have a care." And people knowing his humours were afraid, and never said a slighting word; but supposed that Bruno was content.

But the fury with which he had thrust the rifle into the fire consumed him always. The gift−−hurting him like a blow, cast to him as it seemed like so much wage−−had dug a chasm between him and the boy he loved.

Any other time he might have taken it as a symbol of grateful tenderness. But now−−when Signa forsook him−it added a sting to the sharpness of his pain under neglect. It seemed to him the very insolence of success of triumph of riches, which said,−−"So my debts are paid."

In cold reason the next day, when he raked out the fire and found one silver plate unburned amidst the embers, he stamped it under his heel, and hurled it into the deep well at his door.

Signa had had the unhesitating unhalting sacrifice of twenty years of his life, and thought to pay him by a gunsmith's glittering toy!

That was how it seemed to him.

So he worked on amidst the fields, and let the days go: between him and the boy there was a gulf of silence. Bruno's heart revolted against him. He asked himself why he had let the years go by and lived without woman's love, and the laughter of children, and the good will of men which comes from easy spending, that Pippa's son might have his way and pay him with forgetfulness? Why had he consumed a score of years in rigid self−denial, ceaseless labour, and barren solitude for this boy's sake only in the end to be abandoned for the first wanton face that smiled, and recompensed with such reward as careless princes give the forest−guards that drive their game?

Yet the great loyal love in him cleaved even to what he thought thankless and thoughtless and forgetful. He still would have bought Signa's peace at any price of his own body or soul; he still said to the priest, "Pray for him; for me it does not matter."

But in the short soft days and in the long cold nights there was a heavy darkness always on him. Once he said to the priest:

"If she take him from me−−there is no God."

And he toiled in his fields with the fragrance of the coming spring in all the soil, and looked across at the low lines of the hills, and felt his heart like a stone, his feet like lead.

One fresh chill daybreak, as he worked with the silver dew on every blade of grass, and spread like a white veil over all the hills, his brother's voice called him.

Looking up he saw Lippo. He stood on the other side of one of the low stone walls that are built across the sloping fields to stay the force of water coming from the heights in winter rains.

Bruno did as he had done ten years and more; he worked on and seemed never to see the figure of his brother between him and the light.

They met a hundred times a year and more; Bruno did always so. For him Lippo had ceased to live.

The priest had urged him vainly to forgiveness.

"Who cannot hate, cannot love;" Bruno had answered always. "Forgetfulness is for women. Forgiveness is for dogs: I have said it."

"Bruno, may I speak a word to you?" said Lippo, gently. He had his softest and most pensive face; his eyes were tender and regretful; his voice was calm and kindly; in his boot he had slipped a knife, for fear−−no one could tell,−−Bruno was violent, and he had left his cowherd in the lower fields within a call; but in his look and

attitude Lippo had the simplest trustfulness and candour. He seemed oppressed and sorrowful: that was all.

Bruno went on and worked as he had done on the day that he had heard his brother was the owner of the neighbouring land. He was cutting his olive−trees. He slashed the branches and flung them from him with force; so that if they would they might strike Lippo in the face.

Lippo watched the gleaming steel play in the grey leaves; and was glad he had bethought him to slip that knife within his boot.

"Bruno," he said, very gently. "Do not be in haste or rage. I come in all true brotherliness; the saints are my witnesses. You have been in anger against me many years. Some of your anger was just; much unjust. I could not defend myself from your accusations of having dealt ill with Pippa's child unless I had blamed Nita−−and what husband can shield himself at his wife's cost? Poor soul! She has many virtues, but her hand is rough, and her tongue harsh, and mothers think it a merit to hurt other children to benefit their own. A woman's virtue is locked up in the cupboard by her own hearthstone. Nita has been an honest wife to me; but she has−−a temper."

Bruno slashed a great bough from his tree, and flung it downward; it struck Lippo. He moved aside, blinded for the moment, then went gently on.

"A temper:−−oh, I know it, none so well. No doubt the poor child suffered from it, and were it not that in marriage one must serve a wife at every hazard, and take her wrong−doing as one's own, I could have proved to you with ease that what you thought my treachery was none of mine, but bitter pain and grief to me; aye, indeed. Again and again I have gone supperless to give the little lad my portion. You know I never was master in my house. The money has always been hers and her father's. Never once have they let me forget that, though Baldo is a good soul in much."

Bruno descended from his ladder, lifted it from the tree upon his shoulder, and turned to leave his olives, as though there were no man speaking or waiting on the other side the wall. He would not waste words on Lippo, and, if he looked at him he knew that he would do some evil on him;−−this brother who had cheated him and got his land.

He shouldered his ladder, and turned to mount the sloping field.

"Wait!" cried the other. "Bruno−−as surely as we are sons of one mother, I come to you in all amity."

Bruno went on up the hill.

"Bruno, wait!" cried Lippo. "By the Lord above us, I come with good intent."

Bruno did not pause, nor look back.

He went up the slope of the grass−lands, leisurely, as though there were no one near.

"But if I come to make amends?" said Lippo.

Bruno laughed, a short deep laugh, fierce as a fierce dog's bite; and went on his way against the glittering dews of the rising ground.

Lippo cried to him from the wall,−−

"But I have journeyed up from Rome."

Rome! Involuntarily, unconsciously, Bruno stopped, and turned his head over his shoulder. The name of the city struck him like a shot. It was the last word he would have dreamed of hearing. It was the place for ever in his mind. It was the dim, majestic, terrible world that Argol shone on in the frosty nights.

Lippo, who had never travelled beyond the hills round the Lastra and the town walls of Florence, had journeyed back from Rome!

In the natural movement of surprise and wonder he halted a moment under the olive trees and looked back.

Lippo took that one moment of riveted attention. He leaped the wall lightly, and joined his brother.

"Bruno−−as I live, I come to make amends. I want to speak to you about the boy. If you will not listen, it is he who will suffer. He destroys himself−−there."

Bruno halted. Mechanically he shifted the ladder from his shoulder, and set it up against the nearest tree. He was taken by surprise. He was forced to show his sense of his brother's presence and his brother's words. He was shaken out of his stern self−control, his impenetrable reticence. Do what he would, he felt his face pale, his eyes fall, under Lippo's. Passionate questions sprang to his lips; but how could he trust a traitor and a liar?

In the instant of his hesitation, Lippo spoke.

"I have been down to Rome. On business. To place my son in trade there. Nay, listen. All the city will tell you I speak truth. Of course I heard of Signa. It was impossible not to hear. At the Apollo they play his Actea; all the

town is full of him. Of his great genius no one can say enough. But if some means be not found to save him, he will be destroyed, body and soul. A woman has hold of him. He only lives for her. I caught sight of him once two nights ago; he was with her in the moonlight. He looks so changed; one would not know him for that happy, simple lad of our last autumn time. Listen. All boys have follies. This might pass as such a folly does. But it will not do so−−no. Because this woman is not as others are. She is the vilest of the vile, but beautiful:−−the saints forgive me, but when I saw her, I felt one might do any crime for such a face as that. They call her Innocence! In mockery, no doubt. For they say there is no living thing more cruel than she is, nor more depraved, nor more voracious of all kinds of wealth. That is the worst. This woman is rich. The boy is poor. You know what they will say−−he lives upon her, or they say he does. I know it is not true. Your Signa is too proud and pure for that. But, still, they say so; and great men, while they praise his genius, look askance on him−−so I hear. Nay:−−it is a sorcery. A strong will would break from it. But the lad is not strong. When God gives genius, I think he makes the brain of some strange glorious stuff, that takes all strength out of the character, and all sight out of the eyes. Those artists−−they are like the birds we blind: they sing, and make people weep for very joy to hear them; but they cannot see their way to peck the worms, and are for ever wounding their breasts against the wires. No doubt it is a great thing to have genius: but it is a sort of sickness, after all; and when love comes−−"

Bruno, standing with his back against the olive, heard his brother's voice run on, and did not stop him. His eyes were fastened with anxious, hungry pain on Lippo's face. He knew that Lippo spoke the truth.

"The boy has amorous fancies, like any other," he muttered. "Why not? Why not? You hate him, because you wronged him. Therefore you make much from little. You lie now; you always lied. Get you gone−−while I let you go in peace."

Lippo sighed.

"Nay, Bruno−−it is you who do wrong to me. Why should I come and tell you this? It cannot pleasure me, nor hurt me. Only one has some natural affections, some bowels of compassion−−and he was poor Pippa's son! I do not blame the lad; a boy like that. And if you saw the beauty of the woman ! Only, I said to myself, Bruno should know of this; and, rather than ask a stranger to meddle in it, I came myself. Because he is the woman's toy, her tool, her feel, her slave. He does nothing with his time. He never touches pen nor lute, nor anything of art. I hear she says to him, 'Give me a rival in your art, I leave you.' And he, to do her will, flings all his life away. Some say she loves him really. Some say that it is only wantonness, because the world talks of him; and so she likes to rule him, and, in a month or two, will break his heart, and send him out a beggar and an idiot. Nay−−I say nothing more than all Rome says; in truth, not a tittle so much. It is the common gossip of the streets. The woman is rich. She has had great lovers, princes and the like. The boy is known to live under her roof, to be lapped in luxury;−−you know what men will say."

Bruno sprang forward and seized his brother by the shoulders, in an iron grasp.

"It is a lie of Rome−−a lie, a lie. They grudge my boy his glory, and so they stone him thus, and fling their mud upon him!"

"It is not a lie. Think−−is he not silent to you? Is he frank with you, and glad, and truthful, as of old? It is true, terribly true: a woman has bewitched him."

"As God lives−−do you say this in honesty and pity or brutally, to triumph in his weakness?"

Lippo looked him full in the eyes, candidly.

"In honesty and pity."

Bruno gazed in his brother's face. Lippo's eyes met him in steadiness and sorrow. Bruno let him go, and stood stupefied, mastering, as best he could, his own suffering, lest Lippo should read it and be glad. In his heart, he knew that the story brought from Rome was true.

Lippo took up his narrative; he had a sweet, pathetic voice, and skill in speech, like almost all his countrymen.

"Bruno, I know I have offended you; nay, more−−wronged you, in the days gone by. I am poor, amongst crafty well−to−do folks, who goad me on; I have many children; I have a troubled home, and noisy hearth. I know I have thought too much of getting on in life, and laying by; and so was untrue to your trust sometimes, and so lost your confidence−−justly. That I see now. And you have been harsh and violent. You cannot gainsay that. But as the angels watch us this hour in heaven, I have no single thought but the boy's good in what I tell you now. He is so young. He is soft−hearted as a girl. He is alone in a great turbulent world, that first turns his head with flattery and homage, and then reviles him the first moment that, he falls. They tell me it is always so. The world is

a spoilt princeling, and the genius in it is the dog it first flings cakes to, and then bids go drown. They say so. But, I think Signa may be saved. He is so young. It cannot be that this sudden passion has killed all natural, innocent love and gratitude in him. That is impossible, his heart is good: even to me−−whom you had made him hold as his foe−−he was most gentle always. It cannot be he has forgotten all he owes to you, or would be altogether deaf to what you urge on him. It cannot be that all old memories and old affections are dead in him."

