

THE WIZARD OF THE MOUNTAIN

A SERIES OF TALES

WRITTEN BY WILLIAM GILBERT

1867

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FIRST VOLUME

William Gilbert, 1804-1890, was the father of W. S. Gilbert. Retired from the Royal Navy, William decided to begin a career as an author after noting the success of his son. He wrote a number of novels, from which can be discerned a commonality of the Gilberts' imaginations.

The Wizard Of The Mountain, written in 1867, is a series of tales linked together by the doings of the Innominato (Nameless; having no name). The Innominato lived in late fourteenth century Italy, and was a mysterious wizard who possessed magical powers. These tales had previously been serially published in various London monthly magazines.

The Innominato is the master of his own castle and is well-respected and feared by all those in the area. The local nobles are wary of him, and the local peasants and burghers come to him for advice and help. The Innominato is designated by Gilbert as an 'astrologer.' His powers are never enumerated, but they seem to include clairvoyance, prophecy, and various magical arts.

His origin is that as a young man he had planned to become a priest, but he got diverted to the secular life and drawn in to the study of magic. A mysterious acquaintance had helped him to gain magical powers, but only by forswearing all religion. The acquaintance then took tried to get the young man to sell his soul. The Innominato refused, seeing that the Devil was behind this. Since that time he tried to live a good life and to use his powers to help people, rather than hurt them. The reader will need to determine the degree of success of the Innominato's efforts.

There are eleven tales that make up *The Wizard Of The Mountain*. The last tale is of the Innominato himself and how he came to be. The eleven tales are contained in two volumes. This is the First Volume, which has tales one through six. The Second Volume has tales seven through eleven.

FIRST VOLUME

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THE WIZARD OF THE MOUNTAININTRODUCTION

In the spring of 184—, I had occasion to visit an intimate friend, who had established some extensive silk mills at the village of Ponte, near Pian D’Erba, in the Brianza. As this beautiful portion of the garden of Europe is but little known to English travellers generally, — who, with rare exceptions, on arriving in Italy, hurry southward, — I may state that it is situated in the centre of the base of the triangle which is formed by the high road running from Como to Lecco in the south; while the sides stretching upwards, terminate at the apex formed at Bellaggio in the north. It would be difficult to imagine scenery more lovely than is there to be found.

It varies from the soft undulating hills covered with the mulberry plant and the vine, which form the southern slopes of the Alps, to the wildest mountain scenery. To see it in perfection the traveller should start on foot, and passing through Ponte, follow the course of the impetuous river Lambro, till it dwindles into a little mountain rill. During the six weeks of my visit, I was never tired of strolling among the beautiful scenes which at every turn meet the eye.

Although to me, as a stranger to Italy, it might have possessed a charm greater than to others, still it would be difficult indeed for even the most experienced traveller, who had been familiarized with Nature in all her loveliness, not to be charmed with the beautiful prospects which are to be found in such abundance in the Comasque districts. Frequently in my rambles I remained out so late that my friend would become uneasy, and request me to return for the future before nightfall, as the evenings in those mountain districts shut in so rapidly that it was by no means safe for a stranger to lose himself in the dark; the pathways being frequently narrow, and the precipices very dangerous. Accidents of a serious nature, he assured me, had occurred; and he begged me on all occasions when I was likely to remain out after dark, to provide myself with a guide. Although his advice was sound, I confess I did not act upon it; the luxury of being alone in such a beautiful locality would have been considerably marred by the loquacity of an ignorant peasant, not one-tenth part of whose *patois* I could have understood. Yet it was out of no disrespect to my friend’s advice that I did not follow it, for I could not fail to see that it was most judicious; but sunset, above all other times of the day, had an especial attraction for me. It was my great delight to gain some elevated position, and watch the magnificent effects of light and shade which were produced by the struggle between the fading day and coming night.

One evening when I had strolled much further than usual, I came to a spot which I had not yet visited. I can hardly describe its position better than by saying that it was in a deep valley at the base of a singular-looking mountain, to the eastward of Lecco, and that it overlooked the whole of the peninsula, bounded by the two arms of the Lake. I do not remember its name, but it has two singular-looking protuberances on its summit, something in the shape of two stunted horns, which form a remarkable feature in the landscape, and are seen at a distance of many miles. On looking around me to determine which pathway I should take, I perceived at some distance, and at a considerable elevation on the mountain, what appeared to be some extensive castellated ruins, and a strong desire to inspect them came over me. Although already greatly fatigued by my ramble, I immediately set out with renewed vigour to reach them. As I proceeded, the valley narrowed, and I lost sight of the ruins; but as I knew I must be in the right path, I continued onwards.

Presently I came upon a somewhat large village, and in it I particularly noticed a picturesque-looking inn, whose appearance seemed to promise a far greater amount of comfort to the traveller than is generally found in similar localities. Outside the door and under a verandah, over which was trained a vine, were placed some rough tables, at which several persons were seated. The appearance of a stranger seemed to excite in them no little surprise. They evidently regarded me with great curiosity, and a gentlemanly-looking priest, who was conversing with the landlord, whispered something in his ear which induced him to raise his cap as I passed, and the same courtesy was then repeated by almost all present, his reverence among the number.

I returned their salutation, and without further notice continued on my way. Presently the valley somewhat opened out, and to my great satisfaction I found that the pathway I had chosen rose towards the ruins, which now stood out plainly before me. The road, however, was longer than I had anticipated, for, owing to the clearness of the atmosphere, the ruins appeared to me less distant than they really were; and before I had reached them, evening had already begun to set in.

A more glorious sunset than I watched that evening, I think, I never beheld. The sun, as he sank behind the mountains, seemed to cast over the whole of the western Alps one immense mantle of the richest purple, which, becoming darker and darker, would have subsided into the deepest black had it not been for the myriads of stars which gradually shone out as the light of day faded away. So completely was I absorbed in the scene before me that for some time I totally forgot the ruins which had tempted me to the spot, and at whose base I was seated.

Before I had fully recollected the object of my visit, I turned round, and glancing casually at the heavy masses of masonry which frowned in the dark above me, I resolved on visiting them another day, and, rising from my seat, prepared to retrace my steps homewards. Another attraction, however, chained me to the spot. Although, a short time before, the whole space of the heavens had been equally covered with stars, it now appeared to me that towards the east many of them had faded, or rather melted away, in a brighter hue of the sky, which was evidently spreading itself above the mountains on the Lecco side of the Lake. Brighter and clearer became the heavens, and a silver hue gradually developed itself, and lighted up the mountains on the eastern side of the Lake, bringing into strong relief the rugged fantastic tops of the Reségone — that mountain so graphically described by Manzoni at the commencement of his admirable tale of

I Promessi Sposi [The Betrothed].

There was no longer any doubt as to the cause of the magnificent phenomenon I was witnessing, for the beams of the rising moon began distinctly to spread themselves over one-half of the heavens, the stars — with the exception of some few of magnitude which still held their place, though with enfeebled light — disappearing as she came. And now she gradually rose from her mountain bed in indescribable purity and grandeur. The change her presence wrought over the whole scene was miraculous. All was now in a pure calm light, or intense black shadow. The Lake itself seemed one large mirror of silver encircled by a framework of mountains. There was an unearthly, or rather perhaps heavenly, quiet shed over the whole prospect, which for some time completely overcame me; and I remained for more than an hour on the spot, as if under some powerful enchantment.

But the realities of life again came before my mind and once more I prepared to depart. My eye, however, was attracted by the ruin near me, and I resolved, if but for a moment, to enter within the walls. I had some difficulty in carrying out my purpose, for the castle gateway was in the shadow. At last, however, I succeeded; but my curiosity was but little gratified, for more than three parts of the interior were in a darkness too deep to distinguish one object from another with any certainty. With the exception that the ruins were extensive, and that a considerable portion of them was covered with wild shrubs, and that the place had been (for mediaeval architecture) of considerable military strength, I could ascertain nothing, and I left the spot determining, as before, to visit it again at a future time.

I now began to descend the mountain, and, thanks to the light of the moon, progressed for some time in my path without much difficulty, though I suffered dreadfully from fatigue. I began for the first time to calculate the distance between me and Ponte, and I confess I felt somewhat alarmed lest my strength should fail me before I could reach the house of my friend. Having no alternative, however, I walked boldly onwards. Presently I began to meet with difficulties I had not calculated on when I ascended the mountain. As I approached the valley, the space between the hills became narrower, and the shadows thrown across it made it profoundly dark. To the right of the narrow path ran a deep fissure, at the bottom of which rushed a stream of some magnitude; while, to the left, enormous rocks rose almost perpendicularly.

I now had to pick my way with great caution, and my pace was in consequence much slower. At last the valley had so narrowed, that I was in almost impenetrable darkness, which continued for more than a mile, when suddenly my spirits were raised by the sight of a glimmering light in the windows of a cottage beside the water-mill I had passed in ascending the mountain. I now began to remember the locality with tolerable distinctness, and I knew that the village inn was only a short distance further on; so I resisted the temptation to ask for assistance at the cottage, and continued my way. Very soon I was able to distinguish other houses, and amongst them the inn, with strong lights shining through the doorway and windows on the ground-floor, proving that the inmates had not yet retired to rest. In a moment I forgot my fatigue, and hurrying onward entered the house, and found the host, his wife, and the same priest I had seen before, seated round a table engaged in conversation. My appearance seemed to cause them both surprise and pleasure.

“Welcome back,” said the priest to me, “welcome back. To tell you the truth, we began to be uneasy about you, fearing you had lost your way, or had met with some accident.”

I thanked them for the interest they had taken in my welfare, and then inquired if I could obtain a guide to Ponte, as I was not well acquainted with the road. The priest explained my request to the landlord, in the *patois* of the district, which had but little similarity in it to the Italian language. His answer I did not understand.

“The landlord,” said the priest, “tells me that it would be impossible at this time of night to find a guide for you. Besides, you would not be able to arrive before daylight, even if you started at once, as it is fully ten miles distant, and you already appear much fatigued. Take my advice and remain here for the night. I know my friend Giacomo, our landlord, has an excellent bed, and he is also a capital cook. You can start as early as you please to-morrow morning. I am sure your friend Signor R—, will not expect you tonight.”

“Do you know me then?” I said, greatly surprised.

“I saw you the day of your arrival at Ponte,” he replied. “I am curate of an adjoining parish, but I left it the day after that to do duty here for a few weeks; the late priest died suddenly, and being an intimate friend of mine, he named me as his executor. In advising you to remain here for the night,” he continued, “I am perhaps actuated by a selfish motive. To-morrow the priest who is appointed to this village will arrive, and I shall then return to my own cure; so if you remain, and will honour me, I may have the pleasure of your company on the road.”

I told the priest that I should accept with pleasure the courteous offer of his company on the road next day, and requested him to bid the landlord prepare the bed for me at once, as I was too much fatigued that evening to think of supper. After a little more conversation — which I carried on with some difficulty, for though I understand Italian perfectly, I am but little in the habit of conversing in the language — I bade him good-night, and, seeking my bed, was soon fast asleep.

It was late before I awoke the next day, and when I left my chamber I found my breakfast ready for me, spread on a little table under the verandah. My landlord obsequiously attended on me during the meal, and persisted in conversing with me, somewhat to my annoyance, as I did not understand one word in ten that he uttered. Possibly if I had asked him to desist it would have been useless, as I should have had great difficulty in explaining myself in his *patois*, so I submitted to his chattering with the best grace I could.

Breakfast over, I paid the reckoning, and after bidding the landlord adieu, strolled about in the immediate vicinity of the inn. I also visited the water-mill, from which I obtained a good view of the ruined castle. The longer I gazed at it, the greater became my curiosity to know something of its history; and I resolved, on our road to Ponte, to question the priest on the subject. I had hardly formed the resolution when some one touched me on the shoulder, and on turning round I found his reverence standing beside me; for so absorbed had I been in my meditations, that I had not heard his approach. He was evidently prepared for his walk, for he had a staff in one hand and a bundle in the other.

“My successor has arrived,” he said, “and I have made over to him the duties of the cure; so when you are ready we will start for Ponte, unless there are any other spots in this neighbourhood you wish to visit, and in that case I shall have much pleasure in accompanying you, if you will allow me.”

“I am quite ready,” I said, turning from the spot. “Perhaps some other day I may again visit this locality, but at present I ought to return home, as I am afraid my friend will be getting anxious about me.”

We now started on our journey. I found my companion extremely intelligent and courteous; but I experienced considerable difficulty in conversing with him, for though I understood him perfectly, I could not, from want of practice, explain my meaning very easily. At last I asked if he understood French, as I could speak more fluently in that language than in Italian.

"I understand it, I admit," he said. "By all means let us converse in French" (which he spoke well); "but why should we not talk in Italian? You speak the language admirably."

I sincerely hoped he would remember the falsehood when he next went to confession, and would receive a severe penance for it, which he richly deserved. I thanked him, however, for the compliment, which I attributed to a kind wish on his part to encourage me.

"Have you been long in Italy?" he inquired.

"A very short time," I replied; "and with the exception of the cities of Turin and Milan, and the neighbourhood of Lake Como, I have seen nothing of the country."

"Do you not greatly admire the Lake and the scenery around it?" he asked.

"Immensely," I replied. "I had no idea that so lovely a spot existed on the face of the globe."

"I am delighted to hear you say so, though I am by no means surprised. I have lived here for more than twenty-five years, and of course am well accustomed to the scenery; yet I can assure you it appears to me, at the present time, as beautiful as it was on the first day of my arrival. Turn which way you will, some fresh attraction seems to spring up before you."

"But lovely as it is by day," I remarked, "it is occasionally equally lovely by night. I never saw anything more exquisite than the sunset yesterday evening, and the rising of the moon afterwards. I was completely enchanted by it, and quite forgot how late it was, and the distance I was from home."

"To watch the full moon rising over the Reségone is always a great treat to me," said my companion. "Had you a good view of it yesterday evening?"

"Admirable!" I replied. "I was standing at the time by the old castle, so there was nothing to interfere with my view."

"You could not have been in a better position. At the same time you showed yourself to be either a very bold man or a stranger to the locality," said the priest, adopting a certain mock gravity in the concluding sentence.

"How so?" I asked.

"Because that spot has a very bad reputation. I can assure you that you would have had great difficulty in persuading any of the peasantry in the vicinity to have kept you company."

"I did not know there were robbers in these parts," I remarked. "I have frequently heard my friend say that the peasantry in the neighbourhood were remarkable for their integrity."

"Nor did he in any way exceed the truth when he said so," my companion replied. "A more honest community than our peasantry it would be impossible to find in any part of Europe; but I did not allude to robbers when I spoke. There are various indistinct traditionary rumours respecting the old ruins being haunted by the ghost of a certain necromancer, who is said to have lived about the end of the fourteenth or the early part of the fifteenth century. At the same time I admit that I never met with any one who had seen the phantom; and I have frequently used this as an argument to convince the ignorant peasantry of the absurdity of the idea. One day as I was conversing with one of the most intelligent among them on the subject, I inquired if he, who had lived all his life in the neighbourhood, and was now an old man, had ever seen the ghost. 'Never,' he replied. 'Did your father, who inhabited the cottage before you, ever see him?' 'No; but he was certain the ghost haunted the ruins for all that.' 'Do you know anyone who ever saw him?' I inquired. 'No,' said he, 'and that is my great reason for believing that he haunts the ruins.' 'How so?' I asked. 'Because no one will go near them after nightfall for fear they should see him; and that is, I think, proof enough for any one who is not an infidel.' Of course, it was of little use attempting to combat such a logician, and I gave up the point, greatly to the self-glorification of my adversary."

"But is there really nothing known with certainty of the history of those ruins?"

"Nothing," replied the priest. "Whenever a tradition worthy of any credence is brought forward respecting them, it is always mixed up with so much that is false as to make it of little or no value. My poor friend, the late priest of the parish, took a great interest in the matter, but I am afraid that his attempts to throw light on the subject have only made obscurity doubly obscure."

"How so?"

"Well, I can hardly describe it satisfactorily. He was rather an eccentric character, and occasionally it was exceedingly difficult to know whether he was in jest or in earnest. He has left behind him many memoranda which he made respecting the ruins, and many traditions concerning them; but the latter are of so wild and fantastic a character, as not only to prove themselves utterly fictitious, but at the same time to throw great doubt upon other details which otherwise would have appeared purely historical. Some of his narratives are told, however, in such a matter-of-fact way as to give one the impression that he had derived them from some local traditions representing events which might formerly have happened, but which have become so distorted by being verbally handed down from father to son, that the original facts have been totally lost. Others of them, however, are very possibly the creation of his own brain. At any rate the safer plan is to consider them as such."

“What makes you imagine it possible that any of them had an original foundation in fact?” I inquired.

“That is a very difficult question to answer,” he replied. “I admit that the only data I can offer are the occasional descriptions he gives of different parts of the building, which are narrated so minutely as to throw some air of truth over the tale. I am somewhat inclined to believe that at the commencement he conscientiously determined to write an authentic sketch of the history of the whole castle; but finding it impossible, he merely amused himself by inventing the tales he has put together.”

“Are they really worth reading?” I inquired.

“Yes, in my opinion they are; but I am ready to admit that I may be prejudiced in their favour by my friendship for the writer, and my respect for his ability.”

“Why do you not publish them?” I asked.

“I once had the wish,” he replied; “but on reflection several objections presented themselves, and I gave up the idea. In the first place I hardly considered it consistent with the gravity of my profession to edit a series of fantastic tales of the kind, as they leave us in doubt whether the astrologer, who is supposed to have inhabited the castle at the time the events related took place, did not derive his power from objectionable sources, even from the powers of darkness themselves.”

“But they are not of an immoral or irreligious tendency?”

“Certainly not,” he answered; “on the contrary, they all profess to carry with them a moral, and the text, ‘Therefore by their fruits shall ye know them,’ might, to a certain degree, absolve them from the probability of their being of evil origin. Still it may be held that a priest would not be justified in publishing a book of the kind. Besides, in Italy, I might have some difficulty in finding a publisher; nor would tales of that description be relished by the Italians, and the attempt might end in such a loss as I could ill afford.”

“Why should you imagine that your countrymen would not admire them?” I inquired.

“Because they are hardly suited to their tastes. They are of that wild, fantastic school, which might perhaps be liked in Germany or in your own country, but which, I fear, would hardly be adapted for us children of the south.”

“If I were some day to return to the village do you think I could obtain permission to see them?”

“You can see and inspect them without taking that trouble,” said the priest. “A few days ago I sent them with some other things to my own house, which is not a quarter of an hour’s walk from Ponte. Call on me any day you please, and I will place the whole of my friend’s manuscripts before you. Nay, more, as you appear interested in literature, they are all perfectly at your service, should you think you can make any use of them; and you can make any extracts from them you please.”

I warmly thanked my companion for his kind offer, and assured him that I would willingly profit by it; and then arranged that I should call on him the next morning for the purpose of examining the papers.

We now continued on our road, chatting pleasantly on divers subjects — principally connected with the localities we were at the moment passing through. It was nearly evening before we reached Ponte, where I found my friend in a state of great anxiety in consequence of my absence. I told him the cause, and also of the friendship I had formed with the priest. Mr. R—, it appeared, knew him intimately. “He is a very good fellow,” he said, “a true Christian, and a great benefactor to the poor around us, and is much liked by everyone acquainted with him. I do not think there is a person in the world who could say a bad word of him.”

“Did you know his friend the priest who has lately died?” I inquired.

“I knew him very slightly, and that only from seeing him with our friend, Don Giorgio. He was evidently a man of considerable learning, and a great antiquary, but very eccentric. I have no doubt you will find some very curious documents among his papers.”

“Do you happen to know anything about the old castle?” I asked.

“Nothing whatever, beyond having visited it once or twice. It appears to be one of those strongholds erected in the feudal times, and of which the origin is entirely lost. There are several of them about the Comasque and Bresciano districts, of which not the slightest reliable records remain. Nothing but the faintest traditions can be found respecting them. The one you saw is said to have been inhabited by a mysterious individual, known as the Innominato, who really, one would think, must have had some existence, from the fact that there is said to have been another castle inhabited by him somewhere in the mountains to the north of Bergamo. But even in this tradition a strong discrepancy exists, for the latter chief was a man much dreaded for his sanguinary propensities; while the other, who inhabited the castle near us, is said to have made himself much beloved.”

Next day I called on my new acquaintance, the priest, who received me with great cordiality. After a little conversation on general subjects, he placed before me the memoranda of his deceased friend relating to the Innominato and his castle, and we were soon absorbed in their investigation. Although at first they appeared but a confused mass of papers, with little arrangement or connexion, I soon found that they comprised a series of legends connected with the castle, all exceedingly fantastic; and if some were not absolutely original, they were obviously founded on local traditions.

Many of them were not only curious but highly interesting, notwithstanding their wildness and improbability. The most difficult portion of the whole to understand were a number of detached sheets of paper, evidently intended for the opening chapter. In spite of my earnest wish to make them out, and place them in some kind of order, I found the task impossible — so confused and illegible were they. I could, however, make out that the Innominato was an astrologer, who had obtained a wide celebrity for his skill in magic, and that he lived in great seclusion in the castle, his principle attendants being three or four old men-servants and a porter. Although it seemed many persons of all grades called on him for advice or assistance, very few were allowed to remain a night within the castle walls. At the same time he appeared to have been by no means insensible to the duties of hospitality, as he had built, for the reception of his visitors, a spacious lodge or hospice, about a third of a mile distant from the castle, at which all persons desirous to see him were obliged to remain till a messenger had taken up their names and the object of their visit to the Innominato; and after their reception they were again conducted back to the hospice, where they were usually entertained with great liberality. Of this lodge or hospice no portion now remains. It appears, however, to have been situated somewhere beside the present path, and in sight of the porter when he stood at the entrance-gates of the castle. Of what country the Innominato was a native there was no record.

I ought to have stated that the priest had evidently died before he had completed his work, for the last — and certainly one of the most interesting — of his narratives was left half-finished. From the many legends before me I selected a few for publication, and now offer them to the notice of the reader . . .

THE DOCTOR ONOFRIO

One cold winter's morning, the Innominato, whose fame as a magician and astrologer had long been great throughout a large portion of Northern Italy, was seated in his chair beside the fire, which burnt brightly on the hearth. He was at the time deeply absorbed in his meditations; so much so, indeed, that his servant Pietro had three times knocked at his door to inform him of a new arrival, without his being heard. Although Pietro's orders were never to enter the room without having first received permission, he ventured on the present occasion to disobey them, and placing himself in a respectful attitude before his master, he waited quietly till he should become aware of his presence.

"You here, Pietro?" said the Innominato, at last. "Why have you disobeyed me? I told you never to enter here without my authority."

"Pardon me, your excellency," said Pietro, "but I knocked thrice without your replying, and I then ventured to enter, as the porter from the Hospice has arrived with an urgent message."

"From whom?"

"From a traveller who respectfully desires an interview with you."

"Is he of such importance that he cannot wait my leisure?" said the Innominato, somewhat angrily.

"Doubtless he would have done so had he known your excellency's orders. Nor would I have dared to intrude, but that the porter informed me the traveller is very aged and infirm, and appears to be suffering severely from the cold."

"In that case you are excused, Pietro," said the Innominato. "We ought not to let the aged and infirm suffer, to avoid a temporary inconvenience ourselves. But who is the traveller, and what does he require at my hands?"

"He is the Doctor Onofrio, lately a judge at Verona, and formerly one of the professors in the University of Padua."

"He must be a very aged man," said the Innominato, "eighty at least; but, though he has years on his head, he has gained little honour and less love. Still, let him be admitted."

Pietro left the room, and the Innominato, as soon as he was alone, rose from his chair, and for some minutes paced up and down the room as he smoothed his long snowy beard with his hand, on which a gem of great price sparkled brilliantly.

“It is not difficult to divine what brings the Doctor Onofrio to me,” he murmured to himself. “He feels his age and infirmities weigh sore upon him, and he comes to ask me to prolong his life; and for what reason? He cannot hope to be reinstated in his judgeship, for he must be aware that his infamous reputation is too well known for that to be possible. Is it to ask for wealth? That is more probable; but, though he is far from being rich, he would hardly have taken so long a journey in this inclement weather on that account. Is it that he fears to die? Yes, it must be that has brought him here, and that alone. He wishes to make his peace with heaven, and he fears, that without my assistance, his life will end before he has succeeded. And he has good cause for his alarm. Few men carry on their shoulders a heavier weight of sins.”

Suddenly the Innominato stopped in his walk, and, proceeding to a little room in the watchtower which adjoined his study, opened the small wicket gate, through which he was able to view the whole path from the Hospice to the Castle. On looking out he saw Doctor Onofrio carried on a chair by two men, who with difficulty kept their feet, so fiercely did the wind rush over the snow-capped mountain to the north. After glancing for a moment at the Doctor, the Innominato, struck by the icy chill from without, closed the wicket, and wrapping his rich fur-bordered mantle around him, he again entered the study, and seated himself in his chair by the fire. “The Doctor’s fears must oppress him sorely,” he continued, “or he would not have faced such a storm as now rages.”

The Innominato now took up a vellum-covered book which he had been reading, and which he had placed beside his chair, and, opening it, was soon engrossed in its contents. The Doctor shortly afterwards arrived at the Castle, and assisted by two servants, was ushered into the study. The Innominato received him most courteously, and taking his hand, led him, though with difficulty, to a chair by the fire opposite to his own.

“Pietro,” he said, as soon as the Doctor was seated, “throw some more logs on the fire, and when that is done, leave us.”

Pietro immediately executed the order, but before leaving the room inquired whether he should prepare a bed for the Doctor.

“That question I will answer you presently,” said the Innominato. “Now leave us.”

For some moments after the servant had left the room no word passed between the Innominato and his guest. The two old men formed a singular picture as they remained seated in front of each other. The majestic form, handsome countenance, and open expression of the astrologer contrasted strongly with the cunning, crabbed features — rendered still more so by the cold cutting blast to which they had been exposed — and the shrivelled emaciated form of the Doctor. The one sat erect in his chair; while the other crouched down in his, till he was nearly bent double. To judge from his appearance at that moment, he seemed to have hardly a week’s life left in him — so infirm and debilitated was he.

After waiting with patience for some time, to allow his guest to recover himself, the Innominato commenced the conversation.

“I am aware that I see before me the learned Doctor Onofrio, lately a judge at Verona, and formerly a professor at Padua. May I beg to know the object of his visit?”

The sound of the Innominato’s voice had the effect of recalling the benumbed senses of the old man, and, lifting his eyes from the fire, on which they had been fixed, he said, “Pardon me if I tire your patience; in a few moments I shall be more at my ease, and able to explain myself. At present I fear I should have some difficulty.”

“Let me not hurry you,” said the Innominato. “Possibly, however, it would save time if I stated your reason for visiting me. If I do so more candidly than may seem courteous, it will have, at any rate, one good effect — we shall be able to discourse more unreservedly on the subject afterwards.”

The Doctor gazed at his host with astonishment, but said nothing.

“You are, as I said before,” continued the Innominato, “Doctor Onofrio, lately a judge at Verona, from which appointment you were ignominiously dismissed — not for incompetency, but for dishonesty. Before you received that appointment you were Professor of Jurisprudence in the University of Padua; where, though your abilities were greatly admired, you were personally detested. Few men have led a life of greater wickedness than you have. Many times you would have fallen into the hands of the executioner, had it not been for the deep cunning by which you contrived to escape from the punishment you deserved; and this you did generally by throwing the blame on innocent persons, who were made to suffer for your crimes. You have, in your judicial capacity, oppressed the widow and the orphan. You have taken bribes from the rich to give unjust verdicts; yet your rapacity has availed you nothing, for your love of gambling consumed the money you so infamously obtained. And you are now a poor man, having barely sufficient, even with great economy, to supply the wants of the short remainder of your days. You are aware that you are tottering on the verge of the grave, and you now visit me to try to induce me to use my skill to extend your life, which otherwise would so soon end. You see, Doctor Onofrio, I am well acquainted with your history.”

Great, indeed, was the surprise of Doctor Onofrio at the words of the Innominato. As each successive accusation reached his ear his astonishment became greater, and he raised his head and body from their crouched position, and, sitting erect in his chair for some moments, regarded the Innominato with an expression of intense terror.

“Alas, sir,” he said, as soon as he had somewhat recovered his self-possession, “I cannot offer any defence to the accusations which you have brought against me. I confess with sorrow, that all you have said is true, and it was to implore your assistance I came here, hoping that in your charity you would help me in my present strait.”

“In what way?”

“By obtaining for me through your art a longer term of life.”

“And why should I do so?” asked the Innominato. “Should I be justified in sending back to society, for a longer period and with renewed vigour, such a dishonourable man as you are?”

“No, no, learned sir, such would not be the case,” said the Doctor Onofrio, earnestly. “Believe me, I clearly see the error of my ways. My only reason for making the request is that I may have time for repentance.”

“And why do you wish for time to repent? Is it not solely to avoid the punishment which heaven may inflict upon you, and which is so justly your due?”

“Indeed, you are in error,” said the Doctor; “although I might naturally wish to escape the anger of God, I am to a far greater extent, actuated by sorrow for the ingratitude I have shown for the mercies I have received at his hand. To make restitution to those whom I have wronged is another reason for imploring your assistance.”

“What restitution can you make to those innocent persons who have either died under the hands of the executioner, or perished miserably in poverty, from unjust sentences which you, their judge, pronounced upon them?”

“Too true, learned sir, too true,” said Onofrio. “To them I can make no atonement; but by good deeds in the future, I may, perhaps, atone in part for my wickedness.”

“Could I but think,” said the Innominato, after a few moments’ silence, “that your repentance was real, I should be strongly tempted to assist you.”

“Indeed it is,” said Onofrio. “Try me by any means you please, and if I am found wanting, withdraw from me at a moment’s notice the benefits you may bestow upon me.”

“Let us suppose,” said the Innominato, “that I have the power to extend your life for the period of a hundred years — that I can restore to you youth and strength, neither of which shall fade away, nor shall there be the slightest alteration in your personal appearance till your death — and that I have the power of giving you gold enough to satisfy the most avaricious; — what would you offer me in exchange?”

A singular change came over the countenance of the Doctor as the Innominato spoke. The anxiously-imploing look which he had hitherto worn now vanished, and another of eager and intense anxiety, not unmixed with cunning, took its place.

“What would I give you, learned sir?” he said, “alas! what can I give beyond my gratitude and my unceasing prayers on your behalf? Those I faithfully promise you shall have.”

“For the former,” said the Innominato, “I care but little, and as for the latter, I positively decline to accept them. From such lips, I fear the prayer would be little better than a mockery. No, on reflection, why should I grant you a longer term of life? I have received no benefit from you; and why then should you expect one from me? You have not been accustomed to confer benefits without an equivalent.”

“If for no other reason,” said the Doctor, “let it be from charity. I acknowledge that I can give you no equivalent, unless you tell me in what way I can serve you. I will perform to the very letter whatever you may desire me to do.”

The astrologer remained silent for some moments, evidently watching with interest the greedy, servile expression of the old man’s countenance. Presently he said: “On consideration, I will grant what you wish. I will make no bargain with you, however, that I may not tempt you to break it. I will tell you my conditions, and if you accept these, you cannot escape from them. If you are really honest, you will have ample opportunity of doing a vast amount of good; if dishonest, you will bring about your own punishment.” So saying, he walked to a large chest, and raising the lid, took out a flask and a small drinking cup, both of silver, and a large empty leathern purse. He then poured out some ruby-coloured liquid into the cup, and afterwards addressed the Doctor in these words: “The elixir I have poured into the cup has the power of restoring to you both health and beauty, which you may retain for one hundred years. Whenever you are in want of money, you have only to wish for it, and you will immediately find a hundred zechini in this purse. The conditions, from which neither of us shall depart, are these: that fifty of each hundred zechini you receive shall be expended in building and endowing an asylum for destitute female orphans. Every time you fail to observe these conditions, the penalty I impose is that one half of the remaining portion of your new term of life for a hundred years will be lost to you without the possibility of your regaining it. For example, if, after you have received the first hundred zechini, which will be this day, and you do not before nightfall set apart one half of the amount for the purpose I have mentioned, the remaining portion of your life will only be fifty years. On the second occasion it will be but half the remaining duration of the term, and so on. Now, do you accept these terms?”

“Most readily and most gratefully do I accept them,” said the old man, endeavouring to put on an expression of great humility, through which cunning — not unmixed with triumph — was plainly perceptible.

