

DON GESUALDO

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OUIDA.

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In v. A. 23411

# DON GESUALDO.

A SKETCH.

BY

OUIDA,

AUTHOR OF

“UNDER TWO FLAGS,” “OTHMAR,” ETC.

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# DON GESUALDO.

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## I.

IT was a day in June.

The crickets were chirping, the lizards were gliding, the butterflies were flying above the ripe corn, the reapers were out amongst the wheat, and the tall stalks were swaying and falling under the sickle; through the little windows of his sacristy Don Gesualdo, the young vicar of San Bartolo, in the village of Marca, looked with wistful eyes at the hillside which rose up in front of him, seen through a frame of cherry-boughs in full fruit. The hillside was covered with corn, with vines, with mulberry trees; the men and women were at work amongst the trees, it was the first day of harvest; there was a blue, happy sky above them all; their voices chattering and calling to one another over the sea of grain came to his ears gaily and softened by air and distance. He sighed as he looked and as he heard. Yet, interrogated, he would have said that he was happy and wanted for nothing.

He was a slight, pale man, still almost a youth, with a delicate face without colour and beardless, his eyes were brown and tender and serious, his mouth

was sensitive and sweet. He was the son of a fisherman away by Bocca d'Arno, where the river meets the sea, amidst the cane and cactus brakes which Costa loves to paint. But who could say what fine, time-filtered, pure Etruscan or Latin blood might not run in his veins? There is so much of the classic features and the classic form amongst the peasants of Tyrrhene seashores, of Cimbrian oak woods, of Roman grass plains, of Maremma Marshes.

It was the last day of peace which he was destined to know in Marca.

He turned from the window with reluctance and regret, as the old woman who served him as house-keeper and church cleaner in one summoned him to his frugal supper. He could have supped at any hour he had chosen; there were none to say him nay, but it was the custom at Marca to sup at the twenty-third hour, and he was not a person to violate custom; he would as soon have thought of spitting on the blessed bread itself. Habit is a masterful ruler in all Italian communities; it has always been so; it is a formula which excuses all things and sanctifies all things, and to none did it do so more than to Gesualdo. Often he was not in the least hungry at sunset, often he grudged sorely the hours spent in breaking black bread, and in eating poor soup when Nature was at her sweetest and the skies giving their finest spectacle to a thankless earth. Yet never did he fail to meekly answer old Candida's summons to the humble repast. To have altered the hour of eating would have seemed to him irreligious, revolutionary, altogether impossible.

Candida was a little old woman, burnt black by

the sun, with a whisp of grey hair fastened on the crown of her head, and a neater look about her kerchief and her gown than was usual in Marca, for she was a woman originally from a northern city. She had always been a servant in priests' houses, and if the sacristan were ill or away, knew as well as he where every book, bell, and candle were kept, and could have said the offices herself had her sex allowed her. In tongue she was very sharp, and in secret was proud of the power she possessed of making the vice-regent of God afraid of her. The priest was the first man in this parish of poor folks, and the priest would shrink like a chidden child if she found out that he had given his best shirt to a beggar, or had inadvertently come in with wet boots over the brick floor, which she had just washed and sanded. It was the old story of so many sovereignties. He had power no doubt to bind and loose, to bless and curse, to cleanse or refuse to cleanse the sinful souls of men; but for all that he was only a stupid, forgetful baby of a man in his servant's eyes, and she made him feel the scorn she had for him mixed up with a half-motherly, half-scolding admiration, which saw in him half a child, half a fool, and maybe she would add in her own thoughts, a kind of angel.

Don Gesualdo was not wise or learned in any way; he had barely been able to acquire enough knowledge to pass through the examinations necessary for entrance into the priesthood. That slender amount of scholarship was his all; but he was clever enough for Marca, which had very little brains of its own; and he did his duty most faithfully, as far as he saw it, at all times. As for doubts of any sort as to what that duty was,

such scepticism never could possibly assail him. His creed appeared as plain and sure to him as the sun which shone in the heavens, and his faith was as single-hearted and unswerving as the devoted soul of a docile sheepdog.

He was of a poetic and retiring nature; religion had taken entire possession of his soul, and he was as unworldly, as visionary, and as simple as any one of the *pecorelle di Dio* who dwelt around Francesco d'Assisi. His mother had been a German servant girl, married out of a small inn in Pisa, and some qualities of the dreamy, slow, and serious Teutonic temperament were in him, all Italian of the western coast as he was. On such a dual mind the spiritual side of his creed had obtained intense power; and the office he filled was to him a heaven-given mission which compelled him to incessant sacrifice of every earthly appetite and every selfish thought.

"He is too good to live," said his old house-keeper.

It was a very simple and monotonous life which was led by him in his charge. There was no kind of change in it for anybody, unless they went away, and few people born in Marca ever did that. They were not forced by climate to be nomads, like the mountaineers of the Apennines, nor like the men of the sea-coast, and ague-haunted plains. Marca was a healthy, homely place on the slope of a hill in the wilderness, where its sons and daughters could stay and work all the year round, if they chose, without risk of fever worse than such as might be brought on by too much new wine at close of autumn. Marca was not pretty, or historical, or picturesque, or uncom-



mon in any way; there are five hundred, five thousand, villages like it, standing amongst corn lands and maize fields and mulberry trees, with its little dark church, and its whitewashed presbytery, and its dusky red-tiled houses, and its great silent empty villa that used to be a fortified and stately palace, and now is given over to the rats and the spiders and the scorpions. A very quiet, little place, far away from cities and railways, dusty and uncomely in itself, but blessed in the abundant light and the divine landscape which are around it, and of which no one in it ever thought, except this simple, young priest, Gesualdo Brasaïlo.

Of all natural gifts, a love of natural beauty surely brings most happiness to the possessor of it; happiness altogether unalloyed and unpurchasable, and created by the mere rustle of green leaves, the mere ripple of brown waters. It is not an Italian gift at all, nor an Italian feeling; to an Italian gas is more beautiful than sunshine, and a cambric flower more beautiful than a real one; he usually thinks the mountains hateful and a city divine, he detests trees and adores crowds. But there are exceptions to all rules: there are poetic natures everywhere, though everywhere rare; Gesualdo was the exception in Marca and its neighbourhood, and evening after evening saw him in the summer weather strolling through the fields, his breviary in his hand, but his heart with the dancing fire-flies, the quivering poplar leaves, the tall green cane, the little silvery fish darting over the white stones of the shallow river-waters. He could not have told why he loved to watch these things; he thought it was because they reminded him of Bocca d'Arno and the sand beach and the cane-brakes; but he did love them, and they filled him

with that vague emotion, half pleasure, half pain, known.

His supper over, he went into his church; a little red-bricked, white-washed passage connected it with his parlour. The church was small, and dark, and old; it had an altarpiece said to be old, and by a Senese master, and of some value, but Gesualdo knew nothing of these matters; a Raphael might have hung there and he would have been none the wiser; he loved the church, ugly and simple as it was, as a mother loves a plain child or a dull one because it is hers; and now and then he preached strange, passionate, pathetic sermons in it, which none of his people understood, and which he barely understood himself. He had a sweet full far-reaching voice, with an accent of singular melancholy in it, and as his mystical, romantic, involved phrases passed far over the heads of his hearers, like a flight of birds flying high up against the clouds, the pathos and music in his tones stirred their hearts vaguely. He was certainly they thought a man whom the saints loved. Candida sitting near the altar with her head bowed and her hands feeling her rosary would think as she heard the unintelligible eloquence: "Dear Lord, all that power of words, all that skill of the tongue, and he would put his shirt on bottom upwards were it not for me!"