Bruno stood with the grey wood and leaves of the old olive−tree behind him; his head was bent; his face was very white, under the brown hues from the sun; his lips quivered under the dark, drooping hair; he strove to seem calm, but Lippo read the pain that tortured him.

"It is too true, indeed," said Lippo. "Where a woman is, and the love of her, there reason has no hold, and gratitude no abiding place. And she is beautiful. She makes you dizzy, even seeing her go by in the moonlight, you standing in the gutter. After our brown, dusky, sturdy maidens, that white wonder seems more than a woman−−somehow. They rave of her in Rome. It seems she has abandoned all her mighty lords, and doats on Signa; and they do say, too, that in a month or two she will veer round and laugh at him, and take up her lords again; and then−−there will be worse evil still. Because the boy is mad for her, and believes her all she is not. When he learns the truth, there will be trouble; and any day may show it. When her fancy ends, then what will become of the lad? I spoke to an old man, whom my friend knew, one of the flute−players of the opera−house, and he told me that they think the boy's genius will die out altogether, he cares for nothing−−only for the woman and her whims and will. It is a sorcery. Signa is not like other youths. He was always thinking of the angels, and of all manner of strange sights and sounds, that none but himself could ever see or hear. Now that he loves this woman as he loved his music−−it will go hard with him. Because a wanton cannot ever love. That grown men know."

Bruno was silent. His face moved with a great emotion that he had no longer power to conceal; he could no longer affect to doubt his brother's words, or deny the things they spoke of; the misery and danger for the boy spread before him as if they were written on the limestone hill and on the cloudless winter sky; he forgot all else.

His brother's treacherous deeds against himself paled into nothing; his true and loyal faith to Pippa's son made his own wrongs grow as nought to him; he would have let snake bite him to serve Signa. So he let the triumph of Lippo sting him, thinking only of the peril of the boy.

"Why have you come to say all this to me? You have hated the boy, and been false to him and to me. Of all this−−if it be true−−you are glad."

"Nay! God knows you wrong me!" cried Lippo, as with a burst of generous indignation, of pained sincerity. "You wrong me cruelly. The poor boy I never hated−−heaven and earth!−−why should I? I doubted that he was Pippa's son. I did believe him yours. But either way he was my kith and kin. I erred. I say so. No man can do more. But chiefly I erred through weakness, letting a too violent woman have her way in my little household. I have admitted my fault there. I did not continue loyal to your trust as I should have done. I sacrificed duty to the sake of keeping peace at home. In a word−−I was a coward. You who are brave as lions are, have furious scorn for that. But Bruno, as we are sons of one sainted mother, my heart is free of every taint of bitterness against you or the boy. I have been proud of his greatness. Any ray of it is so much light and honour on us all. I grieve, as any creature with human blood in him would do, to know that all his future has been put in pawn to a vile woman. I come to tell you because I said−−how should he hear anything on that lonely hill? And because I thought that if you saw him−−went to him−−some change might come, or you might save him from some rash, mad deed, when he finds out what thing it is he worships. That is why I come. Upbraid me if you will; but do not doubt me."

"Do you know more of her?"

"Nothing more."

"Where does she come from?"

"From France, I think."

"She is called that name−−Innocence?"

"Yes."

"It is the same woman whose likeness was shown in the town yonder?"

"That I do not know."

"A man called Istriel painted her."

"That I do not know either; I only know what I have told you."

"She passes for rich?"

"She is rich."

"How long has−−he−−been with her?"

"Two months−−or something more; so they say."

"Where does she live?"

"At a palace called the Sciallara; going up by what they call the Campidoglio."

"That is hard to remember. Write it."

Lippo took out a torn letter and a pencil, and, making the wall his desk, wrote it in the clumsy handwriting which he had taught himself]ate in life. "You will do nothing rash," he said, pleadingly, as he gave the paper.

Bruno took it.

"I cannot tell what to do."

His face was dark and weary; his breath came quickly; his eyes had a sort of piteous wish for counsel in them; he was so utterly ignorant of what course to take. He could not see his way. He would have grasped any hand as a friend's that could have led him through the darkness.

"I wish I had not told you," said Lippo, with sudden candid self−rebuke and regret in his vexed tones. "Perhaps I should have held my tongue. But it seemed horrible. To know the lad in such a woman's power, and not speak of it to you, to whom he is the very apple of the eye, though he forgets so−−"

Bruno winced, as a brave steer that has borne the heat and labour of the day unflinchingly winces at the fly that stings him in the wrung nostril, where the iron is.

"You did right to tell me," he said simply. "It was good in you and honest."

"I asked the grace of heaven on it," answered Lippo.

Bruno looked at him.

Lippo's eyes met his with clear and honest candour.

A short troubled sigh heaved Bruno's chest quickly for a moment.

"I must think," he muttered, and he turned and took the ladder on his shoulder, and began to mount the hill.

"Stay, Bruno," said his brother, "Stay one moment. We have been sundered so long. Tell me we are friends?"

Bruno looked at him, turning his head, as he went slowly up the grass between the olives. His own eyes were very sad, and had a heavy dark reproach in them.

"I am not a man to forget," he said, "A foe is a foe−−always−−to me. A traitor always a traitor. But if you mean well by the lad, and would save him, I will forgive you if I can."

Then he went onward.

Lippo stood silent; a little faint smile came on his mouth.

"He will go to Rome," he thought.

Suddenly Bruno turned once more and came downward to him with a swift stride. The generous, fierce, tender nature of him welled up in a sudden warmth and emotion.

"Lippo, you have done good now, it shall cancel the evil. I cannot forget; it is not in me to forget; but if I save the boy we will live in fellowship. You stole the land−−yes. But I will ask God's grace to wash that out of mind with me. If you mean well by the lad−−that is enough."

He stretched his hand out: Lippo took it.

Then they parted.

Bruno went upward to his house, leaving the olive trees untouched.

Lippo went downward into the Lastra.

"He will go to Rome," he thought, "and he will quarrel with the boy, or kill the wanton."

And he smiled, going through the buoyant springlike air, as the western wind blew keen from the mountains.

Lippo knew that wise men do not do harm to whatever they may hate.

They drive it on to slay itself.

So without blood−guiltiness they get their end, yet stainless go to God.

Lippo, content, walked on in the brilliant sunshine of the morning; he smiled on children as he passed them and gave a beggar money.

As he went back he saw Palma carrying up linen to wash in the washing−place behind her on the hill−side.

"Shall I tell her," thought he, and he paused a moment. But Lippo was a kindly man when he had no end to

serve by being cruel; and he disliked giving pain, unless he gained something by it. He had soft words and gentle deeds for every body when they cost him nothing. So he went on and left Palma in ignorance; Palma, who every year, on the feast of the dead, prayed for her sister as for one safe in heaven.

CHAPTER XIII.

A LITTLE later the girl had her linen plunged in the cold deep water, and stood washing with half a dozen other women. To keep her brothers from want and a roof over all their heads, she had to take any and all work as it came; the rough with the smooth. She got a little something−−washing the shirts and shifts of peasants too busy with field work to have time to do it for themselves, and Palma's linen was always white, and always was well wrung out and dried.

Here and there on the hills there are these big water places, like the stone tanks that the women wash at in the streets of Rome. Only these tanks upon the hills are in wide wooden sheds, and have the green country shining through the doors of lattice−work.

Palma was washing among the other women, the water was splashing and bubbling, the sun was shining, the wind was whistling, the tongues were chattering, she alone of all was silent, her bare arms in the cold brown pool.

"You are wanted," the women said to her, surprised, for no one ever wanted her, unless, indeed, as they wanted the mule or the cart−horse: she left the linen soaking, and went outside the wooden door.

Bruno stood there.

He put a little picture in her hand.

"Have ever you seen any one like that?" he asked her, covering all but the face of it. Palma's brown cheek grew ashen: then the blood rushed over her forehead.

"What is it? Where did you get it?"

"Whom is it like?"

"It is like−−Gemma; only it is a woman."

"Yes, it is a woman."

He laughed a little, and took his hand away and left the figure of the dancer of Istriel visible.

Palma coloured over her throat and up to her dusky growing hair.

"It is a shameful woman. Oh, why did you show me that?"

"It is only a picture," said Bruno, moodily, and he pitched it into the water that flowed and foamed outside the washing−house. She caught his arm.

"Why did you show it me? Do you know anything? Do you mean anything?"

"Nothing. It is only a picture."

And he walked away.

She leant over the tank and reached and plucked it out from the water; it was a photograph, and the moisture ran off, and did not harm it. She stood and looked at it. She was alone against the white brick wall, her rough, blue skirt clung wet and close to her; she had a red handkerchief over her short cropped hair; the wind blew over her naked feet and her bared arms; the wide green hills were behind her, the brown wooden door of the shed before her; there was a cold azure sky above the golden budding trees.

She stood and looked at the picture. Her face burned, though she was all alone. She shuddered and hated it.

"He is a hard, cruel man," she said. "How could he bring me such a thing ? My Gemma is safe with Christ."

Then she threw the picture in the water again, and as it floated put a great stone on it and sunk it, and as it rose, flung another greater stone, and then another, and then another, until the picture dropped under it like a drowned dead thing, and lay at the bottom with the mud and weeds. She felt as if she slew a devil.

"My Gemma is with Christ," she said; and she went back to the washing women and the hard work and the coarse linen, while the winter sun shone, and the winter wind blew.

CHAPTER XIV.

BRUNO went straight to the steward, and told him that he was about to go to Rome.

It was as base to him to leave his land as it is to the soldier to desert his post.

The land was more than your mother; so he thought; it fed you all your life long, and gave you shelter when you were dead, and men would have you cumber their households no more. He loved every clod of the good sound earth, and every breath of its honest fresh fragrance. He looked to lie in it when he should be buried and gone for ever, by the side of Dina, under the pines, with his feet resting for ever on the mountain−side that they had trodden so long. He had always a fancy that in his grave there he should know when the corn was springing and feel the soft rainfall.

The love of the country was in his blood, in his brain, in all the soul he had. He could not comprehend how life would go on with him elsewhere. He was rooted to his birthplace as an oak is to its forest.

Nevertheless he tore himself away.

He did not know what penalty might avenge, what fate might follow, his desertion of the soil. His lord might be furious. His possessions might be pillaged. When he returned he might find himself ruined, ejected, displaced;−−if he returned at all;−−if;−−who could tell?

The thing he did was, to him, as if he stepped off a great precipice into the emptiness and nothingness of silent and unfathomable air.