“There is the purse, then,” said the Innominato. (The old man greedily caught it, and pressed it between his fingers, feeling if it contained money, but it was empty.) “Now drink off the elixir,” the astrologer continued; “but before doing so, let me ask if you fully understand the conditions I have told you of.”

“I do.”

“Then drink,” said the astrologer, placing the cup in his hands.

The old man swallowed the contents of the cup at a draught. The astrologer then took a wand and waved it gently over the head of the Doctor. Gradually all objects around him seemed to melt away, and he remembered nothing more till he awakened as if from a deep dreamless slumber, when he found himself standing by the sea-shore, near the present town Fucina, with Venice in the distance, lighted up by the beams of a glorious afternoon sun. But though it was Onofrio himself who stood there, how changed was he in appearance from what he had been when he quitted the presence of the astrologer! He was then old, decrepit, and shrivelled, but now he stood erect, a well-built, powerful, and graceful-looking man. The sordid garments which he had worn in the morning, and which then hung loosely on his shrunken limbs, had been replaced by a magnificent and becoming costume, fit for a young noble of great wealth and high rank. On his head was a velvet cap, adorned with an eagle’s feather. He wore a tunic of the same colour, which reached to his knees, and which was fastened round his waist by a band of maroon-coloured velvet, richly embroidered in gold. From this on one side hung an exquisitely-chased dagger, with a brilliant ruby forming the head of the hilt; while on the other side was a leathern pouch of the same colour as his girdle, ornamented with his crest embroidered in gold. If any doubt existed in his own mind as to his identity, which would have been natural enough, considering how great was the metamorphosis he had undergone, there occurred a little incident which fully re-established it. After admiring the splendour of his costume, he placed his hand in his pouch, and drew forth the long but empty leathern purse, which had been given him in the morning by the astrologer. He gazed at it for a moment, and then said, “If you were but full I should then have little more to wish for.”

He had hardly uttered the words when the purse became suddenly heavy, and thrusting his hand into it he drew out a number of zechini. The sight of the gold reminded him of the astrologer’s condition, which had no other effect than to cause him to smile ironically as he replaced the money in his purse.

Having secured the purse in his pouch, he raised his eyes and saw advancing over the Legunes a gondola rowed by two men in rich liveries, while a third, still more splendidly dressed, and having the appearance of a superior servant, stood erect in it. The gondola approached the spot on which Onofrio was standing, and when it reached the shore the servant quitted it, and advancing towards Onofrio said —

“I am addressing, I believe, the noble Count Onofrio de Bovisio? If so, I am ordered to inform your excellency that this gondola has been sent to carry you to your palace should you desire it.”

“And by whom was it sent?” said Onofrio, showing that his original legal caution was still alive within him.

“I do not know the gentleman’s name,” answered the man.

“Tell me, at any rate, whose service are you in,” said Onofrio. “I should like to know something more about you before I trust myself in your power. These are not times for a man to place himself without caution in the hands of entire strangers.”

“I am head valet to the noble Count Greppi; but for the time being I am at your excellency’s service. My name is Antonio. My master was this morning on the point of leaving Venice to visit his estates in the Friuli, attended by only one servant, when a stranger called on him, and asked if he were willing to let a suite of apartments in his palace for the use of a young nobleman of high lineage and great wealth, who would arrive that afternoon, and who was without friend or acquaintance in the city. At first my noble master refused to take any money, saying that his palace was perfectly at the disposal of the expected nobleman; but the stranger declined to profit by the offer. He said that your excellency had great wealth, and was quite willing to pay for any accommodation you might receive. After considerable demur my master agreed to the proposal, and the stranger immediately paid the amount required. The count then left Venice, leaving orders that the servants who remained should obey you as their master. Shortly afterwards your excellency’s baggage arrived, which I saw carefully landed and placed in safety. That is all the information I can give you on the subject.”

“And who was the person who made the bargain?” inquired Onofrio.

“I cannot tell, your excellency. I never, to my knowledge, saw him before. He was dressed something like a foreign merchant; but spoke Italian perfectly. I cannot describe his features, as he wore a black mask, which he did not remove even for an instant. He will, however, be able personally to give you any further particulars you may require, as he is now waiting at the palace to receive you.”

Onofrio made no further objection, but entered the gondola, and was swiftly rowed across the Legunes to a palace in the Grand Canal. On his arrival he was conducted by Antonio upstairs into a room, where he found a plainly-dressed individual of a somewhat foreign appearance, and wearing a black mask. As soon as the servant had left the room, the stranger, without removing his mask, said —

“I have this morning received a message from the illustrious Innominato, informing me of your intended arrival this afternoon, and ordering me to engage an apartment and suite of servants for your use. I have done so. The rent for one year has been paid in advance. The servants are ready at your call. Your luggage is in an adjoining room, and can be disposed of as you desire. I am aware that you have received a purse from my master which may at any time be replenished at your wish; and that certain conditions are attached to your renewed term of life. I will now leave you, and unless I receive an especial message from the Innominato to visit you, you will not see me again, except at your own request, and that but once.”

“Will you tell me your name, and where I may find you?” said Onofrio.

“Neither are necessary,” said the mask. “Take this ring,” he continued, producing one of a very simple appearance, which was attached to a long loop of silken thread, “and wear it round your neck. If at any time you require my presence place the ring on the third finger of your right hand, and I will immediately attend you. Anything you may then wish me to perform I will do, and directly afterwards the ring will lose its power, and you will never see me again.”

The mask now left the room, notwithstanding Onofrio’s wish to retain him a little longer in conversation. He inquired of the servants if they knew who the mysterious individual might be; but no one could give him any information. Onofrio, after placing the silken thread with the ring attached to it round his neck, and concealing it beneath his dress in such a manner that it might not be seen, employed himself in superintending the unpacking of his baggage, and examining the contents of the different boxes. Apathetic as he habitually was, he could hardly restrain his expressions of admiration even before the servants, so valuable were the jewels, and so magnificent were the dresses they contained. No potentate in Europe could have owned a more valuable wardrobe than that which was in the possession of Onofrio.

The different articles being disposed of to his satisfaction, Onofrio ordered his servants to prepare his dinner, and to serve it up as soon as it was ready. While it was being prepared he threw himself on a couch in one of the reception-rooms, and gave himself up to meditation. Notwithstanding the promise he had made to the Innominato, to lead, for the future, a more virtuous and religious life, not a single pious idea passed through his mind, nor a thought of the condition imposed by the astrologer, to place half the amount of the zechini he should receive on each replenishment of his purse to the account of the charitable enterprise which had been fixed on. His mind was solely bent upon pleasure, and the most ready means of procuring it with least trouble to himself. Instead of there being any prospect of reformation in his conduct, there was every likelihood, from the current of his thoughts, of his being more wicked than ever. His present handsome appearance and unlimited supply of wealth would enable him to carry out any extravagance he might wish; while the shrewd lawyer-like cunning which he still possessed in the highest degree, as well his facility for bribery, would enable him to escape from any difficulties in which he might find himself with the police authorities.

Dinner was at last placed on the table, and a sumptuous repast it was. Everything was abundant, and served in excellent taste. The cooking was admirable, and the wines of the finest quality. One of Onofrio's faults was that of indulging in the pleasures of the table, though not to such an extent as to render him open to the accusation of gluttony. On this occasion, tempted by the exquisite flavour of the wine, he drank somewhat more than usual, and after his repast was over he again placed himself on the couch to sleep off its effects. When he awoke, he found it was dark, and called Antonio to bring him a light. Immediately afterwards Antonio entered the room, bearing an exquisitely-formed silver lamp in his hand, which he placed on the table, and awaited in silence his master's orders. For some minutes Onofrio said nothing, but remained in deep meditation. Presently recovering himself, he said to Antonio, "Come with me to my chamber and help me to dress. I shall spend the evening from home, and it may be late before I return."

Antonio attended to Onofrio, and assisted him to change his dress for one still more magnificent. When his toilet was completed he ordered his gondola to be brought up, and entering it with Antonio, whom he desired to follow him, he ordered the men to row him to the Piazza de Schiavoni. In a short time he arrived at the landing place, and left the gondola, followed by Antonio, whom he told to remain in front of the church of St Mark till he should require him. He then mixed with the crowd in the Piazza.

For some time he amused himself by watching the promenaders, and by occasionally stopping at the stalls of the mountebanks and quacks, of which there were several. Presently he began to find a small crowd of idlers gathering round him, attracted by the splendour of his attire and the dignity of his personal appearance; for, although it was now night, a clear full moon was shining. Being too proud to make himself an object of notoriety in a place of public resort, he quitted the Piazza and turned into the Chetto da San Felice, the principal of the many gaming houses in Venice, to which only noblemen who were well known were admitted. The dignity of Onofrio's appearance, and his sumptuous attire, being considered by the custodians a sufficient passport, they allowed him to pass without asking him any questions. The principal saloon was at the time crowded with noblemen who had congregated round the different tables, and were eagerly watching the players and betting on the success of the game. Their attention was so much bent on the play, that for some time Onofrio's presence among them caused no remark. At last, as he was standing by one of the tables used for the game of bassett (which had lately come into vogue in Venice), he made some remark to one of the bystanders, who turning round to answer him, was much struck by his appearance, and asked if he were not a stranger in Venice.

"I am," replied Onofrio. "I only arrived this morning."

"Would you like to approach nearer to the table, so as to watch the game more conveniently?" inquired the person who had addressed him. "It is now in great favour with us."

Onofrio thanked him, and the bystanders were then requested to allow him to approach the table. The request was courteously acceded to, and Onofrio now stood close beside the players, watching the game with great interest, though without taking any part in it. At last, however, he determined to try his fortune, and drawing out his purse, in which were the hundred zechini still intact, he began to stake heavily. Fortune at first smiled upon him, and he won a considerable sum of money; but his luck changed very soon, and he not only lost all he had gained, but a considerable inroad was made on his capital. He now also lost his temper, and, getting reckless, played at random. Bad fortune continued to follow him, and with such pertinacity, that before midnight he had lost the whole contents of his purse.

Beyond the momentary annoyance it caused him, the loss gave him little concern. Finding he was not in the vein for winning that evening, he quitted the rooms, notwithstanding the entreaties of the gamesters for him to remain, many of whom expressed their willingness to lend him money should he require it. With some little difficulty he found Antonio, whom he desired to search for the gondola, and being informed that it was in readiness, he entered it, and shortly afterwards arrived at the palace of Count Greppi.

As soon as Onofrio had risen from his bed next morning, he drew forth his empty purse, and wished that it might be replenished. The thought had hardly been formed when one hundred zechini were again found in the purse. He replaced the purse in his pouch, apparently feeling no regret that one half of his term of life had been shortened by his having neglected to apply to the pious purpose agreed on half the amount he had been in possession of the day before. He now entered a room where he found his breakfast already prepared for him. During the meal he occupied his thoughts in framing some scheme to pass the day agreeably. Of course no idea of study or any serious occupation occurred to him — pleasure, and pleasure alone was all that he desired. He already began to find life irksome without friends or acquaintances; but where was he to find them? True, there were many families in Venice with whom he had been more or less acquainted, but from prudential motives he did not dare to make himself known to them lest he might be suspected of witchcraft.

He now resolved that he should introduce himself as a stranger to some of the principal merchants and noblemen, and endeavour to become intimate with them, calculating that he should find the task all the easier from his being already aware of their peculiar habits. By cautiously working upon their good feeling, he might get invited to their houses. To do this he was well aware that he must assume a respectable and sedate appearance; and as soon as his meal was over he dressed himself in a sombre but rich suit, and leaving home without any attendant, he made his way to the Exchange.

For some time after his arrival there no good opportunity presented itself for him to make a desirable acquaintance, there being but few merchants of high standing among the crowd. Later, however, he was more fortunate. Near him he heard two gentlemen conversing angrily on some subject of interest, and presently others of the bystanders joined in the debate. Now it so happened that one of the disputants was the Signor Morini, one of the richest merchants in Venice. Onofrio recognised him immediately, having formerly sat as judge in a case in which Morini was interested. His altered appearance sufficiently securing him from being detected, Onofrio advanced to the group, and, listening attentively, soon found that the cause of the dispute was that some goods which had been shipped to Cyprus had never arrived. Morini, the owner of the goods, claimed their full value from the proprietor of the ship, a wealthy merchant, who upon some legal objection refused to give payment. As soon as Onofrio understood the cause of the dispute he entered with great tact into the conversation, and by his judicious remarks in a short time engaged the attention of all present. Of course he took up the cause of Morini, and argued it so well that all (with the exception of the proprietor of the vessel) took his view of the question.

The owner of the ship still continued obstinate, and Morini declined to argue the subject further, determining to take legal proceedings to enforce his claim. Before leaving the spot Morini not only thanked Onofrio for the lucid manner in which he had argued on his behalf, but requested as a favour that he would spend the evening with him, which invitation Onofrio readily accepted.

He was true to his appointment, and received a cordial welcome from Morini. An advocate of high standing was the only other guest invited, and for some time the three conversed together regarding the contemplated lawsuit. Skilled as the advocate was in the law, he had no difficulty in perceiving that the stranger was more learned than he, and, after attempting for some time to take the lead in the conversation, he gradually began to tacitly acknowledge Onofrio's superiority, and listened to him with the greatest attention and respect. At last he was so struck with the vast amount of his legal knowledge, that he ventured to inquire whether he was not a member of the profession.

"I am not," said Onofrio. "I know nothing of legal matters beyond points connected with shipping. My father was a merchant of eminence in Genoa, and was concerned in shipping, especially in the latter part of his life. As he was then very infirm and somewhat suspicious of those about him, the principal part of my time was occupied in assisting him in getting up evidence and watching the progress of various lawsuits in which he was engaged, and hence my knowledge of such matters."

After Morini and the advocate had complimented Onofrio on the admirable use he had made of his time, the former introduced his guest to his wife and daughter, apologising for the absence of his son, who was then pursuing his studies at Padua, but who was shortly expected to return to Venice. At first sight Onofrio fell desperately in love with Morini's daughter. Nor was this by any means to be wondered at, for a more beautiful girl it would be difficult to imagine. She was a perfect type of Venetian beauty, her face being one of those which Titian, had he then lived, would have selected as a model for a Madonna. Notwithstanding all Onofrio's attempts to please her, it was easy to perceive that his feelings were by no means reciprocated; nay, she appeared to have an instinctive wish to discourage him. On several occasions he attempted to enter into conversation with her, but without success. She replied only in monosyllables, and those were uttered in a tone so cold as which would have damped the courage of one not so deeply smitten as Onofrio. Whether she had a prior attachment, or felt an intuitive fear of him, it is impossible to say; most probably the latter. Onofrio remained with the family till a late hour, and then took his leave, receiving at the time a warm invitation from Morini and his wife to visit them again.

As he had not ordered his gondola nor Antonio to attend him, he determined to return home on foot. By chance he passed on his way the Chetto da San Felice, and seeing lights in the windows he entered the house. He was received with marked attention by the players, who made way for him to come close to one of the tables. His mind being full of the beautiful girl he had just left, he hardly felt any inclination to play, but noticing the curiosity expressed on the countenances of the bystanders as to the stakes the rich stranger would make, he resolved to hazard a few zechini, and if those were lost, to leave the room. He placed them on the table with an air of lordly indifference, and the next moment they were gone. He was about to depart when he noticed a satirical smile on the faces of those around him, and he immediately ventured on another stake of equal amount, which he again lost. He now became quite angry, and played recklessly, sometimes winning a stake, but losing still heavier ones immediately afterwards. At last, when he had lost every coin in his purse, he turned round, and in a defiant, uncourteous manner passed through the crowd and left the room.

That night Onofrio's dreams were chiefly about Morini and his daughter. On awaking next morning he found himself more desperately in love than ever, and he determined to propose to her father for her hand. He had, however, sufficient discretion to allow a few days to pass before he made the proposal, and during the interim he took the opportunity of calling at the house more than once. On each occasion he was received in so friendly a manner as gave him good hopes that his offer would be accepted. Nor was he altogether in error on the subject. When he made his proposal to the parents, which he did in proper form, both Morini and his wife informed him that they considered the proposal most flattering, coming as it did from a nobleman of high standing, great wealth, and still greater learning. At the same time their daughter's happiness was a higher consideration to them than any worldly advantage which might be gained by her marriage. They added, however, that without giving him any decided answer, they should always be happy to receive him as a friend, and if they later found that their daughter had no disinclination to the match, they would receive him as her acknowledged suitor.

Onofrio's offer having been communicated to their daughter by Morini and his wife, they noticed that she showed little pleasure at the idea of accepting him as a lover; but, after the fashion of Italian young ladies of that period, she informed her parents that she would be entirely guided by them in the matter. At the same time she hoped that she should have ample time in order to know a little more of the character of her lover before anything was definitely decided on. Morini and his wife readily promised that her wishes alone should be consulted in the matter, and they then conveyed to Onofrio their daughter's answer.

Onofrio now became a constant visitor at the house, and did everything in his power to make himself agreeable to the young lady. He presented her with many valuable gifts of jewels and other things likely to favourably impress the mind of a young girl, without making any very evident advance in her good graces. To meet the expenditure caused by the presents, his luxurious style of living, and his evening visits to the gambling table — which he invariably quitted a loser — he had had to incessantly replenish his purse, but without giving one thought to the condition attached to it. Ludovico, Morini's son, a bold, handsome, intellectual young man, had now returned from Padua, and to him Onofrio attributed the ill success of his suit with Agnese. Possibly he was not altogether in error in this, for Ludovico had taken a great dislike to Onofrio, in whose manners he pretended to find a vast amount of arrogance and impertinence. Indeed, on more than one occasion he expressed to his father his grave doubts as to Onofrio being a person of the high standing and good family they had been led to believe. Onofrio, on his part, easily detected the ill-feeling Ludovico bore him, and as he was not an individual likely to receive an injury without entertaining the wish to avenge it, the coolness between the two young men, as may be imagined, increased daily.

One evening Morini gave a grand ball, to which, of course, his daughter's suitor was invited. Onofrio, who was painfully aware how little progress he had lately made in winning the girl's affections, determined that evening if possible to obtain a direct answer from her. With that intention he resolved to make himself as attractive as possible. He was occupied for some hours at his toilet, Antonio assisting him, before he had completed it to his entire satisfaction. To do him justice, he had a magnificent appearance, and being himself aware of this, he calculated that he should that night receive a favourable answer. In consequence, when he left his dressing-room, he was in the highest spirits, and having told Antonio to see to the gondola being prepared, he entered the saloon, and walking up to the window overlooking the Grand Canal, he occupied himself in gazing out on the boats as they passed beneath him, gaily humming to himself an opera tune then in vogue.

Seeing his own gondola approaching, and without waiting for a summons from Antonio, he turned from the window to descend the staircase, when he saw standing before him the man in the mask who had received him on his first arrival in Venice.

"You here, my friend!" said Onofrio to him, in a bantering tone. "I thought you told me when we parted that I should not have the pleasure of seeing you again."

"You forgot one possibility I mentioned," said the mask, "that I might come on a mission from the illustrious Innominato, my master."

“Oh, true,” said Onofrio, “that had slipped my memory. And what message may you have brought me from the worthy gentleman?”

“He bids me remind you that you have not on a single occasion kept your promise to set aside one half of the money you have received at different times towards the building and endowment of an asylum for female orphans. He instructed me to add that your tenure of life has now dwindled down to a few days, unless you perform rigidly for the future that portion of the condition he imposed on you, and to which you agreed.”

“Really, my dear friend,” said Onofrio, with a sneer, “I think you must have been dreaming. You cannot have received any message whatever from the Innominato. Your worthy superior could never had acted so absurdly. I am perfectly ready to abide by the conditions he imposed on me, and as a man of honour — as I believe him to be — I am sure he will do the same.”

“On that point,” said the mask, “you need be under no anxiety. At the same time, let me beg of you to calculate how short a term of existence remains for you if you pursue your present course of life. Think how many times your purse has been replenished, and that on each occasion your duration of life has been reduced one half. Think how few days — possibly hours — now remain for you.”

Although the mask had spoken with great earnestness as well as friendliness of tone, Onofrio retorted by first bursting into a loud and insulting fit of laughter, and then inquiring whether the mask really meant to say that the Innominato had sent him such a message.

“I do,” replied the mask.

“It is really astonishing,” said Onofrio, “how often a clever quack by a little knowledge may appear very wise. I am sadly afraid,” he continued, addressing the mask, “that your respected friend is after all but little better than an imposter, who has picked up a few nostrums from some clever physician he may have robbed, or perhaps murdered, and afterwards started in business on his own account. Two things are certain: of science he knows little, and of law still less. Now listen to me, you imagine I have but a few days, possibly a few hours, to live. By my calculation I hold that I have ninety-nine years and eleven months still before me. Very likely ere that time has expired I may become as charitable as your master wishes me to be, but as you may perceive, I have no occasion to be in a hurry about it. Nay, do not interrupt me,” he remarked, noticing that the mask was about to speak.

“I know well enough what you would say. I admit that my life will terminate when the hundred years shall have been subdivided on each replenishment of the purse, till nothing remains. But when will that be? You may divide a day into two halves, an hour into two halves, a minute the same, and a moment also, and reduce time into a millionth part of a second, and that may again be divided into half millionth parts. Subdivide each fraction of a moment in any manner you please, a portion will still remain for further division. It would not be a whit more difficult a task to measure eternity, or to divide time till none should remain. On the scientific point, then, you must perceive that your superior is an ignoramus (I make use of that term as the most courteous I can think of as applicable to him in the present instance), and his knowledge of law, if possible, is still more defective. Remember this for the future, that any bargain which binds a man to perform an impossibility is always considered to be null and void; so that I may remain contented with the remainder of my term of one hundred years, and I sincerely hope that for his own credit your master will say no more about the matter.”

The mask made no reply, and Onofrio, hearing Antonio’s footsteps on the stairs, threw his cloak round him to leave the room. Before quitting it, however, he said to the mask:

“As we now understand each other, you will excuse me, I hope, if I speak frankly to you. I have no doubt your company is most agreeable, but it is in all probability more highly valued in the bosom of your own family than it is by me. I am sure you can have no wish for my society, and I frankly admit I have none for yours. You would therefore oblige me by considering me a perfect stranger in future.”

“Readily, if you wish it,” said the mask. “You do not care, then, to see me again?”

“Such is my sincere desire, I assure you,” said Onofrio.

“Will you oblige me then by giving me back the ring I gave you?”

“Stop a moment,” said Onofrio, “that is a very different affair. It clearly enters into our contract. No, I shall keep the ring, and use it when I require your assistance. But remember, it is only on such an occasion I shall ever wish to see you.”

So saying, he passed by the mask, and descending the stairs, stepped into the gondola.

When Onofrio arrived at the water entrance of Morini’s house, he found a number of gondolas around it, filled with visitors to the ball. In spite of his impatience, he was obliged to wait for more than an hour before he could land, and he then mixed with the guests who were congregated on the staircase, waiting to be ushered in turn into the reception rooms. At last he reached the saloon where Morini, with his wife and daughter, had stationed themselves to receive their guests.

As he entered he drew himself up to his full height, that he might show off to the greatest advantage his fine figure and magnificent dress. He then gracefully advanced to Morini; but to his great surprise he was received in the coldest manner. There was a peculiarly stern expression on the countenances of both husband and wife, while their daughter positively turned her head aside, and took no notice whatever of the obeisance which Onofrio made her. Great as was his annoyance at their behaviour, it was increased still more by the significant glances which he observed to pass between the guests assembled in the room, as from his habitually haughty and dictatorial manner he was but little liked by any of those whose acquaintance he had made. Neither Morini nor his wife, however, made any remark, and Onofrio turned from them to see Ludovico, their son, that he might demand from him an explanation of the conduct of his family, conceiving that it was through his machinations that he had been so coldly treated. Ludovico was nowhere to be found, although Onofrio sought for him in every room which was open to the guests.

Dancing now began, and was carried on with great spirit. For some time Onofrio stood waiting for the arrival of Ludovico, who did not, however, make his appearance. Not wishing to be thought out of humour, he at length invited a young lady to dance with him. He received from her a not very courteous refusal. Attributing this to her ill-breeding, he asked another, but with no better success. A third and a fourth he tried, but no one would accept him as a partner. He now saw clearly that a plot had been got up against him, and he resolved not to ask any other young lady to be his partner, and sat moodily aside nursing his wrath against Ludovico, to whom he perhaps rightly attributed the several rebuffs he had received.

Supper was announced, and the guests entered another room, and, having seated themselves at the different tables, did ample justice to the splendid banquet. When it was nearly over, and the hostess, accompanied by her daughter and many of the guests, had left the room, Ludovico entered, and immediately advanced to his father, and drawing him aside, they conversed for some moments in a whisper. When they had finished, Morini followed his wife, while his son joined the guests who remained in the room.

As soon as Onofrio saw Ludovico at liberty, he advanced towards him, and touching him on the arm, said, in a stern and threatening tone,

“I wish to have a word with you sir. I have been insulted here to-night, and I demand from you an explanation of the treatment I have received.”

“And you shall have one, I promise you,” said the young man, in a low tone of voice; “but not now, not now. It would be unmannerly to intrude our disputes upon the company.”

“I will have no shuffling, sir,” said Onofrio, raising his voice so that he was heard over the whole room. “I have been insulted before your friends, and by them likewise, and now is the time to demand an explanation. Will you tell me what it all means?”

“Not now,” said Ludovico, evidently repressing his anger with great difficulty. “Not now, but to-morrow I promise you shall have a full explanation.”

“To-morrow will not do, sir,” said Onofrio. “You are simply putting it off that you may have time to form some excuse, or perhaps that you may be able to leave Venice, and thus escape from me.”

Indignation for a moment deprived Ludovico of all power of speech, and one of his friends took him by the arm to lead him away. Onofrio now seemed almost beside himself with rage, and followed Ludovico, exclaiming in a loud voice to the bystanders,

“This fellow is a coward, he has insulted me, and is afraid to meet me.”

To this insult Ludovico merely answered, “To-morrow I will prove to you that I am no coward,” and went forward as if to leave the room.

Onofrio, now goaded to desperation, drew off his glove, and with it struck Ludovico across the face. At this gross insult Ludovico placed his hand on his dagger to draw it, but a number of young men who had gathered round them interposed to prevent him from doing so. Ludovico, finding he could not draw his dagger, said to Onofrio, in a loud voice,

“Once more, sir, I promise you that tomorrow I will take ample satisfaction for this insult. Listen to me, my friends,” he continued, addressing those around him, “we have discovered this fellow to be an imposter. I have long suspected it, and to-day I have received the proof. He has intruded himself into this house under the pretext that he was the son of a noble merchant in Genoa. Not only have we found his statements to be untrue, but I have this evening received further information respecting him. I have every reason to believe that he is either the son or a near relative of the infamous Judge Onofrio of Verona, who was ignominiously deprived of his office, and expelled to the country. The money this fellow is squandering in Venice is doubtless the fruit of the frauds and extortions which were committed by his relative. I have great reason to believe that in the course of a few days a great deal more to his discredit will be brought against him. He is in every way unworthy of the acquaintance of honourable cavaliers.”

“We have long suspected it,” said several voices. “He has behaved this evening like a common ruffian. Do not interfere, Ludovico; we will soon rid the house of him.”

A number of young men now seized Onofrio, and tore him out of the room, threatening him with death if he attempted to enter it again. They then returned to the saloon, where they met Morini, who had been in another apartment during the dispute. They advised him to apply next day to the police for protection, as they were assured Onofrio was a dangerous and dishonourable fellow, who ought to be compelled to give a strict account of himself, or be obliged to leave the city.

As soon as Onofrio was on the water-steps of the house, he looked around him for his gondola, and found it was drawn up close beside the door. He leaped into it, and the rowers immediately began to put themselves into their places to move the boat through the crowd of others by which it was surrounded.

“Stay where you are,” said Onofrio, angrily. “Be ready to start the moment I tell you, but do not move until I give the order.” He then threw himself on a seat under the covering, and, drawing his dagger, watched the door of Morini’s house, with the expression of a tiger crouching for its prey. Presently the guests began to leave, and one by one their gondolas were called up to receive them. When almost all had departed, only two or three other gondolas remained besides his own, and these were close to the entrance door. Onofrio’s attention was attracted by a voice inside the house, which he thought he recognised, and he listened anxiously. He was not mistaken, it was Ludovico’s voice. A moment afterwards the young man himself appeared. On his arm leaned a lady, whom he was conducting to her gondola. It was now the time for Onofrio to act. He crept from under the canvas, and, leaping on to the steps, plunged his dagger into Ludovico’s heart with such force that he left the weapon in the body of his victim. The deed accomplished, he jumped into his gondola, exclaiming to his men, “Row for your lives, delay not a moment!”

The rowers, however, who had witnessed the deed, stood motionless with horror. Onofrio was on the point of repeating his order, but before he could utter a word a rower of one of the other gondolas seized him by the throat. Onofrio used so much violence in the attempt to release himself from the rower’s grasp as to cause the gondola to roll violently, and both fell into the water. Though the man continued to hold Onofrio by the throat, his presence of mind did not for a moment desert him; he remembered that he had a long space of grace to live, and therefore attempted to keep his opponent as long as possible under water to drown him. But the gondolier was a bold powerful man, and an excellent swimmer. Several times he contrived to rise to the surface of the water to take breath, and still kept fast hold of his opponent, but on each occasion he was dragged beneath it again by the almost superhuman efforts of Onofrio. At last the other gondoliers recovered their presence of mind, and, rowing after the combatants, managed with some difficulty to secure them. An armed police boat, attracted by the noise, now approached, and the officer in command, hearing that Onofrio had committed a murder, immediately arrested him, and had him conveyed to the prison beside the Doge’s palace, where he was placed in the custody of the officials.

On his entrance into the receiving room of the prison, he was desired to state his name, place of birth, his occupation, and business at Venice. His answers were of the most unsatisfactory description, for he plainly saw the necessity of replying with great caution. The questions over, he was searched, and on him was found a purse containing a hundred zechini. The officer on duty being about to take possession of the purse, Onofrio made so violent a spring to snatch it from him, that he nearly threw over the two soldiers who held him. Finding himself baffled in his attempts to regain the purse, and knowing well how terrible a loss it would be to him, he imprudently made the officer an offer of the gold, if he would allow him to retain the empty purse. With real or assumed indignation the proposal was refused, and Onofrio was ordered to be incarcerated in one of the lower rooms of the prison cells, in which only the worst of culprits were confined. This order was immediately carried out, and Onofrio, with his clothes still saturated with sea water, was thrust into a dark cell, in which it was impossible for a ray of daylight to enter.

He now felt carefully all round the cell, but he could find nothing of furniture in it, save a sort of bare wooden bedstead, raised about a foot from the ground. On this he seated himself, and attempted to reflect calmly on the position he was in. Looking at it in any way he would, nothing could well be more gloomy. True, he felt assured he should escape death, but he held no security against torture and the galleys. There was now no time to be lost, and he must immediately decide upon some expedient. His purse had been taken from him, so he could have no opportunity of bribing the gaolers. There still, however, remained one chance for him, and he now resolved to avail himself of it. When the soldiers examined him, they had omitted to notice the thin gold ring hanging by the silken thread round his neck. He immediately detached the ring from the thread, and placing it, as directed, on the third finger of his right hand, the mysterious masked stranger, holding a small lighted lamp in his hand, stood before him.

“I am here at your command,” said he to Onofrio. “What are your wishes?”

“Restore my purse to me, and remove me from this prison to any spot you please beyond the Venetian territory,” was Onofrio’s answer.

The mask made no reply, but vanished in a moment, leaving Onofrio in the dense darkness of his cell.

As soon as he had somewhat recovered from his surprise at the sudden disappearance of the mask, he found his purse in his right hand, but it was empty. No matter, he thought to himself, as soon as he had realized the fact that the zechini had been taken from the purse — no matter; and he immediately wished it to be replenished. To his intense astonishment as well as terror, the purse continued to be empty. Again and again he repeated the wish, but without any better success attending it; not one coin came into the purse.

In his astonishment he attempted to ascertain the cause of this. Could it really be that he had outwitted himself in his legal quibble upon the point that time could not be subdivided until nothing remained; and that he had neutralized the magic power the Innominato had given to the purse, as well as the conditions? It flashed through his mind that all the conditions might now be null and void; and not simply that which related to his side of the question. So powerful was the effect the idea produced on him that, as he sat there, he seemed to sink under it. A feeling of excessive weakness came over him, so that he could not hold himself erect, but bent forward, until his head nearly approached his knees. The terrible idea that his purse was now valueless to him weighed so painfully on his mind that he had taken no notice of a glimmering of daylight which had appeared in his cell, and which gradually increased in power. At last he became aware that someone was standing before him, and he was about to raise his eyes to discover who it might be, when a voice he had heard before exclaimed,

“There will be no necessity for your preparing a bed for the Doctor Onofrio, as he must immediately return to the Hospice. See that every attention is paid to him there.”

