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THE OUTCAST

THE WORKS OF LUIGI PIRANDELLO

AWARDED THE NOBEL PRIZE IN LITERATURE, 1934

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THE OUTCAST

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THE OLD AND THE YOUNG (2 Vols.)

THE OUTCAST

A NOVEL

BY
LUIGI PIRANDELLO

Awarded Nobel Prize in Literature, 1934

Authorized Translation from the Italian by
LEO ONGLEY



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Part I

THE OUTCAST

CHAPTER I

UNDER the hood of the chimney, large as an over-turned mill-hopper sliced in two, old Pentagora was muttering to herself more than usual, that evening, chewing at the ends of the large black woollen handkerchief that was fastened over her head and tied in a knot under her chin.

As though the brushwood and coals were talking to her as they sputtered, crackled, and burst into showers of sparks, she would sit there all day, frowning, scowling, making long speeches to the fire, her black parched hands with their weirdly agile fingers every now and then sketching a wild gesture in the air. She was always talking that way to herself, running the words together until they sounded like the whirring of spindles.

Whenever she would get up from the fireside to go buzzing through the house like some old gad-fly, she seemed always to be moving in a sort of frantic dream, her eyes unseeing, her fingers in-

cessantly restless. Sometimes she would discover . . . you never knew what . . . something on the walls, or on the ground, or in the air: she would stop, spellbound, and stare with clear, laughing, speaking eyes; and then her face, flushed by the fire, would widen into a smile of such beatitude that it aroused even in those who pitied her an envy mingled with consternation.

What did she see! What made her smile that way!

Some of the things she did, and some of the things she said, were just what you would expect of a poor crazy old woman; but now and then on the other hand she would strike everybody dumb by some divination of distant things, proving beyond a shadow of doubt that she could see what human eyes never saw. Naturally, the people round about thought she must have mysterious dealings with 'i The Grannies.⁹⁹ Some even vowed that on stormy nights of winter they had heard the wind crooning her name over the house-tops:

"Sidora! Sidora!"

No question but that "The Grannies" who came to call her took her away with them—in spirit! Didn't everybody know that she had an altar in her house on which she worshipped three dried **ears** of corn, with little scarlet bags full of salt set in a circle around them?

"My little ghost has round-round eyes, red-red **eyes** and they're quick-quick-quick; and it has a

long-long tail and a black-black beak. There's a swallow's nest, hanging from the belfry, near the bells. That's where my little ghost lives. Ding-dong-ding! Ding-dong-ding! An old rat came out, the little rats came out; they started to play with a pebble on the belfry railing. The bells clang and yawn at the sky; they have lazy tongues; they're hungry for the wind. How they burn in summer! Bain, rain, wash the bells! The cool drops make the grass grow. . . . Ding-ding-ding-ding ! That's for the sparrows of the abbey! Caw! Caw! The devil take you, crow!"

That's the way she would chatter when she was in a good humour. But more often she was in a cranky mood, and—that evening more than usual even!

"Aunt Sido, supper's ready!" her nephew Niccolino, pale and agitated, came to tell her. "Papa says that whatever happens, it's no reason not to eat. But Bocco hasn't come back yet! How's that?"

The old woman turned a scowling glance on her grandson as though she hadn't understood. Then she jumped to her feet, raising both arms in a quick gesture of scornful indifference, and rushed, hump-shouldered and mumbling, to the dining-room.

A gloomy room, its low walls bare and yellowing, with two interminable lines of chairs, none of them mates, running down the length of it. What

a creaking and squeaking went on there at night as they talked to one another, and to the crazy old woman. Strange histories they had, those chairs! Most of them had been sold for debt along with other household goods, and they were still haunted by the wails and cries and curses of their former owners. There was one, more broken down than the others, that squeaked out the tale of how it had been reduced to its ragged state . . . how a poor mother had sat in it nightly nursing her baby hour after hour, because the little creature, sucking in vain at her withered breasts, and finding there no drop of milk, would not, could not, go to sleep. • . . It was from these chairs perhaps, or from the floors, or the walls, that the mouldy smell pervading the room arose—a smell made up of many odours, stale, indefinable. From the smoke-blackened ceiling a lamp hung down over the table, that was already laid, and seemingly lost there in that big room.

Antonio Pentagora, a thick-set, full-blooded man,—Niccolino's father,—was already at table. Against the pinkish pallor of his clean-shaven hide, bulging in folds on the back of his neck, his pock-scarred face looked almost like a mask. Under his soft shirt, open at the neck, you could see his great hairy breast.

Niccolino and his grandmother sat down and began to eat their supper quietly, just as though nothing had happened.

Then Rocco appeared in the doorway, with a gloomy, disheartened air.

"Oh, here's our Eoccuccio now!" exclaimed his father, turning and rubbing his big rough hands laden with massive rings.

Niccolino raised his lean wide-eared head, craning his neck to see past his aunt who sat opposite him. He wanted to discover how Rocco looked now. But Aunt Sidora made no motion to get out of his way.

Rocco stood for a moment staring at the three who were seated at table, then flung himself into the chair nearest the door, placed his elbows on his knees, and rested his chin on his fist, his hat almost covering his eyes.

"Come, get up from there, and sit down at table!" Pentagora continued.ⁱⁱ "We waited for you, you know I You don't believe it, eh! On my word! Until ten o'clock . . . no, later even. . . . What time is it? Come here. This is your place. They laid it here, just where it used to be before."

And in a loud voice he called,

"Signora Poponica!"

"Epponina," Niccolino corrected him, speaking very low.

"Shut up, stupid! I know it! But I want to call her Poponica, after your aunt. Isn't that allowable?"

Rocco, his curiosity stirring, raised his head and grumbled:

"Who is PopdnicaV⁹

"Oh, a lady fallen on evil days!"—answered his father jovially. "A real lady too! She came here yesterday to help out with the housework. A protegee of your aunt's."

"From the North," added Niccolino meekly.

Bocco put his chin down again on his fists. His father, satisfied, carefully raised his brimming cup to his lips, and cautiously drained off the top. Then he turned an eye on Niccolino, smacked his lips, and observed:

"Good! New wine, Roccuccio! Makes you wink. . . . Try it, try it! It will settle your stomach. Come, don't be foolish!"

And he drained the rest at a gulp.

"Don't you want any supperV⁹ he asked.

"He doesn't feel like eating," said Niccolino gently.

They were all silent now, taking care to keep their forks from rattling against their plates so as not to give offence to the silence painfully filling the room. And now here came Signora Popdnica, her tobacco-brown hair glued into place by means of some strange pomade, the flesh around her eyes stained as though it had been bruised, her lips puckering to a point. She tottered a little as she walked, drying her small work-roughened hands on an old cast-off jacket of the man of the house that was tied by the sleeves around her waist to serve as an apron. Her

tinted hair and the mournful expression of her face indicated clearly enough that this "lady fallen on evil days" would perhaps have desired something more than the desperate embrace of those empty sleeves.

Suddenly, with a wave of the hand, Antonio Pentagora signified that she could go. If Eocco didn't want any supper, there was no further need of her. She raised her eyebrows until they nearly reached her hair, stretching the skin of the lids tight over her sad eyes. Sighing, dignified, she went away.

"You remember, I told you this would happen," Pentagora finally brought out. His great voice struck the silence so harshly that his sister Sidora, for all she was rapt in her musings, again jumped up from her chair, picked up the salad bowl from the table, snatched a piece of bread and rushed away to finish her supper in another room.

Antonio Pentagora's eyes followed her to the door. Then with a glance at Niccolino, he stroked his shaven head with both hands, and his lips parted in a cold, silent grin.

He remembered. . . .

Years, years ago, when he too had come back to the old house after his wife had proved unfaithful, his sister Sidora, although something of a scold even as a child, had not allowed a word of blame to be addressed to him. Silently, she had

led him to the room that had been his before he married, as though to indicate that she had expected to see him come home some fine day, betrayed, and regretful that he had ever gone away. . . .

"I told you this would happen!" he repeated with a sigh, shaking off that distant memory.

Eocco got up angrily.

"Can't you find anything else to say to me?" he asked.

Very gently Niccolino pulled at his father's jacket, as if pleading,—*"Please don't say anything!"*

"No!" roared Pentagora full in Niccolino's face. "Come here, Eoccuccio! Take that hat off your eyes. . . . Ah! the wound! Where you cut yourself! Let me see it. . . ."

"What do I care about that?" cried Eocco, almost crying with rage, as he twisted his hat in his hand and then threw it down on the floor.

"See what a mess you've made of yourself! . . . Bring me some water and vinegar, quick, and a bandage. . . ."

"Again? I'm going to clear out!" threatened Eocco.

"Well, clear out then! What did you come here for? Speak out, get it off your chest! I handle you with gloves and you shoot kicks. . . . But come, don't take on so, my boy! I don't say that

you might not have picked up the letter a little more gracefully, without breaking your head open that way on the door of the wardrobe. . . . But never mind. And enough foolishness, eh? You We got all the money you want, and you can get all the women you want. Enough foolishness!"

Foolishness! He had a trick of interpolating exclamations, and he always accompanied this particular one with an expressive gesture of the hand, contracting the muscles of one cheek as he spoke.

He got up from table and going to the sideboard on which huddled a large grey cat, picked up a candlestick. To show what he purposed doing, he picked off the hardened drops of tallow, lit the wick, and gave a sigh:

"And now, God help us, let's go to bed!"

"Are you going to leave me like this?" exclaimed Eocco, exasperated.

"Eh, what can I do? When I talk, it annoys you. . . . Do you want me to stay here? Very well then, I'll stay. . . ."

He blew out the candle and sat down on a chair near the sideboard. The cat jumped down on his shoulder.

Rocco was walking up and down in the long room, now and then biting his hands or making gestures of impotent rage with his clenched fists. And he was crying.

Still seated at the supper table, under the lamp,

Niccolino was rolling bread pills over the cloth with his forefinger.

"You wouldn't listen to me," his father continued after a long silence. "Ha! Hem! Yes, you had to go and do the same thing I did. . . . It almost makes me laugh! Can't help it. . . . I'm sorry for you, mind. But Rocco *mio*, it was no use. We Pentagoras—get your tail out of the way, Fuf u!—we Pentagoras have no luck with our wives."

He was silent for another long interval, then, with a heavy sigh, he continued slowly:

"I knew it well enough. . . . But of course you thought you'd found a woman different from all the rest! And If just like you! And my fatherf God bless him! Just like me!"

With his right hand he made the traditional gesture—"horns"—and waved them about in the air.

"Do you see, my boyf Do you seef For us Pentagoras, they run in the family! We don't need to provide any!"

At this Niccolino, who was still tranquilly rolling his bread pills, broke into a grin.

"You young fool, is that anything to laugh atf" his father exclaimed angrily, raising his close-shaven, apoplectic head from his breast. "It's our fate! Everyone has some cross to carry. Ours is here! This is our Calvary!"

And he struck his head with his fist.

"But, after all, it's nothing but foolishness!"

he went on. "It's not a heavy cross, is it, Fufut Not when we've chased our wives out of the house! On the contrary, it brings luck, they say. As to health, we've got enough, and to spare, and for the rest God's been good to us. Anyway, everybody knows that it's a woman's nature to deceive her husband. When I got married, boy, your grandfather told me exactly what I once told you, word for word the same. I wouldn't listen to him, just as you wouldn't listen to me. Well, nothing so strange about that! Every man wants his own experience. What did I think Fana, my wife, was like! Just what you thought your wife was like, Eocco! A saint! An angel! No, I'm not saying anything bad about her, I haven't anything against her. Both of you can bear witness to that. I give your mother what she needs to live on and let you go to see her once a year at Palermo. And, when all is said and done, she did me a good turn. She taught me that one ought to mind one's parents. That's why I say to Niccolino: 'Sonny, you at least ought to keep out of trouble!' "

But this conclusion didn't much please Niccolino, who was already making love to the girls.

"You fellows just look out for yourselves, will you T I '11 look out for myself!"

"Bah! Listen to him! . . . You look sharp, boy!" said Pentagora with a mocking laugh.

"Oh, all right, all right," said Niccolino, more and more annoyed. "But just the same, it never

did us any harm, as far as I can see, even if mother did . . ."

"Niccoli, you're getting on my nerves!" broke in his father, getting up. "It's fate, you donkey! And what I'm saying I say for your own good. Go get yourself a wife, go get one by all means, if three experiences aren't enough to convince you, and—if you really are Pentagora flesh and blood—you'll see!"

With a shake of his shoulder he got rid of the cat, picked up the candle from the sideboard, and without lighting it, left the room.

Eocco opened the window and looked out a long time.

The night was humid. Below, at the end of the sharp incline along which the last houses of the town stepped down the hill, an immense lonely plain stretched away to the sea. Above it hovered a mist wanly illuminated by the moon. How much air there was and how much space out there beyond that high narrow window! He looked up at the facade of the house, always exposed to wind and rain, melancholy now in the misty moonlight. He looked down at the dark, narrow, deserted street, that was lit by a single whimpering street-lamp. The roofs of the mean little houses seemed to huddle in sleep, and he felt his anguish growing within him. Still he gazed, almost as though his soul itself were straining to see. And just as light ivague clouds float over the sky after a violent

tempest, so strange thoughts, bewildering memories and impressions from the distant past began streaming through his mind, but without taking definite shape. He remembered that when he was a child, in that narrow alleyway, under that very-street lamp with its dim wavering light, a man had one night been treacherously stabbed. Later, a servant girl had told him that the dead man's ghost had been seen, oh, by a lot of people! And he had been so frightened that for a long time he had not been able to look out of the window at the street after dark. . . . It was two years since he had left the old house, but now it was taking possession of him again, claiming him with all the old memories, and the old sense of oppression. He was free again, just as though he had come back unmarried! He would sleep alone that night, in his bare little room, in the mean little bed he had slept in as a boy: alone! His own house, with its fine new furnishings, stood empty and dark, just as he had left it . . . the windows even were open . . . and that same mist-veiled moon now setting toward the distant sea, must be shining into his bedroom windows. . . . His double bed there . . . under the hangings of pink silk . . . ah! He closed his eyes and clenched his fists. 'And tomorrow! What would it be like tomorrow when the whole countryside would have learned that he had driven his faithless wife out of the house?

His head thus plunged in the vast melancholy silence of the night, a silence pierced now and again by some sound or other, and vibrating with the rapid whirr of invisible bat-wings, Rocco, his fist still clenched, groaned with exasperation.

"What ought I to do? What ought I to do!"

"Go down and see the Englishman," prompted Niccolino very softly. He was still sitting near the table, his eyes fixed on the cloth.

Eocco gave a jump at the sound of the voice, and turned around, startled by the advice, and startled too at seeing his brother still there, motionless under the lamp.

"Go to see Bill!" he asked, frowning. "Why!"⁹

"In your place, I'd fight a duel," said Niccolino simply, with an air of conviction. He collected all the bread pills he had been rolling and got up to throw them out of the window.

"A duelf" repeated Rocco, and stood brooding, caught by the idea. Suddenly, he broke out:

"Why yes, yes! You're right! I wonder I hadn't thought of it! Why, of course, a duel!"

The church belfry near by slowly boomed out twelve strokes,

"Midnight!"

"The Englishman won't be in bed yet. . . ."

Rocco picked up the hat he had thrown down on the floor.

"I'll go see him," he said.

CHAPTER II

ON the stairs, in the dark, Rocco Pentagora stood hesitating a moment, wondering whether to knock at the Englishman's door, or at the door of Professor Blandino, another lodger on the floor above. Antonio Pentagora had built that house of his as though it were a tower, little by little adding one storey to another. For the moment he had stopped at the fourth. But, whether the house was really too far out of the way, or whether it was that no one wanted to have any dealings with the owner, the fact remains that Pentagora never succeeded in renting the premises. The first floor had been vacant for years. On the second, one room alone was rented—that occupied by Professor Blandino—now entrusted to the tender care of Mme. Poponica. On the third also one room only was rented, its occupant, a Mr. H. W. Madden, an Englishman, known as Bill. All the others, from top to bottom of the house, had no tenants but the rats. Just the same, the janitor of the premises had all the dignified bearing of a notary. But, for five lire a month, he could not undertake to bother taking off his hat

to anyone or wishing them *[€] Good day!" He made no exceptions to his rule.

Luca Blandino, professor of Philosophy at the Liceo, was going on fifty now. He was tall, gaunt, extremely bald; but in compensation for this last deficiency, nature had provided him with a beard as bushy as it was fantastic. A singular person, famous miles around, for the incredible fits of absent-mindedness to which he was subject. Forced by stern necessity to teach, and mournfully resigned to his lot, he was always absorbed in his meditations, and cared not a whit for anybody or anything. Just the same, anyone who could manage suddenly to force an impression on him, sufficient to bring him down from the nebulous sphere he inhabited, was sure to succeed in getting the professor into his own world, momentarily at least, and obtaining from him the most useful and disinterested sort of help. And this Rocco knew very well.

No less singular an individual was Madden, a professor also, who taught foreign languages at so much an hour. At incredibly modest rates he gave lessons in German, and French—for Italian he had nothing but contempt! That enormous forehead of his—there really seemed no end to it!—was a sort of Square of All Nations, echoing with phrases from the four corners of the globe. An enormous hooked nose had, seemingly, frightened his fine blond hair away from his forehead

and temples. And as though to find it and bring it back, two protruding veins ran circuitously from the ends of his eyebrows upward toward his retreating locks. From under his thatch-coloured eyebrows peered small blue-grey eyes, now weirdly astute, now wearily mournful, as though oppressed by the weight of the forehead above them. Under his nose, a straw-coloured moustache nestled close to the lip. In spite of his monumental forehead, nature had endowed the rest of Mr. Madden's person with an almost monkey-like agility. This characteristic too he had turned to profit. In his moments of leisure he gave instruction in fencing. But without any pretensions, mind! to being a past-master in the art.

Probably, not even our poor Bill himself could have explained how it was he had happened to stray from his native Ireland into a little Sicilian town. He never had been known to receive a letter from his own country. No, he was alone in the world, really alone, with poverty stretching drearily behind him, in the past, and poverty lying drearily ahead of him in the future. But for all he was thus exposed to the mercy of his fate, he never lost heart. Fortunately, Mr. Madden had more words than thoughts in his head. And he was constantly rehearsing his vocabulary.

Just as Niccolino had prophesied, Rocco found him still up.

Bill was sitting on an old broken-down sofa at a small table, his vast forehead illumined by a lamp with a broken shade. He had taken off his shoes, and, knees crossed, was furiously chewing away at a roll stuffed with meat, and gazing devoutly at the bottle of cheap beer that stood uncorked in front of him.

Not a tile in the floor of that room that didn't clamour for a broom and a spittoon for Mr. Madden; the walls and the few decrepit pieces of furniture clamoured for a duster, the wretched bed, with its springs showing, clamoured for the stout arms of a servant to make it up at least once in the course of the week; and as to Mr. Madden's clothes, they clamoured not so much for a whisk-broom as for a currycomb.

The only window in the room was swung inward, and the outside shutters drawn together, with a small crack left open. Mr. Madden's shoes lay, one here, and one yonder, in the middle of the room.

"Oh, Bocco!" he exclaimed, with his usual barbarous pronunciation. He gargled his Italian, he mangled it, he spat out its vowels and consonants, breaking up the syllables into unheard-of combinations, smothering them as with a hot potato.

"You must excuse me for coming so late," said Eocco, his face quite ghastly. "I need help from you."

Bill had a way of repeating the last words

spoken by the person he was talking to as though trying to hook his reply on to them.

"From mef One moment. It is my duty to put on my shoes first."

Disconcerted, he stared at the gash on his friend's forehead.

"I've had a fight—*Ho avuto una lite*^o he said.

"I don't understand."

"*Ite!*" repeated Eocco, very loud, pointing to his forehead.

"Oh, a fight, very good. *Strife, der Streite, une melee*, yes, well understood. You say *lite* in Italian? *Lite*? Very good. What can I do?"

"I need you."

"*Lite*. I don't follow."

"I want to fight a duel."

"Ah! A duel, you ? Yes, well understood. "

"But I don't really know anything about fencing," Eocco went on. "What's the trick of it ? I don't want to be cut down like a dog, do you understand?"

"Like a dog, well understood. So then . . . you want a trick . . . a *coup*, ah . . . what you call a *colpo*, is that it? Yes, infallible, I'll teach you one that's *infallible*. Very easy, too. Eight away!"

And Bill, with the grotesque rapidity of motion of a monkey who has been carefully trained to adapt himself to a human habitation, took two rusty old foils down from the wall.

"Wait, wait," said Ecco, growing uneasy at sight of so much steel. "Explain it to me first. . . I challenge, don't I? Or rather, I slap his face, and he challenges me. Then the seconds talk things over and decide how it's to be done. A duel with swords, let's say. Then we go—to the place they've picked out. Well, then what? Ecco, see, I want to know the whole thing, in the right order."

"Ecco, yes," Madden replied, who approved of order in speech at least, as it helped him to escape much excessively painful confusion. He began to explain as best he could, and in his own way, all the preliminaries of a duel.

"Nude, did you say?" inquired Ecco, in consternation, at a certain point. 'i How so? Why?"

"*Nudo* . . . in your shirt," Madden replied. "*Nudo* . . . how do you say it . . . *nudo, le trone du corps* . . . *die Brust* . . . ah, yes, *torso, il torso*. Or, simply, *senza nudo*, without nude, *si* . . . if you like."

"And then?"

"And then? Then, duel . . . the sword. On guard! *Avous!*"

"Ecco," said Ecco, "you mean, I take the sword. Come, show me. . . How do you do it?"

Bill first of all arranged his pupil's fingers very carefully on the handle. But Ecco soon grew discouraged in the strained unaccustomed position the professor required of him. "I'm falling!

"I'm falling!" His outstretched arm grew heavy, stiff. The foil . . . could it really bet . . . the foil was too heavy.—"Eh! Eh! Hola! Hola!" Madden was encouraging him meanwhile. "Wait a moment, Bill!" How could he keep his left foot steady as he lunged? And his right foot, *Bio! Bio!* he couldn't draw it back to the guard position! At every move the blood rushed furiously to the throbbing wound in his forehead. And all the while the decrepit furniture was shuddering and starting, astounded at the ridiculous leaps of the fantastically distended shadows those two duelists made, so frantically lunging at one another in the dead of night.

"*Burn! Bum! Bum!*"—furious knockings on the floor under their feet. Madden straightened up, his joints fairly unhinged, his enormous forehead beaded with sweat. He stood listening.

"We've waked up Professor Luca!"

Rocco, completely exhausted, his arms hanging limp, his head drooping, had staggered against the wall, almost fainting. In that attitude he looked like the victor of a mortal duel, himself the recipient of a mortal wound.

"We've waked up Professor Luca," repeated Bill, looking at Eocco, in whom this news seemed not to arouse any unpleasant surprise.

"I'll go down to Blandino's," he said finally, getting up.^{i i} We must get everything done before tomorrow. Blandino will be the other second.

Addio. Thank you, Bill. I'm counting on you, too, mind ⁷

Madden, lamp in hand, accompanied his friend to the door. He waited on the landing until Professor Blandino came out. When the door on the second floor had closed again, he went down the hall toward his room, waving one arm in a gesture peculiar to him—the gesture indicating that the professor was making determined efforts to drive an obstinate—though perhaps imaginary—fly from the end of his nose.

Luca Blandino received his nocturnal visitor in a very bad humour. Grumbling and staggering as he walked, he led Bocco through the empty rooms to his own quarters. Then, his grey whiskers pointing every which way, and his eyes swollen and red from his interrupted slumbers, he sat on the bed, his naked, hairy legs dangling down the side.

"Professor, you must take pity on me, and forgive me," said Bocco. "I place myself in your hands."

"What has happened to you? Why, you've hurt yourself!" exclaimed Blandino in a hoarse voice, peering, candle in hand, at his visitor.

"Yes . . . oh, if you knew! For ten hours I . . . You know, my wife? . . ."

"What, an accident?"

"Worse. My wife . . . she . . . I put her out. . . ."

"You. . . . Why?"

"She was betraying me . . . betraying me . . . betraying me. . . ."

"Are you crazy?"

"Crazy! If only I were crazy!"

Rocco began to sob, hiding his face in his hands, and groaning.

Crazy! Crazy! I wish I were crazy!"

The professor stared at him from the bed, scarcely believing his eyes, or his ears, still dull with sleep.

"She was betraying your"

"I caught her . . . reading a letter. . . . Do you know from whom? From Alvignani!"

"Ah, the brigand! Gregorio? Gregorio Alvignani?"

"Yes!"—Rocco swallowed hard. "Now, you understand, Professor, matters can't stop there! He's gone away."

"Gregorio Alvignani?"

"Run away, yes. This very night. I don't know where to, but I'll find out. He was afraid. . . . Professor, I place myself in your hands."

"Me? . . . What have I got to do with it?"

"Satisfaction, professor! I must have some satisfaction. . . . I ought to demand it . . . on account of what people will say. . . . Don't you think so? I must do something!"

"Gently, gently. . . . Keep calm, my boy! What have *people' to do with it?"

"But my honour, professor! That has something to do with it! I must defend it. . . . Before everybody !"

Luca Blandino shrugged his shoulders, bored.

"Oh, leave 'people' out of it! What you want to do is to think things over. In the first place, *are you sure?*"

"I have their letters, I tell you, letters that he used to drop down to her from his window!"

"What, Gregorio? Like a schoolboy? Is this the truth you're telling me? . . . *Ohi, ohi, ohi.* . . . He used to drop letters down from his window?"

ⁱ"Yes! And I have them here!"

"But see here! Your wife . . . *santo Biol* Isn't your wife Francesco Ajala's daughter? Take care, my dear fellow, he's a fierce sort of man. . . . Why, you'll have a slaughter-house on your hands! . . . What did you say? What? . . . That he dropped letters down to her like a school-boy?"

"Can I count on you, professor?"

"On me? Why? Ah, you want to. . . . Wait, my toy, you must think matters over. . . . I'm flabbergasted, I tell you. . . . Can't do anything now. • . . ."

He got down off the bed, drew near to Eocco, and bringing a hand down heavily on his shoulder, added:

"You'd better go home, my boy. . . . You're

taking it too hard, I can see that. . . . Tomorrow, eh! by broad daylight, we can talk it over. It's late. . . . Go get some sleep, if you can . . . go get some sleep, my young friend. . . ."

"But you must promise me now. . . ." Ecco insisted.

"Tomorrow, tomorrow," Blandino interrupted him again, pushing him towards the door. "I promise. . . . But what a brigand, eh? He dropped letters down out of his window, did he? Well, one has to be prepared for everything in this miserable world, my dear fellow! Poor Roccuccio! So she was betraying you. . . . Well, well! But come along now. . . ."

"Professor . . . don't fail me, for pity's sake! I'm counting on you!"

"Tomorrow, tomorrow!" Blandino repeated. "Poor Roccuccio . . . it's a wretched business, this life, eh? . . . Good night, my boy, good night, good night. . . ."

And Rocco heard the door softly closing behind him, and found himself in the dark, on the landing, standing bewildered in the middle of the great staircase. So nobody wanted to have anything to do with him now?

Like a child that has lost its way, he sat down on the first steps of the flight, close to the banister, with his elbows on his knees, and his head between his hands. The dark, and the silence, and the posture he was in all oppressed him, weighed on

him, crushed him. He felt himself sinking, drowning in discouragement. And then his face puckered up and he began to cry and sob dejectedly.

"Ah, *mamma mia! Mamma mia! Mamma mia! . . .*"

He cried as though he would never stop. Then he fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a tattered letter. He struck a match and tried to read it. But his hand felt the touch of something clammy, elusive, slightly viscous. He held up his match to see what it was. A long spider web hung down from the top of the stair. He stared at it absently, forgetting the match until it burnt itself out in his fingers. Then he shook himself, and in the darkness cried out:

"*Maledetto! Maledetto! Maledetto! . . .*"

He lit another match and began to read the letter. The writing was very fine and hard to make out on the greyish paper. Mechanically he read the first words—"*I wrote you three months ago (it's already three months!) and still . . .*" He 'skipped a few lines, and fixed his gaze on a "*When?*" heavily underlined. Then he threw away his match and remained with the letter in his hand, his eyes muffled by the dark.

Again he saw that scene. . . .

He felt again the compression of the muscles in his shoulder as he pushed violently against the door, forcing it open finally; he could feel himself shouting, "The letter! Give me the letter!" And

there was Marta, at the crash, taking refuge behind the panel of the wardrobe built into the wall near which she was reading. . . . And now he was dragging her out by main force from behind the door, grasping her by the wrists—"What letter? What letter?" Stammering, terrified, her eyes on his, defiantly. . . . And then the letter—she had crumpled it up in that first quick movement of terror; it had caught between the clothes and a shelf in the closet—fluttering like a dry leaf to the floor. . . .

In that frenzied spring of his to pick it up, he had struck his head against the open door, and gashed his forehead. Blinded with rage and pain, he had hurled furious accusations against her, without heed to her incipient pregnancy, and then without more ado, had driven her out of the house, pushing and cursing and striking her. . . .

That other scene, then, with his father-in-law. . . . He had gone to show him that letter, and the other letters from Alvignani that he had found in the wardrobe. Didn't that prove her guilty? "And what do you call guilt?" her father had asked him. "The fact that she is your daughter, perhaps?" Francesco Ajala had leapt at him like a tiger. "My daughter? What are you saying? My daughter a wanton?" Then he had suddenly turned very calm. "Look, Eocco, you must be careful about what you do. . . . You see what's at stake, don't you? Nothing but letters . . . and

you ruin two homes, yours and mine. You can still perhaps forgive. . . ." " Ah, so you think? And if you were in my place, if you were her husband instead of her father, would you forgive her?" And Francesco Ajala had not known what answer to make.

"He couldn't, but I am supposed to? That's fine!" thought Eocco, in the silence of that dark stairway.

"It's all over! All over!"

He rose to his feet and, lighting another match, began to climb the stairs again, his eyes fastened on the letter he still held in his hand.

"What might that mean? . . ." he was asking himself, trying to decipher the Alvignani motto embossed in red at the top of the sheet: NIHIL-MIHI-CONSCIO.

CHAPTER III

FIRST the twilight, then, very softly, the dark, had crept into the room where Marta's mother had given her shelter after the girl had come home, driven out of her husband's house. In the darkness the glassware on the table, laid for supper before Marta arrived, caught a few threads of light from the street.

Signora Agata Ajala was an extremely tall heavy woman, but her eyes and voice were strangely gentle, as though she were trying to attenuate, in everyone who looked at her or spoke to her, the disagreeable impression her awkward person must have made. As she came in from the hall where someone had required her attention for a few moments, the sudden flood of light that poured through the opening door revealed her two daughters sitting on the sofa—Marta, with a handkerchief raised to her face, her head thrown back against the upholstered back, and Maria bending over her, holding her hand.

"She wants to go away . . ." said Maria, almost stunned by the sudden catastrophe.

"Mamma, he found out . . . he found out. . . ." said Marta, rolling her head from side to side and

twisting her hands. "He found out, and doesn't want to come home. He can't forgive me. I know that. You must go find him, and tell him to come back, Mamma. I am going away, tell him. He doesn't think I'm fit to live in his house, any more. Tell him I came to you here . . . just like this . . . because I didn't know where to go. I'm leaving now . . . I didn't know where to go. . . ."

Two arms, stretched out impulsively, drew her within their circle.

She heard her mother saying:

"And where else should you have gone? Where could you go? Stay here, stay here, with Maria. I'll go talk with him. . . ."

She threw a black wool shawl over her head, fastened it round her neck, and went out.

The main street of the suburb, animated enough during the day, was as still and deserted at night as a street in a dream, the tall houses standing in silent rows, dark, every one, with here and there a window-pane reflecting the greenish glitter of the moon. A thick but broken skein of smoky clouds now and then veiled its pallid, fresh serenity, throwing dark shadows on the humid street.

"San Francesco!" Marta's mother raised a hand toward the church at the end of the street, invoking the saint.

A few steps from the house, on the same street, rose the huge tannery owned by Francesco Ajala. Hurrying along, she caught sight of her husband

at a balcony on the first floor, and trembled at the thought of having to face his anger and grief. She knew only too well to what terrible excesses they might lead him. Taller even than she, his gigantic frame was outlined in shadow in the luminous opening of the balcony.

It was not a question of one injury only, but of two, and that suffered by her father was even more grave than that suffered by Marta. Because, by dint of reasoning things out and keeping calm, and being patient for a few days, the daughter's injury might perhaps be made up for in a measure; but there was no question of reasoning with the father.

Signora Ajala had long ago learned to measure every disappointment or misfortune, not with respect to herself, for to her it would have seemed little or nothing to bear, but with respect to the furious outbursts it would call forth from her husband. If, on occasion, just because some object that might prove difficult to replace had been spoiled or broken, the whole household was thrown into mourning and the gravest consternation—the neighbours, and strangers who did not have to live in that house could afford to laugh when they heard about it—what then must happen when there was cause? Of course, other people didn't understand this expenditure of fury because of a broken bottle, a smashed picture frame, the most insignificant trifle. That was because they didn't

understand just what it meant to Francesco Ajala when some paltry object in his household was injured or broken. Why, it was a lack of respect, not to the glass or the picture frame, which might be of little or no value, but to him, to *him* who had bought it! Nobody could dream of calling him stingy! He was capable, for that gewgaw there, worth ten cents, of tearing the whole house down!

After all these years of marriage she had succeeded, through her own gentleness, in taming him a little, forgiving him again and again for wrongs by no means slight, and all without ever injuring her own dignity, or making her forgiveness irksome to him. But any trifle was enough to set him off, to arouse him to the most savage outbursts. Perhaps he regretted them immediately. But he wouldn't—or couldn't, perhaps—say he was sorry. That would have seemed to him humiliating, it would have proclaimed too clearly that he was wrong. He wanted people to *feel* he was sorry.

But since no one, in the general dismay caused by his outbursts, dared so much as breathe, he would lock himself up in these black silent rages for weeks at a time. To be sure he noticed, and with secret contempt, the exaggerated efforts •everyone in the household made not to give him the slightest cause of displeasure, and he suspected that a great many things were concealed from him. If, by ill luck, any of these secrets

emerged after a time from the silence in which they were hidden, he promptly let loose his long-accumulated scorn, without recognizing that his wrath was entirely out of place, since whatever concealment there had been was due entirely to the wish not to displease him.

He felt he was a stranger in his own house. It seemed to him at least that his family treated him as a stranger, and he mistrusted it. And particularly he mistrusted *her*—his wife.

And in truth Signora Agata suffered above all from the fact that her husband harboured two false impressions concerning her: one, that she was not always innocent of guile; the other, that she was occasionally hypocritical. She suffered all the more in that she herself was often forced to admit he did not altogether lack justification for believing these two notions respecting her to be true, because time and time again she was forced for the sake of peace to do in secret things he would be sure to disapprove. And then she would have to pretend. . . .

She felt quite certain now that in his wrath her husband would throw in her face all the slight concessions she had succeeded, by force of gentle suasion, in winning from him.

"Francesco!"—a voice cried humbly from the silence of the street.

"Who's there?" asked Ajala very loud, with an abrupt turn of his head, and leaning over the

railing of the balcony. "Is that you? Who told you to come here! Go away! Go away at once! Don't make me shout at you!"

"Open the door, please. . . ."

"Go home, I tell you! I don't want to see anybody! Go home, go home at once! No? Then I'll come down after you!"

And Francesco Ajala gave a powerful shake to the iron railing, and retired.

She waited in the doorway like a beggar, her head bent down, now and then wiping her eyes with the handkerchief she had been carrying in her hand for four hours now.

The sound of steps in the long corridor inside, a hollow echoing sound. The spy-window to the right of the door opened, and Ajala, leaning over and thrusting his head forward, grasped his wife by the arm.

"What did you come here for? What do you want? Who are you anyway? I have no one, no one, no one, any more! No family, no home! Out of here, all of you! Out of here, I say! You make me sick, you give me cold chills! Go away, go away!"

And he gave her a violent push.

She stood, her arm numb from the pressure of his fingers, in front of the opening, then went in the door like a shadow, resigned to wait until he had poured out on her all the rage filling his heart; and resolved also to stand firm against him.

In the middle of the dark corridor, Ajala, his hands clasped at the back of his neck, his arms pressing against the sides of his head, stood staring at the glass-paned door at the back, that showed opaque in the soft moonlight. Hearing his wife sobbing in the darkness, he turned and came towards her, fists clenched, shouting, bitterly mocking her:

"Did you take her into your house? Did you kiss and pet and caress that fine daughter of yours? What do you want of me now? What are you waiting for? Will you tell me?"

"You want to go away . . ." she sobbed, softly.

"At once, yes! My valise. . . ."

"Where are you going?"

"Do you expect me to tell you?"

"But . . . I don't know how to pack it. . . . I don't know how long you expect to be away. . . ."

"How long?" he shouted. "Do you think I can ever come back? - What? Set foot again in your dishonoured house? I'm going for good! To the galleys or to the grave. But I'll overtake him! I'll overtake him! No matter what it costs. . . ."

"Do you think that's just?" she ventured, disconsolately.

"No, why of course not! No!" he thundered with a frightful sneer. "'Just!' It's just for a daughter to soil her father's name! To get herself driven out of her husband's house like a woman of town! And then to come and teach her

trade to her younger sister! That's 'just,' that's what you mean by 'just!' "

"As you please," she said. "But I was asking you if, before you went to such extremes, you didn't think it advisable . . ."

"What!"

"To see if we couldn't avoid scandal. . . ."

¹¹ "Scandal?" he shouted. ⁱⁱ But Eocco came here himself!"

"Here?"

"To show me the letters!"

"Oh, you've seen them?" she asked anxiously. "The last one? That's sufficient proof that Marta . . ."

"Is 'innocent'? That's the word you want, isn't it?" he broke out, seizing her by one arm, pushing and pulling her as he spoke. "Innocent? Innocent? You dare say 'innocent' to me? Have you any shame? Well then, show it here and here!"

He slapped his cheeks furiously several times as he spoke. Then he went on again.

"Innocent. . . . With those letters? Would you have done the same then? Hold your tongue! Don't you dare try to excuse her!"

"I'm not excusing her," she moaned softly, despairingly. "But if I have the proof that my daughter doesn't deserve the punishment you want to inflict on her. . . ."

"Ah, if so!" said Ajala sombrely. "That's what I said to that idiot."

"You see?" cried his wife, almost cheerful at glimpsing this ray of hope.

"But then he asked me if, in his place, / would have forgiven. . . . Well, no! Because I——" again he grasped his wife, by both arms now, and shook her hard—"I would not have forgiven you. I would have killed you!"

"Guilty or not. . . ."

¹ⁱ For such a letter! Isn 't that enough ?"

"Guilty, yes, Marta is guilty," her mother said submissively, "but of one thing only—of being foolish, and nothing else. And now what do you want to do? You want to go away, is that it? You want to fight that other man—and you don't understand that if you do, the injury becomes . . . Oh, let me speak, for pity's sake! I believe, I believe, that some day the truth will come out. . . ."

Don't excuse her! Don't excuse her I ' '

"I am not excusing Marta, no. I am blaming myself. Will that do? Blaming myself because I ought not to have let that marriage take place. . . •"

ⁱ You 're blaming me too, then ?"

^l Well, you said so yourself! Didn 't you regret it? We were in too great a hurry, and you might as well admit that we made a bad choice! And

what about all she had to put up with from the tyranny of that old witch of an aunt and that impossible father of his, before Eocco decided to set up his own home? It doesn't excuse her, true enough, I know that. But, it seems to me, it should make us less severe when she's at fault. She's a poor unfortunate girl . . . yes, she is, a . . ."

Her voice failed her. She hid her face in her handkerchief, and sobs she could not control shook her from head to foot.

With one elbow against the wall, and his forehead leaning on his hand, he was rhythmically tapping with his foot a heap of old cast-off bits of iron gathered up there in the hallway, and, his rough thick eyebrows drawn together in a scowl, he seemed solely intent on this exercise. Then, in his sombre voice, he said:

"Since the fault is yours and mine, let this be our punishment, and let's pay it to the last penny. Look! I *'m going* back to the house with you. But from now on it's to be our prison. I shall never leave it again till I die!"

He went upstairs to close the window on the balcony that had been left open when he came down. His wife waited for him awhile in the darkness of the hallway. Then, as he delayed so long, she too went upstairs. She found him, his face against the wall, weeping.

" Francesco. . . . "

"Go away! Go away! Go away!"

He pushed her ahead of him out of the room, locked up the tannery, and in silence they went back to the house. Arrived at the door, he commanded his wife to go ahead of him, adding, in a threatening tone:

"Don't let me see her!"

A little while later he too went upstairs and, in total darkness, locked himself into one of the spare rooms. Throwing himself on the bed fully dressed, he hid his face in the pillows, one hand grasping the head of the bed.

All night long he lay there. Now and then he would sit up, straining to listen. Not a sound in the house. Yet surely no one in that house was asleep.