Its bones might be broken in the fall, and his very existence cease to be.

Nevertheless he went: as he would have leapt off an actual height down into unknown space, if by so doing he could have saved the boy.

In the white marble of the great Borghese sculpture, Curtius leaps down, and the world hails a hero:−−no one saw Bruno, or would have praised him had they seen, yet the courage was scarcely less, and the sacrifice nearly as absolute.

Indeed the hero saw glory in the bottomless abyss and darted to it:−−the peasant saw nothing except impenetrable gloom and hopelessness. Yet he went; because the son of Pippa was in peril.

He went back to his homestead, and put all his things in order.

It was high noon.

He took out from its hiding place his copper pitcher with his savings in it. They were not much in value. He had had only one harvest time and one vintage to save from, since his all had been taken for the Actea. Such as they were he stitched them in the waistband of his trousers, and put a shirt or two up in a bundle, and so was ready for his journey. He could not go until evening. He worked all day; leaving everything as it should be, and so far as it was possible nothing for new hands to do; except so far as seeing to the beasts went, that was of necessity a new care every day.

He had been brought up on this wooded spur, looking down on the Signa country; all his loves and hatreds, joys and pains, had been known here; from the time he had plucked the maple leaves in autumn for the cattle with little brown five−year−old hands he had laboured here, never seeing the sun set elsewhere except on that one night at the sea. He was close rooted to the earth as the stonepines were and the oaks. It had always seemed to him that a man should die where he took life first, amongst his kindred and under the sods that his feet had run over in babyhood. He had never thought much about it, but unconsciously the fibres of his heart had twisted themselves round all the smallest and the biggest things of his home as the tendrils of a strong ivy bush fasten round a great tower and the little stones alike.

The wooden settle where his mother had sat; the shrine in the house wall; the copper vessels that had glowed in the wood−fuel light when a large family had gathered there about the hearth; the stone well under the walnut tree where dead Dina had often stayed to smile on him; the cypress−wood presses where Pippa had kept her feast−day finery and her pearls; the old vast sweet−smelling sheds and stables where he had threshed and hewn and yoked his oxen thirty years if one: all these things, and a hundred like them, were dear to him with all the

memories of his entire life; and away from them he could know no peace.

He was going away into a great darkness. He had nothing to guide him. The iron of a wasted love, of a useless sacrifice, was in his heart. His instinct drove him where there was peril for Pippa's son:−−that was all.

If this woman took the lad away from him−−where was there any mercy or justice, earthly or divine? That was all he asked himself, blindly and stupidly; as the oxen seem to ask it with their mild sad eyes as they strain under the yoke and goad, suffering, and not knowing why they suffer.

Nothing was clear to Bruno.

Only life had taught him that Love is the brother of Death.

One thing and another had come between him and the lad he cherished. The dreams of the child, the desires of the youth, the powers of art, the passion of genius, one by one had come in between him and loosened his hold, and made him stand aloof as a stranger. But Love he had dreaded most of all; Love which slays with one glance dreams and art and genius, and lays them dead as rootless weeds that rot in burning suns.

Now Love had come.

He worked all day, holding the sickness of fear off him as best he could, for he was a brave man;−−only he had wrestled with fate so long, and it seemed always to beat him, and almost he grew tired.

He cut a week's fodder for the beasts, and left all things in their places, and then, as the day darkened, prepared to go.

Tinello and Pastore lowed at him, thrusting their broad white foreheads and soft noses over their stable door.

He turned and stroked them in farewell.

"Poor beasts!" he muttered, "shall I never muzzle and yoke you ever again?"

His throat grew dry, his eyes grew dim. He was like a man who sails for a voyage on unknown seas, and neither he nor any other can tell whether he will ever return.

He might come back in a day; he might come back never.

Multitudes, well used to wander, would have laughed at him. But to him it was as though he set forth on the journey which men call death.

In the grey lowering evening he kissed the beasts on their white brows; there was no one there to see his weakness, and year on year he had decked them with their garlands of hedge flowers, and led them up on God's day to have their strength blessed by the priest−−their strength that laboured with his own from dawn to dark over the bare brown fields.

Then he turned his back on his own home, and went down the green sides of the hill, and lost sight of his birthplace as the night fell.

All through the night he was borne away by the edge of the sea, along the wild windy shores, through the stagnant marshes and the black pools where the buffalo and the wild boar herded, past the deserted cities of the coast, and beyond the forsaken harbours of Æneas and of Nero.

The west wind blew strong; the clouds were heavy; now and then the moon shone on a sullen sea; now and then the darkness broke over rank maremma vapours; at times he heard the distant bellowing of the herds, at times he heard the moaning of the water; mighty cities, lost armies, slaughtered hosts, foundered fleets, were underneath that soil and sea, whole nations had their sepulchres on that low windblown shore. But of these he knew nothing.

It only seemed to him that day would never come.

Once or twice he fell asleep for a few moments, and waking in that confused noise of the stormy night and the wild water, and the frightened herds, thought that he was dead and that this sound was the passing of the feet of all the living multitude going for ever to and fro, unthinking, over the depths of the dark earth where he lay.

CHAPTER XV.

LIPPO in this last lengthening day of February found hours of sunshine and of leisure to loiter in and out the Lastra doors, set open to the noonday brightness and the smell of the air from the hills, which brought the fragrance of a world of violets with it.

Lippo, with sad eyes and softened voice, said to his gossips:

"My brother is gone down to Rome. Yes−−left the old house where we were born, and all his labours, and gone down to Rome. I dread the worst−−poor Bruno! He has been an unbrotherly soul to me, and harsh and hasty, and has been misguided always and mistaken. But before he went, he asked my pardon frankly, and you know when a man does that, bygones are bygones. I do not understand those hard hearts which never will forgive. Yes: I dread the worst. You see the poor lad Signa has fallen in evil courses, and been taken in the coils of a base woman, and Bruno hears of it, and will go see for himself, and says that he will drag the boy from ruin though it cost bloodshed. I do dread the worst. Because, you see, youths are not lightly turned from their mad passions and Bruno is too quick of hand and heavy of wrath−−it makes me very anxious. Oh, yes indeed, I know he has had little love for me, and been unjust to me, and done me harm; but when a man says that he repents−−it may be weak, but I for one could not refuse my hand. And between brothers, too. Indeed, I loved him always, and the poor boy knew that."

And Lippo sighed.

"What a heart of gold!" said the barber, looking after him as he went up the street.

"Aye, truly, tender as a woman when you take him the right way," quoth the butcher.

"And a man of thrift: money soon jumps itself treble in his pocket," said Toto the tinman.

"And a good son of the church," said the parish priest, who was passing by; and the barber nodded solemnly and added:

"And never a shrewder brain under my razor, with all the polls I have shaved as clean as pumpkins−−forty years and one last St. Michael−−in the Lastra."

Lippo went on to the sacristy of the Misericordia, where he had risen to be of good report, and one of the foremost capi di guardia, by dint of assiduous service in the black robes, and bearing to and fro hospital or graveyard his sick or lifeless fellow−creatures; and being constantly present at mass and requiem.

There was a dead body lying upon the hills as far away as Mosciano−−the body of a poor sister of the order, a peasant woman−−and the bier and catafalque were going out to fetch her. One of the daily servitors, whose turn it was, had met with an accident to his foot in answering the summons: Lippo, with kindliest quickest willingness, took his place, and bade the man go home and rest, and he would himself pay his fine of absence.

Amidst blessings Lippo moved away under the black and dismal pall.

"A pure good Christian soul," said the bystanders. "It will be hard for such a man if his wild brother make a shame and scandal for him down in Rome."

From the Lastra to Mosciano is a long and toilsome way, winding up into the green hills and under the steep heights that are left as nature made them, and have the arbutus and the oak and the stone pines growing at free will in beautiful dells and on bold rocky knolls that lie high under the skies, nameless, and rarely seen of men. There is infinite loveliness in these lonely, wild, richly−foliaged hill−tops, with the great golden valley far below, and beyond on the other side the shining plains by the sea. The day was fair; the opposite mountains were silvered with snow; the fox and the wild hare ran across the solitary paths; but it was cold; the north wind blew, the ascent was steep, and the way seemed endless, lying along over the green chain of the high woods. The men, labouring under the weight of the bier, grew footsore and tired; when they brought the poor dead sister down, and laid her in the chapel to await her burial on the morrow, the long hours of the day were already gone−−it was night.

Lippo wiped the sweat from his forehead as he laid away his cowl; he was aching in every limb, and his feet were cut and bruised, but he was well content. Those were the things which smelt sweet in the nostrils of his neighbours. To walk in a steam of good savour is, he knew, to walk soon or late to the goal of success.

"You are not strong enough to take such exertion; it was noble of you, but you overtask yourself," said pretty Candida, the vintner's wife, as he left the church; and she would have him in, and made him warm himself beside her stove, and brewed him some coffee, and praised him, and hoped with a sigh that Nita knew her own good fortune and his worth.

"Do not make me vain," murmured Lippo, with a pathetic appeal in his soft lustrous eyes, "Do not make me vain−−nor miserable."

And he said it so sweetly, and his hand stole so gently into hers, and his eyes were so eloquent and so plaintive, that pretty Candida was ready to promise him coffee−−or aught else−−whenever he passed that way.

So Lippo went home, having done a good day's work, and meeting the vintner within a few yards from the door, pressed him by the hand warmly, and said−−was Candida well? he had not seen her for a week or more; and being praised a little farther onward by the parish priest, said−−he had done nothing: oh no! Mosciano was a stretch, but what mattered a little fatigue when there was God's labour to be done, and the saints' pleasure? and then, with modest denial of any virtue in himself, took a few farther steps, and mounted to the upper chamber, where his wife was sitting and waiting for him with a scowl and loud upbraiding.

"Nay, dear," said he, "do not be angered. Poor Tista hurt his ancle at the church, and so I took his turn in fetching a corpse down from the hills; that is all. From Mosciano−−an endless way; a day's work, and a hard one, for a mule. I thought I should have died. And not a bit or drop passing my mouth since noonday, and it is nine of the clock. Dear, give me some wine−−quick−−I feel faint."

And Nita, who loved him in a jealous, eager, tyrannous way, got him of the best, and waited on him, and roasted him some little birds upon a toast, and sorrowed over him.

For she was a fierce−tongued, fierce−eyed, jealous creature−−but his dupe. The sharpest woman will be the merest fool of the man she loves, if he choose to fool her.

"There is a letter come for you," said Nita, when the birds were eaten.

A letter was a rarity in any household of the Lastra.

Lippo broke it open, and slowly spoiled it out, syllable by syllable.

"Heaven is good to us," he said softly, and laid it down by the brass lamp.

"What is in it?" asked his wife, watching his face breathlessly.

