

RICHARD BAGOT

THE
PASSPORT

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I

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

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

But now, with the first coming of the evening breeze, casements were thrown open, green shutters which had been hermetically closed since morning were flung back and Montefiano awoke for the second time in the twenty-four hours.

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

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

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

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

He had been at Montefiano some years now, and the stories current at the time of his arrival in the place as to the reason why he had been sent there from Rome were wellnigh forgotten by his parishioners. At first they held aloof from him suspiciously, as from one who was not of their condition in life, and who had only been sent to Montefiano because – well, because of some indiscretion committed at Rome. Some said it was politics, others that it was women, and others, again, that it was neither the one nor the other. All agreed that an *istruito* like Don Agostino, with his air of a *gran signore*, and money behind that air, too, was not sent to a place like Montefiano for nothing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Some people in Rome said that the deceased Montefiano was bored and prayed to death by his pious wife and the priests with whom she surrounded him. These, however, were chiefly the boon

companions of the prince's unregenerate days, whose constitutions were presumably stronger than his had proved itself to be.

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

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

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

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

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

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

II

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

And Don Agostino stood and gazed, and as he did so he thought of the restless life forever seething in the far-off city he knew so well – the busy brains that were working, calculating, intriguing in the shadow of that mighty dome which bore the emblem of self-sacrifice and humility on its summit, and of all the good and all the evil that was being wrought beneath that purple patch of mist that hid – Rome.

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

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

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

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

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

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

But at Rome the true motives for actions both public and private are rarely to be discovered on the surface. Nominally, Monsignor Lelli's disgrace was the direct consequence of his negligence in safeguarding the sums of money for the sound investment of which he was supposed to be responsible. Practically, its cause lay elsewhere. He was known to be a Liberal in his political views, the friend of a prominent foreign cardinal resident in Rome, to whose influence, indeed, he owed his canonry of Santa Maria Maggiore, and whose attitude towards the Italian government, and also towards various dogmatic questions, had for some time aroused the ill-will of a pontiff who was even more anti-Italian than his predecessor. Unfortunately for himself, Monsignor Lelli had published his views on the relations between Church and State, and had drawn down upon his head the wrath of the clerical party in consequence. His enemies, and they were many, left no means untried to bring about his disgrace, fully aware that by doing so they would at the same time be striking a blow at the obnoxious cardinal who supported not only Monsignor Lelli but also every Liberal ecclesiastic in Rome. When it became

evident that more than one grave financial blunder had been committed by others in authority, it was equally obvious that the moment to strike this blow had arrived, and it was delivered accordingly.

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

Don Agostino moved out of the shade to meet him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Don Agostino read the letter attentively.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Except to obey her excellency's instructions."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But it was not entirely of these matters that Don Agostino was thinking as he let himself into the little garden by the side of the church. His house, connected with the sacristy by a *pergola* over

which vines and roses were struggling for the mastery, stood at the end of this garden, and Don Agostino, opening the door quietly lest his housekeeper should hear and descend upon him, passed into his study.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And with a *contorno* of rice?"

Don Agostino sighed.

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

III

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"People of that sort," she had responded, coldly, "often go to mass in order to keep up appearances, or sometimes to meet – oh, well" – she broke off, abruptly – "to stare about them as you seem to have been doing this morning, Bianca, instead of saying your prayers. Is it not so, Monsieur

l'Abbé?" she added to the priest, with whom she generally conversed in French, though both spoke Italian perfectly.

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

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

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

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

"And do not dance," interrupted Bianca.

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

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

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

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

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

Nor was this state of things of recent origin. Ever since the Abbé Roux had become, as it were, a member of the Montefiano household, Bianca Acorari had entertained the same feeling towards him. Her obstinacy on this point, indeed, had first awakened the princess to the fact that her step-daughter had a very decided will of her own, which, short of breaking, nothing was likely to conquer.

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

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

Perhaps it was the gradual consciousness that she was debarred from associating with any one of her own age which had made Bianca think wistfully that it would be pleasant to make the acquaintance of the attractive-looking girl whom she passed occasionally on the staircase, and who had come to

live under the same roof as herself. She could not but notice that the older she became the more she seemed to be cut off from the society of others of her years. Formerly she had occasionally been allowed to associate with the children of her step-mother's friends and acquaintances, and, at rare intervals, they had been invited to some childish festivity at Palazzo Acorari.