That deep silence proved dully irritating to the wild tumult going on in the depths of his violent nature. As he sat up he dug his nails into his legs, his arms, choking with a raging, helpless desire to weep, to howl. Then he would fall back again on the bed, and once more plunge his face in the pillows, now wet with tears.

"Why . . . Had he been crying?"

Little by little, under the pressure of the thoughts that incessantly presented themselves in the same guise, and went round and round in the same order, his brain grew numb and he remained a long while motionless, almost unconscious, taking a breath now and then, wearily, waking up confused, aware only of the dry burning sensa-

tion in his eyes, baffled by the darkness of the room.

Then the openings between the curtains began to grow light. Gradually, gradually, the slender beams of humid dawn began to glitter in the dark, **and** turn to gold—the sun!

From the bed, hands clasped behind his neck, he stared at the openings. Already carts were passing ceaselessly up and down the street, and it was as though they were passing through his head. As he lay pervaded by the warmth of the bed and of the room, his spirit barely conscious, he saw them rumble by out there in the street, on the other side of the curtains. Beyond the darkness of the room was another day . . . with its tasks. . . . The workmen, sitting one next the other on the curb, are waiting for the great door of the tannery to open. And now the bell rings, and they come in, in twos and threes, some in good spirits, others taciturn, bundles of sticks under their arms. Old Scoma there, never a word out of him . . . his daughter . . .

"My daughter too! My daughter . . . worse than his! For old Scoma's daughter did not betray, she was betrayed . . . and now . . . disgrace . . . misery . . .

He jumped from the bed, on the point of running to Marta's room to seize her by the hair, drag her through the house, and strike her till the blood ran.

Two knocks at the door, timid knocks.

"Who is it?" he cried, with a start, and held his breath to hear. . . .

"I . . ." sighed a voice behind the door.

"Go away! I don't want to see anybody!"

"If you need . . ."

"Go away! Go away!"

And he heard his wife's steps going softly **down** the hall. He followed her in his mind's eye **into** the other rooms. Where was *she*? What was she doing? Could she be brazen enough to dare look her mother in the face, and her sister? And what had she to say for herself? Shameless one, shameless, shameless!

The thought of her, his curiosity about her, one might almost say the need he felt to see her weep, trembling, before his eyes, on her knees imploring the forgiveness he would not grant, kept him in a fever all day. The room was still in darkness, for he had even come to feel a horror of the few rays of light that came in through the cracks, hurting his eyes every time he passed by the window in his restless pacing up and down.

During the afternoon he consented to let his younger daughter in. After opening the door he lay down on the bed again.

"Close the door, quickly V

Maria obeyed, and feeling her way to the table beside the bed, set down a cup of broth.

"Do you feel ill, father?"

"I don't feel anything," he replied harshly.

Maria, sighing softly, sat down at the foot of the bed, holding a napkin between her hands.

He raised himself on one elbow, trying to see his daughter in the dark.

Maria had never been the favourite child. She had grown up in Marta's shadow, one might say, and it almost seemed as though, of her own choice, she had taken it upon herself to provide a contrast to her sister, so as to bring out by her own unassuming plainness the latter's talents, and spirit, and beauty. No one had ever paid any attention to her, nor had she ever complained, for she, too, was completely subdued by Marta's pervasive charm. And so the girl's thoughts and feelings remained locked up in her, for no one, scarcely, ever asked her to reveal them. Neither her father nor her mother, it seemed, had yet realized that she was grown up, a woman now. Not beautiful, nor especially attractive; but from her eyes and voice there breathed such sheer goodness of heart, and there was such a timid grace in all she did, that, irresistibly, she won good will and affection.

⁴ 'Maria," her father, still in the same position, called out hoarsely.

She ran to the bed, and suddenly felt herself caught in his arms and pressed close to him, her head held to his breast. And clasped in this embrace they wept together, without a word, a long time.

"Go away, go away . . ." he said at last, in anguish. "I don't want anything . . . I want to stay alone. . . ."

She obeyed, still trembling from this unexpected burst of tenderness.

CHAPTER IV

MARIA had given up to Marta the small bedroom the latter had slept in as a girl. Not a thing had been changed in it; Maria had not added a single possession of her own to the objects already there.

The quaint old wardrobe still stood against the wall, the rustic paintings on its panels improved rather than harmed by age. And there was grandmother's work-table, its veneer scorched and cracked since that evening long ago when she had dropped the lamp on it, coming within an ace of setting fire to her skirts. And there, beside the brass bed, a glass holy water font, and under it, a bit of palm tied with a faded pink ribbon. And the holy water with which Maria devotedly filled it. Above the bed, an ivory crucifix fastened on a concave slab under the black cornice, the very same ivory crucifix that had once nodded its thorn-crowned head at her and Maria as they stood praying before it for their mother, when the latter had been laid low by a sudden illness.

Not that Marta was superstitious or ever had been. But she had never forgotten the signal favour once accorded to her, nor her amazement

when, a while later, she found out that her sister too had, with her own eyes, seen the Christ on the crucifix bend his head in sign that their prayers would be granted.

Hallucinations, of course! But just the same, why didn't she dare now raise her eyes and look at the sacred image above the bed?

Wasn't she innocent really? Had she so far forgotten herself as to fall in love with Alvignani? Preposterous! How could anyone believe such a thing? If she was to blame, it was for not having known how to put a stop to Alvignani's letters as she should have done. She had in a sense rejected them . . . but in such a foolish way—by replying! . . . Just the same she didn't feel that she had incurred the slightest degree of guilt towards her husband.

The only portion of that furtive correspondence which she had read with any interest was the part dealing with the problem confronting her conscience—a problem she had gravely and ingenuously described in her replies to those first letters of his,—letters over-philosophical, alas! in spite of all their subtilized sentimentality'

To the words of endearment that here and there dropped from his pen she had paid no attention, or else she had laughed at them as at quite superfluous, but innocuous, gallantries. A purely sentimental and almost literary discussion had followed between them. It had lasted almost

three months and—yes, it was true that in the idle solitude to which her husband abandoned her, she had found some pleasure in it. She had written her replies with as much care for form and phrase as though she had been preparing a school essay. Eeally, she was very proud of that intellectual duel she had been carrying on in secret with such a distinguished adversary—lawyer of note as he was, greatly admired and made much of by his townspeople, who were actually on the point of electing him to the Chamber of Deputies!

And then her husband bursting into the room while she was reading the letter in which, for the first time, Alvignani had ventured to address her with the familiar "tu"—the scene that followed, the violence of it, all the more astounding and terrifying to her in that, while she had been reading the letter she had felt so calm and indifferent • . . "innocent," as she put it.

Mightn't it happen to any woman not positively unattractive to be stared at with searching persistence by some stranger or other? If she were totally unprepared for such an experience, she would probably be distressed by it. If aware of her charms, it might give her pleasure. . . . But could any honest woman be persuaded to believe in her heart that this moment of either distress or of pleasure constituted an offence . . . even though she might for a moment dwell in imagination on the interest aroused, might even catch a

fugitive glimpse of some other life, some other love, that destiny might have brought her? . . . But the sight of familiar things around her called her back, reminding her of her actual station, her duties . . . and everything ended there! . . . Moments, nothing more . . . but didn't we all have moments when strange thoughts flashed through our minds, gleams of madness, thoughts without sequence, thoughts we could not confess to, thoughts apparently issuing from a mind different entirely from that we habitually think of as our own! And then these flashes cease troubling us; the monotonous dull shadow, or it may be, the calm light to which we are accustomed, is unbroken as before.

Yes. But would it be easy to find any other woman who, like Marta, would without knowing how exactly, suddenly find herself caught, enveloped in a net? How in the world could she, startled and terrified as she had been when Alvignani threw down that first letter from his window, tormented for days by doubts as to how she would prevent him from repeating the indiscretion—how in the world could she, honest daughter of honest parents, have gone so far without knowing it? How many foolhardy risks that man had taken when he threw down that first message, and how many afterwards! She was aware of them now for the first time, and for the first time offended by them. The curtains of the windows opposite—

why they never had any rest at all! Now they were being pulled up, and now suddenly pulled down. And then sudden vanishings from the window, signalings with head and hands. . . . Ah, she had been able to laugh at him then, to laugh at this man, already middle-aged, already a personage in the town, who yet, in her eyes, made himself so ridiculous, so childish! . . . But what could she have done to make him stop troubling her? A word to her father, to her husband, why, that would have been madness. . • . She was exasperated, disheartened; just the same, her eyes were always turning to those windows opposite, without her volition, almost as though, in some strange manner, they were tied to something there. . . . She went out a great deal to escape that childish temptation. For days at a time, she would stay at her parents', making Maria play for her—the same thing, always, a melancholy old barcarole.

"Well, Martaf . . ."

Buried in the recesses of the divan, she would answer plaintively, and with vague eyes:

"I am far away . . . far away. . . ."

Maria would burst out laughing; her innocuous laughter rang now in Marta's ears. So many other impressions came back too! She let her thoughts follow them. For instance, her mother coming into the room, asking how her husband was.

"Just as usual," she would answer.

"Are you happy, daughter?"

"Yes."

That was not true. Not that she had anything to complain of really as to his conduct. But in the bottom of her heart there was a sense of hostility, not clearly defined, nor recently awakened. It went back to that first day of their engagement. Scarcely sixteen, she had been taken out of school, taken away from the studies she was pursuing with such fervour. And Rocco Pentagora had been presented to her as her future husband. A vague sense then of oppression; but it had been driven back from her consciousness, smothered, you might say, by the sage reflections of her parents who had seen in rich young Pentagora—and he was a personable boy too!—a desirable match for their Marta. . . . Yes, yes; and she had repeated, as though they were her own, these sage remarks of her father and mother, to her school friends when she went back to take leave of them; just as though, from the little girl that she was when she left them, she had suddenly become an old woman, experienced in all the ways of the world.

The walls of her small bedroom still preserved here and there some dates she had scrawled on them as records of school triumphs or naive festivities among her small girl friends, or in the family circle. On all the humble objects in her

room, as on the walls themselves, it seemed as though time had gone to sleep and everything there had preserved the fragrance of the breath she had breathed on it in these early years.

Again she began ransacking the memories of her childhood. . . . How many times, standing this way, with eyes intent, wandering in spirit, she had listened to the patter of the first raindrops on the window-panes; how many times, with a sense of subdued pleasure, she had stood in this low-ceilinged room, watching the whitish, melancholy light that presaged approaching frosts, the end of cloudy autumn, the sudden chill that comes on wintry nights just before dawn? . . .

Maria, amazed by her sister's calm, was staring at Marta, scarcely believing her eyes, hurt by the indifference with which, seemingly, her sister accepted the disaster, just as though the tempest had not passed over her own head. "And yet she knows what a state father is in all on her account!" thought Maria, almost weeping with the distress it caused her not to see her sister as she would have preferred to see her—that is to say, contrite and inconsolable, overcome with anguish, as on the first days of her return to her parents' home.

No. Marta wept no more. After having confessed everything to her mother, everything, to the smallest details, even her most intimate and secret feelings, she had hoped that her father at

least, if not her husband, would be just towards her and alter his resolve about not setting foot out of his house. That determination of his was for her, so far as the town was concerned, a punishment even harder to bear than the one her husband, with so little justification, had tried to inflict on her by driving her out from under his roof!

He could have chosen no more effective way of confirming her husband's accusations . . . he was doing her an irremediable injury. Was that what he meant to do?

Anxiously, she asked her mother if she had imparted the confession Marta had made to her to her father. "Yes," said her mother.

"Well?"

"Immovable."

From that moment on she had shed no more tears. The feelings she had had before vanished completely. Others had changed beyond recognition. In the general shifting and chaos within her, the rage she held in check hardened to a cold scorn, to a mask of contemptuous indifference for the grief of mother and sister. Instead of condemning their husband and father for his blind head-strong injustice, they showed nothing but concern for him and for the injury to his health, just as though that were her fault!

And then Marta would ask Maria for news of some friend or other who used to call on her

mother; and to Maria, answering her questions with evident embarrassment, she would exclaim with a strange smile:

"Of course, no one will want to come to see us now. . . ."

So everything was to end up this way, and for no reason? Was she to remain imprisoned in stifling air, in darkness, and mourning, until she died?

His wife and daughters had removed into the rooms farthest away from the one into which Francesco Ajala had locked himself. Not a voice nor a sound reached his ears as he sat in the arm-chair at the foot of the bed looking at the light coming through the crack under the dark door, listening intently for cautious steps on the other side of the partition of the adjoining room, trying to guess who it was going by on tiptoe. . . . It wasn't *she*, no, of course not. . . . It was Agata . . . Maria . . . the servant. . . .

"And the tannery"—his wife attempted one day to remind him. "Do you want everything to go to wrack and ruin?"

"Everything! Everything!" he replied. "' We can all starve to death!"

"And Maria? Isn't she your daughter too? Why should poor Maria pay such a penalty?"

"And I?" Ajala shouted with a frightful scowl, as he jumped up and stood in front of his wife.

"Penalty? Why should the penalty fall on me? You insisted upon it!"⁹

He checked himself, and sat down again; then he went on, sombrely:

"Send for your nephew, Paolo Sistri. I'll ask him to take over the management of the tannery. There's no cause to be proud now. He wanted to marry Marta once. Well, let him take her. . . . Everybody can have her now."

"Oh, Francesco!"

"Enough! Send for Paolo. Go away I!"

From Paolo Sistri, the son of a sister, now deceased, of Signora Agata's, the three women received news of Rocco Pentagora's exploits. He had, it seemed, started off with Professor Blandino and Madden, the day after the scandal, in search of Alvignani. The latter, when overtaken at Palermo, had at first refused to accept the challenge, had even succeeded in persuading Blandino to urge Pentagora to withdraw it. But then Rocco had attacked him publicly so as to force him to fight. The duel had taken place and young Pentagora had come out of it with a long gash on his left cheek. Just three days ago he had come back to town with a woman of the streets, had taken her home with him, had made her put on Marta's clothes, and, while the whole community hummed and buzzed with indignation, persisted in making a spectacle of himself and

his companion, walking and driving about with her and flaunting the bawd, thus arrayed, in the faces of his townspeople.

Well, after this news, was her father still not going to make any move! Didn't he see what an indignity had been put upon her by that vile husband of hers? Wasn't he ashamed to lend any support to that man's infamous condemnation of her!

Marta, incessantly swept with scorn and rage, was forced to make violent efforts to contain herself before her mother and sister, who, poor things, looked more and more grief-stricken from day to day, and more despondent and hopeless.

"But why are you crying, Maria?⁵" she asked her sister one morning with a derisive smile, as the latter came into her room, eyes reddened with weeping.

"Father . . . you know . . ." answered Maria with difficulty.

"Oh," sighed Marta. "But what can you do about it? Perhaps he is resting. Anyway he isn't hurting anyone. . . ."

Arms and throat bare, for she had taken off her blouse, she stood in front of the mirror, drawing the tortoise-shell combs from her hair. It fell in fragrant ripples over her as she threw back her head and shook the heavy handsome mane. Then she sat down, and her round shoulder, white and gleaming as though polished, showed through the

long tresses which had parted to flow down back and breast. On the white flesh a violet mole that had come slowly with the years, a star, from the scapula. It was Maria who had first discovered it, when the two sisters were still sharing the same bed.

"Come, brush my hair, Maria'

CHAPTER V

TALL, gaunt, with oddly elongated legs, a white face sprinkled with freckles, and tufts of reddish hair on throat and chin, Paolo Sistri came every evening to submit his report of the day's work at the tannery to Uncle Ajala for his approval.

Half an hour later he would emerge, discouraged and confused, from the room occupied by the obstinate prisoner. To Aunt Agata, and Maria, anxiously awaiting him, he would invariably answer, invariably bending his head a little to one side:

"He says it's all right/⁹

But apparently he was neither convinced nor satisfied by the approbation expressed. He seemed to suspect his uncle of praising him in mockery. Throwing himself into a chair, he would breathe in all the air he could hold and then softly blow it out through his nose, mournfully shaking his head as he did so.

Henceforth, absorbed by his duties as manager of the family affairs, he renounced all his earlier pretensions to being regarded as a suitor. At first

he betrayed acute embarrassment in Marta's presence. But little by little he recovered his composure. Whenever he had anything to say, however, he usually addressed it to Maria or to Agata. In a confusing flood of words he would narrate all the day's vicissitudes, sinking back into his chair at the end of each paragraph, rolling his eyes about, sweating and swallowing hard. Every sentence in his involved discourse either dangled, unfinished, in the air, or suddenly evaporated in an exclamation. If, however, any one of them had the misfortune to flow on to an end without fatality, he would repeat it three or four times before taking up the task of spinning out another.

His aunt gave every indication of listening to him attentively, nodding at almost every word, and often, when he had done, she would ask him to stay to supper, remembering that now he had no one at home.

Almost always Paolo accepted. But How gloomy they were, those silent supper-times, interrupted only by the ceremony of sending some food to Ajala, still obstinately locked in his room, and chilled by Maria's expression when she returned, more and more distressed and saddened by every trip to his door.

With a strange expression in her eyes, half-derisive, half-disdainful, Marta watched everything that went on around her. Wasn't all this grief with which she was constantly being re-

proached an assumption of her guilt? . . . Often she would get up and in silence leave the table.

"Marta!"

Without answering, she would go lock herself up in her room. Then Maria from the other side of the door would implore her to come back to the supper table. It was with a strange mixture of pain and pleasure that she listened to those insistent pleadings. She would not open, nor would she answer. But no sooner had Maria, worn out by her useless supplications, gone away, than growing angry with herself for not having yielded, she would burst into tears. Then suddenly her remorse would turn into hate for her husband. Ah, if in those moments, with that rage in her heart, she could only have had him there within her reach! And sobbing, raving, she would wring her hands. Meanwhile, his child was growing in her womb. . . . In just a little while she would be a mother! Her condition filled her with horror; she fought it, fought herself, fell into convulsions. And these violent attacks left her spent, exhausted.

Sometimes Paolo Sistri would stay a little while after supper to keep his aunt and cousins company. When the table had been cleared away, a bit of the old family life would begin to glow there again, timidly, under the lamp. But then a voice would cry out in pain from lips grown almost fearful of the silence that had fallen upon the house

with that calamity. Every once in a while Maria would go on tiptoe to listen at her father's door.

"He is sleeping"—she would say, when she came back, in answer to her mother's anxious glance.

And her mother would close her eyes a moment on her anguish, and give a sigh as she took up her sewing again—baby clothes for the little creature soon to be born.

There was need of haste too. For until then no one had given a thought to preparing anything for the poor innocent who was coming into the world in these difficult conditions. A friend of earlier years with whom Signora Agata had, at her husband's orders, broken off all relations, had, from a distance, bethought herself of what was needed. . . .

Anna Veronica, this friend's name. When Signora Agata had known her first, the girl was living with her mother, and proud of supporting her by teaching in the primary school. A good many youths had paid court to her in those days, hoping to take advantage of her impulsively affectionate nature. But Anna, who was really eating her heart out waiting for some man to come her way on whom she might have bestowed ardent love and devotion, had always known how to defend herself. A bunch of flowers, the exchange of a few letters, some pretty speeches, dreams, perhaps, perhaps even a few kisses—and that was all.

Until, at last, she had fallen into a snare. . . . It was a short time after her mother's death that, in the most cowardly manner, she was taken advantage of by the brother of a rich friend, to whose house she often went after the interminable school hours, and where she was always a welcome visitor; for she was always ready to lend a helping hand with the sewing, and equally ready to amuse her listeners with her shrewd wit and ready tongue; often she stayed to supper, and sometimes spent the night.

That first misadventure was concealed with prudent self-interest by the parents of the young man so that nothing very definite about the affair had ever leaked out. Anna had wept in secret over her tarnished girlhood, her shattered future, and for a while had hoped the youth would try to make amends for his act. Many of her girl friends, either ignorant of what had happened or generously disposed, had kept up their friendship with her, and among these Agata Ajala, then but recently married.

A few years later, however, Anna Veronica had, to her misfortune, fallen in with another young man, a sickly and melancholy fellow, who had come to live next door to her, in three modest airy rooms looking out on a terrace overrun with flowers. He had asked her to marry him. Anna, out of sheer honesty, had confessed her misadventure. And then she had not known how, or

perhaps had not been able, to deny him the proof of love she had granted to another. . . . But this time, after he had repudiated and deserted her, there came a scandal. For this sentimental seducer of hers, when he suddenly removed from town, left her pregnant. Fortunately, the child had died almost at birth. Anna, dismissed from her school, had obtained a meagre little charity pension, thanks to which she had been able barely to keep body and soul together in the solitude and shame to which her suitor had abandoned her; and then she had bethought herself of God, and His forgiveness.

Signora Agata often saw Anna Veronica in church but pretended not to be aware of her. Anna understood, and bore her no ill-will. She kept her eyes raised and the prayers in both eyes and lips were but the more fervent, for now they were nourished with love for all beings, friends and enemies, as though she felt it her special duty to give the first example of that forgiveness she herself was seeking.

But when Marta's scandal occurred, Anna Veronica turned different eyes on Signora Agata the following Sunday at Mass. She knew that Marta was pregnant. And coming out of the church one day she humbly greeted her friend who was still at her prayers, and hastily dropping a little package in her lap, whispered:

"For Marta."

Signora Agata tried to call her back. But Anna barely turned to wave her hand to her, and was gone. In the small package Signora Agata found some crocheted lace, three embroidered bibs, and two caps. Tears filled her eyes as she looked at them, thinking of Anna Veronica.

Of all the women friends she had once had, not one had stood by her after the scandal. But here on the other hand, was this old friendship almost furtively renewing itself. When on the next Sunday she saw Anna Veronica in church, she sat down beside her after Mass, and they talked a long time, both women, moved to tears by more than one memory of their old friendship and the vicissitudes and misfortunes that had befallen them each in turn.

And now that Francesco Ajala was always locked in his room, couldn't Anna Veronica come, without his knowing anything about it, to stay with her old friend, and, as she used to do, help her with her sewing f

Of course she could! And there was Anna Veronica tiptoeing about in the room next to his. She would take off her long shawl, like those worn by penitents, and smiling at Marta and Maria—two very different smiles!——

"Here I am, children,⁵" she would say, under her breath. "What is there to do?"

In the evening Marta helped mother and friend with their work. And often, looking at the flannel

bands, and shirts, and baby jackets, and caps in the basket, her eyes would darken and fill with tears.

Meanwhile, speaking in a low muffled voice, Paolo was trying to make Maria understand the different machines in use in the tannery; the millstone that crushed the myrtle and sumach bark, the trestles on which the hides were spread out . . . or he would rehearse the latest gossip of the district. Elections were approaching. Gregorio Alvignani had come out as a candidate. The Pentagoras were spending slews of money fighting him. Manifestos, messengers, meetings, pamphlets. . . . As far as he, Paolo, was concerned, he didn't really know which candidate to vote for. Just because he didn't happen to side with the Pentagoras, he didn't want to support Alvignani's opponent; but he never under any circumstances would have voted for the latter; still, considering the importance of the position he was now occupying as manager of the tannery—there were all of sixty workmen employed there!—he didn't think he ought to stand aside from the contest altogether. . . .

Poor Maria pretended to be paying attention, so as not to hurt his feelings. Often this torture lasted two or three hours.

"I'm willing to wager that Paolo is in love with you," said Marta, smiling at her one night as they were going to bed.

"Marta!" exclaimed Maria, reddening even to the whites of her eyes. "How can you think of such things?"

Marta burst into a strident laugh.

"What do you expect? Don't you know that I'm a fallen woman?"

"Marta! Oh, Marta! For pity's sake!" moaned Maria, hiding her face in her hands.

Marta seized her by the arm, and shaking her violently, cried out, in a sudden rage:

"Do you want to drive me crazy with this tragedy you keep acting around me all the time? Are you in a conspiracy against me? Do you want to drive me away? Well then, say it once and for all! I'll go at once, this very moment. . . . Let me go, let me go. . . ."

She sprang towards the door, Maria vainly trying to hold her back. Her mother hurried into the room.

"Be quiet, Marta, for pity's sake! . . . Are you crazy? Where do you want to go?"

"I want to go down there to the street, to scream 'justice!' 'justice!' . . . Crazy, yes, crazy! . . ."

"Don't shout so. . . . Your father will hear you!"

"All the better! Let him hear me! Why does he stay locked up in his room? It's not for nothing he locked himself up in the dark. He makes himself blind so he can condemn me . . . without

seeing . . . without seeing. . . . No, I don't want to stay here any more. . . . I don't want to. . . . You'll be happier, all of you, when I am gone...."

A sudden tempest of weeping shook her. She fell into convulsions, and it was late that night when she finally ceased writhing and twisting on the bed and beating herself with her fists. Her mother and sister watched over her by turns.

CHAPTER VI

HER head thrown back on the headrest of the wide armchair, her shapely transparent hands resting on its arms, in an unshakeable lethargy, Marta would stare for hours at some article of furniture in the room; and it seemed to her that only now did the significance of these various objects in some strange way become clear to her. As she examined them, she could almost understand their existence, quite aside from her own relation to them. Then her eyes would rest once more on her mother, on Maria, on Anna Veronica, working away in silence there in front of her; and dropping her eyelids, she would heave a long sigh of weariness.

Slowly, very slowly, the days of unhappy waiting passed by. . . •

And at last, one morning, a little before noon, the pains of childbirth began.

Icy cold, her forehead damp with sweat, moving restlessly about the room, she found she could no longer hold off the moment of agony.

Terrified, she watched, while the midwife and another woman who had come to help, prepared the bed for her. A shudder of irritation ran

through her at every word of the sensible advice they placidly addressed to her.

In the adjoining room the young doctor, tall, pale, light-haired, summoned at the urgent request of the midwife who was fearful about the condition of her patient, was quietly unpacking and arranging forceps, bandages, bottles, rubber tubes, and other strange-looking instruments. Every time he set down some object or other, after carefully picking out the exact position it was to occupy on the table before him, he seemed to be saying, "Now, that's done!" And every once in a while he would prick up his ears and smile to himself at some wail from the woman in travail.

"Mother, I'm dying!" moaned Marta, ceaselessly rolling her head from side to side. "'Mother, I 'm dying! Oh, mother! Oh, mother!'"

And she clutched her mother's arm with all her might. Signora Agata smiled at her daughter with infinite pity through the tears streaming down her cheeks, her heart torn by the groans, now muffled, now sharp, and by the incessant wailing of the sufferer. Together they stayed in one corner of the room, as though that were the only place where the girl's pain might be a little diminished.

Maria had retired with Anna Veronica to a distant room, near her father's, and Anna, speaking as low as she could, was trying to quiet the girl's impatience and anxiety.

"When the little one toddles down the hall with his mother to knock on that door, calling 'Grandpa! Grandpa!'—and the smell of milk still in his voice,—ah, then you'll see whether the door opens or not! . . . Hell open it. . . . And then, my child, I'll not be able to come and see you any more! But that doesn't matter! I pray to Christ every night to grant you this. . . ."

Suddenly, reeling, screaming, arms upraised, frantic with pain and terror, Marta, undressed, dishevelled, burst into the room, followed by her mother and the two women helpers. Maria and Anna Veronica jumped to their feet horrified, and ran after her with the others. Marta was pounding on her father's door, beating head and hands against it, crying out, imploring him:

"Father! Open to me, father! Don't make me die this way! Open the door! I'm dying! Father, forgive me!"

The women, weeping and screaming, were trying to get her away. The doctor took her by the arms.

"All this is sheer madness, *signorai* Come away now! Your father will see you later. You must do as we tell you. . . ."

The women crowded around her, and almost carrying her, dragged her into the room where she was to be brought to bed.

Here, finally, they made her lie down.

A little while later, Maria, who had gone back

to listen before her father's door, came trembling, with frightened eyes, into her sister's room to call her mother. Together they stood outside his door, straining their ears.

"Do you hear? Mother, do you hear?"

From that room there came, through the door, a muffled, continuous sound, like the growling of an angry dog.

"Francesco!" cried Signora Ajala, as loud as she could.

"Father!" cried Maria, on the verge of bursting into terrified sobs.

No answer. Convulsively, the mother grasped the latch of the door and rattled and shook it. In vain. She waited. The wheezing continued, rising to something that sounded like a snarl.

"Francesco!" she cried again.

"Oh, mother! mother!" cried Maria, with foreboding, wringing her hands.

Signora Ajala threw her shoulder against the door; a second time; the third time the door yielded.

In the dark room Francesco Ajala lay, mouth to the floor, one arm extended, the other doubled under his breast.

The sharp scream that broke from her mother and from Maria was answered by a long wild howl from the room of the woman in travail. Anna Veronica came running, and the doctor. They threw open the blinds.

Francesco Ajala's body, inert, as though struck by a thunderbolt, was laid with useless caution on the bed, and propped up almost in a sitting position, supported by pillows.

"Stop screaming, for pity's sake, stop screaming, or you'll lose two of them," warned the doctor.

"He's gone, you mean!" cried Signora Ajala.

The doctor made a despairing gesture, and before hurrying back to his patient, ordered the servant to go as quickly as she could to find another doctor at the nearest drug store.

Maria, weeping, was with her handkerchief wiping away the blood that trickled from a small cut on her father's congested face. Ah, if that had been the only injury! She gave all her attention, she seemed to put all her devotion into stopping those few oozings of blood as though her father's life depended upon that and that alone. Her mother seemed for the moment beyond the control of reason. She insisted that her husband must speak to her, embraced him, and pressed his icy hands, already dead. Francesco Ajala, his face ashen, continued to make a muffled rattling sound, his mouth open wide, his eyes closed.

The other doctor arrived, a bald little man with a squint in one eye.

"Out of the way, please! What is it? Let me see. . . . Eh!" said he, in a voice made thin and nasal by some obstruction in his nose.

"Poor Signor Francesco! Ice, ice. . . . Here, at the drug store opposite, a mustard plaster, and a bladder. . . . Who can go? Eun, someone! Stand away from the bed . . . air, air! Poor Signor Francesco !"

Through the closed door there penetrated a prolonged cry, almost like that of a maniac, raving. The doctor turned abruptly to listen. For a moment everyone stood tense, startled.

"My poor daughter ⁹ Signora Agata moaned at last, bursting into sobs.

Then the other women began to cry and sob together.

The doctor looked about him in dismay, at a loss, scratched his skull with one finger, then sat down and clasping his hands across his belly began to twiddle his thumbs.

A tear slowly rolled down the dying man's furrowed cheek, and splashed into his thick grey moustache.

Every remedy proved vain. . . .

But the death agony lasted until evening. Nothing but that continuous, monotonous rattle gave evidence that a last remnant of life still lingered in that huge body, doubled up so that it sat almost erect in the bed.

It was already late when Signora Agata thought of Marta, and hurried to her room. She was startled, when she opened the door, by an odour of

ammonia and vinegar ' Had the birth already taken place!

Marta lay motionless, waxen, on the pillows, apparently lifeless. The woman who had come in to help was holding a compress in position, leaning over the patient, and the doctor, in his shirt sleeves, and extremely pale, was throwing wads of blood-stained cotton into a basin on the floor.

"In there," he said to the mother, motioning toward the next room.

Signora Agata, before going into the other room, silently, almost like an automaton, looked at her daughter.

"The little one . . . dead . . ." she whispered, to herself apparently, her voice toneless, as though it came from her lips alone.

The midwife in the next room showed her, wrapped in bandages, a poor little formless thing, livid, and fragrant with musk.

"Dead_____"

From the street below came the shrill sound of a bell, and the nasal, almost childish chorus of women in hurried procession:

Today and forever be praised,
God of our sacrament . . .

"The Viaticum," exclaimed the old midwife, crossing herself and kneeling in the middle of the room with the little dead creature in her arms.

Signora Agata ran out in haste to the front hall.

The priest, already in his robes, pyx in hand, **and** a man who walked behind him, his eyes starting out of his head with terror, held the baldaquin. The sexton, carrying a small tabernacle, followed the priest to the room of the dying man. The women and children who came with the Viaticum knelt in the parlor, whispering to one another.

Francesco Ajala neither heard nor understood. He received extreme unction and the priest had not yet gone when he breathed his last.

Scarcely had the procession gone down to the street again when the sound of the bell and the women's chanting was drowned out by the din that came from a crowd of men and boys who, carrying a flag before them, were celebrating the election, as deputy, of Gregorio Alvignani.

CHAPTER VII

FOR three months, nearly, Marta hung between life and death.

Divine Providence, that illness, Anna Veronica used to say. Because, without it, the two poor women who had lost husband and father would certainly have gone mad. Instead of that, as they struggled desperately against an illness that seemed invincible, their lips, for all it seemed they were never to smile again, did actually smile—scarcely two months after the almost violent death of the head of the house—at the first signs of Marta's recovery.

Indefatigable, Anna, in spite of so many nights of watching by the bedside, now every morning brought the convalescent small perfumed pictures of saints, made of quilted cardboard dotted with gold, and with golden aureolas.

"Here," she would say, "keep these in an envelope under the pillow. They'll make you well. They've been blessed⁹

And she showed her patient the two patron saints of the town, Saints Cosimo and Damiano, with their long robes flowing down to their feet, crowns on their heads, and the martyr's palm in

their hands. Two diligent miracle-workers, these. . . . Their feast day was soon to be celebrated throughout the region, and Anna had offered them a gift if only they would cure her friend. . . .

"These two can do more for you than your bald old doctor, with his one eye on Christ and the other on Saint John," she would say.

And she would imitate the doctor, mimicking his voice, grotesquely nasal from a perennial catarrh. " 'I suffer from lithiasis, *signora* P

" 'What might that be V

" 'Gall stones, *signora*, gall stones.' "

Marta, from her bed, would turn a wan smile on Anna, and even Maria and her mother would smile too.

In the evening, before going home, Anna told her beads with Agata and Maria in Marta's room.

The sick girl would listen to the murmur of their prayers as she lay there, the room faintly lighted by a lamp with a green shade; she would watch the three kneeling figures, and often, while they recited the litany, she would answer Anna Veronica's invocation:

"*Ora pro nobis.*"

The sense of serenity, of renewal, of lightness that comes with convalescence failed her, however, as night drew on. It seemed to her that the feeble light subdued by the green shade was too small to cope with the darkness invading the house; and she felt a sombre anguish, a despairing bewilder-

ment, a sense of emptiness, and dismay, creeping in from the other rooms through which her thoughts strayed shuddering. Suddenly, she would draw them back, and again fix her eyes on the light, comforted by its homely cheer. In the shadows out there, in the darkness of the other rooms, her father had disappeared. He wasn't there any more. There was no one there. . . . Only shadows, the dark. A crushing weight he had been for her, that was true! But at what a price she had freed herself from that weight. . . . This sombre anguish, and despairing bewilderment of hers, the sense of emptiness, and dismay, didn't all that come from the thought of him?

"Ora pro nobis."

Often she went to sleep with the prayer on her lips. Her mother lay beside her, in the same bed. But she too tried vainly to sleep, made wakeful nightly, not only by the ever-present and terrible memory of her husband, but also by the constant anxiety her nephew, Paolo Sistri, on whom now depended the whole existence of the family, caused her.

After his uncle's death, Paolo no longer came punctually every night to give an accounting. His aunt had to send for him two or three times in order finally to have news of the tannery; and when at last he presented himself he seemed more discouraged and confused than ever.

One evening he arrived with his head bandaged up.

"Oh, *Dio*, Paolo, what have you done to yourself?"

Oh, nothing. In one of the rooms at the tannery, in the dark, someone (perhaps on purpose) had forgotten to close the . . . what do you call it! . . . oh, yes, the cover on the trap-door, and as he went by, pum! down he went. The what-do-you-call-it—that wooden thing—oh, the sluice ladder—had fallen . . . it was a miracle he hadn't killed himself. But everything was going on well enough at the tannery. Still, perhaps . . . look . . . it would really be a good idea to try one of those new French tan-vats . . . one of the kind . . . see here now! . . . this is how they work. . . . You pulverize the what-do-you-call-it . . . the tan bark, and the cork, and the beech; but with our method, pouring the nut-gall into the hazel bark water. . . .

"For mercy's sake, Paolo!" his aunt interrupted him, hands upraised, "let's not try anything new now! The tannery was doing well enough for us as long as my poor husband, God rest his soul. . . ."

"Well, what has that to do with it?" answered Paolo, quite satisfied with his own wisdom now that his uncle was no longer there. "It's quite a different process. You see . . . it's like this! You take . . . what is it you use first . . . oh,

yes, boiling water. Well, now they use cold water . . . wait a minute . . . cold water with holm-oak, or else. . . ."

And so he would go on, getting his words all mixed up, and then going back to the very beginning so as to be sure that his aunt understood about this famous French tan-vat.

"Have I made it quite clear!"

"No, my dear boy. Perhaps it's my fault. You must be patient. I'll try to follow. . . ."

"You just let me manage it."

And really it wasn't his fault if things went wrong. Night and day he was in a constant bustle; during the day at the lime-pits to watch the mixing of the tanning liquids, and then at the vats for the baths; then at the trestles, overseeing the skinning and cleaning of the hides—in ceaseless rounds; and at night, up there in the office, poring over the books, casting up the accounts. About four o'clock he would hear the cocks crow, • . . Why, his aunt had not the slightest notion about how he sat up! . . . Word of honour, the cocks, at four o'clock. . . . And he not in bed yet! The ink in the inkwell had no respect for any of his ten fingers; it even made itself quite at home on his nose and forehead.

"Too bad she isn't here to see!" he would fume, sprawling in his shirt-sleeves, with his head thrown back on the head-rest of his uncle's big armchair as though he expected to find the figures

of the accounts perching among the spider-webs on the rafters. Absently, he blew towards them the smoke he drew in great mouthfuls from his charred pipe:—/////.

Out on the street meanwhile, and in the huge building, the silence of the tomb. The bare age-yellowed walls reflected the candle flame, that wavered at every puff Paolo gave.

"Puah! That's for——'s face!"—and he would name one of his creditors, as he spat at the wall.

A spider scuttled down from the ceiling, very cautiously, and as though frightened by the light, staggering along on its eight long thin legs. Paolo had the same horror of these creatures that women usually have of mice. He would suddenly jump to his feet, raise a slipper, and paff!—crush the spider with the slipper sole; then, his face grimacing with disgust, he would stand awhile gazing at the victim thus plastered against the wall.

After his uncle's death he had pitched his tent definitely at the tannery. He ate there and slept there; and he never permitted anyone to enter that mouldering room of his. He got his own meals, made his own bed, did everything himself. But nothing ever went as it should! While he was looking for his knife and fork, the meat would burn on the stove. If ever he wanted a drink, he would find drops of grease floating around on **his** wine. Who had put oil in his glass!

"Puahl . . ."

And he would remain with his tongue hanging out and his face distorted with disgust.

But that was nothing, all that. He had other troubles . . . fighting the whole flock of crows that had alighted on the tannery when his uncle died, for instance! With truly ferocious zeal he defended the poor widow's interests. The courtyard of the tannery resounded with the noise of his violent arguings. But in the end he always had to give in and pay, and pay again. Meanwhile the sales diminished from one day to another, while debts and claims increased daily. The leather dealers went back on their orders, demanded their hides back, and took them elsewhere. His aunt, unaware of his difficulties, asked him every first of the month for the same amount of money she had always received before, just as though the business was going on as well as ever. As he lacked courage to reveal to her the wretched plight it had actually fallen into, he resorted to all sorts of expedients so as to have some money for her, at least, every month.

Marta had left her sickbed at last, and, with her mother and Maria on either side of her, was already taking a few faltering steps about the room, from the armchair to the foot of the bed, and even as far as the looking-glass on the wardrobe.

"Heavens, what a sight I am !"

Raising an arm from about Maria's neck, with

a tremulous white hand she lightly smoothed the hair about her forehead, looking into her reflected eyes and smiling with almost frightened pity at her poor lips burned with the heat of so many days and nights of fever. Then she went to sit down in the leather armchair near the window. Anna Veronica came in and in that gentle sweet way of hers told her about the May vespers in honour of the Madonna—the cool church, fragrant with roses, and the benediction, and last, the hymns and the organ accompaniment; and then the last golden rays of the sun streaming into the church through the high wide windows open at the top; and a little stray swallow fluttering terrified among the arches, while the other swallows, following one another in excited swarms, called and chattered outside.

Marta was listening, her mind straying, almost adrift from her senses.

"We'll take you there, we'll go all four of us together, before the month is out. . . . Oh, yes, you'll be well enough, never fear!"

"No," she said, "that wouldn't be possible. I know the church is only a few steps away. But I can't even stand yet . . . I can't even stand. . . ."

The third Sunday in May, when Mass was over, Anna ran in, exultant, from the church.

"It's for you, for you, Marta! Brought out just for you!"

⁴ 'What is?" asked Marta, looking up, almost dismayed.

"The Madonna! The Madonna! For you, do you hear! The daughters of Mary are bringing her to you. Do you hear the drum? The Madonna is coming to your house to see you!"