"Dear−−your aunt of most blessed memory is dead; God rest her soul! She died of a stricture of the stomach, all in a moment. Would I had been there! She leaves us all she had; it seems she saved much; her cottage at Assisi and twenty thousand francs in scrip; all to us−−to me−−without reserve."

Nita screamed aloud, with her black eyes all kindling with ferocious joy, and flung her brown arms about his neck and kissed him.

"Oh Lippo! oh Lippino! How clever you are! To have thought of taking the silly old soul those conserves and cough potions just in the nick of time! How clever!−−I never will say you nay!"

Lippo returned her caress, thinking the lips of Candida were softer. His face grew very grave, with a pensive reproach upon it.

"Oh, my love, your words are unbecoming. You know full well I had no thought of after gain in paying that poor soul the deference due to age. You know it pains me now to be in friendship with all our relatives−−and she so old too−−it was only duty, Nita; believe me. dear, when we do right, heaven goes with us. I am thankful, of course, that so much more is added to us to keep you and the children in good com− fort; but I would sooner far that the kind old creature were living and enjoying life, than gain this greater prosperity by her death; and so, I know, would you, though your quick tongue outruns your heart and does belie it."

Nita suddenly drew back, and made unseen a grimace behind her husband's handsome head. She began to feel he was her master. She began to realize her own clumsy inferiority to this delicate fine workmanship of his.

"Anyhow, the cough syrup has brought good measure back" she muttered; her eyes still aglow.

"My journey to Rome, in my boy's interests, has prospered, thanks to heaven," said Lippo with calm serious grace; and went and read the notary's letter to old Baldo.

"You will be a warm man, Lippo," chuckled the cobbler, who had grown very infirm and kept his bed; "a warm man. You will have all I have too, ere long."

"May it be very long!" said Lippo, and said it with such earnest graceful tenderness that the old man, though he had known him tell lies morning, noon, and night for five−and−twenty years, was touched, and almost thought

that Lippo said the truth and meant it.

"Once," said Baldo, "I did wish that my girl had taken your mad brother. But now I know that she chose aright. Yes−−you are a man to prosper, Lippo."

"All things are with God," said Lippo; and tired though he was, sat down by the bed and spelt out aloud to the old man, who was drawing near his end, and liked to be well with heaven, one of the seven psalms of penitence.

The window−shutter was not closed; a pretty woman, leaning in the opposite casement, could see, and a canon, who dwelt on the other side of the thin wall, could hear him.

CHAPTER XVI.

IT was three in the afternoon, owing to accident and delay, when Bruno, dazzled, stupefied, cold and fasting, stumbled on his first steps on the stones of Rome.

There was a sort of awe for him in Rome.

He had been taught that it was there the great St. Peter always lived, and held the keys of heaven and hell. That was all. Other thoughts of Rome he had none, and even that died out of him in the engrossing dread that possessed him of all he should learn here of the boy.

He got down, and on his feet, and stared blandly across the square, and felt blind and bewildered with that sense of strangeness which overpowers beyond all other sense the ignorant and the untravelled who alight in an unknown place.

What had he come for?−−he did not know.

He came on the impulse which his brother had set alight in him; the impulse to save Signa.

The men and women who had come with him in that dreary journey went all their several ways with noise and tumult, quarrelling and difficulty. Bruno stood stock still, like a lost dog, in the midst of the uproar; and it soon had ceased.

"Where are you going?" said a man to him, who had a horse and vehicle, and thought that he might need both, as other travellers did.

Bruno stared at him; and, without answering, felt to make sure that both his belt and knife were safe.

"You will be sick and sorry not to have taken me," said the driver, irritated with the churlishness of silence. "There is not another beast to be hired under its worth in scudi all over the city to−day: not one."

"What is there amiss in the city?" he asked. He was hungry, and felt a dizzy stupor in his head.

The driver laughed outright.

"Oh, Tuscan gaby, where are your wits? Is it not Shrove Tuesday?"

"I forgot," said Bruno, and stood still, wondering where he had best go.

"Are you come to get a job on the Campagna?" said the man, knowing him to be a peasant, and guessing his province by his accent. "You are too early. They come in by troops in another month; labourers like you."

Bruno moved away mechanically; as the lost dog will when some one teases it.

It had been a mild and golden day, and the sun was now setting.

The mists had been left with the marshes, and the clouds had blown away over the sea; the dark, lowering, windy weather had been left in the north; and over Rome there was a flood of amber radiant light.

The sunshine of Rome has a great influence in it.

It makes happiness an ecstacy. It makes pain a despair.

Bruno moved away in it; a lofty, erect, dark figure, with his brown cloak on one shoulder.

He wished the light was not so bright. The grey sullen mists of the pools and the shores had hurt him less.

Very soon his wish was fulfilled. The sun sank, and night fell.

He had not tasted food or drink for fifteen hours.

He saw a winehouse in a crooked street; he went in and took a draught and ate a bit of bread and a few mushrooms; then he went out again, the stupor of his brain clearing a little as his body was refreshed.

It was already quite dark.

Undying Petrus dwelt here, and kept the keys of eternal life. So he had always been told. He did not doubt it.

It made the city mysterious and half divine to him. That was all. Otherwise he was scarcely sensible of the difference of place.

His mind was absorbed in his errand.

Bruno would have moved unabashed and unconscious through all the palaces of the world; and now, when he thought that he was where the Regent of Christ dwelt, he said to himself:

"If I could see him−−I would tell him to shut me out for ever, for ever; it will not matter for me; so that only

the boy may go to God."

To Bruno heaven and hell were as two visible worlds: had not he seen them, one golden as morning, the other lurid as a tempestuous night, painted by great Orgagna, who had been suffered to behold them, as in a vision, and prefigure them for the warning of men?

He went through the lonely streets pondering within himself. Their solemnity was welcome to him, and soothed the jagged, weary, impatient bitterness of his mind.

A girl laughed above, in an open lattice behind a grating. He wondered to hear her. It seemed to him as if the city were a mighty grave in which sinners waited for judgment.

He wondered to hear her. It seemed to him as if the city were a mighty grave in which sinners waited for judgment.

He remembered hearing from the priests and preachers church tales of the martyrs who had perished here for their faith. He envied them such death.

If only they would take him so, and bind him and burn him;−−if by such means he could save the boy.

Those men were happy. They made their bond with God, and paid down their brief, fiery pang, and got eternal life by it−−or so they thought.

Bruno envied them. He could only see the soul he loved drift into hell; and could do nothing.

He walked on, seeing the greatness round him as in a dream. The mind of the man was larger than the shell in which it had been imprisoned all its years.

He was ignorant; his brain had never gone out from its narrow confines of pastoral knowledge and of daily cares. But in it there was a certain unawakened power which, under other habits and under other modes of life, might have become strength and dignity of thought.

As it was, his brain, dumb, fettered, confused, confined, was only pain to him; and no more use than the lion's force is to the lion born in an iron cage, and doomed to live and die in one.

It was quite night when he left the wine−house and walked onward.

It was all dark. For Rome is ill lit at all times, and the streets are narrow and the walls are high, and the moonbeams only shine in here and there, save when the moon is at her full, and the white glory of her is spread everywhere like a phosphorescent sea.

It was all dark as Bruno passed along its unknown ways, his hand upon his knife. He made his way slowly, with a curious sense of something greater than himself, and greater than the world that he had known around him.

A vast stillness and obscurity reigned everywhere, but ever and again there loomed out from the gloom a thing of Rome, such as only Rome can give: a colossal statue, sombre and crowned, with the orb of the world at its feet; a saint with gigantic crozier raised on high to awe into subjection the rulers of the universe; a mighty form tiared and robed in travertine that gleamed to a red pale gold in the light of some solitary lamp; a huge column fitted for the grip of Samson; a dusky arch with wild grasses grow− ing in its keystone, or a white fountain with its fantastic play of foam cast up in silver on the black background of towering walls or endless stairways. These and such as these gleamed ever and again out from the universal shadow. There was a vague nameless sense of immensity around. These statues were Titans frozen into stone; the S. Agnese was the full−breasted, fleet−footed daughter of a god; this naked Gregorius had the brow and the loins of banished Zeus.

These are all Rome gives at night−−some prophet with outstretched arms raised in imprecation; some stern stone face of an Assyrian lion; some Sphynx with cold and dreaming eyes that hold the mysteries of the lost races in them; some Christian martyr with white marble limbs wound about a cross of bronze; some Latin god with thyrsus broken in his hand and wine−cup filled with dust and ashes;−−these and their like gleam here and there, parted by great breadths of shadow and gloom of impenetrable darkness, where any crime may have been wrought and any woe been suffered.

A strange perpetual sense of power and of measureless empire is still upon the air; here all the passions and all the forces of humanity were once at their fullest and their fiercest; here giants moved and breathed and worked and fought and had their being; and in their turn died−−died mortal−men also at the last, but to the last also in their sinew and substance, by their legacy and tradition, giants even in the silence and the impotence of Death.

Bruno going through the night, and seeing these, was moved to a vague fear such as even a bold man may feel entering a haunted house at midnight and alone.

Rome had been once the throne of the world, and was now the refuge of God.

That was all he knew. But it was enough.

He wandered without knowing where he went, or whither he ought to go.

Used to a fairy city, he was lost and bewildered in this city of giants.

Until he had set foot in Rome it had never come to his mind that the boy might be hard to find.

"They must know of him at the Theatre of Apollo," he said to himself; and tried to reach the theatre; and missed his way; and came on what seemed to him most beautiful and most appalling−−a great arena strewn with fallen pillars and mutilated friezes, and with a carved column that alone stood erect, and seemed to tower to the clouds, and deep stone ways in which stagnant black water glittered; and all around there was an intense stillness; and above all there rose a mountain as it seemed, of marble and brick and sculpture; and over all was the silvery mist of the new−risen moon and wide sombre veils of shadow.

It was the Forum of Trajan.

And the mountain of stone was the back of the Capitol.

Bruno, knowing nothing, thought it a vast sepulchre, whose tombs and temples had been overthrown in war.

No living mortal met his eye. It seemed to him that spirits alone could have their dwelling there.

All the thousands and tens of thousands were away in the feasting of the grandest day of car− nival; gathered together by the Pinclan Hill. They had told him so; but he forgot it as he went.

The stillness, the vastness, the sadness of the mighty wilderness of stone in which he wandered oppressed him. He had been reared on the mountain side, amidst the waving seas of corn, the fresh fragrance of woods, the width of the green valleys, and the smell of the wet wind−tossed pines.

This maze of brick, this labyrinth of broken marble, was wonderful to him, and terrible to him. When he saw a green curled palm rising over the granite of a palace bastion he could have stretched his arms to it as to a friend.

Nature−−living and laughing, Nature, eternal and ever triumphant everywhere else over all the works of men,−−Nature is cowed and hushed in Rome.

Men have cast such weight of stone upon her breasts that their milk is dry.