There was no office in his church that evening, but he lingered about it, touching this thing and the other with tender fingers. There was always a sweet scent in the little place; its door usually stood open to the fields amidst which it was planted, and the smell of the incense which century after century had been burned in it, blended with the fragrance from

primroses, or dog-roses, or new mown hay, or crushed ripe grapes which, according to the season, came in it from without. Candida kept it very clean and the scorpions and spiders were left so little peace there by her ever-active broom that they betook themselves elsewhere, dear as the wooden benches and the cranied stones had been to them for ages.

Since he had come to Marca nothing of any kind had happened in it. There had been some marriages, a great many births, not a few burials; but that was all. The people who came to confession at Easter confessed very common sins; they had stolen this or that, cheated here, there, and everywhere; got drunk and quarrelled, nothing more; he would give them clean bills of spiritual health, and bid them go in peace and sin no more, quite sure, as they were sure themselves, that they would have the selfsame sins to tell off next time they came there.

Everybody in Marca thought a great deal of their religion, that is they trusted to it in a helpless but confident kind of way as a fetish, which being duly and carefully propitiated, would make things all right for them after death. They would not have missed a mass to save their lives; that they dozed through it, and cracked nuts or took a suck at their pipe stems when they woke, did not affect their awed and unchangeable belief in its miraculous and saving powers. If they had been asked what they believed or why they believed, they would have scratched their heads and felt puzzled. Their minds dwelt in a twilight in which nothing had any distinct form. The clearest idea ever presented to them was that of the Madonna: they thought of her as of some universal

mother who wanted to do them good in present and future if they only observed her ceremonials: just as in the ages gone by upon these same hillsides, the Latin peasant had thought of the great Demeter.

Gesualdo himself, despite all the doctrine which had been instilled into him in his novitiate, did not know much more than they; he repeated the words of his offices without any distinct notion of all that they meant; he had a vague feeling that all self-denial and self-sacrifice were thrice blessed, and he tried his best to save his own soul and the souls of others; but there he ceased to think; outside that speculation lay, and speculation was a thrice damnable offence. Yet he, being imaginative and intelligent in a humble and dog-like way was at times infinitely distressed to see how little effect this religion which he taught and which they professed had upon the lives of his people. His own life was altogether guided by it. Why could not theirs be the same? Why did they go on all through the year swearing, cursing, drinking, quarrelling, lying, stealing; he could not but perceive that they came to him to confess their peccadilloes only that they might pursue them more completely at their ease. He could not flatter himself that his ministrations in Marca, which were now of six years' duration, had made the village a whit different to what it had been when he had entered it.

Thinking of this, as he did think of it continually night and day, being a man of singularly sensitive conscience, he sat down on a marble bench near the door and opened his breviary. The sun was setting behind the pines on the crest of the hills; the warm

orange light poured across the paved way in front of the church, through the stems of the cypresses, which stood before the door, and found its way over the uneven slates of the stone floor to his feet. A nightingale was singing somewhere in the dog-rose hedge beyond the cypress-trees. Lizards ran from crack to crack in the pavement. A tendril of honeysuckle came through a hole in the wall, thrusting its delicate curled horns of perfume towards him. The whole entrance was bathed in golden warmth and light; the body of the church behind him was quite dark.

He had opened his breviary from habit, but he did not read; he sat and gazed at the evening clouds, at the blue hills, at the radiant air, and listened to the song of the nightingales in that dreamy trance which made him look so stupid in the eyes of his housekeeper and his parishioners, but which were only the meditations of a poetic temper, cramped and cooped up in a narrow and uncongenial existence, and not educated or free enough to be able even to analyse what it felt.

“The nightingale’s song in June is altogether unlike its songs of April and May,” thought this poor priest, whom Nature had made a poet, and to whom she had given the eyes which see and the ears which hear. “The very phrases are wholly different; the very accent is not the same; in spring it is all a canticle like the songs of Solomon, in midsummer—what is it he is singing? Is he lamenting the summer? or is it he is only teaching his young ones how they should sing next year?”

And he fell again to listening to the sweetest bird

that gladdens earth. The nightingale was patiently repeating his song, again and again, sometimes more slowly, sometimes more quickly, seeming to lay stress on some phrases more than on others; and another voice, fainter and feebler than his own, repeated the trills and roulades after him fitfully, and often breaking down altogether. It was plain that there in the wild-rose hedge he was teaching his son. Anyone who will may hear these sweet lessons given under bays and myrtle, under arbutus and pomegranate, through all the month of June.

Nightingales in Marca were only regarded as creatures to be trapped, shot, caged, eaten, sold for a centime like any other small bird; but about the church no one touched them; the people knew that their *parocco* cared to hear their songs coming sweetly through the pauses in the recitatives of the office. Absorbed, as he was now in hearkening in the music lesson amongst the white dog-roses, he started violently as a shadow fell across the threshold and a voice called to him, "Good evening, Don Gesualdo!"

He looked up and saw a woman whom he knew well; a young woman scarcely indeed eighteen years old, very handsome, with a face full of warmth, and colour, and fire, and tenderness, great flashing eyes which could at times be as soft as a dog's, and a beautiful ruddy mouth with teeth as white as a dog's are also. She was by name Generosa Fè; she was the wife of Tasso Tassilo, the miller. In Marca, most of the women by toil and sun were black as berries by the time they were twenty, and looked old almost before they were young, with rough hair and loose forms and wrinkled skins, and children dragging at their

breasts all the year through. Generosa was not like them; she did little work; she had the form of a goddess; she took care of her beauty, and she had no children, though she had married at fifteen. She was friends with Gesualdo; they had both come from the Bocca d'Arno, and it was a link of common memory and mutual attachment. They liked to recall how they had each run through the tall canes and cactus, and waded in the surf, and slept in the hot sand, and hidden themselves for fright when the King's camels had come towards them, throwing their huge misshapen shadows over the seas of flowering reeds and rushes.

He remembered her a small child, jumping about on the sand and laughing at him, a youth, when he was going to college to study for entrance into the church. "Gesualdo! che Gesualdo!" she had cried. "A fine priest he will make for us all to confess to!" And she had screamed with mirth, her handsome little face rippling all over with gaiety like the waves of the sea with the sunshine.

He had remembered her and had been glad when Tasso Tassilo, the miller, had gone sixty miles away for a wife, and had brought her from Bocca d'Arno to live at the mill on the small river, which was the sole water which ran through the village of Marca.

Tasso Tassilo, going on business once to the sea coast, had chanced to see that handsome face of hers, and had wooed and won her without great difficulty, for her people were poor folk, living by carting sand, and she herself was tired of her bare legs and face, her robust hunger, which made her glad to eat the fruit off the cactus plants, and her great beauty, which

nobody ever saw except the sea gulls and carters, and fishers, and cane cutters, who were all as poor as she was herself.

Tasso Tassilo, in his own person, she hated, an ugly, dry, elderly man, with his soul wrapped up in his flour-bags and his money-bags; but he adored her, and let her spend as she chose on her attire and her ornaments; and the millhouse was a pleasant place enough with its walls painted on the outside *in tempora*, and the willows drooping over its eaves, and the young men and the mules loitering about on the land side of it, and the peasants coming up with corn to be ground whenever there had been rain in summer, and so water enough in the river bed to turn the mill wheels. In drought the stream was low and its stones dry, and no work could be done by the grindstones. There was then only water enough for the ducks to paddle in, and the pretty teal to float in, which they would always do at sunrise unless the miller let fly a charge of small shot amongst them from the windows under the roof.