On Sundays in May, after the service in the church, the devout carried a little wax Madonna in a glass case about the town to the people whose names had been drawn.

"Oh, how can that be? How can they?" Marta was saying, startled as she heard the singers **and** the roll of the drum coming nearer.

"I took a number for you every Sunday. And today I knew it would happen! Something kept saying to me, 'Marta⁹'s number will be drawn this time!' and it was! When I heard it, I cried out so loud in the church that everybody turned around. Here's the Madonna coming to see you. . . . Here she is, here she is, *Vergine santa!*"

A delegation of little girls came into the room, all wearing a medal hanging from a blue ribbon around their necks. Then the deacon of the church entered carrying the wax Madonna under the glass case. In his great blackened rough hands the statue looked even more frail. Out on the street the drum was rolling noisily.

The little girls habitually all wore the same smile as they looked and listened to the exclamations of joy and gratitude with which the devout

welcomed the little Madonna. At sight of Marta sitting in her chair, pale, confused by a commotion too over-powering for one in her feeble condition, they remained disconcerted awhile, then drew near her chair, and began to chatter, repeating one another's words.

"Now you'll surely get better. . . . Yes, the Madonna. . . . You don't have to see the doctors any more • . . just throw your medicine away. . . ."

The rolling of the drum had ceased meanwhile. Signora Ajala gave the drummer and the sexton some small change, and a short while later the house was left to its usual occupants.

Marta was entranced by the little Madonna on her knees, and could find no words to express her admiration sufficiently, as she steadied the glass bell with her own waxen fingers.

"How beautiful! How beautiful she is, Maria!"

And actually, before the month had run out, she was able, accompanied by Anna Veronica, her mother, and sister, to go to church to give thanks to the Madonna for her recovery.

CHAPTER VIII

"T WANT, dear Jesus, to win your forgiveness, - '-' by confessing to your priest all the sins I have sinned against you. . . . I am a poor miserable creature to be able to forget you so easily, and an ungrateful sinner not to be able to live without offending you, my Father, and my beloved Saviour. Now that I see how guilty I am, I repent, and implore your merciful forgiveness. Weep, my heart, for having given offence to God, who suffered so for your sins! O Lord, receive this my confession; accept my contrite heart and touch it with your Grace, as I pray with our beloved Saint Catherine of Sienna, 'let there be no more worldliness, and no more sins within you, O my love, but faithfulness and obedience to His holy commandments,' in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, Amen."

Crossing herself, and closing her prayer book, Marta turned an anguished glance towards the confessional in front of which, on the opposite side, knelt an old woman, who had arrived before she did. Over here on this side, the wood of the confessional, carved with open-work tracings, and

worn smooth and yellow, bore the obscure imprint of many a sinful forehead. Marta noticed it, and with a shudder drew her long black shawl closer around her until it almost hid her face. She was very pale, and trembled as she waited.

The church, deserted now, was full of a mysterious stillness, an absorbing silence, more tangible even than the chill that hung, harshly immobile, and blended with incense, through all its shadowy length. The solemn emptiness of that sacred interior seemed to hang down from the enormous pillars and the wide arches, giving a sense of oppression in that semi-darkness. The whole central nave was filled by straw-seated chairs arranged in long rows along the dusty floor, its surface raised here and there by some worn ancient tombstone.

Marta was kneeling on one of these humble tombs, waiting for the aged penitent to surrender her place in the confessional.

How many sins the old woman had, it seemed! Her own really, or those of her poverty? And what might they be? The old confessor, his face impassive, was listening through the openings in the carved woodwork.

Marta lowered her eyes and, to while away the time, tried to decipher the partly erased inscription on the stone bearing the worn effigy; under it lay a skeleton. . . . What did the name matter any more? Yet how much more secure and pro-

tected was the repose of death in the solemn peacefulness of the church!

The two wings of chairs reached out to the columns supporting the choir-stalls. Behind these columns were two long benches. As she came in, Marta had noticed an old peasant sitting on one of them, absorbed in his prayers, his arms crossed on his breast, his eyes dried with the years and deep-sunken. Ah, those gnarled, earth-stained hands, that scrawny neck, its flaccid flesh marked from chin to collar-bone by a black furrow, those worn temples, that narrow forehead, with wrinkles running up to the bristling white hair! Now and then the old man would cough, and the hollow sound re-echoed in the silence of the deserted church.

Through the high wide windows the pale golden splendour in which day was dying, amid the deafening chatter of the swallows, streamed on to the frescoes of the arches.

Marta had come to church at Anna Veronica's suggestion. But already, after that long wait there on her knees like a beggar, she was beginning to see herself in an extremely painful light. She could understand such humility in Anna,—for Anna it was the source of such serene sweetness! But Anna had really sinned; that was why she had sought and found comfort in her faith, and a refuge in the church. But in her own case? She had the absolute certainty that she would never

have failed of her duty as a wife, not because she considered her husband worthy of such respect, but because she deemed it unworthy of herself to betray him. No flattery would have prevailed on her to make the slightest concession. . . . But people seeing her there in church, humbly prostrating herself in this fashion would naturally suppose that she had accepted the punishment visited on her as just, and that she was kneeling before God to ask help and protection from Him, recognizing that she no longer had the right to stand up and face people, head high. But neither her undeserved punishment, nor the injury to her father—for which she refused to admit her responsibility—were the real reason for her yielding to Anna's persuasions, and coming to church to confession. . . . No, she came for her own sake—to obtain light and peace from God. But what was she going to say to that old confessor in a little while? What ought she to repent of? What had she done, what sin had she committed to deserve all these punishments, this suffering and disgrace, the injury to her father and to her child, the ceaseless mourning in her home, and, perhaps, bitter poverty tomorrow? Should she make all sorts of accusations against herself? Repent? If she had done harm, without wanting to, from lack of experience, hadn't she paid for it all at a fantastically high price? Of course, the priest would bid her accept, with love and resignation, the

punishment God visited upon her. But was it really from God? If He was just, and could see into one's heart. . . . Didn't it come from men rather . . . instruments of God? . . . But does God tell them the limits within which they should punish! No, they go too far, either through meanness of spirit, or through a mistaken zeal. . . . Was one humbly to accept a sentence, without applying one's reason to it?—and then humbly forgive? Could she forgive? No! No!

Marta raised her head and looked about at the church as though suddenly she felt uneasy there. That silence and solemn peace, the height of the arches, the small confession box, the old woman on her knees, and the motionless impassive confessor suddenly melted away from her rebellious spirit, like some empty dream into which she had strayed while her consciousness drowsed, but that now, as she roused once more to the harsh and painful realities of her life, melted away before her.

She got up, still perplexed. Her legs faltered under her, and in a kind of dizziness, she raised one hand to her eyes, and with the other steadied herself on the back of a chair. On the bench below, under the choir stalls, she could still see the old man, in the same position, arms crossed on his breast, absorbed in his prayers, ecstatic.

His image haunted her to her own door.

That was the faith she would have needed! But

she couldn't have it. She couldn't forgive. Inside her skull her brain felt shrunken, like a dry-sponge. She couldn't squeeze a single thought from it that would give her any comfort or even a moment's peace.

A fantastic sensation, of course. Just the same it caused her a real anguish that vainly tried to find some relief in tears. And how many tears she had shed, *Biol* But now not even crying did her any good. There was always that tightness in her throat, irritating, oppressing her. She was watching an evil fate take shape there around her, a fate that just a while ago had been an empty shadow—a breath would have dispelled it: then it grew hard, crushing her, crushing her home, everything; and she was powerless against it. The fact, the thing done . . . something she could not alter, enormous for everyone, enormous even for her though she still felt this *fact* to be impalpable shadow, mist; nevertheless, it had *turned to stone*; and her father, who might, had he met it with proud disdain, have caused it to vanish, had, on the contrary, allowed himself to be its first victim. Was she perhaps changed in some way after that fact? Why, no; she was the same, she felt she was the same; so much so that often it seemed to her the catastrophe could not really have taken place. But now she too was hardening, turning to stone, beginning not to feel anything any more; neither sorrow **for** her father's

death, nor compassion for her mother and sister, nor friendly affection for Anna Veronica: nothing, nothing!

Should she go back to the church? But why? She had tried to pray, and her prayer was but a meaningless movement of her lips; the sense of the words she was speaking escaped her. Often, during Mass, she would catch herself intently watching the feet of the priest on the altar stool, the splashes of gold on the chasuble, the lace of the missal; then, at the elevation of the Host, roused by the noise of the scraping chairs, and the silvery tinkling of the bell, she too would stand and then kneel, watching with amazement when some of her neighbours struck their breasts resounding blows and shed real tears. Why did they do that? %

To save herself from the senility in which her every thought and feeling seemed to be drowning, she endeavoured to take up some studying again, or at least some reading. As she opened her old abandoned books, an indescribable tenderness for them swept over her. Sweet memories lived again for her, almost throbbed with life before her eyes; the school, her classes, the benches, the teacher's desk, she saw them all; and one by one, the professors who followed one another in the round of lessons; and then the garden where she and her companions spent their recess, the chattering and laughter, the walks up and down the narrow paths

arm in arm with her dearest friends; then the clang of the bell, and the schoolroom again; the principal, his assistant . . . rivalries . . . punishments. . . . On the little table tinder her eyes was a small book, a geography text; she turned over some of the pages; on the margin of one of them she found a sketch, and under it, in her hand:

"Mita, we'll start for Pekin tomorrow!"—Mita Lumia. . . . What an abyss now between her and this school friend of hers!

Why was it that in some minds not the slightest aspiration ever seemed to stir, not the slightest ambition to excel others even in the smallest thing!

She had noticed this so often in her school companions, she noticed it in her sister, in that good kind Maria. Her husband belonged to this herd too, and, what's more, was content, even glad to belong to it. Ah, if only she had gone on with her studying! By now. . . .

She recalled the encouragement and praise her professors had given her, and even . . . yes, even the flattering things *someone else* had said . . . when she replied to his letters . . . Alvignani. . . . What was it she had written to him, discussing woman's place in society! . . . "She combines with her extraordinarily keen senses"—that was Alvignani to her—"a penetrating observation of reality. . . ." How she had laughed at this praise

and at that " combines with her extraordinarily keen senses! . . ." Perhaps it was well put . . . certainly he was an unusually cultivated man . . . but his style—when he wrote at least—was, die thought, too academic; but when he talked . . . Oh, at Eome, with him! . . . if only they had not chained her up as they did! . . . At Borne, as the wife of Gregorio Alvignani, in more spacious surroundings, quite different surroundings, illumined by the light of intelligence . . . far, far away from all that mud. . . .

She bent her head over her books, animated suddenly by all the old fervour and, seemingly, by an irresistible need to nourish, no matter how, an aspiration which could not apparently withstand the slightest blow from reality: for instance, the creaking of the door whenever she went into the other rooms where her mother and sister were, in their black clothes. . . .

She knew nothing of what was going on in the family. She had noticed that her mother and Maria looked at her as though they were trying to hide something from her—an impression, a feeling merely, on her part. Perhaps they didn't like her remaining all day long in seclusion? They were excusing her perhaps, or pitying her? Her mother's eyes were often red with weeping; Maria grew thinner and thinner, was now actually drooping with her lanky height; and she had taken on an expression of bewildered grief that it hurt one

to see. To make her happy, Marta would say to her:

" Shall we go to church, Maria ?"

For her the question meant:

"Shall we go pray for father?"

"Yes" she would reply eagerly; and they would start out together.

One afternoon, as they were coming out of the church, they were waylaid by a small boy; sallow-faced and dirty he was, almost naked save for some filthy rags that fell in tatters on his thin, grimy legs. With one claw-like hand he grasped Marta's shawl and would not let go, as he looked up at her and implored her to help his father, a plasterer, who had fallen from the top of a wall at the factory.

"It's true," said Maria. "Yesterday he fell from a scaffold, and broke an arm and a leg."

"Come, come with me, you poor child!" said Marta, starting off.

"No, Marta," said Maria, looking pityingly at her sister; but suddenly she lowered her eyes as though, embarrassed, she had changed her mind.

"Why?" Marta asked.

"Nothing, nothing . . . let's go on," Maria answered hurriedly.

They reached the house and Marta asked her mother for some money to give the child.

"Oh, daughter! We haven't any even for ourselves. . . ."

"What do you mean!"

"It's true," her mother answered, weeping. "Paolo disappeared two days ago, no one knows where. . . . The tannery is closed; they've put seals on the door for the creditors. . . . That means we are ruined! You tell her, Maria. . . . Stay here, both of you. . . . I have to go to the lawyer's."

CHAPTER IX

BEFORE dawn the next day they were brusquely wakened by a fiendish uproar down on the street; shouts and disjointed exclamations flew through the darkness, and ear-splitting shrieks from the sea-horns.

"The fishermen," sighed Maria, nearly frantic with the din.

The feast-day of the patron Saints of the region. No one in the house had given it a thought.

Every year at daybreak on this day, up from the shore in a seething crowd came the so-called "fishermen"; that is to say, nearly all those who lived along the shore, not only those who were fishermen by their calling. To the inhabitants along the water's edge ancient tradition reserved the special honour of carrying in triumph about the city the bier of its two patron saints, who, as it happened, had suffered their first martyrdom in the sea, and therefore accorded their special protection to sea-farers.

The town was accordingly roused once every year by a noisy invasion like that of the sea itself in a tempest. Along the streets windows were

hastily flung open, bare arms waved in the openings and were suddenly withdrawn to give place to faces pallid with sleep, and heads wrapped in old shawls, caps, handkerchiefs.

Not one of the three unhappy women thought of getting up. They lay, eyes wide open in the darkness, and through the mind of each there passed a vision of those wild celebrants down in the street; the smoke and blood-red flame of the torches wavering in the wind, white figures dressed in shirt and drawers, a red sash around their waists, a yellow handkerchief tied around their heads, and either barefoot or wearing only stockings. So many times, in happier years, they had seen the *pescatori*. . . .

"When the noisy throng had passed by, the street relapsed into its nightly silence; but a short while later it came festively to life once more. Maria buried her face in her pillow and began to weep noiselessly, tortured by memories. . . .

Then the first shout of those whom the Saints had at some time miraculously assisted, and who were now walking without their shoes through the town. "The Saint of the Miracles, good Christians !"

They were boys, and youths, and full-grown men who, through the intervention of Saints Cosimo and Damiano—the populace made of the two one single Saint in two persons—had been saved from some peril or cured of some ailment,

and who, every year, as a thank-offering, went about through the region, in their stocking feet, dressed in white like the *pescatori*, and with a tray supported by a silk band passing over their shoulders. On the tray penny pictures of the two martyrs were spread out for sale.

"The Saint of the Miracles, good people V

They went into the houses to sell the pictures, and were rewarded by offerings of one or more gilded candles, or stuffed fowl, in fulfilment of promises to the Miracle-workers; and the offerings and the pennies they collected, they then turned in several times during the day, to the directors of the celebration, who had their headquarters in the little church of the Saints.

Besides the candles and the cakes, other more important offerings trooped ostentatiously to the church, to the rolling of drums—lambs, ewes, and sheep, also "stuffed," their snowy wool carefully brushed, and, carrying bags of grain, mules wearing gay saddle-cloths, bright-coloured ribbons hanging from their bridles.

It was still early when Anna Veronica arrived, dressed in black as usual, her long penitent's shawl wrapped around her. She wanted to fulfil the vow she had made during Marta's illness, and take to the church the two candles and the embroidered tablecloth she had promised.

And Marta was to go with her. In the confusion of those last days, after Paolo's flight, she

had forgotten to tell Marta about it the night before.

"Come, come, child, take courage! Vows must be kept."

Marta, locked within herself, wrapped in an obstinate silence, answered suddenly, as though she could bear no more:

"I'm not going . . . leave me alone! I'm not going!"

"What!" exclaimed Anna. "What are you saying?"

Hurt, she looked at her friend, and at Maria.

"As you will," she said, shaking her head.

"But who can help us?"

Marta sprang to her feet.

"So I must act as though I were grateful besides, is that it! Grateful for the mercies I have received, for getting well. . . ."

"But it is easy to die, child," sighed Anna Veronica, half closing her eyes. "If you are still alive, doesn't that seem to you a sign that God wants you to live!"

Marta did not answer. Perhaps the words her friend had spoken had answered a secret feeling of her own, and a secret question. She frowned, and moved towards her own room.

"It will also take your mind off other things," Anna added.

There was already a great crowd in the streets. From the fishing villages and the mountains,

from all the outlying country, people were pouring into the town in swarms now so dense as to be troublesome to themselves, so that smaller groups of five or six people would catch hold of one another by the hand to keep from being trampled; the women came gaily dressed with long embroidered shawls, or short capes of white, blue, or black velvet, with great embroidered handkerchiefs of cotton or silk on their heads or across their breasts, heavy gold circlets in their ears, necklaces, brooches, beads; the men,—peasants, sulphur-miners, fishermen — embarrassed and awkward in their stiff new clothes, and their hobnailed shoes.

Marta and Anna Veronica, hiding their tapers and the table-cover under their shawls, made their way as carefully as they could through the restless, noisy crowd that moved along seemingly without knowing where it was going.

Finally, near the church, they reached a square crowded with people. The uproar was tremendous and incessant, the confusion indescribable. All around the square, tents had sprung up, and tent-flaps were waving; the vendors were splitting their throats announcing their wares—toys, dried fruits, sweets; and everywhere, image-vendors, with their figures of painted plaster recalling the history of the barefoot witnesses so miraculously cured; toy-mongers, cracking their long, curling whips, or snapping tops off the string; and ice-

cream hawkers, their push-carts adorned with coloured lanterns and clattering glasses:

Freeze-your-heart! Freeze-your-heart!"

This cheering announcement was followed by a generous distribution of slaps among the most troublesome of the young rascals who followed the ice-cream carts like a swarm of persistent flies.

In contrast with the jovial bellowing of the vendors rose the mournful lament of a crowd of beggars on the steps of the church portico where the crowd was trying to elbow its way into the edifice. Marta and Anna Veronica, caught in the crush, the breath almost squeezed out of them, were carried along by the crowd until finally, without lifting a foot scarcely, they entered the dark church packed with curiosity seekers and the devout who had come to worship.

Deposited in the middle of the central nave the bier loomed enormous, its massive bulk iron studded, so as to enable it to withstand the bumps and blows to which it was invariably treated in that frenzied procession. On the bier the statues of the two Saints, almost identical in attitude, their heads made of iron, their tunics reaching to their feet, and each bearing a palm in his hand. At the back, on the left, between two columns under an arch of the nave, the Commission of the Festival makers stood or sat around a wide table, busily receiving the votive offerings of the pious—

tablets representing in crude fashion miracles obtained in the most unlikely and bizarre circumstances, tapers, altar decorations, legs, arms, breasts, feet, and hands, made of wax.

Among the directors of the festivities that year was Antonio Pentagora.

Luckily, Anna Veronica noticed him before she reached the table; she stood still, perplexed, startled.

"Stay here a moment, Marta. I'll go alone with the offerings."

"Why!" asked Marta, and Anna noticed that she was very pale.

"Nicola is here in the church," she added, lowering her eyes.

"And his father is over there at the table," said Anna, half in a whisper. "You'd better stay here. I'll hurry."

Niccolino had not foreseen that meeting with Marta. He hadn't seen her since the day before the break with his brother, and stood staring at her, wide-eyed; then softly he stole away, and mingled with the crowd, ashamed. He had always been very shy with her, perhaps because he wanted so much to have her treat him with the affection she would naturally have for a younger brother, for he had grown up without the petting of either mother or sisters. From the midst of that confusion of heads he tried to catch sight of her again without being seen: he succeeded, and

stood still watching her; then plunging into the crowd again, he managed to keep her in sight until he reached the door of the church. For a while he had neither eyes nor ears for the sights around him. Without knowing just how, he found himself once more in the midst of the crowded square, suffocating in the crowd, increased now enormously, and feverishly waiting for the bier to come out of the church. Above the dense mass of close-packed bodies there rose on every side, from cramped and craning necks, perspiring, apoplectic faces, furiously struggling for breath; some with an imploring, despairing expression in their eyes, and some with an air of merciless ferocity. The bells in the steeple rang out high above this ferment and the bells of the other churches answered from a distance.

Suddenly, the throng began to sway and move, impelled by a thousand opposing forces, with no heed to the violent pushings, bruises, or suffocation it might inflict in its progress, intent only on seeing.

"Here it comes! Here it comes! It's coming out!"

The women were sobbing, the air was rent with furious oaths as some of the men, maddened by the pressure around them, fought frantically against the crowd that prevented them from seeing what they had come there to see. The whole mass shouted in mounting delirium and the bells

answered, as though maddened by the howling of the mob.

The bier erupted with violent suddenness through the main door and came to an abrupt stop in front of the church. Then a roar from thousands of frenzied throats:

"Viva San Cosimo e Damianol' "

And thousands of arms waved in the air as though the entire population had risen in fury to take part in a desperate conflict.

"Make way! Make way!" now sounded from all sides. "Make way for the Saint! Make way for the Saint V^o

And before the on-coming bier the crowd began to draw aside here and there, but with difficulty, pushed back violently by the guards who tried to clear a space in front of it. Everyone knew that the two Saints always went through the town at a great pace, like a whirlwind. They were the Saints of good health, the saviours of the region in cholera epidemics, and they had to run about all the time, from one place to another. So the race through the town on their feast-day was traditional. Without it the Feast would have lost all its animation and character. Just the same everyone there was afraid he might be crushed in the course of it.

A strident clang from the belfry. Then, under the strong iron bars of the bier there began a scuffle among the *pescatori* who were to carry it

on their shoulders. At every stopping-place along the way the same scuffle, quieted with difficulty by the directors whose duty it was to guide the procession.

A hundred congested, crimson, savage-eyed faces disappeared under the cross-pieces in front and back of the clumsy machine: a swarming of sinewy bare arms, of purpling faces, shirts tearing to ribbons, faces streaming with sweat, bellowings, and anguished gasps, shoulders crushed to pulp under the iron bar, knotted hands that fiercely clutched at the wood. . . . And every one of those frantic pall-bearers, seized with the mad desire to suffer as much as possible under the overpowering burden, all for love of the Saint, pulled the bar toward himself, so that one man's strength neutralized that of another, and the Saints staggered like drunken men through the savagely pushing and howling mob.

At every short rest, following a "run," some of the women on the balconies or in the crowded windows, to show their devotion to the Saints, would throw slices of black, spongy bread from baskets and hampers down to the bier and the crowd. In the street below, renewed scuffles as everyone tried to snatch the bread. Meanwhile the pall-bearers were pouring bottle after bottle full of wine down their gullets, and even though most of it soon poured out again as sweat, they nevertheless grew increasingly tipsy.

Every now and then the bier became portentously light: at such times it would rush forward with irresistible impetus, fairly leaping amid the joyful uproar of the throng. At other times it became so heavy nothing could have held it up: that meant the Saints did not wish to go further in this direction, and were suddenly recoiling: at such moments accidents occurred: someone in the crowd was always caught. . . . A moment of panic; then, to give themselves courage again, they would shout:

"*Viva San Cosimo e Damiano!*"—and they would forget what had happened, and go on. But several times, when they reached the place where the bier had stopped before, it would again, with a sudden jerk, refuse to go on; and then all eyes would turn toward the windows, and the crowd, howling threats and curses, would force whoever was there to go away, for this was a sign that among those looking on there must be someone who had not fulfilled his promises to the Saint, or who had given cause for unfavourable reports about himself to be spread through the town, and was therefore unworthy of looking at the holy bier! Thus on that day the populace took it upon itself to act as censor.

In a balcony, Marta and Anna Veronica stood facing one another, Signora Agata and Maria on either side of them. Antonio Pentagora had some time before given a signal to the bearers. At first

the four unhappy women did not understand the motions of the Saints: they saw them recoil, but it did not occur to them this might be on their account. When the litter again reached a point opposite the balcony and stopped once more, the whole mob raised eyes and fists menacingly toward them, howling and cursing, maddened by the fate of a poor boy who had been thrown to the ground by the sudden recoil, and now lay, a crushed and bleeding mass. Suddenly, Marta and Anna Veronica left the balcony, followed by Maria in tears. Signora Agata, pale and trembling with scorn, closed the windows after her with such violence that one of the panes was shattered into fragments. The frenzied crowd interpreted this as an insult. Shrieks and imprecations rose from thousands of throats. While the tempest raged below, the four women stood trembling in a corner, their arms around one another; and in that anxious pause they heard, against the iron railing of the balcony—one, two, three heavy blows, struck by the head of one of the Saints.

At each blow the whole house shook.

Then the fury outside quieted down little by little; and now deep silence in the street.

"Cowards! Cowards!" said Marta, pale and trembling, her teeth clenched.

Anna Veronica was crying, her face hidden in her hands. Maria hurried timorously to the bal-

cony, and, through the glass pane, saw that the blows from the Saint's iron head had twisted and bent one of the heavy iron window bars as though it had been made of wax.

CHAPTER X

"Too much, eh?" said Antonio Pentagora, his customary cold sneer curling his lip, and in his eyes an expression of pity for his youngest born.

"It was a cowardly thing to do!" exclaimed Niccolino, pale with anger. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself! The whole town is talking about that disgraceful performance yesterday. A pretty piece of business it was!"

"He's a fine fellow, Niccolino!" his father remarked unperturbed. "I really congratulate myself *on having such a son!* *Such noble sentiments, generous sentiments,* he has . . . Bravo! Feed their roots well, my boy, and you'll see how they'll branch out in time. . . ."

Trembling with rage, Niccolino rushed from the room for fear of losing control of himself. In just the same fashion Rocco had run out of the house the night before after a violent quarrel in the course of which father and son had only just missed coming to blows.

Left alone in the room, Antonio Pentagora slowly shook his head several times, and then gave a sigh:

"Poor in spirit, both of them!"

He stood a long while pondering, his broad purpling cheeks clean shaven, his head sunk on his chest, eyes closed, and eyebrows drawn together in a scowl.

He knew everyone hated him, his own sons first of all . . . he knew it. Bah! . . . What was he to do about it? There was no remedy. Things had to be that way. For the Pentagoras, since destiny had amused *itself by branding them with the sign* of the stag, there was *no* escape. Alas! They were doomed to be either hated or made a laughing-stock. Better be hated then. It was fate!

In Antonio Pentagora's opinion everyone came into the world with a role assigned to him. It was sheer *foolishness to think one could change one's* part. When he was a young blood, he *too*—just like his sons—had for a moment thought *it* was possible. He had hoped, and he had deceived himself: he too, like that poor Niccolino of his, had found noble, generous sentiments in his heart: he had trusted himself to them, and where had they landed him? Pentagoras had to be deceived by their wives. That was their role, there was no escaping it.

This way of thinking was so firmly fixed in **his** mind that if perchance, forced by an emergency, someone came to him for help, then just as he was on the point of yielding, or even while he **was** stirred to pity, he would check himself with a

snort, his lips would part in that cold silent sneer that was now habitual with him, and he would advise the poor devil to go elsewhere for help—to so-and-so, for instance, who was known to be one of the philanthropists of the region.

"Go see Ferrero, my dear fellow. He was born for the express purpose of helping people in trouble. I wasn't born for any such purpose, you see. That isn't my department. I'd be committing an offence against that worthy soul who has been filling this office for years, and really isn't good at anything else. Horns are my line—horns."

He had become as cynical as that in his talk, quite unintentionally. He would come out with such speeches as these in the most natural way in the world. And he was always the first to make fun of his matrimonial misfortunes so as to forestall what others might say, and disarm them. When he was among other people, he felt as though he had strayed into the midst of the enemy's camp. And that sneer of his was like the snarl of a dog when he turns on his pursuers. Luckily for him, he was rich—strong, therefore. He need not fear anybody. In fact, everybody kept away from him: give the calf a wide berth, as they say—especially the golden calf!

"Foolishness!"

After the betrayal—he had expected it from the first!—of his son by his daughter-in-law, he had

been immensely diverted by the brazen fashion in which Eocco had flaunted his relations with one of the town bawds.

"Good boy, Eoccuccio! Now you've got the idea! That's the role for you. You'll see how, little by little. . . . Let me feel your forehead. . . ."

But no. The big dolt hadn't taken kindly to the part fate had assigned to him. Irritable, rude, in a bad temper, all the time. He had had to reprove the boy on several occasions. Then, out of a clear sky, Francesco Ajala's death! Well, that poor fool of a son of his had had all his spirit scared out of him by the general outburst of indignation that followed Ajala's death, what with the feeling the crazy old fool had succeeded in stirring up for miles around. Very quietly, so as not to stir up any new scandal, Eocco had got rid of his mistress, and then had come back to his father's, looking like a funeral.

"What do you take it so hard for? Do you flatter yourself you killed Francesco Ajala?"

For a long time there had been no getting him out of the house to take the air and change the current of his thoughts a little. Horses, driving and saddle horses—he had bought the lad six of them! And after a fortnight the boy was paying no more attention to the beasts than if they hadn't existed. Then what! A trip, maybe, to the mainland, or a foreign country, perhaps! No, not even

that! Gambling then, at his club? Nine thousand lire lost in an evening. He had paid the boy's debt without a murmur.

Well, now what was to be done? The opportunity of the Saints' feast-day had presented itself: "extreme ills need extreme remedies"; and so he had provoked the scandalous scene under the balcony of the Ajala house.

Just the same, he wasn't sorry. Eocco had rushed away like an ill-tempered bull at touch of the branding iron. Yes: he had given the poor fellow a pretty strong dose. But he needed a strong dose! In time he'd calm down and even thank his father for what he had done.

"Just listen to that crazy old woman!" muttered Antonio Pentagora to himself with a shudder, as a burst of unintelligible gabble came from his sister Sidora, who was wandering around and around through the house, raving and staring.

Perhaps she too had heard about the scandal. What did she think of it? No one could tell except the fire on the hearth, that was kept going winter and summer, and in which—so Pentagora used to say—she was trying to burn up all the horns of the family, but without success.

For several days Eocco refused to have anything to do with his father, even from a distance. Niccolino bore his brother company, and, good fellow that he was, afforded him some relief.

"Wasn't it enough to drive her out of the

house! Wasn't that enough, I say? I'd avenged myself. . . . That ought to have been sufficient! But no . . . her father has to go and die on top of it all. I don't take the blame for that; but there's no doubt that it was partly my fault; and then the baby dies; and she, almost . . . and then when she's barely up from her sick-bed, he, the coward, has to go make that shameful scene under her very-eyes! Was there any need to insult her after everything else? And who had asked him to anyway? The coward! The vile coward!"

And he wrung his hands in helpless rage.

Meanwhile the news grew worse from day to day. The tannery was closed: Paolo Sistri had run away, and people were accusing him of having stolen from the safe money that had never been in it. Want was knocking at the door of the three poor forsaken women. How were they going to live? Alone, with no one to help them, and with everyone in the town unfriendly or worse?

At night it seemed to Eocco that Francesco Ajala's gigantic figure loomed up before him, shaking its fists at him: "You are destroying two homes, your own and mine," spoke the lips in the pale, swollen face. Then he would see his mother-in-law—from the very first day of his betrothal she had been so good to him!—quite changed now, dishevelled, despairing; and Marta, weeping, her face hidden, and Maria, almost stupefied, murmuring, "And now where shall we turn for help?"

The day Eocco learned the tannery was to be sold at public auction, he rushed off, controlling himself with difficulty, to propose to his father—the boy spoke thickly, and without looking at Pentagora—that he ought to buy the tannery and run it himself.

"You're crazy!" his father answered him. "Not even if they knocked it down to me for three cents. But see here now. So far I've let you take the bit in your teeth. You've thrown enough of my money away. It isn't sand, you know! Now you want a fling at charity, in addition? That's not my line! We Pentagoras, we deal in horns.' "

And he left Eocco flat.

CHAPTER XI

MART A, Maria, and their mother had not been out of bed long when they heard the door-bell tinkle discreetly. Maria went to open, and looking first through the spy-window, saw a shabbily dressed old man accompanied by two youths waiting on the door-step.

"What is it?" she asked, not knowing whether to open.

"Ziro, the process-server, Don Protogene," answered the old man with a pull at the ringlets of his thick white beard. "Will you be so kind as to let us in?"

"The process-server? But what do you want?"

"Isn't this Don Francesco Ajala's house?" Ziro, the process-server, asked of the two youths accompanying him.

Maria timidly opened the door.

"Begging your pardon, miss," said one of the young men. "Don Protogene, give the lady the paper you've got there. Here, miss, just show this paper to your mother. We'll wait here."

But at that moment Signora Agata also was on her way to the front door.

"Mother," Maria called out, "come and see what this is. . . . I don't know. . . ."

"Ziro, the process-server, Don Protogene"—the old man introduced himself once more, this time removing from his shrivelled head an enormous beaver hat, bald in spots, that sank down over the back of his neck to his shoulders. "I know you won't relish what I've got to do, but . . . the Law commands . . . and we carry the gavel!"

Signora Agata stared at him a moment, in bewilderment. Then she unfolded the paper, and read out its contents. Maria, frightened, looked at her mother; the old process-server gave a nod of approval at every word, and when the lady finally raised her eyes, not understanding what she was reading, he said very meekly:

"That's the orders from the magistrate. And here are the two witnesses."

At which the two young men took off their hats and made a bow.

"But how is that?" Signora Agata exclaimed. "They told me . . ."

Even Marta by this time was standing in the doorway listening; and the two youths on the stair-landing pointed her out to one another with furtive thrusts of the elbow.

"But how can that be?" Signora Agata repeated, confused, turning to Marta. "The lawyer said . . ."

"Oh, lawyers always have a lot to say," remarked one of the young men, a squat blond youth, with a smile for which he then proceeded to blush furiously. "Just let us attend to things, *signora*, and you'll see that . . ."

"But if you take away all we've got . . ."

"Mother," said Marta haughtily, "there's no use standing here discussing it. Let them come in. They have been ordered to do this, and they must do their duty."

"With regret, yes," added Don Protogene.

"Yes, indeed. . . •"

He closed his eyes, opened his hands, and applied the tip of his tongue to his upper lip.

"Just be patient," he went on after a few seconds. "Where are we to begin! Would the lady be so kind . . ."

'i Follow me,'⁹ commanded Marta. "Here is the parlour."

She opened the door and went in ahead of the others to unfasten the shutters and let some light into the room which for months had been slumbering in the dark, unused. Turning to her mother and sister she added:

"Go away now. I'll attend to these people."

The two youths looked at one another, quite mortified; and the blond young man, who aspired to the bar, and had already progressed to the point of being Gregorio Alvignani's messenger—(out of sheer curiosity to see Marta at close range, he had

teased the old process-server into taking him along as a witness)—said, looking at his long, carefully tended nails:

"We are very sorry, Madame, I assure you. . . ."

But with the same scornful glance Marta cut him short.

"Make haste, please. All this talk is beside the point."

Don Protogene, having drawn from his breast-pocket a sheet of paper, a horn ink-bottle, and a goose-quill, set about making an inventory of the parlour. Looking about him, and seeing nothing to sit on but upholstered chairs and sofas—he felt certain it would not be good manners to occupy any of these—he turned to Marta with a humble smile.

"Would the *signora* be so kind as to have a common chair brought in?"

"Sit down there," said Marta, pointing to one of the armchairs.

And the old man obediently sat down, but on the very edge of the chair. With a wavering hand he perched his spectacles on the tip of his nose, and, spreading out the sheet of paper on the small round table that stood near the sofa, he solemnly inscribed the word "*saUotto*" (spelling it with two l's) at the top of the page. This accomplished, he placed his pen behind his ear, and rubbing his hands, said to Marta:

"Of course, this furniture will remain here, most excellent lady. I'll just make out a small inventory, with an estimate of the value. . . ."

"You can take it all away with you," Marta interrupted him. "We'll be leaving this house in a few days, and there won't be room in our new quarters for all this furniture."

"Well, we needn't worry about that now," said Don Protogene, and he began to write down: "*Grandpianos, 1. . . .*"

Marta looked at the piano Maria had played upon so often, and that she too, as a girl, had practised on many an hour before her passion for study distracted her from her interest in music. And as the old fellow and the two young men went on naming and describing the various objects in the room, Marta's eyes would rest for a moment on the chair or picture or ornament in question, evoking a memory. . . .

Meanwhile, Anna Veronica arrived, and Signora Agata, disheartened and in tears, told her about this new affliction.

"Not even that is spared us! To be put out on the street. . . . Oh, my God, have you no pity? Not even for that poor innocent, O God?"

And her gesture indicated Maria standing, her forehead pressing against the window-pane, trying to subdue her sobs and conceal from her mother the fact that she was weeping.

"Marta?" asked Anna Veronica.

"She's in there, with *them*," Signora Agata replied, wiping her eyes. "If you could see her . . . perfectly unconcerned . . . just as though it had nothing to do with us at all"

ⁱⁱ "Courage, my dear Agata!" said Anna. ⁱⁱ "God wants to test you. . . ."

"No! It isn't God, Anna!" Signora Agata interrupted, grasping Anna by the arm. "Don't say it's God! God can't want things like this to happen!"

And again her hand made a motion towards Maria, and she added under her breath: "What torture! What torture to see her. . . ."

To distract her, Anna Veronica began to talk about the house they were soon to move into.

"I just came from there. You ought to see it! Three light airy rooms . . . not so small either. . . . Oh, you'll be very comfortable, I'm sure of it! And it has a little terrace, just the thing to dry the clothes . . . there's a metal clothes-line up already, and four posts . . . and when you are out there—think of it!—we can almost shake hands—just like this . . . because the window of my little room opens out on it. . . . Oh, moonlight nights. • • •"

She broke off. In a flash she saw again a night long past; for that sentimental seducer of hers had once lived in the very house her friends were to move to in a day or so. Perturbed, she gave her chatter another turn.

"Oh, what a head I have! . . . Here I am forgetting the very thing I came for! I have some good news for you. Yes . . . Maria, come here, child," she called out; "here, let's wipe off those tears . . . take my handkerchief. That's it . . . good! Well, let me impart to you the information that Baron Troisi's daughter is getting married. . . . I'll wager that means nothing to you. But it does to me, my dears. Because the *signora baronessa* has actually had the condescension—though it doesn't really seem possible—to order her daughter's trousseau here in town! Do you follow me, my little ones? I'm managing a good part of it. So we can all work on it together, and God will surely help us. On to the new house!"

"With your permission?"

Ziro, the process-server, stood in the doorway, bowing clumsily, his goose-quill behind his ear, his ink-well and sheet of paper in one hand, and his stovepipe hat in the other.

The two young men came along behind him. Then Marta arrived on the scene.

"Go in, go right in. Mother, you stay in the other room. Oh, you here, Anna? Do take Maria and Mother in there."

"You see?" said Signora Agata to her friend. "How can she be so calm and cold?"

"But Agata, why do you want to make yourself believe that she isn't suffering too, just as much? It's to give you courage that she hides it all. . . ."

ii Perhaps,⁹ sighed the mother. *i* "But you know—you were there to see it all—how she behaved when the very inferno was let loose in our poor home, just as it is now. What did she do? Nothing but lock herself up in there just as though she didn't want to know anything that was going on. It's a wonder that today for once she's taking even this amount of interest in what happens to us. . . . What is she writing and reading about all the time? I'm really ashamed, Anna, to be reduced to paying attention to certain details . . . for instance, Maria and I go to bed as early as we can to save the oil, but Marta keeps her lamp going until midnight, until two in the morning even . . . studying, studying. . . . Sometimes I wonder if her sickness hasn't, perhaps, turned her brain. . . . 'But Marta,' I say to her, 'you know what we are reduced to, what with your father's death, and our ruin, and being left penniless . . . and how you can go on reading in there, locked up by yourself, just as though nothing had happened! . . .' "

Anna Veronica listened, sadly. She couldn't understand Marta either, could make nothing of what seemed to her sheer indifference, or worse, lack of feeling: it could scarcely be called selfishness since Marta too was involved in the general catastrophe.

"With your kind permission"—Don Protogene said once again, appearing in the doorway of that room too, the two witnesses closing in behind him.

And the three women again went away; and so they were driven, room by room, from the house which, three days later, they were to leave forever.

In the new quarters, after the melancholy clearing up and setting to rights had been attended to, Anna Veronica set her friends to work on the fragrant linen, the soft lawns, the laces, and ribbons, and embroideries of the *Baronessina* Troisi.

Signora Agata, watching Maria intent on her work, could with difficulty restrain her tears: ah, the girl would never have a trousseau of her own to work on, she would be like that all her life, poor child, fatherless, alone in the world. . . .

Marta, in her new home, continued to lead the same sort of life as before. But Anna Veronica no longer marvelled at it, for Marta had revealed to Anna a plan she had made, pledging her to keep it secret from her mother and sister.

But one evening, with a troubled brow, she came out of her room and told them what it was she was doing. The next morning the examinations for a licence to teach were to be held at the Normal School, and she had prepared herself to take them. Anna Veronica, it seemed, had put in an application for her, and with her own savings had paid the examination fee.