She has crept slowly, as a bereaved childless creature might, over this vast battle−ground, and has covered with a green mantle the nakedness of the innumerable slain; but she is stilled and sterile in her office. She lies barren in the plains, and forsakes the city where the people so long ago denied her, and turned to worship their gods of bronze and clay.

He mounted the steep stairway and entered by it the grand granite desolation that saw Rienzi fall.

It was all deserted.

Through an arch where the moonrays shone he saw a colossal river−god lying dark and prostrate. The cold, damp, lofty courts were all silent. The bronze Augustus sat alone; gazing over Rome. Castor and Pollux caught their great horses back on a field of stone. The stairways seemed measureless and endless, shelving into the dim unknown depths of the silent city.

Bruno shuddered.

He was a brave man amidst mad cattle, furies of the flood, bare knives unsheathed in feud, or any bodily peril. But here he was stupefied and afraid.

Here; alone with this great past, of which he knew nothing.

He doffed his hat to the bronze emperor erect there in his lonely grandeur.

Was it a statue or a spectre? He did not know. The air had grown very cold. On the vast steps which had felt the feet of millions the moonbeams were shining.

When he saw at last a human form he was thankful.

He spoke aloud.

"Where am I?−−tell me."

The ascending shadow answered him.

"This is the Capitol."

"Who is that?−−who reigns in the midst?"

"Men called him Augustus−−lord of the world."

"And those two that struggle with the horses?"

"They are the Gemini. They ride in the heavens too. You may see them any night amongst the stars from tulip time to vintage."

Bruno did not understand.

Yet he felt that the words suited the place better than any bare bald answer, and he had sense enough to know that no common man spoke so.

"Do they ride with the stars?" he said, doubtfully, half believing.

"Yes. All the summer long."

"Are they stronger than Argol?"

"What is Argol?"

"A star of evil: so they say."

"Then be sure they are not. Evil is always stronger than good."

Bruno made the sign of the cross, and stood silent, looking at the brothers straining at their steeds.

The ascending figure, pausing too, looked at him. With his stature, his unconscious dignity of posture, his oval, olive face, his broad brows, his dark, fathomless gaze, he had a grandeur in him, though he had followed his oxen and trodden the ploughed earth all his days.

The other looked at him from head to foot.

"Do you fear that star−−your Argol?"

"It is to be feared," said Bruno.

"Is it in your horoscope?"

"What is that?"

"It is a fate, read by the stars."

"Is there such a thing?"

"No doubt. How else should anyone have known that some stars are good, some evil?"

"Where are the living people?"

"You must go onward for them. Take that way. You will find them by tens of thousands."

"What do they do there?"

"They are at the Mocoletti."

"What is that?"

"Fire−worship. In Egypt it was of old the Feast of Lamps."

"But they worship Christ in Rome."

"A few did, eighteen hundred years ago," said the other, with a smile, and ascended the rest of the stairs.

"Is he the Evil One?" thought Bruno, with a chill, as he saw the smile in the moonlight.

The stranger passed away into the empty space of the Capitol, and Bruno took his way through the darkness, leaving the heaven−born Gemini to wrestle with their coursers.

He moved always in the direction which the other had pointed to him. For a time all was still, sombre, and solitary; frowning masses of masonry ascending to the skies on either side, with here and there the slender feathers of a palm east up against the silver of the night.

Then he came to a great battlemented brown pile, and to a continuous living stream of tumultuous people, and stood still with utter amaze:−−for what he saw was a winding way of fire, which seemed to be without end, as though all the fireflies of the old eastern world and the new south−west had met there and there held revel. Clouds of starry little flames were moving everywhere; the earth was all alive with them, and the air; a river of light stretched away, away, away, with cupolas and stairs and domes all ablaze in golden coruscations in the far distance; whilst all along the channel of fire clusters and plumes of sparks flew and fought and whirled and sprang aloft, as though all the million stars of heaven had dropped to the lower air, and were in battle.

Bruno stood and gazed entranced, and doubting his own sight.

It was only the great game of the Mocoletti. But in his own province Carnival knows not this crown and glory of the high feast day; and he had never heard of it, and could not comprehend the torrent of light that rushed down the long and crowded Corso towards him, and the mad uproar of shouts and cries that deafened him like the roar of cannon.

For a few moments he stood and gazed aghast at the sight, whilst at the end of the river of flame the great round domes of the church, raised to lay Nero's wandering soul at rest, gleamed like globes of light in the fiery rain of a thousand rockets. Then, as the fantastic cars and chariots passed him, their gay combatants armed with blazing wands, and as the grotesque masks and harlequins and dominoes flew by him, striking with their long

tapers right and left, he saw that it was some feast of carnival unknown to him, and tried to turn away from it, and gain the solitude of some side street. For his heart was heavy and his brain was dull; and the tumult and the mirth and the madness were hateful to him.

But to escape from such a crowd was no longer possible. The Moccosi once lit at Ave Maria, the Romans are mad till the last light dies. He was wedged in a multitude, whose numbers were swelled with every moment; the frightened horses, the great allegorical cars, the throngs of masqueraders, the striking, dancing, nodding, flaming tapers, all hemmed him in, and pushed him upward almost off his feet, and bore him on by the force of the screaming and rapturous mob. The utmost he could do was to defend his face from blows, and his clothes from the flying fires. Against his will, he was carried along, higher and higher, under the crowded casements and balconies, nearer to the domes and the obelisks and the fountains glowing to gold and crimson in the feast of fire.

When he at last got breathing space and rest a moment, and leaned against an open doorway, to watch this strange fantastic war of flames, that seemed to make the very stones and walls and winds and clouds alive with it, he rested opposite a wide open window, with a gallery running underneath it, and draped with gold cloths and furs and silken stuffs, more richly than any of those near it. A woman leaned her arms on the balustrade, and gazed down on the sea of lights below, and with a long white wand, alight at the end, fought the lights underneath her, and laughed as she moved it for the thousandth time, burning still, despite all efforts from the street to blow it out or strike it from her hand.

She laughed as a little child might have done at the sport they made her; and many, looking upward, forgot their warfare and let her vanquish them, because, in the flickering, fitful light of the countless flames, she looked so lovely, leaning there, as if the fire were burning in her and shining through her, as its flame in an alabaster lamp.

Bruno looked up, as all the others did, seeing how the chariots paused and the faces were upturned, and the wands were lowered under this one casement.

He knew her in an instant: the wanton whose likeness Palma had flung under the water and stoned; the child who had sunned her snowy little limbs in the long grass amongst the daisies and the wind−flowers of Giovoli.

At her feet lay a youth, whose hands held a change of tapers ready to tip her wand afresh should she be vanquished; every now and then he gave her a knot of roses or lilies of the valley that she asked for; always he was looking upward to her face.

The river of fire ran unheeded by him; the feast of folly had its wild way unshared by him; he saw only her;−−as the hot, changeful light shone over her laughing eyes and mouth, and her shining throat, whiter than the pearls that clasped it.

He was screened from the sight of the multitude by the draperies of the balustrade; but as he raised himself on his arm to give her flowers, Bruno's gaze found him.

Bruno's hand went to the knife in his waistbelt; and, with a curse, thrust it back again.

It could not reach the smiling thing throned up there on high.

He wished that he had never burned that deadly fair weapon which had been broken up and destroyed in his haste.

His eyes devoured her with that hate which is deep as lava and as ruthless;−−he thought of one day when he had seen her a little, white, new−born thing, lying at her mother's toil−worn breast; and poor, improvident Sandro, gleeful and rueful at another branch to his roof−tree, and another mouth to feed, had said,−−

"Such a white child!−−so white! Heaven send her a white soul, too. We will bring her up to the cloister life. When one has so many, one can spare one to God!"

So Sandro had said:−−a faulty man, but loving his children and hating shame.

And the white child was here.

Some roses fell through from the rails of her balcony−−winter roses−−fair and rare. A boy, whose rags were covered with a goatskin, and who wore a mask of Bacchus, grinning from ear to ear, as though life were one long wine−song, caught them eagerly, as boys do all such things in carnival; then, seeing where they came from, threw them under his feet and stamped on them and spit on their scattered leaves.

Bruno saw, and felt for a coin to toward the lad that hated her.

"Why do you hate her?" he asked.

"She let her horse lame my brother a month ago; he, a little child; and she laughed and drove on, saying never

a word, and Lili with both feet jammed and bleeding in the dust. If she were a princess one would not mind; but they say she was a beggar, like ourselves."

Bruno gave him money.

"Does she live up yonder?−−tell me."

"No. She is there to see. I will show you her house when the sport is all over. You hate her too?"

Bruno was silent.

He was watching the flame of her wand as it played, seeming to lick her cheek and her throat, while the shadows above enfolded her softly like a cloud. There were many faces round her; one was the face which had been like the face of the sleeping Endymion, but there were no dreams there now; it was haggard with the exhaustion of passion, hectic, wasted, with all the beautiful youthfulness of it burned away, as the bloom of a flower is consumed in the heat of a lamp; in the eyes were the hunger of jealousy, the hunger which drives out all other sense as the famine of the body kills the mind.

With a loud cry Bruno flung his arms upward towards the boy he loved. The great city, the strange crowds, the blazing fires faded from his sight; he had no eyes except for Pippa's son. But his shout was drowned in the uproar of the screaming multitude; the close−packed throngs swept with one movement outward to where the coloured fires were blazing and roaring from the Place of the People, around the great obelisk of Egypt; he was borne off his feet, wedged in, hemmed round, carried and forced by the rushing tide of human life away from the spot where the White Child played with fire; he lost his consciousness for a moment in the great roar and pressure of the overwhelming mass; when he came to himself he had been pushed upward into the square under the domes of the church raised to lay the ghost of Nero; all was dark; the sport was over; the throngs were still dense, the horses of the city guard were slowly scattering them; there were no lights; except the quiet stars above in the cloudless skies.

The boy in the goatskin was by him, and looked at him curiously.

"They hit you on the head; not meaning. You would have fallen, I think, only the crowd was so close, it kept you upright; you are a strong man. I ran with you because you hate that woman, and you gave me money. Will you give me more? Shall I show you where she lives?"

"Aye!−−show me!" said Bruno, stupidly; and by instinct, like a dog, stooped and drank from the hollow of his hand the water of the lion's mouth.

"You are her father or her brother?" said the boy; "you must be something to her since you look like that. She is an evil one−−yes−−that is sure. Did you see that lad with her; the one with the great dark eyes and the girl's face? That is the one who makes all that great music. He will make no more. Not he."

And the boy turned a somersault on the stones under the stars, and flung his Bacchus mask up in the starlight.