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

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

It never entered into her head, however, to suggest to the princess that her life was an exceedingly dull one. Indeed, having no means of comparing it with the lives of other girls of her age, she scarcely realized that it was dull, and she accepted it as the natural order of things. It had not been until she had seen Giacinta Rossano that an indefinable longing for some companionship other than that of those much older than herself began to make itself felt within her, and she had found herself wondering why she had no brothers and sisters, no cousins, such as other girls must have, with whom they could associate.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A pair of soft, dark eyes smiled back into her own. "*Buona Natale, e buona anno, Donna Bianca.*" Giacinta Rossano replied, in a low, clear voice which caused Bettina to withdraw her eyes from the altar and to look sharply round to see whence it proceeded. Somebody else turned round also – a young man whom Bianca had not noticed, but who was sitting next to Giacinta. For a moment their eyes met, and then she looked away quickly, half conscious of a sensation of effort in doing so that caused her a vague surprise. The gaze she had suddenly encountered had seemed to enchain her own. The eyes that had looked into hers with a wondering, questioning look were like Giacinta Rossano's, only they were blue – Bianca felt quite sure of that. They had seemed to shut out for a second or two the blaze of light on the altar. The momentary feeling of surprise passed, she turned her head towards the altar again, and as she did so she overheard Giacinta Rossano's companion whisper to her, "*Chiè?*" accompanied by a rapid backward motion of his head.

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

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

Owing to the general shuffling of chairs consequent upon the members of the congregation resuming their seats after the elevation, Bianca suddenly became aware that Giacinta Rossano's companion had somewhat changed his position, and that he was now sitting where he could see her

without, as before, turning half round in his seat. Apparently, too, he was not allowing the opportunity to escape him, for more than once she felt conscious that his eyes were resting upon her; and, indeed, each time she ventured to steal a glance in Giacinta's direction that glance was intercepted – not rudely or offensively, but with the same almost wondering look in the dark-blue eyes that they had worn when they first met her own.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What thing?" interrupted Bianca, tranquilly.

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

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

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

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

"You will make the acquaintance of the other one, too," Bettina said to herself – "but who knows whether you will keep it? Mali!" and with a sharp shrug of the shoulders she walked by Bianca's side in silence until they reached Palazzo Acorari, where the porter, who was waiting for them at

the entrance, let them through the gateway and lighted them up the dark staircase to the doors of the *piano nobile*.

IV

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

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

Giacinta glanced at her brother proudly.

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

"If what?" demanded Silvio.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The interest that Donna Bianca Acorari had aroused in Silvio had not escaped Giacinta's notice. She had observed where his gaze had wandered so frequently during the midnight mass a few nights previously, and, knowing that Silvio's life had been too busy a one to have left him much time to think about love, she had marvelled at the effect that Bianca Acorari seemed suddenly to have had

upon him. Since that night, whenever they were alone together, he would begin to question her as to the surroundings of their neighbors on the floor below them, and urge her to make friends with Donna Bianca. It was in vain that Giacinta pointed out that she had only interchanged a word or two with the girl in her life, and that there was evidently a fixed determination on the princess's part not to permit any acquaintance.

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

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

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

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

Some days had elapsed since Christmas, and Giacinta Rossano had not again seen either Bianca or the princess. Under the circumstances, she by no means regretted the fact, for she rather dreaded lest she and her brother might encounter them on the staircase, and then, if Silvio behaved as he had behaved in the Sudario, the princess would certainly suspect his admiration for her step-daughter.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nevertheless, Silvio continued to pursue the lady, and three or four minutes or more elapsed before he rejoined his sister.

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

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

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

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

"Step-daughter," corrected Giacinta, dryly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Silvio looked evidently relieved.

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

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

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

felt certain that, though treating the matter as a joke, he had intended to let Silvio know that his superiors had noticed some falling off in his work.