Onofrio, in a state of intense surprise, now raised his head, and found himself again a miserable old man, seated in a chair in the study of the Innominato, who stood before him, with an expression of great indignation on his face.

“Doctor Onofrio,” he said, in a stern voice, “little more conversation need pass between us. You have perfectly taught me your real character, and the amount of reliance to be placed in you. Take my advice. Make the best use of the few remaining hours of your life; for you have much to do and little time to do it in. Nay, not a word,” he continued, noticing Onofrio placing his hands together in an imploring manner, “not a word. Pietro, help the Doctor from the room.”

With difficulty the servants placed the Doctor in the chair in which he had been brought to the Castle, and conveyed him to the Hospice. The same evening he was taken alarmingly ill, and a priest was sent for to attend him. After hearing Onofrio’s confession, he remained by his bedside till the next morning, when the wretched man expired. He was buried the next day without a tear or regret, or a mourner to follow him to the grave. One circumstance connected with Onofrio’s memory still remains to be told. The Innominato had ordered a large black wooden cross to be erected at the head of his grave. The order was obeyed, and the cross placed on the spot indicated the evening after the funeral. The next morning not a vestige of it was to be seen, nor could any account be rendered of its disappearance, although the strictest inquiries were made on the subject.

THE END

FRA GEROLAMO

In one of the recesses of the mountains on the eastern side of Lake Como, about half-way between Varenna and Colico, there formerly stood a convent of Franciscan monks. Considering the secluded nature of the locality, they were rather a numerous body, numbering more than twenty persons, including the superior and the lay-brothers.

Many of the monks were men of considerable learning, and generally much respected. Although the convent was distant from the more populous part of the lake, the brethren, from the nature of their duties, were well known in all the towns and villages surrounding it. In addition to their ecclesiastical duties, they were frequently occupied in avocations which in the present day would be considered entirely secular. They were, of course, expected to officiate in the different parish churches when, from sickness or any other cause, the regular priests were unable to attend, and they also practised the art of medicine, in which several of their body had at divers times acquired great reputation. They had, moreover, considerable skill in the useful arts, and their advice on subjects connected with these, as well as on agriculture, was highly valued.

There was one amongst them, however — Fra Gerolamo by name — whose reputation far exceeded that of the others. He was an excellent preacher, and much sought after to give spiritual consolation at the bedside of the sick and dying, and was also esteemed the most skilful leech of the convent. Although his services in the latter capacity were eagerly desired by the wealthy, his greatest delight was to give solace to the sick poor; and a kinder friend to the peasantry could not have been found in the whole lake district. From the discretion he showed in distributing alms intrusted to his care, he had become the favourite almoner of the rich residents around Lake Como and in the Brianza, and not of them only; considerable sums of money being also forwarded to him from the wealthy nobles of Milan, to be distributed among the poor as he might think fit.

Although no particular district had been marked out by the superior as the field for Fra Gerolamo's ministrations, there was one he always chose in preference to others. His choice was not in any way opposed by his reverend brethren, as it was by far the most impoverished and unhealthy portion of the district under their care. It was that part of the Valteline which extends from Colico for several miles towards Bormio, and through which passes the present military road to the Stelvio mountain. Here poverty was to be found in company with chronic sickness; the former caused not only by the sterile nature of the land, but by the frequent overflowing of the Adda river when the snow melted on the mountains, causing it to rush onwards towards the lake with great impetuosity. Often it carried all before it, destroying the spring cultivations of the peasant, and frequently leaving whole fields of well-tilled land, which before had been green with young crops, covered with a layer of stones. The sickness was principally caused by the malaria which arose from the marshes when the inundations had subsided.

In this dreary locality Fra Gerolamo passed a considerable portion of his time. For weeks together he would quit his cell before sunrise, and, with a heavy weight of food in a sack thrown over his shoulder, and his wallet full of medicines, he would start off on foot, and resolutely keep on his way, insensible to fatigue, although he had many miles to pass before he arrived at the field of his labours. There he would remain the whole day, dispensing religious instruction, visiting the sick, and distributing the food he had brought with him to the most needy. His duties over, he would return to the convent in the evening, less wearied than sorrowful at feeling that all he had done was not a twentieth part of what was needed; and on the morrow he would start again on the same mission, to return home in the evening equally broken-spirited.

There was something eminently attractive in Fra Gerolamo's personal appearance. His features were delicately formed and handsome; he was above the middle height, and very erect. In figure, perhaps, he was somewhat too thin; but this defect was to a great measure concealed by the flowing shape of the frock he wore. In age he was certainly not more than forty; and in temper he was kind, patient, and placable. During the many years he had resided in the convent, no one had ever seen him fairly out of humour. It would be folly to say that he had no human infirmities; but these were of a very venial description. He had a passion for collecting books, and was by no means liberal in lending them to others, carefully locking the door of his cell (for there he had established his library) whenever he left the convent. Although he had taken the vow of humility, his feelings were aristocratic to an extent hardly consistent with the rules of his convent; but, to do him justice, he carefully repressed and concealed them. Yet, in spite of all his caution, they would occasionally manifest themselves, and he had more than once received a sharp rebuke from his superior for giving way to them. It should be stated, however, that Fra Gerolamo was not without some excuse. He was, in fact, sprung from a branch of one of the most wealthy and aristocratic families in Lombardy; and there was good reason to believe that the present holder of the title ought in right to have ceded it to Fra Gerolamo. The monk himself was fully convinced on the subject; and without daring to mention it to his superior, the idea frequently crossed his mind whether he should not take steps to obtain what he firmly believed to be his own. He was further stimulated to this course by the fact of his having a widowed sister in poor circumstances, who had a son who might accept the title even if he himself could not. But frequently as the thought had presented itself to his mind, he had never yet endeavoured to have his claims to the title and estates thoroughly investigated.

One evening Fra Gerolamo returned from a visit to his district, not only fatigued but exceedingly unwell. He did not, however, mention the circumstance, but took his place with the others at the supper table. The superior, noticing that he ate little, and remarking his expression of fatigue, asked if he felt indisposed. Fra Gerolamo replied that he did not feel so well as usual, but he had no doubt he would soon be better, and he then helped himself to some food, though he had not the slightest appetite. The meal being over, he retired to his cell and passed a very disturbed night, suffering alternately from burning heats and shivering fits. Next morning he rose from his bed somewhat later than usual, and although exceedingly ill, he prepared to set out again to the favourite field of his labours in the Valteline. His superior happened, however, to pass him as he was leaving the convent, and noticing his pallid countenance and sunken eye, he inquired, with much alarm, whether he was suffering from ill health. Fra Gerolamo told him he felt rather indisposed, but that he thought the walk and occupation might possibly do him good.

“My son,” said the superior, “I must order you to remain at home to-day. I perceive clearly that your zeal has far exceeded your strength, and that you are now suffering the effects of it. I will send one of the lay-brothers with the food you have prepared, and he shall give it to the persons you name, but you must remain at home.”

Of course Fra Gerolamo had no alternative but to obey; and with a somewhat sorrowful heart he gave his directions to the lay-brother, and then seeking his cell, he remained stretched upon his couch almost the whole of the day, too weak to move.

It was some days before Fra Gerolamo had sufficiently recovered his health to enable him to resume his duties, and then the superior prohibited him from visiting the Valteline till further orders.

“I have a mission for you to the Brianza, my son,” said the superior, a few days later. “You will remain there for some weeks, and I trust that, before your return you will have fully regained your strength. Besides preaching, you will have an opportunity of collecting alms, and I promise you that whatever you bring back with you I will leave at your disposal for the poor of the Valteline.”

Fra Gerolamo bowed obedience, and the next day, having received his instructions, he set out on his mission.

After he had been about a week in the Brianza, he had occasion to preach at a village church in the mountains not very far distant from the castle of the famous Innominato. Although he had frequently heard of the astrologer he had never yet been in his society, and he now resolved to pay him a visit. In this he was actuated by two motives: he might implore aid in succouring the suffering inhabitants of the Valteline, and also consult the learned man on the possibility of his obtaining possession of the title and territory he believed himself rightfully entitled to.

It should here be clearly understood, however, that although the Innominato was well known to Fra Gerolamo, it was solely as a man of great wealth, learning, and benevolence. Had he received the slightest hint from any trustworthy person of the Innominato being a magician, nothing, probably, would have induced him to visit the castle, for he was too good a Catholic to seek the acquaintance of any man whom he suspected to be in communication with evil spirits.

It was late in the afternoon when Fra Gerolamo arrived at the Hospice, where he was met by one of the Innominato's servants, who inquired on what business he had come.

"My wish is to see your master," was the monk's reply; "but if it is now inconvenient, I will return to-morrow morning, or any other time he may appoint."

"Are you not Fra Gerolamo?" inquired the servant, who had closely scrutinized him.

"Yes, my son, I am. Do you know me?"

"I saw your reverence once at Lecco, at the sick bed of a relative of mine, and it would not have been easy to forget you, though that was some years ago. My master's orders are that every one visiting the castle shall remain here till he has been told their name and business, but I am sure I may make an exception in your case. If you will go up to the castle gate, the porter, who has reason to know you even better than I do, will admit you, I am certain, without any difficulty."

The porter at the castle received Fra Gerolamo with even greater goodwill than the servant at the Hospice. After expressing his pleasure at seeing the monk, he requested him to wait below while he should go and inform the Innominato. When the porter entered the study he found his master so deeply engrossed in a book, that he inquired somewhat angrily of the man why he had interrupted him. No sooner was he told that Fra Gerolamo had paid him a visit than he rose from his chair, and throwing aside the huge volume he had been reading, hurried downstairs to receive the monk. Nothing could be more courteous than the reception the astrologer gave him. He led him by the hand upstairs into his study, and placed him in his own chair. He then ordered viands to be served, and the best wines put before him. He also desired Pietro to prepare a bed for the monk, whom he had already persuaded to remain in the castle for the night.

After Fra Gerolamo had partaken of some refreshment, the Innominato again expressed the pleasure he had in receiving him, and inquired in what way he could serve him.

"To say the truth," said the monk, "the object of my visit is twofold. First, I come to implore your charity for the poor peasantry of the Valteline, and afterwards to ask you to give me a little advice on an affair of my own."

He then gave the Innominato a graphic description of the miserable state of the inhabitants of the Valteline, and the great necessity there was for some immediate relief, as hundreds of them might otherwise perish from starvation and disease. The Innominato listened silently and with great interest, and when the monk had finished, he said, "Reverend father, I am much indebted to you for bringing the subject under my notice. To-morrow, before you leave the castle, I will place in your hands my contribution to the good cause you are engaged in; and if it will not be sufficient to relieve all who are in need, it shall at any rate be large enough to afford them considerable assistance. Now let me know in what way I can serve you personally."

Fra Gerolamo then entered into a somewhat lengthy narrative of his family history, and his supposed right to the title and estates. The Innominato listened patiently and with great courtesy, but evidently with far less interest than he had shown to the monk's description of the Valteline and its inhabitants. Having heard Fra Gerolamo to the end, he said,

"I am not sufficiently well versed in the law to give you an opinion worth having, but I have an agent in Milan, one of the shrewdest lawyers in that city. To-morrow, should you desire it, I will give you a line to him, and, without expense to you, he shall give your suit every attention. But assure me that you will not be offended if I ask you what is perhaps a somewhat indiscreet question."

"I am sure," said Fra Gerolamo, "that you can ask me no question which I would not very willingly answer."

"Then, are you not somewhat imprudent in further pursuing the doubtful question of your inheritance?"

"No," said the monk, in a tone of considerable surprise; "why should you think so?"

"Because it appears to me that you may lose more than you can gain, even should you succeed, which is doubtful."

"How so?"

"At present you are beloved and respected by all; and I am fully convinced that you have great pleasure in carrying out the benevolent works in which you are so busily employed. By becoming wealthy and noble, is there no risk of your also turning proud and selfish? Judging from the conduct of the nobles of our day, illustrious birth and great riches are by no means conducive to a pious and charitable course of life."

Fra Gerolamo remained silent for some moments, giving due consideration to the Innominato's suggestion.

"No," he replied at last, "I do not fear such a result, although I thank you for the caution. I trust I know myself too well to be in any danger of that kind. Besides, should I succeed in gaining my inheritance, it will be my constant prayer to be guarded from pride and avarice."

“So be it then,” said the Innominato. “To-morrow I will give you a letter to my lawyer, as well as my contribution to your poor.”

The conversation now turned on works of charity performed by the brethren of Fra Gerolamo's convent, and other benevolent subjects, and the two continued their talk till a somewhat late hour of the night.

Next morning, when the astrologer and the monk met at breakfast, the expression of the latter was remarkably thoughtful. He was also very silent during the meal, replying only in monosyllables to any remark or question of the Innominato. The meal over, Fra Gerolamo told his host that he must now leave him, as he had to reach Como before night, and must visit some sick persons on the road. On hearing this, the Innominato rose from his chair, and opening a chest by his side, took out a purse of gold, and placing it in the hand of the monk, told him to apply it to the relief of the poor sufferers in the Valteline.

“If you want more,” he said, “send to me, and you shall have it. And now, if you wish it, I will write you a letter of introduction to my lawyer in Milan.”

“I do not wish it,” said Fra Gerolamo. “But I thank you equally for the offer.”

“Would you think me unmannerly if I asked your reason for refusing the letter this morning, when you so readily accepted the offer of it last night?”

“Not in the least,” said the monk, “although you may think me somewhat superstitious when I tell you that I have changed my resolution in consequence of a dream I had last night, and which, I feel assured, was a warning sent me from heaven.”

“No sooner had I quitted you yesterday than I threw myself upon my couch, and in a few minutes I was fast asleep. For some time my slumbers were most profound, nor do I remember my dreams, if I had any. At last, I thought I was in Como, in a house near the cathedral; and many people were in the room where I was standing. These all showed me the greatest respect. Several indeed applied to me to assist them in obtaining employment in the state. Others begged that I would grant them leases on easy terms, urging that as I was one of the richest lords in the land, I could easily afford to be generous. Some asked me to use my influence with the government to get their relatives released from prison, all of whom, they assured me, had been unjustly sentenced. I should also mention that, although the different courtiers and supplicants offered me adulation, and treated me as a person possessing immense wealth and power, I still wore my monk's frock; the simplicity of which appeared to be the more remarkable when compared with the magnificent costumes of many of those who surrounded me.”

“I felt great pride in the comparison, knowing that lowly as my monk’s grade was in the eyes of the dignitaries of the church, I was still far above the splendidly-attired crowd who were now so humble in my presence. I felt thoroughly happy, when in a moment I had proof that, even in my exalted position, I was still capable of suffering severe humiliation, for presently I saw enter at the further door an infirm and shabbily-dressed woman, who held by the hand a lad of about fourteen years of age, as poorly clad as herself. A blush flew to my cheek, and I felt deeply annoyed, for I recognized in them my sister and her son. Dreading lest the courtiers around me should detect our relationship, I walked rapidly towards my sister, and drew her hastily aside, feeling the while that all eyes were directed towards me with astonishment and curiosity.

“‘What are you doing here?’ I said to her. ‘Why do you thus disgrace me by coming dressed in this disreputable and squalid manner?’”

“‘My dear brother,’ she said, her eyes filling with tears, ‘what am I to do? we are starving. I have not a farthing left in the world. Pray assist me.’”

“‘The porter does his duty very badly,’ I heard some one say in the room. ‘Why does he allow such mendicants to enter and annoy his illustrious reverence in that barefaced manner? That he is most charitable we all know, but that is no reason why he should be subjected to such persecution. Here, Stephano,’ he said to a servant, ‘find out who that woman is and bring me her name. I will soon set the police after her.’”

“Terrified at the idea of the man questioning her, I thrust some money into her hand and requested her to go away. She held the coin for a moment in her hand without moving. Her eyes filled with tears, and she was upon the point of addressing me, when I saw the servant advancing towards us. I again told her angrily to be gone, and I remember her turning round towards the stair-head to obey me, when suddenly I found myself standing by the side of the lake, still surrounded by the gay crowd of flatterers. A large bark, with several rowers richly dressed, was waiting to receive me, and I stepped into it followed by several of my courtiers, while the others entered smaller barks which were in readiness for them, and on a signal being given they all pushed from the shore. The rowers exerted themselves wonderfully, but those in my own bark being both more numerous and stronger than the others, our course was very rapid, and we soon left them behind. Onward we went, the distance between us rapidly increasing. I lounged back languidly in the richly-cushioned seat of the boat, and silently listened to the conversation of the rest. It turned entirely on my great wealth and unbounded liberality, and they blessed themselves and thanked heaven that so fruitful and beautiful a territory as that which surrounded the lake should have fallen into the hands of a man so powerful and enlightened.”

“Suddenly I found that I had landed on the spot on which Bellaggio stands; but I was alone. Although there was not a house near me, nor a human being in sight, it did not seem to cause me the slightest surprise. I climbed to the top of a hill and viewed from its summit the three branches of the lake, and the mountains surrounding them, with a feeling of intense satisfaction, as I reflected that all I saw — houses, palaces, farms, vineyards, and the thousand barks which floated on the waters — were my own, and that I, so lately an obscure monk, was now among the richest and most powerful nobles of the land. The longer I viewed the prospect the more I was delighted with it. The idea struck me that I would build a palace on that spot. The position, I thought, was admirable, as from it I could survey the principal portion of my domains. I resolved that it should be commenced immediately, and that in point of magnificence and beauty of design it should surpass that of any other noble in the land.”

“Lake, mountains, palaces, and barks all vanished, and I found myself in a darkness so profound that it might almost have been felt. The earth under my feet seemed to have gone, and I was sinking rapidly through space, though not a breath of air could I feel. I did not even seem to respire. After I appeared to have sunk to an immense depth, I found myself upon my feet again, but outer darkness still surrounded me. I moved about cautiously, stretching forth my hands to ascertain, if possible, what I might be near; but nothing came within my reach. Presently, on raising my eyes, I perceived the glimmering of a star in the heavens, but only one. Although at first its light was so faint, that I had some difficulty in clearly detecting it, it gradually became brighter, until at last it cast a slight glimmer over the spot on which I was standing, so that I could see I was in a sort of large square courtyard, surrounded on all sides with buildings. I now again began to feel cautiously around me, and found as I came near to the side that the buildings above me were supported on arches, and on continuing my search I thought I could detect that I was in the cloisters of a monastery, not my own, but one of far greater magnitude.”

“For some time I stood musing under the arches, considering what I should do next. The solitary star still continued to shine brightly in the heavens, when the sound of distant music fell upon my ear. I listened attentively, and the voices of the singers became clearer, as if they were advancing towards me. Onwards they seemed to come, and I could now detect that they were a numerous body of monks chanting one of the services of our church. Still nearer and nearer they came, till, at the extremity of what seemed to be a long corridor, I could distinguish a procession of monks, their faces covered with their hoods, and each carrying in his hand a lighted taper, with the single exception of their leader, who carried a cross. They continued to advance till they reached me. I made no room for them to pass, but stood motionless, gazing on them with wonder. They took no notice of my presence either, but continued to march onwards, and seemed to walk through me, as if I were to them an invisible spirit.”

“When the procession had passed me, I turned round and followed it, glancing only for a moment at the star, which still continued to give out its solitary light. The monks now entered an immense room, used apparently as the dormitory of the convent, for around the walls bedsteads were ranged. The room itself, before the entrance of the monks, must have been gloomy indeed, for it was lighted only by one small lamp which burned before a picture of the Virgin. The procession marched to the further extremity of the room, chanting the while, and then, suddenly ceasing their singing, they grouped themselves around a bed on which lay one of their order, apparently at the point of death. I shall never forget the countenance of the sick man — so fearful was its expression of terror. It had so painful an effect on me, that I raised my eyes from the bed, and my gaze fell upon the window above it. Through it I noticed that the same star was shining brightly, and still alone without another near it.”

“The monks, who had ceased their chant when they placed themselves around the sick man’s bed, now recommenced it; and my attention was again drawn to the patient. The leader, with the cross in his hand, now advanced to put it to the lips of the dying man, who with intense anxiety on his gaunt countenance made a great effort to meet it by partially raising himself; and in so doing the coverlet fell somewhat aside, disclosing a purse of gold which he tightly clasped in his hand. The monk immediately withdrew the cross from the sick man’s lips, and snatching the purse from his hand, threw it on the ground, and in a moment the gold was rolling on the floor. The patient, exhausted, fell back, his head on the pillow. Then pressing his hands together, as in prayer, he muttered something almost inaudible. On listening attentively, however, I could hear that he was only begging that his gold might be restored to him. Death now seemed to stamp his seal upon the man’s face, his hands sunk from their position of supplication, the usual symptoms of immediate dissolution became manifest, and a few minutes afterwards his spirit fled.”

“As soon as the wretched man had expired, I looked round me, and found that the monks had vanished, with the exception of the one who held the cross. He now turned towards me as he was standing at the opposite side of the bed, and with his hand threw back his hood. It would be impossible to describe the angelic beauty of his countenance, but so stern was its expression that from fear I sank down on my knees before him. After I had remained motionless for some moments, he slowly raised his arm and pointed impressively to the bed on which the dead man lay. I rose from my knees to gaze upon the corpse, and to my horror found that its features were my own.”

“What was the termination of my dream,” continued Fra Gerolamo, “I know not; but I remember too well the lesson I received last night ever to forget it. No, I will not trouble you for a letter of introduction to your lawyer. I will remain the poor monk I now am, and not risk my eternal welfare in the temptations which I find riches bring with them.”

After again thanking the Innominato for his liberality to the poor peasantry of the Valteline, Fra Gerolamo left the castle, accompanied to the gate by his host, who then bade him farewell.

THE END

THE MAGIC FLOWER

Although the Innominato was habitually grave and reserved in his demeanour, he would occasionally converse in a free and humorous manner with strangers. With the young he would not unfrequently be even jocose, though he still uniformly insisted on the respect due to his age and his high reputation. Of the few amusements he allowed himself — unless in his case study might be called an amusement — his favourite one was the superintendence of a small but exquisitely-arranged flower-garden. In this he took great interest, rewarding with no niggard hand those who could procure for him any flower of more than ordinary beauty. On a fine spring morning he might be seen watching for hours the operations of his gardeners, giving them advice, and encouraging them to care and exertion in placing in the most favourable positions those of Donna Natura's jewels (as he used to call the more beautiful of his flowers) which particularly required light and warmth.

One fine morning in the month of May, his servants having gone to their usual meal, the Innominato imagined himself quite alone in his garden. On raising his eyes from a flower he had been examining, he perceived a peasant girl of great beauty standing before him, apparently wishing to speak to him, and yet too timid to advance. For some moments the Innominato said nothing, so completely was he absorbed in the contemplation of her beauty. Nor was he without good excuse. It would have been difficult, indeed, to find a more perfect model of that style of beauty held in so much estimation by Luini, Leonardo da Vinci, and others of that school. Although not more than seventeen years of age, her figure was almost womanly, yet tempered by the easy grace and flexibility of girlhood. Her features were beautifully moulded, and had that expression of intelligence and amiability, which doubtless originally induced the artists of the Lombard school to choose from these peasant girls the types of their female saints. Her feet, on which she wore a kind of sandals still in use among the female peasantry in Lombardy, were small, and exquisitely formed, and her hands, though somewhat browned by the sun, matched her feet in their perfection of modelling. Her eyes were deep blue, and well placed in her head; her brow was clear, her complexion fair, and her hair of that lovely golden hue which is so often seen in the works of artists of the period, and which was then held in such high estimation. Her dress alone distinguished her from the peasantry of the neighbourhood. Although made in the same fashion as that generally in use among them, it was of a finer quality, and evidently fitted better, showing either that the wearer or her parents were somewhat above the common grade, possibly the daughter of some small farmer in easy circumstances.

As soon as the Innominato had somewhat recovered from his surprise, he said to the girl, who was now examining attentively a small basket she held in her hand, —

“Are you looking for any one, my pretty lass? All my men have left the garden, but they will soon be back.”

“It was your Excellency alone that I wished to speak to, if I might be so bold,” she replied, as she timidly raised her eyes from the basket.

“By all means, if you wish it. In what way can I serve you ?” inquired the Innominato.

The girl made no answer, but cast her eyes on the ground, evidently lacking sufficient courage to explain the object of her visit.

“If you do not tell me what you want, I can do nothing for you,” continued the Innominato. “It is impossible for me to guess your meaning. But take heart, and let me know your errand.”

“I am almost ashamed to tell your Excellency,” said the girl, blushing; “but everybody says you are so kind, that I thought” — and here again she relapsed into silence.

“Ah, I understand something about it now,” said the astrologer. “It is a little love affair you wish to speak of, is it not?”

The girl remained silent, but the expression of her countenance clearly told the Innominato that he had guessed rightly.

“I think I see what it is,” he continued; “you have had a quarrel with your lover, and you wish me to assist you in making it up with him again.”

“Your Excellency is partly right,” said the girl. “But I have not quarrelled with him, and, although he is not allowed to speak to me, I am sure he loves me still.”

“That I think extremely likely,” said the Innominato, after looking at her intently for a moment. “At least he must have a very bad taste if he does not. But what has occurred to cause a separation between you?”

“His father's interference.”

“And what is the father's reason?” inquired the Innominato.

“He says that I am not his son's equal,” replied the girl.

“Who is his father?”

“The Count Miniscalchi of Pavia.”

“Well,” said the Innominato, “that is very awkward. The Count is proud as well as wealthy, and doubtless he wishes his son to marry some one in his own rank. Has Count Miniscalchi ever seen you?”

“Never, so far as I know, your Excellency. Somebody told him that his son had fallen in love with me, and wished to make me his wife. When the Count found out that I was only a poor peasant girl, he flew into a passion, and told his son that, if he did not promise never to speak to me again, he would request the Duke to imprison or banish him.”

“And how did you get acquainted with the son?” inquired the Innominato.

“I had taken some silk which I had made to market at Como. The Contino Edgardo saw me there, and followed me home to my mother’s house.”

“In spite of all your entreaties that he would not do so?” said the Innominato, smiling.

At this the girl hung her head, but said nothing. “You live with your mother then,” continued the Innominato. “Have you no father?”

“I have no father, your Excellency. He was killed in the wars when I was quite a child, and I have remained ever since with my mother, who has a small silk farm in the valley about two miles from Camerlato.”

“Have you brothers or sisters?”

“No, your Excellency; I am an only child.”

“And what is your name?”

“Carlotta Zampi.”

“Who advised you to apply to me?” asked the Innominato, after a short pause.

“No one, your Excellency,” replied the girl. “I had so often heard of your great wisdom and generosity, that I determined if possible to apply to you, before telling any one else my secret. Yesterday I found that my uncle had some business to do in the village below, and I asked him to let me ride behind him on his mule, and the weather being so beautiful, he consented. I have left him, promising to return in an hour’s time. He thinks I am merely wandering about for my amusement.”

“Well now, tell me what you wish me to do for you,” said the Innominato.

“To-morrow a tournament is to be held in the great square at Como,” said Carlotta, “in which the Contino is to take a part. I thought that perhaps, with your aid, if he saw me, he might love me again, notwithstanding his father’s threat. If he marries the young Marchioness they have engaged him to, I am sure it will break my heart” — and here poor Carlotta burst into tears.

“Well, well,” he said, “don’t cry, and I will see what can be done. I do not like to interfere in matters of the kind, still I cannot refuse to help a good and pretty girl in distress. Take that,” he continued, as he plucked a beautiful white flower from a plant which stood near him, and which he had been examining before his eyes first fell on Carlotta, probably a *camellia japonica*, which by some chance had been thus early brought from the East into Italy through Venice. “Take this flower with you, and all will yet end happily.”

“But what am I to do with it?” said Carlotta, much pleased with its beauty.

“Anything you please.”

“But should I wear it to-morrow?” she inquired.

“Once more, do what you please with it,” he replied. “Only take it carefully home. Now go, or your uncle will think you are lost.”

Carlotta again attempted to obtain from the Innominato further instructions about the flower, but he would give her none. Finding he was inflexible, she placed the flower carefully in her basket, and, after thanking the astrologer for his kindness, and wishing him good-morning, she quitted the garden and descended the hill to find her uncle.

Carlotta’s mother was superior to the peasantry in general, as far as worldly circumstances were concerned. She occupied (as has been already stated) a small silk farm of her own, which she and her daughter cultivated, with the occasional assistance of one or more of her neighbours. They had, moreover, two cows, some goats, and a very well-stocked poultry-yard. Their cottage was also better than habitations of the kind are generally, being solidly built of stone, and having four good well-furnished rooms in it. Still Carlotta and her mother were but peasants after all, and the Count Miniscalchi was one of the richest and proudest nobles in the land. Though by no means of a bad disposition, he was exceedingly ambitious, and was ever thinking in what way he could advance the honour of his family.

The Count was a widower, and, although he was in the prime of life, and a remarkably handsome man, he would enter into no matrimonial alliance. His whole thoughts were absorbed on advancing the prospects of his only son, Edgardo. Among other projects, that of forming for him an advantageous matrimonial alliance held a high place. In this he was the more interested, as Edgardo was his only relative, and in case of his death without children, the family would become extinct. At last the Count, without consulting his son, succeeded in making what he considered a suitable match for him. And he had evidently chosen with great judgment, for the young lady herself was not only very beautiful and intelligent, but of a lineage as honourable and as wealthy as that of the Count himself. She was the daughter of the late Marquis of Caranzi, who had possessed large estates near Lodi, and which by his will he had left conjointly to his wife and daughter. The widowed Marchioness had, in her youth, been a great beauty, and was still a very handsome woman, though of course somewhat matronly in appearance. Her daughter Erminia was handsome in face and gracefully formed, but her features bore an expression of pride and harshness which went far to spoil the impression they might otherwise have produced.

And the expression of her face was not altogether an untruthful one. She had little on the score of amiability to recommend her; and it was more than suspected that she was in love with the son of the Marquis Andreozzi of Vercelli, a very handsome young soldier, who, by a singular coincidence, had been chosen to be Edgardo's opponent in the tournament which was to be held at Como the day after Carlotta's visit to the Innominato. Whether she really loved young Andreozzi she herself only knew. Certainly he had made her an offer of marriage, which would as certainly have been accepted by the mother had not the Count Miniscalchi come forward as a suitor for Erminia's hand for his son, and, being the richer of the two, he was accepted by the mother. Count Andreozzi, when he heard of this, was highly incensed, but he had too much good breeding to allow it to be seen. He appeared to treat the matter with the greatest indifference, but he nourished the most deadly animosity towards young Miniscalchi, and resolved, at all hazards, that he would have Erminia for his wife.

The Count Miniscalchi, after the Marchioness had given her consent to her daughter's marriage with Edgardo, called his son before him, and with an air of great pride and satisfaction, informed him of the fortunate alliance which had been arranged. His astonishment and indignation were very great when Edgardo refused to accept it; and these were still further increased when he heard that his son was on the very point of applying to him for permission to marry a common peasant. In vain did the father storm and threaten his son with every kind of vengeance if he dared to disobey him. In vain did he promise to obtain an order from the Duke for his incarceration in the Castle of Monza — notorious as containing the most horrible dungeon in Europe. Edgardo still positively refused to marry Erminia; and all the satisfaction the Count could obtain from his son, was that he would neither pursue his intentions with respect to Carlotta, nor speak to her again, without his father's permission.

The reader may, therefore, imagine how difficult was the mission of reconciling all these conflicting interests which the Innominato had placed upon the delicate white flower which lay concealed in Carlotta's basket.

We must now return to Carlotta, who found her uncle waiting for her in a state of great anxiety.

"You silly girl," he said, "where have you been? I was beginning to be dreadfully frightened about you, and was afraid you had either lost yourself, or had fallen into some gully. I am very angry with you, I can tell you."

"I am sorry for that, uncle," she replied. "I found myself in a garden where there were such beautiful flowers that I did not like to leave it."

“Whose garden could that be? I did not know there was any garden in the neighbourhood, except that belonging to the Innominato; and I should be sorry to find that you had been there.”

“Why so?” inquired Carlotta.

“Because he is believed to have dealings with the Evil One. It is true I never heard of any harm having been done by him to any one, though at the same time it is better to avoid all such people, lest we should get into mischief through them. But now, as it is getting late, we must start at once, else it will be dark before we reach home, and your poor mother will be in a state of great anxiety about you, I am sure.”