"He is good," said the lad, when his somersault was ended, and he dipped his mask in the fountain and drank from it and spit it out again, because water was not wine. "He is good. When Lili was lamed that day he came and found us out and gave us money and spoke soft words; and there was an old lute of Lili's lying there, and he took it up and made it sound so−−one would have said the angels were all singing−−and then, all in a minute, he put it down and tears were in his eyes, and he went,−−so,−−saying nothing more. But he sent to us often; only Lili always says−−since that−−the lute seems dumb."

Bruno gave him more money.

"Show me where," he said.

The boy pressed through the loosening crowd, and bade him follow.

They went through many a narrow street, solitary and dark, until all the noise of the multitude was left behind them, and they even ceased to see the stray noisy groups of the straggling maskers.

"Why should he play no more?" said Bruno, suddenly, in the stillness; the words were haunting him.

"That is what the city says," answered the boy, who went leaping and turning in endless gyrations; a ghastly figure in the moon rays and the shadows in his satyr's garb, and with his wine−god's head.

"The city says it? Why?"

Bruno felt stupid still; a falling torch had struck him on the head, and he had fasted long, and all his heart and soul were sick with hopelessness.

"Because it is dead; gone out of him; that is what they say. She killed it−−just for sport. Why not? That is what she would ask: Why not?" And the boy whirled like a wheel in the gloom under the beetling houses.

"Why not?" said Bruno, as a rock might give back an echo sullenly.

There arose near them iron gates and high black walls, and the heads of palm trees. The boy pointed to them.

"There it is. Pay me."

At that moment wheels passed them; horses foaming and plunging passed them; the gates opened; the mud from the winter rains struck Bruno in the face.

"That is she," said the boy in the mask of Bacchus.

The gates closed, shutting her in. Bruno wiped the mud from his mouth.

He put money in the child's hand again, and bade him go.

"He was with her," said the boy, with his white teeth shining through the wide jaws of his mask. "She has not done with him yet. She maddens him with jealousy and pain. She cheats him always−−and them all. It must be brave sport to be a woman?"

Bruno bade him begone.

The little lad ran off; but, once more lingering, returned.

"Do not hurt him," he said, again, and then reluctantly went away; a quaint, small, faun−like figure in the moon rays.

Bruno remained by the closed gates. He sat down on the stone coping of the wall and wrapped his cloak around him. It was now the tenth hour.

There was no sound, except from a fountain that was within the gates and of the night wind amongst the palm−trees. He had no hope; all was dark. He could not see why God dealt thus with him. His heart hardened against earth and heaven.

To behold the dominion of evil; the victory of the liar; the empire of that which is base; to be powerless to resist, impotent to strip it bare; to watch it suck under a beloved life as the whirlpool the gold−freighted vessel; to know that the soul for which we would give our own to everlasting ruin is daily, hourly, momentarily subjugated, emasculated, possessed, devoured by those alien powers of violence and fraud which have fastened upon it as their prey; to stand by fettered and mute, and cry out to heaven that in this conflict the angels themselves should descend to wrestle for us, and yet know that all the while the very stars in their courses shall sooner stand still than this reign of sin be ended:−−this is the greatest woe that the world holds.

Beaten, we shake in vain the adamant gates of a brazen iniquity; we may bruise our breasts there till we die; there is no entrance possible. For that which is vile is stronger than all love, all faith, all pure desire, all passionate pain; that which is vile has all the forces that men have called the powers of hell.

CHAPTER XVII.

A GREAT bell clanging within the iron gates jarred on the silence.

He looked up; there was a man there by his side without who rang thus.

A voice answered the stranger's demand through a grated wicket. Was she within? No; she was not within.

Bruno opened his lips to say that they lied; but kept back the words unuttered: the other was naught to him.

"I raised her from the very dust and have to ring at her gates like a beggar," the stranger muttered, with tones too low for Bruno's ear to hear them; then he turned and went away unwillingly. The moon fell full upon him. He saw the motionless dark figure of the peasant leaning by the wall. He looked and spoke:

"Is it you who dread Argol? What do you do here?"

"What do you?" said Bruno; his mouth scarcely unclosed, his whole heart and soul were full of frozen pain; his hand was against every man's; he would have struck a child dead, or have spat upon the cross. What use were man or God? Where was their justice?

He looked at the stranger sullenly; who rang at her gates must be her friend−−his foe.

The moon had risen fully, and shone with that pure and dreamful light which takes two thousand years of age away from Rome; the moonlight in which they say the dead gods rise and walk−−weeping.

The face of the man was turned to him in it; a fair proud face, with something arrogant and something gentle, and the eyes of a poet and the lips of a cynic.

Bruno stared on him, wondering, doubting, remembering; then ground his teeth as a mastiff would at sight of what he loathed, and sprang erect.

"Wait! I know you," he said, slowly; "You are the painter−−Istriel."

"Yes," said the other, with a careless smile, as of one whose name meant homage. He was known so well by princes and by people. It seemed nothing strange.

"I meant to look for you. Wait there," said Bruno. "Oh! I went and read your face, line by line, in the city where you have painted it; I meant to deal with you one day−−and, yet, yonder, it was so dark there; you escaped me. Oh, I know you now."

He spoke savagely, with his teeth set, still staring upon Istriel; startled, the other looked and kept his ground; he was a bold man, and knew that in his life he had sown enemies broadcast. This might be one of them.

"So you come to ring at her gates?" said Bruno. "When you shared her with all the world, were you not sick of her? You great men are less squeamish than we peasants are. When we throw the rotten fruit away, we have done with it. Do you know what Sandro said when she came to the birth? 'Such a white child−−so white−God send her a white soul too.' That is what he said, and he died looking at the little white plaster Christ on the wall, and saying, 'I had a white child too; has the Holy Mother got her safe? Shall I see her the other side of the sun?' That is what he died saying−−"

"I do not understand," said Istriel.

Bruno laughed aloud.

"No, no doubt: why should you? You take the loveliest, vilest thing you own, and strip it bare and smile, and paint it so, and send it out to all the multitudes−−that is genius. You go down to hell and bring up a curse from it, and throw it out broadcast amongst the living people−−that is genius. You have cursed my boy. Ten thousand others, too, for aught I know. But his was the gentlest, purest, sweetest soul that lived, and came so fresh from heaven, that he brought all heaven's music with him in his ear and in his mouth, and was for ever hearing it and making others hear it. I have seen fierce men fighting cease and grow quiet, only because the child passed−−singing. Look you, the lizards would come from their holes and the sheep and the goats stand listening round him, and the snakes lie still and quiet, in the sun there on the hills, because he piped upon his little lute−−the broken lute I gave him. He never hurt a living thing. When he was a young child, he would take scorpions in his hand and say that he was sorry for them, because they hated men and had no one to love them−−that was my boy. It is of no use telling you; how should you know, how should any one know, as I do?

God sent him on to earth, I think, just to show what a human thing can be−−how beautiful−−when it has no greed and no vile thought. I laboured for the land and got it, and then I lost that, and all was to begin over again; and I could bear it−−somehow−−because he was safe, and things went well with him, and he had his heart's desire; and when he came home to me, though the world had got him, it had not hurt him−−not one whit, nor did he forget nor cease to care. But after he saw the accursed picture, then it was all over. There are women that have little white souls like doves, and when they enter the heart of a man, it is with him as if the Holy Spirit were there, and they nestle in him, and keep him from evil; but there are others;−−your picture was accursed, I say. It bewitched him. It poured fire into him; the fire that consumes the bones and the nerves and the brain. When a boy or a man loves a woman that is vile, he kisses corruption on the mouth."

"That is true," said. the other; "but what have I done to you that you should upbraid me thus?"

He did not understand in any way the fierce onslaught and the confused meanings of the unknown man who fronted and arraigned him in the moonlight; but the rough eloquence of it fascinated him, and the courage and very rudeness of it and passionate pathos moved him to know more.

"You are a great man, that I hear,'" answered Bruno, "and you spend your strength painting lewd women. I do not know. I suppose it seems good to you. For me, it looks a poor pastime. Those men of old that coloured our walls−−they saw God and the saints, and the great deeds that were done when men were giants; so they painted them. You paint what you see−−I suppose. Is that what it is to have talents? to make dancing wantons live unperishing and drive innocent souls mad with sick passions? I praise heaven that I am a peasant and a fool. When you come to die, will it be well with you? to see these women for ever about your bed, and think of the young lives you have burned up with the teachings of wicked desire? If my right hand could create such things as that Innocence of yours, I would cut my hand off rather than leave it its cunning."

"You are an ascetic?" said Istriel, with a smile. He was surprised at the fierce earnestness of this peasant, and was of that temper which will quarrel with nothing which is new to it and diverts it.

"I do not know what you mean," said Bruno. "I am a man, and have been a bad man. At least, they have always said so. But I would slay myself before I would pander to the vileness of the world as you do. God gives you that gift of yours, to make the likeness of his living things, and give them more beauty than any real life has. And what do you do with it? Make shameless women glow like the fire, and the rose, and the jewels of the kings; and drive pure souls to hell with longing for them. What are you better than a pander and a tempter? You might make men see heaven, and you will not. You are like a jewel in a toad's head. Has all your learning taught you no greater thing? is there nothing on all the broad earth but a naked wanton? For me, I have been a fool and a sinner with many a living woman in my time: that is the folly of all men; there is nature in that, and good may come out of its evil; but to set a vile creature up on high, and colour every hue of her, and draw every line, and set her up in the midst of the people, and seem to say to them, 'There is nothing in all the world to worship but only a beautiful body, with a foul cancer hid in it;' since to do that is what they call genius, I praise Fate that made me unlettered and unlearned, and sent me to dwell with my beasts at the plough."

The painter Istriel looked at him with greater intentness: the rough eloquence stirred a certain shame in him; he knew that in it there was a grain of truth; in his own youth he had had pure aspirations and spiritual aims, and he had descended to delight and stimulate with the matchless grace of his colour, and the vital power of his hand, the sated materialism of his age.

He recognised in the passionate imperfect words of the man before him the temper which had made the men of the Middle Ages hurl their marble bacchanals and painted syrens into the flames at Savonarola's word.

He was less offended than aroused.

"What has any one of my pictures done to you?" he asked. "Men like you feel no impersonal pain; what is your personal wrong at my hand?"

Bruno's eyes glanced at him with a deep mute scorn.