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

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

Breakfast over, Professor Rossano soon retired again to the correction of his proofs, leaving Giacinta and Silvio alone together. For a short time neither of them spoke, and Silvio apparently devoted his whole attention to the proper roasting of the end of a "Verginia" cigar in the flame of a candle. Giacinta meditated on the possible contents of the piece of paper that she felt positive was still lying in a crumpled condition in her brother's pocket, and wondered what particular part the lady who had passed them on the staircase might be playing in the business – though she had already made a very natural guess at it. She would have given a good deal to know whether the note – or the memorandum, as Silvio had called it, with a possibly unconscious humor that had made Giacinta smile – was written by Bianca Acorari herself or by the quietly dressed young person who was, no

doubt, Bianca's daily governess. If it were from Donna Bianca, then things must have advanced to what the professor would have termed the contagious stage – only Giacinta did not employ that simile, its suggestiveness having escaped her – which would be a decidedly serious affair. If, however, as was far more probable, the missive came from the governess, who had been disappointed of the expected opportunity to give it to Silvio unobserved, and so had dropped it for him to pick up, the matter was serious, too, but not so serious. If Silvio had won over the governess to aid him in furthering his plans, Giacinta thought that she, too, might manage to do a little corrupting on her own account with the same individual. It did not immediately strike her that Silvio's sex, as well as his particularly attractive face and personality, might have removed many difficulties out of his path in dealing with the demure-looking female who devoted three hours a day to the improvement of Donna Bianca's education.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Silvio Rossano glanced at her.

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

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

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

Giacinta laughed. "Scarcely," she said; "but, Silvio *mio*, you must not be angry. You know that I do not care at all whether people are noble by birth or whether they are not. All the same, I think you are preparing for yourself a great deal of mortification; and for that girl, if you make her care for you, a great deal of unhappiness. You see how she is isolated. Does anybody, even of their own world, ever come to visit the princess and Donna Bianca? A few old women come occasionally, and a few priests – but that is all. Who or what the girl is being kept for I do not know – but it is certainly not for marriage with one not of her condition. Besides, except as her *fidanzato*, what opportunity could you have, or ever hope to have, of seeing her or of knowing what her feelings might be towards you?"

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

Giacinta looked grave.

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

"I, for instance!" exclaimed Silvio.

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

"Afterwards – ?"

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

"Giacinta!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Silvio Rossano swore under his breath.

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

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

V

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

himself to think out the situation in much the same spirit as that in which he would have grappled with a professional problem demanding accurate solution.

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

Bettina was probably unconscious that she had been more than once the subject of a searching study on the part of the *signorino* of the second floor, as she called him. But the results of the study were negative, for Silvio had instinctively felt that any attempt to suborn Donna Bianca's maid would almost certainly prove disastrous. The woman was not young enough to be romantic, he thought, with some shrewdness, nor old enough to be avaricious.

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

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

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

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

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

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

On the whole, the thought of lending herself to a little intrigue rather commended itself to the Frenchwoman. Life in Rome was not very amusing, and to be the confidante in a love-affair, and especially in such an apparently hopeless love-affair, would add an interest to it. Perhaps a little of the sentimentality, the existence of which in Bettina Silvio had doubted, entered into the matter. Mademoiselle Durand liked her pupil, and had always secretly pitied her for the dulness and isolation of her life; and as for Silvio – well, when he looked at her with his soft Roman eyes, and seemed to be throwing himself upon her generosity and compassion, Mademoiselle Durand felt that she would

do anything in the world he asked her to do. The Princess of Montefiano she regarded as a mere machine in the hands of the Abbé Roux. Though she had only been a few moments in her present position, Mademoiselle Durand had fully realized that the Abbé Roux was master in the Montefiano establishment; and, though she had been highly recommended to the princess by most pious people, she entertained a cordial dislike to priests except in church, where, she averred, they were necessary to the business, and no doubt useful enough.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He looked so disconcerted that Mademoiselle Durand laughed outright.

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

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

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

"Only?" repeated Silvio, interrogatively.

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

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

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

Mademoiselle Durand shot a quick glance of approval at him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Frenchwoman tapped her foot impatiently on the ground.

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

"What other things?" asked Silvio, absently.

Mademoiselle Durand fairly stamped her foot this time.

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

And Silvio was quite satisfied that they were so.

VI

Bianca Acorari was sitting by herself in the room devoted to her own especial use, where she studied in the mornings with Mademoiselle Durand, and, indeed, spent most of her time. It was now the beginning of June – the moment in all the year, perhaps, when Rome is the most enjoyable; when the hotels are empty, and the foreigners have fled before the imaginary spectres of heat, malaria, and other evils to which those who remain in the city during the late spring and summer are popularly supposed to fall victims.