The mule was now saddled and brought to the door of the little inn, and Carlotta and her uncle (the former still holding the basket carefully on her arm) having seated themselves, they proceeded gently on their homeward road. For some time little conversation passed between them. The girl was silent and abstracted; and although her uncle tried several times to get information from her respecting her interview with the Innominato (with whom he found she had been in conversation), he did not succeed, obtaining only the most evasive answers. That Carlotta’s mind was occupied with the subject of her interview with the Innominato was proved by the extreme care she took of the flower in her basket, and her alarm lest it might receive any injury. More than once a slight misunderstanding arose between her and her uncle about the pace of the mule — he wishing to hurry onwards rapidly, so that they might reach home before nightfall, while Carlotta, fearing that the quickened pace of the beast might shake or injure the flower in her basket, begged of him, without telling her true reason, to keep on at a walking pace. In vain the worthy man impressed upon her the necessity there was for their hurrying onwards. Carlotta would not listen to reason, and her uncle — with whom she was a great favourite — allowed her to have her own way.

It was dark before they arrived at Carlotta’s home, as the uncle predicted. They found her mother in great anxiety. Her joy at her daughter’s appearance, however, quickly dispelled the little cloud which had gathered on her brow, and they were soon seated at the supper-table. The conversation turned principally upon the tournament which was to take place the next day at Como; the necessity for their arriving at the city at an early hour, so as to obtain good places; what costumes the mother and daughter should wear; and what preparations they should make, so as to arrive with as little fatigue as possible. At last it was agreed that Carlotta and her mother should leave home immediately after breakfast, and proceed onwards towards Como, and that the uncle, who resided at some little distance from them, should overtake them on their way, and, seating Carlotta *en croupe* behind him on his mule, should conduct her into the town. Having taken seats for himself and his niece, he would resign his own as soon as the mother arrived, in case they could not find places for all three.

Supper over, Carlotta pleaded fatigue, and retired to her bedroom. Once in it, and the door carefully fastened, she took the flower from her basket. After examining it, and finding that it was still perfectly fresh and uninjured, she placed it in a little mug of water beneath the picture of the Virgin, before which she lighted a small lamp. She then offered up a fervent prayer to the Madonna to bless the flower, that through its aid she might be able to effect a reconciliation with her lover.

Having finished her prayer, Carlotta threw herself on her bed, but not to sleep. Her mind was too much occupied with the flower to permit that. She was constantly engaged in endeavouring to devise how it would restore to her the affections of Edgardo. She continued to reflect in what way she should use it, and she could not help feeling somewhat angry with the Innominato for having refused to give her any explicit instructions on that point. It was evidently necessary that she should wear it on the morrow. To leave it at home she felt would simply be to lose the benefit which might be derived from it. But how should she wear it so that it might be seen to the greatest advantage? This point occupied her mind for a considerable time. At last she resolved to wear it in her hair, as it would thus be more likely to attract her lover's attention; and it is possible that at the same time the idea did not escape her that he could not then gaze at the flower without looking on her own lovely face. Hour after hour passed away in this manner; in fact the dawn was breaking before she had arranged all her plans. Then sleep came to her relief.

After a few hours' rest Carlotta rose, and began to make arrangements for setting out. Her mother had already risen, and had not only prepared the morning meal, but milked the cows, and completed her other domestic duties before Carlotta had left her room. The mother was first ready to leave the house, and, indeed, had been waiting nearly half an hour before Carlotta made her appearance. If the good woman felt some little impatience at the delay, it vanished as soon as she saw Carlotta, so beautiful did she look. She had arrayed herself in her best. Her costume was in excellent taste, but she wore no ornament beyond a neat gold cross which hung suspended from her neck by a black ribbon, and in her hair the camellia, which looked as fresh as at the moment when the Innominato had plucked it from its stalk. After her mother had looked at her for some moments, full of pride and admiration, she said, —

“How did you obtain that beautiful flower, Carlotta? I never saw one like it before.”

“It was given me yesterday, mother,” said Carlotta, “and I brought it home with me in my basket.”

“How I should like to obtain the plant that bears such flowers,” said her mother. “What is the name of it, dear?”

“Really I don’t know,” said Carlotta. “But perhaps I shall manage to obtain a plant for you some day, when my uncle goes back to the village we were at yesterday. Now, let us fasten the door, and start on our road. We ought to be at Como early, to get good places.”

“Yes, let us start immediately,” said her mother, “or we shall miss your uncle, and he will be at Como before us. What a fortunate thing it is that the day is so fine! I suppose we shall meet a great number of people on the road.”

Of the people they might meet on the road, or of the many thousands they would see, Carlotta thought very little. Her mind was occupied with one person only, and apart from him the tournament, with all its gaiety, would be to her little better than solitude. Having closed the door securely behind them, the two now left the house. As soon as they were in the high road, they found that they had not started by any means too early. Many people were already on their way to the tournament, dressed in their best, and on the tiptoe of expectation. Much to Carlotta’s annoyance, she was obliged to enter into conversation with many of their neighbours. She did all she could do with civility to avoid them, but her mother, who, of course, did not understand Carlotta’s position, chatted to her gossips with great volubility, much to her daughter’s annoyance. Fortunately, however, she at last perceived her uncle coming up one of the bye-roads on his mule. Fearing that he might pass them without speaking, she called to him, and, as soon as he recognised her voice, he made towards them.

“Sister,” he said, “I am surprised that you can allow Carlotta to trudge along on foot in that manner. Before you get to Como she will certainly be covered with dust. Let her get up behind me, and we will go on together; and, after I have put up the mule (as I told you yesterday evening), I will secure good places, where we will remain until you arrive, and then you can seat yourself beside us.”

“Thank you, brother,” said the mother; “that is very kind. If I had known it would have been so dusty, I should have asked you to take Carlotta with you all the way.”

Carlotta having been assisted to her seat on the mule, her uncle started off, her mother promising to meet them at the tournament.

“Who gave you that beautiful flower?” said her uncle, who had noticed it whilst she was standing beside her mother. “I never saw one of the kind before.”

“The old gentleman gave it to me yesterday, whilst you were waiting.” “You don’t mean the Innominato?”

“Yes, I do,” said Carlotta. “And a very kind old gentleman he is.”

“If he has any more of those flowers, I wish he would give me one of them,” said the uncle. “I should like to have a tree of them.”

“But did you not tell me that it was wrong to have anything to say to him, uncle?” said Carlotta, laughing. “I am sure you would not like to take such a gift from his hands.”

“Well, to speak the truth, I don’t know that it would be altogether right,” said her uncle. “But, at the same time, it would be a great temptation. I venture to say there will not be another lady at the tournament with a flower like that, and they will all be envying you.”

“That I care very little about,” said Carlotta. “But please try and keep the mule at a steady pace, or the flower may fall out of my hair.”

“But why then did you not fasten it more securely?” asked her uncle. “I half suspect, now, that you think it probable you may have to take it out, and give it to somebody.”

Carlotta gave no answer to this, and continued silent and thoughtful till they arrived at the gates of Como. Here all was bustle and confusion. The crowd was very great, and horses, mules, and carriages were jumbled together with hundreds of foot passengers, all eagerly striving to gain an entrance. Everybody was in good humour, and the little annoyances they were subjected to caused much joking and hearty laughter. Once inside the gate, the crowd somewhat opened up, and all then went forward smoothly enough. Carlotta, owing to her great beauty, was well known by reputation to many, and was the object of special admiration, her uncle receiving many compliments on her appearance.

“My dear,” said one matron, who was trudging along with three rather ungainly daughters, “your mother ought to be a happy woman.” “Why do you think so?” asked Carlotta.

“To have a daughter who can marry any one she chooses. Why, a man has only to look at you, to fall in love with you.”

So many were the compliments Carlotta received, that at last she began to believe that the flower in her hair might have a magic power to attract attention, and that its influence was possibly increased in intensity the nearer that she approached the spot appropriated for the tournament. She was soon confirmed in this, for the further she went the stronger and more frequent appeared to be the admiring glances which were cast upon her. She now began to feel certain that the Contino’s attention would be drawn to her, and that, in spite of his father’s prohibition, he would speak to her, and all would end well. Probably her having arrived at this conclusion tended to increase her beauty, as it added considerable gaiety to her features, which well became them.

Carlotta and her uncle at last reached the inn, which was situated near the lists, where the mule was to be left till they should return home in the evening. In the yard of the inn the compliments paid to Carlotta, even by strangers, exceeded what had been said about her in the street, strengthening her very much in her conclusion that the flower’s power to attract attention was gradually increasing, and that before the day was over her lover would succumb to its influence.

So great was the crowd which had gathered round her that it was with some difficulty Carlotta and her uncle contrived to leave the inn yard. Indeed it required energetic remonstrance, both on the part of her uncle and the landlord of the Falcone (for that was the name of the inn), before they could manage to depart. At length, however, they contrived to arrive at the enclosure set apart for the lists, and with some difficulty they managed to enter. To their great satisfaction, they obtained two excellent front seats, which, though at some distance from the part marked out for the Duke and his court, were so near the entrance to the lists that the Contino must of necessity pass near the spot where Carlotta was seated, and thus come within the influence of the magic flower in her hair.

Carlotta and her uncle having secured their seats, the former looked round for her mother, but she did not arrive for some time, and all the places around them were speedily occupied, in spite of their expostulations and representations that they were keeping a seat for a person who would shortly arrive. At last Carlotta saw her mother standing on one of the back seats, and as her uncle would not allow his sister to remain in that inconvenient position, he beckoned to her to advance, which she did, making her way with some difficulty through the crowd. At last she was comfortably seated beside her daughter, her brother retiring to the back benches, where he remained until the day's proceedings were brought to a close.

As soon as Carlotta and her mother had seated themselves they looked round, and were for some moments completely dazzled by the magnificent preparations which had been made for the tournament. The place enclosed for the combatants was an oblong of considerable extent, three sides of which were fenced with wooden barricades, which rose to the height of six or seven feet, and were covered with magnificent embroidery. Behind this were placed several rows of seats, each rising gradually above the other, so as to give the spectators a full opportunity of viewing the tournament. At one of the smaller sides of the parallelogram was raised a magnificent *loggione* for the accommodation of the Duke and the nobles of his court. In the centre at the other end was a void concealed by curtains so formed as to draw aside easily to permit the entrance of the combatants, and other persons having a part in the proceedings. The vast compartment set apart for the court was as yet empty, as it would not have been accordant with etiquette for any one to have occupied their places before the Duke had entered, but the whole remaining portion of the space was densely crowded with spectators, all in their holiday dress, and in the highest good humour.

The sound of many trumpets was now heard, which told that the Duke and his court had arrived, and all eyes were at once turned to the *loggione* to see him enter, which he did in great state. First came six pages dressed in black and yellow striped tunics; then a hundred gentlemen of the court, arrayed in black velvet tunics, with close-fitting pantaloons of black and yellow stripes, and with velvet caps on their heads, adorned with eagles' plumes. Next followed the governors of the different towns then comprised in the Duchy of Milan. After these again came the bishops, clad in their richest robes, ornamented with gold, headed by the cardinal himself. These were followed by the Duke Azoni Visconti, and his lovely wife Catherine of Savoy.

Nothing could exceed the splendour of the costumes worn by the Duke and his Duchess. The dress of the former was of mulberry-coloured velvet. It reached to the knees, and was richly ornamented with gold embroidery. The sleeves were of white satin, fitting close to the arm. His cap was of green velvet, thickly embroidered with gold. The Duchess wore a long robe of dark-coloured satin, and her stomacher was so thickly covered with jewels that it almost dazzled the eye when the sun fell upon it. Over her tight white satin sleeves she wore loose ones, which hung open from the shoulder and reached to the feet, while on her head was a magnificent tiara of diamonds. The ladies of the court, all superbly dressed, followed the Duke and Duchess; and among them, remarkable especially for their great beauty and richness of attire, were the Marchioness Caranzi and her daughter Erminia. A crowd of gentlemen and others attached to the court completed a procession which for magnificence could scarcely have been surpassed in any capital in Europe.

The Duke and Duchess having taken their seats, their example was followed by the nobles and ladies of the court. The Marchioness and her daughter, who sat in the front row, were easily seen from the spot where Carlotta and her mother were seated. Although Carlotta had never seen Erminia before, her attention was now drawn to her at once as if by instinct. Carlotta had a lower opinion of her own attractions than is sometimes the case with persons less prepossessing; and a flutter of fear passed over her as she looked on the splendidly-dressed Erminia, and thought how little her own charms could compare with those of her stately rival. Certainly, as far as dress went, Erminia had the advantage, which was by no means a small one. But although she was what is generally styled handsome, her beauty was far behind that of the lovely peasant girl who at that moment so envied her.

Carlotta's reflections were interrupted by the sound of trumpets outside that portion of the enclosure opposite the Duke's *loggione*. The curtains were immediately afterwards drawn aside, and six richly-dressed heralds, representing the towns of Bergamo, Vercelli, Vigivano, Treviglio, Pavia, and Cremona, entered. From each of these towns a combatant for the tournament had been selected, chosen from the highest families in the locality. The Duke now gave the signal for the jousts to commence, and two of the combatants, attended by their esquires and pages, entered the lists. It would be useless to detain the reader with a description of the two first combats. The third and last was to take place between the two young nobles — one the willing, and the other the unwilling, suitor for the hand of Erminia. When young Miniscalchi entered the lists, arrayed *cap-à-pie* in a splendid suit of Milanese steel, and attended by his esquire and page, poor Carlotta could not sustain herself erect, but leant against her mother for support. So great was her admiration of the magnificent figure he presented, that for the moment she quite forgot the influence she imagined the flower would exercise over him; but, as he came nearer to her, it again returned to her mind, and she waited with intense anxiety as to what effect it would produce. Although he advanced laterally in her direction, he evidently did not perceive her, his eyes being fixed on the Duke and his court. "Never mind," thought Carlotta, "he must look at me presently, whether he wishes it or no, that is certain." But the poor girl was doomed to be disappointed. When he was within twenty yards of the spot where she was seated, his horse — a young spirited creature — suddenly made a demi-volt, and then started forward rapidly for some paces, carrying him far beyond Carlotta and her mother. The poor girl was dreadfully disappointed, but made no remark, and waited anxiously for another opportunity.

The trumpets sounded again, and Miniscalchi's opponent, the young Count Andrezzi, advanced, and having saluted the Duke, the combatants closed their visors, and each took up his position. The charge was sounded, and they rushed forward to the attack. Of what took place Carlotta saw nothing. A thick mist rose before her eyes, and she would have fainted had it not been for a loud shout which arose on all sides around her. She now raised her eyes, and saw her lover sitting proudly erect on his horse in the centre of the lists; while his adversary, who had been thrown on the ground, was being carried off by the attendants. The space having been cleared, young Miniscalchi, as the victor, advanced to salute the Duke and Duchess. That ceremony over, all now regarded him with fixed attention, anxious to discover whom he would salute as the Queen of Beauty.

They were not long in doubt, for as soon as Miniscalchi had quitted the Duke's presence, he turned his horse's head towards the Countess Erminia, and lowering his lance, saluted her as the Queen. At this a loud shout of approbation arose from the spectators. But Carlotta heard it not. A singular change seemed to have come over her usually placid countenance. For a moment she glared savagely at the Marchioness and her daughter; and then suddenly rising from her seat, she snatched the flower from her hair, and threw it indignantly, as far from her as she could, into the arena. She then seized her mother by the arm, and said —

“Come away, come away, or I shall go mad. Come away, I say. I can support this no longer.”

Her mother, terrified at the expression of her countenance, attempted to 'soothe her, but in vain. Carlotta held her by the arm, and dragged her onwards as she thrust her way through the bystanders. After she had reached the last row of benches, her uncle met them, and asked what was the matter with her.

“Come away, I say,” was all the answer he could obtain from her. “Come away, or I shall go mad.”

The good man offered no objection, though he was evidently much astonished at the behaviour of his niece. The three hurried on till they arrived at the Falcone, where the mule was speedily saddled; and as soon as Carlotta had seated herself behind her uncle, they started homewards, the mother following on foot. For some time after they had quitted the town no conversation passed between them. Carlotta sat erect as a statue on the mule, her lips tightly compressed, and her eyes glaring savagely around her. Suddenly her determination gave way, and she burst into tears. She wept so bitterly that they thought she would have fallen from her seat. Her uncle and her mother assisted her to descend, and placed her on a bank by the roadside, doing everything in their power to console her. But all their endeavours were of no avail, and Carlotta wept on even more bitterly than before.

“What has she done with the flower she had in her hair?” said the uncle to her mother.

“I don't know her reason,” said the mother, “but before we left the tournament she suddenly started up, and tearing it from her hair, she threw it away from her.”

“Ah! I am sure there is something wrong about that flower,” said the uncle. “I hope there is no magic in it, but I strongly suspect there is.”

A crowd now began to gather round them, and Carlotta, having recovered her presence of mind sufficiently to desire to avoid the notice of strangers, once more took her seat on the mule, which her uncle now led. They did not stop again till they had arrived at their cottage, where for the present we will leave Carlotta, sedulously attended by her mother and uncle, and, returning to the lists, will try to trace the events which were passing there.

Although the eyes of the spectators were turned upon the *loggione* and what was transpiring there, Carlotta's behaviour, for the moment, drew considerable attention from those near her. Her mother, however, speedily allayed this concern by informing them that her daughter only felt faint from the heat of the day. As soon as the seats they had occupied were filled up, a woman, who had been sitting beside Carlotta, beckoned to two pages who were below in the area. One of the boys immediately advanced towards her, and inquired what she wanted.

"I wish you would be so kind as to give me that pretty flower," she said, as she pointed to where the flower lay. "A friend of mine has just dropped it."

The boy proceeded to obey her, and took up the flower; but both he and his companion were so struck with its extraordinary beauty that they stood still, looking at it intently.

"I wonder where she got this flower from?" at last said the boy who had picked it up, to his companion.

"To whom does it belong?" inquired the other.

"To the woman who spoke to me. She says that her friend dropped it."

"Nonsense!" said the other. "It was at least a dozen yards from her; and it does not belong to her, I am sure. If I were you, I would keep it myself."

The page followed his companion's advice, and, without taking any further notice of the woman, he advanced towards the *loggione*, which, although the day's proceedings were terminated, was still filled with spectators. The Duke and Duchess had not yet quitted their seats, being engaged in conversation with the Cardinal Archbishop of Milan. As the boy, still holding the flower in his hand, was passing the spot where the Marchioness and her daughter were seated, the former, noticing the flower beckoned, to the boy to approach her.

"My pretty page," she said, "where did you find that beautiful flower? If you do not want it, I wish you would give it to me."

The lad, who had without hesitation refused it to the peasant woman, found himself in a different position with the Marchioness, who was very well known to him by sight. With a hardly-suppressed sigh he handed the flower to her, and then rejoined his companion.

The Marchioness then endeavoured to attract her daughter's attention by showing the flower to her, but she seemed to take no notice of it. Her mind was, at the moment, too much occupied with the misfortune which had befallen the youth whom she secretly loved, although she had been already assured that he had received no injury from his fall. Finding she could not make Erminia attend to her, the Marchioness placed the flower in her own bosom, and had hardly done so when Count Miniscalchi, the father, advanced towards them.

“How fortunate Edgardo has been to-day!” he said, addressing the Marchioness. “I wonder how far your good wishes and those of your daughter contributed to his success.”

“If good wishes could have been of any use,” said the Marchioness, “no little portion of the honour he has obtained is due to us. Am I not right, Erminia?” she continued.

Erminia, however, made no reply, but kept her eyes fixed upon the ground. The Count noticed her pallid looks, and inquired of the mother whether the heat had not been too much for her.

“I fear it has,” replied the Marchioness, “and that, added to the excitement of the scene, has somewhat overcome her. But, Count,” she continued, turning from the subject, “you must be very proud of your son.”

“I am very proud of him indeed,” was the reply. “And I trust, in a little time, you will look upon him in the same light as I do. But let me ask from whom did you obtain that beautiful flower? I never saw one like it before.”

“It is very lovely,” was the reply of the Marchioness. “I saw it in the hand of a page who was passing, and who, on noticing my admiration for it, gave it to me. Since it pleases you so much, pray allow me to offer it to you.”

“I am almost ashamed to take it from you,” said the Count, gallantly; “but, as our Italian proverb says, ‘It is a courtesy to offer, but a greater to accept,’ I will not refuse it. At the same time, however, you would greatly add to the obligation if you taught me how to wear it.”

The Marchioness, after a moment’s hesitation, took the flower in her hand, and placing it on the Count’s breast, near the region of his heart (accidentally, of course), told him that it would look well there, as it would be set off by his dark velvet dress. The Count attempted to fix it in its position, but so clumsily, that the Marchioness was obliged to assist him.

“I shall look like a bridegroom adorned in this manner,” he said jestingly.

The Marchioness said nothing, but raised her eyes (which, by the way, were very fine ones) till they met his, and afterwards neither of them spoke a word, a general movement having just then taken place among the spectators to quit the *loggione*. They were soon afterwards separated by the crowd, and the Marchioness left, attended by her own people.

The streets of Como were now one continuous scene of bustle, confusion, and gaiety, hundreds departing on their road homewards, while others fairly besieged the provision-shops and inns. The Falcone did a roaring trade that day, and great were the profits of the landlord. Not only was the inn-yard completely crowded with guests, but seats and tables were placed in front of the house so far into the street as considerably to impede the traffic. At one of these tables a number of ill-looking men were seated, who, judging from the crossbows and other arms they carried, as well as their style of conversation, were evidently disbanded *condottieri*, lately dismissed from the Milanese army, after the termination of the dispute between the Duke Azoni Visconti and Ludovico, and the total overthrow of the latter. Among these men was a civilian, who, partially intoxicated, was chattering with great volubility, much to the amusement of the rest. He boasted immensely of the great wealth of his master, who, he told them, never travelled without his purse being well filled with gold, as well as wearing finger-rings of enormous value.

“Your master must be a lucky man,” said one of the *condottieri*. “What is his name?”

“The illustrious Count Miniscalchi,” said Pietro, the servant.

“Is he here to-day?”

“Indeed he is,” said Pietro. “It was his son who was conqueror in the last combat.”

“And has he got as much money and as many jewels as usual to-day?” inquired the soldier.

“Certainly,” said Pietro; “his gold chain alone is worth a thousand ducats.”

Here a temporary stop was put to the conversation by the sight of some ten or fifteen nobles, followed by their retainers, advancing in the direction of the inn.

“Here comes my master,” said Pietro. “How much grander he looks than any of the other nobles!”

“To my eyes,” the soldier said, “there does not seem much difference between them. Which is your master?”

“That one in the foremost rank, with a white flower in his breast. Is he not a handsome man?”

“He is indeed,” said the soldier, turning his gaze on the Count, and marking him attentively, as did his companions also. “Whither is he now going?”

“He is to dine with the Governor, and afterwards Giacomo and myself are to attend him as he returns home.”

“Which road do you take?” inquired the soldier.

“We shall go with the others as far as Camerlata, and then turning to the left, we shall continue our course towards the Count’s castle, where he will sleep to-night.”

We must now return to Dame Zampi's cottage. Carlotta for some hours gave full sway to her grief; and her uncle, finding he had not the power to console her, left her with her mother, and bent his steps homewards. Shortly afterwards, Carlotta gave her mother her entire confidence. The good woman listened with intense sympathy and interest to what her daughter told her. When she had concluded, her mother brought forward all the commonplace arguments she could in order to console her. She reminded her how great was the difference of position between her and the young noble whom she loved; how awkward she would feel among the great ladies of the court; how she would be ridiculed by them for her rustic manners; and how happy she might be if she contented herself with marrying one in her own rank of life. To all these arguments Carlotta willingly assented, although her tears continued to fall abundantly. Towards midnight, finding the poor girl somewhat calmer, her mother advised her to retire to bed, and Carlotta followed her advice.

It was near daybreak, however, before Carlotta had fairly sobbed herself to sleep, and soon afterwards her rest was broken by some one knocking violently at the door of the cottage.

Dame Zampi rose and opened the door. She saw advancing towards her three peasants, neighbours of hers, with whom she was acquainted, bearing in their arms the apparently lifeless body of a man richly dressed.

"Oh, mother!" said one of the men, "we have brought you a sad present this morning. As we were going to our work, we found this signore, lying on the ground under his horse, totally senseless. We raised him the best way we could, and have brought him here. He has evidently been robbed, for he has no money on him, and his horse has been killed by a crossbow-bolt. I wonder who he can be. He is evidently some great noble, as we may see from the rich dress he has on, as well as the fine horse he rode, and its appointments."

"What ought I to do?" inquired the affrighted woman. "If you bring him in here, they will think I have murdered him."

"Nonsense," said the man; "how can they think that? You must get a bed ready for him, and take every care of him. He is not dead yet, and may recover. Who knows but your fortune may be made by taking care of him?"

The old woman now hastily prepared her own bed, and the stranger, still insensible, was placed on it. At this moment Carlotta, who had been roused by the noise, entered the room, and advanced to the bedside. As soon as she saw the wounded man, she uttered a loud cry of surprise, for on his breast she saw the camellia she had worn in her hair the previous day.

“Do you know him, dear Carlotta?” her mother inquired.

“I do not,” she replied. “But do you not see that this is the flower I wore yesterday in my hair?” — evidently under the impression that the flower was in some mysterious manner connected with the stranger’s arrival, whom, as she had never before seen, she did not recognize as the father of her lover. Carlotta took the opportunity, when her mother was conversing with the peasants on what they had better do in the emergency, to take the flower and carry it unobserved into her own room, where she placed it in water beneath the picture of the Virgin, and then joined her mother in the other room.

During her short absence it had been determined that one of the peasants should start immediately to Como for a doctor; that another should present himself before the commandant of the castle, and narrate to him what had taken place; while the third should remain at the cottage to assist Carlotta and her mother in attending on the wounded man.

Two hours had scarcely elapsed when both messengers returned. One was accompanied by a celebrated leech, and the other by a lieutenant and three soldiers. No sooner had the lieutenant entered the room where the wounded man was, than he recognized him as the noble Count Miniscalchi. The officer then made inquiries of the peasants as to where they had found the Count, the position in which he was lying, and all the circumstances necessary to aid in tracing the evil-doers. In the meanwhile the doctor carefully examined his patient, and found that he was suffering from concussion of the brain, as well as from a severe contusion of one leg. He ordered that the strictest quiet should be maintained in the house, and that the greatest care and attention should be paid to the wounded man. He then saw him comfortably placed in bed, and left the cottage, promising to return in the evening. When he returned, he found that the Count had partially regained possession of his senses, but was still in a very precarious condition. He ordered that the same treatment should be continued, and perfect quiet observed, and that in no case should the Count be permitted to see strangers, or even any of his own family, as, in his position, the slightest mental shock might be fatal.

During the night a great change for the better took place in the Count. He gained possession of his mental faculties, but still remained lamentably weak. The next day, while the leech was paying his visit, and Carlotta was absent for a few moments from the house, young Miniscalchi was seen advancing towards the cottage-door on horseback. The leech immediately recognized him, and went to meet him.

“Contino,” he said, “I am happy to tell you that your father is much better this morning. He is still unfit to see anybody, however, or to suffer the slightest shock to his mind. Take my advice, and do not ask to see him. I can easily imagine your anxiety, but you should at the same time be prudent. Return to-morrow, and then we will see what progress he has made.”

The young Miniscalchi now entered into conversation with the doctor; but, although he was evidently much interested in the fate of his father, it might have been noticed that his eyes wandered very much. Presently Carlotta appeared advancing towards the house. No sooner did she recognize her lover than a faintness came over her, so that she was on the point of falling, but she recovered herself by a strong effort, and darted aside without his seeing her.

“Doctor,” the Contino said at last to the leech, “I do not like waiting till to-morrow, so I will return this evening. I wish you would meet me. I promise you that I will not speak to my father without your permission.”

The doctor agreed to this, and the young Count left him. Shortly after the doctor returned to his patient Carlotta entered the house.

“I told that young fellow,” he said to Carlotta’s mother, “that I would meet him here to-night; but it will be very inconvenient for me to do so. He must be obeyed, however, and, should he arrive here before I do (which is very probable), keep him engaged in conversation as you best can till I come. He must not be allowed to speak to his father until I give permission.”

Carlotta heard all the doctor said, but made no remark. Shortly afterwards she retired to her room, and seating herself on her bed began to consider what course it was best for her to pursue. Her pride and her love fought a hard fight. The one counselled her to decline seeing her admirer, and the other urged her to do so. For some time she remained undecided, when, suddenly raising her eyes, they fell upon the flower. The idea now flashed into her mind that it had possessed far greater power than she had imagined. At last she resolved that she would discover the truth by wearing it in her hair that evening when the Contino arrived. She would thus ascertain what were its real qualities, and whether she had done it injustice when she threw it from her so scornfully the previous day. She now resumed her duties as nurse till the evening began to approach, when she handed over the care of the sick man to her mother, and retired to her chamber to put the flower in her hair, and to make other little preparations before the Contino should arrive. If the doctor was somewhat late, young Miniscalchi was, at least, as much too early. As he rode up to the house he perceived Carlotta in a field near it, apparently occupied in gathering lilies. He immediately dismounted, and, having tied his horse to a tree, advanced to meet her. When Carlotta saw him she was unable to speak, and stood motionless, with one hand pressed on her heart, the lilies she had just gathered in the other, and her eyes on the ground.

Never before had she looked so lovely in the Contino's eyes, and all his affection for her returned. Everything seemed propitious. They were alone, the evening was calm and beautiful, and the birds in the trees around them were singing their evening song. The interview between the lovers need hardly be described. Suffice it to say, that before it had terminated the young nobleman had in the most decided manner broken the promise he had made to his father not to speak to Carlotta again; while, on her part, she no longer doubted in the slightest degree the powerful magic influence possessed by the flower.

It was some days before the Count was sufficiently recovered to see his son, who, however, received at least twice daily, from the lips of Carlotta, a report of his state. At last the doctor removed the restriction he had placed upon the young Count, and he was allowed to see his father. The interview between them was long and affecting. Young Miniscalchi listened with great interest to the account his father gave of the manner in which he had been attacked and robbed by a number of crossbowmen, who had waylaid him on his road home; and that his two servants had, in the most cowardly way, deserted him. In return he heard from his son that the robbers had been arrested, and were now under sentence of death in the Castle of Monza. One of them had confessed that they had been tempted to commit the deed by a description given by his servant of the great wealth the Count had with him, and that in pointing him out he had been distinguished from the other noblemen by the white flower he wore on his breast. It should be noted, however, that the son made no remark to his father on the disobedience he had been guilty of in speaking to Carlotta, probably fearing it might have an injurious effect on him in his then weak state of health.

The Count remained at the cottage for some weeks, during which time he was tenderly nursed by Carlotta and her mother — principally by the former. In return he began to entertain for her an affection so strong and pure, that it could scarcely have been exceeded had she been his own daughter. At last young Miniscalchi found courage to tell his father who the beautiful girl who had so faithfully nursed him really was, and he confessed likewise the disobedience he had been guilty of in speaking to her without his permission. The Count remained silent for some moments, and then, suddenly turning his gaze on his son, said to him in a kind voice, —

“Edgardo, had I been of your age, I should have acted exactly as you have done, and therefore I have no right to blame you. If Carlotta is as willing to accept you as a husband as I am to receive her as a daughter, she will love you dearly indeed.”

Little more remains to be told, at least directly connected with our narrative, although the effect produced by the magic flower on others was scarcely less than that exercised on the fortunes of Carlotta and Edgardo. Erminia's match with young Miniscalchi was broken off, and shortly afterwards she married the young Count Andrezzi, and a close friendship was established between him and Edgardo. It remained doubtful for some time whether another union would not take place, between the Marchioness and the Count Miniscalchi himself. If, however, such a match was ever contemplated, it never was carried out, although ever afterwards the Count and the Marchioness continued on terms of the warmest friendship with each other.