“Good evening, Don Gesualdo,” said the miller’s wife now, in the midst of the nightingale’s song, and the orange glow from the sunset.

Gesualdo rose with a smile. He was always glad to see her; she had something about her for him of boyhood, of home, of the sea, and of the careless days before he became a seminarist; he did not positively regret that he had entered the priesthood, but he remembered the earlier life wistfully and with wonder that he could ever have been that light-hearted lad who had run through the cane brakes to plunge into the rolling waters with all the wide gay sunlit world



of sea and sky and river and shore before him, behind him, and above him.

"What is wrong, Generosa?" he asked her, seeing as he looked up that her handsome face was clouded. Her days were not often tranquil; her husband was jealous, and she gave him cause for jealousy; the mill was a favourite resort of all young men for thirty miles around, and unless Tasso Tassilo had ceased to grind corn he could not have shut his doors to them.

"It is the old story, Don Gesualdo," she answered, leaning against the church porch. "You know what Tasso is, and what a dog's life he leads me."

"You are not always prudent, my daughter," said Gesualdo with a faint smile.

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"Who could be always prudent at my years?" said the miller's young wife. "Tasso is a brute, and a fool too. One day he will drive me out of myself; I tell him so."

"That is not the way to make him better," said Gesualdo. "I am sorry you do not see it. The man loves you, and he feels he is old, and he knows that you do not care: there is always like a thorn in his flesh: he feels you do not care."

"How should he suppose that I care?" said Generosa, passionately. "I hated him always; he is as old as my father; he expects me to be shut up like a nun; if he had his own way I should never stir out of the house; does one marry for that?"

"One should marry to do one's duty," said Gesualdo timidly, for he felt the feebleness of his counsels and arguments against the force and the warmth and the self-will of a woman, conscious of her beauty and her

power, and her lovers, and moved by all the instincts of vanity and passion.

"We had a terrible scene an hour ago," said Generosa, passing over what she did not choose to answer. "It cost me much not to put a knife into him. It was about Falko. There was nothing new, but he thought there was. I fear he will do Falko mischief one day; he threatened it; it is not the first time."

"That is very grave," said Gesualdo, growing paler as he heard. "My daughter, you are more in error than Tassilo. After all, he has his rights. Why do you not send the young man away? He would obey you."

"He would obey me in anything else, not in that," said the woman, with the little conscious smile of one who knows her own power. "He would not go away. Indeed why should he go away? He has his employment here. Why should he go away because Tasso is a jealous fool?"

"Is he such a fool?" said Gesualdo, and he raised his eyes suddenly and looked straight into hers. Generosa coloured through her warm, paleless skin. She was silent.

"It has not gone as far as you think," she muttered, after a pause.

"But I will not be accused for nothing," she added, "Tasso shall have what he thinks he has had; why would he marry me? He knew I hated him. We were all very poor down there by Bocca d'Arno, but we were gay and happy. Why did he take me away?"

The tears started to her eyes and rolled down her hot cheeks. It was the hundredth time that she had

told her sorrows to Gesualdo, in the confessional and out of it; it was an old story, of which she never tired of the telling. Her own people were far away by the sea shore, and she had no friends in Marca, for she was thought a "foreigner," not being of that country side, and the women were jealous of her beauty, and of the idle life which she led in comparison to theirs, and of the cared-for look of her person. Gesualdo seemed a countryman, and a relative and a friend. She took all her woes to him. A priest was like a woman, she thought; only a still safer confidant.

"You are ungrateful, my daughter," he said, now, with an effort to be severe in reprimand. "You know that you were glad to marry so rich a man as Tassilo. You know that your father and mother were glad, and you yourself likewise. No doubt, the man is not all that you could wish, but you owe him something; indeed you owe him much. I speak to you now out of my office, only as a friend. I would entreat you to send your lover away. If not, there will be crime, perhaps bloodshed, and the fault of all that may happen will be yours."

She gave a gesture, which said that she cared nothing, whatever might happen. She was in a headstrong and desperate mood; she had had a violent quarrel with her husband, and she loved Falko Melegari, the steward of the absent noble who owned the empty, half ruined palace which stood on the banks of the river; he was a fair and handsome young man with Lombard blood in him; tall, slender, vigorous, amorous and light-hearted; the strongest of contrasts

in all ways to Tasso Tassilo, taciturn, feeble, sullen, and unlovely, and twice the years of his wife.

There was not more than a mile between the mill-house and the deserted villa; Tassilo might as well have tried to arrest the sirocco, or the mariner's winds when they blew, as prevent an intercourse so favoured and so facilitated by circumstances. The steward had a million reasons in the year to visit the mill, and when the miller insulted him and forbade him his doors he had no power to prevent him from fishing in the waters, from walking on the bank, from making signals from the villa terraces, and appointments in the canebrakes and the vinefields. Nothing could have broken off the intrigue except the departure of one or other of the lovers from Marca. But Falko Melegari would not go away from a place where his interests and his passions both combined to hold him; and it never entered the mind of the miller to take his wife elsewhere. He had dwelt at the mill all the years of his life, and his forefathers for five generations before him. To change their residence never occurs to such people as these; they are fixed, like the cypress trees, in the ground, and dream no more than they of new homes. Like the tree, they never change till death fells them.

Generosa continued to pour out her woes, leaning against the pillar of the porch, and playing with a twig of pomegranate, whose buds were not more scarlet than her own lips; and Gesualdo continued to press on her his good counsels, knowing all the while that he might as well speak to the swallows under the church eaves for any benefit that he could effect. In

sole answer to the arguments of Gesualdo she retorted in scornful words.

"You may find duty enough for you because you are a saint," she added, with less of reverence than of disdain, "but I am no saint, and I will not spend all my best days tied to the side of a sickly and sullen old man."

"You are wrong, my daughter," said Gesualdo sternly. He coloured; he knew not why. "I know nothing of these passions," he added with some embarrassment. "But I know what duty is, and yours is clear."

He did not know much of human nature, and of woman nature nothing, yet he dimly comprehended that Generosa was now at that crisis of her life when all the ardours of her youth and all the delight in her own power made her passionately rebellious against the cruelties of her fate; when it was impossible to make duty look other than hateful to her, and when the very peril and difficulty which surrounded her love story made it the sweeter and more irresistible to her. She was of a passionate, ardent, careless, daring temperament; and the dangers of the intrigue which she pursued had no terrors for her, whilst the indifference which she had felt for years for her husband had deepened of late into hatred.

"One is not a stick nor a stone, nor a beam of timber nor a block of granite, that one should be able to live without love all one's days!" she cried with passion and contempt.

She drew the branches of pomegranate over the hedge, she gave him a glance half contemptuous and half compassionate, and left the church door.

"After all, what should he understand!" she thought. "He is a saint, but he is not a man."

Gesualdo looked after her a moment as she went over the courtyard and between the stems of the cypresses out towards the open hillside. The sun had set; there was a rosy afterglow which bathed her elastic figure in a carmine light; she had that beautiful walk which some Italian women have who have never worn shoes in the first fifteen years of their lives. The light shone on her dusky auburn hair, her gold earrings, the slender column of her throat, her vigorous and voluptuous form. Gesualdo looked after her, and a subtle warmth and pain passed through him, bringing with it a sharp sense of guilt. He looked away from her and went within his church and prayed.

That night Falko Melegari had just alighted from the saddle of his good grey horse, when he was told that the Parroco of San Bartolo was waiting to see him.