"I do not know what you mean. Your wantons never hurt me. Only I would hew the wood you paint them into a million pieces, and thrust them in the nearest kiln to burn to ashes−−if I could. From the time he saw that accursed thing all was altered with him. It got into him like wine−−like poison. It made him drunk. Before−−he lived in all the sweet sounds he heard; just as a bird does in the leaves and the light. He was always hearing beautiful things, and seeing them−−we could not. He was so near the angels−−my boy! But after he saw your accursed picture, it was the woman he saw−−always the woman; she got between him and God. Do you not

know? And so when she chose, she took him. It is like the plague. He looked with innocent eyes on your picture; when he looked away, he knew that we are all beasts. Yes, that is what your genius does for men. It is great; ah! so is the marsh fever, for it can kill a king if he pass by; your picture has killed my boy. When he found it living, he fell down before it. You see. He has no brain, or soul, or memory, or beauty left; all his dreams are dead; he only sees your wanton. Because you played with a wretched thing like that, must you make her a public glory to lure men's souls? Why did you do it? Was there not the sea, and the sun, and the children, and the face of the mountains, and all the wide world for you to make a likeness of, and call all the nations to look? Was the great blue sky too narrow for you that you must needs go and make a devil−star out of the mud of the sewer? Because the woman had no shame with you, must you crown her for that, and make others that look on her shameless? Your hand is accursed; your hand is accursed, I say. Were I lord and king, I would have it struck off in the sight of all the people. Look−−the wanton you made takes my boy from me; from the world, from his art, from his God!"

He paused abruptly; he had spoken with broken impetuous passion; the long−locked gates of his silence once burst asunder, all his heart rushed forth in his words; he smote wildly like a blind man in the midst of foes.

Istriel listened; the wrath that rose in him was daunted by a vague trouble, a restless uncertain shame.

"Whom do you speak of?" he said, with a wonder that held his wrath in check. "Your boy I is it possible that you mean the musician that they call Signa?"

Bruno made a gesture of assent.

Istriel was silent. In his soul he hated the young lover of his Innocence; the beautiful boy who had youth, who had fame, who had her.

"What have I to do with that?" he said, bitterly. "She takes a whim for him; a fancy of a month; he thinks it heaven and eternity. She has ruined him. His genius is burned up; his youth is dead; he will do nothing more of any worth. Women like her are like the Indian drugs, that sleep and kill. How is that any fault of mine? He could see the thing she was. If he will fling his soul away upon a creature lighter than thistle−down, viler than a rattlesnake's poison, poorer and quicker to pass than the breath of a gnat −−whose blame is that except his own? There was a sculptor once, you know, that fell to lascivious worship of the marble image he had made; well,−−poets are not even so far wise as that. They make an image out of the gossamer rainbow stuff of their own dreams, and then curse heaven and earth because it dissolves to empty air in their fond arms−−whose blame is that? The fools are made so−−"

He spoke with fierce curt scorn; he too had loved this worthless loveliness that he had christened Innocence.

"It is as bad as that with him?" muttered Bruno. "It is true then all they say?"

Istriel laughed.

"Most true. All Rome can read it. Her fancy is done; and now his hell has come. It is always so. But what can it be to you? What is he to you?" he said, abruptly.

Bruno smiled; a smile of the pale passion which is bitter as death, and deep as the bottomless sea.

"I have given him all my life," he said, simply. "All my life. And you and your wanton have destroyed him."

"He is your son?" said Istriel.

"No. They all thought so, but they were wrong. He was Pippa's son," said Bruno, whose mind was clouded with the lores and fury of his pain, and who at all times had the peasant's optimism, and believed that every one must know, without need of explanation, who he was, and what he meant, and why he spoke.

"Pippa!" echoed Istriel. His memories were wakened by the name, and went back to the days of his youth, when he had gone through the fields at evening, when the purple beanflower was in bloom.

"What is your name then?" he asked, with a changed sound in his voice, and with his fair cheek paler.

"I am Bruno Marcillo; I come from the hills above the Lastra a Signa."

Istriel rose, and looked at him; he had not remembered dead Pippa for many a year. All in a moment he did remember: the long light days, the little grey−walled town, the meetings in the vine−hung paths, when sunset burned the skies; the girl with the pearls on her round brown throat, the moonlit nights, with the strings of the guitar throbbing, and the hearts of the lovers leaping; the sweet, eager, thoughtless passion that swayed them one to another, as two flowers are blown together in the mild soft winds of summer; he remembered it all now.

And he had forgotten so long; forgotten so utterly; save now and then, when in some great man's house he had chanted to see some painting done in his youth, and sold then for a few gold coins, of a tender tempestuous face, half smiling and half sobbing, full of storm and sunshine, both in one; and, then at such times had thought "Poor

little fool! she loved me too well;−−it is the worst fault a woman has."

Some regret he had felt, and some remorse when he had found the garret empty, and had lost Pippa from sight in the great sea of chance; but she had wearied him, importuned him, clung to him; she had had the worst fault, she had loved him too much. He had been young and poor, and very ambitious; he had been soon reconciled; he had soon learned to think that it was a burden best fallen from his shoulders. No doubt she had suffered; but there was no help for that−−someone always suffered when these ties were broken−−so he had said to himself. And then there had come success and fame, and the pleasure of the world and the triumphs of art, and Pippa had dropped from his thoughts as dead blossoms from a bough; and he had loved so many other women, that he could not have counted them; and the memory of that boy and girl romance in the green hill country of the old Etruscan land had died away from him like a song long mute.

Now, all at once, Pippa's hand seemed to touch him−−Pippa's voice seemed to rouse him−−Pippa's eyes seemed to look at him.

This was Bruno, then?−−the great, dark, elder brother, whom she had feared, and had often pointed out to him in the fading evening light from afar on the hillsides, and had begged him never to meet, lest there should be feud about her and bloodshed.

This was Bruno.

All in a moment the past leaped up to him, and grew fresh as yesterday.

This was Bruno−−and what, then, was the boy?

He mastered the horror and the emotion which possessed him; but his mouth was dry, and his voice was unsteady, as he asked,

"She was your sister−−Pippa?"

"Yes."

"Is she dead, then?"

"Yes."

"When did she die?"

"On the night of the flood, in the dark, we found her dead, Lippo and I. The child was at her breast. She had fallen from the edge of the road. She could tell us nothing. What is it to you? Why do you want to know?"

Istriel was silent a moment−−a shiver as of some great cold went over him. Then he spoke suddenly,

"Because I was her lover. I took her from your country. That lad, if he be hers, is mine. She loved me too well to be faithless. There are women so."

Bruno stared at him stupidly. The sense of what he heard was long before it reached him, or brought perception of its truth. Then all at once he understood.

"It will kill him!" he muttered, at last; "it will kill him! Do you not see?"

With a shudder, Istriel looked him slowly in the face.

Remembering the boy, their mutual thoughts dulled passion, numbed rage, and struck them mute.

Bruno's hand, raised to strike the lover of dead Pippa, fell to his side nerveless and strengthless as a reed that is plucked upward by the roots.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"LET me think−−let me breathe!" said Bruno, and he staggered farther out into the darkness, gasping for air.

The horror of an inevitable and irrevocable destiny closed in on him like a cage of iron.

There are hours in the lives of men when the old Greek sense of being but the sport of an inexorable Fate, from which there is no possible escape, sweeps away all hope and power of self−help, and strikes all courage blinded to the dust.

What could he do?

The powers of heaven and hell were alike against him−so he thought.

He was no god to struggle with this ghastly curse of risen years−−these poison−mists of perished passions.

It was no fault of his.

His hands were innocent−−his soul was free of guilt; yet he suffered as the guilty do not. It is often so.

There was a sound as of many waters in his ears; the white moon and the curled palm leaves went round and round; the great stones seemed to heave beneath his feet.

He saw the face of the man before him as in a mist−−blood−red.

"Get you gone," he muttered, "get you gone. You have no share with him. For you, he would have drowned, like any lamb that the flood took. He is mine−−mine−−mine. My hands worked for him; my bread fed him; my roof sheltered him. He was naught to you. You have lived your life and never thought. He is naught to you; he is mine. Get you gone!"

And he struck at the air−−blindly.

The other shrank away before that great just passion−−shrank, palsied and awed, in all his proud vain manhood, as though old age had seized him. He had dropped the serpent's tooth of a careless love by the wayside, and thought no more; and now an armed host sprang on him.

"But−−to save him?" he murmured, and was still.

Bruno stood erect, and in the changing shadows his form seemed to tower and dilate, and grow to giant's stature.

"Leave him to me!" he cried; and his voice rolled like thunder down the deserted ruined ways of Rome. "He is mine; he is mine! My soul for his−−that I have said−−always−−always−−while you feasted and were famous, and kissed your wantons, and took no thought. Get you gone; get you gone. You gave him your life; but I gave him my soul."

The other shrank back into the shadows.

Bruno stood silent, with his face to the stars.

"Is there a God, there?" he cried to them. "Is there a God, that he lets the innocent suffer for the guilty?"

The serene star−covered heavens seemed chill as any vault of ice. What cared they for his pain!

It was no blasphemy in him that cried thus, and thus doubted; it was faith in its death agony; the faith of Peter's "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief."

He was alone in the pale night.

The lover of dead Pippa, who had never feared anything in life, feared him.

"Is it all of no use?" muttered Bruno to the silence; and silence answered him. Was it all of no use?−−the long years of toil; the patient sacrifice; the unceasing resistance of selfish desire; the bitter winters; the burning summers; the effort; the anxiety; the prayers; the love?

Was it all of no use? Did neither men nor God care anything?

That unutterable and terrible loneliness which comes to all in their death−hour, and comes to some in their full height of life, encompassed Bruno now.

It seemed to him as if he stood solitary amidst the wreck of the whole world.

He had tried to build up in safety the temple of this young life, so that every fair and pure thing might be garnered therein, and no foul spirits ever enter; he had been willing to cement its corner−stone with his heart's

blood; and by the sweat of his labour, and by the pain of his perishing hopes, purchase a blessing upon it. And now it burned and crumbled before his sight, blasted with the lightning of a hideous passion. And he stood by, with bound hands.

"My soul for this," he muttered. That he had said always; that he would give still; only it seemed to him that there was no way to force on fate such barter.

It is not given to any life to be the providence of another−−so the old man had told him in the sacristy of the Lastra, and he found the truth now.

A great sickness came on him; a loathing of life and of the hopes with which he had cheated himself through these twenty long years of vain sacrifices.

He seemed to feel the long wet hair of dead Pippa, and the cold of her lifeless breasts. Was it an hour ago that they had found her by the old sea road, or was it twenty years?

He stood stunned and stupid in the silent ways of Rome.

A great darkness was over all his mind like the plague of that unending night which brooded over Egypt.

All the ferocity of his nature was scourged into its greatest strength; he was sensible of nothing except the sense that he was beaten in the one aim and purpose of his life.

Only−−if by any chance he could still save the boy.

That one thought−−companion with him, sleeping and waking, through so many joyless nights−−stayed with him still.

It seemed to him that he would have strength to scale the very heights of heaven, and shake the very throne of God until He heard−−to save the boy.

The night was far gone; the red of the day−dawn began to glow, and the stars paled.

He did not know how time went; but he knew the look of the daybreak. When the skies looked so, through his grated windows at home, he rose and said a prayer, and went down and unbarred his doors, and led out his white beasts to the plough, or between the golden lines of the reaped corn; all that was over now.