THE END

THE LAST LORDS OF GARDONAL - PART I

One of the most picturesque objects of the valley of the Engadin is the ruined castle of Gardonal, near the village of Madaline. In the feudal times it was the seat of a family of barons, who possessed as their patrimony the whole of the valley, which with the castle had descended from father to son for many generations. The two last of the race were brothers; handsome, well-made, fine-looking young men, but in nature they more resembled fiends than human beings — so cruel, rapacious, and tyrannical were they. During the earlier part of his life their father had been careful of his patrimony. He had also been unusually just to the serfs on his estates, and in consequence they had attained to such a condition of comfort and prosperity as was rarely met with among those in the power of the feudal lords of the country; most of whom were arbitrary and exacting in the extreme. For several years in the latter part of his life he had been subject to a severe illness, which had confined him to the castle, and the management of his possessions and the government of his serfs had thus fallen into the hands of his sons. Although the old baron had placed so much power in their hands, still he was far from resigning his own authority. He exacted a strict account from them of the manner in which they performed the different duties he had entrusted to them; and, having a strong suspicion of their character, and the probability of their endeavouring to conceal their misdoings, he caused agents to watch them secretly, and to report to him as to the correctness of the statements they gave. These agents, possibly knowing that the old man had but a short time to live, invariably gave a most favourable description of the conduct of the two young nobles, which, it must be admitted, was not, during their father's lifetime, particularly reprehensible on the whole. Still, they frequently showed as much of the cloven foot as to prove to the tenants what they had to expect at no distant day.

At the old baron's death, Conrad, the elder, inherited as his portion the castle of Gardonal, and the whole valley of Engadin; while to Hermann, the younger, was assigned some immense estates belonging to his father in the Bresciano district; for even in those early days, there was considerable intercourse between the inhabitants of that northern portion of Italy and those of the valley of the Engadin. The old baron had also willed, that should either of his sons die without children his estates should go to the survivor.

Conrad accordingly now took possession of the castle and its territory, and Hermann of the estates on the southern side of the Alps; which, although much smaller than those left to his elder brother, were still of great value. Notwithstanding the disparity in the worth of the legacies bequeathed to the two brothers, a perfectly good feeling existed between them, which promised to continue, their tastes being the same, while the mountains which divided them tended to the continuance of peace.

Conrad had hardly been one single week feudal lord of the Engadin before the inhabitants found, to their sorrow, how great was the difference between him and the old baron. Instead of the score of armed retainers his father had kept, Conrad increased the number to three hundred men, none of whom were natives of the valley. They had been chosen with great care from a body of Bohemian, German, and Italian outlaws, who at that time infested the borders of the Grisons, or had found refuge in the fastnesses of the mountains — men capable of any atrocity, and to whom pity was unknown. From these miscreants the baron especially chose for his body-guard those who were ignorant of the language spoken by the peasantry of the Engadin, as they would be less likely to be influenced by any supplications or excuses which might be made to them when in the performance of their duty. Although the keeping of so numerous a body of armed retainers might naturally be considered to have entailed great expense, such a conclusion would be most erroneous, at least as far as regarded the present baron, who was as avaricious as he was despotic. He contrived to support his soldiers by imposing a most onerous tax on his tenants, irrespective of his ordinary feudal imposts; and woe to the unfortunate villagers who from inability, or from a sense of the injustice inflicted on them, did not contribute to the uttermost farthing the amount levied on them. In such a case a party of soldiers was immediately sent off to the defaulting village to collect the tax, with permission to live at free quarters till the money was paid; and they knew their duty too well to return home till they had succeeded in their errand. In doing this they were frequently merciless in the extreme, exacting the money by torture or any other means they pleased; and, when they had been successful in obtaining the baron's dues, by way of further punishment they generally robbed the poor peasantry of everything they had which was worth the trouble of carrying away, and not unfrequently, from a spirit of sheer mischief, they spoiled all that remained. Many were the complaints which reached the ears of the baron of the cruel behaviour of his retainers; but in no case did they receive any redress, as it was a part of his policy that no crimes committed by those under his command should be investigated, so long as those crimes took place when employed in collecting taxes which he had imposed, and which had remained unpaid.

But the depredations and cruelties of the Baron Conrad were not confined solely to the valley of the Engadin. Frequently in the summer-time when the snows had melted on the mountains, so as to make the road practicable for his soldiers and their plunder, he would make a raid on the Italian side of the Alps. There they would rob and commit every sort of atrocity with impunity; and when they had collected sufficient booty they returned with it to the castle. Loud indeed were the complaints which reached the authorities of Milan. With routine tardiness, the government never took any energetic steps to punish the offenders until the winter had set in; and to cross the mountains in that season would have been almost an impossibility, at all events for an army. When the spring returned, more prudential reasons prevailed, and the matter, gradually diminishing in interest, was at last allowed to die out without any active measures being taken. Again, the districts in which the atrocities had been committed were hardly looked upon by the Milanese government as being Italian. The people themselves were beginning to be infected by a heresy which approached closely to the Protestantism of the present day; nor was their language that of Italy, but a *patois* of their own. Thus the government began to consider it unadvisable to attempt to punish the baron, richly as he deserved it, on behalf of those who, after all, were little worthy of the protection they demanded. The only real step they took to chastise him was to get him excommunicated by the Pope; which, as the baron and his followers professed no religion at all, was treated by them with ridicule.

It happened that in one of his marauding expeditions in the Valteline the baron, when near Bormio, saw a young girl of extraordinary beauty. He was only attended at the time by two followers, else it is more than probable he would have made her a prisoner and carried her off to Gardonal. As it was he would probably have made the attempt had she not been surrounded by a number of peasants, who were working in some fields belonging to her father. The baron was also aware that the militia of the town, who had been expecting his visit were under arms, and on an alarm being given could be on the spot in a few minutes. Now as he combined with his despotism a considerable amount of cunning, he merely attempted to enter into conversation with the girl. Finding his advances coldly received, he contented himself with inquiring of one of the peasants the girl's name and place of abode. He received for reply that her name was Teresa Biffi, and that she was the daughter of a substantial farmer, who with his wife and four children (of whom Teresa was the eldest) lived in a house at the extremity of the land he occupied.

As soon as the baron had received this information, he left the spot and proceeded to the farmer's house, which he inspected externally with great care. He found it was of considerable size, strongly built of stone, with iron bars to the lower windows, and a strong well-made oaken door which could be securely fastened from the inside. After having made the round of the house (which he did alone), he returned to his two men, whom, in order to avoid suspicion, he had placed at a short distance from the building, in a spot where they could not easily be seen.

"Ludovico," he said to one of them who was his lieutenant and invariably accompanied him in all his expeditions, "mark well that house; for some day, or more probably some night, you may have to pay it a visit."

Ludovico merely said in reply that he would be always ready and willing to perform any order his master might honour him with; and the baron, with his men, then left the spot.

The hold the beauty of Teresa Biffi had taken upon the imagination of the baron actually looked like enchantment. His love for her, instead of diminishing by time, seemed to increase daily. At last he resolved on making her his wife; and about a month after he had seen her, he commissioned his lieutenant Ludovico to carry to Biffi an offer of marriage with his daughter; not dreaming, at the moment, of the possibility of a refusal. Ludovico immediately started on his mission, and in due time arrived at the farmer's house and delivered the baron's message. To Ludovico's intense surprise, however, he received from Biffi a positive refusal. Not daring to take back so uncourteous a reply to his master, Ludovico went on to describe the great advantage which would accrue to the farmer and his family if the baron's proposal were accepted. Not only, he said, would Teresa be a lady of the highest rank, and in possession of enormous wealth both in gold and jewels, but the other members of her family would also be ennobled, and each of them, as they grew up, would receive appointments under the baron, besides having large estates allotted to them in the Engadin Valley.

The farmer listened with patience to Ludovico, and when he had concluded, he replied —

“Tell your master I have received his message, and that I am ready to admit that great personal advantages might accrue to me and my family by accepting his offer. Say, that although I am neither noble nor rich, yet at the same time I am not poor; but were I as poor as the blind mendicant whom you passed on the road in coming hither, I would spurn such an offer from an infamous wretch like the baron. You say truly that he is well known for his power and his wealth; but the latter has been obtained by robbing both rich and poor, who had not the means to resist him, and his power has been greatly strengthened by engaging in his service a numerous band of robbers and cut-throats, who are ready and willing to murder any one at his bidding. You have my answer, and the sooner you quit this neighbourhood the better, for I can assure you that any one known to be in the service of the Baron Conrad is likely to meet with a most unfavourable reception from those who live around.”

“Then you positively refuse his offer?” said Ludovico.

“Positively, and without the slightest reservation,” was the farmer’s reply.

“And you wish me to give him the message in the terms you have made use of?”

“Without omitting a word,” was the farmer’s reply. “At the same time, you may add to it as many of the same description as you please.”

“Take care,” said Ludovico. “There is yet time for you to reconsider your decision. If you insist on my taking your message to the baron, I must of course do so; but in that case make your peace with heaven as soon as you can, for the baron is not a man to let such an insult pass. Follow my advice, and accept his offer ere it is too late.”

“I have no other answer to give you,” said Biffi.

“I am sorry for it,” said Ludovico, heaving a deep sigh; “I have now no alternative,” and mounting his horse he rode away.

Now it must not be imagined that the advice Ludovico gave the farmer, and the urgent requests and arguments he offered, were altogether the genuine effusions of his heart. On the contrary, Ludovico had easily perceived, on hearing the farmer’s first refusal, that there was no chance of the proposal being accepted. He had therefore occupied his time during the remaining portion of the interview in carefully examining the premises, and mentally taking note of the manner in which they could be most easily entered, as he judged rightly enough, that before long he might be sent to the house on a far less peaceable mission.

Nothing could exceed the rage of the baron when he heard the farmer’s message.

“You cowardly villain!” he said to Ludovico, “did you allow the wretch to live who could send such a message to your master?”

“So please you,” said Ludovico. “What could I do?”

“You could have struck him to the heart with your dagger, could you not?” said the baron. “I have known you do such a thing to an old woman for half the provocation. Had it been Biffi’s wife instead, you might have shown more courage.”

“Had I followed my own inclination,” said Ludovico, “I would have killed the fellow on the spot; but then I could not have brought away the young lady with me, for there were too many persons about the house and in the fields at the time. So I thought, before acting further, I had better let you hear his answer. One favour I hope your excellency will grant me, that if the fellow is to be punished you will allow me to inflict it as a reward for the skill I showed in keeping my temper when I heard the message.”

“Perhaps you have acted wisely, Ludovico,” said the baron, after a few moments’ silence. “At present my mind is too much ruffled by the villain’s impertinence to think calmly on the subject. Tomorrow we will speak of it again.”

Next day the baron sent for his lieutenant, and said to him —

“Ludovico, I have now a commission for you to execute which I think will be exactly to your taste. Take with you six men whom you can trust, and start this afternoon for Bormio. Sleep at some village on the road, but let not one word escape you as to your errand. To-morrow morning leave the village, but separately, so that you may not be seen together, as it is better to avoid suspicion. Meet again near the farmer’s house, and arrive there, if possible, before evening has set in, for in all probability you will have to make an attack upon the house, and you may thus become well acquainted with the locality before doing so; but keep yourselves concealed, otherwise you will spoil all. After you have done this, retire some distance, and remain concealed till midnight, as then all the family will be in their first sleep, and you will experience less difficulty than if you began later. I particularly wish you to enter the house without using force, but if you cannot do so, break into it in any way you consider best. Bring out the girl and do her no harm. If any resistance is made by her father, kill him; but not unless you are compelled, as I do not wish to enrage his daughter against me. However, let nothing prevent you from securing her. Burn the house down or anything you please, but bring her here. If you execute your mission promptly, and to my satisfaction, I promise you and those with you a most liberal reward. Now go, and get ready to depart as speedily as you can.”

Ludovico promised to execute the baron’s mission to the letter, and shortly afterwards left the castle, accompanied by six of the greatest ruffians he could find among the men-at-arms.

Although Biffi on the spur of the moment had sent so defiant a message to the baron, he afterwards felt considerable uneasiness as to the manner in which it would be received. He did not repent having refused the proposal, but he knew that the baron was a man of the most cruel and vindictive disposition, and would in all probability seek some means to be avenged. The only defence he could adopt was to make the fastenings of his house as secure as possible, and to keep at least one of his labourers about him, whom he could send as a messenger to Bormio for assistance, and to arouse the inhabitants in the immediate vicinity, in case of his being attacked. Without any hesitation all promised to aid Biffi in every way in their power, for he had acquired great renown among the inhabitants of the place for the courage he had shown in refusing so indignantly the baron's offer of marriage for his daughter.

About midnight, on the day after Ludovico's departure from the castle, Biffi was aroused by some one knocking at the door of his house, and demanding admission. It was Ludovico, for after attempting in vain to enter the house secretly, he had concealed his men, determining to try the effect of treachery before using force. On the inquiry being made as to who the stranger was, he replied that he was a poor traveller who had lost his way, and begged that he might be allowed a night's lodging, as he was so weary he could not go a step further.

"I am sorry for you," said Biffi, "but I cannot allow you to enter this house before daylight. As the night is fine and warm you can easily sleep on the straw under the windows, and in the morning I will let you in and give you a good breakfast."

Again and again did Ludovico plead to be admitted, but in vain; Biffi would not be moved from his resolution. At last, however, the bravo's patience got exhausted, and suddenly changing his manner he roared out in a threatening tone, "If you don't let me in, you villain, I will burn your house over your head. I have here, as you may see, plenty of men to help me to put my threat into execution," he continued, pointing to the men, who had now come up, "so you had better let me in at once."

In a moment Biffi comprehended the character of the person he had to deal with; so, instead of returning any answer, he retired from the window and alarmed the inmates of the house. He also told the labourer whom he had engaged to sleep there to drop from a window at the back, and run as fast as he could to arouse the inhabitants in the vicinity, and tell them that his house was attacked by the baron and his men. He was to beg them to arm themselves and come to his aid as quickly as possible, and having done this, he was to go on to Bormio on the same errand. The poor fellow attempted to carry out his master's orders; but in dropping from the window he fell with such force on the ground that he could only move with difficulty, and in trying to crawl away he was observed by some of the baron's men, who immediately set on him. and killed him.

Ludovico, finding that he could not enter the house either secretly or by threats, attempted to force open the door, but it was so firmly barricaded from within that he did not succeed; while in the meantime Biffi and his family employed themselves in placing wooden faggots and heavy articles of furniture against it, thus making it stronger than ever. Ludovico, finding he could not gain an entrance by the door, told his men to look around in search of a ladder so that they might get to the windows on the first floor, as those on the ground floor were all small, high up, and well barricaded, as was common in Italian houses of the time; but in spite of all their efforts no ladder could be found. He now deliberated what step he should next take. As it was getting late, he saw that if they did not succeed in effecting an entrance quickly the dawn would break upon them, and the labourers going to their work would raise an alarm. At last one man suggested that as abundance of fuel could be obtained from the stacks at the back of the house, they might place a quantity of it against the door and set fire to it; adding that the sight of the flames would soon make the occupants glad to effect their escape by the first-floor windows.

The suggestion was no sooner made than acted upon. A quantity of dry fuel was piled up against the door to the height of many feet, and a light having been procured by striking a flint stone against the hilt of a sword over some dried leaves, fire was set to the pile. From the dry nature of the fuel, the whole mass was in a blaze in a few moments. But the scheme did not have the effect Ludovico had anticipated. True, the family rushed towards the windows in the front of the house, but when they saw the flames rising so fiercely, they retreated in the utmost alarm. Meanwhile the screams from the women and children — who had now lost all self-control — mingled with the roar of the blazing element which, besides having set fire to the faggots and furniture placed within the door, had now reached a quantity of fodder and Indian corn stored on the ground floor.

Ludovico soon perceived that the whole house was in flames, and that the case was becoming desperate. Not only was there the danger of the fire alarming the inhabitants in the vicinity by the light it shed around, but he also reflected what would be the rage of his master if the girl should perish in the flames, and the consequent punishment which would be inflicted on him and those under his command if he returned empty-handed. He now called out to Biffi and his family to throw themselves out of the window, and that he and his men would save them. It was some time before he was understood, but at last Biffi brought the two younger children to the window, and, lowering them as far as he could, he let them fall into the arms of Ludovico and his men, and they reached the ground in safety.

Biffi now returned for the others, and saw Teresa standing at a short distance behind him. He took her by the hand to bring her forward, and they had nearly reached the window, when she heard a scream from her mother, who being an incurable invalid was confined to her bed. Without a moment's hesitation, the girl turned back to assist her, and the men below, who thought that the prey they wanted was all but in their hands, and cared little about the fate of the rest of the family, were thus disappointed. Ludovico now anxiously awaited the reappearance of Teresa — but he waited in vain. The flames had gained entire mastery, and even the roof had taken fire. The screams of the inmates were now no longer heard, for, if not stifled in the smoke, they were lost in the roar of the fire; whilst the glare which arose from it illumined the landscape far and near.

It so happened that a peasant, who resided about a quarter of a mile from Biffi's house, had to go a long distance to his work, and, having risen at an unusually early hour, he saw the flames, and aroused the inmates of the other cottages in the village, who immediately armed themselves and started off to the scene of the disaster, imagining, but too certainly, that it was the work of an incendiary. The alarm was also communicated to another village, and from thence to Bormio, and in a short time a strong band of armed men had collected, and proceeded together to assist in extinguishing the flames. On their arrival at the house they found the place one immense heap of ashes — not a soul was to be seen, for Ludovico and his men had already decamped.

The dawn now broke, and the assembled peasantry made some attempt to account for the fire. At first they were induced to attribute it to accident, but on searching around they found the dead body of the murdered peasant, and afterwards the two children who had escaped, and who in their terror had rushed into a thick copse to conceal themselves. With great difficulty they gathered from them sufficient to show that the fire had been caused by a band of robbers who had come for the purpose of plundering the house; and their suspicion fell immediately on Baron Conrad, without any better proof than his infamous reputation.

As soon as Ludovico found that an alarm had been given, he and his men started off to find their horses, which they had hidden among some trees about a mile distant from Biffi's house. The daylight was just breaking, and objects around them began to be visible, but not so clearly as to allow them to see for any distance. Suddenly one of the men pointed to an indistinct figure in white some little way in advance of them. Ludovico halted for a moment to see what it might be, and, with his men, watched it attentively as it appeared to fly from them.

“It is the young girl herself,” said one of the men. “She has escaped from the fire; and she is exactly as she appeared in her white dress with her father at the window. I saw her well, and am sure I am not mistaken.”

“It is indeed the girl,” said another. “I also saw her.”

“I hope you are right,” said Ludovico; “and if so, it will be fortunate indeed, for should we return without her we may receive but a rude reception from the baron.”

They now quickened their pace, but, fast as they walked, the figure in white walked quite as rapidly. Ludovico, who of course began to suspect that it was Teresa attempting to escape from them, commanded his men to run as fast as they could in order to reach her. Although they tried their utmost, the figure, however, still kept the same distance before them. Another singularity about it was, that as daylight advanced the figure appeared to become less distinct, and ere they had reached their horses it seemed to have melted away.

Before mounting their horses, Ludovico held a consultation with his men as to what course they had better adopt; whether they should depart at once or search the neighbourhood for the girl. Both suggestions seemed to be attended with danger. If they delayed their departure, they might be attacked by the peasantry, who by this time were doubtless in hot pursuit of them; and if they returned to the baron without Teresa, they were almost certain to receive a severe punishment for failing in their enterprise. At last the idea struck Ludovico that a good round lie might possibly succeed with the baron, and do something to avert his anger, while there was little hope of its in the slightest manner availing with the enraged peasantry. He therefore gave the order for his men to mount their horses, resolving to tell the baron that Teresa had escaped from the flames, and had begged their assistance, but a number of armed inhabitants of Bormio chancing to approach, she had sought their protection. A great portion of this statement could be substantiated by his men, as they still fully believed that the figure in white which they had so indistinctly seen was the girl herself. Ludovico and his men during their homeward journey had great difficulty in crossing the mountains, in consequence of a heavy fall of snow (for it was now late in the autumn). Next day they arrived at the castle of Gardonal.

It would be difficult to describe the rage of the baron when he heard that his retainers had been unsuccessful in their mission. He ordered Ludovico to be thrown into a dungeon, where he remained for more than a month, and was only then liberated in consequence of the baron needing his services for some expedition requiring special skill and courage. The other men were also punished, though less severely than their leader, on whom, of course, they laid all the blame.

For some time after Ludovico's return, the baron occupied himself in concocting schemes, not only to secure the girl Teresa (for he fully believed the account Ludovico had given of her escape), but to revenge himself on the inhabitants of Bormio for the part they had taken in the affair; and it was to carry out these schemes that he liberated Ludovico from prison.

The winter had passed, and the spring sun was rapidly melting the snows on the mountains, when one morning three travel-stained men, having the appearance of respectable burghers, arrived at the Hospice, and requested to be allowed an interview with the Innominato. A messenger was despatched to the castle, who shortly afterwards returned, saying that his master desired the visitors should immediately be admitted into his presence. When they arrived at the castle they found him fully prepared to receive them, a handsome repast being spread out for their refreshment. At first the travellers seemed under some restraint; but this was soon dispelled by the friendly courtesy of the astrologer. After partaking of the viands which had been set before them, the Innominato inquired the object of their visit. One of them who had been evidently chosen as spokesman, then rose from his chair and addressed their host as follows:

“We have been sent to your excellency by the inhabitants of Bormio as a deputation, to ask your advice and assistance in a strait we are in at present. Late in the autumn of last year, the Baron Conrad, feudal lord of the Engadin, was on some not very honest expedition in our neighbourhood, when by chance he saw a very beautiful girl, of the name of Teresa Biffi, whose father occupied a large farm about half a league from the town. The baron, it appears, became so deeply enamoured of the girl that he afterwards sent a messenger to her father with an offer of marriage for his daughter. Biffi, knowing full well the infamous reputation of the baron, unhesitatingly declined his proposal and in such indignant terms as to arouse the tyrant's anger to the highest pitch. Determining not only to possess himself of the girl, but to avenge the insult he had received, he sent a body of armed retainers, who in the night attacked the farmer's house, and endeavoured to effect an entrance by breaking open the door. Finding they could not succeed, and after murdering one of the servants who had been sent to a neighbouring village to give the alarm, they set fire to the house, and with the exception of two children, who contrived to escape, the whole family, including the young girl herself, perished in the flames. It appears, however, that the baron (doubtless through his agents) received a false report that the young girl had escaped, and was taken under the protection of some of the inhabitants of Bormio.”

“In consequence, he sent another body of armed men, who arrived in the night at the house of the podesta, and contrived to make prisoner his only son, a boy of about fifteen years old, bearing him off to the baron’s castle. They left word, that unless Teresa Biffi was placed in their power before the first day of May, not only would the youth be put to death, but the baron would also wreak vengeance on the whole town. On the perpetration of this last atrocity, we again applied to the government of Milan for protection; but although our reception was most courteous, and we were promised assistance, we have too good reason to doubt our receiving it. Certainly up to the present time no steps have been taken in the matter, nor has a single soldier been sent, although the time named for the death of the child has nearly expired. The townsmen therefore, having heard of your great wisdom and power, and your willingness to help those who are in distress, as well as to protect the weak and oppressed, have sent us to ask you to take them under your protection; as the baron is not a man to scruple at putting such a threat into execution.”

The Innominato, who had listened to the delegate with great patience and attention, told him that he had no soldiers or retainers at his orders; while the baron, whose wicked life was known to him, had many.

“But your excellency has great wisdom, and from all we have heard, we feel certain that you could protect us.”

“Your case,” said the Innominato, “is a very sad one, I admit, and you certainly ought to be protected from the baron’s machinations. I will not disguise from you that I have the power to help you. Tell the unhappy podesta that he need be under no alarm as to his son’s safety, and that I will oblige the baron to release him. My art tells me that the boy is still alive, though confined in prison. As for your friends who sent you to me, tell them that the baron shall do them no harm. All you have to do is, to contrive some means by which the baron may hear that the girl Teresa Biffi has been placed by me where he will never find her without my permission.”

“But Teresa Biffi,” said the delegate, “perished with her father; and the baron will wreak his vengeance both on you and us, when he finds you cannot place the girl in his power.”

“Fear nothing, but obey my orders,” said the Innominato. ”Do what I have told you, and I promise you shall have nothing to dread from him. The sooner you carry out my directions the better.”

The deputation now returned to Bormio, and related all that had taken place at their interview with the Innominato. Although the result of their mission was scarcely considered satisfactory, they determined, after much consideration, to act on the astrologer's advice. But how to carry it out was a very difficult matter. This was, however, overcome by one of the chief inhabitants of the town — a man of most determined courage — offering himself as a delegate to the baron, to convey to him the Innominato's message. Without hesitation the offer was gratefully accepted, and the next day he started on his journey. No sooner had he arrived at the castle of Gardonal, and explained the object of his mission, than he was ushered into the presence of the baron, whom he found in the great hall, surrounded by a numerous body of armed men.

"Well," said the baron, as soon as the delegate had entered, "have your townspeople come to their senses at last, and sent me the girl Teresa?"

"No, they have not, baron," was the reply, "for she is not in their custody. All they can do is to inform you where you may possibly receive some information about her."

"And where may that be?"

"The only person who knows where she may be found is the celebrated astrologer who lives in a castle near Lecco."

"Ah now, you are trifling with me," said the baron sternly. "You must be a great fool or a very bold man to try such an experiment as that."

"I am neither the one nor the other, your excellency; nor am I trifling with you. What I have told you is the simple truth."

"And how did you learn it?"

"From the Innominato's own lips."

"Then you applied to him for assistance against me," said the baron, furiously.

"That is hardly correct, your excellency," said the delegate. "It is true we applied to him for advice as to the manner in which we should act in case you should attack us, and put your threat into execution respecting the son of the podesta."

"And what answer did he give you?"

"Just what I have told you — that he alone knows where Teresa Biffi is to be found, and that you could not remove her from the protection she is under without his permission."

"Did he send that message to me in defiance?" said the baron.

"I have no reason to believe so, your excellency."

The baron was silent for some time; he then inquired of the delegate how many armed retainers the Innominato kept.

"None, I believe," was the reply. "At any rate, there were none to be seen when the deputation from the town visited him."

The baron was again silent for some moments, and seemed deeply absorbed in thought. He would rather have met with any other opponent than the Innominato, whose reputation was well known to him, and whose learning he dreaded more than the power of any nobleman — no matter how many armed retainers he could bring against him.

“I very much suspect,” he said at last, “that some deception is being practised on me. But should my suspicion be correct, I shall exact terrible vengeance. I shall detain you,” he continued, turning abruptly and fiercely on the delegate, “as a hostage while I visit the Innominato; and if I do not succeed with him, you shall die on the same scaffold as the son of your podesta.”

It was in vain that the delegate protested against being detained as a prisoner, saying that it was against all rules of knightly usage; but the baron would not listen to reason, and the unfortunate man was immediately hurried out of the hall, and imprisoned.

Although the baron by no means liked the idea of an interview with the Innominato, he immediately made preparations to visit him, and the day after the delegate’s arrival he set out on his journey, attended by only four of his retainers. It should here be mentioned, that it is more than probable the baron would have avoided meeting the Innominato on any other occasion whatever so great was the dislike he had to him. He seemed to be acting under some fatality; some power seemed to impel him in his endeavours to obtain Teresa which it was impossible to account for.

The road chosen by the baron to reach the castle of the Innominato was rather a circuitous one. In the first place, he did not consider it prudent to pass through the Valteline; and in the second, he thought that by visiting his brother on his way he might be able to obtain some particulars of the mysterious individual whom he was about to see, as his reputation would probably be better known among the inhabitants of the Bergamo district than by those in the valley of the Engadin.

The baron arrived safely at his brother’s castle, where the reports which had hitherto indistinctly reached him of the wonderful power and skill of the astrologer were fully confirmed. After remaining a day with his brother, the baron started for Lecco. Under an assumed name he stayed here for two days, in order that he might receive the report of one of his men, whom he had sent forward to ascertain whether the Innominato had any armed men in his castle; for, being capable of any act of treachery himself, he naturally suspected treason in others. The man in due time returned, and reported that, although he had taken great pains to find out the truth, he was fully convinced, that not only were there no soldiers in the castle, but that it did not, to the best of his belief, contain an arm of any kind — the Innominato relying solely on his occult power for his defence.

Perfectly assured that he had no danger to apprehend, the baron left Lecco, attended by his retainers, and in a few hours afterwards he arrived at the Hospice, where his wish for an interview was conveyed to the astrologer. After some delay a reply was sent that the Innominato was willing to receive the baron on condition that he came alone, as his retainers would not be allowed to enter the castle. The baron hesitated for some moments, not liking to place himself in the power of a man who, after all, might prove a very dangerous adversary, and who might even use treacherous means. His love for Teresa Biffi, however, urged him to accept the invitation, and he accompanied the messenger to the castle.

The Innominato received his guest with stern courtesy; and, without even asking him to be seated, requested to know the object of his visit.

"Perhaps I am not altogether unknown to you," said the baron. "I am lord of the Engadin."

"Frankly," said the Innominato, "your name and reputation are both well known to me. It would give me great satisfaction were they less so."

"I regret to hear you speak in that tone," said the baron, evidently making great efforts to repress his rising passion. "A person in my position is not likely to be without enemies, but it rather surprises me to find a man of your reputation so prejudiced against me without having investigated the accusations laid to my charge."

"You judge wrongly if you imagine that I am so," said the Innominato. "But once more, will you tell me the object of your visit?"

"I understood," said the baron, "by a message sent to me by the insolent inhabitants of Bormio, that you know the person with whom a young girl, named Teresa Biffi, is at present residing. Might I ask if that statement is correct?"

"I hardly sent it in those words," said the Innominato. "But admitting it to be so, I must first ask your reason for inquiring."

"I have not the slightest objection to inform you," said the baron. "I have nothing to conceal. I wish to make her my wife."

"On those terms I am willing to assist you," said the astrologer. "But only on the condition that you immediately release the messenger you have most unjustly confined in one of your dungeons, as well as the young son of the podesta, and that you grant them a safe escort back to Bormio; and further, that you promise to cease annoying the people of that district. Do all this, and I am willing to promise you that Teresa Biffi shall not only become your wife, but shall bring with her a dowry and wedding outfit sufficiently magnificent even for the exalted position to which you propose to raise her."

“I solemnly promise you,” said the baron, “that the moment the wedding is over, the delegate from Bormio and the son of the podesta shall both leave my castle perfectly free and unhampered with any conditions; and moreover that I will send a strong escort with them to protect them on their road.”

“I see you are already meditating treachery,” said the Innominato. “But I will not, in any manner, alter my offer. The day week after their safe return to Bormio, Teresa Biffi shall arrive at the castle of Gardonal for the wedding ceremony. Now you distinctly know my conditions, and I demand from you an unequivocal acceptance or refusal.”

“What security shall I have that the bargain will be kept on your side?” said the baron.

“My word, and no other.”

The baron remained silent for a moment, and then said —

“I accept your offer. But clearly understand me in my turn, sir astrologer. Fail to keep your promise, and had you ten times the power you have I will take my revenge on you; and I am not a man to threaten such a thing without doing it.”

“All that I am ready to allow,” said the Innominato, with great coolness; “that is to say, in case you have the power to carry out your threat, which in the present instance you have not. Do not imagine that because I am not surrounded by a band of cut-throats and miscreants I am not the stronger of the two. You little dream how powerless you are in my hands. You see this bird,” he continued, taking down a common sparrow in a wooden cage from a nail in the wall on which it hung, — “it is not more helpless in my hands than you are; nay more, I will now give the bird far greater power over you than I possess over it.”

As he spoke he unfastened the door of the cage, and the sparrow darted from it through the window into the air, and in a moment afterwards was lost to sight.

“That bird,” the astrologer went on to say, “will follow you till I deprive it of the power. I bear you no malice for doubting my veracity; falsehood is too much a portion of your nature for you to disbelieve its existence in others. I will not seek to punish you for the treachery which I am perfectly sure you will soon be imagining against me without giving you fair warning; for, a traitor yourself, you naturally suspect treason in others. As soon as you entertain a thought of evading your promise to release your prisoners, or conceive any treason or ill feeling against me, that sparrow will appear to you. If you instantly abandon the thought no harm will follow; but if you do not a terrible punishment will soon fall upon you. In whatever position you may find yourself at the moment, the bird will be near you, and no skill of yours will be able to harm it.”

The baron now left the Innominato, and returned with his men to Lecco, where he employed himself for the remainder of the day in making preparations for his homeward journey. To return by the circuitous route he had taken in going to Lecco would have occupied too much time, as he was anxious to arrive at his castle, that he might without delay release the prisoners and make preparations for his wedding with Teresa Biffi. To pass the Valteline openly with his retainers — which was by far the shortest road — would have exposed him to too much danger; he therefore resolved to divide his party and send three men back by his brother's castle, so that they could return the horses they had borrowed. Then he would disguise himself and the fourth man (a German who could not speak a word of Italian, and from whom he had nothing therefore to fear on the score of treachery) as two Tyrolese merchants returning to their own country. He also purchased two mules and some provisions for the journey, so that they need not be obliged to rest in any of the villages they passed through, where possibly they might be detected, and probably maltreated.