The villa had been famous and splendid in other days; but it formed now only one of the many neglected possessions of a gay young noble, called Ser Baldo by his dependents, who spent what little money he had in pleasure-places out of Italy, seldom or never came near his estates, and accepted without investigation all such statements of accounts as his various men of business were disposed to send to him.

His steward lived on the ground floor of the great villa, in the vast frescoed chambers with their domed and gilded ceilings, their sculptured cornices, their carved doors, their stately couches, with the satin dropping in shreds, and the pale tapestries with the moths and the mice at work in them. His narrow camp bed, his deal table and chairs were sadly out

of place in those once splendid halls, but he did not think about it; he vaguely liked the space and the ruined grandeur about him, and all the thoughts he had were given to his love, Generosa, the wife of Tasso Tassilo. From the terraces of the villa he could see the mill a mile further down the stream, and he would pass half the short nights of the summer looking at the distant lights in it.

He was only five-and-twenty, and he was passionately in love with all the increased ardour of a forbidden passion.

He was fair-haired and blue-eyed, was well made and very tall; in character he was neither better nor worse than most men of his age, but as a steward he was tolerably honest, and as a lover he was thoroughly sincere. He went with a quick step into the central hall to meet his visitor; he supposed that the vicar had come about flowers for the feast of S.S. Peter and Paul, which was on the morrow. Though the villa gardens were wholly neglected they were still rich in flowers which wanted no care, lilies, lavender, old-fashioned roses, oleanders red and white, and magnolia trees.

“Good evening, Reverend Father, you do me honour,” he said, as he saw Gesualdo. “Is there anything that I can do for you? I am your humble servant.”

Gesualdo looked at him curiously. He had never noticed the young man before; he had seen him ride past, he had seen him at mass, he had spoken to him of the feasts of the church; but he had never noticed him. Now he looked at him curiously as he answered, without any preface whatever:

"I am come to speak to you of Generosa Fè, the wife of Tasso Tassilo."

The young steward coloured violently. He was astonished and silent.

"She loves you," said Gesualdo, simply.

Falko Melegari made a gesture as though he implied that it was his place neither to deny nor to affirm.

"She loves you," said Gesualdo again.

The young man had that fatuous smile which unconsciously expresses the consciousness of conquest. But he was honest in his passion and ardent in it.

"Not so much as I love her," he said, rapturously, forgetful of his hearer.

Gesualdo frowned.

"She is the wife of another man," he said, with reproof. Falko Melegari shrugged his shoulders; that did not seem any reason against it to him.

"How will it end?" said the priest.

The lover smiled.

"These things always end in one way."

Gesualdo winced, as though someone had wounded him.

"I am come to bid you go out of Marca," he said, simply.

The young man stared at him; then he laughed angrily.

"Good Ser Vicario," he said, impatiently; "you are the keeper of our souls, no doubt; but not quite to such a point as that. Has Tassilo sent you to me, or she?" he added, with a gleam of suspicion in his eyes.

"No one has sent me."



“Why then——”

“Because, if you do not go, there will be tragedy and misery. Tasso Tassilo is not a man to make you welcome to his couch. I have known Generosa since she was a little child; we were both born on the Bocca d’Arno. She is of a warm nature, but not a deep one; and if you go away she will forget. Tassilo is a rude man and a hard one; he gives her all she has; he has many claims on her, for in his way he has been generous and tender. You are a stranger; you can only ruin her life; you can with ease find another *gattaria* far away in another province; why will you not go? If you really loved her you would go.”

Falko laughed. “Dear Don Gesualdo, you are a holy man, but you know nothing of love.”

Gesualdo winced a little again. It was the second time this had been said to him this evening.

“Is it love,” he said, after a pause, “to risk her murder by her husband? I tell you Tassilo is not a man to take his dishonour quietly.”

“Who cares what Tassilo does!” said the young steward, petulantly. “If he touches a hair of her head I will make him die a thousand deaths.”

“All those are words,” said Gesualdo. “You cannot mend one crime by another, and you cannot protect a woman from her husband’s just vengeance. There is only one way by which to save her from the danger you have dragged her into. It is for you to go away.”

“I will go away when this house walks a mile,” said Falko. “Not before. Go away!” he echoed in wrath. “What! run like a mongrel dog before Tassilo’s anger? What! leave her all alone to curse me

as a faithless coward? What! go away when all my life and my soul, and all the light of my eyes, is in Marca? Don Gesualdo, you are a good man, but you are mad. You must pardon me if I speak roughly. Your words make me beside myself."

"Do you believe in no duty, then?"

"I believe in the duty of every honest lover!" said Falko, with vehemence, "and that duty is to do everything that the loved one wishes. She is bound to a cur; she is unhappy; she has not even any children to comfort her; she is like a beautiful flower shut up in a cellar, and she loves me—me!—and you bid me go away! Don Gesualdo, keep to your church offices, and leave the loves of others alone. What should you know of them? Forgive me, if I am rude. You are a holy man, but you know nothing at all of men and women."

"I do not know much," said Gesualdo, meekly.

He was depressed and intimidated. He was sensible of his own utter ignorance of the passions of life. This man, nigh his own age, but so full of vigour, of ardour, of indignation, of pride in his consciousness that he was beloved, and of resolve to stay where that love was, be the cost what it would, daunted him with a sense of power and of triumph such as he himself could not even comprehend, and yet wistfully envied. It was sin, no doubt, he said to himself; and, yet, it was life, it was strength, it was virility.

He had come to reprove, to censure, and to persuade into repentance this headstrong lover, and he could only stand before him feeble and oppressed, with a sense of his own ignorance and childishness. All the stock, trite arguments which his religious belief

supplied him, seemed to fall away and to be of no more use than empty husks of rotten nuts before the urgency, the fervour, and the self-will of real life. This man and woman loved each other, and they cared for no other fact than this on earth or in heaven. He left the villa-grounds in silence, with only a gesture of farewell-salutation.

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## II.

"POOR innocent, he meant well!" thought the steward, as he watched the dark, slender form of the priest pass away through the vines and mulberry trees. The young man did not greatly venerate the church himself; though he showed himself at mass and sent flowers for the feast days because it was the custom to do so. He was like most young Italians who have had a smattering of education, very indifferent on such matters, and inclined to ridicule. He left them for women and old men. But there was something about his visitant which touched him; a simplicity, an unworldliness, a sincerity which moved his respect; and he knew in his secret heart that the Parroco as he called him was right enough in everything that he had said.

Gesualdo himself went on his solitary way, his buckled shoes dragging wearily over the dusty grass of the wayside. He had done no good, and he did not see what good he could do. He felt helpless before the force and speed of an unknown and guilty passion, as he once felt before a forest fire which he had seen in the Marche. All his church books gave him homilies enough on the sins of the flesh and the temptings of the devil; but none of these helped him before the facts of this lawless and godless love, which seemed to pass high above his head like a whirlwind.

He went on slowly and dully along the edge of the river-bed; a sense of something which he had always missed, which he would miss eternally, was with him.

It was now quite night. Gesualdo liked to walk late at night. All things were so peaceful, or at the least seemed so. You did not see the gashes in the lopped trees, the scars in the burned hillside, the wounds in the mule's loins, the blood-shot eyes of the working ox, the goitered throat of the child rolling in the dust. Night, kindly friend of dreams, cast her soft veil over all woes, and made the very dust seem as a silvered highway to a throne for God.