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

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

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

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

Mademoiselle Durand had very soon discovered Bianca's desire to know the girl who lived in the apartment above her, and her annoyance that she had not been allowed to make any acquaintance with the Signorina Rossano. This very natural wish on her pupil's part to make friends with some

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

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

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

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

On this particular June afternoon Bianca Acorari was free to amuse herself in-doors as she chose until five o'clock, at which hour the princess had ordered the carriage, and Bianca would have to accompany her to visit an orphanage outside the Porta Pia. She was not at all sorry for those orphans. An orphan herself, she had always thought their life must be certainly more amusing than her own, and she had once ventured to hint as much, to the manifest annoyance of her step-mother, who had reproved her for want of charity.

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

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

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

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

The fact was that Silvio had been becoming impatient lately, and Mademoiselle Durand's task grew more difficult in consequence. To afford him any opportunity of meeting Bianca, or of interchanging even a single word with her, appeared to be impossible. The girl was too well guarded. Mademoiselle Durand had once suggested to her that she should take her some morning to the galleries in the Vatican which Bianca had never seen. The princess's permission had, of course, to be obtained, and Bianca broached the subject one day at breakfast. For a moment her step-mother had hesitated, and seemed disposed to allow her to accept Mademoiselle Durand's proposition. Unfortunately, however, Monsieur l'Abbé was present, and, true to her practice, the princess appealed to him as to whether there could be any objections.

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

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

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

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

Bianca Acorari sat listening in silence for some time.

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

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

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

"Why, mademoiselle?" she asked.

Mademoiselle Durand pursed up her lips.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mademoiselle Durand shrugged her shoulders.

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

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

Mademoiselle Durand looked at her critically.

"It entirely depends," she replied.

"And upon what?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was of this little interlude in her morning's studies that Bianca Acorari was meditating as she sat waiting for the hour when she would have to accompany her step-mother in her afternoon drive. She wished that Mademoiselle Durand would have been more communicative. It was certainly interesting to hear about Giacinta Rossano's brother, Silvio! Yes, it was a nice name, decidedly – and somehow, she thought, it suited its owner. It must be an odd sensation – that of being in love. Perhaps one always saw in the imagination the person one was in love with. One saw a well-built figure and a sun-tanned face with dark, curling hair clustering over a broad brow, and a pair of dark-blue eyes that looked – but, how they looked! as though asking a perpetual question... How pleasant it would be there in the gardens of Villa Acorari! – so quiet and cool in the deep shade of the ilex-trees, with

the sound of the water falling from the fountains. But it was a little dull to be alone – always alone. What a difference if she had had a brother, as Giacinta Rossano had. He would have wandered about with her sometimes, perhaps, in these gardens ... and he and she would have sat and talked together by the fountains where the water was always making a soft music of its own. What was the story she had heard the people tell of some heathen god of long ago who haunted the ilex grove? How still it was – and how the water murmured always ... and the eyes looked at her, always with that question in their blue depths – and the graceful head with its short, close curls bent towards her ... the god, of course – they said he often came – and how his sweet curved lips smiled at her as he stood in that chequered ray of sunlight slanting through the heavy foliage overhead...

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

VII

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

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

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

"Physically so, perhaps," returned the princess.

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

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

During the last couple of years, Baron d'Antin had abandoned Brussels and Paris, where he had hitherto passed the greater part of his time, for Rome. He had certainly not chosen Rome as a place of residence on account of its worldly attractions, and its other claims to interest did not particularly appeal to him. As a matter of fact, Monsieur d'Antin found Rome exceedingly dull, as a city. It is, indeed, scarcely the capital that a man of pleasure would elect to live in. Now Monsieur d'Antin had certainly been a man of pleasure while his constitution and years had allowed him to be so, and he still liked amusing himself and being amused. Unfortunately, however, when necessity obliged him to pursue other pastimes with greater moderation, he had given way more and more to a passion for gambling, and he had left the larger portion of his patrimony in clubs, both in his own capital, in Paris, and in Nice. It was not unnatural, perhaps, that, on financial disaster overtaking him, he should have remembered his sister, the Princess of Montefiano, and have been seized with a desire to pass a season or two in Rome; and it had never, somehow or other, been quite convenient to return to Belgium or to Paris since.

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

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

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

Monsieur d'Antin was an egoist, pure and simple, but he could be a very agreeable egoist – so long as he was supplied with all he wanted. Fortunately, perhaps, for his popularity, his egoism

was tempered by an almost imperturbable good-humor, which, as a rule, prevented it from ruffling the nerves of others.

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

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

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

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

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

living as she did, completely apart from the cosmopolitan society in which her brother preferred to move.