Next morning the baron and his servant, together with the two mules, went on board a large bark which was manned by six men, and which he had hired for the occasion, and in it they started for Colico. At the commencement of their voyage they kept along the eastern side of the lake, but after advancing a few miles the wind, which had hitherto been moderate, now became so strong as to cause much fatigue to the rowers, and the captain of the bark determined on crossing the lake, so as to be under the lee of the mountains on the other side. When half way across they came in view of the turrets of the castle of the Innominato. The sight of the castle brought to the baron's mind his interview with its owner, and the defiant manner in which he had been treated by him. The longer he gazed the stronger became his anger against the Innominato, and at last it rose to such a point that he exclaimed aloud, to the great surprise of the men in the boat, "Some day I will meet thee again, thou insolent villain, and I will then take signal vengeance on thee for the insult offered me yesterday."

The words had hardly been uttered when a sparrow, apparently driven from the shore by the wind, settled on the bark for a moment, and then flew away. The baron instantly remembered what the Innominato had said to him, and also the warning the bird was to give. With a sensation closely resembling fear, he tried to change the current of his thoughts, and was on the point of turning his head from the castle, when the rowers in the boat simultaneously set up a loud shout of warning, and the baron then perceived that a heavily-laden vessel, four times the size of his own, and with a huge sail set, was running before the wind with great velocity, threatening the next moment to strike his boat on the beam; in which case both he and the men would undoubtedly be drowned. Fortunately, the captain of the strange bark had heard the cry of the rowers, and by rapidly putting down his helm, saved their lives; though the baron's boat was struck with so much violence on the quarter that she nearly sank.

The Baron Conrad had now received an earnest that the threat of the Innominato was not a vain one, and feeling that he was entirely in his power, resolved if possible not to offend him again. The boat continued on her voyage, and late in the evening arrived safely at Colico, where the baron, with his servant and the mules, disembarked, and without delay proceeded on their journey. They continued on their road till nightfall, when they began to consider how they should pass the night. They looked around them, but they could perceive no habitation or shelter of any kind, and it was now raining heavily. They continued their journey onwards, and had almost come to the conclusion that they should be obliged to pass the night in the open air, when a short distance before them they saw a low cottage, the door of which was open, showing the dim light of a fire burning within. The baron now determined to ask the owner of the cottage for permission to remain there for the night; but to be certain that no danger could arise, he sent forward his man to discover whether it was a house standing by itself, or one of a village; as in the latter case he would have to use great caution to avoid being detected. His servant accordingly left him to obey orders, and shortly afterwards returned with the news that the house was a solitary one, and that he could not distinguish a trace of any other in the neighbourhood. Satisfied with this information, the baron proceeded to the cottage door, and begged the inmates to afford him shelter for the night, assuring them that the next morning he would remunerate them handsomely. The peasant and his wife — a sickly-looking, emaciated old couple — gladly offered them all the accommodation the wretched cabin could afford. After fastening up the mules at the back of the house, and bringing in the baggage and some dry fodder to form a bed for the baron and his servant, they prepared some of the food their guests had brought with them for supper, and shortly afterwards the baron and his servant were fast asleep.

Next morning they rose early, and continued on their journey. After they had been some hours on the road, the baron, who had before been conversing with his retainer, suddenly became silent, and absorbed in thought. He rode on a few paces in advance of the man, thinking over the conditions made by the Innominato, when the idea struck him whether it would not be possible in some way to evade them. He had hardly entertained the thought, when the sparrow flew rapidly before his mule's head, and then instantly afterwards his servant, who had ridden up to him, touched him on the shoulder, and pointed to a body of eight or ten armed men about a quarter of a mile distant, who were advancing towards them. The baron, fearing lest they might be some of the armed inhabitants of the neighbourhood who were banded against him, and seeing that no time was to be lost, immediately plunged, with his servant, into a thick copse, where, without being seen, he could command a view of the advancing soldiers as they passed. He perceived that when they came near the place where he was concealed they halted, and evidently set about examining the traces of the footsteps of the mules. They communed together for some time as if in doubt what course they should adopt, and finally, the leader giving the order, they continued their march onwards, and the baron shortly afterwards left his place of concealment.

Nothing further worthy of notice occurred that day; and late at night they passed through Bormio, fortunately without being observed. They afterwards arrived safely at the foot of the mountain pass, and at dawn began the ascent. The day was fine and calm, and the sun shone magnificently. The baron, who now calculated that the dangers of his journey were over, was in high spirits, and familiarly conversed with his retainer. When they had reached a considerable elevation, the path narrowed, so that the two could not ride abreast, and the baron went in advance. He now became very silent and thoughtful, his mind being fixed on the approaching wedding, and in speculations as to how short a time it would take for the delegate and the youth to reach Bormio. Suddenly the thought occurred to him, whether the men whom he should send to escort the hostages back, could not, when they had completed their business, remain concealed in the immediate neighbourhood till after the celebration of the wedding, and then bring back with them some other hostage, and thus enable him to make further demands for compensation for the insult he considered had been offered him. Although the idea had only been vaguely formed, and possibly with but little intention of carrying it out, he had an immediate proof that the power of the astrologer was following him. A sparrow settled on the ground before him, and did not move until his mule was close to it, when it rose in the air right before his face. He continued to follow its course with his eyes, and as it rose higher he thought he perceived a tremulous movement in an immense mass of snow, which had accumulated at the base of one of the mountain peaks. All thought of treachery immediately vanished. He gave a cry of alarm to his servant, and they both hurried onwards, thus barely escaping being buried in an avalanche, which the moment afterwards overwhelmed the path they had crossed.

The baron was now more convinced than ever of the tremendous power of the Innominato, and so great was his fear of him, that he resolved for the future not to contemplate any treachery against him, or entertain any thoughts of revenge.

THE LAST LORDS OF GARDONAL - PART II

The day after Baron Conrad's arrival at the castle of Gardonal, he ordered the delegate and the podesta's son to be brought into his presence. Assuming a tone of much mildness and courtesy, he told them he much regretted the inconvenience they had been put to, but that the behaviour of the inhabitants of Bormio had left him no alternative. He was ready to admit that the delegate had told him the truth, although from the interview he had with the Innominato, he was by no means certain that the inhabitants of their town had acted in a friendly manner towards him, or were without blame in the matter. Still he did not wish to be harsh, and was willing for the future to be on friendly terms with them if they promised to cease insulting him — what possible affront they could have offered him it would be difficult to say.

“At the same time, in justice to myself,” he continued (his natural cupidity gaining the ascendant at the moment), “I hardly think I ought to allow you to return without the payment of some fair ransom.” He had scarcely uttered these words when a sparrow flew in at the window, and darting wildly two or three times across the hall, left by the same window through which it had entered. Those present who noticed the bird looked at it with an eye of indifference. But not so the baron. He knew perfectly well that it was a warning from the astrologer, and he looked around him to see what accident might have befallen him had he continued the train of thought. Nothing of an extraordinary nature followed the disappearance of the bird. The baron now changed the conversation, and told his prisoners that they were at liberty to depart as soon as they pleased; and that, to prevent any misfortune befalling them on the road, he would send four of his retainers to protect them. In this he kept his promise to the letter, and a few days afterwards the men returned, reporting that the delegate and the son of the podesta had both arrived safely at their destination.

Immediately after the departure of his prisoners, the baron began to make preparations for his wedding, for, although he detested the Innominato in his heart, he had still the fullest reliance on his fulfilling the promise he had made. His assurance was further confirmed by a messenger from the astrologer, who arrived at the castle the day after the prisoners had reached their home, to inform him that on the Wednesday the affianced bride would arrive with her suite, and that he (the Innominato) had given this notice, that all things might be in readiness for the ceremony.

Neither expense nor exertion was spared by the baron to make his nuptials imposing and magnificent. The chapel belonging to the castle, which had been allowed to fall into a most neglected condition, was put into order; the altar redecorated, and the walls hung with tapestry. Rich new garments were provided for the officiating priest, a stranger who had been engaged for the occasion. Preparations were made in the inner hall for a banquet on the grandest scale which was to be given after the ceremony; and on a dais in the main hall into which the bride was to be conducted on her arrival were placed two chairs of state, where the baron and his bride were to be seated while the principal officers of the castle and the better class of tenants on the estate were introduced to her.

When the day arrived for the wedding, everything was prepared for the reception of the bride. As no hour had been named for her arrival, all persons who were to be engaged in the ceremony were ready in the castle by break of day; and the baron, in a state of great excitement, mounted to the top of the watch-tower — which commanded an extensive view of the country around — that he might be able to give orders to the rest the moment her cavalcade appeared in sight. Hour after hour passed, but still Teresa did not make her appearance, and at last the baron began to feel considerable anxiety on the subject. He did not doubt the good faith of the astrologer, but feared lest some accident might have occurred to Teresa on the road.

At last a mist, which had been over a part of the valley, cleared up, and all the anxiety of the baron was dispelled; for in the distance he perceived a group of travellers approaching the castle, some mounted on horseback and some on foot. While they were yet at too great a distance for the baron to be certain they were the bridal party, he gave orders for all below to take their places; and then he returned to his post on the tower to watch the procession as it approached. At length it came sufficiently near to enable him to make out the different individuals who composed it. In front rode the bride on a superb white palfrey, her face covered with a thick veil. On each side of her rode an esquire magnificently dressed. Behind her were a waiting woman on horseback and two men-servants; and in the rear were several led mules laden with packages. The baron now quitted his position in the tower and descended to the castle gates to receive his bride. When he arrived there, he found one of the esquires, who had ridden forward at the desire of his mistress, waiting to speak to him.

“I have been ordered,” he said to the baron, “by the Lady Teresa, to request that you will be good enough to allow her to change her dress before she meets you.”

The baron of course willingly assented, and then retired into the hall destined for the reception ceremony. Shortly afterwards Teresa arrived at the castle, and, being helped from her palfrey, she proceeded with her lady in waiting and a female attendant (who had been engaged by the baron) into her private apartment, while two of the muleteers brought up a large trunk containing her wedding-dress. While Teresa was occupied at her toilet, the other mules were unladen and the different packages placed aside to be afterwards disposed of as she might direct.

In less than an hour Teresa left her room to be introduced to the baron, and was conducted into his presence by one of the esquires. As soon as she entered the hall, a cry of admiration arose from all present — so extraordinary was her beauty. The baron, in a state of breathless emotion, advanced to meet her, but before he had reached her she bent on her knee, and remained in that position till he had raised her up. “Kneel not to me, thou lovely one,” he said. “It is for all present to kneel to thee in adoration of thy wonderful beauty, rather than for thee to bend to any one.” So saying, and holding her hand, he led her to one of the seats on the dais, and then, seating himself by her side, gave orders for the ceremony of introduction to begin. One by one the different persons to be presented were led up to her, all of whom she received with a grace and amiability which raised her very high in their estimation.

When the ceremony of introduction was over the baron ordered that the procession should be formed, and then, taking Teresa by the hand, he led her into the chapel, followed by the others. When all were arranged in their proper places the marriage ceremony was performed by the priest, and the newly-married couple, with the retainers and guests, entered into the banqueting hall.

The baron and his wife were seated at a table on a slightly-elevated dais, at one end of the hall, while the guests arranged themselves at parallel tables extending from the dais to the entrance doors. Splendid as was the repast which had been prepared for the company, their attention seemed for some time more drawn to the baron and his bride than to the duties of the feast. Nor was this without good cause. A handsomer couple it would have been impossible to find. The baron himself, as has been stated already, had no lack of manly beauty either in face or form; while the loveliness of his bride appeared almost more than mortal. Even their splendid attire seemed to attract little notice when compared with their personal beauty.

After the surprise and admiration had somewhat abated, the feast progressed most satisfactorily. All were in high spirits, and good humour and conviviality reigned throughout the hall. Even on the baron it seemed to produce a kindly effect, so that few who could have seen him at that moment would have imagined him to be the stern, cold-blooded tyrant he really was. His countenance was lighted up with good humour and friendliness. Much as his attention was occupied with his bride, he had still a little to bestow on his guests, and he rose many times from his seat to request the attention of the servants to their wants. At last he cast his eye over the tables as if searching for some person whom he could not see, and he then beckoned to the major-domo, who, staff of office in hand, advanced to receive his orders.

“I do not see the esquires of the Lady Teresa in the room,” said the baron.

“Your excellency,” said the man, “they are not here.”

“How is that?” said the baron, with some impatience. “You ought to have found room for them in the hall. Where are they?”

“Your excellency,” said the major-domo, who from the expression of the baron’s countenance evidently expected a storm, “they are not here. The whole of the suite left the castle immediately after the mules were unladen and her ladyship had left her room. I was inspecting the places which I had prepared for them immediately under your own table to see that all was in readiness, when a servant came forward and told me that the esquires and attendants had left the castle. I at once hurried after them and begged they would return, as I was sure your excellency would feel hurt if they did not stay to the banquet. But they told me they had received express orders to leave the castle directly after they had seen the Lady Teresa lodged safely in it. I again entreated them to stay, but it was useless. They hurried on their way, and I returned by myself.”

“The ill-bred hounds!” said the baron, in anger. “A sound scourging would have taught them better manners.”

“Do not be angry with them,” said Teresa, laying her hand gently on that of her husband, “do not be angry with them. They did but obey their master’s orders.”

“Some day, I swear,” said the baron, “I will be revenged on their master for this insult, miserable churl that he is!”

He had no sooner uttered these words than he looked round him for the sparrow, but the bird did not make its appearance. Possibly its absence alarmed him even more than its presence would have done, for he began to dread lest the vengeance of the astrologer was about to fall on him, without giving him the usual notice. Teresa, perceiving the expression of his countenance, did all in her power to calm him, but for some time she but partially succeeded. He continued to glance anxiously about him, to ascertain, if possible, from which side the blow might come. He was just on the point of raising a goblet to his lips, when the idea seized him that the wine might be poisoned. He declined to touch food for the same reason. The idea of being struck with death when at the height of his happiness seemed to overwhelm him. Thanks, however, to the kind soothing of Teresa (whose mild, gentle voice acted on him like a charm), as well as the absence of any visible effects of the Innominato's anger, he at last became completely reassured, and the feast proceeded without anything else remarkable occurring.

Long before the banquet had concluded the baron and his wife quitted the hall, and retired through their private apartments to the terrace of the castle. The evening, which was now rapidly advancing, was warm and genial, and not a cloud was to be seen in the atmosphere. For some time they walked together up and down on the terrace; and afterwards they seated themselves on a bench. There, with his arm round her waist and her head leaning on his shoulder, they watched the sun in all his magnificence sinking behind the mountains. The sun had almost disappeared, when the baron took his wife's hand in his.

"How cold thou art, my dear!" he said to her. "Let us go in."

Teresa made no answer, but rising from her seat was conducted by her husband into the room which opened on to the terrace, and which was lighted by a large brass lamp which hung by a chain from the ceiling. When they were nearly under the lamp, whose light increased as the daylight declined, Conrad again cast his arm round his wife, and fondly pressed her head to his breast. They remained thus for some moments, entranced in their happiness.

"Dost thou really love me, Teresa!" asked the baron.

"Love you?" said Teresa, now burying her face in his bosom. "Love you? Yes, dearer than all the world. My very existence hangs on your life. When that ceases my existence ends."

When she had uttered these words, Conrad, in a state of intense happiness, said to her —
"Kiss me, my beloved."

Teresa still kept her face pressed on his bosom; and Conrad, to overcome her coyness, placed his hand on her head and gently pressed it backwards, so that he might kiss her.

He stood motionless, aghast with horror, for the light of the lamp above their heads showed him no longer the angelic features of Teresa, but the hideous face of a corpse that had remained some time in the tomb, and whose only sign of vitality was a horrible phosphoric light which shone in its eyes. Conrad now tried to rush from the room, and to scream for assistance — but in vain. With one arm she clasped him tightly round the waist, and raising the other, she placed her clammy hand upon his mouth, and threw him with great force upon the floor. Then seizing the side of his neck with her lips, she deliberately and slowly sucked from him his life's blood; while he, utterly incapable either of moving or crying, was yet perfectly conscious of the awful fate that was awaiting him.

In this manner Conrad remained for some hours in the arms of his vampire wife. At last faintness came over him, and he grew insensible. The sun had risen some hours before consciousness returned. He rose from the ground horror-stricken and pallid, and glanced fearfully around him to see if Teresa were still there; but he found himself alone in the room. He now seated himself on a chair, and attempted to collect his scattered senses. In this he partly succeeded — the events of the last night, however, appearing to him more like a horrible dream than a stern reality. For some minutes he remained undecided what step to take; but nothing could he determine on.

He now rose from his chair to leave the apartment, but he was so weak he could scarcely drag himself along, and was obliged to take hold of different objects as he passed to keep himself from falling. When he left the room he bent his steps towards the courtyard. Each person he met saluted him with the most profound respect, while on the countenance of each was visible an expression of intense surprise, so altered was he from the athletic young man they had seen him the day before. Presently he heard the merry laughter of a number of children, and immediately hastened to the spot from whence the noise came. To his surprise he found his wife Teresa, in full possession of her beauty, playing with several children, whose mothers had brought them to see her, and who stood delighted with the condescending kindness of the baroness towards their little ones.

Conrad remained motionless for some moments, gazing with intense surprise at his wife, the idea again occurring to him that the events of the last night must have been a terrible dream, and nothing more. But he was at a loss how to account for his bodily weakness. Teresa, in the midst of her gambols with the children, accidentally raised her head and perceived her husband. She uttered a slight cry of pleasure when she saw him, and snatching up in her arms a beautiful child she had been playing with, she rushed towards him, exclaiming —

“Look, dear Conrad, what a little beauty this is! Is he not a little cherub?”

The baron gazed wildly at his wife for a few moments, but said nothing.

“My dearest husband, what ails you?” said Teresa. “Are you not well?”

Conrad made no answer, but turning suddenly round staggered hurriedly away, and Teresa, with an expression of alarm and anxiety on her face, followed him with her eyes as he went. He still hurried till he reached the small sitting-room from which he was accustomed each morning to issue his orders to his dependants, and seated himself in a chair to recover if possible from the bewilderment he was in. Presently Ludovico, whose duty it was to attend on his master every morning for instructions, entered the room, and bowing respectfully to the baron, stood silently aside, waiting till he should be spoken to, but during the time marking the baron's altered appearance with the most intense curiosity. It was some moments before Conrad was aware of his lieutenant's presence, but accidentally turning his eyes towards the spot where he stood, and noticing the expression of curiosity on his face, he asked him what he saw to make him stare in that manner.

"Pardon my boldness, your excellency," said Ludovico, "but I was afraid you might be ill. I trust I am in error."

"What should make you think I am unwell?" inquired the baron.

"Your highness's countenance is far paler than usual, and there is a small, slight fresh wound on the side of your throat. I hope you have not injured yourself."

The last remark of Ludovico decided the baron that the events of the evening had been no hallucination. What stronger proof could be required than the marks of his vampire wife's teeth still upon him? He perceived that some course of action must be at once decided upon, and the urgency of his position aided him to concentrate his thoughts. He determined on visiting a celebrated anchorite who lived in the mountains about four leagues distant, and who was famous not only for the piety of his life, but for his power in exorcising evil spirits. All those supposed to be possessed of devils or afflicted with evil spirits, for many miles around, were brought to him to be cured. Having come to this resolution, he desired Ludovico immediately to saddle for him a sure-footed mule, as the path to the anchorite's dwelling was not only difficult but dangerous.

Ludovico bowed, and after having been informed that there were no other orders, he left the room, wondering in his mind what could be the reason for his master's wishing a mule saddled, when he generally rode only the highest-spirited horses. The conclusion he came to was, that the baron must have been attacked with some serious illness, and was about to proceed to some skilful leech.

As soon as Ludovico had left the room, the baron called to one of the servants whom he saw passing, and ordered breakfast to be brought to him immediately, hoping that by a hearty meal he should recover sufficient strength for the journey he was about to undertake. To a certain extent he succeeded, though possibly it was from the quantity of wine he drank, rather than from any other cause, for he had no appetite and had eaten but little.

He now descended into the courtyard of the castle, cautiously avoiding his wife. Finding the mule in readiness, he mounted it and started on his journey. For some time he went along quietly and slowly, for he still felt weak and languid; but as he attained a higher elevation of the mountains, the cold breeze seemed to invigorate him. He now began to consider how he could rid himself of the horrible vampire he had married, and of whose real nature he had no longer any doubt. Speculations on this subject occupied him till he had entered on a narrow path on the slope of an exceedingly high mountain. It was difficult to keep footing, and it required all his caution to prevent himself from falling. Of fear, however, the baron had none; and his thoughts continued to run on the possibility of separating himself from Teresa, and as to what vengeance he would take on the Innominato for the treachery he had practised on him, as soon as he should be fairly freed. The more he dwelt on his revenge, the more excited he became, till at last he exclaimed aloud, "Infamous wretch! Let me be but once fairly released from the execrable fiend you have imposed upon me, and I swear I will burn thee alive in thy castle, as a fitting punishment for the sorcery thou hast practised."

He had hardly uttered these words, when the pathway upon which he was riding gave way beneath him, and glided down the incline into a tremendous precipice below. Conrad succeeded in throwing himself from his mule, which, with the *débris* of the rocks, was hurried over the precipice, while he clutched with the energy of despair at each object he saw likely to give him a moment's support. But everything he touched gave way, and he gradually sank and sank towards the verge of the precipice, his efforts to save himself becoming more violent the nearer he approached to what appeared certain death. Down he sank, till his legs actually hung over the precipice, when he succeeded in grasping a stone somewhat firmer than the others, thus retarding his fall for a moment. In horror he now glanced at the terrible chasm beneath him, when suddenly different objects came before his mind with fearful reality. There was an unhappy peasant, who had without permission killed a head of game, hanging from the branch of a tree, still struggling in the agonies of death, while his wife and children were in vain imploring the baron's clemency.

This vanished and he saw a boy with a knife in his hand, stabbing at his own mother for some slight offence she had given him.

This passed, and he found himself in a small village, the inhabitants of which were all dead within their houses; for at the approach of winter he had, in a fit of ill-temper, ordered his retainers to take from them all their provisions; and a snow-storm coming on immediately afterwards, they were blocked up in their dwellings and all perished.

Again his thoughts reverted to the position he was in, and his eye glanced over the terrible precipice that yawned beneath him, when he saw, as if in a dream, the house of Biffi the farmer, with his wife and children around him, apparently contented and happy.

As soon as he had realized the idea, the stone which he had clutched began to give way, and all seemed lost to him, when a sparrow suddenly flew on the earth a short distance from him, and immediately afterwards darted away. "Save but my life!" screamed the baron, "and I swear I will keep all secret."

The words had hardly been uttered, when a goatherd with a long staff in his hand appeared on the incline above him. The man, perceiving the imminent peril of the baron, with great caution, and yet with great activity, descended to assist him, dislodging as he went numerous fragments of stones, which rolled over the precipice, and many of which nearly struck the baron as they passed him. The goatherd at last succeeded in reaching a ledge of rock a few feet above, and rather to the side of the baron, to whom he stretched forth the long mountain staff in his hand. The baron clutched it with such energy as would certainly have drawn the goatherd over with him, had it not been that the latter was a remarkably powerful man. With some difficulty the baron reached the ledge of the rock, and the goatherd then ascended to a higher position, and in like manner drew the baron on till at last he had contrived to get him to a place of safety. As soon as Conrad found himself out of danger, he gazed wildly around him for a moment, then dizziness came over him, and he sank fainting on the ground.

When the baron had recovered his senses, he found himself so weak that it would have been impossible for him to have reached the castle that evening, and he willingly accompanied the goatherd to his hut in the mountains, where he proposed to pass the night. The man made what provision he could for his illustrious guest, and prepared him a supper of the best his hut afforded; but had the latter been composed of the most exquisite delicacies, it would have been equally tasteless; for Conrad had not the slightest appetite. Evening was now rapidly approaching, and the goatherd prepared a bed of leaves, over which he threw a cloak; and the baron, utterly exhausted, reposed on it for the night, without anything occurring to disturb his rest.

Next morning he found himself somewhat refreshed by his night's rest, and he prepared to return to the castle, assisted by the goatherd, to whom he had promised a handsome reward. He had now given up all idea of visiting the anchorite, dreading that by so doing he might excite the animosity of the Innominato, of whose tremendous power he had lately received more than ample proof. In due time he reached home in safety, and the goatherd was dismissed after having received the promised reward. On entering the castle-yard the baron found his wife in a state of great alarm and sorrow, and surrounded by the retainers. No sooner did she perceive her husband than, uttering a cry of delight and surprise, she rushed forward to clasp him in her arms; but the baron pushed her rudely away, and hurrying forwards, directed his steps to the room in which he was accustomed to issue his orders. Ludovico, having heard of the arrival of his master, immediately waited on him.

“Ludovico,” said the baron, as soon as he saw him, “I want you to execute an order for me with great promptitude and secrecy. Go below, and prepare two good horses for a journey; one for you, the other for myself. See that we take with us provisions and equipments for two or three days. As soon as they are in readiness, leave the castle with them without speaking to any one, and wait for me about a league up the mountain, where in less than two hours I will join you. Now see that you faithfully carry out my orders; and if you do so, I assure you you will lose nothing by your obedience.”

Ludovico left the baron’s presence to execute his order, when immediately afterwards a servant came into the room, and inquired if the Lady Teresa might enter.

“Tell your mistress,” said the baron, in a tone of great courtesy and kindness, “that I hope she will excuse me for the moment, as I am deeply engaged in affairs of importance; but I shall await her visit with great impatience in the afternoon.”

The baron, now left to himself, began to draw out more fully the plan for his future operations. He resolved to visit his brother Hermann, and consult him as to what steps he ought to take in this horrible emergency; and in case no better means presented themselves, he determined on offering to give up to Hermann the castle of Gardonal and the whole valley of the Engadin, on condition of receiving from him an annuity sufficient to support him in the position he had always been accustomed to maintain. He then intended to retire to some distant country, where there would be no probability of his being followed by the horrible monster whom he had accepted as his wife. Of course he had no intention of receiving Teresa in the afternoon, and he had merely put off her visit the purpose of allowing himself to escape with greater convenience from the castle.

About an hour after Ludovico had left him, the baron quitted the castle by a postern, with as much haste as his enfeebled strength would allow, and hurried after his retainer, whom he found waiting him with the horses. The baron immediately mounted one, and, followed by Ludovico, took the road to his brother’s, where in three days he arrived in safety. Hermann received his brother with great pleasure, though much surprised at the alteration in his appearance.

“My dear Conrad,” he said to him, “what can possibly have occurred to you? You look very pale, weak, and haggard. Have you been ill?”

“Worse, a thousand times worse,” said Conrad. “Let us go where we may be by ourselves, and I will tell you all.”

Hermann led his brother into a private room, where Conrad explained to him the terrible misfortune which had befallen him. Hermann listened attentively, and for some time could not help doubting whether his brother's mind was not affected; but Conrad explained everything in so circumstantial and lucid a manner as to dispel that idea. To the proposition which Conrad made, to make over the territory of the Engadin valley for an annuity, Hermann promised to give full consideration. At the same time, before any further steps were taken in the matter, he advised Conrad to visit a villa he had, on the sea-shore, about ten miles distant from Genoa; where, in quiet and seclusion, he would be able to recover his energies, both mental and bodily.

Conrad thanked his brother for his advice, and willingly accepted the offer. Two days afterwards he started on the journey, and by the end of the week arrived safely, and without difficulty, at the villa.

On the evening of his arrival Conrad, who had employed himself during the afternoon in visiting the different apartments, as well as the grounds surrounding the villa, was seated at a window overlooking the sea. The evening was deliciously calm, and he felt such ease and security as he had not enjoyed for some time past. The sun was sinking in the ocean, and the moon began to appear, and the stars one by one to shine in the cloudless heavens. The thought crossed Conrad's mind that the sight of the sun sinking in the waters strongly resembled his own position when he fell over the precipice. The thought had hardly been conceived when some one touched him on the shoulder. He turned round, and saw standing before him, in the full majesty of her beauty — his wife Teresa!

"My dearest Conrad," she said, with much affection in her tone, "why have you treated me in this cruel manner? It was most unkind of you to leave me suddenly without giving the slightest hint of your intentions."

"Execrable fiend," said Conrad, springing from his chair, "leave me! Why do you haunt me in this manner?"

"Do not speak so harshly to me, my dear husband," said Teresa. "To oblige you I was taken from my grave; and on you now my very existence depends."

"Rather my death," said Conrad. "One night more such as we passed, and I should be a corpse."

"Nay, dear Conrad," said Teresa; "I have the power of indefinitely prolonging your life. Drink but of this," she continued, taking from the table behind her a silver goblet, "and to-morrow all ill effects will have passed away."

Conrad mechanically took the goblet from her hand, and was on the point of raising it to his lips when he suddenly stopped, and with a shudder replaced it again on the table.

"It is blood," he said.

"True, my dear husband," said Teresa; "what else could it be? My life is dependent on your life's blood, and when that ceases so does my life. Drink then, I implore you," she continued, again offering him the goblet. "Look, the sun has already sunk beneath the wave; a minute more and daylight will have gone. Drink, Conrad, I implore you, or this night will be your last."

Conrad again took the goblet from her hand to raise it to his lips; but it was impossible, and he placed it on the table. A ray of pure moon-light now penetrated the room, as if to prove that the light of day had fled. Teresa, again transformed into a horrible vampire, flew at her husband, and throwing him on the floor, fastened her teeth on the half-healed wound in his throat. The next morning, when the servants entered the room, they found the baron a corpse on the floor; but Teresa was nowhere to be seen, nor was she ever heard of afterwards.

Little more remains to be told. Hermann took possession of the castle of Gardonal and the valley of the Engadin, and treated his vassals with even more despotism than his brother had done before him. At last, driven to desperation, they rose against him and slew him; and the valley with the castle afterwards became absorbed into the Canton of the Grisons.

THE END

TOMASO AND PEPINA

On a small farm in the Bresciano lived an old working couple, Tomaso and Pepina. They were frugal, industrious, and pious. The few inhabitants of the secluded village in which they resided much respected them; but beyond it they were unknown. Besides their other good qualities, they were very much attached to each other; and both being by nature amiably disposed, their lives had passed very happily in each other's society. Though not poor, they were far from being rich, yet they did not envy their richer neighbours, but were content with what God had given them. They had but one cause for anxiety. The little farm on which they lived was not their own; and the landlord had frequently spoken of dispossessing them, in order to add the land to his own farm. But something or other had always turned up to induce him to delay carrying his idea into practice, prior to the date of our narrative, when they received a peremptory notice to quit within the space of a week.

By a singular coincidence, on the same day they received this order, intelligence reached them that a cousin of Tomaso's, an old bachelor, who resided near Menaggio, and whom he had not seen for more than thirty years, was dead, and had left Tomaso his farm, with the house and furniture. The worthy couple, late in life though it was for them to remove to a new dwelling, determined to go and reside in it. Many long and anxious debates took place, however, before they came to this resolution. Their principal objection was that they were not acquainted with any one in the neighbourhood of the new dwelling, and that they should leave behind them friends whom they loved and respected. They had but one alternative, however — they must remove, or starve; and they chose the former, sorely as it grieved them to do so. As they had heard on good authority that the house left them was amply furnished, they sold all they had in their old dwelling with the exception of a modest stock of clothing, which could be tied up in a bundle. After a painful leave-taking with their friends, they engaged the driver of a cart, who was returning to Lecco, to carry them with him so far on their journey, as they intended to make that town their first halting-place.

For some time after they had quitted the village both husband and wife gave full vent to their tears; while the driver of the cart, prompted by a feeling of delicacy, pretended not to see them, but walked quietly beside his horse's head, looking straight along the road before him. After they had been about an hour on their journey, Tomaso said to his wife —

“It's very hard for people at our time of life to be turned out of house and home at a week's notice, isn't it, Pepina?”

“So it is, dear,” was the reply; “but still we ought to be thankful that we have another good home to go to, when so many poor creatures are wandering about in these hard times without a roof to shelter them.”

“True, wife; but for all that, it’s a hard thing to have to leave against one’s will. I trust we shall be as happy in our new home as we were in our last.”

“There’s little fear of that,” said Pepina; “our happiness will be, in a great measure, in our own hands. I have no doubt we shall be as happy in the new house as we have been in the one we have left.”