Mother and sister stood thunderstruck.

"Just let me carry out my plan," said Marta, hurt by their amazement. "Don't argue with me, for pity's sake. . . ."

And she went and locked herself up in her room again.

There would surely be some of her old school friends taking the examinations. She could scarcely avoid seeing them. But she cherished no illusions as to how they would receive her. She fully intended to meet them as the challenger—and not only these schoolmates of hers, but the whole town. She looked out at the streets along which she would pass the next morning. Yes, she would throw her challenge in the faces of those contemptible cowards who had publicly insulted her on the day of that savage festival. . . .

As she thought of the enormous crowd, made bestial by wine and sun, rioting, arms upraised, under the balcony of the house that had then been her home, Marta felt her inclination to fight double and treble. During the long vigil of that night, she felt certain that she would rise above the shameful wrong that had been done her: and then with what scorn and pride she would be able to say: "I have raised my mother and sister out of want and misery; they live now through my work, through what I give them!"

Little by little, comforted by these thoughts, her solicitude for the future slowly getting the better of her anxiety about the test she was so soon to undergo, she succeeded in controlling her nervousness; but her anger was not allayed; on the contrary, it reached an acute wakefulness, and grew

until, by the time she got up next morning, it **had** become a confusion that paralyzed her will.

She didn't know any more what she was to do. She looked about her as though she expected the poor meagre furnishings in her small room to make some suggestion, to call her back to herself. There was the basin she would use to wash in, and on the chair yonder, the clothes she was going to put on. A few minutes later she was hastily going through the motions of washing and dressing.

While she was arranging her hair as best she could, with no mirror to see by, her mother, already dressed to accompany her, came into the room.

i 'Oh, good, mother I Please help me do my hair. . . . It's getting late!"

And her mother began to brush and comb her long locks just as she used to do when Marta was a schoolgirl.

When she had finished, she looked at her daughter. Truly, Marta had never been so beautiful! Her mother felt almost embarrassed at the thought of going out with her through the town, of escorting her past ill-natured glances, and all to carry out an undertaking which her own timid, humble nature could neither understand nor appreciate. She was afraid that the girl's very beauty, and the defiant expression in her eyes, would give people cause to exclaim:

"Isn't she brazen!"

"How flushed your cheeks are!" she said, looking away; and she would have liked to add: "Do keep your eyes lowered going through the streets."

Finally, they went downstairs and along the pavement, walking straight ahead without a glance whether to right or left. Maria shuddered as she looked after them from behind the window pane.

Poor Signora Agata would have given anything to be just about half her size so as not to attract so much attention, so as to be able to go through the town unnoticed, to run down those interminable streets in a flash. Marta, however, was thinking of the schoolmates she would encounter, and was not in such haste to reach her destination.

They were among the first to arrive at the college.

"Oh, *signorina bellal* Who would ever have thought it! To see you here again! How you've grown! And the pretty face you've got!" exclaimed the old janitress, wagging her head and waving her hands about in an endeavour to express her expansive admiration.

"Nobody here yet!" asked Marta a little embarrassed, but with a kindly smile for the old woman.

"Nobody!" she answered. "You're the first in one way at least. . . . You remember when you were so high! and every blessed morning, bum,

bum, bum! there you were kicking the door because you couldn't reach the bell handle. . . . *Gesu mio*, it was scarcely daylight. . . . Do you remember V⁹

Ah yes! Marta was smiling. . . . Ah, the sweet old memories!

"Will you come into the waiting-room?" the old woman went on. "The lady must be tired. . . ." And, peering into Signora Agata's face, she sighed, shaking her head:

"Poor Signor Francesco! What a loss. . . . There aren't any more such fine men as he coming into the world nowadays, *signora mia!* But let be. . . . The blessed Lord take him to glory! I think the door of the waiting-room is locked yet. Just be patient and wait a minute, and I'll go get the key."

"A good soul!" said Signora Agata, grateful for this respectful reception.

After a few moments, the old janitress came back from her errand, saying:

"My girl Euphemia is taking the examinations with you today, Marta!"

"Euphemia! Eeally! How is she?"

"Poor thing! She hasn't slept a wink all night since I don't know when. . . . If she doesn't pass, it won't be her fault. . . . It's all so easy for you, *signorina*. . . . Do help the poor girl a bit today, if ever you did! They say it's the hardest examination of them all! I'll just tell her to come

down—so, she'll be keeping you company. . . . Here now, do sit down, and make yourselves comfortable.^

With a corner of her apron she dusted off the leather sofa.

"If Euphemia is studying, don't disturb her," said Marta to the old woman, who was already going out of the door.

"Why, the idea! The idea!" the old janitress answered without turning around.

Since their first year in school, Euphemia Sabetti and Marta had been schoolmates, although Euphemia was several years the elder. Brought up in the school atmosphere, among schoolmates of a much higher social station, she had caught something of their poise and bearing, to the immense delight and pride of her mother. The old janitress willingly paid for this satisfaction with innumerable sacrifices. Euphemia did, it is true, address her friends with the familiar "tu," and wear hats, just as though her mother weren't a working woman, and she had all the manners and ease of speech of a real "lady"; just the same, in her school-friends' estimation she remained the janitress' daughter. Of course, they didn't throw it in her face; no, poor thing! But they made it quite clear either by the way they looked at her dress, her hat, her shoes, or by suddenly dropping her to crowd around some other girl—one of their own set, naturally; and Euphemia, for fear of

losing their friendship, pretended not to notice their slights.

"Oh, Marta! What luck!" she exclaimed as she came running in, and, with no trace of embarrassment, greeted her friend with a kiss. Smiling, as she bowed to Signora Agata, she sat down on the sofa, leaving Marta in the middle. "What luck!" she repeated. "How are you? To think of your being here with us again! And are you going to take the examinations, really?"

She was dark and very thin, puny-looking in her cafe-au-lait, black-trimmed dress. When she spoke, she quivered all over, and kept continually fluttering the lids of her sharp ferret's eyes; when she laughed she showed her gums, and her startlingly white teeth.

There I Embarrassing questions already!
Marta answered the more discreet ones as best she could; but the other questions she saw peering out of Euphemia's eyes made her evasive.

Signora Agata stood up.

"I'm going home, Marta. I'll leave you here with your friend. Take courage, children!"

As she left the waiting-room, she saw in the hall a group of young girls gay in their bright summer dresses. Among them she recognized several of Marta's old schoolmates. They abruptly grew silent, lowering their eyes as she passed. No one bowed to her. And only one of them, Mita **Lumia**, gave her a slight nod.

The old janitress had announced Marta's arrival to them.

"I must say, that's brazen enough!" exclaimed one of them.

"Well, I certainly shan't stay in the same room with her!" another declared, and:

"What in the world is she coming here for?" asked a third.

"Oh, my dear, the examinations! You can't stop her from taking them!" answered Mita Lumia, offended also, but not so relentless as the others.

"All right; but I'm not going to sit beside her, not even if the principal orders me to!"

"But we don't know what to call her!" exclaimed a fifth. "Pentagora? Ajala?"

"For pity's sake! Call her Marta just as we used to do!" answered the Lumia girl, with disgust.

At the same moment Marta, with a bitter smile, was saying to Euphemia:

"Who knows what they are saying about me?"

"Oh, let them talk!" answered the janitress' daughter.

Four of the group burst in and crossed the room at a run, without turning their eyes once toward the sofa.

Marta, although she was grateful in her heart to Euphemia for her company, could not help feeling depressed as she sat there beside her; it must

be quite plain to those cruel gossips that no one had paid any attention to her except the janitress' daughter.

They got up. Just then Mita Lumia came in, in leisurely fashion.

"Oh, Marta! How are you?"

She attempted a smile, and held out a soft humid hand.

"Dear Mita," Marta answered.

And they stood there for a brief interval, without knowing what more to say.

CHAPTER XII

ENVY, thwarted intrigues, and disappointed hopes, all of them united found it quite easy to discover in slander an explanation of their discomfiture.

It was all clear enough!

How did it happen that Marta Ajala had been appointed substitute teacher of the first preparatory classes of the Normal School? Why, my dear, didn't you know she was the deputy Alvignani's *protegee*?

During the days following the appointment, there was a constant procession to the school door, of fathers of families who wanted to speak to the principal. A scandalous proceeding, this appointment! Their daughters would simply refuse to go to school! And, in all conscience, not one of those fathers could force his daughter to go to school against her will, under the circumstances! Something must be done about such a state of affairs—and quickly too!

After defending the future substitute—who had passed a "really remarkable examination" it seemed—the old principal sent the fathers of families on to the inspector of schools, giving them

to understand, however, that if some other student had done any better, then *she* would have been appointed. There was nothing unfair about it, no favouritism. . . . Why, certainly not!

The inspector of schools, the *cavaliere* Claudio Torchiara, was a fellow-townsmen and intimate friend of Gregorio Alvignani's. Accordingly, before these complaints reached him, they took on another form and tone. Did Alvignani want to endanger his standing among the voters through this scandalous exercise of his influence?

It was useless for Torchiara to protest that Alvignani had nothing whatever to do with the matter, and that the school-teacher Ajala's position was not a government appointment. Oh, come now! It was all right for the principal of the school to talk that way, he was nothing but an Italian, but Torchiara, a fellow Sicilian. . . . Why, the fellow must have forgotten all about the recent scandals. . . .

Had that Ajala appointment come clean out of the air, now I ask you? And, to be honest about it, if Torchiara had had a daughter of his own, would he have been willing to send her to school to be taught by a teacher who had been talked about through the town the way this girl had? A fine example for our daughters!

If Marta, more and more depressed by the increasing poverty at home, had for a moment foreseen, as she locked herself up in her room and shut

herself away from her uncomprehending family, to prepare in secret for her examinations, that she was to encounter under another aspect, almost a duplicate of the cowardly and outrageous attack that had been launched upon her before, her courage would perhaps have failed her; but her youthful daring was stimulated, on the one hand, by a tremendous eagerness to rise through her own efforts, and on the other, by the helpless poverty into which she and her family had been plunged, by the knowledge of her own worth and the honesty of the sacrifice she was making for her mother and sister. Her sole thought, for the moment, was to pass the examination; success in that was the first step toward carrying out her plans.

But now she understood the amazement and distress of her mother and sister when she announced her bold determination to them. And she had as yet only divined some of the calumnies with which the respectable people of the town were arming themselves in order to attack her, and drive her back into the ignominy, the mud, from which she was striving so frantically to escape!

The old janitress, meanwhile, came to announce to her, sadly, that the position promised her was to be awarded to the niece of one of the members of the city council.

In the interval, at the unexpected news that Marta intended to become a teacher, Rocco Penta-

gora's pity, on the point of turning into remorse, had abruptly changed into angry contempt at his being thus suddenly thrown into the shade.

He was unable to see in Marta's decision the pressure of necessity, the urgent need of providing for the most elementary family needs. (He would have been glad enough to supply in secret the funds for these needs.) But he saw in Marta's act nothing but her scornful determination to defy the whole town, as though to say: "I am sufficient unto myself, and my family's wants: what do I care for your condemnation of me and what I do?" He felt that he was being left out of all her calculations. It wasn't only that she paid no attention to him; he was being put openly to scorn and derision by his wife! And a raging anger began to agitate him, taking the form of exaggerated contempt for the profession she had elected to exercise.

He had not a moment's peace after that; as though her being a teacher brought dishonour to the name she had borne.

But how was he to prevent it? How was he to come to life again, so to speak, to cut some figure in her plans, make her feel that she could not ignore him, could not thus break her chains and escape from the dead weight of a bond to which she had failed to be true?

And his rage grew. . . . A new scandal? A new vengeance? Could he bring himself to add

fuel to the slander concerning Marta's pretended relations with Alvignani, by publishing the letters the latter had written her! No! No! The ridicule so aroused would have fallen more openly upon him than upon her. Besides, the whole town firmly believed those relations to be scandalous, and his taking part in spreading the slander would only make him feel all the more keenly his powerlessness to control a woman whose conduct so plainly showed that she cared nothing whether for him or for anyone else. . . . It would be better really to give that calumny a thorough airing. Yes . . . but how? Whereupon innumerable contradictory plans, dictated now by his hatred for Alvignani,—and correspondingly savage—now by his anger, his wounded love, or his generosity, rose in his mind, mutually destroying one another.

He would rush out of the house, not knowing where he was going. Suddenly, he would find himself on the road leading to the outskirts of the town, close to Francesco Ajala's tannery. What was he doing there! Oh, if he could only see her! . . . There was the old house. . . . Now she was living farther down . . . past the church . . . And cautiously he would continue on his way, peering furtively at the few balconies where there was a light. At the first sound of steps ahead of him on the solitary street, he would turn back for fear of being recognized, prowling in that neighbourhood; and then he would turn back home.

But the next day, the same thing all over again.

Why that obsessing desire of his to see Marta, or rather, to be seen by her? He himself didn't know. He imagined her dressed in black just as Niccolino had seen her that day in church.

"More beautiful than ever, you know!"

But of course she wouldn't look at him. She would lower her eyes as soon as she caught a glimpse of him. Supposing he did stop her on the street? Supposing he did actually speak to her? He must be out of his head to dream of it! And what would people think? And he, what would he say, if he did speak to her?

It was in this state of mind that one morning he went to Anna Veronica's.

At sight of him, so pale, so obviously upset, Anna looked up from her work, almost frightened.

"What do you want of me?"

"You must excuse my disturbing you. . . . Don't get up, I beg of you. . . . I'll find a chair for myself."

But all the chairs were covered with heaps of linen and underwear.

"What handsome silks and laces," said Bocco, embarrassed.

"The Baroness Troisi's."

"For her daughter?"

Anna nodded, and Bocco heaved a sigh, frowning, his face darkening. He remembered the prep-

arations that had been made for his own wedding, and Marta's trousseau.

"Here's a chair,"⁵ said Anna, with nervous haste.

Eocco sat down without a word. He didn't know just what he was going to say nor where to begin. He remained a moment with eyebrows drawn together, his eyes lowered, his shoulders sagging, as though expecting something to fall on his back. Anna Veronica, still startled, was searchingly scanning his face.

"You . . . already know . . . I imagine . . ." he began at last, stopping at every word, and keeping his eyes lowered, "I know you are a friend of . . . and so. . . ."

He broke off. It was impossible to continue in that tone, in that attitude. He shook himself, coughed, raised his head, and looked Anna in the face.

"*Signora maestra*, I believe that . . . that is, I don't believe what people are saying about . . . about Marta now . . . about this latest crazy notion of hers. . . ."

"A h," said Anna, shaking her head with a sad smile. "So you call it crazy, do you?"

"It's worse!" Rocco answered with prompt anger. "I beg your pardon, but. . . ."

"I don't know what people are saying," Anna continued. "But I can imagine. . . . And you do

well, Signor Pentagora, not to believe it. The more so as no one can know better than you . . ."

"Let's not speak of that! Let's not speak of that! I beg of you!" Eocco fairly implored her, holding his hands out in front of him. "I haven't come here to speak of the past. . . ."

"Well then? But if you yourself say that you don't believe . . ." Anna tried to continue.

"Believe what? Do you know what people are saying?" he asked, his voice suddenly quite changed. "That she's still carrying on with Al-vignani! . . . that's what they're saying!"

"Carrying on?"

"Yes, *signora!* And why? Because of that crazy mania of hers for calling attention to herself! 'Why how can you,' they say, 'knowing your guilt, and what you have done . . . and yet you have the impudence to go out in the street and defy the gossip of the whole town! People are talking! . . .' I can well believe it! How did she get that appointment?"

"But everyone knows!" said Anna with bitter scorn. "That is the only way appointments are ever obtained nowadays! And it is these very people, all these guardians of honesty in our happy country who point the way, who show us how these things must be obtained! 'You might as well do it! Whether you do it or not, it's all the same. As far as we're concerned, it's just as

though you had done it!' Silly Marta, not to act like the rest, isn't that so? What good did it do her not to? Is there anyone who believes that she didn't?"

"I don't believe what they say, I've already told you," answered Eocco, his face darkening still more. "Nevertheless, I maintain that, if people are gossiping, it isn't entirely their fault. . . . What can you expect them to care about whether the examination papers handed in are good or bad? All they can think about is the intrigue that must, they think—and they are usually right!—lurk somewhere in the background. That is what you don't see. . . . That is why you can excuse her. . . ."

"Oh, not only that, I assure you!" cried Anna, getting up. "I admire Marta, and respect her! Put it that way! Because I know that poor girl's conscience, I know how remorseful she feels that others should suffer unjustly on her account. But not a sin nor a stain there, before God! Only a sense of injury, of having had to bear insults and outrages . . . until finally she couldn't help crying out 'Enough! I refuse to stand any more!' But do you know what they are reduced to? Do you know that they haven't even enough to eat? Who did you think was going to support her mother and sister? And lift them a little out of their dreadful poverty? I know . . . I know what it cost her, poor Marta, to make that sacrifice!

Was she to let them die of starvation just to please you and the rest!"

Eocco Pentagora too stood up, his brain awhirl, his face drawn and mottled with red. He walked nervously about the room, touching the furniture, his fingers constantly in motion; then he drew near to Anna, a grim look in his eyes, and seized her by both hands:

"Hear what I have to say, *signora*. . . . For pity's sake tell her . . . tell her to give up this idea she has about teaching . . . so as not to make it so easy for people to speak ill of her and . . . and I'll provide—put it that way—for her mother and sister without . . . without letting anyone know . . . not even my father, of course! I promise, by the memory of Francesco Ajala! I'm not doing this for love of her, don't think I am! I'm doing it for her reputation and mine, . . . Tell her so. . . ."

Anna Veronica promised to deliver the message entrusted to her; and a short while later, repeating his instructions and promises, he went away, more troubled and upset seemingly than when he had arrived.

"For her reputation and mine, not for love of her. . . . Tell her so. Just out of decency, understand. . . ."

CHAPTER XIII

NO sooner had Rocco Pentagora gone than Anna Veronica ran in all haste to the Ajalas.

"Where is Marta?" she asked softly, putting a finger to her lip.

"In her room. . . . Why?" Maria rejoined.

"Sh! Not a word!"

She motioned to Signora Agata to come closer, and gave a look around:

"Let me sit down a moment. . . . I'm shaking all over. . . . Oh, my dears, if you knew. . . . Guess who came to see me just now, just a minute ago ? Marta 's husband!"

"Rocco! Not Rocco!" Maria and her mother, amazed, exclaimed together under their breath.

Anna laid her finger to her lip again.

"Just like a madman," she added, waving her hands in the air. "OH, how he frightened me! He is still in love with her, I can tell you that much! If it weren't for. . . . But this is how it was. . . . So . . . as I was saying, he came to see me. 'I don't believe all the slanders these people are circulating . . .' he said. . . ."

At this, a "Well, then!" from the mother's heart

"Exactly. 'Well then!' I said to him, just like you! But he, Marta, says—wait a minute I he says Marta should not expose herself to the slander of these people . . . shouldn't teach in short. . . . It hurts his feelings, his pride. . . . Well, my dears, do you know what he proposed to me? That I should try to influence Marta to give up her idea. . . . He says he will support you,—just so there won't be any more gossip,"

"Is that all?" sighed Signora Agata at this point. "So, just with a bit of money that he'd hand out in secret like charity, he proposes to keep people from talking? And people saying the very next day that the money comes from some other source ? Oh, how stupid, and cowardly!"

"No! No!" Anna went on. "Don't say that! He loves her, take my word for it. But it's that Jew dog of a father of his, you see, and so long as he. . . . If Marta meanwhile would just write him a note. . . ."

"Write a note? . . . To whom?"

"To her husband! To soften him . . . a letter such as no one but she could write. . . . It would be just the moment. You know well enough she ought to tell him the truth of the matter. . . 'and now you see how I am treated? And what they say about me? . . .' Ah, if she would only write him just a few words. . . . All the more because he asked for an answer. . . . What do you think?"

"Marta will not do it!" said Maria, shaking her head.

"We'll see," Anna replied. "Do you want me to speak to her? Where is she?"

"In there"—Signora Agata motioned towards Marta's room. "But I am afraid it's not the moment. . . ."

"I'll go in alone," said Anna, getting up.

Stretched out full length on the bed, Marta lay with her arms thrown over the pillows and her face hidden; as she heard the door open she drew her arms closer and pressed her face deeper into the pillows.

"It is I, Marta," said Anna, softly closing the door behind her.

"Please leave me alone, Anna!" Marta answered, without looking up, but stirring restlessly on the bed. "Don't try to comfort me, for pity's sake!"

"No, no," Anna Veronica hastened to reply, drawing near the bed and laying a hand lightly on the girl's shoulder. "I just wanted to see you. . . ."

"I don't want to see anyone, I can't listen to anyone now!" Marta began again feverishly. "Leave me alone, for pity's sake!"

Anna drew her hand away quickly.

"You are right," she said.

She waited a moment, then went on, with a sigh:

"It would have been too much luck, too easy!

You imagined that people were going to let you walk without interference along the road you had made for yourself by your work and your brains and your courage! . . . But, my dear, work, brains, courage—what's the good of such things without protection? And who is protecting you? No one! But there's no other way of getting on. . . . And of course every one judges you by the others. . . ."

Marta suddenly raised her head from the pillow.

"But they promised me I should have it!" she cried, cold rage in her voice.

"Yes," answered Anna quickly, "and that was all that was necessary—a mere unkept promise,—for all these people to begin shouting that you were being backed up by someone. . . ."

"I?" asked Marta, not understanding at first, and looking straight at Anna Veronica. Then she gave a cry. "They say that . . . about me? Me? Me? . . . " She could not go on, but pressed her hands against her face; then she broke out: "Oh, of course! Of course, they would believe it! Someone is spreading this slander, more than likely!"

"Not your husband! No, he isn't doing it!" said Anna hurriedly. "He came to see me on purpose to tell me so. . . ."

"Eocco?" exclaimed Marta, startled, and vainly trying to frown. "Eocco came to see you?"

"Yes, yes . . . just a short while ago . . . to tell me that he doesn't believe it . . ."

"He came . . . to your door?" Marta repeated again.

Her amazement for the moment prevented her hatred from interposing another explanation for this visit.

"What does he want?"

"He wants . . ." Anna replied, "he would like, that is. . . ."

"Do you know what it is he wants?" Marta broke out, her eyes flashing. "He's lost courage. It's partly remorse, and partly. . . . I've tried to keep my head high, haven't I? Well, he wants me to hang my head, and fall back into the mud he threw me into! That's what he wants! I'm not to dare so much as breathe any more, I'm not to remove the brand he chose to burn into my forehead! That's what he wants! And if I were willing to give him that satisfaction, to lie flat in the mud like some poor frog he could crush with his foot, when he chose—if I gave him that satisfaction; why, he'd even be willing to support me, to feed and dress me, and my mother and sister. . . ."

Surprised and pained, Anna looked at her.

"Isn't that what he wants, tell me?" Marta persisted. "Have I guessed it or not? Do you really want to tell me? I can read everything

that's passing through his mind as plain as a book!"

"If you would only write this to him," Anna ventured timidly.

"I? To him?"

"He would like an answer . . ."

"From me?" asked Marta scornfully. "I, write to him? But I . . . look, rather than do that, since nothing has touched these people, and mother and Maria, in order to get bread enough to live on, have to descend to working for others, why, I'll write to someone else rather, I'll write to Rome. . . ."

"No, Marta!" exclaimed Anna, distressed.

"No . . . no. . . ." Marta took back her threat, and turned over on the bed again, hiding her face once more in the pillows. "No . . . I know it . . . I know.... It's better to starve...."

Anna Veronica was at a loss. Her eyes rested pityingly on that lovely body lying prostrate on the bed and shaken with sobs. With one hand she pulled down over Marta's feet a fold of the girl's skirt that had turned up over her leg.

Then, with a sigh, she left the room.

Neither Signora Agata nor Maria, at sight of her, thought it necessary to ask any questions. All three stood a long time silent, staring into space.

"Why don't you go to see Torchiara?" Anna suggested finally.

Signora Agata looked at her as much as to say: "What for!"

"Why, it isn't fair! He ought to have something to say about it. . . . And it might help. . . . Can you go on like this?"

For two days now Marta had scarcely touched food. For hours and hours she lay motionless on the bed.

"What do you think he can say to me?" sighed Signora Agata. "The appointment has been given to somebody else now. . . ."

"But it had been promised to Marta first!" said Anna. "He'll explain to you perhaps. . . . No, without raising any false hopes . . . but at the very least he'll say something that you can repeat to her . . . to shake the girl out of that dreadful state. . . . Come, Agata, try. . . . You'd better go now! I know it's a sacrifice. . . ."

"For me?" said Signora Agata disconsolately, getting up and holding out her arms.

Everything now was as nothing to her. Her will was gone. She arranged her bonnet on her hair, that in a few months had turned quite grey, and said:

"I'll go at once."

As though she had really cause to be ashamed, she avoided the glances of those she met on the way. There were so many . . . everyone in the town for that matter, who approved the injustice, who supported the general condemnation. Even

her husband, who had never asked for anything, who had never bent his back to anyone, had hidden away from it. And she . . . what was she? Just a poor woman, dismayed by the injustice done her, frightened by the injury suffered, and ashamed, yes, ashamed of her poverty, of the clothes she had on her back. . . . Marta . . . Marta ought to have resigned herself, ought to have waited humbly for time to prove the others wrong: they could all three have worked together, in some quiet corner, and made the best of things, without stirring up all this new turmoil. . . .

Here was Torchiara's house. She went up the stairs with difficulty, panting; in front of his door, before she knocked, she hid her face in her hands.

"Is he alone?" she hastily asked the servant who let her in.

"No . . . Professor Blandino is there," she answered.

"Then . . . shall I wait here?"

"As you like • . . I'll just give your name,"

In a few minutes *cavaliere* Claudio Torchiara appeared, one hand lifting the curtain that hung over the door, the other arranging on his nose eye-glasses so thick-lensed that, in correcting his extreme short-sightedness, they made his eyes appear incongruously and comically small.

"Oh, please come in, *signora!*"

And taking her hand he led her to the sofa in his study.

Bending her head in acknowledgment of his courtesies, Signora Agata sat down in a corner of the sofa and smiled sadly.

"Professor Luca Blandino," added Torchiara, introducing him.

"I have the honour, already . . . already . . ." the bald, bearded man interrupted him, absently offering a hand to the lady, who looked up at him, embarrassed. "Francesco Ajala's widow! • . . A fine man, your husband, *signora!*"

Torchiara gave a sigh, and again settled his heavy gold-rimmed glasses on his nose. There was a moment of silence during which Signora Agata with difficulty checked her tears.

"How true it is," Blandino went on, his eyes closed, his arms hanging limp, "how true it is that our conduct toward others is just or unjust, not by virtue of its intrinsic nature, but by virtue of external circumstances. . . . How do we judge Francesco Ajala? We judge him with the same vocabulary we habitually use to talk of duties and obligations in general, that is to say, without considering at all the particular code prescribed and imposed on him by his own particular nature and modified—edited as you might say—by his training and education. We are only too prone to judge in this way!"

He stood up.

"Are you leaving?" Torchiara asked him.

Professor Blandino did not reply. He began

to walk up and down the room, his eyebrows drawn together in a scowl, his eyes half closed, not understanding in the slightest, so profound was his absorption, the impropriety of his remaining nor how embarrassing his presence must be to the lady.

"You do me the honour of calling on me on your daughter's account, *signora*, do you not!" Torchiara asked softly, with a glance of resignation and apology for Blandino's presence, as though saying, "Patience! We'll just have to excuse the poor fellow, he can't help being like that!"

As a matter of fact, Torchiara was not at all sorry to see Blandino remain. He had even urged him to stay when the caller was announced, so as to cut the call short and prevent it from being too excessively painful for his—Torchiara's—tender sensibilities. How unpleasant the task of taking a poor mother's last hopes from her!

"But it is too soon, you see, for an appointment, even a temporary one, even for the appointment of a substitute. . . . Such a difficult profession . . . extremely difficult, teaching! . . . She would just have to wait a little. . . . Oh, the future would be easier . . . looked extremely promising in fact for the young lady, no doubt of that! What! The Breganza girl? Oh yes, yes. . . ." At this question, so embarrassing to his tender sensibilities, *cavaliere* Torchiara

scratched his head with one finger and for the third time adjusted his glasses on his nose. "Yes, the Breganza girl, the niece of the counsellor Breganza, a friend of his. . . . No influence on that score, of course not! Just precedence, a question of precedence, simply. . . . Not of ability, no!" As to the Breganza girl, she was a good teacher too, you may be sure! But he knew of course that as far as ability went, Miss Ajala was incomparably superior. . . . Oh, yes, incomparably!

The few fragments of sentences that reached Luca Blandino, walking up and down, absorbed in his thoughts, his hands clasped behind his back, made him scowl more ferociously than ever. He didn't understand at all what this most painful dialogue was about; the only thing he noted was the expression of anguished disappointment, of profound despair on Signora Ajala's face when she rose and bent her head in salutation.

"Auff!" puffed Torchiara, coming back into his study after having accompanied his caller to the door, "I can't stand any more of this accursed business! I'm sorry, of course, for the poor lady. But what can I do if her daughter. • • • You follow me! We have the misfortune to live in a small town where certain things are neither forgiven nor forgotten. . . . I can't possibly, my dear sir, take a stand against the whole town - Horace alone against Beotia in arms!"

"What's it all about?" asked Professor Blandino.

"A trifle, my dear fellow, a trifle! The most tremendous trifle in the world, the one in the black coat . . . bread, in short, that's what it's about. . . . But what am I to do about it, good God, I ask you! I'm sorry . . . let that suffice!"

And he explained to Blandino the reason for Signora Ajala's call.

"What! And you sent her away like that?" exclaimed Blandino in reply. "Why, why, you amaze me! How's that! *Perdio!* Why, there's need for action here! To straighten things out and make amends . . . and at once!"

Torchiara burst into a laugh.

"Where are you going now?"

Profoundly agitated, Blandino was running about the room.

"My hat! . . . Where did Heave my hat?"

"Your head! Your head!" exclaimed Torchiara, with another burst of laughter. "Look for your head rather!"

He grasped his friend by the arm.

"There you go again! And then they call you crazy! First you take the husband's side in the duel; and now you want to defend the wife?"

"But I don't look at things the way you do!" Blandino shouted at him. "I judge according to circumstances: I don't trace a line arbitrarily the way you do. Up to this point everything is good,

on this side everything is bad. . . . Let me do all the crazy things I want! First of all, I'm going to write a letter full of insults to Gregorio Alvi gnani. . . . Ah, yes—he, the great man, he can get out of it all like that after plunging a whole family into disgrace and poverty! 'Don't you know he used to throw letters down to her out of the window like a schoolboy ? Good-bye! Good-bye!'⁹

And amid *cavaliere* Claudio Torchiara's forced bursts of laughter, Professor Luca Blandino rushed out of the house.

CHAPTER XIV

IT was about three months later, when, quite unexpectedly, Marta was notified by the principal of the school that there was a position for her there.

The old janitress, who had so unwillingly taken her the news of the Breganza girls' appointment, this time came exclaiming jubilantly:

"Signorina! Signorina! We are going to have you in our school! In our school, signorina! Here, read this note. . . ."

It was like a sudden ray of sunshine in their poverty and despair. Marta's face flamed like fire.

"What good fortune!"—the old woman went on, with excited gestures. "One of the teachers in the second preparatory is going back to town, outside . . . somewhere . . . she asked for it . . . and now she's got the transfer, God be praised! The girls will be able to breathe again. . . ."

"I am to go to the school and teach there to-day!" Marta announced, her voice trembling with excitement, after she had read the note.

"Sissignora!"—the old janitress went on.

"And you'll see that it's just as I'm telling you! I'm sure of it!"

"But how does it happen!" exclaimed Marta. "Was the Flori woman really transferred!"

"They gave her another place, *sissignoral* And a piece of good-luck I call it for the poor girls. • . . All they learned with her was how to yawn. . . ."

"But with the school year already begun!" Marta went on, not knowing what to think.

"Torchiera, perhaps . . •" escaped from Signora Agata.

And she told her daughter about the call she had made on the inspector of schools.

A short while later, as she was dressing to go to the school, Marta divined, in the comparative calm that followed her earlier agitation, who was responsible for this tardy appointment. . . . And at the suspicion she suddenly felt too weak to fasten her stays. . . .

Then the struggle began again, almost from the Very day she began teaching.

The older teachers in the school, virtuous plain old maids most of them, had already taken a dislike to her. The briefest of greetings in the morning from their unbending lips—nothing more; a slow nod, grudgingly bestowed. . . . "An insult really to all the teachers . . . a disgrace to the school! Yes, the world was nothing but intrigue, intrigue.... What people will do to get what they

want! But as to securing things honestly, or shall we say *honourably* . . ."

And so, under their breath they commented with sour envy and venom on the way the principal and the other teachers in the school had begun to treat that Ajala person from the very first! And they lamented the departure of that dear Miss Flori, whom they would never see again, alas!

The recent and still more indignant complaints from the girls' families having met with no result, the pupils—who had absented themselves from school for a few days after Marta's appointment—gradually began to resume their lessons; but with bad grace, resentfully, even spitefully, incited to rebel against the new teacher—that was all too evident!—by their parents.

From the very first, Marta's courteous affability was powerless to disarm them, her discretion and forbearance counted for nothing. Her pupils met her advances with rudeness, turned a deaf ear to her kindly warnings, received her rare threats with a shrug. The most troublesome of them took pains, during the recess period in the garden, to speak ill of her loud enough to be overheard, or else, in the hope of annoying her, they would run to the other teachers and make much of them, showering them with attentions and demonstrations of affection, and leaving her to walk up and down alone.

When Marta came home after six hours of this, She had to make a violent effort to hide from her toother and sister the depression and exasperation she felt.

One day she came home earlier than usual, her cheeks burning, and quivering with a rage she could scarcely contain. She had not yet taken off her hat when, at her mother's anxious question, and Anna Veronica's—"What had happened?"—she burst into a convulsion of tears.

Her patience exhausted at last, as she was forced to recognize that all her efforts to win her pupils were unavailing, she had begun, on the principal's advice, to treat them with greater severity, though against her will. For a week now she had been exercising the utmost caution and tact with one of them, Counsellor Breganza's daughter, as it happened, a thin, fair, irritable girl, all nerves, who, egged on by her companions, had been noticeably impertinent on several occasions.

"I pretended not to hear what she said. . . . But today, just a short while before the end of the lesson hour, she went beyond my patience. I talked sharply to her. She talked back, and laughed and gave me an insolent stare. You ought to have heard her I ' Leave the room I' I said. 'I don't choose toV That was too much! I stepped down from the platform to make her leave the class; but she took hold of her desk and

shouted in my face, ⁴"Don't touch me! I don't want *your* hands to touch me!"—"You don't? Very well then, leave the room!"—and I tried to make her let go of the desk. Then she began to scream, and stamp on the floor, and writhe and twist. All the girls left their seats and came crowding around. And then, threatening me, she left the room, the other girls after her. She went to the principal. He defended me while they were there. But when they had gone he told me I had gone rather far, that no one had the right to raise a hand against any pupil. . . . A hand! . . . I hadn't touched her! I made him see that, finally. But how can I go on in the face of things like this? I can't stand any more of it, I can't stand it!"

The next day, in a fine fury, the girl's father, Ippolito Onorio Breganza, officer of the Chevalier of the Crown and member of the Perennial Council, went to make a scene in the principal's office.

His corpulence really didn't admit of his gesticulating as he would have liked. Short of arm and leg, he trotted his little globe of a paunch up and down the room, puffing, his shoes squeaking at every step. What, raise a hand against his daughter? God himself, God himself, I say, had no right to do it! Why he, the child's own father though he was, had never dared go so far! Perhaps we had returned to the happy times of the Jesuits, when children were taught to the **slap**

of the ferrule. Well, he was going to have immediate satisfaction for this injury! Yes, by God! If Signorina Ajala had such powerful friends at court, he, Chevalier of the Crown Breganza, would demand satisfaction from some higher court, higher—here he made desperate but vain efforts to raise his fat little arm—yes, sir, higher! and in the name of wounded Morality, yes sir, not only the Morality of the school, but of the whole town!

Cri, cri, cri! squeaked the shoes.

The principal tried in vain to quiet the angry little man, though it was difficult not to laugh, for it was currently reported in the town that the *cavaliere* was by no means his wife's daughter's father. But as he strutted up and down the room, red as a peacock, Ippolito Onorio Breganza made it quite clear that he would never be satisfied with a simple reproof, administered in private, to the misguided teacher. He claimed, he *demand*ed, a real punishment. He wasn't thinking only of what was due his dear child, he was thinking of "public morals, *Signor Direttore*, and of the affront that had been put upon the whole town! Didn't the principal perhaps know what had happened? Didn't he know what kind of a woman it was to whom he had entrusted the education of those tender, impressionable minds, the delicate young souls of all those budding girls?

"It's simply immoral!" he thundered with all

the power of his lungs, as he terminated his discourse. "Either you set this scandalous state of things right, or I will! I am going to present a formal complaint to the State inspector of schools! Sir, I have the honour. . . ."

And thumping his top-hat—bum!—down on his head with relentless fury, he rushed out of the door just as the janitor was coming in. They collided with such force that they nearly threw one another flat on the ground.

"Pardon me. . . ."

"Pardon me. . . ."

Squeak, squeak, squeak. . . .

Two days later the principal was summoned to an interview by the inspector of schools.

For two months now Torchiara had been noting with consternation the damaging effect that Ajala girPs appointment was having in the region on Alvignani's not yet assured political position.

"My dear fellow, the heart has always been the head's worst enemy!" he frequently asserted to himself. For *cavaliere* Claudio Torchiara delighted in formulating aphorisms, usually interspersing them with a few "*Signor mios*" even when he was enunciating them to a lady, or, by way of solitary pastime, to himself.

Counsellor Breganza's furious visit had thrown him headlong into angry waters. So now the municipality too would turn against Alvignani! He had promised Breganza reparation and satis-

faction, so he summoned the principal. Sifting and weighing contradictory versions of the affair, he wrote to Alvignani as a necessary caution, hoping, as the saying is, to save both the kid and the cabbage—the cabbages in the case being the votes by means of which Gregorio Alvignani had been elected deputy.

The principal of the school, although thoroughly wearied by this time of all the annoyance this particular teacher had quite involuntarily caused him, had, purely as a matter of conscience, defended Marta against the inspector's charges.

"I understand, I understand," answered *cavalier e* Torchiara. "But ability, my dear sir, and good-will, do not suffice. It is necessary to consider the private life of an individual, sir, which exercises an influence, and is of weight—of very great weight—in determining the attitude of the pupils toward the teacher . . . the esteem in which they hold her. Do I make myself clear?"

But the principal had not been in the town very long, and didn't know the teacher's history; he did, however, frankly admire her ability, and thought she deserved every consideration.

"Why, of course we'll take all that into account!" exclaimed *cavaliere* Torchiara. "Why not? Of course, we'll take account of it. All the more because I know the unfortunate state of affairs in which the young lady's family. . . . Oh, have no fear, we can arrange all that by a trans-

fer, let us say, and one that would be to the young lady's advantage. . . . Meanwhile, my dear sir, you will have to go outside the four walls of your school a bit and . . . and pay some attention to the demands of the public which. . . . You see, it appears that the young woman—who was, I don't deny it, provoked thereto, and one might even find some excuse for her—it appears that she . . . why yes, she did go a little too far. . . . And of course, my dear sir, Signor Breganza is a man of some influence • . . and even for the interest of the young lady herself it would be better to give him whatever small satisfaction we can, so as to keep the matter in the sphere of school matters, do I make myself clear! . . • I would suggest, for instance. . • . You might persuade Miss Ajala to take a sick leave for a fortnight, providing yourself with a substitute, of course, so the classes won't suffer through the change, which. . . • Meantime arrangements will be made. How will that do!"

That very day he wrote a long and confidential letter to his dear Gregorio, conjuring him to do all he could to obtain the transfer of "the young lady he had recommended"—incurring thereby such serious damage to his prospects! He, the writer, had no false optimism as to the difficulties in the way. But, after the splendid speech his dear Gregorio had delivered in the Chamber of Deputies in the discussion on the

budget appropriation for educational purposes, a speech which, at a stroke (no, not flattery)—had created a singularly promising parliamentary future for him, as all the newspapers asserted—he ought not to find any difficulty insurmountable. For the rest of that year, anyway, Miss Ajala could fill the place of substitute in the Collegio Nuovo at Palermo (a vacancy there).

While waiting for these momentous decisions to be made, Marta was constrained to extend the fifteen days' leave she had asked for "on account of illness" by another fortnight. At the end of about a month, two letters arrived from the honourable Alvignani, one of them for Marta, the other for the inspector Torchiara.

At sight of the letter Marta experienced a sharp feeling of distress. Disheartened by her inability to struggle against the overpowering injustice of all around her, rebellious against the punishment inflicted without her deserving it, she felt poisoned by hatred and rage. But that letter gave her a weapon for revenge.