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

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

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

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

looked at the girl, he would say to himself that Jeanne was shutting her eyes to obvious facts, and that at some not very distant day they would probably be opened unexpectedly.

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

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

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

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

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

VIII

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

"Really, Philippe!" expostulated Princess Montefiano.

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

Princess Montefiano appeared thoroughly alarmed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Monsieur d'Antin looked at his sister curiously. She had very rarely spoken to him of family affairs, and he had very little idea how the Montefiano property was settled, beyond a natural conclusion that the old prince would have left the bulk of it to his only child and representative.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Monsieur d'Antin shrugged his shoulders.

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

The princess dropped her voice mysteriously.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Perfectly natural – from all points of view," repeated Monsieur d'Antin; "and," he added to himself, "more particularly from his own, I imagine. Well," he continued, "I must leave you, Jeanne. I

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

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

Monsieur d'Antin waved his hands.

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

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

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

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

And Bianca Acorari? Monsieur d'Antin allowed his thoughts to dwell upon her dreamy face, with its eyes that seemed always to be looking into an unexplored distance, upon the curved mouth and firm, rounded throat, upon the graceful lines of the figure just melting into womanhood, and came to the conclusion that Jeanne and her abbé were a couple of fools. Why, the girl had something about her that stirred even his well-worn passions – and how would it not be with a younger man? She had some idea, too, of her own power, of her own charm, unless he was very much mistaken. It was a vague, undefined consciousness, perhaps, but none the less fascinating on that account. A child? Nonsense! A peach almost ripe for the plucking.

IX

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

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

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

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

Tradition declared that a shrine sacred to the rites of the *Lupercalia* once stood in the midst of this ilex grove, on the very spot where the fountains now murmured and the water-lilies lifted their pure whiteness to the hot caress of the sunbeams.

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

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

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

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

It had struck Bianca that the Frenchwoman displayed considerable curiosity as to her movements. Mademoiselle Durand insisted upon being taken all over the grounds of the villa, and

almost appeared as though she were studying the topography of the spots which Bianca pointed out as being her usual resorts.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mademoiselle Durand looked at her and hesitated for a moment.

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

Bianca was silent.

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

"You mean – " began Bianca.

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

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

Mademoiselle Durand suddenly sprang up with a little scream.

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

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

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

Mademoiselle's question returned to Bianca's mind as she sat under her ilex-tree. It was all nonsense, of course, for how could she meet Silvio Rossano and talk to him about his love-affair? Mademoiselle Durand knew perfectly well that there could be no question of such a thing. But still it would be very interesting to hear all about this mysterious girl with whom he was so hopelessly in love. And, yes, she would certainly like to meet him and talk to him. It was odd how well she remembered his features, though she had never dared to look at him very much. Nevertheless, since that Christmas night in the Sudario they had seemed to be impressed upon her mind. And that other girl, the one he was in love with, whose name Mademoiselle Durand declared she was bound in honor

not to mention, did she think much about him – remember the look of his eyes and the expression of his mouth? Perhaps she never thought about him at all.

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

"Or s'ode su tutta la fronda
 crosciare
 l'argentea pioggia
 che monda,
 il croscio che varia
 secondo la fronda
 più folta, men folta
 Ascolta.
 La figlia del aria
 è muta; ma la figlia
 del limo lontana,
 la rana,
 canta nell'ombra più fonda,
 chi sa dove, chi sa dove!"¹

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

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

She turned aside hesitatingly.

"Donna Bianca!"

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

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

"You!" she exclaimed.

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

¹ *Le laudi; (Pioggia nel Pineto) Gabriele d'Annunzio.*

And then he waited.

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

Only the frog croaked:

"Chi sa dove, chi sa dove!"

Presently Bianca Acorari spoke.

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

Then Silvio moved a few steps nearer to her.

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

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

Silvio's eyes flashed.

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

Bianca drew back from him.

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

Silvio looked at her in bewilderment.

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

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

She moved towards the casino as she spoke.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ah, yes, I know!" interposed Bianca, hurriedly. "It is very sad, and, believe me, I am very sorry for you – very sorry."

Silvio's bronze face grew suddenly white.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Silvio looked at her curiously.

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

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

Silvio drew a long breath.

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

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

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

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

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

Bianca Acorari sprang up from her chair.

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

Silvio seized her hand almost roughly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Suddenly she wrenched herself from him, crimson and trembling.

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

Silvio laughed aloud in the very intoxication of his joy.