He went now through the balmy air, the rustling canes, the low-hanging boughs of the fruit-laden peach trees, and the sheaves of cut corn leaning one up against another under the hives. He followed the course of the water, a shallow thread at this season, glistening under the moon in its bed of shingle and sand. He passed the millhouse perforce on his homeward way, he saw the place of the weir made visible even in the dark by the lanterns which swung on a cord stretched from one bank to another, to entice any such fish as there might still be in the shallows. The mill stood down into the water, a strong place built in olden days, the great black wheels were perforce at rest; the mules champed and chafed in their stalls, inactive, like the mill; for the next three months there would be nothing to do unless a storm came and brought a freshet from the hills. The miller would have the more leisure to nurse his wrongs, thought Gesualdo; and his heart was troubled; he had never met with these woes of the passions; they oppressed and alarmed him.

As he passed the low mill windows, protected from thieves by their iron gratings, he could see the interior lighted as it was by the flame of oil lamps, and through the open lattices the voices, raised high in stormy quarrel, seemed to smite the holy stillness of the night like a blow. The figure of Generosa stood out against the light which shone behind her; she was in a paroxysm of rage; her eyes flashed like the lightnings of the hills; and her beautiful arms were tossed above her head in impassioned imprecation. Tasso Tassilo seemed for the moment to crouch beneath this rain of flamelike words; his face, on which the light shone full, was deformed with malignant and impotent fury, with covetous and jealous desire; there was no need to hear her words to know that she was taunting him with her love for Falko Melegari. Gesualdo was a weak man and physically timid; but here he hesitated but one instant. He lifted the latch of the house door and walked straightway into the mill kitchen.

“In the name of Christ be silent!” he said to them, and made the sign of the cross.

The torrent of words stopped on the lips of the young woman; the miller scowled and shrank from the light, and was mute.

“Is this how you keep your vows to heaven and to each other?” said Gesualdo.

A flush of shame came over the face of the woman; the man drew his hat farther over his eyes, and went out of the kitchen silently. The victory had been easier than their monitor had expected. And yet of what use was it, he thought; they were silent

out of respect for him. As soon as the restraint of his presence should be removed they would begin afresh. Unless he could change their souls it was of little avail to bridle their lips for an hour.

There was a wild chafing hatred on one side and a tyrannical, covetous, dissatisfied love on the other; out of such discordant elements what peace could come?

Gesualdo shut the wooden shutters of the windows, that others should not see, as he had seen, into the interior; then he strove to pacify his old playmate, whose heaving breast and burning cheeks, and eyes which scorched up in fire their own tears, spoke of a tempest lulled, not spent. He spoke with all the wisdom with which study and the counsels of the Fathers had supplied him, and with what was sweeter and more like to be efficacious, a true and yearning wish to save her from herself. She was altogether wrong, and he strove to make her see the danger and the error of her ways. But he strove in vain. She had one of those temperaments, reckless, vehement, pleasure-loving, ardent, and profoundly selfish, which sees only its own immediate gain, its own immediate desires. When he tried to stir her conscience by speaking of the danger she drew down on the head of the man she professed to love, she almost laughed.

"He would be a poor creature," she said, proudly, "if all danger would not be dear to him for me!"

Gesualdo looked her full in the eyes.

"You know that this matter must end in the death of one man or of the other. Do you mean that this troubles you not one whit?"

"It will not be my fault," said Generosa, and he saw in her the woman's lust of vanity, which finds food for its pride in the blood shed for her, as the tigress does, and even the gentle hind.

He remained an hour or more with her, exhausting every argument which his creed and his sympathy could suggest to him as having any possible force in it to sway this wayward and sin-bound soul; but he knew that his words were poured on her ear as uselessly as water on a stone floor. She was in a manner grateful to him as her friend, in a manner afraid of that vague majesty of some unknown power which he represented to her; but she hated her husband, she adored her lover;—he could not stir her from those two extremes of passion. He left her with apprehension and a pained sense of his own impotence. She promised him that she would provoke Tassilo no more that night, and this poor promise was all that he could wring from her. It was late when he left the mill-house. He feared Candida would be alarmed at his unusual absence; and hastened, with trouble on his soul, towards the village, lying white and lonely underneath the midsummer moon. He had so little influence, so slender a power to persuade or warn, to counsel or command; he felt afraid that he was unworthy of his calling.

"I should have been better in the cloister," he thought, sadly; "I have not the key to human hearts."

He went on through a starry world of fireflies making luminous the still uncut corn, and, entering his presbytery, crept noiselessly up the stairs to his chamber, thankful that the voice of his housekeeper did not cry to him out of the darkness to know why



he had so long tarried. He slept little that night, and was up, as was his wont, by daybreak.

It was still dark when the church bell was clanging above his head for the first office.

It was the day of Peter and of Paul. Few people came to the early mass. Some peasants who wanted to have the rest of the day clear; some women, thrifty housewives who were up betimes; Candida herself; no others. The lovely morning light streamed in, cool and roseate; there were a few lilies and roses on the altar; some red draperies floated in the doorway; the nightingales in the wild-rose hedge sang all the while, their sweet voices crossing the monotonous Latin recitatives. The mass was just over when into the church from without there arose a strange sound, shrill and yet hoarse, inarticulate and yet uproarious; it came from the throats of many people, all screaming, and shouting, and talking, and swearing together. The peasants and the women who were on their knees scrambled to their feet and rushed to the door, thinking the earth had opened and the houses were falling. Gesualdo came down from the altar and strove to calm them, but they did not heed him, and he followed them despite himself. The whole village seemed out—man, woman, and child—the nightingales grew dumb under the outcry.

“What is it?” asked Gesualdo.

Several voices shouted back to him, “Tasso Tassilo has been murdered!”

“Ah!”

Gesualdo gave a low cry, and leaned against the

stem of a cypress tree to save himself from falling. What use had been his words that night!

The murdered man had been found lying under the canes on the way side not a rood from the church. A dog smelling at it had caused the body to be sought out and discovered. He had been dead but a few hours; apparently killed by a knife thrust under his left shoulder, which had struck straight through the heart. The agitation in the people was unimaginable, the uproar deafening. Some one with a grain of sense remaining had sent for the carabinieri, but their picket was two miles off, and they had not yet arrived. The dead man still lay where he had fallen; everyone was afraid to touch him.

"Does his wife know?" said Gesualdo, in a strange, hoarse voice.

"His wife will not grieve," said a man in the crowd, and there was a laugh, subdued by awe and the presence of death and of the priest.

Gesualdo, with a strong shudder of disgust, held up his hand in horror and reproof, then bent over the dead body where it lay amongst the reeds.

"Bring him to the sacristy," he said, to the men nearest him. "He must not lie there like a beast unclean, by the roadside; go, fetch a hurdle, a sheet, anything."

But no one of them would stir.

"If we touch him they will take us up for murdering him," they muttered, as one man.

"Cowards! Stand off; I will carry him in doors," said the priest.

"You are in full canonicals!" cried Candida, twitching at his sleeve.

But Gesualdo did not heed her. He was brushing off with a tender hand the flies which had begun to buzz about the dead man's mouth. The flies might have stung and eaten him all the day through for what anyone of the little crowd would have cared; they would not have stretched a hand even to drag him into the shade.

Gesualdo was a weakly man; he had always fasted long and often, and had never been strong from his birth; but indignation, compassion, and horror for the moment lent him a strength not his own; he stooped down and raised the dead body in his arms, and, staggering under his burden, he bore it the few rods which separated the place where it had fallen from the church and the vicar's house.