It had been composed with consummate discretion. Not a single vague allusion—since it might have hurt her, just then—to the past; instead, under his bitter reflections on life and society, a subtle intuition of the state of mind she was in! It was better—oh, yes, it was better!—to shut oneself up in an uninterrupted dream, far above the vulgarity and shabby miseries of daily life,

above the yoke of the laws that level all whom they affect down to within a handsbreadth of the mud, a net woven for the protection of dwarfs, an obstacle fairly unsurmountable, shackles for whoever would mount towards an ideal!

He knew, he wrote, all that had befallen her of late, and announced that she had been appointed to another school so as to remove her from the "mud" against which she had been struggling. He had taken this liberty upon himself quite on his own responsibility, sure that he must be interpreting a wish she had never—to him at least—in the slightest degree expressed; and he implored her to let him do this much, at least, and to allow him, from afar, to watch over her, and remember her always. Unfortunately, he had at hand only very feeble and limited means of showing her the extent of his interest, his respect!

And, at the top of the page, his motto: NIHIL-MIHI-CONSCIO.

At leaving their native town, Marta, Maria, and their mother had only one cause for regret—they had to part from Anna Veronica!

Poor Anna! She was always trying to cheer their flagging courage, but it was she who was the most distressed at heart. There were three of them, but she was to remain alone, alone, alone, abandoned among the enemy. Once more, for her, silence, and solitude, and long, sad, monotonous days. . . .

"But you'll write to me V⁹

Even while she was declaring that she was not going to cry, tears rolled down her cheeks; she would try to force her lips into a smile, but, more than likely the result would be a struggling little sob.

She had insisted on accompanying her friends to the railway station at the foot of the hill on which the town was built. While they rode in the cab together, no one spoke a word. It was a humid grey day and the old four-wheeler bounced and rattled over the battered cobbles of the steep streets, shaking the loosened panes of the carriage doors in an incessant, nerve-wracking rattle.

As the train was about to start, Anna Veronica and Signora Agata, clutching one another and muffling their sobs on one another's shoulder, were almost violently torn apart by the conductor. The engine was already blowing its whistle, on the point of pulling out.

And there stood Anna, her face dripping with tears, her extended arms slowly sinking, as the black train rolled away; and still she kept her eyes fixed on the windows of the coach from which her three friends were still waving their handkerchiefs—one last flutter . . . and another . . .

"*Addio . . . Addio . . .*" she murmured, almost to herself, as she waved back. . . •

Part II

CHAPTER I

A **GAY** little house on Papireto Street; on the top floor, light and airy, four clean small rooms with floors of Valencian tiles, and walls covered with paper that, though faded, was untorn and of a pleasant colour. The least small of the four Signora Agata and Maria shared; the one adjoining was to be Marta's bedroom and study both. It lent itself to this double use all the more successfully in that it had a balcony opening out on Papireto Street; the other two, a dining- and living-room, were to be properly furnished in due time. The chief attraction of the house was a terrace. Its pillars and balustrades seemed, as one looked up from the street, to crown the building. Just the thing for Maria's beloved flowers!

It was Marta who, guided, you might say, by a distant memory, had found the house. Years, years ago when she had taken a trip to Palermo with her father, he had wanted to show her the place where as a young man he had fought on the very day Garibaldi entered the town.

With two other volunteers he was standing

there at the entrance to the street, firing at a cloud of smoke that came from the front windows of some houses in the distance where the Bourbon soldiers had taken cover. First one, then the other, of his two companions had fallen. He meanwhile went on firing shot after shot almost as though he were waiting for the bullet that was to dispose of him. Suddenly, he felt a hand lightly strike his shoulder, and a voice, saying:

"Get up from there, boy, it's too dangerous I"

He turned around and saw *him*, Garibaldi, covered with dust, frowning but calm, and exposing himself without a thought on the very ground he considered too dangerous for a mere volun-

teer

Marta in turn had wanted to take her mother and sister to that street and show them the very spot. . . . And, as it chanced, raising her eyes, she discovered a sign "To let" right there, over the door at the entrance to the narrow street. And so, in memory of their father, who it seemed had almost conducted them thither himself, they took the lodgings they found there. With that memory in mind, Maria felt less alone, felt warmed by a sense of protection.

When they had set things in order somewhat, after the confusion and turmoil of moving, all three began to provide the most important needs of their new home. The few household goods that had survived the wreck—poor, melancholy flotsam

to which so many memories still clung!—no longer sufficed.

Together they went out to make their purchases without always knowing at first which direction to take. They would stop to look in the windows of the shops, trying to elude the temptations of the more expensive ones. As they strayed through the streets of the city among so many people they did not know, amid the ceaseless coming and going around them, and the ceaseless noise, they felt a kind of relief in being lost. Not a soul knew them. They could go where they chose and look about them as long as they liked, quite freely, without attracting any hostile glances. Only Marta felt secretly annoyed by the stares of the passers-by. Often she would go without rearranging her hair, so as to attract less attention.

⁴'There . . . that will do," she would say to Maria, as she put on her hat, scarcely taking time with an impatient hand to arrange the locks on her forehead.

But then she noticed that a touch of disorder only enhanced the grace of her appearance. A fleeting look at her mirror told her so; and the glances of the passers-by, like those she stole at the shop windows, repeated the assurance.

At the Collegio Nuovo, meanwhile, she was received with benevolent cordiality by the principal, an old lady, gracious, cultivated, worthy of presiding over an educational institution attended

by the flower of the aristocracy and the leading tax-payers.

Marta's manners and appearance immediately caught the old principal's fancy, and she made no attempt to conceal from Signora Agata how pleased she was to have "such a fine young woman" as one of her teachers. Of charming appearance herself, always carefully dressed, and in exquisite taste, she cherished the belief that everything in life was intended to give pleasure to young people, and to arouse the regrets of the old. As she confided this belief to her listeners, she would smile gently—but who knows from what depths of bitterness that smile rose to the surface! As an old woman she could not have been called ugly, more particularly because she was so affable and kind; but as a young woman she could never have had any claims to beauty. Her goodness of heart was therefore all the more to her credit.

With that simple kindliness which is always reassuring, she described to Marta the school, the other women teachers, the three men professors, and the pupils, touching off everything with gay easy talk; she spoke about the schedule, she spoke a little about everything; and finally she gave Marta four days' leave of absence so she need not feel over-hurried in making her arrangements.

Marta came away quite dazzled by this cordial welcome, which she related to Maria with warm praise for everything she had seen—the school

building itself, the luxury of the rooms, the orderliness that prevailed. And after her first day's teaching she came home still overjoyed by the way in which her pupils had received her and the principal's flattering introduction to them of their new teacher.

As if in answer to her happier mood, both earth and sky were just then giving the first signs of renewed springtime. The air was still cool, biting in fact in the morning when she went to her classes; but the sky was so limpid, and the sharp atmosphere so pure, so bracing, that it was a pleasure to bathe one's eyes in it, and to fill one's lungs with deep delicious breaths. It seemed as though the very soul of things, grown serene at last at the promise the joyful season made to it, and forgetful of all else, had composed itself to a mysterious, delightful harmony.

And what serenity there was, what freshness of spirit, during those days, what inner peace! The clear, happy sense of life that Marta had possessed as a child woke within her once more. She was repaid; she had conquered; she was conscious of helping others, and living seemed good. How sweetly the new little leaves rustled at sunrise as she passed under the trees of the Piazza Vittorio in front of the Norman Palace and then under those of the Calatafimi drive beyond the Porta Nuoval. The encircling mountains seemed to be breathing away up there against the tender blue of

the sky just as though they were not made of harsh solid rock!

And as she walked along, without haste, thinking of what she was going to teach, rejoicing in her sense of well-being, not only did her thoughts flow freely, but the words she was going to speak fairly rushed to her lips and the smiles that would accompany them. She felt an imperious need of being loved by her pupils, and lingering in that cool air made the warmth of their adoration as it displayed itself in the mild air of the schoolroom seem all the sweeter.

It was true, it was really true that the season of unhappiness had passed; that spring had returned again even for her. Not only the earth was at last shaking off the shadows of winter; she too had found it possible to free herself from the dead weight of painful memories.

At home, it seemed to her that even her mother and Maria were content, and in her heart she rejoiced in the consciousness that their being so was due to her. All three lived for one another, carefully avoiding every memory of the past which might have led their thoughts back to their native city. But one single loved image was to be evoked there now, that of Anna Veronica, of whom they often spoke as they read over the long letters that came from her. And so Anna still remained their only friend, their only companion in this

almost instinctive separation from the outer world.

They received only one call from the other tenants in the house, but it caused them a great deal of amusement for some time afterwards. Marta had of late displayed a knack for discovering and mimicking the absurdities that lurk at the bottom of almost everything and in everyone, and of evoking with startling vividness the persons whose tricks of gesture and voice her quick eye had noted. Don Fifo Jue's legs—he was the tenant on the second floor—and his wife's manner of sitting, her odd chatter, and extravagant gestures, were all portrayed by her with such effect that both her mother and Maria fairly ached with laughing.

"Marta, *please!*"

Don Fifo Jue and his wife Maria Eosa had presented themselves one fine day, both dressed in deep mourning, eyes lowered, expressions profoundly contrite—in short, as though they had just that very moment come back from a funeral.

"A ceremonial call . . . we are the tenants of the second floor," they explained in mournful voices, as Maria, who had gone to the door, stood perplexed at sight of those two strangers. Whereupon both emitted what could only be described as a groan followed by a sigh that wailed like a storm wind.

Introduced into the room that was eventually to be the parlour, Don Fifo, who was very long **and** lank, sat with his legs pressed close together, his feet likewise, barely touching the floor with the tips of his shoes, and his arms folded as though he were a bad boy ordered to do penance in a corner. His trousers were so tight they appeared to be sewed to his legs. Donna Maria Eosa, fat and blonde, threw the long thick black crepe veil that hung down from her hat over her shoulder, and, settling in her chair, drew forth another lugubrious sigh.

The couple had been husband and wife for only three months it seemed. Donna Maria Eosa's first husband had died only a year before this time—Don Isidor Jue, known as Doro, Don Fifo's older brother. Throughout the long call that followed, Donna Maria Eosa, with tears in her eyes and sobs in her voice, spoke of nothing but her deceased husband and her first marriage, as though she had been bereaved only yesterday. Don Fifo, meanwhile, sat motionless, listening with lowered eyes and arms crossed on his chest to an interminable funeral eulogy of his dead brother. He represented the sarcophagus of the deceased, one might have said, and his wife the cenotaph.

"No indeed, no one, no one, could possibly have enumerated all the virtues of Don Dor6," lisped Donna Maria Eosa in her provincial dialect. **Just**

as long as the deceased Doro had lingered on alive, she and Don Fifo had done their best to bestow on him every care and mark of affection. He had been their guide in life, had Doro, their teacher and their friend. Husband, wife, and brother-in-law had always lived together, one soul in three bodies.

"May he rest in the peace of the Angels, signora!"

Why Doro himself, bless your soul, Doro himself, when he was on his death-bed, with his very own lips said to those two poor unhappy creatures he was leaving: "Fifo, I leave Maria Bosa to you! Maria Eosa, I leave Fifo to you! Your consolation . . . and yours, . . . Live for one another!"

"Ah, *signora mia*" Maria Eosa, at the height of her emotion, would exclaim at this point, quoting his very words and with a black-bordered handkerchief dabbing her eyes now streaming like fountains. Controlling herself then somewhat, and noisily blowing her nose, she would run on: "Of course, we asked everyone's advice, *signora mia*, we asked every one of our acquaintances to give us the benefit of his experience or hers as the case might be, and tell us what two unfortunates like us, left all alone in the world, ought to do. There we were—relatives you see, and we had to live together, under the same roof . . . people might have talked. . . . And everyone, the very

best of them to tell the truth, advised us to take this step, every single one! Of course, we 're both getting on in years, quite true! But, *signora mia*, you know how people will gossip 1 And what people don't know they just make up. . . . And in this town especially. . • "

"Oh, everywhere!" sighed Signora Agata.

"Everywhere, everywhere, you're right, *signora mia*. . . . So, we got married just a short time ago. • . • We had to wait nine months as the law requires, although, as far as I was concerned there was no danger, no danger at all, as I pointed out to the gentlemen of the City Council . . . no prospects, *signora*, none whatever. God didn't choose to give me that consolation. Doro was always sickly and weak, very! Well, to make a long story short, we got married."

Don Fifo always gave the effect of being fastened together in such a way that if he made the slightest motion to speak he might fall to pieces. But, after all, he didn't talk much. At a certain point, however, he burst out quite unexpectedly.

"A melancholy fate, *signora*, a melancholy fate, God knows!"

Marta and Maria had all they could do to resist the gale of mirth that threatened to sweep them out of the room. . . .

CHAPTER n

MART A would have liked to make life as pleasant and happy for her "mother and Maria as it had been when her father was alive and the tannery prospering. She spared herself neither labour nor sacrifice. The principal of the school had arranged for her to give private lessons to some of the small pupils of the lower grades, and the money she received for this work, together with her monthly salary, she handed over intact to her mother, at the same time strictly forbidding her to bemoan the fact that her daughter had to work so hard "without enjoying any of the fruits of her labour" as Donna Agata put it. But she was mistaken! Marta got nothing out of it? But weren't those fruits the renewed faith in life of mother and sister, and her own present peace of mind? Wasn't her reward there in the smile that now came spontaneously to their lips? She would have given her very blood to make them happier still, to see them smiling and confident in the presence of others as well. She felt intoxicated with her own generosity, the more so that in her heart of hearts she had never been appeased after the wrong her father had done her by so blindly con-

demning her and bringing about the ruin of the entire family.

Music was the only thing Maria had a real passion for. Well then, Maria must have a piano, almost new, paid for at so much a month. Did it help to make her mother feel more at ease, more tranquil, to have enough provisions stored in their small pantry to last through the month? Well then, Mother must be contented too; and so the small pantry was always well stocked.

Sometimes Don Fifo Jue and his wife would come up to spend the evening with the three ladies, the defunct Don Doro still providing the sole subject of conversation.

Through the gossip of these two callers, Marta learned that Signora Fana, Pentagora's wife, was still alive, dragging out a wretched existence in the utmost poverty and squalor.

"We own a house on the via Benfratelli, *signor mia*," Donna Maria Eosa mentioned one evening, "and the tenant of two of the rooms on the top floor is a poor old woman who's been separated from her husband. He comes from your part of the country . . . you know him perhaps. . . ."

"The name is . . . what is it, Fifo, do you remember it?"

"Fana . . . Stefana," answered Fifo, threatening as usual to fall apart as he spoke.

"No, his name, I mean, the husband's. . . ."

"Oh yes, of course . . . Pentagono, Pentagono!"

Maria burst out laughing in spite of herself.

"Pentagora," Signora Agata corrected, to explain her daughter's laughter.

"Do you know himf "

Donna Maria Eosa wanted to know what kind of a man he was, and had a great deal to say about his poor wife. . . . Neither Marta nor Signora Agata could manage to make her change the subject throughout the entire length of the call.

Maria took up her music again with fervour, and in the evening, after supper, she played while her mother sewed. Marta in the next room usually worked at correcting her pupils' themes.

Shut in her own room, out of her mother's sight, and her sister's, Marta would often pause in her irksome task. Elbows on the table, and chin on her hands, she would sit there with a vague sense of waiting for something; what, she did not know; sometimes Maria's playing would bring tears to her eyes. A deep melancholy possessed her, tightening her throat. . . . She was not thinking of anything in particular, yet she was weeping. But why? A vague, mysterious anguish, the anguish of unformulated desires. . . • She was a little tired, not mentally, but physically: tired, yes. . . . Her mother and sister were always praising her courage, saying she was just like her father for energy and strength of will; on such evenings as these she almost enjoyed her sense of bitterness,

and the vague emotion that brought tears, and the heavy languor to which she surrendered her relaxed limbs with a kind of voluptuous melancholy—in short, the consciousness that came to her in those moments, of being weak, and a woman. . . . No, no, she was not strong. . . . And really, why was she crying this way! Oh, how silly of her . . . like a baby. . . . She would look for her handkerchief, and give herself a shake; and then, with renewed energy, set to work again.

Neither her mother nor Maria was aware of this mood of hers; and she took good care not to let them know anything about it. She made every effort on the contrary, not to fall short of the idea they had of her. That was her simple duty, she must make it her duty. And she went even so far as to conceal from her mother a letter she had received from Anna Veronica in which the latter wrote at length about Eocco, and his rage at their departure, his threats of a new scandal, all the wild things he threatened to do. . . .

Why sadden her mother with such news? Marta had replied to her friend that what her husband did had no interest for her and that she did not care to hear anything more about him. The man had started out by being a fool and now seemed no better than a madman—in short, an unfortunate, both before and now.

Meanwhile, her mother and sister returned to their earlier habits, and lived as simply and quietly

as in the home they had left; and all the more did she feel the conviction growing in her that she alone was the exile, that she alone could never regain her position in the world, no matter what she did; for the others, the life they had once lived might return again; but for her, never! It was another life now, another road. . . . Peace, the happiness of those two beings she loved, study, the school, her pupils—that was what remained to her, that was the goal of the new road she had taken . . . that, and nothing else!

Was she unhappy about it? No, not that exactly . . . now and then a passing moment of sadness. After the dismal winter during which the weather had matched her own feelings only too well, she was coming to life again on that new road in the gay springtime sun, one ray of which had succeeded in penetrating to the griefs heaped in confusion in her heart, and awakening them: that was why she was sad; or was it perhaps the effect of Anna Veronica's letter—or Maria's music?

She did not want to bother now about how she looked. Her mother had begun to arrange her hair for her in the morning once more, but Marta complained of spending so much time on her toilet.

"Enough, mamma . . . let it go . . . that's good enough. . . ."

And she would give the pivot mirror on her dressing-table a push, as though wearied of her own image, of the deep brilliance of her eyes and

her flaming lips. If her mother kept her a while longer for a few additional strokes of the brush or comb, or to fasten the hairpins more securely, Marta would heave quick sighs of impatience, and grow restless, writhing on her chair as though put to the torture. Why so much attention now on her appearance, so much care? To what end? Didn't her mother understand that it was not of the slightest importance to her now whether she appeared a little more or a little less beautiful?

And when one day her mother, after arranging her hair, persisted in spite of the girl's lively objections, in seeing how she would look with curls on her forehead, Marta burst into tears.

"Why, you aren't crying? But what for?" her mother gasped in surprise.

Marta made a valiant effort to smile as she dried her eyes.

"Oh, nothing, nothing . . . don't pay any attention to me. . . ."

"But, dear child, why? . . . It's becoming. . . ."

"No, I don't want it that way. . . Undo it. . . . please . . . I look better without them. . . ."

Was it unwitting cruelty on her mother's part? And she, meanwhile, what a baby she was! To cry that way, for nothing at all, before her mother. . . .

All day long she was more animated than usual, attempting to counteract the impression those tears might have made. . . .

And now she began to feel a new uneasiness, a strange apprehension, at finding herself alone, with no one of her family by her side, as she went through the street among all those people who stared at her so.

No one had ever molested her; but she felt that all these glances were in themselves an injury; it seemed to her that everyone looked at her in a way to make her blush. She would go along embarrassed, head down, a buzzing in her ears, and her heart pounding hard. Why! How had it come about that her habitual assurance had been changed into this stupid timidity? What was she afraid of! Hadn't she always laughed at the old maids she knew who were timorous about going through the city alone, scenting some attack on their virtue at every step?

But no sooner had she arrived at the school than she regained her composure, her poise returning at once in the presence of the three male teachers, whom she often found in the reading-room and with whom she usually exchanged a few words before they went away to their various classes.

She had observed that two of them, each in his own way, were endeavouring to pay court to her in secret. Far from being alarmed by this discovery, she often laughed about it to herself, pretending not to be aware of anything unusual. But she derived great amusement from watching the effect of her conduct on these two aspirants.

Professor Mormoni, Pompeo Emanuele Mormoni, author of "*The History of Sicily in fourteen octavo volumes with an appendix containing the most notable names, events, places and dates*"⁹ was a tall, heavy, dark man with enormous black eyes, and a long beard, grey-threaded like his hair—in short, a figure of tremendous dignity. He always wore a cape-coat and top-hat, in which he strutted about with the scornful pride of a turkey cock. Thus puffed up, he seemed to be saying to Marta: "You know, my dear, if you don't care anything about me, neither do I care anything about you; don't make any mistake about that!" Just the same he did care; oh, how he did care! It seemed at times as though the poor man must surely explode. He even lost his trick of falling into monumental attitudes when he sat down; there had been a time when every chair he occupied seemed to turn at once into a pedestal, while he himself seemed to be saying, "Sculpture me thus for posterity!"

From time to time Marta would hear the chair Mormoni was sitting in creak under this monumental burden. She could scarcely restrain a smile. . . . Within a month all the chairs in the waiting-room had been damaged, their seats broken through, their legs sprained off the rungs.

His rival, Attilio Nusco, was on the contrary very small, thin, nerves always quivering, perpetually ill at ease. Poor little Nusco! It seemed

as though, doubtful of finding any place at all for his puny little body in the cruel, crowded world, he were always trying, with his glances and smiles and hurried scrapings and bowings, to win the favour of the people about him, so as not to be driven away. When he sat down, he always occupied as little space as possible (Oh, excuse me I excuse me!). When he spoke, his voice always quavered; he never ventured to contradict anyone, and he seemed always to be embarrassed by his own excessive politeness. He would have liked to weigh no more than a straw on other people—if he weighed nothing they would not brush him off, perhaps! But as to *heart* . . . Oh dear me! And yet that Marta girl . . . didn't she really notice anything?

The poor fellow would try, very gently, to come out a bit from his own timidity, like a lizard creeping out from his crack in the rocks; first, the tip of his nose; then a bit more; finally his eyes; then his whole head—but always with the expectation of being caught in a snare ready set.

He had forced himself to perfectly unheard-of boldness in displaying his interest: he had even gone so far as to ask Marta, "Are you cold this morning?" (he sweating the while, but with terror). And he would bring some first blossom of the spring to school and stand with thin restless fingers, twisting it by the stem: but he never dared offer it. . . .

All this Marta duly noted, and laughed to herself. . . .

One morning he left his flower on the table in the waiting-room; an hour later he came down to see. . . . Ah! at last! Marta had understood, and taken it. . . . But when he came down again at the end of the next hour—cruel disappointment! His flower was adorning Pompeo Emanuele's button-hole!

Good-bye, wood-violet, good-bye, anemone!

Nevertheless, Attilio Nusco was not a fool by any means. A doctor of philosophy, still very young, he occupied the position of professor of Italian at the academy, besides teaching at the Collegio Nuovo; and could besides turn out a bit of verse far above the average in "taste" and "feeling." . . .

Marta knew this too; but what did this Nusco man or the Mormoni either want of her anyway!

The third of the professors at the school had apparently not yet noticed her presence. Matteo Falcone taught drawing and design. Pompeo Emanuele Mormoni called him "the hedge-hog," and, true to his role of Eoman Emperor, would, had he had the power, have condemned him to cleaning the sewers.

He was in all reality appallingly ugly. Still worse, he was aware of it, which was nothing short of a tragedy, with such a spirit planted in such a body. Always brooding, plunged in gloom, he

never raised his eyes to look at any one, perhaps so as to avoid noticing the shudder of repulsion his proximity usually aroused. His responses to the greetings of his colleagues consisted of short grunts, and he kept his head sunk between his shoulders, the lines of his face distorted seemingly by the helpless rage the perception of his own hideousness aroused in him. As a climax to his physical misfortunes, he had club feet, whose deformity was only emphasized by the shoes that had been made to enable him to walk.

Mormoni and Nusco were already accustomed to his manners, more those one might expect of a bear than of a man, and no longer paid any attention to them; Marta, in spite of having been forewarned by the principal, had been somewhat offended at first by his rudeness. In reality, while she paid little attention to the airs and graces of the other two except to laugh at them, the almost contemptuous indifference this man displayed towards her, harmless though it was, aroused in her a certain degree of vexation.

During the short interval when she remained in the waiting-room before class, he would sit absorbed in his newspaper, oblivious of everyone. Often Marta would rest a fleeting look on the man's scowling brow, trying to imagine what sort of thoughts this bristling head might give lodging to—not foolish, no, certainly not that—but cruel, brutal perhaps. . . .

She had heard his voice only once, on a morning when Mormoni, with a glance, called her attention to the "hedge-hog," buried as usual in his newspaper. In order not to be the accomplice of that mocking signal, or merely to annoy the "great man," perhaps she let a "Good morning, Professor Falcone" escape, unadvisedly, from her lips.

"My compliments," growled the latter without even raising his eyes from his newspaper.

On another morning Marta was greatly surprised, on entering the room, to find a lively dispute in progress between Falcone and Nusco. Cheeks fiery red, a nervous smile on his lips, his hands trembling, he was trying to bolster up his opinion with many a "that may be, but. . . ." Falcone's harsh voice meanwhile running down his poor little phrases without mercy as the latter talked on, eyes fixed on the paper spread open in front of him. Mormoni meanwhile, in one of his monumental attitudes, lent an ear, but did not deign to waste a word on theseⁱ stupidities."

Falcone was ferociously attacking the authors who affect to give an acid tang of irony to their verse or their prose, while at bottom they remain entirely obsequious to the prevailing opinions of society.

"If you think these opinions are false, unjust, harmful, why don't you rebel against them, for God's sake, instead of jesting about it, of capering

and grimacing, and making harlequins of your souls! But no! On the one hand you bend your necks to the yoke, on the other you deride your own spinelessness. A sad lot of buffoons, all of you!"

"That may be, but . . ." Nusco began again. He wanted to make the observation that ridicule was after all a powerful weapon and that Dickens, Heine . . . But Falcone would not give him a chance.

"A fine lot of buffoons . . . a fine lot!"

"Let's hear what Signora Ajala has to say," suggested Mormoni, with a gesture suiting the magnanimity of his attitude.

"Women are conservative by nature/^f Falcone pronounced brusquely.

"Conservative? For me, fire and a sword!" Marta exclaimed, with such an intonation that Falcone raised his eyes and for the first time looked her straight in the face.

And those eyes, illuminating a visage that was actually new at that moment, the eyes, startlingly intelligent, of some strange wild creature, disturbed her profoundly.

A few mornings later Falcone came in with his hat crushed and muddied, his coat torn down the front, a scratch on his nose, and his face ghastly pale, while a tragic smile twisted his lips into a frightful grimace; even the breast of his coat was torn and covered with dust.

"Why, what is the matter, professor?" Mormoni exclaimed at seeing him in such a state.

Marta and Nusco turned to look at him with startled wonder,

"A fight?"

"No, nothing," Falcone answered, his voice trembling and that frightful smile of his still on his lips. "I happened to be passing by near the church of Santa Caterina that was shored up three years ago . . . and it seems that Holy Mother Church was just waiting for me this morning to drop a piece of her cornice on my head."

Marta, Nusco, and Mormoni still stared at him in bewilderment.

"Yes," Falcone continued. "It fell so that it grazed the full length of me and . . . behold the wonderful provisions of Nature . . ." he added with a frightful sneer, pointing to his deformed feet, "behold and admire! If it had happened to you, Nusco, you wouldn't have had those little doll's feet of yours any more. But I — I have mine still!" And his tone was of a scathing bitterness which it hurt one to hear.

Did that really seem to Falcone to be a tremendous reply of "provident Mother Nature" to all the curses he had hurled at her because of his deformity? Did he really feel as though he had heard a voice saying to him: "Praise me for the feet I gave you"?

From that **day** on he began little by little to

emerge from his accustomed silence. Or was it perhaps Marta's presence that was working the miracle!

Mormoni had some suspicions that this was the case.

"Because, you see," he would explain to Nusco, "while it's true that he says 'good morning ' to us now, it's by no means in the same Sunday voice, you might say, that he uses to say 'good morning' to her. A hirsute sort of tenderness, true enough, but . . . And have you, by the way, noticed his new collars . . . quite in the latest stylet and his new suit? And his new hat? Here's to Santa Caterina's church cornices !"

Neither one could be seriously jealous of poor Falcone, they felt so sorry for him. But then neither was Mormoni jealous of Nusco nor Nusco of Mormoni. In Nusco's estimation, Pompeo Emanuele was too fat and foolish to be a dangerous rival, and he had too high an opinion of Marta's intelligence to fear him; Mormoni on the other hand esteemed Marta's good taste too highly to have any fears about that poor little creature who was "always in a panic!" And so both of them joined in commiserating "poor Falcone," after which, in secret, they commiserated one another.

Meanwhile, the revelation of Falcone's new attitude towards her aroused in Marta both disgust and fear. She knew—and she regretted—that she

could not laugh at him as she did at the other two. The very repulsiveness of the poor bitterly scornful being awakened her pity at the same time that it filled her with loathing. The unhappy man had probably never loved any woman in his life before.

On the one hand Marta felt offended and angry at the thought that in spite of being so keenly conscious of his deformity, Falcone could still aspire to her love; on the other hand, she understood how it might well be that this passion he felt—the first perhaps ever to come to life in his heart—might be strong enough to overcome, to blot out that consciousness itself, tragically active though it was.

One thought alone gave her any comfort and that was that she had really done nothing, nothing! to give rise to this monstrous passion.

Nearly every day now, towards sunset, she would see Falcone pass down Papireto Street, then raise his eyes to the balcony of her room. The first day she noticed him she wanted to point him out to Maria; she hadn't expected that he would raise his head and stare up at her. . . .

"What? Is he really looking? Why, how in the world. . . ."

The first evidence, that, of a passion hinted by so many other signs the significance of which she had not understood or had not wanted to understand. From then on she took good care never to be seen behind the window-pane; but she would see Falcone walk by every day, and look up two or three times.

And now, after a night full of oppressive dreams and strange visions, tormented by incessant agitation and anguish, after the hard shock that came with opening her tired eyes once more on the bare, monotonous realities of her existence, while all around the spring blossomed again, her fear of going out alone took possession of her every morning; her nerves quivered as she went along just as though the quiet streets threatened unknown perils. She was scarcely able to regain her serenity even when she reached the school

How was she to behave towards Falcone? She did not want to let him know that she had noticed him; but how could she dissimulate when every morning she was still full of the horror of her dreams? For in those dreams Falcone's figure appeared almost constantly, at times less monstrous than in reality. If she treated him as she had at first, she feared his passion might feed on some flattery or deception that was in reality due to nothing but her pity.

Mormoni did not amuse her so much now as at first. In fact, the very sight of him roused her to such fury that she could have slapped him. And Nusco's painful timidity irritated and bored her.

"Don't you come around here bothering me!" she would have liked to say to him, certain that at the words he would have sunk ten feet into the ground with shame and terror.

CHAPTER III

EVEN he perhaps—Attilio Nusco himself—was inwardly aware of the distressing humility of his manner and realized that to others his excessive shyness must have seemed pathetically ridiculous ; perhaps he was ashamed of it, and, in secret, rebellious against his nature; for in his own estimation he could not have thought himself altogether a fool. But to how many other people he reserved the term "fool" no one ever quite knew!

One day he sent a sonnet inspired by Marta to one of the local literary reviews, which published it.

Pompeo Emanuele Mormoni's eagle glance was the first to discover it in the paper. The sonnet bore the really mysterious title—"To You!"

"To you? . . . To whom? . . . There are so many 'yous' in this world . . . more 'yous' than house-flies! I shall pretend not to understand to whom it refers. . . ."

And the next day, profiting by Nusco's modesty, he handed the review to Marta, certain the verses printed there would annoy her.

"Here is a sonnet of Nusco's—"To You/ . . ."

"To me?" said Marta, surprised, and turning crimson.

"No, no I 'To You ' is the title. . . . How you are blushing. . . . Yes, such things always give pleasure. . . . Bead it, I'll leave it with you. . . . Now I'm going home, because there's a shower every few minutes and I have no umbrella."

A bow, and off he went, pompously, with his nose raised to a majestic angle.

Marta's first impulse was to throw away the review. But she controlled it; and then she opened the magazine and read the sonnet:

"TO YOU"

Against your breast, when first your yearning sigh
Of love it rose, and love's all fair intent,
Fate's cruel hand let fly the banishment
And torments that now heavy on it lie,

And those who in that happier time gone by
All eagerly besought you to relent
And give the sign that spoke encouragement,
Now mock you, fall'n, they murmur, from so high;

But well I know that you are faithful still
To that one love for which you must despise
A love less pure, and that your valiant will

Holds bitterness at bay; still can you smile
Though tears at times yet veil your lovely eyes;
And for this I would worship here awhile.

A furious shower shook the windows. Marta raised her eyes from the periodical and looked mechanically at the window.

Were these verses about her? Who had told Nusco about the difficulties she had lived through? And what did that verse mean—"But well I know that you are faithful still." Suddenly, she thought of Alvignani. No, the allusion could not be to him. . . . "And for this I would worship here awhile. . . ."

Thus absorbed by her meditations on the sonnet, she quite forgot Mormoni's malice in giving it to her to read.

Then Falcone came along. Marta shook herself. Her umbrella? Where had she left it? She remembered very distinctly having brought it with her from home that morning. . . .

"What are you looking for, *signora*?" Falcone asked her.

"Perhaps I left it upstairs," said Marta, almost beside herself. And she called the janitress.

"Take mine," suggested Falcone. "It isn't new, but it might be of service just the same."

He spoke as if he were uttering imprecations. And he seemed even more nervous and morose than usual.

Then the janitress came down. She had not been able to find it, though she had looked in both the classroom and the corridor. Marta grew annoyed, anxious even, Falcone was so insistent in proffering his own. It was raining hard and she could not consent to Falcone's exposing himself unprotected to that downpour on her account.

"If you will permit me, I might accompany you to your door," said Falcone, his expression suddenly changing. "I live on the same street now, a little farther down." And then, with a glance at his feet, he added, "If you are not ashamed. . . ." Marta felt her cheeks flaming. She pretended not to have heard him, and replied:

"I never paid much attention to what people might say. Come, shall we start!"

"You are leaving something on the table . . . a magazine," said Falcone, picking it up and handing it to her.

"Oh, thank you . . . some verses of Nusco's in it"

"The impossible fool," Matteo Falcone hissed between his teeth.

How in the world would she be able to walk along beside this man, Marta wondered, losing heart.

She sensed the joy and embarrassment he felt at that moment, and this distressed her and made her feel such violent pain that if he had but barely touched her, even unintentionally, she would, she felt certain, have uttered a sharp exclamation of disgust.

Just as she was going out of the door the janitress brought her a letter.

"For me?" Marta exclaimed, pleased to have something occur which would help to cover up her own embarrassment. "If you will allow me," she

added, turning toward Falcone. And she tore open the envelope.

It was from Anna Veronica. Marta began to read it, slowly approaching the door. Falcone was watching her suspiciously, sombrely. He saw a sudden change of expression pass over Marta's face; it grew intensely pale, and she drew her eyebrows together disdainfully. They were by now at the portico. Marta had stopped reading and, absorbed by her thoughts, was looking straight ahead at the rain splashing into the mud of the road.

" Shall we go on V⁹ he asked, gloomily, opening his umbrella.

" Ah . . . yes . . . I beg your pardon!^M Marta replied, with a start, folding up her letter, and stepping under the umbrella.

She no longer paid any attention to the fact that her arm must inevitably touch Falcone's, nor did she notice the painful effort he was making to walk faster beside her. She would have liked to run, not on his account—and Falcone felt this intuitively—but on account of some news just imparted by the letter. Consumed with jealousy, he no longer heeded his feet, as they moved hurriedly along, interfering with one another far more clumsily than usual. He wanted to shout out, "Who wrote that letter?" and "What does it say!" and meanwhile he let her wade through the puddles, and get her shoes soaking wet, fearful lest

any request of his to go more slowly might be interpreted as a pathetic reference to his deformity, as an intimation that he really could not keep up with her in that race. He was slipping about in the mud at a frightful rate, and fairly panting, but Marta did not hear him. Why, why was she running so?

Something like a shudder passed over her. She stopped suddenly as if to check a scream.

"What is it? What is the matter?" he asked, coming to a halt.

"¹¹ Nothing, nothing! Come!"⁹ said Marta softly, and lowering her head, she went on.

Falcone turned, and a little ahead of them on the opposite side of the street, saw two men standing under an umbrella. Both stared hard at Marta and at him. One was dark, with a gloomy, dejected air, the other, taller, very thin and foreign-looking, with a comically derisive expression in his clear eyes.

Rocco Pentagora and Mr. Madden. . . .

In spite of Marta's command to the contrary, Falcone turned savage eyes in their direction.

"Don't look at them! Don't turn around!" Marta commanded, choking with rage.

"Who are those two men?" Falcone demanded almost out loud and threatening to stop short again.

"Keep quiet, I tell you, and come along!"

Marta began again in the same furious voice. "What right have you to ask?"

"No right, but I . . . you don't know," he continued in a voice which seemed really not his, as sobbing, gasping, choking, yet continuing all the same in spite of his torment to race after her under the pelting rain, he confessed his love, imploring her pity and compassion.

Her mind in feverish confusion, and as though stunned by the violence of the rain, Marta saw the street, already half-submerged, pass whirling under her feet; without listening she ran on, hearing only confusedly, and with intolerable anguish, Falcone's breathless words, as they mingled in her ears with the roar of the rain—and at last the door of her home!

There Falcone tried to hold her back by one arm, imploring her to speak to him.

"Let me go!" Marta cried, freeing herself with a violent pull; and she rushed up the stairs.

Maria opened the door.

"You are all wet?"

"Yes, I'm going to change my things!"

She turned the key in the lock; and throwing herself into a chair, and pressing her temples as hard as she could with both hands, she moaned softly, her eyes closed:

"Oh Dio! Oh Dio!"

She was whirling in a frightful dizziness. It was not her room so much as life itself that

whirled and whirled about her, turning into a vortex under her eyes, while precipitous, violent streams of rain still roared in her ears; but the roar was that of words too; the words of that frantic monster, sobbing behind her. . . .

And then those two standing there on the sidewalk, spying on her. What did they want of her? What did they take her for? And those other two, those other two as well, that big fool and the little one publicly addressing those verses to her. . . .

Ah, Anna's letter! She looked for it, and read it again, skipping the parts that did not interest her.

" You know, my dear Marta, as I wrote you____ But he has never come to see me after that *furious* visit I described to you. . . . Through the Miracolis however—Niccolino goes there often, and, they say, is going to marry Tina Miracoli—I hear that *he* left this morning for your town. He wants to find out—so Niccolino told his betrothed—what you are doing at Palermo, for he is convinced that there must be *a good reason* for your staying there. Although Tina, like all other well-brought-up young persons, has to pretend not to understand, she made it clear to me by the excessively mysterious tone in which she confided this news to me just what I was to understand by *good reason*. You can imagine how I received the young lady's news and what my reply was! She

assured me, however, that she doesn't know anything about all this, that she doesn't really believe a word of the gossip about you and that she is only repeating what the Pentagoras say. As you know, when your father was living and you were rich, Signora Miracoli was your mother's best friend. Now, with the prospect of a marriage between Tina and Niccolino, she is hand in glove with Antonio Pentagora who, by the way, does not want to hear a word about the marriage in question. To return to your husband—if he discovers anything—I am quoting Niccola—he will have recourse to the courts to get a separation. Remember, the latter is a mere boy talking for effect before his beloved. . . ."

So, another handful of mud. Persecution again, from a distance. Calumny and malice.

Marta stood up, quivering with anger and contempt, her eyes blazing with hate.

In spite of her innocence, here she was being branded with infamy simply because, in an inexperienced fashion, she had defended herself from temptation—this was her reward notwithstanding the clear proof of her fidelity! First, her father's blind condemnation; and then all the consequences it brought in its train, heaped upon her as so many separate proofs of her guilt—failure, ruin, poverty, her sister's shattered future; and infamy besides, the public insult pitilessly administered by the crowd upon a defenceless

woman, a sick woman, a woman in widow's weeds! . . . Hadn't she done her best to avenge herself nobly, to raise herself above this unmerited shame by the force of her own ability, by dint of study and work? But no! Her humility had called forth nothing but insults just as, because of her pride, she had been stoned with calumnies! This was her reward for her hard-won victory! Bitterness, injustice, an existence devoid of all real meaning, exposed besides to the horrible lust of a monster, to the puny desires of a poor-spirited weakling, or to the pompous cowardice of that other—stones and thorns everywhere on that road—and worst of all it led farther and farther away from life. . . .

She was startled by a knock at the door,

"Supper, Marta." It was Maria's voice calling.

Supper, already? She was not yet dressed. How could she eat now? How could she hide her agitation from mother and sister? She hadn't even taken off her hat when she came in. After bathing her eyes and her face to cool her burning cheeks, she dressed in furious haste.

"How good it smells!" Maria, already at table exclaimed as the steam rose toward her from her bowl.

And her mother began to tell how she and Maria had worked up on the terrace during that sudden deluge, to save the plants.

"Our poor flowers. . . ."