“It will be no fault of mine if we are not,” said Tomaso.

“That I know,” said his wife. “You have been a good husband to me for the last fifty years, and I am sure there is no danger of your changing now.”

“Fifty years!” said the driver, who, finding his passengers had so far recovered as to allow them the use of their tongues, had gradually slackened his pace, and had fallen back from the horse’s head in a line with Tomaso and Pepina as they were seated in the cart. “Fifty years! Why, you don’t mean to say you have been married so long as that.”

“Very nearly,” said Pepina; “we want only five days of it. Next Sunday we shall have been married fifty years.”

“And a very happy time we have had of it,” said Tomaso. “I should like to live as much longer.”

“I don’t know that we should gain much by it,” said his wife. “At our time of life we have as many infirmities as we can well bear; and how many we should have when we had lived fifty, or even twenty years more, would be even terrible to think of. No, old man, we are better off as we are, unless we could find somebody to make us young again, and that is not very likely, I should think.”

“I don’t know that,” said the driver, who was a native of Lecco. “There is a wonderful astrologer in our parts, who, they say, can make people young again. Not that I know any case of the kind; though, I must say, I have heard of some extraordinary things he has done, which no common man could do.”

“Where does he live?” inquired Pepina.

“In the slope of the mountains, behind the horns of Cantu.”

“But perhaps,” said Pepina, with a pious shudder, “he may be in league with the Evil One.”

“I know nothing about that,” said the driver in a somewhat careless tone; “but I should rather think he is not. I never heard of him doing any harm to any one, but I have heard of a good many he has been kind to, especially the poor.”

“That don’t look as if there was much wrong in him,” said both husband and wife at the same time.

Conversation was carried on in this amicable manner until the cart arrived at Lecco, when Tomaso and his wife bade adieu to the friendly driver. Carrying the bundle which contained their clothes, they proceeded to a small inn, where they engaged a room for the night, determining to continue their journey the next day. In the evening they entered into conversation with some of the inmates of the house; and, by chance, the Innominato and his wonderful powers were mentioned. Tomaso and his wife (who had felt greatly interested in the details given by the driver respecting that singular individual) listened attentively, and made many inquiries. The answers they received had only the effect of greatly increasing their curiosity. When they retired for the night, Tomaso said to his wife, —

“I wish we could only find out the place where that astrologer lives. If we could, I should be much tempted to pay him a visit tomorrow.”

“For what purpose?” inquired Pepina.

“I should like to know whether he could make us young again. If he could, it would go a great way to reconcile me to our removal.”

“I should like it as much as you,” said the old woman. “But if he can do so, I am afraid he would require more money than we have to give him.”

“That we should know more about when we saw him,” said Tomaso. “Even though we found that he wanted more than we could pay, we should be no worse off than we are now. But from what the driver told us, as well as what we heard this evening, he is not likely to be hard upon a poor old couple. I’ll tell you what I will do. To-morrow I will inquire if he lives far from here, and, if not, we will go and see him. It will do as no harm, even though we come back no better off than when we went.”

“With all my heart,” said the old woman. “I am sure, if we succeed, it would give me as much pleasure as it would you.”

Next morning Tomaso rose at daybreak, and made many inquiries respecting the astrologer’s abode, and the best method of reaching it. He found that they could arrive at it in the course of the day; so the old couple, after making a hearty breakfast, Tomaso shouldering his bundle, started for the castle of the Innominato. It was late in the afternoon when they reached the Hospice, where they remained while a servant took in their message. In a few minutes he returned and informed them that, if they would follow him to the castle, his master would see them immediately. On their arrival they were ushered into the presence of the Innominato, whom they found in his study, engaged in some chemical experiments, assisted by one of his servants.

So deeply intent was he in his work, that it was some minutes before he was aware of their presence — a somewhat fortunate circumstance for them; for they were so overwhelmed by the mysterious aspect of the place, and the imposing appearance of the astrologer, that it is probable neither would have been able to address him. But presently the astrologer turned round, and seeing his two visitors, and the expression of bewilderment on their countenances, he addressed them with great kindness of tone and manner. After requesting them to be seated, he inquired the purpose of their visit.

“Learned sir,” said Tomaso — rising from his seat, and, evidently in great fear, bowing to the astrologer most obsequiously — “we have heard that you are very kind to poor people, and that you can perform very wonderful things, so we have come to ask you to do us a great favour. At the same time, we hope you will not be offended at our boldness; and we are ready to pay you as much as we can afford.”

“As you say you do not intend to offend me,” said the astrologer, “I will take no offence. At the same time, understand that I accept money from no one. Tell me plainly and conscientiously what you wish, and I will oblige you if I can; for, by aid of my science, I know you are a worthy old couple.”

“Many thanks, Illustrissimo,” said Tomaso, greatly encouraged by his kind reception; “we are much obliged to you for your good opinion. The truth is, we are much attached to each other, and have lived a very happy life together for many years. What we want to ask you is, whether you could make us young again, as we are now getting very old. We have been married fifty years come next Sunday.”

“I am sorry I have not the power to oblige you,” said the astrologer. “One of you I could make young again, but not both; that is far beyond my power. If that will meet your views, and you can settle between you which of the two it shall be, I am ready to oblige you.”

For some seconds Tomaso and his wife remained silent, looking at each other in a state of great perplexity. At last Pepina said —

“I am obliged to your excellency for the offer, but, for my own part, I decline it. I should like to be young again if my husband could be so too; but I have no wish to change if he must remain old. Whatever good I may get I always like to share it with him.”

“And I am of the same opinion,” said Tomaso. “I have no wish to be young if she is to remain old. We will now leave you, sir, if you cannot make us both young; but, at the same time, we are much obliged to you for your condescension in receiving us.” So saying, he rose, and taking up his bundle, prepared to depart.

“Stop one moment,” said the astrologer. “I wish to oblige you as far as I can, and I have another proposition to make, though I hardly think you will agree to it. I cannot make you both young — my power being limited — but I can divide the gift. I can make one of you young and beautiful in appearance, but whichever of you it may be, must retain the grave method of thinking and speaking of old age. The other must keep the appearance of age, but shall have the mind and spirits of youth — gay, buoyant, and enthusiastic. Now what do you say to my offer? If you are satisfied with it, you can decide between yourselves which portion of the gift you would each like to accept.”

Again Tomaso and his wife were silent for some seconds, both being evidently inclined to accept the offer of the astrologer.

“I see,” he continued, “that you both like the idea. Before you definitely decide, however, let me urge you to consider well what you are about to accept, as very likely you will both be exposed to the ridicule of your friends when you return home.”

“We are not going to our old home,” said Tomaso, “but to a farm near Menaggio, where nobody knows us. We have hitherto lived in the Bresciano.”

“That entirely alters the case,” said the astrologer. “But other inconveniences may possibly arise, therefore think well over the matter before you decide.”

“I have made up my mind, sir,” said Tomaso. “Give me but the spirits of youth, and I am perfectly content to wear the appearance of old age.”

“And what do you say?” said the astrologer, addressing Pepina.

The old woman hung her head with an absurd appearance of modesty, but made no reply.

“If you do not give me an answer,” said the astrologer, “I can do nothing for either.”

Still Pepina was silent. “Then the bargain is dropped,” said the astrologer, turning again to the experiment he was performing, “and we will say no more about it.”

“I will do just as my husband pleases, sir,” said Pepina quickly, and evidently alarmed.

“And I wish her to be young and beautiful,” said Tomaso, “but to remain discreet and steady, as she now is.”

“Very well,” said the astrologer, “then we are all agreed. Go now to the Hospice, where you can remain for the night. But remember, you must, without a lamp or any other light, rise before daybreak and start on your journey. As the sun rises, you will gradually undergo the transformation you wish — the one in mind and the other in body. One word more. You are a good old couple, and in case you should find that you do not like your altered condition after you have tried it, I will give you an opportunity of returning to your present state, should you desire it. On Sunday next you say you will have been married fifty years. If at any time before midnight on Saturday you should both wish to be restored to your former condition of life, you can do so; but remember, you must be agreed on the subject. Now you can leave me.”

The old couple now quitted the presence of the Innominato, and descended to the Hospice, where a good supper had been prepared for them. After partaking of it they retired to their room, but not to sleep — so fearful and anxious were they lest the sun might rise before they awoke and were able to carry out the instructions of the astrologer.

It wanted considerably more than an hour of daybreak when they left the house to commence their journey. For some time their progress was trifling, for the night was dark, their eyesight dim, and the path somewhat difficult to keep. After they had proceeded about a mile from the castle, the old man commenced to sing, at the top of his cracked voice, a warrior's song, which drew from Pepina rather a sharp remark on the folly of his behaviour — singing in such an absurd manner, instead of carefully looking which way they were going, while they were on the edge of a precipice. Tomaso, in obedience to his wife's wishes, stopped his singing for some minutes, but he soon burst out again still louder than before, at the same time using the most ludicrous gesticulations, as if he saw an enemy before him whom he was about to attack. Pepina now got fairly angry, and fractiously told him not to make an old fool of himself. Tomaso stopped his singing a second time, and good-naturedly turned round to say something conciliatory to his wife, when a faint ray of the coming dawn passing through a cleft in the mountains allowed him to gain a tolerably distinct view of her face. He gazed at her in silent astonishment, for she now appeared a buxom woman of about fifty years of age — stout, well-made, erect, and hearty. Pepina seemed at a loss to understand her husband's astonishment, and somewhat angrily inquired what he saw to make him stare at her in that silly manner.

“See in you?” said Tomaso, almost breathless with surprise — “see in you? Why, a very handsome woman. Don't you think that is a very good excuse for staring at you? I declare you are twice as plump as you were before we went to the astrologer.”

Pepina now felt her own arms, and then took as good a look at her person as the faint light of day would enable her to do. She could easily perceive that her form was greatly changed for the better. She, however, expressed no pleasure at this, but said, in a fractious tone —

“It was well worth while, indeed, to spend the whole of yesterday, wearing the soles off one's feet, to find out that conjuror, and then to be made fifty years of age! I suspect he is only a cheat after all. He promised me I should become young and beautiful, and he has made me fifty, if I'm a day. I would just as soon have kept as I was.”

“Come, come, wife,” said Tomaso, “don’t be ungrateful. For a person at your time of life to have twenty years taken off their head in less than an hour is really a good deal gained.”

“My time of life!” said Pepina, “my time of life, indeed! Look at your own. I can walk upright, at any rate, and that’s more than you can do, try as much as you please.”

They now entered a narrow valley hung with high trees, which so completely shut out the little light as to leave them again in total darkness. Here Pepina, finding that her husband moved along with great difficulty, offered to carry the bundle for him, saying that she was far stronger than he was. Tomaso took this offer very ill, and he told her he was not a man to require assistance from her or any other woman; and by way of proving his words hurried on before her, stumbling continually as he went. His ill-humour, however, soon vanished, and he again commenced to sing his warrior’s song in the same absurd manner as before.

The road now opened up, being no longer overshadowed by trees. The daylight had now also increased so much that they could see a considerable distance before them. Tomaso still continued in front, singing his song, and taking no notice of his wife, who followed him silently and sedately.

Again their path lay along the side of a deep precipice, at the bottom of which rushed a swollen mountain-stream. Tomaso, on hearing the noise, looked below for a moment, and then continued his road, singing as lustily as ever. He also amused himself by walking at the extreme edge of the precipice, to Pepina’s intense terror, for he stumbled incessantly, and appeared much fatigued.

“Come away from that dangerous place, you silly old man,” she said. “Do you wish to break your neck? Come away, I say, and give me the bundle, for I see you are so tired you can hardly get along.”

“That is not true,” said Tomaso, turning round; “I was never stronger.” Here he stopped speaking, and looked for some minutes in speechless astonishment at his wife, who now appeared a very handsome woman of thirty years of age. When she had reached him, she inquired what was the matter, that he had so suddenly become silent.

“Pepina,” he said, “I cannot take my eyes off you. I never in my life saw a more beautiful woman than you have become. Give ma a kiss.”

“Nonsense, you silly old man,” was her reply; “hold your tongue, and do not make a fool of yourself. Go on again, and keep away from the edge of the precipice.”

But far from obeying her, Tomaso walked by her side, and attempted to make himself as agreeable as possible by saying all the sweet things which came into his head; to all of which Pepina lent either a deaf ear, or upbraided him for his folly. Finding his compliments had no other effect on her than to make her still more ill-tempered, he determined to try what singing would do, and immediately commenced a love-song, which he sang in a most impressive manner, but in so cracked a voice that he made himself perfectly ridiculous. It was not, however, without its effect on Pepina, who began to cry, and her husband, mistaking the cause, attempted to give a still more impassioned and pathetic tone to his voice, and by so doing made himself more absurd than ever.

Pepina still continuing to cry, her husband said to her, — “Why do you weep, my dear? Are you unhappy?” evidently thinking at the moment that she had melted into tears at the sweetness of his singing.

“Unhappy?” she replied; “how can I be otherwise, when I see an old man, who ought to know better, behaving so absurdly? You ought to be ashamed, croaking there like an old raven, and imagining that you are singing. If you have no respect for yourself, you ought at least to have a little for your wife’s feelings.”

Tomaso turned round to return her a sharp answer, but she looked so beautiful that he had not the heart to say anything unkind, and the pair walked on together for some time in silence; Tomaso, however, keeping close by the side of his wife.

Pepina, who had now dried her tears, wished in her turn to say something agreeable to her spouse, by way of smoothing away any little rancour against her that might still remain in his mind, and asked him in a kind tone whether he found his rheumatism better.

“My rheumatism!” he replied, tartly; “when I complain to you of it, you may then speak to me about it. I am no more rheumatic than you are. At the same time, I hope you don’t suffer from your corns this morning as you did yesterday?”

“My corns, indeed!” said Pepina, with a toss of her head, and stopping to put out one of the prettiest little feet that could be seen in all Lombardy. “I should like to know where you would find them. But don’t let us quarrel any more; but give me the bundle, for you must be getting tired, and I am a good deal stronger than you are.”

Tomaso had too much gallantry to allow her to carry the bundle; and they now continued amicably enough on their road till they came to a roadside inn, at which they determined to stop for breakfast. They seated themselves at a table near the door, and the landlord soon spread before Tomaso some bread, cheese, and wine; his wife contenting herself with a cup of new milk, some fruit, and bread. When they had finished their meal, their host entered into conversation with them by asking how far they had travelled that morning. Tomaso told him only a few miles, saying nothing about his visit to the castle of the Innominato, and he then asked the landlord if they were far distant from Bellaggio.

“About four hours’ walk,” said the landlord, “Are you going to see any of the gay doings which are going on there?”

“I did not know that there were any,” said Tomaso, delighted at the idea, while Pepina appeared to receive the news with perfect indifference. “What sort of gay doings are they?”

“Oh! there are a number of soldiers there, and very handsome young fellows they are; and they have excellent music.”

“How fortunate!” said Tomaso.

“All the pretty girls for miles round are gathering there,” continued the landlord; “and the soldiers, who are very gallant, dance with them every evening.”

Tomaso’s expression of countenance fell considerably at this information.

“If you are going to stop there any time, you had better take care,” said the landlord, laughing, “or one of them will be running away with your pretty grand-daughter, as I suppose she is.”

“You have made a very great mistake, my friend,” said Tomaso, angrily. “She is my wife.”

The landlord had so much difficulty in restraining his laughter at this information, that Tomaso noticed it, and was upon the point of saying something uncivil, when Pepina, fearing there might be an altercation, put in that they only intended stopping the night at Bellaggio, and then crossing over to the other side of the lake next morning.

“I think you would do wisely, old gentleman, if you kept to that resolution,” said the landlord; “for, otherwise, I can assure you your pretty wife will have a great many admirers.”

Tomaso was exceedingly displeased at the landlord’s remark, and answered him very sharply. Even Pepina told him that he ought not to talk such nonsense, and that there was no one handsomer in her eyes than her husband; at which the landlord burst into a very loud and rude laugh. Tomaso now got thoroughly into a passion, and after abusing the landlord soundly, he threw their reckoning on the table, and, snatching up his bundle, he and Pepina started on their journey again.

For some time they walked on silently together; Tomaso evidently sulky, though he said nothing. The truth was, he felt annoyed at the indifference Pepina showed to the landlord’s remarks when he spoke of her beauty; and he seemed to think that she ought to have considered them as an insult, and shown proper and becoming spirit on the occasion. He then began to conjure up in his mind the possibility of her wishing to dance with the handsome young soldiers at Bellaggio.

In all this, however, he did his wife a great injustice. The fact was, she cared nothing for gaieties of the kind. Her feelings were those of advanced age, she having, of course, undergone no mental change when she became beautiful; and although she might not have been, at the moment, angry when the landlord paid her the compliments (what woman would have been?), they had scarcely been uttered than they were forgotten, and her mind had reverted to the domestic duties she would have to perform at the new house, and what sort of a dwelling it would prove.

When they had arrived within two or three miles of Bellaggio, Tomaso, who had remained sullen and uneasy during the whole of the afternoon, suddenly complained of fatigue, and proposed to stay the night at a poor-looking little inn, instead of going further on. Pepina, however, not liking the appearance of the place, advised that they should continue their journey; whereupon Tomaso got into a great passion, and accused her of wishing to mix in the gaieties of Bellaggio, when nothing could have been further from the poor woman's thoughts. Her idea was simply that they would be able to find a more comfortable bed at Bellaggio than at the house where her husband proposed to remain. After they had passed the little inn a few hundred yards, Tomaso positively refused to go further, and Pepina, getting angry in her turn, was determined to go on; and her husband, telling her that she should, in that case, do it by herself, returned alone and inquired of the landlord whether he could give him a bed, and received in reply that he had not an unoccupied room in the house, it being full of soldiers who had been quartered on him.

On hearing this, Tomaso immediately left and hurried on after his wife. When they had arrived within two miles of their destination, they seated themselves on a bank by the side of the path, as they both began to feel fatigued by the unusual amount of exertion they had undergone. Presently they heard a noise in a thick clump of shrubs before them, as if someone was, with difficulty, making a way through, and a moment afterwards a young soldier made his appearance. He was remarkably handsome, and his fine figure appeared to still greater advantage from the attractive style of his uniform. His features were regular, and though he was somewhat sunburnt, this in no way detracted from his martial look; but his face at the time was rather flushed, for he was to all appearance partially intoxicated. For a moment he seemed surprised at the singular looking couple before him, but recovering himself, he cast an impudent look on Pepina, and said, —

“What, tired, my pretty girl? I hope you are going my way, and then I can have the pleasure of offering you my arm.”

“I neither want your arm nor your acquaintance,” said Pepina. “Go on your way and leave us alone.”

“Come, come, now,” said the soldier, in a cajoling manner, and advancing close to her, “do not speak in that cruel manner. Ill-temper doesn’t become such a pretty countenance, does it, old gentleman? Is this pretty girl your daughter or your grand-daughter?”

“Neither,” said Tomaso, rising from the bank in a great passion at the impertinent behaviour of the soldier. “That lady is my wife.”

“Your wife? Nonsense!” said the soldier. “You don’t mean to tell me that that lovely creature could ever have chosen such a withered old baboon as you are?”

“I told you the truth,” said Tomaso; “and what is more, if I hear any further impertinence from you, I will chastise you so severely that you will not forget the lesson the longest day you live.”

The only answer the soldier gave to Tomaso’s threat was a loud laugh, and then walking up to Pepina, who had also risen from the bank, and putting his arm round her waist, he said to her, —

“Come with me, my dear, and never mind him. You are far too handsome to be the wife of such a crabbed old fool as he is.”

Pepina, enraged at the soldier’s impertinence, told him to leave her alone; and by way of giving point to her words, she gave him a sound box on the ear.

“A fair challenge, by Jove!” said the soldier. “There is the same penalty for that all the world over, and I claim it now.” So saying, he put his arm round her neck and gave her a hearty kiss.

Both husband and wife now set upon him, and buffeted him soundly; indeed, so sudden and hearty were they in their attacks, that the soldier was completely taken by surprise. He struggled violently to disengage himself, but found it no easy matter, for their combined strength was quite equal to his own. At last, however, by a violent effort, he managed to release himself, and standing at a short distance, he remained for some moments to gather his scattered wits, so completely had they been dispersed by the vigorous attack of his two assailants. When he had somewhat succeeded, he said to Pepina, —

“I forgive you, young lady, for I cannot revenge myself upon you; but that amiable old gentleman shall suffer for his behaviour to-morrow morning, I can tell him. I suppose you are going to Bellaggio, and unfortunately I am going the other way. I am already somewhat behind time, and my sergeant is not particularly forgiving, so I must be off. But we shall meet again, old gentleman, and then, if you do not give me satisfaction, I will cudgel your old body till it is black and blue all over. Two hours after daybreak to-morrow I will be with you; so look for me.” Saying this, he started off in the direction of the inn they had lately passed.

Tomaso and his wife now continued their road to Bellaggio, naturally very indignant at the behaviour of the soldier. Little conversation passed between the old couple, and at last there was a dead silence, which continued till darkness had set in. When they had come to within about a quarter of an hour's walk of Bellaggio, Pepina's attention was aroused by the sound of some one sobbing bitterly, and on listening more attentively, she found that it proceeded from Tomaso, who was walking a few paces in advance of her. She hastened up to him and found her suspicions were correct, and that he was crying like a child.

"What is the matter with you, my dear?" she said to him. "Why do you cry so? It is not, I hope, at the rude behaviour of the soldier. I think we have given him a good lesson, and we may now treat him with contempt."

"I do not care one straw about him; and if he puts his threat into force to-morrow, I think he will find me as completely his match as he did to-day," said Tomaso, totally ignoring the part Pepina had taken in the fray, which had been far more effective than his own. "I am unhappy from another cause. You are, in appearance, young and beautiful, while I am old and decrepit. All admire you, and all will ridicule me for having a wife so young and handsome; and I see that my life will, for the future, be one of utter misery, for I love you dearly, and cannot bear the idea of others paying you the attentions you will receive. I am afraid I made a very foolish bargain after all."

"But there is no difficulty in getting off it, you know, dear," said Pepina. "The astrologer told us that, if we repented of the transaction, we could change to our former condition any time before next Sunday, when we shall have been married fifty years."

"But if I do change," said Tomaso, still crying, "I do not see that I shall gain much by it. I shall then have an old man's mind in an old man's body; while you will still remain in person young and beautiful."

"But why should I remain young and beautiful?" said Pepina, artlessly. "He gave me the power to change if I wished it, as fully as he did to you."

"And you would really give up youth and beauty to please me?" said Tomaso, in a tone of mingled surprise and delight.

"Certainly," said his wife, "Why not? Just let us at once wish ourselves old again in mind and body, and so put an end to all unpleasantness between us."

Tomaso, of course, willingly agreed to this suggestion, and the transformation immediately took place. How it was effected it was impossible to say, so dense was the darkness around them. Tomaso's mind was now again that of an old man, while Pepina's form was once more that of an old woman, her body bent, and her step slow and difficult. At last they contrived to reach Bellaggio in safety, and they put up for the night at a little inn at the entrance to the town.

Next morning Tomaso rose early, and proceeded to the water-side to engage a boat to carry him and his wife over to Menaggio. Having secured one, he told the boatman to remain in readiness, as he would return in a few minutes. He then left the water-side, and was on his way back to the inn to fetch Pepina and settle with the landlord, when he heard some one calling out to him, "Stop, I say, you old baboon. You shan't escape me so easily as that."

On hearing the voice, Tomaso turned round and beheld the soldier of the previous evening, with a couple of swords under his arm, and a dozen of his comrades at his heels, advancing towards him.

"So I have found you, my friend," said the soldier. "You see I am a man of my word. And now, in the presence of my honourable comrades, I intend to wipe off the stain you put on my honour yesterday evening."

"Leave me alone," said Tomaso. "I want to have nothing to say to you."

"That I can easily imagine," said the soldier; "and I am perfectly willing to admit that it is not an unreasonable wish on your part. But, my friend, I take a totally different view of the case, and satisfaction for the insult you offered me yesterday I will have. I have brought with me a couple of good swords, so that you can have no excuse. Choose which you like, and you shall have fair play. By-the-by, where is your pretty wife? Yes, you may laugh, comrades," he continued; "but this old fellow has one of the handsomest girls for a wife I ever saw in my life. That I will say, although she was not particularly civil to me last night. No matter; I shall easily find the means to get into her good graces; and my first step shall be to rid her of her ugly old husband. I am sure she will be grateful to me for that, so this will be something gained. I only wish she were here now to see the pains I am taking to make her a widow."

This wish was immediately accomplished, for Pepina, who, witnessing the scene from the window of the inn, had guessed the soldier's intentions, now rushed through the crowd, and after buffeting the fellow's face severely, she seized him by the hair, which she pulled out by handfuls at a time — the soldier in vain attempting to rid himself of her.

"Comrades," he called out, "for heaven's sake take away this hag; I shall not have a hair left on my head if you don't."

But his companions, instead of assisting him, roared with laughter, and asked him jeeringly if this was the young beauty he had been raving so much about.

How long Pepina would have kept up the struggle it is impossible to say, had it not been put a stop to by the captain of the soldiers, who came forward to inquire the cause of the tumult.

"What is all this about?" he asked, as soon as some of the men, in obedience to his orders, had released their comrade from Pepina's clutches.

"He wanted to murder my husband, who is an infirm old man, and I am protecting him."

“And most efficiently, it appears,” said the captain. “And now what is your version of the story?” he continued, addressing the soldier.

“In the first place, captain,” said the soldier, “this hag is not the fellow’s wife” — here he was interrupted by Pepina, who burst from the men holding her, and rushing on the soldier, assailed him even more vigorously than before, exclaiming at the same time, “How dare you say I am not his wife, when I have been married to him for fifty years? I will soon prove to you that I am.”

Pepina was again drawn away from the soldier, and the captain inquired of Tomaso whether she was really his wife.

“She is, your excellency.”

“Have you any complaint to make against the soldier?”

“I have, your excellency; and a great one too. He met us yesterday evening, and grossly insulted my wife; indeed, we had great difficulty in getting away from him.”

“Well, what have you to say in your defence?” said the captain, turning to the soldier.

“I never insulted the old woman, captain, nor did I ever see her before. It is true I saw this fellow yesterday, but he was with a very beautiful young woman whom he called his wife.”

The captain then inquired of Pepina whether she was with her husband the previous evening, and whether any other person had been with them. He received for answer that there was no one else present, and that she had not quitted her husband’s society even for a minute during the whole of the day.

“Now,” said the captain to the soldier, “one thing is clear to me; and that is, that you must have been drunk again yesterday evening; for no one in his sober senses could have mistaken this old woman for a handsome young girl. I have warned you many times that your drinking habits would at last bring you into disgrace, and you have paid no attention to these warnings. But I will now give you a lesson you will not easily forget. For one month you shall remain in irons; and the next time I hear any complaint against you, the sentence shall be confinement in irons for one year. Take him into custody,” said the captain to his attendants, “and see that my orders are carried out.”

The soldier was immediately removed, and the crowd shortly afterwards dispersed.

Tomaso, accompanied by his wife, and carrying his bundle, then went to the boat which he had engaged, and they were rowed across the lake to Menaggio. In the evening they arrived at their new dwelling, which they found very commodious, and in excellent condition. They resided in it during the remainder of their lives, without anything worthy of notice occurring to mar their happiness.

THE END

THE ROBBER CHIEF

In a beautiful gorge to the eastward of the Resegone mountains, resided Carlo Pedrazzi and his wife. Pedrazzi was a man of considerable substance. He had an excellent farm of his own, which was free from impositions of a feudal service, and he also owned a somewhat extensive village near it, in which the labourers employed on his estate principally resided. The farm was well stocked with cattle, and yielded annually an enormous out-turn of Indian corn — sufficient in fact, not only for his own family, but for the whole village. Pedrazzi's principal wealth, however, arose from a large plantation of mulberry-trees, which, being very favourably situated, realized in the quantity of silk produced from them every year, a very handsome income for their proprietor. The position of the village with the farm and its outhouses was very picturesque. It was situated on the slope of the mountains, some hundred feet above the valley, thus securing it from the malaria which so frequently infests the narrow valleys of the southern Alps. To the northward of the village, and separated from it by some hundred yards, was a neat church, in which mass was occasionally performed by a priest, who also officiated at a village several miles farther south. He was a very infirm old man, and although the services of both churches had, when he was in good health and in the vigour of life, been conducted with great regularity, he was now incapacitated, except on particular occasions, and when the weather was genial, from visiting his church in the mountains. He very naturally considered that it was quite as easy for his congregation to attend at the other church in the valley, as for him, at his time of life, to make a very fatiguing journey to that in the mountains.

Behind the church was situated an inclosed burial ground, which not only served for the village, but also for the different farms and hamlets in the mountains around. In the village churchyard the path to the northward was closed by the mountains. Nothing could be grander or more magnificent than the scenery here. The mountains which terminated the northern portion of the valley were exceedingly rugged and steep, and formed a singular contrast to the luxuriant appearance of the valley and hills to the south. They rose perpendicularly to the height of many hundred feet, and then sloped gradually upwards to the elevation of some thousand; but they were so difficult of access, that none of the inhabitants of the village had ever climbed to their summit. In fact, the district beyond them was a sort of *terra incognita* to all, and the most absurd traditions were current concerning the evil spirits and robbers who inhabited it.

At the time our narrative opens, the domestic establishment of Carlo Pedrazzi consisted of his wife, a child of four or five years old, and an ample staff of servants. Pedrazzi was a man in the prime of life — shrewd, intelligent, bold, and good-tempered. His wife was a very amiable woman, a few years younger than her husband. The child was a boy of extraordinary beauty, and the idol of the farmer and his wife, although he was only an adopted child — they having no family of their own. He was about two years old when he first came to them; and the way he had fallen into their hands was so singular that the worthy couple had reasoned themselves into the conviction that he had been specially sent by God to console them for being childless.

Pedrazzi had one day gone to attend the silk market at Bergamo, intending to return in the course of a few days. The leave-taking had been somewhat sorrowful, especially to the wife, who in vain endeavoured to conceal her tears.

“Come, come, wife,” said Pedrazzi to her, as he mounted his horse; “you must not be downhearted like that. I shall soon be back again, and I will bring with me a handsome present for you from the fair at Bergamo.”

She attempted to conceal her tears by a smile, but did not quite succeed. She stood at the doorway, wiping her eyes and watching her husband moving down the mountain till he was lost to sight. Pedrazzi, who was mounted on an excellent horse, had taken with him one servant, who led a mule, over whose back were thrown two enormous baskets filled with the cocoons of the silkworms. The master and man plodded steadily on the road — little conversation passing between them. Late in the evening they arrived at Bergamo. Next morning Pedrazzi having disposed of the whole of his cocoons to great advantage, was deliberating in his mind whether he should not return home immediately, when he met a friend with whom he often transacted business.

“Why, caro [dear] Pedrazzi,” said his friend, “what are you doing here? I did not think you would be at the fair. Have you brought any silk with you?”

“I have; and what is more, I have sold it all.”

“It was not a very friendly act,” said the other, “to do so before you let me know of your arrival. I always give as high a price for silk as any person in the trade, as you very well know. But have you really sold it all?”

“Well,” said Pedrazzi, “although I have sold all I brought with me, I have a considerable quantity still left at home.”

“Cannot we agree about it, then?” inquired his friend. “What price do you want? I know your silk is always of excellent quality; and I should really like to trade with you. I have lately established, with my brother-in-law, some looms for velvet weaving in Brescia, and if you have no objection to extend your journey to that city, I think there would be little difficulty in our coming to terms — not only for all the silk you have now in your possession but also for next year’s crop.”

Pedrazzi hesitated for some moments. He knew the speaker to be a respectable man and of great substance, and he was also well aware that the brother-in-law to whom he referred was a manufacturer of high standing. He was, however, very desirous to return home that day if possible, as he felt somewhat unhappy at the low spirits in which he had left his wife, for he was tenderly attached to her. After a little consideration, he came to the conclusion that it would perhaps be better for him to accept the invitation. He would, of course, be obliged to be two days longer away from home; but, on the other hand, if he came to any arrangement about the sale of the silk, he would not have to leave his farm so frequently, as he had more than one servant whom he could trust to take the cocoons from the farm to Brescia. He told his friend that he was ready to accompany him if he would start at once, and the other willingly acceded to this proposal. Pedrazzi sent back the servant, who accompanied him with the mule, with instructions to inform his wife that he would not return for two days, as some business of importance required his presence in Brescia.