The people looked on open-mouthed with wonder and awe. "It is against the law," they muttered, but they did not offer active opposition. Gesualdo unmolested, save for the cries of the old housekeeper, carried his load into his own house and laid it reverently down on the couch which stood in the sacristy. He was exhausted with the great strain and effort; his limbs shook under him, the sweat poured off his face, the white silk and golden embroideries of his cope and stole were stained with the clotted blood which had fallen from the wound in the dead man's breast. He did not heed it, nor did he hear the cries of Candida mourning the disfigured vestments, nor the loud chattering of the crowd thrusting itself into the sacristy. He stood looking down on the poor, dusty, stiffening corpse before him with blind eyes and thinking in silent terror: "Is it her work?"

In his own soul he had no doubt.

Candida plucked once more at his robes.

"The vestments, the vestments! You will ruin them; take them off——"

He put her from him with a gesture of dignity which she had never seen in him; and motioned the throng back towards the open door.

"I will watch with him till the guards come," he said; "go, send his wife hither."

Then he scattered holy water on the dead body, and kneeled down beside it and prayed.

The crowd thought that he acted strangely; why was he so still and cold, and why did he seem so stunned and stricken? If he had screamed and raved, and run hither and thither purposelessly, and let the corpse lie where it was in the canes, he would have acted naturally in their estimation. They hung about the doorways half afraid, half angered, some of them went to the millhouse eager to have the honour of being the first bearer of such news.

No one was sorry for the dead man, except some few who were in his debt, and knew that now they would be obliged to pay with heavy interest what they owed up to his successors.

With the grim pathos and dignity which death imparts to the commonest creature, the murdered man lay on the bench of the sacristy, amidst the hubbub and the uproar of the crowding people; he and the priest the only mute creatures in the place.

Gesualdo kneeled by the dead man in his blood-stained, sand-stained canonicals; he was praying with all the soul there was in him, not for the dead man, but the living woman.

The morning broadened into the warmth of day. He rose from his knees, and bade his sacristan bring linen, and spread it over the corpse to cheat the flies and the gnats of their ghastly repast. No men of law came. The messengers returned. The picket house had been closed at dawn and the carabineers were away. There was nothing to be done but to wait. The villagers stood or sat about in the paved court, and in the road under the cypresses. They seldom had such an event as this in the dullness of their lives. They brought hunches of bread and ate as they discoursed of it.

“Will you not break your fast?” said Candida to Gesualdo. “You will not bring him to life by starving yourself.”

Gesualdo made a sign of refusal.

His mouth was parched, his throat felt closed; he was straining his eyes for the first sight of Generosa on the white road. If she were guilty she would never come, he thought, to look on the dead man.

Soon he saw her, coming with swift feet and flying skirts and bare head, through the boles of the cypresses. She was livid, her unbound hair was streaming behind her.

She had passed a feverish night, locking her door against her husband, and spending the whole weary hours at the casement where she could see the old grey villa where her lover dwelt, standing out against the moonlight amongst its ilex and olive trees. She had had no sense of the beauty of the night; she had been only concerned by the fret and fever of a first love and of a guilty passion.

She was not callous at heart, though wholly un-

trained and undisciplined in character, and her conscience told her that she gave a bad return to a man who had honestly and generously adored her, who had been lavish to her poverty out of his riches, and had never been unkind until a natural and justified jealousy had embittered the whole current of his life. She held the offence of infidelity lightly, yet her candour compelled her to feel that she was returning evil for good, and repaying in a base manner an old man's unwise but generous affection. She would have hesitated at nothing that could have united her life to her lover; yet in a corner of her soul she was vaguely conscious that there was a degree of unfairness and baseness in setting their youth and their ardour to hoodwink and betray a feeble and aged creature like Tasso Tassilo. She hated him fiercely; he was her jailer, her tyrant, her keeper. She detested the sound of his slow step, of his croaking voice, of his harsh calls to his men and his horses and mules; the sight of his withered features, flushed and hot with restless jealous pains, was at once absurd and loathsome to her. Youth has no pity for such woes of age, and she often mocked him openly and cruelly to his face. Still, she knew that she did him wrong, and her conscience had been more stirred by the reproof of Gesualdo than she had acknowledged. She was in that wavering mood when a woman may be saved from an unwise course by change, travel, movement, and the distractions of the world; but there were none of these for the miller's young wife. So long as her husband lived, so long would she be doomed to live here, with the roar of the mill wheels and the foaming of the weir water on her ear, and before her eyes the same

thickets of cane, the same fields with their maples and vines, the same white, dusty road winding away beyond the poplars, and with nothing to distract her thoughts or lull her mind away from its idolatry of her fair-haired lover at the old grey palace on the hill above her home.

She had spent the whole night gazing at the place where he lived. He was not even there at that moment; he had gone away for two days to a grain fair in the town of Vendramino, but she recalled with ecstasy their meetings by the side of the low green river, their hours in the wild flowering gardens of the palace, the lovely evenings when she had stolen out to see him come through the maize and canes, the fireflies all alight about his footsteps. Sleepless but languid, weary and yet restless, she had thrown herself on her bed without taking off her clothes and in the dark as the bells for the first mass have rung over the shadowy fields. She had for the first time fallen into a heavy sleep, haunted by dreams of her lover, which made her stretch her arms to him in the empty air, and murmur sleeping, wild and tender words.

She had been still on her bed, when the men of the mill had roused her beating at the chamber door and crying to her—

“Generosa, Generosa, Padrona! get up! The master is murdered, and lying dead at the church.”

She had been lying dreaming of Falko, and feeling in memory his kisses on her mouth, when those screams had come through the stillness of the early day breaking, through the music of the blackbirds piping in the cherry boughs outside her windows.

She had sprung from off her bed.

She had huddled on some decenter clothing, and bursting through the detaining hands of the henchmen and neighbours, had fled as fast as her trembling limbs could bear her to the church.

"Is it true? Is it true?" she cried, with white lips to Gesualdo.

He looked at her with a long enquiring regard; then, without a word, he drew the linen off the dead face of her husband, and pointed to it.

She, strong as a colt, and full of life as a young tree, fell headlong on the stone floor in a dead swoon.

The people gathered about the doorway and watched her suspiciously and without compassion. There was no one there who did not believe her to be the murderess. No one except Gesualdo. In that one moment when he had looked into her eyes he had felt that she was guiltless. He called Candida to her and left her, and closed the door on the curious, cruel, staring eyes of the throng without.

The people murmured: what title had he more than they to command and direct in this matter? The murder was a precious feast to them: why should he defraud them of their rights?

"He knows she is guilty," they muttered, "and he wants to screen her and give her time to recover herself and to arrange what story she shall tell."

Soon there came the sound of horses' feet on the road, and the jingling of chains and scabbards stirred the morning air: the carabineers had arrived. Then came also the syndic and petty officers of the larger village of Sant' Arturo, where the Communal Municipality in which Marca was enrolled had its seat of justice, its tax offices and its schools. There was a



great noise and stir, grinding of wheels and shouting of orders, vast clouds of dust and ceaseless din of voices, loud bickerings of conflicting authorities at war with one another, and rabid inquisitiveness and greedy excitement on all sides.

In a later time they remembered against him all this which he did now.

The Feast of SS. Peter and Paul had been a day of disaster and disorder, but to the good people of Marca both these were sweet. They had something to talk of from dawn till dark, and the blacker the tragedy the merrier wagged the tongues. The soul of their vicar alone was sick within him. Since he had seen the astonished, horrified eyes of the woman Generosa he had never once doubted her, but he felt that her guilt must seem clear as the noonday to all others. Her disputes with her husband, and her passion for Falko Melegari were facts known to all the village, and who else had any interest in his death? The whole of Marca pronounced as with one voice against her; the women had always hated her for her superior beauty, and the men had always borne her a grudge for her saucy disdain of them, and that way of bearing herself as though a beggar from Bocca d'Arno were a queen.