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

But Bianca shook her head. "I must be very wicked," she said. "I did not know I was quite so wicked. Silvio," she added, looking at him, shyly, "for the love of God, go! It is getting late. At any moment they may be coming to look for me. No – not again – "

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bianca stamped her foot on the turf.

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

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

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

X

"You do not congratulate me, Giacinta."

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

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

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

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

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

Giacinta Rossano's pride was aroused. It would be intolerable to feel that her brother was regarded as not good enough to be the husband of an Acorari, or of anybody else, for that matter. Knowing Silvio's contemptuous indifference to merely hereditary rank, she wondered that he did not realize the false position into which he was apparently doing his best to put himself. That Donna Bianca Acorari would fall in love with Silvio, if any reasonable opportunity were given her, Giacinta had very little doubt. Any woman might fall in love with him, if it were only for his good looks. But what would be gained if Donna Bianca did fall in love with him? There would be a great *disturbo*—a family consultation—probably a dozen family consultations—a great many disagreeable things said on all sides, and after the girl had had one or two fits of crying, she would give up all thoughts of Silvio, and allow herself to be engaged to some man of her own world. And, in the mean time, Silvio's life would be wrecked, for he would never stand the mortification of a refusal on the part of Princess Montefiano to regard him as a suitable husband for her daughter. He would probably become soured and embittered, and as likely as not take to wild habits. Altogether, Giacinta Rossano had a very unfavorable opinion of the whole business. She devoutly wished that the fates had led her father to choose any other apartment than the second floor of Palazzo Acorari; for in that case Silvio would certainly not have gone to mass at the Sudario on Christmas Eve, and lost his heart and his common-sense when he got there.

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

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

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

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

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

"How do you mean – nothing to congratulate me upon," said Silvio, with an unruffled good-humor that almost annoyed Giacinta, "when I tell you that she loves me – that she has promised to be my wife? Is not that reason enough for you to congratulate me? But, of course, I always told you I was sure she returned my love."

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

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

"And you are sure of it now?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Giacinta was silent for a moment. Silvio was strangely confident, she thought. Perhaps she underrated Bianca Acorari's strength of character. It might be that this girl was really in love with Silvio, and that her character and Silvio's were alike in tenacity of purpose and loyalty. At any rate, she had no right to judge Bianca until she knew her, or at least had had some opportunity of observing

how she behaved by Silvio when the storm which they had brewed finally burst, which it certainly must do very quickly.

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

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

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

"Pressure!" exclaimed Silvio.

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

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

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

"And with me," interrupted Silvio.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Silvio looked at his sister, curiously.

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

Giacinta shrugged her shoulders.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

XI

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

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

He had been spending the day at Genzano, where he had breakfasted with a well-known Roman lady possessing an equally well-known villa lying buried in its oak and chestnut woods. The breakfast-party had been a pleasant one, and Monsieur d'Antin had enjoyed himself so much that he felt disinclined to return to Rome as early as he had at first intended. It would be agreeable, he thought, to drive from Genzano to the Villa Acorari, spend two or three hours there, and drive back to Rome, as he had been invited to do late in the evening, instead of returning by train.

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

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

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

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

Probably, had it not been for that self-same shower of rain which had disturbed Bianca's meditations and caused her to seek the shelter of the avenue and the casino, he would have found her sitting in the open space near the fountains, where, as a matter of fact, Silvio Rossano had been watching her for some little time, wondering how he should best accost her. Silvio, concealed behind his tree, would certainly have seen Monsieur d'Antin approaching, and would have waited for another opportunity to accomplish his object. But, as usual, Puck or Providence must needs interfere and

cause the rain to descend more heavily just as Monsieur d'Antin arrived at the fountains. Seeing that the avenue would afford him shelter he had entered it, and, after waiting for a few minutes, had bent his steps in the direction of the casino he observed at the farther end of it. The sound of voices coming from within the summer-house had caused him to stop and listen; and what he overheard, although he could not entirely follow the rapid Italian in which its occupants were speaking, was enough to tell him that Bianca Acorari was one of the speakers, that the other was a man, and that love was the topic of the conversation. Very quietly, and crouching down so as to be invisible from the window of the casino, Monsieur d'Antin had stepped past the half-closed door and concealed himself behind the little building. Through the open window he had been able from his hiding-place to hear every word that was said, and also to hear the sounds which certainly could not be called articulate.

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

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