CHAPTER IV

"**N**ow hr 'll think that monster is my lover lover—he's capable of it," Marta went on to herself after supper, when she had once more locked herself in her room.

And she put it just that way—"my lover" since that was the way her husband had thrust another man upon her—yes, that other man! But how much more opprobrious the phrase now seemed when it was made to refer to Falcone!

So her scorn of him had exasperated him to such a degree that he wanted to take new vengeance on her now? The threat was quite explicit as Anna Veronica's letter gave it.

A new scandal . . . but what proof? Oh *Dio*, that "monster" . . . yes, it was likely enough that the monster would have offered him all the proof he needed if they had met once more on the street. . . . A scene . . . and then her name in the papers beside Falcone's. . . .

Marta was wringing her hands with fear and disgust, raging up and down without a moment's rest. To Maria, in the next room playing over some fragments of old and simple music—her mother's unfailing delight—she would have liked to scream outⁱ "Stop! Stop!"

How they tormented her now, her mother's tranquillity, and her sister's, and the quiet in the house, and music, and the sound of people talking together!

Her work, yes, there was her work; but could no one understand, could no one guess what martyrdom it cost her? Once they had set up a cross over the grave of the past, were they never to speak of it again? They had come out of it, her mother and sister; and behold! A new life, calm and modest, had begun again for them. But for her? Were her life and her youth to remain buried there in the past? Was that not to be thought of, ever again? What had been had been, was that it? Dead . . . was she dead? Was everything dead for her now? Was she to live only to make others live? Yes, yes, she would even have been contented, thus exiled from life, if they had at least let her enjoy the sweet quiet spectacle of that little house in peace, since the little house was built on her grave after all. . . . But let them at least speak of it now and then, give a thought once in a while to her dead youth, and her broken life! Why, it was a crime to have shattered her life that way, without any reason, and cut her off in her first flowering! Was no one ever to mention that either?

A shadow, and again she was being attacked and persecuted! No doubt but that she would see her husband again the next day at his post;

just as she would have to see Falcone again at school.

"If he goes on tormenting me, I shall speak to the principal," thought Marta suddenly with an impetuous stirring of energy; and with nervous fingers she began to undress to go to bed.

"As for those other two, if they don't stop, I'll put them in their place! And for you, you just wait," she went on in a hoarse whisper, alluding to her husband. Then she turned down the covers and put out the light.

In the dark, curled up under the sheets, she tried to collect her thoughts, but she could discover no very precise intention so far as her husband was concerned. To herself she would say, "Yes, this is what I'll do if Falcone persists. . . . The principal can't bear him, she's just looking for some sort of a pretext to get rid of him. . . . I'll provide her with what she wants . . ."; and mechanically repeating these sentences, she went on trying to think what she would do to her husband. Nothing, really nothing! Not a single means of vengeance at her disposal? In her helplessness, she felt her hatred ferment and boil up into a rage. Then—although she had not noticed the physical pain of all this useless tension, her brain, unable to offer her the suggestion she wanted, began, under the torture she inflicted, to offer her other thoughts instead, confusedly, distracting her. Marta, however, was determined to

find the one she wanted, and scarcely did these others appear than she drove them away. One, however, finally succeeded in catching her attention; her umbrella—yes—now she remembered quite clearly how she had leaned it against the door-jamb of her classroom—but outside in the corridor—so as to straighten her hat—yes, of course! And then she had forgotten it there. • . . And, no doubt, Falcone, passing down the corridor, had recognized it and hidden it so he could offer her his and have an excuse to accompany her . . . yes, no doubt at all, he must have done it! That was why he was so uneasy down there in the waiting-room. . . . Where could he have hidden it? A short while later Marta was asleep.

She woke early, with a violent headache, but her spirit sustained by a nervous energy very different from the strength she usually derived from her self-assurance. She could not see what her life was to lead to; but she would go on to the very end, at whatever cost; she was waiting and ready to rush upon any new obstacle that might seek to overwhelm her.

She had no apprehensions that morning about going out alone. After the rain of the preceding day, the green of the trees had freshened gaily and even the houses and streets had a festive appearance in the liquid clarity of the early morning air.

She looked ahead to see if her husband would

be there "at his post"; she felt certain she would have had the spirit to walk past, head held high, under his very nose. . . .

"But, of course, he's asleep at this hour," she thought suddenly, and a scornful smile touched her lips as she walked along. "He never in his whole life saw the sun rise. • • •"

In her mind's eye she saw him again in bed beside her, pale, his stiff blond moustache in disarray on his dry, open lips.

But quickly she turned her mind away from that image and, as she was on her way to school, Falcone became the immediate object of her pre-occupation. She thought no more about her own sufferings.

What would she do, what would she say, she wondered, if he should venture to make the slightest allusion to what had occurred yesterday?

She didn't know. . . . But, with extraordinary vividness she saw the waiting-room at the college; she would soon be in that very room; already in imagination, she was entering it; there were Nusco and Mormoni, spectators of the scene in which she was going to act there, and Falcone waiting for her, more glum than usual.

Already she had reached the college gate; she went up the short flight of steps, and in the door.

The waiting-room . . . no one there. . . .

And on the instant she felt the tension maintained by the energy of her impulses quiver and

dissolve in the emptiness of that deserted room. Painful memories, sufferings only recently allayed, swept over her in a mounting flood. Alone in that room she lost courage; the very futility of her impulses to fight, to live, crushed her, and the emptiness of her revolt. • . .

CHAPTER V

MATTEO Falcone did not go to school that morning.

If Marta had turned around as she rushed up the stairs the day before, she would perhaps have felt a little pity for him, standing there at the door as if turned to stone. Vainly he waited, while she went up, hoping that she would look back at least once; and then he moved away in the rain, nearly staggering as he went, and startling the people he passed.

Never, never had he felt such ferocious hatred toward himself. Sneering derisively, he grasped the umbrella handle tight enough to crush it as he muttered: "I . . . love . . . I . . . love . . ." and other words quite unintelligible. And then, out loud, in the middle of the street, his features contracted in a horrible grimace, and savagely staring some passer-by out of countenance, he would mutter:

"It's lucky for you, you didn't laugh at me!"

But he, on the other hand, did laugh, a terrible laugh. People turned around to look at him, startled as at the sight of a madman.

And at last, soaked with rain, he went home.

With his mother and aunt, both decrepit and in their dotage, he lived in an enormous old house full of ramshackle furniture, arranged in rows along the walls, some of the chairs resting upside down on other chairs as in a furniture store: enormous cupboards of painted wood, and tables of every shape and size, boxes, chests, cabinets, brackets, hat-stands, cane-seated chairs, and upholstered chairs, the stuff they were covered with all faded and worn; and some sofas of ancient vintage with two rolls of wood at either end.

When the two sisters had gone to housekeeping together, after the death of their respective husbands, neither had been willing to give up any of the furniture that had had a place in her home: hence this useless abundance—an encumbrance rather than riches!

Oddly enough, the dotage of both old women took the form of not being able to remember ever having had a husband; each one of them was, she firmly believed, waiting for the other to die so that she would then be free to give her hand to an imaginary suitor.

"Why don't you die?" they would ask one another simultaneously every time one of them found herself facing the other one, as, clutching at the backs of chairs, they laboriously dragged themselves about from room to room.

They lived apart in opposite wings of the house. And every now and then during the day and often

during the night as well, one of them would ask the other, in a kind of mournful wail:

"What time is it ! "

And always the other would answer in a drawling muffled voice:

"Seven o'clock!"

It was always seven o'clock! And whenever some neighbour woman would climb up into the vast old caravanserai to laugh at the two old creatures behind their backs, they would raise their arms and shake their bony grimy hands in the air as they counselled her:

" Better get married! Better get married!"

It was their notion apparently that there was no other safety, no other refuge in life. And for a thousand years at least each one of them had known that the long-awaited wedding day would surely arrive at last. But alas! The other one would not die! Meanwhile they had the neighbours dress them and adorn them and make them fine in the clothes of their heyday, of an ancient style; and the neighbours, of course, always chose the brightest, the oddest dresses to array them in, those most stridently at variance with the decrepitude of the two poor old dotards; and as their gowns were too big for them now, they would tie a mangy boa around one old lady's waist, a wide ribbon around the other one's; and then the poor old things would stick paper flowers and cabbage

and lettuce leaves in their hair, and pin on some false curls, and powder their faces, and paint their flaccid cadaverous cheeks.

"There now! You look just like a fourteen-year-old girl!"

"Yes! Yes!" the old woman would quaver, smiling with her toothless mouth at the mirror and making a valiant effort to keep her head from shaking lest the whole edifice of that befrizzled coiffure should crumble. "Yes, yes, but now close the door quickly! because he is coming and I don't want her in there to see him come in . . . close the door . . . close it quick!"

When Matteo Falcone came home, he often found them thus outlandishly gotten up, quite unable to move under the enormous structure of hair and frizzes.

"Oh, mother!"

"Over there, over there, your mother's over there!" his mother would cry out quite vexed. "I haven't any children! I'm only twenty-eight. . . . I'm not married. . . . You shouldn't call me 'Mother'!"

And then his aunt—he had a filial respect and pity for her too—would answer him:

"I'm only twenty-eight • . . I'm not married!"

But his aunt was uneasy and distressed now and again by the suspicion that Matteo was really her son; for in her beclouded memory there

stirred a vague sense of the grief she had experienced years and years ago when her baby had died.

"But how can that be?" the neighbours would say to her. "If you have never had a husband!"

"Yes, that's true . . . and yet . . . and yet . . . perhaps Matteo is my son," the old lady would answer with a sly smile and an air of great mystery. "Perhaps!"

"But how so?"

And then the old creature would clutch the neighbour's arm, and draw her nearer and whisper in her ear:

"The Holy Ghost!"

After which a great burst of laughter.

And who can say how much these scenes at home, added to his consciousness of his own ugliness, had contributed to the monstrous conception Falcone had of life and of human nature?

He could not understand such unhappiness as the mind creates for itself with doubts or the feverish thirst to know all things; poverty to him seemed a bearable and remediable ill; life had but two real sources of unhappiness reserved for those against whom Nature chooses to exercise her relentless injustice; ugliness and old age, mocked and despised by beauty and youth.

Perhaps that was all his mother and aunt kept on living for—to provide sport for the neighbours! And he—why had he come into the world?

[Why should reason be taken away, and life left, to those who are already ripe for death?

He was so obsessed by this idea, and it aroused such profound rebellion within him that many a time he felt the whole force of his being pushing him on to avenge the victims of such injustice; to slash beauty in the face and liberate old age from the agony of life! And he must at times have done himself actual violence in order to resist the impulse to crime; his mind, extraordinarily clear, would show him every aspect of the act he brooded over, as though he were actually committing it. A crime? No. Separation!

And how many times, when, with a sudden effort he would detach himself from that invasion of criminal desires, and go to his mother as though to make up to her by exaggerated solicitude for the cruel project he had harboured an instant against her, all unconscious as she was of her peril, she would welcome him with a laugh, saying:

"Do put your feet on straight!"

The old lady thought that he wore them that way for a whim, or just to make her laugh. And, laughing, she always insisted:

"Do put your feet on straight V⁹

Then he too would laugh. Oh, to grow mad face to face with his mother's senility!

"Yes, see, Mother! Now I'll get them on right."

And the old creature, watching him, as he leaned against the wall, and tried to straighten his feet, laughed and laughed again. . . .

But on the day of Marta's contemptuous repulse, he did not go to see his mother and aunt in their rooms as he usually did when he came in; he ate no dinner, nor did he go to bed that night; he did not even take off his rain-soaked clothing. Scarcely had day dawned when he went out on one of the long walks he usually took—to the frightful torture to his feet and his body—after he had suffered one of his violent attacks. Montecuccio, the highest mountain of the Conca d'oro, was his goal. When he reached the summit, with all the venom in his soul he spat toward the city:

"I a worm, and you a worm's nest!"

He came down later that day, tired out, spent, almost calm. It was late. At that hour the classes at the school must be over. He thought it "prudent, however, to go there to excuse his absence. In reality he hoped to meet Marta on the way.

And he did, in fact, meet her a few steps from the school gate. She was walking slowly reading a letter: another letter. . . . Who was it wrote to her every day? And how her cheeks flamed! No doubt, no doubt, it was a love letter!

Falcone was as sure of it as if he had snatched the letter from her hand and read it.

As a matter of fact, that had been his first impulse when he saw her; but he had restrained himself; he had let her pass slowly by and go ahead of him down the street, profoundly absorbed in what she was reading.

"She didn't see me," he said to himself. And he turned down an adjoining street, without giving another thought to explaining his absence at school.

CHAPTER VI

ONCE inside the door of the house, Marta tore the letter Falcone had seen into minute pieces and threw them away before going up the stairs. With the letter she tore up a printed admission card; then she passed her hands over her eyes and her feverish cheeks and stood in some perplexity as though desperately trying to remember something.

Her veins throbbed and in that moment of indecision the tumult within her grew till it clouded her mind like an intoxication. And in truth as she stood there at the foot of the stairs, cheeks aflame and eyes sparkling, smiling unconsciously, one might have thought her really drunk.

What was she waiting for as she paused before going upstairs?

Outward calm at least, so that her mother and sister would not notice. . . .

She went up hurriedly as though trying by that hurried flight up the stairs to escape the thoughts that disturbed her. She was ready to lie to her mother and sister, to make up any falsehood on the spot. Didn't she lie to them every day to conceal her bitterness?

She had destroyed the letter; but the words it

had contained, fitting themselves together from the scraps of paper she had scattered, followed her up the stairs as though whirling around her head and buzzing in her ears. She heard them resounding confusedly within her, not in the tones of him who had written them, but in tones she gave them at that moment, tones neither gentle nor caressing : tones of revolt against everything which, up to that moment, she had been called upon to endure.

No sooner was she alone in her room than she felt even more keenly than usual the painfulness of the perpetual lying she was forced to in her own home; and more than ever before she felt how detached she was from mother and sister. Hadn't they both, with their modest reserved humility, their timorous regard for other people's opinion, and constant concern lest they give it offence, with their slavish subservience to the tyranny of every social prejudice—hadn't they both perhaps made their way back into that world from which she had been expelled, the world which had condemned her without mercy?

A new pucker showed on her forehead as this new feeling against her family took shape in her mind. She tried to check it, she tried to prevent her confusion of spirit from settling down into the feeling of hate which rose of its own accord, vigorous, and eager to smother the uneasiness that had earlier pervaded her consciousness.

But why must she be a victim? Why, when she had conquered? Was *she* dead, she by whom others lived? What had she done that she must lose all right to life? Nothing . . . nothing. . . . But why then must she suffer patent injustice from everyone? And not only injustice, but insult and slander besides. Not even that unjust condemnation was reparable. Who indeed could believe her innocent after what her husband and father had done? No, there could be no reparation for the war she had had forced upon her; she was lost forever. But innocence, her own innocence, shook her, crying for vengeance. And the avenger had come.

Gregorio Alvignani had come, in short, and was that very moment in Palermo. He had written to her, inclosing an invitation card to the lecture he was to deliver the morning of the next day at the University. "Come, Marta," ran the letter—she remembered it almost word for word—"Come, and bring the principal of your school with you. You will see how my words glow at the thought that you are there, listening. . . ." And then • . • No. How could she go there? She tore the card into fragments.

But she would see him the next day just the same. He wrote that he would call on her at the school to hear from her own lips whether she had been satisfied with him. He knew that she would never have written to him, never manifested any

desire to see him; his letter dwelt rather sadly on that point; that was precisely why he had come to see her.

Why was she trembling so? She stood up and raising her hand haughtily pushed her hair away from her forehead. Her cheeks seemed on fire and she was intensely restless as though a stream of new blood were burning in her veins. She opened the window on the balcony and looked at the sky aglow with the splendours of sunset.

Was she to remain outside of life forever? To fill its radiance with shadows and mists? To smother the feelings that so recently had begun to stir confusedly, feverishly in her again, like some eager aspiration to those azure skies, to that springtide sun, to the joy of the swallows and the flowers—the swallows that had built their nests above the balcony, the flowers her mother scattered here and there, everywhere—in the house? Hadn't the time come for her too to live again?

' ' To live! To live!' ⁹ Alvignani 's letter ran on, "That is the cry which burst from my heart after all the useless and vain anxieties, the intrigues, and annoyances, the weariness, the depression, the disgust with the lying and falsity and never-ending duplicity I found in that pandemonium—our national Capital. To live, live! And so I fled_____"

Marta was fairly obsessed by this unexpected letter that was like a hymn to life.

"Time is pressing me close, gaining on me. . . . Every hour I allow to escape me while I attend to these inanities is lost: I feel it to be so! Just as I feel convinced that an unhappy fate is reserved for him who does not heed soon enough the honest warning our own nature sends us. Woe to him who obstinately turns a deaf ear and waits for something else. . . . For only bitter regret can then fill the great emptiness of his existence. Ah, with how many lies do we bewilder ourselves, and lose our most spontaneous and natural sense of life! I know, Marta, I know! Your chain and mine. But how could it be possible for two souls like ours born to understand one another to pass thus alone through life, like strangers? The roads of the world lead us in quite opposite directions, it is true: and at every crossroads there waits a Cerberus; only too often he will let us pass only if we throw him our heart to feed on; but there are other roads our souls can find for their communing far above the miseries of life, roads no splatterings of mud can reach. . . ."

Marta felt suddenly seized with an overwhelming desire to weep. She drew quickly back from the balcony, her eyes full of tears, and sitting down, covered her face with her hands.

CHAPTER V n

T I K E everything else he did or said, Gregorio •" Alvignani's letter was, in part, sincere.

He had really felt, at Rome, what he described in his letter as "The honest warning our nature sends us. . . ."

Confining work and incessant mental activity, the long-sustained and persistent efforts required not only to keep up the lordly style of living he was accustomed to, but also to give substance to his political ambitions and make them seem reasonable to others, lack of sufficient sleep, and of occasional holidays, had finally worn him out and even had brought about a serious nerve-strain.

One morning he suddenly caught sight in the mirror of his pallid, tired face, and noted the lines in the corner of his eyes, the furrows running down from his mouth and his rapidly thinning hair; he had never noted these changes before though he had looked on them daily; and he was profoundly startled. When he went to his study later and sat down in front of his desk with its neat piles of documents arranged in due order, he was unable to do a stroke of work on any of the tasks he had under way. And thus, without

warning, the consciousness of his inability, for the moment, to go on, had forced itself upon him and he had made up his mind that he needed a long and thorough rest, and without delay.

He was besides thoroughly disgusted at the time by the treacherous campaign some of his colleagues were for the most trivial reasons carrying on just then in Parliament and the press against the Prime Minister. He was himself in the opposition, but the nature of the attack being made by these several accomplices-in-bad-faith threatened to draw down upon the opposition the general disgust of the public. He foresaw that the Chamber would be closed within a few days and the Parliamentary session prorogued. And in fact Parliament was dismissed a few days later.

He decided thereupon to leave Borne, take a long rest, and prepare for the unavoidable approaching struggle. The mirror too had something to say to the painful feelings agitating him. He was already on the downward slope, had even progressed a little way upon it; he was fearful of rushing headlong; he felt he must catch hold of something.

In his brief parliamentary career he had been very fortunate. Almost from the start he had succeeded in keeping in the public eye, stimulating both envy and admiration, arousing genuine hopes and winning precious friendships. After too

easily winning his victory in this fashion, the inevitable rancours and countless disillusionments of politics had distressed him all the more, for the reason that no one close to him had in any intimate sense enjoyed his triumphs and thrilled with his victories; just as now there was no one to comfort him in his hours of bitterness. He was alone!

After his father's death, the not too happy conditions in his family had produced in him a sort of prolonged exaltation of all his youthful energies, stimulating him to intense efforts in his valiant attempt to master life.

His sense of responsibility had served to spur him on, but with such sharp pricks that suddenly he found himself fairly making a vice of work, avoiding everything which might have distracted him from it—and he was but a youth at the time! How many of his impulses had failed to find the outlet they needed! As a consequence, all his energies, even those his strong constitution provided for the exercise of faculties on which his daily labours made no demands, were also thrown into his work. When his mother died he endeavoured to distract his attention from the emptiness around him by an even greater excess of devotion to his task. It had suddenly occurred to him to present himself as a candidate for the Chamber of Deputies, and he had set about going through the motions necessary to obtain his election, play-

ing the social role best calculated to bring him success.

During those years of fervid preparation and feverish struggle, he had had but one moment of weakness—Marta—a fragmentary adventure.

At the time he had been in exactly the same situation as now. His brain, tired by incessant work, had been insistently demanding rest, a change of occupation. Vainly he had struggled against himself. When, after the scandal, he contemplated the harm done, he tried to diminish his remorse by disguising to himself the real reason for that resistance. But, on the other hand, how many annoyances and difficulties that adventure had cost him!

He really believed—he really believed it had cost him too much! But, all things considered, hadn't he done his best to remedy the injury Marta had suffered? Yes, but why then, when he wrote to tell her she had been transferred to Palermo, did he allow the implication of an understanding between them to show between the lines? He was not in love, nor did he have any intention of renewing a relation which could not fail to place new obstacles in his path, and draw down upon him all manner of grave annoyances. Just the same, if a letter from Marta had sought him out now and then from afar, it would unquestionably have given him pleasure—an affectionate letter that is, wholly untouched by the applause

with which his friends greeted his victories, or the lamentations that arose from them at his defeats.

But he had deluded himself: Marta had not answered.

"Well then, let us think no more about it!

Nevertheless, he *had* thought about it, now and again. His position at present was very different from what it had been. But what pleasure did he derive from it? And evening was already drawing on. . . . On his person what scars the years had inflicted! Of course, his moral prestige in part made up for the marks time had laid upon his body. Yes—ah, but youth!

Could it be that everything then was over and done with?

Alvignani did not meet directly the questions that rose of their own accord at the thought of Marta; had he done so he would have found himself immersed in too many anxieties concerning her future and his own, and instinctively, he avoided this preoccupation. On the other hand, his need for rest and relaxation was too urgent. He would go away simply to rest therefore; if perchance he should then happen to find a definite form of relaxation, so much the better; but there must be no risks involving the future.

Hastily, he made his preparations for departure, and, no sooner had he started out on his travels than he felt a sudden and quite unhopedor relief, as though the clouds had at a stroke

broken apart; a new stream of life, an indescribable sense of well-being had caught him, was pouring through him. Behold the sun! Behold the fresh green of the fields! The train was speeding along, puffing as it went. In great draughts he drank the rushing, whistling air as he leaned out of the window of his compartment. "Live! Live!" Throughout the whole length of the journey his excitement grew. It seemed to him that the world, that life were presenting themselves to him under quite another aspect; all his standards of criticism were disturbed and shaken by it: life free from all complexities, life in the sim, in the immense beatitude of the springtime's azure and green, flooded his soul, swelling it, uplifting it, driving out every anxiety and every care.

A few days after his arrival in Palermo he found a house which suited his mood of the moment. It was on an unfrequented street beyond the Porta Nuova, on Cuba Street, rather far from the centre of the city, almost in the suburbs.

A villa a single storey high, of quite lordly appearance, with a balcony in the middle of the front and two windows, one on each side.

"A paradise! No one could die here!" as the janitor said when he opened the little door below the balcony.

As he traversed the hallway, and set his foot on the first of the three steps which led into a kind

of open courtyard, wide and brick-paved, enclosed by walls but open to the sky, Alvignani was startled by the noisy whirring of doves' wings as a great flock started up, and then alighted on the top of the wall where they strutted, cooing '

"How many doves!"

"*Si signore*. They belong to the owner of the *casino*. I'm taking care of it for him. . . . If the *signore* doesn't want them here, they can be put out."

"Oh, no I Not on my account. They don't disturb me."

"As the *signore* wishes. I come twice a day to feed them and to clean up."

And the old janitor called them with an old call of his own, and a snapping of his fingers. First one, then two together, then three, then all of them fluttered down into the court at the familiar note, cooing, stretching their necks, and bending their small heads down so they could look about sideways.

On the left, fitted into the outer side of the wall, rose the steps in two short easy flights. These double stairs, the courtyard, the doves, gave the house a rustic air that was both modest and gay.

"There's nothing to be afraid of at all. . . . The *signore* can look all around. . . . Not an eye could see inside here, God alone and the creatures of the air," the old janitor assured him.

They went up to view the house from within.

Its eight rooms were furnished with some attempt at style, and Alvignani felt pleased with his find.

"The *signore* has a family?"

"No. I'm alone."

"Ah, well then. . . . If the *signorino* would like to have this double bed changed for a single one . . . the owners live just two steps from here, on the Corso Calatafimi. If the *signore* wants to eat at home, they can also provide meals. . . . In short, the *signore* can have whatever he wants. . . ."

"Yes, yes, we'll arrange everything," said Alvignani.

"Ah, but wait . . . the terrace! The *signore* must see it. A grand terrace! A man could fairly touch the mountains from it with his very hands."

Ah, yes, yes . . . this was the refuge he needed . . . just there, under the mountains, with the open country around him. . . •

Two days later he moved in.

"Here I shall really rest!"

Going down to the town every morning along the Corso Calatafimi, he passed near the Collegio Nuovo; and as he looked at the door and the windows of the huge edifice he thought of Marta who was there somewhere, and he assured himself he would see her, if for no other reason, out of curiosity. But how could it be managed? He must find an opportunity.

He thought to himself: "I might stop in this

very moment, send up my card, and see her, speak to her. But why do it that way, so abruptly? No. It would be better to let her know beforehand. She doesn't even know that I am here in town. Who knows how she will seem to me now! Perhaps not at all as before. . . ."

So he would go by, glad to have a good length of deserted road ahead of him before he reached the city, where doubtless he would meet a lot of bores. . . .

He was profoundly convinced of his own worth, of his importance; but, for the moment, the air of brisk sprightliness he lent himself to now that he was far away from Eome and the press of affairs, pleasantly softened whatever there was of over-aggressive self-assertion in that conviction.

He did not yet know just how he was to employ his time during his sojourn at Palermo. In complete idleness? No; idleness and boredom were for him synonymous. Besides, it would be very dangerous for him to have nothing to do. From the moment he had arrived, a single thought had possessed him, or, as he put it, one single pre-occupation had exercised his curiosity; he wanted to see Marta.

"I'll order some of the new books and do some reading. And then, if I feel like it, I'll prepare a few more notes for my *Relative Ethics*. That ought to keep me busy. We'll see, anyway."

He didn't want to follow out any line of thought very far; his mind was drowsing in a sense of well-being, and renewing itself.

" We never really want to die—I doubt if we do. Even when our brains are beclouded with worries, our bodies find some means of enjoyment—the balminess of the air, a plunge in the sea in summer, the glow of the fireside in winter; sleeping, eating, walking about, what more do they need for their pleasures, these bodies of ours! But never a word to us about it I When is it we talk? When do we reflect? Only when we are forced to by adverse circumstances; but when life is pleasant our spirits are at peace—and silent; that is why the world seems so full of ills to us. A brief hour of pain leaves a profound impression in our memories; a happy day passes and leaves no trace."

This observation struck him as being both accurate and original, and he smiled to himself with satisfaction. But how was he to find the opportunity, or the means, of seeing Marta again? No matter how hard he tried, he could not keep his mind from returning to this subject; and invariably he would endeavour to devise a way of bringing about this meeting without compromising either Marta or himself.

He left the house, and walked along, thinking to himself: " I f only I might catch a glimpse of her

on the street first without her seeing me! But supposing she should notice me then? Everything will depend on that first encounter. . . •"

"Everything!" What did he mean? But Gregorio Alvignani avoided thinking this out precisely.

"Everything will depend on the first encounter. . . ."

And thereupon an opportunity did present itself, and it seemed to him a propitious one. He was invited to speak, on any subject he might choose, at the University. Although he had few of his books at hand, and was as a matter of fact totally unprepared, he accepted the invitation, after sufficient urging. He had for some time been tempted to try his skill at a thorough-going and eloquent examination of the conscience of the modern age, and he had with him as it happened some notes for an interrupted essay on "Future Changes in Morals"—just the thing! From his probings into the modern conscience he proposed to pass on to an examination of the various manifestations of life, chiefly of those related to the arts—ecco!—the title of his address—"Art and the Conscience of Today."

"I'll write her a note and ask her to come to the lecture. In that way I can see her and have her sitting out there in front while I am speaking!"

He was quite sure of his success—when had it ever failed him?—and it tickled him to think of

seeing Marta again in that fashion—amid the plaudits of a large and enthusiastic audience.

He drew up an outline of the lecture he would deliver, and pondered it point by point, for he intended to speak, not read it. And when the substance of it was all determined upon and the plan clear, then with a feeling of profound satisfaction, he wrote to Marta the letter which was to lay the fuse.

The triumph of his oratory on this occasion was even greater than he had expected; but Marta had not replied to his invitation. Vainly, he scanned the wide hall crowded with people. Finally, he discovered the principal of the school; she was alone. Marta had not come with her. And he forgot to bow at the applause which greeted him from the vast auditorium as he came out on the platform. Seemingly he did not hear it.

CHAPTER VIII

"i^OME, two steps more. . . . Your headache
^ will go away. See what a day it is! Two
steps . . . Two steps. . . ."

"I ought not to have come. • . ."

"Why?"

"I ought to have sent you word. . . . But where
could I?"

"Why?" Alvignani persisted.

He too was troubled. He had not expected to find Marta so luxuriantly beautiful, nor so embarrassed and tremulous in his presence. He could not understand the passivity with which she allowed herself to be led, and was almost dismayed by it; for he feared he might be mistaken; he forced himself still to doubt, and was afraid to believe; and he was afraid that a gesture, a word, an imprudent smile might at some fatal moment break the spell.

Marta was walking beside him with her head down and her cheeks burning. She had not thought it desirable, she had not been able somehow to take leave of him at the gate of the school; and yielding to his suggestion that they take a short walk together, she had turned up the road

where there was less and less likelihood of meeting anyone as she advanced. No, she would certainly not have walked with him if they had been going towards the city and towards people who might know them.

She left the school at least two hours earlier than usual. Her husband could not therefore be at his post—it seemed unlikely at least that he should be already on the watch for her; nor was it probable that Matteo Falcone could have seen her. Just the same, she was trembling. It seemed to her that everyone, everyone, must have noticed his indiscretion—temerity rather it seemed to her. And how could they fail to notice her agitation as she followed where he led—followed as though bewitched and blind? She didn't really grasp the sense of the words he was saying, his voice trembling as he spoke, but she heard them, fervid, impetuous words which at first made her feel ashamed and frightened, and at the same time gave her a pleasure she could not have defined. All the time he had been so far away from her he had always thought of her, he said. . . .

And involuntarily she repeated, with an incredulous expression:

"All the time!"

"Yes, all the time I"

What was it he was saying now! That she had not replied. . . . When? What letter did he meant She was raising her eyes to look at him,

but all at once she bent her head again. Yes, it was true. She had not replied. But how could she have replied at that time?

Disjointed thoughts whirled in her brain—the two little girls she usually gave a lesson to on that day of the week—her husband's latest threat, according to news from Anna Veronica, Matteo Falcone, and his monstrous love, his monstrous jealousy. . . . But no one of these thoughts succeeded in making an impression on her perturbed and quivering consciousness.

She felt she belonged to this well-dressed, graceful-mannered, impetuous man walking there beside her, this man who had so suddenly come to take her. . . . And she was following him as though he had some natural right over her, as though it were her duty to follow him.

Waves of blood were pounding through her brain; and then a sudden weakness fell on her limbs, making them heavy as lead. She **had** in a profound sense lost consciousness of herself and of everything. She went on, and on, will-less, and with no hope of being able to separate herself from this man who was weaving about her a web of ardent, binding words.

He too was caught and conquered by the irresistible spell and talked and talked without quite knowing what he was saying, but conscious that her every word, her every inflection, and expression were in perfect harmony and possessed an

immediate and infallible power of persuasion. He too had ceased thinking; and he knew but one thing in the world just then—that he was near her and that he would never leave her.

The very air around their bodies had grown feverish and clung about them, making them totally unable to perceive the life close at hand; their eyes were as incapable of discovering an object in their surroundings as their ears were of taking in any sound.

He was using the familiar "tu" now in speaking to her as he had done in that last letter he had written before the discovery . . . and now she accepted it almost without noticing it.

For some distance the road had been quite solitary. The brilliant sunshine drew innumerable dazzling sparks from the yellow dust of the road; it seemed as though the very earth were aflame under their feet; and the sky was of an intense, unblemished blue.

Suddenly, they came to a halt. He stopped first. Marta looked about her, startled. Where were they? How long was it they had been walking?

"Have you never climbed as far up as this?"

"No . . . never," she replied timidly, and still looking as though she were coming out of a dream.

"Over there!" he said to her, taking her wrist quietly without pressing it and motioning towards a cross street on his left.

"Where?" she asked, forcing herself to **look**

at him, and a little, drawing away the arm he would not release,

"This way, come," he insisted, drawing her gently towards him, a slight, tremulous smile on his dry lips, and his face very pale.

"No, no . . . now I must . . ." she tried to defend herself, more and more embarrassed and agitated as she noticed the trembling of his hand, his nervous smile, his pallor and the expression of his eyes, as their pupils darkened and contracted.

"Only for a moment . . . this way. . . . You see, there's no one. . . ."

"But where! No. . . ."

"Why not? You'll see the valley down below and Morreale towering above . . . and the fields all flowering . . . and over there the sea, Monte Pellegrino . . . and then the whole city under your very eyes. . . . Look, we're at the door. Come!"

"No, no I" Marta refused more decisively, as she looked at the house almost as though she didn't yet understand that he lived there. She had not yet found the strength to free her wrist from his grasp.

But he pulled her gently along. Once over the threshold Marta drew a deep sigh. Within the shelter of the short narrow entrance hall she felt a momentary relief, like the relief cool air brings to hot skin.

"Look, look," said Gregorio motioning towards

the doves all cooing in unison as they strutted forwards, throwing out their breasts, advancing seemingly to defend their camp, and then drawing away in a fright as Marta bent down, calling them.

"How lovely they are____ Oh, how many!... ."

As she leaned over, Gregorio watched her, almost overmastered by an irresistible desire to put his arms around her, and press her close, and never let her go. It seemed to him that he had always, always desired her since the first day he had seen her.

"Look . . . two little steps here. . . . We'll go up on the terrace. . . ."

"No, no. I'm going away now," Marta answered suddenly, straightening up.

"Why so? Now that you are here. . . . Just two little steps. . . • You ought to see the terrace. . . . You are almost there. . . ."

Again Marta allowed herself to be pulled gently. But no sooner had she set foot inside the house than the spell which had held her up to that point snapped. Her sight became blurred. She grew dizzy, confused. She was lost! And, as though under a weighty spell, she felt powerless to save herself from the peril that threatened.

' ' The terrace J Where is the terrace T'

"Eight here . . . we'll go there now,"^M answered Gregorio, taking one of her hands and pressing it to his breast.

She raised anxious, pleading eyes to his face.

"Where is it!" she repeated, drawing away her hand.

She saw no other refuge now.

Gregorio led her through the intervening rooms, then they went up some narrow wooden steps.

Up there in the open Marta felt her heart expand. Truly, the scene was a splendid one. The soaring cluster of mountains showed dark and majestic under the resplendent sky, their powerful forms brought into relief by sharply defining shadows. There was Morreale like a white flock pastured half-way up the slope, and down below stretched the valley, dark now in the shadow of the mountains, but dotted with little white houses.

"And now this side," he said.

In complete contrast with this startlingly near and magnificently sombre scene of the mountains was the wide and luminous view that offered on the opposite side—the entire city here with all its wide expanse of roofs, cupolas, and spires; yonder, gigantic, the mass of the Teatro Massimo, and then the sea, crowded into the background, and sparkling in the sun; and Monte Pellegrino happily dozing in the rosy light of approaching sunset. . .

Marta forgot all about herself for a moment as she looked out on this vast spectacle. Then her eyes began searching for the spire of the Duomo, for behind it was her home. And suddenly, at the thought of her mother and sister

waiting for her there, her distress grew more keen, her remorse sharper, and she was beset by a profound and despairing distrust of herself. She caught up her handkerchief and hid her face in it.

"You are crying? Why, Marta? Why?" he asked with affectionate concern, coming close to her. "Come, let's go down. . . . You can go now. . . ."

"Yes, yes . . . right away," she replied, controlling herself with a great effort. "I ought not . . . I ought not to have come. . . ."

"But why?" Gregorio repeated, disturbed, almost wounded by her words. "Why do you say that, Marta? why?" he insisted as he helped her down. "Wait, wait. . . . You must not cry . . . sit down again a moment. . . ."

And drying her eyes, he caressed her gently, for she was trembling.

"No . . . no. . . ." She tried to defend herself, though her strength was leaving her.

When he put his arms around her she gave a great shudder that shook her in every limb, and then a sob broke from her, like the moan of one who succumbs without yielding.

CHAPTER IX

"**W**HEN, when will you come back!" asked Alvignani impetuously as he pressed her close against him on the stairs.

She let him hold her without replying, strangely inert, almost unconscious. Had she tried to speak, she would have found no voice to do it with. Come back! But now she would have chosen rather not to go away, not because she clung to those arms but because there she felt she had reached her destination, had fallen at last into the depths to which everyone, everyone, everyone had tried to thrust her, pushing her, raining blows upon her, tripping her. . . . How could she ever raise herself out of this thing she had fallen into now? How could she ever go back? How could she ever take up the struggle again? It was all over! She had arrived at the destination everyone had insisted was hers. They had had their way! He who had been waiting for her . . . well, he had had her. He had come to get her, quite simply, just as though all the injustice she had suffered had given him this right over her. That was why from the very moment she had first seen him again she had had no power to resist him, she had had no will of her

own with which to meet his assurance. No will! That was the impression of herself that dominated all the others.

"Mine • . . mine . . . mine . . ." Alvignani insisted, drawing her closer and closer.

His, yes. His • . . like a thing she might have given him.

He did not understand her abandon, or rather he misinterpreted it, and, drunk with joy, bent down to whisper, "Stay a little . . . just a little while. . . ."

"No, I am going," she said, giving herself a sudden shake and almost slipping out of his arms.

He took her hand.

"When will you come back!"

"I'll write!"

And she went away. But no sooner was she alone on the street she had for the first time traversed an hour before than she was once more beset by the feelings and confused thoughts she had scattered along its course. It was almost as though they were waiting there on the watch for her to come past again, retracing her steps.

Almost terrified she turned to stare at the street she had just left. Then she began to walk hastily down toward the town, her mind seething. As she hurried along she tried to find arguments and excuses in support of her belief in her own honesty. It was almost as though she were trying to make herself strong with respect to him who

had thus suddenly robbed her of that honesty, and as though, at the same time, she were trying to free herself from the thought which disheartened and humiliated her, the thought that she had almost unresistingly incurred the guilt, of which, when innocent, she had been accused. She fairly forced herself to see, to feel, to sense, in that sudden yielding of hers that now shocked her every fibre, an act of vengeance that she had deliberately willed, an act of revenge accomplished in behalf of her earlier innocence on all who had raised a hand against it.

At sight of the school on her right she made an effort to raise her spirits. Now she had reached a part of the town she was accustomed to pass through every day. She slackened her pace and went on with a calmer mind and increased assurance, as though she had left guilt behind her by the mere fact that now if people saw her they would think—"She's going home from school," Just the same, she still felt something indefinable weighing upon her, something which might betray her if anyone so much as breathed very close to her, or looked at her or spoke to her. She tried to free herself from this unpleasant sensation by reading the shop signs, most of which she knew from passing them every day. Once or twice it flashed over her in a kind of terror that if she tried to speak to anyone her voice would tremble; and then a sigh came to her lips.ⁱ ' Oh, how tired, how

tired. . . ." She listened sharply to the words but as though they really expressed what she felt, not as though saying them were an experiment, suggested by a sudden fear. Yes, that was her usual voice; but it seemed scarcely to have come from her own mouth, or rather it sounded like an imitation—her own imitation—of her own voice.

She noted with relief that nothing had changed in the aspect of the street, that it looked just as it had looked before, and she tried to bring herself too into harmony with the daily aspect of things. Here she was passing under the Porta Nuova, just as she had done yesterday and the day before. And little by little, as she drew near home, she felt herself growing calmer, by sheer force of will and deliberate reflection.

Maria was on the terrace, and, looking down between the urns of flowers near the coping, she caught sight of her sister in the street. Marta waved to her, and Maria smiled. . . . Just as on every other day. . . .

"Why . . . you're earlier than usual today, aren't you?" her mother asked.

"Earlier? Yes . . . I didn't give one of my private lessons. . . . My head was aching a little."

What she was saying was perfectly true. Her voice was steady. She had remembered her headache very aptly. Then she smiled at her mother, and added:

"I am going to take my things off now. Maria is on the terrace. I saw her from the street. . . ."⁹⁹

Alone in her own room, she felt as amazed at her calmness as though she had not forced it upon herself. She had not known how competent she was to deceive. There was a satisfaction in making the discovery. All that day she appeared happier to her mother and sister than they could remember to have seen her for a long time.