The birds were waking on the old green hills and the crocus flowers unclosing; but he−−

"I shall never see it again," he thought, and his heart yearned to it, and the great hot slow tears of a man's woe stole into his aching eyes and burned them. But he had no pity on himself.

He had freedom and health and strength and manhood, and he was still not old, and still might win the favour of women, and see his children laugh−−if he went back to the old homestead, and the old safe ways of his fathers. And the very smell of the earth there was sweet to him as a virgin's breath, and the mere toil of the ground had been dear to him by reason of the faithful love that he bore to his birthplace. But he had no pity on himself.

"My soul for his," he had said; and he cleaved to his word and kept it.

In his day he had been savage to others. He was no less so to himself.

He had done all that he knew how to do. He had crushed out the natural evil of him, and denied the desires of the flesh, and changed his very nature to do good by Pippa's son: and it had all been of no use; it had all been spent in vain, as drowning seamen's cries for help are spent on angry winds and yawning waters. He had tried to follow God's will and to drive the tempter from him, for the boy's sake; and it had all been of no avail. Through the long score of years his vain sacrifices echoed dully by him as a dropt stone through the dark shaft of a well.

Perhaps it was not enough.

Perhaps it was needful that he should redeem the boy's soul by the utter surrender and eternal ruin of his own−−perhaps. After all it was a poor love which balanced cost; a meek, mean love which would not dare take guilt upon it for the thing it cherished.

To him crime was crime in naked utter blackness; without aught of those palliatives with which the cultured and philosophic temper can streak it smooth and paint its soft excuse, and trace it back to influence or insanity. To him sin was a mighty, hideous, hell−born thing, which, being embraced, dragged him who kissed it on the mourn, downward and downward into bottomless pits of endless night and ceaseless torment. To him the depths of hell and heights of heaven were real as he had seen them in the visions of Orgagna.

Yet he was willing to say, "evil be thou my good," if by such evil he could break the bonds of passion from the life of Pippa's son.

He had in him the mighty fanaticism which has made at once the tyrants and the martyrs of the world.

"Leave him to me," he had said, and then the strength and weakness, and ruthless heat, and utter

self−deliverance of his nature, leaped to their height, and nerved him with deadly passion.

"There is but one way," he said to himself;−−there was but one way to cut the cords of this hideous, tangled knot of destiny, and let free the boy to the old ways of innocence.

"He will curse me," he thought; "I shall die−−never looking on his face−−never hearing his voice. But he will be freed−−so. He will suffer−−for a day−−a year. But he will be spared the truth. And he is so young−−he will be glad again before the summer comes."

For a moment his courage failed him.

He could face the thought of an eternity of pain, and not turn pale, nor pause. But to die with the boy's curse on him−−that was harder.

"It is selfishness to pause," he told himself. "He will loathe me always; but what matter−−he will be saved; he will be innocent once more; he will hear his 'beautiful things' again; he will never know the truth; he will be at peace with himself, and forget before the summer comes. He never has loved me−−not much. What does it matter−−so that he is saved. When he sees his mother in heaven some day, then she will say to him−−'It was done for your sake.' And I shall know that he sees then, as God sees. That will be enough."

And he refused to have pity on himself; and hardened his heart, and faced the red of the breaking day with his resolve stronger and firmer in his soul, till he seemed to himself to be no more a man with nerves to wound and heart to suffer, but a thing of iron set to vengeance as a clock is wound to strike.

There was no other way, that was what he thought; no other way to turn the boy to innocence, and spare him ever any knowledge of the truth.

The same terrible sense of crime as duty which of old nerved the hands of Judith and of Jael, came on him now. In the great blindness that was upon him it seemed to him that to shrink from this act set to him, would be the feeblest cowardice. It seemed to him that all the forces of Satan were at war with him, and that not to strike them down and crush them out, would be to pander to and aid them, and shrink, a craven, from their path.

The passion which makes tyrannicides was in him now.

"I have lived righteously, and no good has come of it," he said to himself. "If came can save him−−crime shall be sweeter to me than all virtue."

That was all he felt; dully, savagely, hopelessly, with that despair upon him which is irresponsible as madness.

He had given all his manhood to the boy, and surrendered all the hopes and ties and pleasures and tender follies which make the toil of manhood bearable, and soften creeping age of half its terrors−−and one after another alien forces had arisen and taken the thing he had laboured for away from him.

His heart was hard. His blood was fire. Fate had been merciless and God been deaf. He grew merciless too, and stopped his ears to pity.

Pity!

Where was there any in all this wide world? The fiend sent a creature on to earth with a wooing mouth and a white body, and she ate up youth and innocence, and all pure desires, and all high endeavours, and devoured souls as swine the garbage; and from heaven there was never any sign.

The young day grew wider and brighter and redder in the sky. Nightingales sang in the gardens on the other side of the high walls. The wind rose fragrant with the smell of wet grass−ways and of the laden orange boughs. He noticed nothing. The time had gone by with him when any sight or sound had power on him. He only waited−−waited silently−−drawn back within the shadow of the walls.

With the full morning the bolts of the gates were drawn back, there came forth a young man with a face strange to him, and rich garments, and a smile of triumph on his mouth; a little later came a woman, with brass buckets on her shoulders going to fetch water from the fountain in the public square a street or two beyond.

He, waiting for such a moment's favouring chance, went within. The fresh dark gardens were deserted. There was a stone terrace with two flights of steps; winged lions; and grim marble masks. He ascended the stairs, and pushed back some great doors which were unlatched within. They yielded to his hand. He entered the silent house.

Two or three servants, drowsy or drunken, lay about on the couches in the great vaulted entrance whose white and red marbles gleamed in the golden glory of the slanting sunrays.

One of them raised himself sleepily, and stopped him with a stupid smile.

"Where do you go?−−what would you do?"

Bruno pushed him aside:

"I go to my work," he answered, and passed onward. The other, muttering, dropped back again into his vinous rest.

Bruno went on. Long corridors, empty banqueting rooms, chambers rich with sculptures and with frescoes, deserted splendours where the flowers were fading, and the morning shining through the crevices of closed shutters, all followed one on another like the tombs of dead Etrurian kings. All the household slept, after the long, gay amorous vigil of the night. He traversed the silent places as a living man traverses the solitude of sepulchres. He had no knowledge where to find the thing he sought; but he went on without a pause; he had grasped Evil by the hand; it guides unerringly.

His bare feet smote the bare marble and trode on, inexorable as the tread of time. After many chambers−−the vast, beautiful, painted chambers of Rome, lofty as temples, and cool as the deep sea−−he saw a door closed, with garlands of roses coloured on its panels under the morning sunbeams.

He thrust his strength against it; it resisted a moment, then gave way and opened noiselessly; a fierce exultant joy leaped up in his heart like a sudden flame; he had found his goal.

Here no daylight came; a little lamp was burning, a Cupid swung it from a chain; there was deep colour in the shadows everywhere; the gloom of the place was filled with aromatic odours.

He paused neither for the loveliness nor the stillness of it; he went through its fragrant darkness with the same slow calm steps. As destiny comes to men to strike, unhasting but unresting, so he went to her.

He paused a moment and looked on her. Her bed was white as sea−foam is, it rose and sunk like billows under her; her loosened hair half covered her; her arms were cast above her head; her limbs were lightly crossed; she was one of those women who are most beautiful in sleep; and her sleep was soft and smiling and profound in its repose, as when she had slumbered on the nest of hay by Palma's side in the old hut at Giovoli.

In her disarray, in her abandonment, in her deep dreamless rest, she was like a white rose just ruffled with the dew and wind, and shutting all the summer in its breast.

He stood and looked on her.

In her nude beauty she was to him sexless; in her perfect loveliness she was to him loathsome.

She was no woman; but all the evil, all the wrong, all the injustice, and all the mockery of human life made manifest in the flesh in her.

He stood and looked on her; at her red closed mouth, at her fair curled limbs, at her soft breast that rose and fell with the even measures of her peaceful breath.

Then he leaned forward and drew his knife from his belt, and, stooping, stabbed her through the heart−−again and again and again−−driving each stroke farther home.

She quivered a moment, then was still; she passed from sleep to death.

He went out, no man staying him, or asking him anything, into the broad bright daylight of the outer air.

"It was for him," he said in his thoughts, and a great serenity was with him as of some duty done.

Man would slay him, and God would bid him burn in hell for ever:−−what matter?−−the boy was saved.

He went on, erect, in the full sunshine. Justice was done.

A deep, fierce, exultant calm was on him. He would perish−−body and soul−−but the boy was saved.

In the streets there were many people, and the multitudes were silent and afraid, and there was a sound as of weeping among women, and the stir and the press grew greater at each step; and through the crowds there was brought out in the living light of the joyous day an open bier; met followed mourning as once they followed Raffaele.

"What is it?" he asked, and paused, for a great fear fell upon him.

A woman answered him.

"His wanton was faithless, look you−−and last night alone he knew it. So he slew himself−−why not? She had killed all his soul in him. When Love is dead, one's body best dies too."

They brought the bier through the weeping crowds.

The face was uncovered to the light. It was the face of Signa.

They had folded his hands on his breast, and his eyes were closed as in slumber.

Love had killed him.

Why not? It is the only mercy that Love ever has.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN a warm cloudless morning, with the scent of wild flowers upon the wind, when the summer had drawn near, and the world was filled with life and light, they brought Bruno out into the public place of Rome to meet his death.

He was quite silent. He had been always silent.

When the sun smote his eyes, and the wind blew on his face, he shivered a little, that was all.

"It was all of no use," he muttered. "It was all of no use."

He mounted the scaffold with a firm step. He was unconscious what he did, but courage remained an instinct with him.

Priests could do naught for him. He repelled them. He had no remorse.

"I did what I could," he said in his heart. "But it was all of no use−−of no use."

He looked a moment at the blue sky−−at the fair sailing clouds−−at the hills which rose between him and his old home−−then he surrendered himself.

They bared his throat.

"Pray for your soul," said some voice in his ear.

He looked straight upward at the sun.

"Let my soul burn for ever!" he said. "Save the boy's."

That was his prayer.

Then he bowed his head, and knelt.

The axe fell.

They flung his body in a ditch, and threw the quicklime on it, and the heavy earth.

That was the end.

The hills lie quiet and know no change; the winds wander amongst the white arbutus−bells and shake the odours from the clustering herbs; the stone−pines scent the storm; the plain out− spreads its golden glory to the morning light; the sweet chimes ring; the days glide on; the splendours of the sunsets burn across the sky, and make the mountains as the jewelled thrones of gods.

Signa, hoary and old, stands there unchanged; beholding the sun shine alike on the just and on the unjust.

Why not?

Signa can count her age by many centuries. Before the Latins were, she knew Etruria; but many as be her memories, she remembers no other thing than this, there is no justice that she knows of anywhere. Signa is wise. She lets this world go by; and sleeps.