"Neighbours put up with her pride while she was on the sunny side of the street," said Candida, with grim satisfaction, "but now she is in the shade they'll fling the stones fast enough," and she was ready to fling her own stone. Generosa had always seemed an impudent jade to her, coming and talking with Don Gesualdo, as she did, at all hours, and as though the church and the sacristy were open bazaars!

How that day passed, and how he bore himself through all its functions he never knew. It was the dead of night, when he, still dressed and unable even to think calmly, clasping his crucifix in his hands, and pacing to and fro his narrow chamber with restless and uneven steps, heard his name called by the voice of a man in great agitation, and, looking out of his casement, saw Falko Melegari on his grey horse, which was covered with foam and sweating as from a hard gallop.

"Is it true?" he cried, a score of times.

"Yes, it is all true," said Gesualdo. His voice was stern and cold; he could not tell what share this man might not have had in the crime.

"But she is innocent as that bird in the air," screamed her lover, pointing to a scops owl which was sailing above the cypresses.

Gesualdo bowed his head and spread out his hands, palm downward, in a gesture meaning hopeless doubt.

"I was away at dark into the town to buy cattle," said the steward with sobs in his throat. "I rode out by the opposite road; I knew naught of it. Oh, my God, why was I not here! They should not have taken her without it costing them hard."

"You would have done her no good," said Gesualdo, coldly. "You have done her harm enough already," he added after a pause. Falko did not resent the words; the tears were falling like rain down his cheeks, his hands were clenched on his saddle-bow, the horse stretched its foam-flecked neck unheeded.

"Who did it? Who could do it? He had many enemies. He was a hard man," he muttered.

Gesualdo gave a gesture of hopeless doubt and ignorance. He looked down on the lover's handsome face and head in the moonlight. There was a strange expression in his own eyes.

"Curse you for a cold-hearted priest," thought the young steward, with bitterness. Then he wheeled his horse sharply round, and, without any other word, rode off towards his home in the glistening white light, to stable his weary horse, and to saddle another to ride into the larger village of Sant' Arturo. It was past midnight; he could do no good; he could see no one; but it was a relief to him to be in movement; he felt that it would choke him to sit and sup and sleep and smoke as usual in his quiet house amongst the magnolias and the myrtles, whilst the love of his life lay alone in her misery.

All gladness, which would at any natural death of Tasso Tassilo's have filled his soul, was quenched in the darkness of horror in which her fate was snatched from him and plunged into the mystery and the blackness of imputed crime.

He never actually suspected her for a moment; but he knew that others would no doubt do more than suspect.

"Perhaps the brute killed himself," he thought, "that the blame of the crime might lie on her and part her from me."

Then he knew that such a thought was absurd. Tasso Tassilo had loved his life, loved his mill, and his money, and his petty power, and his possession of his beautiful wife; and beside, what man could stab himself from behind between the shoulders? It was just the blow that a strong yet timid woman would

give. As he walked to and fro on the old terrace, whilst they saddled the horse, he felt a sickening shudder run through him. He did not suspect her. No, not for an instant. And yet there was a dim, unutterable horror upon him which veiled the remembered beauty of her face.

The passing of the days which came after this feast of the two apostles, were full of an unspeakable horror to him, and in the brief space of them he grew haggard, hollow-cheeked, almost aged, despite his youth. The dread formalities and tyrannies of law seized on the quiet village, and tortured every soul in it; everyone who had seen or heard or known aught of the dead man was questioned, tormented, harangued, examined, suspected. Don Gesualdo himself was made subject to a searching and oft-repeated interrogation, and severely reproved that he had not let the body lie untouched until the arrival of the officers of justice. He told the exact truth as far as he knew it, but when questioned as to the relations of the murdered man and his wife, he hesitated, prevaricated, contradicted himself, and gave the impression to the judicial authorities that he knew much more against the wife than he would say. What he tried to do was to convey to others his own passionate conviction of the innocence of Generosa, but he utterly failed in doing this; and his very anxiety to defend her only created an additional suspicion against her.

The issue of the preliminary investigation was that the wife of Tasso Tassilo, murdered on the morning of the Day of SS. Peter and Paul, was consigned to prison, to be "detained as a precaution" under the lock and key of the law, circumstantial evidence being

held to be strongly against her as the primary cause, if not the actual executant, of the murder of her lord.

Everyone called from the village to speak of her spoke against her with the exception of Falko Melegari, who was known to be her lover, and whose testimony weighed not a straw, and Don Gesualdo himself, a priest, indeed, but the examining judge was no friend of priests, and would not have believed them on their oaths, whilst the strong friendship for her and the nervous anxiety to shield her, displayed so unwisely, though so sincerely by him, did her more harm than good, and made his bias so visible that his declarations were held valueless.

“You know I am innocent!” she cried to him, the day of her arrest; and he answered her with the tears falling down his cheeks: “I am sure of it; I would die to prove it! for one moment I did doubt you—pardon me!—but only one. I am sure you are innocent, as I am sure that the sun hangs in the skies.”

But his unsupported belief availed nothing to secure that of others; the dominant feeling amongst the people of Marca was against her, and in face of that feeling and of the known jealousy of her which had consumed the latter days of the dead man, the authorities deemed that they could do no less than order her provisional arrest. Her very beauty was a weapon turned against her. It seemed so natural to her accusers that so lovely and so young a woman should have desired to rid herself of a husband, old, ill-favoured, exacting and unloved. In vain—utterly in vain—did Falko Melegari, black with rage and beside himself with misery, swear by every saint in the calendar that his

relations with her had been hitherto absolutely innocent. No one believed him.

"You are obliged to say that," said the judge, with good-humoured impatience.

"But God in heaven why not when it is true?" shouted Falko.

"It is always true when the *damo* is a man of honour," said the ironical judge, with an incredulous, amused smile.

So, her only defenders utterly discredited, she paid the penalty of being handsomer and grander than her neighbours, and was taken to the town of Vendramino, and there left to lie in prison until such time as the majesty of the law should be pleased to decide whether or no it deemed her guilty of causing the death of her husband. The people of Marca were content. They only could not see why the law should take such a time to doubt and puzzle over a fact, which to them all was as clear as the weather-vane on their church tower.

"Who should have killed him if not she or her *damo*?" they asked, and no one could answer.

So she was taken away by the men of justice, and Marca no more saw her handsome head with the silver pins in its coiled hair leaning out from the square mill windows, or her bright-coloured skirts going light as the wind up the brown sides of the hills, and through the yellow-blossomed gorse in the warm autumn air, to some trysting place under the topmost pines, where the wild pigeons dwelt in the boughs above, and the black stoat ran through the bracken below.