At nightfall, however, she discovered that it was not for other people she needed to pretend nearly so much as for herself. To distract her attention from her own uneasiness, and avoid being alone with herself, she drew some uncorrected themes from her desk and, pencil in hand, began to read and to underline the mistakes, centring all her attention on what she was doing. A fruitless attempt. The harder she tried, the more confused her thoughts became. She couldn't even sit still, and went to lean her burning forehead on the cool pane of the balcony window.

Standing there with closed eyes, she tried to recall every least detail of that day. But even now, when she thought of that long walk with Alvignani to his house, her brain grew troubled. He lived way up there • . . and he had beguiled her, ignorant of his intentions as she was, to his vety lair! But she ought to have left him when they reached the corner of his street. . . . How could she have done it though . . . confused as

she was and not able to speak a word? Again she saw the courtyard full of doves and the open stairway. There . . . if the stairs hadn't been open that way perhaps she would not have gone up. . . . Yes, no doubt! Again she saw the mountains towering against the sky; and as she lived over again the moment when, standing on Alvignani's terrace, she had tried to discover the roof of her own house near the Duomo, she experienced a curious sensation, for it seemed to her that she was once more on the terrace looking out on the town below and that she was seeing herself there in her room, leaning her forehead against the window-pane.

"It's what they wanted, all of them," she said harshly, endeavouring to check the commotion that was painfully tightening her throat. "I'll write to him," she added, frowning. Then, with a sudden change of mind, and a shrug:

"It had to end that way anyhow," she concluded.

She wrote a long letter which revolved persistently, frantically, around the two refrains "What have I done?" and "What shall I do now?" In its sudden violent outpouring of passion, and constant repetition of "now I am yours," heavily scored—it was enough to frighten him!—one could read the remorse torturing her.

"As I walked along beside you, I did not have the least suspicion. . . . You ought to have told

me . . . and then I should not have come. It would have been so much better both for you **and** for me! If you knew how I felt when I came home alone, and what I am suffering now with my mother and sister here! And tomorrow? I feel as though I had been thrust out of every road of life, and I don't know what I am going to do nor what is to become of me. Two unhappy women depend wholly on me for their support. I am myself at a loss, with no one to guide me. . . . Do you not see how bitter is the fruit of this love of ours? Merely to think at all poisons it. And how, in my situation, am I *not* to think? You are free, but I am not free. The freedom of spirit you speak of is nothing but torment for a body in chains. . . ."

And then an abrupt ending at the bottom of the sheet as though the letter had been choked off by lack of space. "It is absolutely necessary that we should meet again. I shall let you know. . . . Good-bye/⁹

Part III

CHAPTEE I

"**O**H, *mia cara*, when I say to yon, 'My conscience will not permit me to do this or that,' what I am really saying is, 'People will not permit me, society will not permit me. • . My conscience! And what might this conscience of mine be, pray? It is other people in me, *carat* This conscience of mine merely repeats to me what other people say. Well then—hear me out! My conscience gives me most clear permission to love you. And you, question your own conscience a bit and you will see that other people have given you permission to love me—yes!—for the very reason, as you yourself say—that they have made you suffer with so little justification."

With these sophistications Alvignani tried to subdue his scruples and Marta's remorse and fears. At times he would repeat the argument in some other form so as to make it seem clearer and more convincing to himself, and, with a rising fury of words, to deafen his own scruples, his own remorse, and the fear he had not yet openly nor in secret admitted even to himself.

Marta would listen in silence, hanging on his

words, letting his warm, colourful phrases wrap her round, all disposed to believe, and yet not convinced. Only too well she knew what it cost her to come thus furtively to his house, what torment she endured at school, and what anxiety and anguish at night! It seemed inevitable that sooner or later that terrible confusion of mind in which all her thoughts struggled disassociated, torn apart, thrust into new and painful contacts, would betray her. If only she could have faced the future with some sense of security! Security about what? She could not have said, really; but she felt that it was impossible to go on any longer that way, to continue that mode of existence. There was no longer any place at all where she could have a moment's peace; at home it was lies, at school torture, at his villa, remorse and fear. Where could she find refuge? What was she to do?

She went to Alvignani's simply to hear him talk, to hear him say what she wanted to believe, what she had tried in vain, when alone, to make herself believe—that she had not "yielded"—that this man had not gained possession of her through the acts of others, but that she had willed it, and that now she must stand by the situation she had created for herself in giving herself to him. Her mind, frantic from ceaseless and unavailing repetition, found some slight relief only in his words.

"If you loved me more you would think less

about all this," he would say to her. "Love demands that we forget everything else. . . ."

"But I don't think about all this because I want to," said Marta, irritated.

"You see, the only thing I can think of is that you are mine and that we must love one another. Look in my eyes. Do you love me?"

Marta looked at him a moment, then lowered her eyelids, her cheeks crimson as she replied:

"I wouldn't be here . . ."

"Well then?" he asked, taking her hand and drawing her towards him.

She made no resistance but yielded, shamefaced and trembling, to the caress; and then she hurried away, thinking, when she roused from her momentary forgetfulness of time, that she had stayed too long with him.

He meanwhile did not now, as on that first day, linger on the last step of the stair, unsatisfied, fascinated. Now, scarcely had she left the entrance hall with a last sad wave of the hand, than he would draw a sigh, as though of relief, perhaps of pity, and slowly, thoughtfully, go up the stairs.

Thus vanished little by little the first almost dream-like stupor, and the first joyful agitation Marta's visit and the unhopèd-for ease with which he had attained his suddenly conceived desires had aroused in him. He knew now why it was, and how it had happened that he thus at a stroke succeeded in possessing her; he had by this time taken

the measure of Marta's feelings toward him. No, she did not love him, she had not given herself to him because of love. Perhaps, in other circumstances, she would have loved him, but not now. In the confusion of her sudden fall she had clutched at him as men suddenly tossed into the sea cling to one another, desperately, without hope of escaping from their doom.

How would the situation resolve itself?

"Will she want to come with me to Borne?" Alvignani wondered.

He would have been glad enough to have her accompany him. But what of her mother, her sister? Could they come with her? He had no objections to make to that, but how propose it? She was so proud . . . assuredly she would not be willing to accept the only situation he could offer her. There was no other. What, indeed, could he do for her? He was ready for whatever it might be. But she must give some sign. . . .

And while thinking these thoughts, Alvignani deemed it only proper to have nothing to reproach himself with.

"I bore you, don't *IV*^o she would say bitterly. "You want to go away. . . ."

"Why no, Marta! What do you draw that conclusion from? You judge me wrongly! So long as you won't come with me . . ."

"With you? If I were alone! But you see you are thinking of going away!"

Gregorio shrugged, and then gave a sigh,

"But if you refuse to understand what I say! Here I am, and here I shall be, with you, until you make some decision with respect to the future. My only wish is to make you happy. That is all I am thinking of. . . ."

"But how? How? If I only knew!"

"I know; I understand you. But you see also that I do not fail you. . . ."

Yes, Marta had to agree. But how was she to direct her will? Everyone she knew had a road to follow, a good one it might be, or a bad one. She alone had no course traced, no goal; she alone did not know how far she had still to go.

For two months now their relations had dragged tm in this fashion, overcast and saddened by the shadow of guilt which her conscience continually threw over them. Vainly, he tried by means of impassioned words to banish, to shake off this shadow ' And now he suffered in silence while it added its oppression to the weight of their unhappiness, and the moment inevitably drew near when this weight would become for both of them more than they could bear.

"It is for you to decide. As I have told you, I am ready for anything,"

He might, of course, go away, return to Kome, write her some sort of excuse—"urgent professional matters, etc.'" And then perhaps she would regain a little calm, and with it, the power to make

a decision. No; after mature reflexion he dismissed this plan as too violent. Perhaps it would be better to suggest to her quite openly that they ought to part; not on his account, but because all this cost her so much. But this project too Gregorio Alvignani dismissed as he contemplated the possible occurrence of some painful scene. It was better to wait for her to take some step of her own accord.

And then came a totally unforeseen bit of news, which in quite different ways profoundly affected Marta and Alvignani both. A long letter arrived from Anna Veronica containing the information that Eocco Pentagora was very ill of typhus, that, indeed, the doctors had small hope of pulling him through.

Marta turned faint as she read this information which came like an immediate and odious answer to the desperate wishes that had taken shape in her heart during long nights of sleeplessness, wishes her conscience in its very innermost recesses disapproved; she had no right now to hope for her husband's death! Yet how many times, writhing in agony of spirit on her bed she had prayed:

"If he would only die!"

And look now—he was dying! He was really dying. . . .

In a state of intense agitation she went to impart the news to Alvignani.

Perplexed, he stood watching her as she stood eyeing him sharply. And so they looked at one another awhile and it seemed to him that the silence enveloping them was waiting for some word from his lips—as though death had come into the room and had challenged their love to speak. . . .

CHAPTER II

"**I**N Palermo! Why, how's that!"

Gregorio Alvignani stopped short and turned to face Professor Luca Blandino, who, as usual, was walking along with his eyes half closed, absorbed in his thoughts, with his stick under his arm, his hands behind his back, and his long black cigar partly supported by his bush-like beard.

"Oh, my dear boy!" said Blandino, contemplating Alvignani without the least symptom of surprise, quite as though he had been in his company for at least an hour. "Raise your chin a little . . . that's it. . . . How much are they?"

"What!" asked Gregorio, laughing.

"Those collars . . . when did you take to wearing them! Too high for me, though. . . . What are you laughing at, you rascal? Are you making fun of me? I think I'll buy three of them. Come, help me out! I have to make a call, and I can't present myself like this. I just this moment arrived. . . ."

He took Alvignani, who was still laughing, by the arm and went off down the street with him.

"Oh, by the way! What are you doing here!"

"By way of what!" Gregorio Alvignani in-

quired, again breaking into laughter at the professor's style.

"Oh, nothing, nothing—just by way of knowing, that's all," Blandino replied, at once turning very serious and frowning portentously.

"The Camera is closed," said Alvignani.

"I know it. . . . And why are you here! I don't want to make another botch of things. . . . Tell me the truth."

"Botch of things? When?" asked Gregorio, likewise becoming serious and trying hard to catch the drift.

"I'll tell you about it. . . . Let's go in here," was Blandino's response, as he dove into a haberdasher's. "I want to buy some collars."

"Why, I had to come down here to give a lecture at the University. I'm leaving in a few days. . . ."

"For Rome?"

"For Rome."

"Collars!" Blandino demanded of the clerk. "Like these . . . look! Like my friend's, only not quite so high."

When the purchase was completed Gregorio Alvignani proposed going to his house—Marta was not to come that day—and Blandino and he climbed into a carriage.

"And now explain about that botch!"

"Ah! Now, eh? What did you say, a lecture f And going so soon?"

"I hope so. . . ."

"I should have preferred not to find you here."

"Why, may I ask!"

Alvignani thought he understood why; nevertheless, he assumed an air of pained surprise. But a faint smile hovered on his lips.

And Blandino, had he been a more acute observer, would have known from this smile that Alvignani was already on his guard.

"Why! Because your being here arouses my suspicion. . . ."

"Oh, it stands to reason that I ought never to come to Palermo any more! But why are you here, if I may make so bold? And what suspicion!"

"Didn't you understand me?" Blandino demanded, staring at him fixedly.

"I didn't understand you . . . that is to say . . . well, I suppose you aren't alluding to . . . Ah, yes, yes. . . . Still? My dear fellow, water that's passed the mill-wheel does no more grind-TMft y^o" know. . . ."

"Word of honour!"

Again Gregorio Alvignani burst out laughing.

"Do you know, you grow more foolish every day."

"You're right!" Luca Blandino agreed with the utmost gravity, shaking his head and closing his eyes. "I'm more forgetful and clumsy every day I live. I can't even teach any more. I can't

remember a single thing. . . . Eighty, eighty, and eighty . . . two lire forty centesime, isn't it! Wait, I think there's a mistake. Three collars, wasn't it? Two lire, and forty centesime . . . the robbers! How much change did they give me back? No, no . . . it comes out all right; forty and sixty, a hundred—that's right, three lire even. Good! Well, what were we saying? . . ."

"How many more years do you have to teach before you can retire on your pension?" asked Gregorio Alvignani.

"Oh, a lot! Don't let's talk about it, I beg of you!" Blandino exclaimed. "The thing to do now is to bring about a reconciliation between Bocco Pentagora and his wife."

For a moment Gregorio Alvignani thought he could not have heard correctly. Then he turned pale, but a jesting smile still lingered on his lips.

"Oh yes? How's that to be accomplished? After_____"

He broke off, for he noticed that his voice was not entirely steady.

"That's what I came here for," Blandino continued, watching him closely. "That's why I said I would have preferred not to find you here."

"And where do I come in? What have I got to do with it?" exclaimed Alvignani, with an air of astonishment.

"Oh, you come in, don't worry!" exclaimed Blandino with a sigh. "But let's not talk about

that any more . . . what we need to think about now is this reconciliation."

"Are you sure you can bring it about?" Alvignani inquired, simulating the most complete ingenuousness.

"There's reason to hope so. Why not? Her husband wants her back."

"Oh, he made up his mind to that finally^V Gregorio Alvignani commented, with an air of indifference.

They drove on in silence.

"That way, driver. Via Cuba, the first house," Alvignani directed.

A few moments later, once within the wide room which opened out on the balcony with its pillars and balustrade, they resumed their conversation.

"You are incorrigible!" Gregorio exclaimed, laughing.¹ⁱ You just want to borrow trouble?⁹

¹ⁱ Oh yes, I know! But what's the use? It's my fate, . . . They all come to me . . . • I can't refuse them ' . . . • But this time . . . Do you know the poor boy has been sick? Almost died, in fact?"

"The Pentagora fellow? You don't mean it!"

"Rocco, yes. Typhoid . . . • I live in his house, you know. He sent for me. . . . Poor fellow, you'd never know him, he's so changed. 'Professor,' he said to me, 'you must help me. . . . Letters are no good. . . . You must go to Marta's mother, and tell her what a state I'm in. . . . I want Marta, I want her!' And so, that's how we

happen to be here, my dear Gregorio! Hoping to give a happy ending to this story that's been such an unhappy one for everybody concerned. . . ."

"Yes, yes," Alvignani assented, as he paced up and down the room. "No doubt that's best."

"Isn't it?"

¹ⁱ Yes. It would have been better if nothing had happened, as of course nothing should have happened. . . . I said so at the time, do you remember? That time when you were so bold as to come to me as Pentagora's second. . . . He acted rashly, just like a schoolboy, tried to provoke me. . . . I couldn't avoid the scandal of the duel, and that, added to the first. . . . Well, even then I foresaw this solution. . . . It has been a little too slow in coming, perhaps. But at any rate he is trying to make amends. And he does well."

"Do you know that since Francesco Ajala's death he has made three separate attempts to have a reconciliation? But she wouldn't hear of it!"

"Too late, or too soon, perhaps," Alvignani remarked. "You ought to have some sympathy for the wife too, it seems to me! It's not exactly my place to say it, but between ourselves! Well, now everything is over and done with, or will be in a very short time. But they—they acted infamously toward her! If there's any blame to be attached to any one person in this matter, it should fall to me, and certainly I've bitterly reproached myself for my part in these events. I

still do. I had my moment of aberration, I confess. Propinquity, a spontaneous and strong interest on my part . . . the solitary sort of life I was leading, buried in work . . . well, it was inevitable, perhaps, that I should have a moment of cordial, and quite uncontrollable emotional excitement! I would have gone back to my books soon enough, thanks to her thorough-going virtue if, all at once, owing to the perfectly incredible lack of judgment of that husband of hers, things had not happened—well, as they did happen! Ah, there is no need, ever, to linger so long in our dreams that we are overtaken by the sharp shock of reality, my dear friend! How many times I have told myself that! All this just to show you that if he, the husband in question that is, had had the misfortune to die, I would at once have made amends for the calamities which began raining down on the poor lady from every quarter. You know me well enough, you know that I am not the sort of man who goes in for affairs with women! You yourself once wrote me a rather sharp letter on the lady's account, do you recall? But I bore you no malice for it. I at once did all I could possibly do for her—little enough though it was, given the nature of the misfortunes that had befallen her. But literally, it was all I could do. Now, at last, this is encouraging news you give me. We shall see the lady completely rehabilitated in the eyes of society. That is what

you must make her understand. . . . Because I think she will not be disposed to listen to her husband's regrets. . . . To do her justice, she has suffered too much, poor thing. . . . You ought, I think, to stress that particularly in presenting your proposals—if you want to succeed! And you'll need to use a great deal of tact, and zeal . . . but you have enough! It really is the way out, and the only complete reparation which can be offered her, the proof and recognition of her innocence by the one who had accused her and condemned her both, with his eyes tight shut! Don't you agree with me? This is what you will have to insist upon when you see her!"

"Yes, yes," Blandino agreed absently. "Just leave it to me. . . ."

"Don't you agree with me?" Alvignani repeated, still absorbed by his arguments as if it were more particularly himself he wanted to convince. "It is really the ending required by this unhappy story—the only true, just, natural ending. You can't imagine, my dear man, how glad I am. . . . But you understand how I must feel. This state of affairs, inflicted without rhyme or reason and all because of me on an innocent woman, was a terrific weight on my conscience. To know that the poor lady had been flung out of her environment in such a fashion—young, and beautiful as she is—and exposed to the indiscretions of people in general . . . why, I assure you,

it is a ceaseless anxiety and reproach to me. . . .
Are you going!"

"Yes, I'm going," replied Blandino, who had already risen from his chair.

"Shall we meet tonight . . . I'd like to know
• . . shall we have supper together?"

They arranged to meet, and Luca Blandino went away. A short while later Gregorio opened the door leading to his bedroom, now almost completely in darkness.

ⁱ Coward! Coward!^f

The words struck him full in the face like blows.
He sprang back.

"You here, Marta!"

And quickly he closed the door

CHAPTER III

"**H**ERE, yes. I heard it all!" Marta went on, quivering with anger.

"Why, what did I say?" stammered Gregorio Alvignani, at a loss.

"I had to hold on to jny own hands to keep from throwing open the door and unmasking you in front of that idiot I I would have liked to shout out to him as I stood here, 'Don't believe him! I'm here in his house I' "

"Marta! Are you crazy?" cried Gregorio. "What did you expect me to say? Is it my fault that he happened to talk to me about your husband?"

"And perhaps you are going to try to make me believe he asked you to tell him the best way to catch me with his bait? The way to present his proposal? Ah, so you're really pleased, are you?"

"I? Well . . . yes, for your sake. . . ."

"For my sake? And what other vileness are you going to try to stain me with now? For my sake, you say? What am I now, I should like to know? Now that youVe had what you wanted, you've grown weary of me, and would like nothing

better than to push me back again into my husband's arms, isn't that it?"

"No, no! Not if you don't want it!" was Gregorio's emphatic denial.

"Whether I want it or not. And do you think it is possible now after what has happened between you and me? So you were free to hope this would happen, and to be pleased about it? . . . God! What have they made of me? What have I become? You waited for me; I came here to your house—on my own feet! And now that you've had me I can just pass on to this other man, is that it?"

"How can you think that of me!" exclaimed Alvignani, dismayed.

"And you . . . how can you think that I . . . how could you hope that I. . . . But you don't know yet . . . you don't know the worst . . . Oh, my head . . . my poor head!"

And Marta pressed her hands against her temples until her arms shook with the strain.

"The worst?" Gregorio Alvignani repeated.

"Yes, yes. For me there is no escape possible now. You might as well know it. Death alone."

"What are you saying?"

"I am lost! You have destroyed me. . . . That is what I came to tell you."

"Destroyed? What are you saying? What do you mean?"

"I am lost, I tell you! Don't you understand?" Marta cried. "Lost . . . lost!"

Gregorio Alvignani stood stock-still, faint with fear as he stared fixedly at Marta and stammered:

"Are you sure?"

"Sure, sure. . . . How could I make a mistake?" she replied, sinking into a chair. "You see, it is all over for me! That is what I came to tell you. How can I keep my mother and sister from knowing my condition? . . . They can't help noticing it. . . . No, no, I'd rather die. . . . I must die now. . . . There's nothing else I can do_____"

"What a monstrous calamity!" he murmured, covering his face with his hands.

"What remedy is there?" asked Marta despairingly through her tears.

"Don't cry so . . . we'll find something. . . ."

"Oh, as for you, it's all right! You had found away out. . . ."

"For me? What do you mean? Oh no, Marta, don't reproach me again! How could I suppose? Forgive me! Listen. . . . I'll run over and catch Blandino and tell him. . . . I'll tell him the truth! . . . and ask him not to make any more efforts to_____"

"Oh . . . and then? . . ."

"Then you'll come with me. . . ."

"Again! Why do you torment me so? And to

no purpose? Or do you suggest it because you know I can't possibly wish it!"

"Must you forever doubt my word! Marta, for God's sake, can't you see that I am really suffering? It may be that you can't wish it, but you ought to wish it now! What is it you want to do?"

"I don't know. . . . I don't know. . . . Go with you, yes. . . . I can now. . . . I'm lost. . . . But my mother? My sister? You know that they depend on me for a living. . . . How can I drag them through my shame? Don't you understand that? Don't you know who my mother is?"

"Well then?" asked Gregorio in an irritated tone of voice, trying to dispel his discouragement by dint of argument, "don't you see that there's no other way out? That it's either with me or with him—with your husband!"

Marta rose to her feet haughtily.

"No! That vilest of all vilenesses I shall not commit!"

"Well then?" Gregorio repeated.

After a moment of silence he went on:

"No, not with me, and not with him either; but now that he, quite providentially, is offering you the opportunity—let me talk! Think a moment. . . . You haven't the courage to come with me . . . because of your mother and sister, isn't that it? Very well. How are you going to protect yourself? Either you sacrifice yourself to them

by going to live with your husband, or they are sacrificed and you come with me. But tell me . . . have you made any effort to obtain the reparation he is offering you? No! Your husband offers it quite of his own choice/⁹

"Yes," replied Marta, "but why? Because he thinks I am as innocent of all blame as I was before, and because he is remorseful about having punished me unjustly."

"And wasn't it truly unjust?"

"Yes."

"Well then? Why do you now seem to be defending him?"

"I? Defending him?" Marta broke out. "How can I find fault with him now, tell me that!"

"Now you are accusing me instead of him . . ."

"Why yes, you and myself, my unhappy fate, everything!" she exclaimed.

Gregorio Alvignani shrugged his shoulders.

"I hold out my hand . . . and you push it away. . . . You overheard what I said in there to Blandino. If your husband had died, I would have married you. . . . What other proof could I give of the honesty of my intentions? But you insist on making it appear that I have simply taken advantage of your unhappy situation. Well, I deny it! I am not what you think me. I am ready now as always to do for you whatever you desire. . . . What more can I say? Why do you persist in being so unjust? . . ."

"I accuse no one but myself," said Marta sadly.
€Only myself for becoming your lover. . . ."

But at the word Alvignani gave a sudden start, and drawing near to Marta caught her by the arm.

"My lover? No, dear one. . . . Oh, if I had caught a single flicker of love in your eyes! I would go to that man and I would say to him: 'You drove your wife out of the house when she was innocent, you defamed her without any cause, you ruined her because I loved her . . . and now that she loves me you want her back? No! I say. . . . Now she is mine, mine forever, all mine . . . and one of us two is in the way!' You love me? You, my lover? . . . No! That is why I could accept the sudden prospect of a reconciliation between you and your husband. Because I believed that you would not be able much longer to endure the unbearable situation I had created for you . . . unbearable for you, that is, since you did not love me, but not unbearable for me since I love you, understand! You have never loved me, you have never loved anybody, never! Whether through some fault of your own, or through the fault of others, I don't know. You yourself admit it. You were forced into my arms by everyone. . . . And now, don't you see that this is your real revenge? Were I in your place I should not hesitate a moment! Think of it! When you were innocent, they punished you, they drove you out,

they insulted and defamed you. And now, when pursued by neither your passion nor your will, but driven by everybody, you have committed the sin—you view it as such!—which others accused you of when you were innocent of it—now they want you back, they insist on taking you back! Go back then, go back! You will be punishing them as they deserve, simply!"

The eloquent and fiery disdain of his speech fairly stunned her. She stood a moment gazing at him, and then her eyes strayed to the windows and she was startled to see how dark it was. She jumped to her feet.

"Evening already! What shall I do? And dark. . . . Oh, Heavens! What shall I tell them at home? What excuse can I give?"

"The most important thing for you to do is to find the solution of this situation," said Alvignani gloomily, paying no attention to Marta's consternation at the lateness of the hour. "Think over what I've said. . . ."

"You argue . . . you can still argue," sighed Marta, "but I. . . . Oh, let me go now. . . . I must go . . . it's already evening. . . ."

"I shall expect you here tomorrow," he said. "Whatever you decide, count me ready for anything. Good-bye! Wait . . . your hair . . . do smooth it a little. . . ."

"No, no . . . there, that's it. . . . *Addio!*"

Marta sped down the street, drying her eyes,

smoothing her hair, and wondering what excuse she could offer at home for arriving so late.

As she turned a corner in the semi-darkness, quite abruptly she found herself face to face with Matteo Falcone.

"Where are you coming from?"

"You! What do you want of me?"

"Where do you come from?" Falcone repeated, almost touching her as he came so close.

"Let me by! What right have you to be insolent to people on the street? Are you playing spy?"

"I despise you!" roared Falcone between clenched teeth.

"You coward . . . taking advantage of a woman out alone!"

"Where do you come from?" said Falcone once more, beside himself with jealousy, trying to grasp her by the arm.

"Let go, you fiend, or I'll cry out!"

"Cry out, that's it, make him come down! You know the way I am. . . . Just the same, my fingers itch to wring his neck for him as I'd wring the neck of a pullet! Is it that washed-out whippersnapper I saw you with before?"

"Yes, my husband!" said Marta. "You'd better go talk to him!"

"Your husband? What? He is your husband?" Falcone exclaimed, startled and dismayed.

"Will you kindly remove yourself from my

path! . . . I am under no obligations to answer to you for what I do. . . ."

Marta rushed on down the street, Falcone following her.

"He is your husband? Listen, please.. .. You must forgive me. . . ."

"Do you want to drive me crazy?" she asked him, turning round and stopping a moment.

"You have no need to be so desperate . . . it is I who am the desperate one! Forgive me, have pity on me! I deserve compassion, not contempt. . . . It is not I who am so monstrous, it is the world that is a monstrosity, a mad monster which created you so beautiful, and me as you see me. . . . Let me clamour for vengeance! Pay back this demented world with hate, I say! Help me get my revenge! For it is revenge . . . revenge. . . ."

Marta was shuddering with fear and loathing as she ran on, Falcone following behind, shouting out and gesticulating wildly in the middle of the deserted street:

"Vendetta! VendettaV⁹

Windows flew open, people came out to their doorways. In a short time Falcone was entirely surrounded.

"MadmanI"—the word flew down the street, caught up by the people in the windows.

Marta turned around a moment, and in the obscurity made out what looked like a scuffle. Fal-

cone was cursing those who were trying to **lay** hands on him. With great howls of frantic rage he tore away again and again from the grasp of his pursuers. The street by now was alive with spectators hurrying to see what was going on. Marta began to run down towards her home. In the extremity of her agitation one thought, a foolish, childish thought kept pounding in her brain. " I ' l l say I was taken ill at school. . . . "

When she had gone a considerable distance, and was already near the Porta Nuova she came to a sudden stop as though fear had all at once frozen every muscle of her body. . . . Supposing Falcone, in the madness that had all at once overtaken him, had called out her name!

Marta felt paralyzed, as if her chest had been shattered. In the whirl of disconnected ideas and feelings that followed, she stood still a moment, not knowing whether to turn back or to go on to the house. A strength she was barely conscious of upheld her. She was no longer capable of thought or feeling. But once more she began to go down, down towards her home, as though in obedience to the thought her brain kept repeating to her:

" I ' l l **say** I was taken ill at school. • . . "

CHAPTEE IV

WHEN, the next day, she came trembling into the waiting-room at the school, she found the charming old principal talking with Mormoni and Nusco.

ⁱ "Have you heard, *signora*? . . ."

"What!" stammered Marta.

"About poor Professor Falcone!"

"Falcone . . . the lady knows. It was to be expected!" Pompeo Mormoni exclaimed, sawing the air with one of his habitual gestures.

"Went crazy," the principal went on. "Or, at least, he gave signs of suffering from a serious mental disturbance—last night, right out on the street."

Marta stared first into the principal's eyes, then into Mormoni's and Nusco's.

"He began to howl and scream," she went on, smiling nervously. "Then, they say, he attacked the people around him. . . ."

"Where is he now!" Mormoni asked.

"Probably at the asylum . . • or else. . . . Last night they took him to gaol first. But he was not drunk. He never drinks. He was on his way back perhaps from Montecuccio . . . just

think, with those feet of his he is always climbing up into the mountains: the sun was beating down on his head, and who knows what suddenly burst in his brain? He was shouting for revenge, they say."

"It is to be hoped that by this time the poor fellow has his wits back," observed little Nusco.

"Yes," said the principal. "And then what? To be honest—I confess that I'd be afraid to have him back here among our girls. . . • • I can't help praying they'll send him somewhere else if he does come back to his senses, as I sincerely hope he will!"

"He is going to lose his position!" thought Marta, listening. "I too, am going to lose my position!"

She went through her teaching almost automatically that day, her mind every so often startled, invaded, obsessed by the two thoughts which night-long had fought for possession of her, while she struggled in anguish against each in turn.

Death—that was the solution which had sprung from her brain yesterday as she struggled against the two odious alternatives Alvignani proposed; and all night it had tyrannized over her, and still did. But the image that presented itself when she thought of what it would be like to carry out some plan of death filled her with horror, almost

turned her faint. In spite of the invading darkness, a faint spark of hope still flickered within her—the hope that perhaps she had made a mistake, that it was not as she had supposed, that in spite of so many symptoms against which it seemed hopeless to argue, she was not really in the condition she feared. This feeble ray showed but one path leading out of the frightful darkness—the only one. Ah, how she longed to rush down it. . . . But held back, as if under a spell, she forced herself to scrutinize this solitary road she must take, far from Alvignani, far from her husband; and breathlessly she watched her body for some sign which would allow her still to hope.

When she came in after her lessons, she found some callers; the Jues, the tenants of the second floor.

Suddenly, she discovered, from her mother's and sister's expressions, that Blandino had already been there. Her mother's eyes were shining, and her cheeks burning. At sight of her daughter she suddenly grew light-hearted, and with difficulty restrained her joy in the presence of the two inopportune visitors.

As a commentary on the news that Marta had not been well of late, Signora Jue observed, turning towards Signora Agata:

"It comes with the season, *signora mia*, I assure you, with the season. Half the city is down with the same trouble. . . . You remember

my telling you about an old tenant of ours in the house we own on via Benf ratelli . . . the poor old woman who 's separated from her husband ? Well, she's flat on her back in bed! The other day Fifo went to get the small bit of rent she pays us—a mere trifle—and, you know, he had to come back empty-handed. . . . Ah, if you only knew, *signora mia*, what a terrible time we have with that blessed house, we're so soft-hearted! You tell her, Fifo "

Don Fifo, sitting with each leg and foot parallel to the other, and his arms folded across his chest, fell apart sufficiently to repeat his favourite phrase:

"Christ, He knows!"

A short while later the odd pair decided to "remove the inconvenience of their presence," Scarcely had they gone when Signora Agata threw her arms about Marta's neck and pressed her close to her breast, kissing her repeatedly on the forehead:

"My dear child, my dear daughter! Look, look! Here is your reward! At last you are going to have justice!"

Her eyes filled with tears as she went on:

"Isn't that exactly what I told your father, bless his soul, that very night! The truth will prevail, I told him, your daughter's innocence will be acknowledged! Just wait! Wait! Ah, if he were only still alive! Don't cry, daughter, don't

cry now! . . . What is the matter? Oh, *Dio*, Marta, what is the matter?"

Marta, pale, worn, trembling, dropped into a chair.

"I feel faint/⁹ she murmured,

"Yes, but now there's no need to weep any more," her mother went on. "Do you know who came to see us this morning? You don't know him, perhaps . . . Professor Blandino! And do you know why he came? And who sent him? Your husband! And do you know that he came near dying? . . ."

"I know," said Marta, with a frown.

"You know it? How do you know it?"

"Anna Veronica wrote to me about it."

"Oh—secretly, to you?"

"Yes. I told her never to mention him when she wrote to you."

"Yes, yes . . . but now. . . . Tell me, do you know, too, that. . . ."

Marta stood up with difficulty, for she was nearly exhausted.

"That he wants a reconciliation? Is that what you were going to say?" she asked.

"Yes, yes!" her mother assented joyfully. But, at sight of Marta's stern face, her joy promptly fell away.

"Do you think that possible now?" she asked, letting every syllable fall slowly, and looking her mother straight in the eye.

"Why? What do you mean?" her mother exclaimed, in bewilderment.

"Why? *He* may want *me* back. But *I* don't want *him* now."

"But . . . you don't mean . . . but how can . . . ?" her mother stammered. "Don't you see that it's to give you justice at last . . . to make reparation . . . to set you right with everyone? How can you refuse ? How can you ?"

"Justice . . . reparation . . . do you believe there can be such a thing, Mamma?" Marta interrupted.

¹*i* Why, how can I help it ? If that Blandino man came here to this house. . . ."

"Oh, I know that Blandino came here. . . . But it's no use, Mamma. . . . What I say is this: do you really believe that there is any reparation for what they did to me—first Eocco, and then Father? . . . No, Mother, no . . . that can never be repaired. . . . And you may be quite sure that I '11 remain just what I am, neither more nor less, in the estimation of all those people. . . . Do you know what they will say? They'll say that he has forgiven me . . . not another thing! And they'll laugh at him and think he's a fool . . . for always in their eyes I shall be guilty. . . . And why not? If I had really been innocent, they will say, then why did my father shut himself up in a darkened room for months and months out of shame . . . until finally he died of it? 'And why

did her husband drive her out!' they will say. Yes, and then you talk of reparation! But are they going to give you back your father, Maria f And who is going to take from us the memory of all we have suffered? What do they mean! Are they joking f Are these injuries which can be made up! No, Mother. I neither can nor ought to accept his repentance. . . ."

"But if he admits he was wrong before everyone?"

"No one will believe him."

"No one? Why, everyone will believe him, daughter! Who would have any right to speak, if *he* justifies you? But, my dear child, do you think people do not know you are innocent?"

Marta felt herself growing faint under her mother's glance and her sister's. She remained silent, listening.

"Yes . . . yes," she said. "I'll think it over. Let me think. . . . I can't say anything about it now."

"For pity's sake, do think it over, Marta. You'll see what is fair, before you make up your mind. . . . I'm sure of it. Meanwhile, tell me, what am I to say to Blandino?"

"Nothing, for the moment. Tell him . . . tell him I need time to think things over . . . and that, if he'll give me time, I will. . . ."

But what was she to think over? Was she to

wait while that spark of hope grew smaller and fainter, from day to day . . . while darkness and emptiness spread more and more within and around her?

She soon had to recognize that no further self-deception was possible. And so, face to face with the horror the thought of death inspired in her, she was forced to make her decision; much as though she were being pursued by someone, and, not to be overtaken, had no recourse but to hide in some frightful cavern. . . . Oh, to die! Yes, die. . . .

The current of her life broke daily on this dismal rock, this idea, fixed henceforth, throwing her into confusion at every incoming and outgoing tide of unconscious resistance, of thoughts, and feelings.

No relief, not even for a moment. . . . On every side she was close-pressed. Her existence could not, ought not to number more than a few days now . . . and then? Her blood turned to ice in her veins. She drew in from the balcony for fear an over-persuasive impulse should prompt her to give a sudden ending to that frightful, acutely conscious death agony of hers. . . . Ah no, no, no . . . not that way! But there were no fire-arms of any kind in the house. . . . Poison! That was a better way to die. . . . How was she to obtain it?

Almost out of her mind, her last energies

wrestled with these material difficulties, making them loom larger and larger. She would hear her mother talking in the other room and would ask herself: "What will she do then! Will they take pity on her and on Maria when I am not there any more!" But why did her mother consider that her husband's repentance, and his ridiculous proffer of a reconciliation made up in any way for the injury she had suffered! She wanted to cry out to her mother that this eternal talk of justice and how time makes it prevail in men's despite, was perfect torture to her; she wanted to scream to her: "What do you call justice, anyway! You believe me innocent and yet you can call the repentance of this man who defamed me without any cause 'justice'? And if I were still really as you believe me to be, do you think this repentance could make up to me for all that has happened? Do you think the idea of going back to live with a man who has already done me so much harm, who doesn't understand me, a man for whom I have no respect, whom I do not love, can be attractive to me? Is this to be the reward assigned to me for being 'innocent'?"

She wanted to see Alvignani once more for the last time. It seemed unlikely that he would have anything helpful to offer, but . . . who knows! . . . he might, while talking things over with Blandino, and pondering them by himself, have thought of some other way out.

"I was just writing to you!" said Gregorio at seeing her come in. "See . . . the letter!"

Marta put out her hand to take it.

"No, it's no use now. . . . I'll tear it up . . . full of nonsense . . . you didn't come. . . ."

He looked at her and read the despair stamped on her features.

"Poor Marta!"

Then, almost without any hope of a reply he asked her:

"Have you made your decision!"

Marta gave a sigh, opened her hand with a light despairing gesture, and sat down.

He turned to look at her, and felt the enormous, the unbearable weight of their situation. Her silence, and inert, oppressive irrationality startled him. To shake her out of this state, he exclaimed:

"Will you come with me?"

But she merely turned to look at him. Then she closed her eyes and, desperately weary, leaned her head against the back of the chair.

"Nothing, then, nothing . . . you have found nothing," she said.

"But what could I find?" he replied quickly, passionately. "Day and night I have thought of you. I waited for you to come. . . . But it is no use to look, Marta I. See, that is just what I was writing to you. . . .ⁱ Decide, decide quickly, there is no time to lose, you have already lost too much. . . . Give Blandino your answer, at once, whether

yes or no. . . .' Look, here I suggest . . . do you want to read it? Take it, read. . . ."

Marta took the letter he held out and began reading the passage he was pointing to. But after a few lines she put her hand down on her lap.

"Bead it to the end of the page," he urged.

Marta once more raised the letter toward her eyes. For all she had been warned that there was no help there, her face as she read betrayed the anxiety with which she was seeking for some word on that page which would serve as the clue to some idea she had not yet thought of, an anxiety like that of a man who, dying of thirst, seeks vainly for a trickle, a drop of water in the dry rocky bed of a mountain torrent. And those words of Alvignani's were like parched, heavy stones which her eyes picked up only to find nothing beneath them; and despairingly she shook her head—"No

. . . no . . .

When she had finished, she stood up with a sigh, but said nothing.

"What do you think of it?" he asked.

Marta gave a shrug and handed back the letter, exclaiming:

"Let's not begin the useless argument we had the last time, for pity's sake . . . or my brain will . . ."

"But what do you want to do?" he interrupted her, frowning, provoked.

"Don't you see?" Marta replied simply. "What else can I do?"

"You are crazy!" Alvignani cried.

"Crazy? But I ought to have done it a long time ago when my father was still alive . . . because then . . . then everything would not have been so . . . so ugly as now! Now I've got my back against the wall."

"You force yourself to it!" Alvignani answered harshly.

He took both her hands, and went on:

"But tell me . . . who ought to be punished in all this? You, perhaps? Why, you know *lie* is the one who ought to suffer!"

"And how, pray?" Marta asked. "Through my deceiving him? Would that, you think, be the means of punishing him? Why, that would punish me! Don't you see how I feel about it, how it horrifies me . . . don't you understand? If I were a thing. . . . But I am a conscious, human being. . . . I know I have been with you . . . and I can't, I can't . . . it fills me with horror!"

"Well then, I can't let you do it," said Alvignani, getting up resolutely. "I can't, knowing how you feel about it, let you commit a double crime. So you aren't thinking any more about your mother and sister even? I'll write to him!"

"To whom?" asked Marta, shaking herself.

"To him, to your husband," Alvignani an-

swered. "I can't leave you alone this way, it would be abandoning you to your despair. . . ."

"Are you mad!" Marta broke in. "What do you want to write!"

"I don't know. As my conscience dictates. I do know, however, that you are not to blame. The punishment should fall either on him or on me, and whichever one of us remains, let him **make** amends as he can!"

"Sheer folly!" exclaimed Marta. "No . . . listen . . . listen. . . ."

She broke off. An idea flashed through **her** mind, and suddenly her face cleared and she almost smiled.

"Don't write!" she said. "I'll write . . . let me do it. . . . I Ve found the way!"

"Found what!" Gregorio asked anxiously. "What are you going to write to him!"

"I Ve got it!" Marta repeated joyfully.ⁱⁱ Yes, that will solve everything. . . . You'll see! Then I'll tell you. . . . Now let me go. . . ."