Pedrazzi and his friend arrived the same evening in Brescia, and next day they visited the silk manufactory, which was on a scale of considerable magnitude. Pedrazzi accepted the offer made him for the remainder of that year's silk crop, and also for the whole of the next year's, whatever its quality might be. The agreement was afterwards ratified at the office of a notary, and the friends spent the remainder of the day together in a very pleasant manner.

Early next morning Pedrazzi left Brescia to return home. On arriving near the line which separates the Venetian from the Milanese territory, he assured himself that his dagger was in its sheath, and that the sword which he invariably wore on his journeys was sufficiently loose in its scabbard to allow him to draw it at a moment's notice, as the locality he was now in had a very bad reputation. But nothing occurred to cause the worthy farmer any anxiety or alarm. He had journeyed on till it was near mid-day, when suddenly he thought he heard the cry of a child issuing from a clump of shrubs and trees by the wayside. At first he thought he must have been mistaken, but on listening attentively, the sound again reached him, and this time he perfectly distinguished that it was the cry of a child. Pedrazzi immediately pulled up his horse, and having dismounted, fastened it to a tree. Then pushing through the shrubs, he had hardly penetrated twenty paces into the copse when he saw seated on the ground — his face covered with tears, and his hair in disorder — a fine little boy of about two years of age.

The child, on seeing Pedrazzi, uttered a loud cry of alarm; but probably reassured by the good-natured expression on the countenance of the farmer, it soon ceased its cry, and stretched forth its little arms, in an imploring manner, for Pedrazzi to take it up. On this the farmer lifted the child from the ground, and carried him from the copse into the road. Seating himself on a bank, the farmer wiped the tears from the child's eyes, and then examined him attentively. Although his face was covered with dust, which had mingled with his tears, Pedrazzi had no difficulty in perceiving that the child was very beautiful; and from the quality of its clothes, he could easily see that it belonged to parents considerably above the common class. The child seemed to take instinctively to its protector, and placed its arm round his neck. Pedrazzi attempted to obtain from it some information respecting its parents, but the few words it uttered were totally unintelligible to him. Pedrazzi now brought from a bag, which he carried at his saddle-bow, some bread; and from the ravenous way in which the child swallowed it, there was no difficulty in perceiving that it had been for a very long time without food. Pedrazzi now seriously began to consider what steps he had better take in order to restore the child to his parents, but he had great difficulty in coming to a conclusion. The locality, for miles round, was not only barren and deserted, but there was not a house within sight. How the child had come there, or why it should have been left alone in such a locality, was a problem quite beyond his means of solving. At last he fairly gave up the matter, and determined to take the child with him till he should meet with some one who could advise him what to do in the matter. Having remounted his horse he placed the child before him, and continued his way at a foot-pace towards the mountains, but for some miles not a soul did he see, and those he at last met with were totally unable to give him any information. At length he arrived at the village at the entrance to the valley, and made his way at once to the house of the aged priest of whom we have already spoken, and, after narrating to him the manner in which he had found the child, he requested his advice as to what he should do with it.

“Caro Pedrazzi,” said the priest, “I think you could not do better than take the child to your own home, and keep him till you hear more about him. I will communicate with my brother priests in the surrounding parishes on the subject, and request them, if they hear any tidings of the child's parents, to inform me, when I will immediately let you know about it.”

Pedrazzi at once resolved to follow the advice of the priest, and proceeded on his road homewards. To say the truth, an idea came into his head, that he should not be sorry if the child's parents were never found. Though childless himself, he was exceedingly fond of children, and already he had begun to feel a deep affection for the little helpless creature that now nestled close to his breast. The autumn being somewhat advanced, the evening was chill, so Pedrazzi unbuckled his cloak and threw it over the child, so as to protect him from the night air. The little fellow soon fell asleep, and Pedrazzi continued on his road, musing on the surprise of his wife at seeing the child — what they would do with it — who were its parents — and other kindred subjects, till he arrived at his own home.

The noise of the horse's hoofs brought Pedrazzi's wife to the door.

"How late you are, my dear," she said. "I began to be frightened about you."

"I am rather late, wife, but I have been a long time on the road, having been obliged to walk the horse the whole way."

"Why was that?" said his wife. "Is he lame?"

"No; he was never sounder on his feet than he is now. But I was afraid of waking this little keepsake I have brought home to you."

So saying, he unloosened the cloak he had wrapped round the child, while Signora Pedrazzi, with feminine curiosity, held up the lighted torch she carried in her hand to see what present her husband had brought her.

"There, wife," he said, "this is a God-send for us. On my road home I heard that poor child crying in some brushwood by the roadside, without a soul near, nor could I find anyone to give me the least information concerning him, although I lost a deal of time in seeking for it. I took him to the Padre Canonico, and asked him what I should do. He told me to keep him till I should hear further from him on the subject. He said he would make inquiries of the different priests of his acquaintance respecting the child, and any tidings he might receive he would forward to me. In the meantime he advised me to take as much care of him as if he were my own son."

Signora Pedrazzi, having placed the torch in the hands of a servant who had arrived to take the horse, examined the features of the child attentively by its light, her husband having placed him in her arms. The little fellow, utterly fatigued by its journey, was not wakened by its change of position, but slept on soundly. The only movement it made was to bury its face in the good woman's breast, who seemed to take this behaviour as a proffer of its love, which she immediately accepted, and returned with interest.

No tidings were ever heard of the child, although the priests of the different parishes round made many inquiries concerning it. Pedrazzi and his wife accordingly kept it, and soon began to look upon it as their own. It soon became a very loveable little creature, and the principal happiness of Signora Pedrazzi's life was to dress it and attend to it herself. In fact, it became almost an idol to her; nor was her husband himself less attached to it than his wife.

Some two years after their adoption of little Diodato (for so Pedrazzi and his wife had named the child), a stranger, who called himself the Count Orembello, attended by two servants both well armed, reached the Hospice, and requested an interview with the Innominato. A messenger was immediately despatched to the castle, who shortly afterwards returned and informed the Count that his master would readily receive him. The Count accompanied the messenger to the castle, his two servants remaining, as was the custom, at the Hospice. To this arrangement the Count at first somewhat demurred, but on being told that this was an inviolable rule, he withdrew his objections and went on alone. When he was ushered by Pietro into the study of the Innominato, he found the astrologer seated in a chair, his brow leaning on his hand, to all appearance absorbed in deep meditation. When Pietro had announced the visitor, the astrologer, contrary to his usual courtesy, did not rise to meet him, but first cast upon him a scrutinizing glance, then raising his head from his hand, he pointed to a chair opposite his own, and requested his visitor to be seated. The Innominato's stern coldness of manner was not altogether unaccountable, for a more ruffianly-looking individual than his visitor could hardly have been imagined. He was a tall man, powerfully built, probably about forty years of age. His complexion was swarthy, his eyes dark and piercing, and his hair uncombed. His expression was a mixture of ferocity and sensuality. Although it was still early in the morning, he was already evidently more than half intoxicated. His dress was a singular mixture. Over the coarse leathern costume of the hunter was thrown a rich velvet cloak, deeply trimmed with sables, and his sword and dagger were of the finest Milanese manufacture, but rusted and uncared for, — and he wore a jewelled ring of great value on his thumb. His manners were those of a ruffian — artificially concealed for the moment by what he evidently intended for courtesy, but which far more closely resembled abject servility.

When the stranger had seated himself, the Innominato spoke for the first time. "You are," he said to him, "the Count Orembello, I understand. Do you reside near Vicenza?"

"Yes, your Excellency, I do," replied the count.

"Permit me then to ask the object of your visit."

“I am come to beg your Excellency’s assistance in recovering a child, my only son, whom I lost about two years since. He was our only one,” he continued — attempting to speak with some pathos, “and the darling both of myself and my wife.”

“And why should you imagine that I am able to assist you in recovering him?” inquired the Innominato.

“From the great reputation your Excellency enjoys for wisdom.”

“Why then did you not apply to me sooner?” inquired the Innominato.

“Because it is not more than a month since I first heard of your Excellency’s fame. The spot we live in is so distant from any town of importance —” Here he stopped suddenly, an expression of annoyance becoming plainly perceptible on his countenance.

Although the Innominato perceived his embarrassment, and was perfectly well aware of the cause — the count, only a moment before, having stated that he lived near Vicenza — he took no notice of the other’s confusion, but merely asked him to describe the manner in which he had lost his child.

“My wife,” began the stranger, “was travelling in a litter, accompanied by a nurse and the child, when some robbers attacked them and plundered them of everything valuable. After some time they allowed my wife and the nurse to proceed on the road, but in spite of all the entreaties of the women they insisted on taking the child with them. From that day to this I can safely say we have never passed a happy hour.”

“That is very sad,” said the Innominato, with a slight tone of irony. “Is the child’s mother now alive? I have not heard of her lately.”

“I was not aware your Excellency knew her,” said the stranger, evidently getting more confused.

“I do not; but I am well acquainted with those who do,” said the Innominato, now looking sternly in the face of the visitor. “I will tell you,” he continued, “what I know of her and her family. She is now a widow. Her husband was murdered about two years since by an infamous brigand and outlaw named Marco Cassoni, who has a stronghold in the mountains to the north of Bergamo, but fortunately for him within the Milanese territory, so that, in consequence of the misunderstanding existing between the Doge and the Milanese government, he can commit his depredations in the Venetian territories with comparative impunity. He murdered the count, partly for plunder, and partly for revenge — the count being the means of bringing to justice two of the robber’s gang who fell into his hands. It was not the countess who was attacked when the child was stolen, but her husband. The chief of the robbers murdered him with his own hands, and then decamped taking the child with him — possibly as a hostage to secure himself from punishment.

He was hotly pursued by the soldiery, when he and his assistants parted company, and the one bearing the child succeeded in passing beyond Brescia, but he found himself so followed that he was forced to conceal the child in some brushwood by the roadside, and afterwards managed to escape. Now, you are the robber, Marco Cassoni. You perfectly well know that the Venetian government have applied to Azzone, duke of Milan, for his assistance in bringing you to punishment, and you wish to obtain possession of the child as a security against the law being put into execution. You see I know everything about you.”

“And supposing all that to be true,” said the brigand, now putting on an impudent air, “why should I not defend myself if I can? You know the Venetian government will show me no mercy if they once succeed in arresting me. Now let us clearly understand each other, for I see it is useless any longer to try to deceive you. I am the man you name; and I have a stronghold in the mountains, and some gallant fellows to defend it. It will take nothing less than an army to drive us from it. We know each other now, so let us see whether we cannot make a bargain. Tell me how I can get that child into my possession, and I will most liberally reward you for your pains.”

The Innominato looked at him sternly for some moments. “And you dare to ask me,” he said at length, “to form so infamous a compact with you?”

“There are few things I dare not do,” said the robber, defiantly. “But now, pray, come to the point. Do you accept my offer? Remember this, before you decline it, that no man ever yet offended me on whom I did not, sooner or later, revenge myself; and you will form no exception to the others. Now let me have your answer.”

“I not only refuse to help you,” said the Innominato, now thoroughly angry, “but I will do all in my power to assist in giving you up to justice.”

“Then hear my last words,” said the robber. “Within one month from this time, place that child in my hands — for I know you can do it. If you do not — as sure as you are now alive — you will certainly be a corpse before a week has elapsed from the expiration of that time.”

“And now hear my last words,” said the Innominato, getting fairly enraged. “Deliver yourself up to the Venetian authorities, and tell them that the child is now in the custody of Carlo Pedrazzi and his wife, in the valley of the mountains not very far distant from your own castle, where he may be found at present in good health and keeping.”

The robber burst into loud and insolent laughter. “How true,” he said, “is the old proverb, that ‘A fool’s bolt is soon shot.’ In the first place, I shall not deliver myself up as a prisoner; and in the next, as you have told me where the child is, be assured that before the night is over he will be in my possession.”

“You are in error,” said the Innominato, coolly; “you think you will enter the valley in the night and seize the child. You are totally wrong. Already you are more than suspected of wishing to seize the child, and the whole neighbourhood at the mouth of the valley are prepared, with a body of soldiers, to receive you.”

The robber eyed the astrologer attentively for some moments. At last a faint smile was visible on his countenance and immediately vanished, but he said nothing. The Innominato also regarded his opponent with the same searching glance, as if he were reading his thoughts. Finding the robber did not speak, the astrologer said —

“It will be useless your remaining longer here; we now perfectly understand each other. If, however, you have imperfectly caught my meaning, let me repeat it clearly. You shall either give yourself up to justice or restore the child to its friends.”

“I will do neither,” said the robber; “and that I swear.”

“And I swear as resolutely that you shall,” said the Innominato. “I will not release you from my order, even at your death.”

The robber once more burst into loud laughter, and said, “He must be a wise man indeed who can make the dead obey him.”

“My science will enable me to do that,” said the Innominato; “and I will prove the truth of my statement in your case.”

The robber now left the Innominato’s presence, and proceeded to the Hospice, where he was joined by his two servants, who had been waiting for him.

We must now return to Pedrazzi and his family. A few weeks after the robber’s visit to the Innominato, a singular change came over the character of little Diodato. The child had hitherto been of a lively though affectionate disposition, now he was quiet and melancholy — his love for his foster parents continuing unabated. For some time, this change in the manner and spirits of the boy caused Pedrazzi and his wife great uneasiness, as they feared that he was sickening for some childish disorder. This fear, however, vanished, as, closely watching him, they perceived his strength was in no way abated. On the contrary, he seemed to take more pleasure than ever in exercise, and embraced every opportunity of leaving the house. A very singular feature soon became noticeable in his wanderings. He invariably took the road to the cemetery, and there strolled among the graves till he was brought home either by the farmer or his wife, or some one despatched on that errand. When questioned as to his reason for preferring to visit the graveyard instead of any other place, he was unable to give any satisfactory reason. On their inquiring why he did not go where he could find flowers to pick — in which occupation he took great delight — he replied, that he “did not know; somebody seemed to want he to go to the graveyard.”

The worthy couple were greatly astonished at the child's behaviour. No one with whom he had been acquainted was buried there; in fact, there had not been a single interment in it since he had come to reside with them. They attempted to question the child further on his mysterious behaviour, but they only caused him to burst into tears, which made the farmer's wife clasp him to her bosom to console him, and so the conversation usually terminated.

Although Pedrazzi and his wife said no more to the child on the subject, they still noticed his unaccountable propensity to visit the graveyard, and they determined the following Sunday, when they went to mass in the village to the south, to consult the priest about it. As the following Sunday, however, was an exceedingly rainy day, they deferred their visit for another week. In the meantime this strange behaviour of the child continued; his melancholy, if anything, increasing, and the attractions which the graveyard had for him augmenting in like proportion. As there was nothing in the locality itself or its surroundings to tempt the child to visit it, this was the more surprising. It was situated behind the church, on a slope to the northward, facing the abrupt precipices of the mountains which terminated the valley, and of which we have already spoken. The graveyard itself was bleak and dreary, and the few crosses that were erected in it seemed to be fast mouldering away. Indeed, had it not been for a very dilapidated wooden fence, which marked the portion of the ground which had been consecrated, there was little to distinguish it from the space around.

Singular rumours now began to be rife in the village. An old woman, the owner of a few goats, stated that when driving them home one evening, she happened to pass near the cemetery, and saw outside the inclosure of the graveyard the figure of a strange-looking man clasping his hands, and holding them up to heaven as if in prayer. Startled at the sight, she turned her head aside for an instant, but recovering herself, she found he had gone, nor could she see the slightest trace of him anywhere.

As the woman was old, her eyesight imperfect, and her brain none of the clearest, little attention was paid to her incoherent statements. The next day, however, when a stalwart labourer — a man of great courage — was returning home at night-fall, he saw outside the rude inclosure, the figure of a man, who strongly resembled the one spoken of by the old woman. Seeing that he was evidently a stranger, the man advanced to speak to him, when to his surprise, the figure suddenly disappeared. On being questioned as to the appearance of the stranger, the labourer replied, that as well as he could make out, he seemed to be a tall powerfully-built man, in a sort of huntsman's dress, but as he saw him only for a moment, in the obscurity of night-fall, he was unable to give more details about him.

As the peasant was a man on whom reliance could be placed, this fresh intelligence caused great surprise in the village, as well as much anxiety in the minds of Pedrazzi and his wife. In some manner — but they were wholly unable to account for the supposition — it seemed to them, that the visits of the mysterious stranger, appearing as he did near the graveyard, were in some way connected with the history of little Diodato, but in what way they were of course unable to determine. They fully resolved, however, that the next Sunday — let the weather be what it might, — they would mass at the village below, and after service, consult the old priest on the matter.

But other important events took place before the Sunday came round. Young Diodato not appearing to be in very good health, his foster mother had kept him in the house during the whole of the morning: but was put into a great state of excitement by the boy suddenly disappearing in the evening. A suspicion immediately darted through her mind that he had gone to the graveyard. Fearing that the damp night air might be injurious to him, she hurriedly left the house, and proceeded to the church. When she had arrived at the graveyard, her suspicion was verified. Near the centre, looking earnestly at one particular spot outside the inclosure, she saw young Diodato standing as motionless as a statue. So earnestly was his mind bent on some particular object, that even when his foster mother took his hand in hers, he did not seem to notice her presence, but continued to gaze earnestly.

“What are you looking at, my child?” she said to him.

Diodato did not answer, but looked in her face for a moment without showing any surprise at her being near him; and then again turning his head from her, he pointed with his finger towards the spot where he had been gazing before she had spoken to him.

Signora Pedrazzi looked earnestly through the gloom of the night which was now setting in fast around them, but at first she could see nothing. The boy, however, still continuing to point silently to the spot, she let go his hand, and advanced a few steps, when she thought she perceived the indistinct figure of a man outside the low fence. She advanced a step or two nearer, and saw it still more clearly. The figure was that of a tall powerful man, in a huntsman’s dress, bending slightly forwards, with the palms of its hands pressed together, as if earnestly imploring some favour of the child. Before the good woman had perfectly realized the object which stood before her, young Diodato rushed to her side, and with one hand took hold of her dress, while with the other he waved angrily at the figure, as if to order it away. The huntsman appeared to understand it, for, throwing up his arms despairingly, he suddenly disappeared.

Another circumstance occurred which, although it did not appear to be connected with the mysterious visitor, caused considerable alarm in the minds of Pedrazzi and his wife. In consequence of the advice given her by her husband, combined with her own anxiety for the welfare of the child, Signora Pedrazzi resolved to keep the child carefully under her own eye till after they had communicated the whole of the mysterious circumstances to the priest after mass next Sunday. But it was in vain she came to this resolution. Two days afterwards, the morning being very fine, she had allowed the child to leave the house for the purpose of plucking flowers on the greensward before it. For some time she watched him thus engaged, and as he did not appear to have the slightest wish to quit it, she left the room for a moment, to give some order in another part of the house. On returning to the window, the boy to her great alarm was nowhere to be seen. She immediately hurried out; but although the lapse of time from her leaving the window till her return could not have exceeded a few minutes, she could discover no traces of him whatever. For some moments the poor woman was completely bewildered. Recovering herself at last, she rushed back to the house to ask Pedrazzi to assist her in the search. But he was not there; and one of the servants told her that his master had left the house nearly half an hour before, but whither he had gone he was unable to say. At this the poor woman was so dismayed that she threw herself on a seat and sat motionless for some moments, endeavouring to collect her ideas, and to form some definite plan of action. At last she thought of the cemetery, and hurried off to it as rapidly as possible. To her dismay, the child was not there! She searched the locality around, and every spot she imagined he could have visited, but no trace of him was to be seen!

She now went hurriedly back to the house, thinking that her husband might have returned; but he had not yet arrived. Her alarm now completely got the better of her, and she burst into a flood of tears, which she continued to shed intermittently till her husband came home. Although he retained possession of his senses better than his wife, his alarm at the disappearance of the child was not less than hers. He could not keep a vague idea from arising in his mind that the huntsman was a demon or evil spirit that had first bewitched the child, and then taken him away. But, although naturally somewhat suspicious, Pedrazzi was a bold and energetic man. He immediately summoned the servants and labourers at the time employed around his house, to come and assist him, and then marking out a separate locality for each, he ordered that strict search should be made for the child. Finding his wife incapable of any exertion, he allowed her to remain within doors, and he then quitted the house himself to join in the search. He directed his steps towards the cemetery, but with no better fortune than had attended his wife. He searched also among the rocks near it, but Diodato was nowhere to be seen.

An idea now struck him that the child might have fallen into a deep ravine facing the perpendicular mountains which bounded the valley, and which shelved rapidly down for more than two hundred feet, and then terminated in a narrow chasm, at whose foot rushed a turbulent mountain torrent. Pedrazzi almost became faint with the thought, but by an effort he recovered himself and carefully descended the rocks, holding on to the different stones and pine-trees which grew among them.

He had descended more than a hundred and fifty feet without finding the slightest trace of the child, and he now began to think that his alarm had been a groundless one; but he would not leave the spot till he was completely assured. He descended still lower, till at last he conjectured that it would be simply losing time to search further. He was just on the point of again ascending the mountain, when on turning round, he saw a figure standing on a jutting rock in the chasm beneath him, and not fifty feet above the torrent. Approaching nearer, he saw that it was little Diodato. The child was totally unaware that Pedrazzi was so close behind him, his attention being fixed on some object in the chasm. Nor was it simply curiosity that seemed to actuate the child, for several times he turned his head as though he were gesticulating in an angry manner to some one below him. Pedrazzi was on the point of calling out to the child, when it struck him that the boy might thus be startled so as to cause him to fall, — the position he was in was so dangerous. He now cautiously advanced towards Diodato, and when he had arrived within a few paces he took off his shoes, that without being heard he might be able to reach the child, whose attention still appeared to be riveted on the same object. Pedrazzi advanced towards him breathlessly, and at last succeeded in catching the boy in his arms. The child looked round at first somewhat astonished, but immediately afterwards he pointed to the chasm beneath them. Pedrazzi gazed anxiously into the abyss, but could perceive nothing, and he now turned his steps homewards. The child — over whom a certain sort of enchantment seemed to have been thrown, and which was now dispelled — leant his head on Pedrazzi's shoulder and wept bitterly.

Beyond some consolatory sentences to calm the boy, Pedrazzi said nothing during their way homewards; but when he had arrived at the house, and the Signora's first exuberant manifestations of joy at the child's return were over, they questioned him as to his reason for descending into the chasm, when he had been told never to go near it. Diodato, notwithstanding that he was generally a very intelligent child, was incapable of explaining his reason for visiting either the chasm or the cemetery. He spoke fluently enough upon any other subject, but the moment his foster parents spoke to him on these, he was unable to answer a word satisfactorily. In fact, the poor child seemed spell-bound, and Pedrazzi and his wife were obliged to give up the matter in despair, resolving not to speak of it again till they had had an interview with the priest.

Sunday at last arrived, and after a little consultation, it was resolved that Pedrazzi along should attend mass, and that his wife should remain at home, keeping the boy in her custody. Pedrazzi duly arrived at the church in time for high mass. He found, however, that the priest with whom he was acquainted did not officiate, the mass being performed by a monk, a stranger to Pedrazzi. For some minutes the farmer deliberated whether he should consult the stranger (who no other than our old acquaintance Fra Gerolamo [see second tale, page 35]), but at looking at him attentively his indecision vanished, so favourably was he impressed with the amiable and kind expression of his countenance. Mass being over, he requested an interview in the sacristy, which was immediately granted by the priest.

Fra Gerolamo listened with great kindness and attention to Pedrazzi's narrative. When he had finished, the monk remained silent for some moments as if deeply considering the subject. "My son," he said to him at last, "your tale is indeed a strange one, nor can I in any manner unravel its meaning. To-morrow, however, after mass, I will pay you a visit, and I will then question the child on the subject. Be assured of this, however, if an evil spirit is haunting the child, or your house, or the neighbourhood, it is fully in the power of our holy religion to exorcise it. I regret I have now no more time, for I must enter the confessional, and I have many confessions to hear. To-morrow you will see me without fail."

Pedrazzi now returned home and informed his wife of the conversation he had had with the monk. The next day, though at a later hour than he had named — in fact, it was nearly evening — Fra Gerolamo arrived.

"I am much behind my time," he said, "but it has arisen from no fault of mine. I have been occupied all the morning in endeavouring to find some clue to the mystery which appears to hang over you child, but I have been disappointed — I can find none. This, however, I have ascertained, that your reputation is so honourable that the strictest reliance may be placed on your word. Now tell me, before I speak to the child, what circumstances you have noticed which should induce you to imagine that the neighbourhood is inhabited by an evil spirit."

Pedrazzi and his wife narrated as clearly and succinctly as they could all that had taken place, and then Diodato was brought in. The moment the child saw the monk he rushed towards him as if attracted to him by some supernatural power, and then placing his arm round the monk's neck kissed him affectionately. Fra Gerolamo having made the sign of the cross began to question the child. But there was a marked difference between his answers to the monk and those he had given to his foster parents.

He told the monk that a wicked man was always wanting to enter the cemetery, and that he (Diodato) would not allow him, but always drove him away. On the monk's inquiring whether the phantom used any angry threats or gestures, Diodato replied that he did not, that, although he said nothing, he always appeared to beg that he might enter the inclosure. The monk inquired why Diodato imagined the stranger was a wicked man. This question the child could not answer satisfactorily, merely reiterating his convictions that he was sure he was. Pedrazzi then asked him why he had visited the chasm when he had been told not to go near it. To this the child could give no further answer than that he had driven the wicked man into it.

The inquiries of the monk, and the conversations which ensued, lasted so long that it was nightfall before they terminated. The monk, who had been greatly fatigued by his journey, was pressed by the farmer and his wife to take some refreshment. This, however, he refused to do, stating that the work he was about to undertake should be performed fasting. He then asked Pedrazzi's wife whether she could allow him to have a room to himself, that he might pray undisturbed. The good woman immediately conducted him into a bedroom, and having lighted a lamp, which hung before a small wooden crucifix on the wall beside the bedstead, she quitted the room, closing the door after her.

After about an hour's interval, during which time he had been engaged in prayer, Fra Gerolamo rejoined Pedrazzi and his wife, bearing in his hand the little crucifix he had taken from the wall. He told them that he considered he had now sufficient strength and courage for the task he was about to undertake, and he requested Pedrazzi to conduct him to the cemetery. It was dark night when the pair left the house, although the beams of the rising moon were faintly perceptible behind the summits of the eastern mountains. Pedrazzi, carrying a torch in his hand, led the way, and he was followed by the monk bearing the small crucifix. When they had arrived at the chapel, Pedrazzi, at the monk's request, opened the door and held up his torch, lighting the interior sufficiently to allow his companion to advance without difficulty to the altar. Before entering the building, Fra Gerolamo warmly thanked his conductor, and requested that he would now return home, as he wished to pursue his labours by himself. With some reluctance Pedrazzi obeyed, and the monk advanced towards the altar, and kneeling before it, commenced a long and anxious prayer. The light of the moon had now become stronger, and her beams penetrating through the chapel window, showed faintly the monk on his knees at the altar. Gradually the light increased, and the moon at last rose in the heavens, pouring a broad flood of pure light upon the monk, who seemed to consider it as a sign from heaven that his prayer had been accepted.

Fra Gerolamo now rose from his knees, and, leaving the chapel, made his way into the consecrated ground behind it. Having advanced to the centre he looked anxiously around him. The moon, now in her full glory, had lighted up the whole scene. Still, for some time, nothing occurred to claim special attention. At length a slight mist seemed to arise from the chasm, but so faint as hardly to be distinguishable. He gazed at it, however, for a moment without interest, and was just on the point of turning his eyes from it, when the thought occurred to him that its density was becoming greater, and he continued to gaze on it. Nor was he mistaken, for not only did it become more distinct, but it seemed also to approach him. Nearer and nearer it came, and, as it advanced, he imagined it began to assume something of the human form. At last, as it neared the inclosure of the cemetery, it assumed the form of a man, dressed in the costume of a hunter — yet without losing its vaporous appearance. The phantom approached as near as it could to Fra Gerolamo, without entering the cemetery inclosure. There it stopped, evidently aware of the presence of the monk, who stood motionless in the centre, holding aloft in his hand the little crucifix. The monk now quitted the spot on which he had been standing, and slowly advanced towards the phantom, who receded, in the direction of the chasm, still holding up its hands in an imploring manner. Fra Gerolamo continued to follow the phantom which went on slowly receding till they had reached the rapid declivity down which Pedrazzi had descended a few days before to find the little Diodato.

The phantom now descended towards the abyss, followed by the monk, who was fortunately enabled, by the strong light of the moon falling on the bank, to see his way with tolerable clearness. Downward the phantom sank, still preserving its imploring attitude, Fra Gerolamo following it at the distance of only a few paces. Downward they went, and as the path became more difficult, rugged, and dangerous, Fra Gerolamo seemed to be supported by some unseen power, so little difficulty did he appear to feel in overcoming the obstacles of the way. At last the phantom arrived at the small ledge of rocks on which Diodato stood when Pedrazzi discovered him. Here the phantom halted, and relinquishing its imploring attitude, pointed with one hand to the deep abyss below them, in which from the dense obscurity nothing was distinguishable to the eye, though the roaring of the torrent at its base was plainly heard.

The monk, who stood a few paces from the phantom, now raised the crucifix in his hand and conjured him to say whose spirit he was, and why he haunted that locality.

In a low voice, which was scarcely audible, amid the sound of the roaring torrent, the phantom replied, "I am the spirit of the wretch who in life was the robber Marco Cassoni and the murderer of Count Orembello of Vicenza. After his death, I and my band, being closely pursued, separated in our flight, and one of our number, bearing the little son of the Count, escaped beyond Brescia, when, fearing detection, he concealed the child in a wood by the roadside, and escaped alone. The child was found by the farmer Pedrazzi, and has since been brought up by him as his own. It was some time before I heard any intelligence of the child, and then, in consequence of an attack which I feared might be made upon me, I determined to secure him so that I might keep him as a hostage, and thus be enabled to make better terms if I was hotly attacked. The mouth of the valley, however, had so many spies of the Venetian government around it, that it would have been dangerous to have entered it by that road, accompanied only by two men. I therefore attempted in the night to cross the mountain above us, for the purpose of seizing the child. But the night was intensely dark, and my foot slipping, I fell over the precipice into the chasm beneath, and was killed by the fall. I now earnestly implore you for mercy's sake to restore the child to his friends, that I may in some slight way atone for the wrong I have committed, and be released from the torture I am in."

"To what torture do you allude?" inquired the monk.

"I am haunted continually by the presence of the child. Even when I am unseen by him, I feel his spirit following me, upbraiding me for my cruelty to his father. An overpowering attraction draws me to the cemetery, which, from its being consecrated ground, I cannot enter. There I am frequently condemned to behold the child reproving me for sins, for which repentance will not now avail me. Again let me implore you to restore the child to his friends, or allow my remains to receive Christian burial in the cemetery, where I may, in consecrated ground, be secured from his presence."

"But how shall I be able to prove that the boy is really the son of the count?" inquired the monk.

"In the chasm below you will find my mortal remains. Around the waist is buckled the sword and dagger which were worn by the count at the time of his death, and on my hand is the jewelled ring which I then took from his. The man who concealed the child will be able to prove that he did so, and the farmer Pedrazzi will provide the rest. You will find no difficulty in obtaining a full confession from the robber. He will be too happy, now I am gone, to save himself by making a full avowal. Once more, I implore you to give my remains Christian burial, and to restore the child to his friends."

The monk promised to comply with the request, and the phantom, after expressing its deep gratitude, vanished. Fra Gerolamo now returned to the house of the farmer, who, with his wife, had been anxiously waiting for him. He related all that had taken place, and they resolved next morning to make a search for the body of the robber. With some difficulty they succeeded in finding it — so deeply had it been buried in the rocks beside the torrent. The clothes it had on were similar to those in which the phantom appeared. The beautifully-chased sword and dagger were still there, though covered with rust; and the ring was on the hand of the corpse. These were secured by Pedrazzi and the monk as collateral proofs of the child's identity. They afterwards contrived to carry the body to the cemetery, where they placed it in consecrated ground; and the phantom never afterwards appeared in the neighbourhood.

The remainder is soon told. Pedrazzi and his wife, assisted by the monk, discovered the family of the child — but, alas! He was now an orphan, the mother having died a few days before the discovery of the child. Diodato's legal claim to the estates having been proved to the satisfaction of the authorities, he was allowed to remain in the custody of Pedrazzi and his wife, who, having disposed of their farm in the mountains, settled in the neighbourhood of Vicenza.

THE END

END OF FIRST VOLUME