"No. Tell me first____»

"Afterwards, afterwards," said Marta. "Everything will come out right, I tell you. . . . Let me go now. . . . I'll tell you later . . . but promise me you won't write. . . ."

"But I'd like to know," objected Alvignani, perplexed.

"There's nothing to know. Let me do it. Promise me. . . ."

"Well, I promise. . . . When are you coming back?"

"Soon. No fear. I'll come back. And now, good-bye !"

"Good-bye! Come soon!"

Marta went away. And as she walked toward home the idea that had flashed into her mind slowly assumed a definite precise form. In the state of exaltation, almost of delirium, she was in, she did not see the absurdity of the solution she had suddenly hit upon. And she kept repeating to herself as she walked along:

"I don't accept his forgiveness . . . it's for him to seek mine, rather . . . I don't accept it. I deserve some punishment, well and good! I'll see to it that I get it. But he owes me reparation for all the harm he did me first, unjustly. . . . All right! I'll just remove myself from the situation, and when I am no longer there, why can't he marry my sister? Maria is clever and good . . . she'll do it for mother's sake . . . they'll all live together then . . . and so everything will be arranged. . . ."

She went on hurriedly, talking to herself. An enormous weight seemed to have been lifted from her. She looked about with clear merry eyes and almost burst out laughing at everything her glance rested on. It seemed to her that her mind was at last perfectly at rest.

And in this state she reached home.

"Have you decided what to do, Martat" her mother ventured to ask.

"Just now, Mamma. I've been thinking about it a long time," she replied. "I must write to him. Don't worry, I'll write tonight or tomorrow. I am thinking of you!"

"Of us? But you must think of yourself, daughter. . . . You see what you have been brought to. . . ."

"I shall think of myself and you too," said Marta. "Don't worry."

CHAPTER V

TOWARDS dawn she slept a little. All night long she had been planning what she would write in that letter to her husband. Sternly she weighed each word, excluding every phrase tinged with pity for herself or blame for him. Then she had tried to imagine, with minute detail, how life would go on for the others after she had gone—her mother's and sister's tears and despair, Rocco coming to bring them help and comfort, the remorseful surprise of all who knew her, their tears . . . then, as day followed day, the disconsolate calm in which grief finally falls asleep; and then, little by little, indications seen, and felt, that life has moved on and is still moving on, and we . . . we with it. The dead? They are far away. . . . And where, where would she be when, with the passing of time, she too had faded from the memory of her own flesh and blood?

After a bare two hours of sleep she woke up very calm, as though during this brief interval of rest her mind had succeeded in freeing itself of her desperate and violent project. Nor did this calmness surprise her. She had thought long and hard about it, had weighed it again and again,

always with the thought of her mother and sister. Why should she then feel remorse! She was prepared, she was ready. After lunch she would write the letter, and then towards evening she would go out to mail it with her own hands; and then . . . then she would not come back to the house any more. From now on all difficulties as to the way in which she would destroy herself seemed puerile. It would be easy enough to lie down on the tracks somewhere near the railway station; and there was the sea where she could drown in some lonely spot off the shore.

"What beautiful weather V⁹ was her greeting to Maria when she came down from her room. "I left the blinds open so as to wake at sunrise . . . wait, wait . . . there has been no sunrise at all. . . ."

The sky was, as a matter of fact, cloudy and threatening for the first time after a long season of good weather.

All day long Marta was unusually affectionate in every word and glance she gave her mother and sister, and at table she was almost gay. After lunch she told her mother that she proposed to write to her husband that afternoon.

"Yes, daughter, God help you!"

Signora Agata was certain that Marta would consent to the proposed reconciliation, and quietly went about her housework, Maria helping her.

Towards afternoon the sky grew ominous.

Heavy storm clouds heaped up over the city, and a high wind rose. At every blast the panes rattled and shook in the windows until it seemed as though they must yield with a great crash to the wind's fury, and every now and then it would pounce on the terrace door. Suddenly, in the darkness, a sharp blinding light, followed almost instantly by a crash of thunder, that rent the air with a formidable clatter. Screaming, Marta fled from her room, and pale, shaking with terror, threw her arms about her mother.

"For shame! Are you so frightened?" her mother exclaimed, caressing her hair. "See how nervous you are! What a baby!"

"Yes, yes," said Marta, shaken by long shudders which turned into sobs. "I'm too nervous to write today . . . I'll write tomorrow . . . I'm shaking so. . . ."

"Stay here with us," urged Maria.

Stay there in that little sheltered kitchen, tasting once more the safe, narrow, blessed life of the home, that life which was henceforth not for her!

She had torn up sheet after sheet of paper. The letter that had come to her so easily in the feverish excitement of the long night hours, now that she was on the point of writing it, seemed disjointed and illogical. She tried persistently to write another. In vain! Her spirit was restive, her brain felt parched, and her whole body struggled against the task her will tried to impose

on it. Her body it seemed felt the present menace of the weather, the electricity quivering in the air, the violence of the storm. Involuntarily, her eyes turned to look out of the window. She saw herself on some forsaken bit of shore, the prey of the relentless wind, and the sea, tossing, raging, howling there in front of her; and now she saw herself searching for a spot from which she could throw herself into the turbulent frightful waves; and while her soul was thus in suspension, watching her move, and walk and run for the last time, on the point of taking that fatal leap, there came that blinding flash and deafening thunderbolt. . . .

A moment later she was laughing impulsively at what her mother and Maria were saying, as they tried to soothe her, making fun of her fright.

Then night fell, black and cruel, on the city. Marta, her mother, and Maria were at supper when a loud knock on the door brought from each of them in chorus:

"Who can it be at this hour!"

Donna Maria Jue came in, shaking her head, and waving her hands about in the air.

"*Signora mia! Signora mia!* The things I have to tell you!" she cried. "Everything falls on me! What have I done to you, *signore Iddio*, what have I done that all these things should happen to me? That poor old thing, my tenant, you know, on Benfratelli street • . . *signora mia*,

the old woman is dying. • . . *Gesu! Gesti! Gesul*
There she is, breathing her last just like an old dog in a corner, except that she's baptized. . . . I sent the doctor to her at my own expense, I bought her medicines, though these remedies they make are nothing but fakes, *signora mia*, and not a bit of good, but just the same, so no one could say I didn't do what I ought. . . . She hasn't paid her rent, but. . . . Well, as I was saying . . . the poor old creature must have some relative over there in your part of the country. . . . I'm not looking for someone to pay me back for the matter of the rent and the doctor and the medicines . . . but for the funeral, *signora miat* Who's to pay for putting her into the cemetery! I and Don Fifo have already done more than enough, just out of charity and love of our neighbours. . . . And with this storm too! A wind, *signora mia*, fit to carry honest people right through the air. . . . We came back for a moment to snatch a bite . . . and then we're off again to watch over the poor lorn woman. . . . What makes us do it, eh? That's what you're wondering. But we're Christians, Christians! Ah, these husbands and wives! I'm not talking of mine. Unworthy as I am, *signora miat* I've had two, praise God! each better than the other, my first, God rest his soul, and this one, the very image of his brother as he is, even to his kind heart. That will be the ruin of us yet, *signora mia*, this

being so kind-hearted. . . . But could you write to anyone? You might know some of her relatives."

"Yes, her son," answered Signora Agata, stunned even more by the torrent of words with which Donna Jue imparted it, than by the news itself.

"What!" exclaimed Donna Maria Rosa, "that poor old woman has a son? And he lets her die like that, just like an old dog in a kennel? That's children for you! Worse than husbands! Do write to him for pity's sake, for really she's at death's door. I'll have the priest give her the last sacraments tonight. Are we Christians or are we not? Are those bodies of ours baptized, or aren't they, I should like to know!"

"I'll go with you," said Marta, getting up from her chair.

Her mother and Maria turned towards her.

"Do you think you'd better go?" her mother asked. "You feel so wretched, and with this weather. . . ."

"Let me go, please," Marta insisted, moving towards her room.

Signora Agata deemed it wise not to oppose her. She admired her daughter for responding thus with an act of generosity to the injury her husband had done her. Besides, it seemed as though this visit she was about to make to the dying woman's bedside was Marta's reply to her

husband's repentance, and set a seal on the proposed peace.

But while she was feeling about for her hat and shawl in the darkened room, Marta was thinking to herself. . . . "She too probably is the victim of the kind of thing I have had put upon me. I'd like to see her, I'd like to know her. . . ."

"I'm all ready."

"You'd better pin your hat on good and steady, or else leave it home, mark my words," said Donna Maria Eosa. "Why don't you wind a shawl around your head, the way I've got mine?"

Don Fifo was waiting on the landing of the second floor, half dead with cold, his hands plunged deep in his pockets, and his muffler wound tight about his neck and ears.

Scarcely had they stepped outside the house than Marta felt the extraordinary fury of the wind that was roaring down the street, lashing at the houses as though it wanted to carry them all away. She looked up at the stormy sky that was overrun with enormous wind-rent clouds; through the openings now and again the moon appeared, seemingly in precipitate, terrified flight. The street was almost completely dark, as the wind had blown out some of the street lamps. A great tree had been blown down on Papireto knoll, and the branches and tree-trunks in the path of the wind were quivering like aspens.

' Bending their backs under the wind's onslaught,

the two women slowly made their way down the road, impeded at every step by their skirts. Don Fifo was desperately hanging on with both hands to his hat which he had pulled down nearly to his shoulder-blades.

At the turn near the Duomo, on the Corso, they came upon an unprecedented scene, a noisy torrent, swelling with every passing moment, all of murmurous dry leaves whirling dizzyingly down the avenue, as though the wind had stripped every tree and bush through the region and was now, in a frenzy of rage, in an orgy of destruction, carrying along with it what had, a few hours before, been foliage, dragging it down, down from the Porta Nuova, down to the sea, to the very bottom. . • .

The two women and Don Fifo were caught by the whirlwind as they turned their backs to it, and were rushed down the hill, the wind almost lifting them like leaves. Suddenly, Don Fifo uttered a scream and Marta saw him give a leap like a grasshopper and dash after his hat which had just been whisked off into the whirlpool of tossing leaves.

"Let it go, Fifo!" shouted his wife.

But Don Fifo as well disappeared in the whirlpool and the dark.

"This way, this way," Donna Jue said to Marta, as she turned down via Protonotaro, which happened not to be in the track of the wind, but

along which great heaps of leaves had found refuge. "He'll catch his hat at Porto Felice, if he gets as far as that! That's all that was wanting, I declare!"

They crossed the piazzetta dell Origlione, and were soon on the via Benfratelli.

"Here it is, *ecco*, this way," exclaimed Donna Maria Rosa, plunging into a narrow doorway.

They went up the steep narrow stairs in the dark, up to the very top storey. Donna Maria Rosa drew a large key from her pocket, blew on the lock-end, felt for the keyhole and opened the door. All at once, as she was pushing it open she cried out:

"*Gesii-Marial* The windows !"

The wind had invaded the three rooms which for years had been the now dying woman's squalid home, tearing apart the window frames and shattering the glass. The candle in the bedroom had been blown out, and Fana Pentagora was wheezing with terror in the darkness.

"The window-panes . . . every single one, all broken! Well, I offer them up to you, Lord, in penitence for my sins!" Donna Maria Jue exclaimed, exerting all the strength of her arms in order to close the window frames against the force of the wind.

Marta stood on the threshold, frightened, intent on that dying wheeze which was like the ghastly breathing of the darkness in the room.

When the windows had been closed, the rattling sound became unbearable in the silence.

"And the matches?" exclaimed Donna Maria Jue. "That Fifo has them of course, and he's istill running after his hat while he leaves us here in the dark. What a man! Just the opposite, sometimes, of his brother, God rest his soul! I'm going to see if there are any in the kitchen. . . ."

Marta groped her way to the bed, as though drawn irresistibly toward it by the sound of that laboured breathing. She endeavoured to lean a hand on the side of the bed, but drew it quickly away with a shudder, for it had come in contact with the dying woman's body. Then she bent down and called softly:

"Mamma . . . Mamma. . . ."

The only response was the heavy painful breathing of the sick woman.

"I am Eocco's wife," she continued.

"Eocco. . . ." Laboriously drawing each breath, the dying woman stammered the name, Marta thought.

"Eocco's wife," she repeated. "Don't be frightened. I'm here. . . ."

"Eocco"; there was no mistake this time. The rattling sound stopped for a moment as the dying woman repeated the name.

The silence became terrifying.

"You must be quiet now," warned Marta af-

fectionately. "Here comes the lady who owns the house,"

With a lighted match in one hand, and guarding it with the other against the draft, Donna Maria Eosa was coming and going in the darkness like a gigantic firefly.

"Where's the lamp? Oh, here it is!"

Donna Maria Eosa, having lighted the lamp, stood with all ten fingers stretched out to the air.

"Heavens! What filth! I got it all over me in the kitchen. . . . Just look what a state the place is in!"

As a matter of fact, fragments of glass from the windows had been thrown into the very middle of the room.

Marta meanwhile nervously watched the dying woman who, very slowly, was moving her head, sunk deep in the pillows, and gazing with dim vague eyes about the room as though stunned by the light and the silence, after the darkness and the howling of the wind. There was a thick growth over the pupil of the left eye, and the skin of her face, especially around her nose, was scattered with small black spots, that stood out on her damp pallid cheeks. Her unkempt, extremely thick grey curly hair was scattered over a pillow stained yellow by long use. Marta's glance was arrested by the enormous hands, as large as those of an old man, that lay inert on the sheet, the

latter even more soiled than the shirt yawning open on her dry bony breast, horrible to see.

"Bocco," the dying woman murmured once more, slowly fixing her eyes on Marta's face, as though thirsting for something she hoped to find there.

^{i i} "What is she saying?" asked Donna Maria, bending over, and raising her skirts above her knee so as to pull up the stocking that had slipped down over her thick short calves to her instep.

"She's calling her son," Marta replied, moving nearer the dying woman once more to whisper:

"He's coming, never fear. . . . I'm going to send him word right away."

But the dying woman did not understand and repeated weakly, while her eyes searched the room:

"Bocco. . . ."

"A telegram, eh?" said Signora Jue. "Fifo can go to the telegraph office. . . . There's no time to lose. Look, here in this drawer there ought to be paper and whatever you need to write with. . . . *Mio Dio*, how it smells, do you notice! What is it that smells so in this room?"

On the table near the window there was a glass half full of a greenish mixture which gave out a most pestiferous stench.

"Ah, here you are!" exclaimed Signora Jue,

pointing with her stumpy forefinger at the glass.

"Well, I'm going to throw you out I"

Marta came running towards her.

"No, what is it?"

"It must be poison," said Donna Maria Bosa, arrested by Marta's anxious expression.

"It might be useful. . . ."

"What use could there be for it now, my dear? It would simply smell to Heaven all night. . . ."

And she went to the kitchen to throw it away.

Marta drew near the table to make out the telegram. She drew it up quite simply, and almost without a thought as to what she should write—"Your mother is ill. Come at once. Marta."

"Ah, you know him well?" observed Donna Maria, reading the telegram. "You are relatives, perhaps?"

Marta blushed with embarrassment and nodded several times in token of assent. Donna Maria Bosa noted this sudden confusion and change of colour, and concluded—"Here lurks another mystery!"

"Or at any rate . . . from the same part of the country," she said. And then, to soften a little the indiscretion of her question, she added:

"May he come soon, at any rate. . . ."

There was a knock at the door.

"Ecco . . . DonFifo!"

Don Fifo came in bareheaded, his hair pointing

in every direction. "It wasn't a hat, it was the devil!" he burst out, exasperated, and sawing the air with his arm.

"Yes, of course," said his wife. "And now, run to the telegraph station. The window-panes are all broken too!"

Don Fifo took a jump backwards.

"Go to the telegraph station? Now? Me? Not even if they made me Pope for it!"

"Idiot! I tell you that even the window-panes are broken!" Donna Maria Eosa threw at him. "Run along to the telegraph station!"

"Oh, *Cristo mio!*" exclaimed Don Fifo. "All the devils of hell are scattered around outside. . . . Where do you want me to go? And have I got to go without a hat?"

"You can wear my shawl round your head."

Don Fifo looked at Marta and opened his mouth in a pathetic smile.

"Yes . . . your shawl . . . and make everybody laugh at me. . . ."

"Who's to see you at this time of night, I should like to know? Come, hurry!"

And she threw her shawl over his head, adding:

"Then you can go home to bed!"

"Alone?" asked Don Fifo, arranging the shawl more securely over his head.

"Are you afraid?"

"Afraid, me? I don't even know what it means.

• • But you here, and me there. . . . No, look.

. . . I'd rather stay in the corner yonder . . . just be patient . . . I'll go and come right back."

He ran out. In half an hour he was back again. Marta was keeping close watch over the dying woman who seemed to have sunk still further in her lethargy. Donna Maria Eosa, on the other side of the bed, chin sunk on her ample bosom, was already slumbering. Don Fifo looked at her awhile, then turned to Marta and said softly:

"God help us, she's beginning to snore. . . ."

He waved his arms up and down, fists clenched, and exclaimed:

"She shakes the house I"

Before he had finished, however, Donna Maria Rosa gave her first snort, opening her mouth wide. Don Fifo ran to her, and shook her gently.

"Mararro . . . Mararro. . . ."

"What is it? . . . What do you want? . . . Have you sent off the . . . All right. . . ."

"No. . . . I was saying. . . ." Don Fifo observed timidly. "Softly . . . *ecco* . . . the sick woman. • . ."

"You make me tired, Fifo!" Donna Maria Eosa interrupted him, composing herself once more for slumber.

Don Fifo gave a shrug and raised his eyes to the ceiling with a sigh.

In a little while he too was asleep beside his wife who was giving out formidable snores. He even began to snore himself, but it was a weak,

timid little sound, accompanied by a gentle whistling that seemed to come from his nose. If Donna Maria was the double-bass, Don Fifo was a muted violin.

Marta remained absorbed by her contemplation of the dying woman, a ghastly image of her own approaching destiny.

"Tomorrow he will get here," she was thinking. "He will find me in this room, and he will suppose that I am willing . . . that I am free to accept what he proposes. I wasn't thinking of him when I came here. But when he knows about it he will suspect that I came just to soften his heart. No, no . . . tomorrow morning, before he arrives, I shall go away . . . before he can see me. . . . I shall go away. . . ."

She stood up, and on tiptoe drew near the prostrate form, already lifeless, apparently, then bent down and put her ear close to hear if there was any sound of breathing. After a few moments she went back to her chair.

"How peaceful she is! And yet she is dying. • . . Death is already in that sleeping body. • . . Go away? No; I can't go away . . . I must speak to him . . . whatever it cost. . . . If I make this sacrifice, he must do his duty . . . he must help mother. So, let him find me here, with *his* mother. . . . I'll tell him everything . . . everything. . . ."

The light was going out on the table beside her.

The shadows cast by the two sleepers grew taller **and** taller and jumped about on the wall at every sputter of the flame. Marta was afraid that at **any** moment the room would be plunged in darkness. She got up to rouse Donna Maria Rosa.

"The light is going out. . • ."

"What's that? Oh, going out? . . . Well, let's 'do this, then. . . ."

She stumbled to her feet, and staggering towards the table, blew out the light, then remarked:

"It stinks. . . . There's no more oil in it. . . . Where's my chair?"

"Ah!" shrilled Don Fifo, "you've ruined one of my feet!"

"My chair. . . . Here it is! Be patient, *Fifo miol* Tomorrow let's hope we'll be able to sleep in our own beds. . . . Anyway, it will soon be daylight. . . ."

And as a matter of fact, soon afterwards a cock's crow sounded in the funereal silence. Marta, wrapped in darkness, listened sharply. Then from a distance another cock answered; then, still farther away, a third. Yet no trace of light showed through the window-frames.

And then at last, dawn. Donna Maria Rosa woke up, stretching, almost neighing in fact. Then she remembered the purpose of the vigil and asked Marta for news of the patient. Don Fifo, chin sunk on his chest, arms folded, legs pressed

close together, looking very miserable indeed, remained alone in his corner, left to draw out his timid snorings with the little whistling sound at the end, quite by himself.

"It's cold! It's cold!" Said Donna Maria Rosa, as, still half asleep, she placed a hand on the dying woman's forehead. "We must get a priest here right away. • . . Fifo! Fifo, wake up!"

Don Fifo woke up.

"Run quick to Santa Chiara . . . or this poor thing will die without the sacraments. . . . Do you hear me, Fifo?"

Don Fifo, who had scrambled to his feet, was wandering vaguely about the room, his eyes swollen and half shut with sleep.

"What are you looking for?"

"I'm looking for. . • Oh, without my hat, *santo Diol* If I only had a cap. • . . Must I go like this!"

"Go right away, I tell you I Run, quick! there's no time to lose!" Donna Maria Rosa shrieked at him, and then, turning to Marta:

"Meanwhile we'll set the room to rights a bit since the Lord is coming!"

Marta stared at Signora Jue in complete bewilderment. "The Lord!" Suddenly the image of Anna Veronica flashed into her mind, and she almost looked about the room for her. Then, she saw Anna Veronica in herself at that supreme

moment. Should she make her guilt and shame kneel to God and implore his pardon as Anna Veronica had done? Ah, no! no! no! When He came there in a little while she would kneel to Him, simply, and pray for her soul's health!

While Donna Maria Eosa was straightening the bedclothes, the dying woman opened her dim lifeless eyes. Closely, Marta watched those eyes and that face now suffused with a serenity more than human, almost like the light of some mysterious star world in which her spirit had already found its home. Nothing but her worn body still lay in that bed, but without any perception of the surrounding squalor, without pain, without memory. Seemingly nothing henceforth had shape or meaning for those eyes which death, invisibly present, was veiling with forgetfulness.

At last, unnoticed by the dying woman, the Viaticum arrived. Fana Pentagora looked at the priest with the same gaze she had turned on the ceiling, and made no replies to his questions. The others were kneeling about the bed, praying. And Marta, her face hidden, wept.

The rites were soon over. Marta raised her tear-stained face and looked about her, disillusioned, almost nauseated, as though she had just witnessed some inconclusive, vulgar scene. Was that the Lord's coming! This pale, cold, insipid priest, clumsily arrayed for the occasion? And, just a moment before, she had thought of throw-

ing herself on her knees and praying to be guided by true piety. . . •

"I'm afraid he isn't going to get here in time," sighed Signora Jue, alluding to the dying woman's son.

Don Fifo, after the last rites, had left the room and, in utter consternation, was walking up and down in the room adjoining, arms crossed, puffing now and then, and waiting for his wife to announce his tenant's decease. From the threshold he impatiently stretched his thin face toward the bed, and with a headshake inquired:

"Is she still alive?"

"After Doro's death, God rest his soul I poor Fifo can't bear to see anyone else die," Donna Maria Rosa explained to Marta.

CHAPTER VI

AS the hours slowly dragged out, Marta's anxiety increased. The uneasiness of waiting grew more and more painful.

Finally, in the early afternoon Kocco Pentagora arrived. Panting, almost frightened, he presented himself on the threshold.

His illness had left him very thin and he seemed taller to Marta as she looked up at him. The fever too had made his hair fall out, and now little silken hairs, extremely fine and somewhat curly, were growing in again. His forehead seemed wider, and his skin had grown clear, although he was still very pale; in his eyes she caught a new expression, mirthful, almost childlike.

"Marta V he exclaimed when he caught sight of her, and came running towards her.

Confused by the sight of her husband, thus changed and improved by convalescence, and embarrassed by his quick movement towards her, Marta involuntarily raised her hand to her lips, warning him to be quiet, and then pointed to the bed, and his mother in her death agony.

He turned quickly toward his mother, bending over her and calling her:

"Mother! Mother! Don't you hear me, Mother? Look at me, Mother . . . I've cornel"

The dying woman opened her eyes and looked at him bewildered, as though she did not recognize him.

"Don't you see me?" he whispered. "Here I am . . . I've come, Mother. . . . ' Now you'll get well_____"

He kissed her softly on the forehead and with a quick gesture of the hand shook the tears from his eyes.

His mother continued to look at him fixedly, every now and then laboriously closing her eyelids, as though her body no longer had the strength to give any other signs of life. Or was that slow sinking of the eyelids, perhaps, a last gesture, from afar, of a spirit already far down the road of death?

With difficulty Marta held back her tears, ashamed to weep before Signora Jue, who was sniffing so loud no one could fail to notice it.

Little by little, however, the eyes of the dying woman grew animate as though, even in the extremity of death, a last remnant of life had turned to gall. She opened her mouth and her lips moved.

"What is it?" asked her son, leaning closer and closer over her.

"I am dying," breathed his mother, almost inaudibly.

⁴ "No, no," he comforted her. ⁵ "You 'll be better

now • . . I am here. • . . And Marta is here too. . . . Didn't you see herf Marta . . . come here. • • ."

„ Marta went to the other side of the bed, and the dying woman fixed her eyes on her, just as she had fastened them on her son a few moments earlier.

" There she is. . . . Do you see her V^o he asked. "There is Marta. . . . There, you see! . . . You remember how much I talked to you about her, last time?"

The dying woman with difficulty drew a sigh. She seemed not to understand and her eyes remained vague. Then her ashen cheeks were slowly suffused with a faint flush, and she moved a hand under the covers. Marta picked up her hand and laid it in her own. But then the dying woman moved her other hand, gazing at her son meanwhile. He followed Marta's example. With an effort his mother succeeded in uniting their two-hands, and then gave a deep sigh.

"Yes, yes," Eocco said, profoundly moved, and he pressed Marta's hand. Marta could not now hold back her tears.

Open-mouthed the two Jues gazed from the bedside, now at Marta, now at Eocco.

In a little while the dying woman closed her eyes, slipping back into the mysterious depths where death awaited her.

Marta timidly drew her hand away from her husband's.

"She is resting again, " said Signora Jue in a low tone. "Better let her rest. . . . Listen, Signora Marta! Fif o and I are going to take advantage of this quiet moment to run down to the house for a little while. We must think of everything. I don't mean to boast, but I know how to manage, if I do say it myself. . . . Fifo, you know how to put it. . . . In such grief, of course . . . but just the same, an empty sack can't stand up, as they say. . . . After coming all that way, Signor Rocco must certainly need some refreshment. . . ."

"No . . . no . . . please. . . ."

"Let me attend to it, " Signora Jue interrupted.

"Marta, rather," said Rocco.

"Let me attend to it, " repeated Donna Maria Rosa. "I always think of everything. . . . And I'll think a bit of myself too and this soul that's ready for Purgatory. . . . We didn't so much as have a sup of water last night. How shall we manage? Patience, patience. . . . Good-bye, I'll come back. . . . Keep up your courage, eh?"

The two Jues went away. On the one hand Marta would have liked to keep them there, by force if necessary, just so as not to be left alone with her husband; on the other hand, however much the thought of the confession she had to make disturbed her, she had by now made up her

mind that it was inevitable, and was eager to get it over with as quickly as possible.

"Oh, Marta! Marta *mia!*" Rocco exclaimed, opening his arms, and calling her to him.

Shaking from head to foot, Marta jumped up from her chair.

"In there . . . in the other room," she said. "No . . . wait . . . I want to tell you everything right away. . . . Come. . . ."

"Why . . . you mean. . . . Aren't you going to forgive me?" he asked, as he followed her into the next room, which was almost completely dark.

"Wait," said Marta without looking at him. "I have nothing to forgive you for if you. . . ."

She stopped short, her features working convulsively as though she were in the clutch of some terrible inner convulsion. Then she turned a pitying glance on her husband, and went on, resolutely:

"Listen, Rocco . . . you knew. . . ."

Again she stopped, her attention caught by the long scar across Rocco's cheek, the scar that marked the wound he had carried away from the duel with Alvignani. She felt her courage fail her, and pressed both hands hard to her face.

"Forgive me! Forgive me!" he implored insistently, laying his hands yearningly on her arms.

"No, Rocco. . . . Listen. I ask nothing of you for myself," Marta began once more, uncovering

her face. "I want to say only this. Yon mnst remember that father left ns very poor. . . . Mother, Maria . . . they were not to blame, . . . It was yonr f anlt. And so three nnhappy women were put out on the street, to be persecuted by the whole town. . . •"

"You mean you aren't going to forgive me? You don't want tot But Marta, you'll see how hard I'll try to make it up to you. . . . Your mother and Maria will come with us . . . to our home . . . that goes without saying, doesn't it? With us, always! Of course! Is that what you wanted to say to me? For pity's sake, Marta, let's not go back to the past. . . . You are crying? But why?"

Marta, her face once more hidden in her hands, shook her head, sobbing. And in vain Rocco tried to make her tell him the reason for her distress and that mute head-shake.

"Oh, for mother, and Maria," she broke out finally, uncovering her wet burning cheeks. "Listen, Rocco. • . ."

"Again?" he asked, perplexed, bewildered, hurt.

"Yes. I am going to leave you free, quite free, from this very day. . . . You can't ask me to do more than that. . . ."

"Why?"

"I'm going to leave you, yes. . . . I'm going to leave you a clear path so that you can do your

duty towards my mother, and my sister, like a man. . . . But I ask nothing for myself! Listen to me, understand what I say. . . ."

"I don't understand! What do you want of me? You leave me free? No, I don't understand. • • • But tell me what you want . . . I'll do it. . . . Don't cry, Marta! It is for me, rather, to cry. . . . But forgive me . . . I'll do anything you ask . . . only you must forgive me!"

"Oh, *Biol* Not now, Eocco! Not now. . . . Before . . . you ought to have asked me before to forgive you, just as you did now . . . and I would not have refused. . . . But now, no • • • I can't give you anything more, now!"

"Why?"

"Because I must die, Eocco! Yes . . . and I am going to die. But . . . *Bio* . . . *Biol* If I couldn't help myself . . . and that terrible anger stayed in my heart. . . . What am I now? Do you see me? What am I? . . . I am what you made people believe me to be, and what they still believe me and will always believe me to be, even though I should accept your repentance. It's too late. Do you understand? I am lost. . . . Do you see what you have done to me? I was alone . . . you persecuted me . . . I was alone and helpless . . . and now I am lost!"

He stood staring at her aghast, afraid to understand, afraid of having understood.

"Marta! How . . . yoti . . . Oh, God! . . . you. . . ."

Again she hid her face and, sobbing, bent her head several times in assent.

Rocco grasped her arms in an endeavour to pull her hands away from her face, and still dumb-founded, still almost incredulous, shook her.

"You . . . then you . . . afterwards . . . with him! Tell me! Look me in the face! That cad . . . can't you speak to me? Ah, the dirty dog!" he broke out. "It's true! And I made myself believe . . . I came to ask your forgiveness . . . and now . . . Tell me, before too, eh, with him?"

"No!" cried Marta, burning with scorn. "Don't you understand that you, you yourself, with your own hands . . . you, and all the rest with you, drove me to the point of accepting aid from him, you brought it about that he was finally the only one who offered me a word of comfort or a single act of fairness, while all the rest of you heaped injustice upon me, and turned my life into bitterness? You . . . you alone have no right to reproach me . . . for anything! I know well enough what I have still to do. I fell under your attack . . . well, it doesn't matter! Let's not consider me any more. I am well out of it. But you . . . you must make some reparation! It is your doing, as you know, that my mother and sister are so reduced. . . . I am their only

support. What will be left them? How are they to live? That is what I want to know, first. . . . That is why I have confessed everything to you. . . . I might have kept my own counsel, I might have deceived you. . . . You should be grateful to me for that at least . . . and in return help them . . . help my mother and sister, because it is not my fault but yours that they are in this helpless state V

Rocco had dropped into a chair. With his elbows on his knees and his face between his hands he was repeating softly to himself, without expression, as though his brain were no longer functioning:

"The cad . . . the cad. . . "

In the momentary silence Marta caught the sound of laboured breathing coming from the next room, and she hurried to the bed of the dying woman.

He followed her, and there, entirely oblivious of his mother dying before him, demanded furiously:

"Tell me . . . tell me everything! I want to know it all! Tell me. . . ."

"No!" answered Marta with haughty firmness. I must die."

She bent down to smooth the pillow under the head of the sick woman who, still in a state of deep coma though she was, continued to send out a subdued mournful death rattle.

"Die !" he asked contemptuously. "Why that ? Why don't you go to him? He helped you, didn't he ? Let him continue to help you!"

Marta made no reply. She closed her eyes slowly and then, with her handkerchief, wiped away the icy sweat from the dying woman's forehead.

"There's the road for you to take! Go to Eome! Why die!"

"Oh Rocco!" said Marta. "Your mother is still here. . . . I delay on her account."

He was silent, but he turned pale as he looked at his mother. The thought of death that Marta had suggested all at once presented itself to him in a terrifying form—Marta and his mother bound together in a common destiny. He had no inclination now to indulge in harsh sarcasm. Pressing both hands against his temples he left the room.

It was already almost night. In the darkness that had slowly crept into the room Marta stared mechanically at the empty lamp on the table. Who would have thought this death agony could have lasted so long? She sat close to the bedside, her eyes intent on the dying woman's face, as though waiting for the plan that had so long and so silently been evolving and ripening within her to give the signal at which she would get up and go away. The rhythmic sound of her husband's steps as he came and went in the next room obsessed

her even more than the laboured breathing of the death agony. She listened as though they must reveal what he was thinking. She knew intuitively that he was in those moments reviewing the past with anguish, assailed in that darkness by memories and regrets. . . . Ah, remorse . . . remorse was for all, with two exceptions . . . Maria and her mother. And her husband must be just to them. That she expected of him; but, as she followed his pacing up and down, up and down, she expected nothing else. . . .

Then suddenly, the sound of steps ceased in the next room. Had he reached his decision, perhaps? Marta stood up and felt about for her shawl. She found it and was about to step to the door to call him when there was a knock. It was the two Jues coming back, followed by a boy carrying a basket of provisions.

"Oh, in the dark ¹⁹" exclaimed Donna Maria Rosa as she came in. "I brought you a candle. . . . I Beg your pardon . . . oh, where is Signor Rocco? . . . Fifo, light the candle!"

Don Fifo obeyed and was revealed blinking confusedly and bearing under his arm a long bundle containing four tapers.

Marta leaned over to examine the dying woman's features.

"How is she! How is **ehe?**" asked **Signora Jue**, out loud.

Startled by a long-drawn strange rattling sound

in the sick woman's throat, Marta turned a frightened perplexed glance on Donna Maria Rosa, then resolutely went to the threshold of the other room and called out in the dark:

"Come . . . come • . . she is dying."

Rocco came running, and they both leaned over the bed.

Don Fifo stepped out of the room on tiptoe with his bundle and beckoned to the errand boy to follow him.

Rocco raised his eyes from his mother's face to Marta's as she stood beside him, and watched her, at first with a frown, then with surprise, then with amazement. Holding one of the dying woman's hands in her own she was leaning over her very close as though trying to breathe her own breath into the faltering lungs.

Then, abruptly, Signora Jue said to him:

"Come, Signor Pentagora," and mechanically he noted she had turned pale.

"Is she dead?" asked Rocco, seeing Marta let go of his mother's hand, and straighten up. And then, very loud, he cried out, convulsively, "Mamma! Oh, Mamma! Mamma *mia*!" Breaking into sobs, he pressed his face into the pillows beside his mother's.

"Fifo, Fifo," called Signora Jue. "Come up, Fifo, take him with you, stay with him in there. . . . Be brave, my boy . . . that's right • . . that's right. . . . Come . . . go with Fifo!"

And with her husband's help she succeeded in parting Eocco from his mother's lifeless body. Then Don Fifo led him into the other room.

"I've thought of every thing," said Signora Jue under her breath to Marta when they were alone. "It couldn't last . . . I expected it . . . I bought four fine tapers. . . . First, we'll bolster her up against the pillows; then we'll dress her. . . ."

Marta, unable to remove her eyes from the dead woman's face, heard not a word of all that Signora Jue was uttering, the same phrases, perhaps, that Don Fifo in the next room was repeating to Eocco.

"If you'll move just a little. . . . Now we'll dress her."

Marta moved away from the bed mechanically. And Signora Jue, while she dressed the dead woman under Marta's horrified eyes, never once ceased alluding in veiled terms to the expenses she had undergone on her tenant's account, omitting nothing, whether doctor, medicines, the broken window-panes, the food brought in, the tapers, or the rent the dead woman owed her, all carefully rehearsed, of course, so that Marta would repeat the whole list to Eocco. When the task was done, she covered the corpse with a sheet and placing the tapers at the four corners of the bed, lit them.

"That's done!" she exclaimed. "'All clean and neat. I'm not saying it to be boastful but. . . ."

She sat down beside Marta and cast admiring glances at her own work.

Several hours passed. It seemed as though nothing were alive in the room except the four torches slowly burning themselves out. Every now and again Signora Jue would get up, remove a drop of wax from the side of one of the tapers, and put it back in the flame.

Finally, Don Fifo appeared in the doorway and, unheeded by Marta, made a sign to his wife. Signora Jue replied to it, and shortly thereafter said to Marta:

"We're off now. I'm going to leave the snuffers here on the table so you can snuff the candles now and then. . . • If you don't, the tapers begin to sputter and the sheet may catch fire. . . . Good-bye . . . I'll see you again. . . . We'll be back tomorrow morning."

"Will you please tell mother not to come," said Marta, as though in a dream. "Tell her we 'll stay here, *her* son, and I . . . to keep watch . . . and that she must not worry . . . and give her my love. . . ."

"Certainly, I will . . . never fear! Oh, by the way, if, later on, Signor Rocco or you should . . . you never can tell . . . the basket is in there, in the other room. . . . You might . . . I'm not hungry at all. . . . Believe me, *signora mia*, I feel as though I had a stone here right in the pit of my stomach. I'm so sensitive. . . . Well, I'll

leave you now. I 'll just call Fifo ever so softly, and we'll be leaving you. Courage, my dear! Good-bye!"

When she was alone, Marta strained her ears to hear what her husband was doing in the other room. Was he perhaps weeping silently? Or was he thinking!

"I don't mean anything to him any more," she said to herself. "He hasn't even the curiosity to see whether I have gone away or not . . . and yet he knows where I must go. . . . I'll go now . . . now that I've told him everything . . . not about the child. . . . The child is mine . . . mine alone . . . just as the other one who died all through his doing was mine too. . . . Ah, if he had lived!"

She turned her eyes toward the bed over which the four tapers threw a warm yellow glow. A few stiff folds in the sheet showed that a corpse lay beneath in heavy immobility.

With one hand, Marta timidly uncovered the face of the dead woman already transfigured, fell on her knees beside the bed and poured out her overwhelming grief in a great flood of tears; and one hand she pressed against her mouth so as not to cry out, so as not to scream. . . .

And so she wept until Bocco came in from the adjoining room; and then she rose to her feet, and, her shawl tucked under her arm, her face in her hands, moved towards the door.

He grasped her by the arm to hold her back.

"Where are you going?" he asked in alarm.

Marta made no reply.

"Tell me where you are going^V he asked again, and, uncertain what to do, put out his other hand and grasped her by both arms.

Marta, very slightly, uncovered her face.

"I am going . . . I don't know. . . . Good-bye. . . ."

He did not let her go on. Impulsively, almost as though in terror, he pushed his face close to hers, and putting his arms around her burst into tears.

'ⁱ No, Marta! No! No! Don't leave me alone! Marta! Marta! Marta *niaV* '

She tried to free herself, drawing back her head and struggling against his arms, but she could not succeed in slipping out of them. Pressed so closely to him, she was trembling.

"Bocco, it is impossible . . . let me go . . . it is impossible, I tell you. . . ."

"Why! . . . Why?" he asked, still holding her, and kissing her desperately. "Why, Marta T Because you told me"

"Let me. . . . No . . . let me go. . . . You didn't want me. . . ."

"I do want you! I want you!^M he cried, frantic, blind with passion.

"No . . . let me go," Marta implored, defending herself as best she could, but her strength fast failing her. "Make me go away . . . I beg you. . . ."

"Marta, I forget everything! And you too, you

must forget! You are mine, Marta! Mine! Don't you love me at all any more?"

"It isn't that!" she moaned, fairly panting with anguish. "But it isn't possible any longer . . . it isn't possible!"

"Why? Do you still love him?" he cried haughtily, at once letting her go.

"No, Rocco, no! I never loved him, I swear to you! Never! Never!"

And she burst into sobs she could no longer check. She felt her strength leave her and let herself fall into his arms, for instinctively they stretched out to support her. Weakened by grief, he tottered under the weight and nearly fell with her. But he made a furious effort, clenching his teeth, and shaking his head desperately, his features working under the strain. Just at that moment his eyes fell on his mother's face, uncovered as Marta had left it, his mother there, on her death bed, between four yellow candles. It was as though death had paused to look at him.

Mastering the shudder his wife's body, much as he desired it, inspired in him, he pressed her close against his breast, and, his eyes on his mother's face, he stammered, in sudden terror:

"She is looking . . . my mother is looking. I forgive . . . I forgive. . . . Stay here . . . stay! . . . We'll keep watch together. . . ."