The work of the mill went on the same, being directed by the brother of Tassilo, who had always

had a share in it, both of labour and profit. The murder still served for food for people's tongues through vintage and onward until the maize harvest and the olive-gathering. As the nights grew long, and the days cold, it ceased to be the supreme theme of interest in Marca; no one ever dreamed that there could be a doubt of the absent woman's guilt, or said a good word for her; and no one gave her any pity for wasting her youth and fretting her soul out in a prison cell, though they were disposed to grant that what she had done had been after all perhaps only natural considering all things. Her own family were too poor to travel to her help; indeed, only heard of her misfortunes after many days, and then only by chance, through a travelling hawker; they could do nothing for her, and did not try; she had never sent them as much of her husband's money as they had expected her to do, and now that she was in trouble she might get out of it as she could, so they said. She had always cared for her earrings and breastpins, never for them, she would see if her jewels would help her now. When any member of a poor family marries into riches, the desire to profit by her marriage is, if ungratified, quickly turned into hatred of herself. Why should she have gone to eat stewed kid and fried lamb and hare baked with fennel, when they had only a bit of salt fish and an onion now and then?

They had admitted the vicar of San Bartolo, once or twice, to visit her, the jailer standing by, but he had been unable to do more than to weep with her and assure her of his own perfect belief in her innocence. The change he found in her shocked him so greatly that he could scarcely speak; and he thought

to himself, as he saw how aged and wasted, and altered she was, if she lose her beauty and grow old before her time, what avail will it be to her even if they declare her innocent? Her gay lover will look at her no more.

Falko Melegari loved her wildly, ardently, vehemently indeed; but Gesualdo, with that acute penetration which sometimes supplies in delicate natures that knowledge of the world which they lack, felt that it was not a love which had any qualities in it to withstand the trials of time or the loss of physical charms. Perchance, Generosa herself felt as much; and the cruel consciousness of it hurt her more than her prison bars.

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## III.

The winter passed away, and with February the corn spread a green carpet everywhere; the almond trees blossomed on the hillsides, the violets opened the ways for the wind flowers, and the willows budded beside the water mill. There were braying of bugles, twanging of lutes, cracking of shots, drinking of wines on the farms and in the village as a rustic celebration of carnival. Not much of it, for times are hard and men's hearts heavy in these days, and the sunlit grace and airy gaiety natural to it are things for ever dead in Italy, like the ilex forests and the great gardens that have perished for ever and aye.

Lent came, with its church bells sounding in melancholy iteration over the March fields, where the daffodils were blowing by millions, and the Parroco of San Bartolo fasted and prayed and mortified his flesh in every way that his creed allowed, and hoped by such miseries, pains, and penances to attain grace in heaven, if not on earth, for Generosa in her misery. All through Lent he wearied the ear of God with incessant supplication for her.

Day and night he racked his brain to discover any evidence as to who the assassin had been. He never once doubted her; if the very apostles and saints of his church had all descended on earth to witness against her, he would have cried to them that she was innocent.

The sickening suspicions, the haunting, irrepressible doubts, which now and then came over the mind of her lover as he walked to and fro by the edge of the river at night, looking up at what had been the casement of her chamber, did not assail for an instant the stronger faith of Gesualdo, weak as he was in body and, in some ways, weak in character.

The truth might remain in horrid mystery, in impenetrable darkness, for ever; it would make no difference to him; he would be always convinced that she had been innocent. Had he not known her when she was a little, barefooted child, coming flying through the shallow green pools and the great yellow grasses and the sunny cane breaks of Bocca d'Arno.

Most innocent, indeed, had been his relations with the wife of Tassilo, but to him it seemed that the interest he had taken in her, the pleasure he had felt in converse with her, had been criminal. There had been times when his eyes, which should have only seen in her a soul to save, had become aware of her mere bodily beauty, had dwelt on her with an awakening of carnal admiration. It sufficed to make him guilty in his own sight. This agony, which he felt for her, was the sympathy of a personal affection. He knew it, and his consciousness of it flung him at the feet of his crucifix in tortures of conscience.

He knew, too, that he had done her harm by the incoherence and the reticence of his testimony, by the mere vehemence with which he had unwisely striven to affirm an innocence which he had no power to prove; even by that natural impulse of humanity which had moved him to bring her husband's corpse under the roof of the church and close the door upon the

clamorous and staring throng who saw in the tragedy but a pastime. He, more than any other, had helped to cast on her the darkness of suspicion; he, more than any other, had helped to make earthly peace and happiness for ever denied to her.

Even if they acquitted her in the house of law yonder, she would be dishonoured for life. Even her lover, who loved her with all the hot coarse ardour of a young man's uncontrolled desires, had declared that he would be ashamed to walk beside her in broad day so long as this slur of possible, if unproven, crime were on her; until his sensitive soul began to take alarm lest it were not a kind of sin to be so occupied with the fate of one to the neglect and detriment of others. Candida saw him growing thinner and more shadow-like every day with ever-increasing anxiety. To fast she knew was needful above all for a priest in Lent, but he did not touch what he might lawfully have eaten; the new-laid eggs and the crisp lettuces of her providing failed to tempt him; and no mortal man, she told him, could live on air and water as he did.

"There should be reason in all piety," she said to him, and he assented.

But he did not change his ways, which were rather those of a monk of the Thebaid than of a vicar of a parish. He had the soul in him of a St. Anthony, of a St. Francis, and he had been born too late; the world as it is was too coarse, and too incredulous for him, even in a little rustic primitive village hidden away from the eyes of men under its millet and its fig-trees.

The people of Marca noticed the great change in

him. Pale he had always been, but now he was the colour of his own ivory Christ; taciturn-like, too, he had always been, yet he had ever had playful words for the children, kind words for the aged; these were silent now. The listless and mechanical manner with which he went through the offices of the church contrasted with the passionate and despairing cries which seemed to come from his very soul when he preached, and which vaguely frightened a rural congregation who were wholly unable to understand them.

“One would think the good Parroco had some awful sin on his soul,” said a woman to Candida one evening.

“Nay, nay; he is as pure as a lamb,” said Candida, twirling her distaff. “But he was always helpless and childlike, and too much taken up with heavenly things—may the saints forgive me for saying so. He should be in a monastery along with S. Romolo and S. Francis.”

Buyet the housekeeper, though loyalty itself, was, in her own secret thoughts, not a little troubled at the change she saw in her master. She put it down to the score of his agitation at the peril of Generosa Fè;—but this in itself seemed to her unfitting in one of his sacred calling. A mere light-o’-love and saucebox, as she had always herself called the miller’s wife, was wholly unworthy to occupy, even in pity, the thoughts of so holy a man.

There could not be a doubt that she had given that knife stroke amongst the canes in the dusk of the dawn of SS. Peter and Paul, thought Candida, amongst whose virtues charity had small place; but what had the Parocco to do with it?

In her rough way, motherly and unmannerly, she ventured to take her master to task for so much interest in a sinner.

"The people of Marca say you think too much about that foul business; they do even whisper that you neglect your holy duties," she said to him, as she served the frugal supper of cabbage soaked in oil. "There will always be crimes as long as the world wags on, but that is no reason why good souls should put themselves about that which they cannot help."

Gesualdo said nothing, but she saw the nerves of his mouth quiver.

"I have no business to lecture your reverence on your duties," she added, tartly; "but they do say that so much anxiety for a guilty woman is a manner of injustice to innocent souls."

Gesualdo struck his closed hand on the table with concentrated expression of passion.

"How dare you say that she is guilty?" he cried. "Who has proved her so?"

Candida looked at him with shrewd suspicious eyes as she set down the bottle of vinegar.

"I have met with nobody who doubts it," she said, cruelly, "except your reverence, and her lover up yonder at the villa."

"You are all far too ready to believe evil," said Gesualdo, with nervous haste; and he arose and pushed aside the untasted dish and went out of the house.

"He is beside himself for that jade's sake," thought Candida, and after waiting a little while to see if he returned, she sat down and ate the cabbage.

Whether there were as many crimes in the world

as flies on the pavement in summer, she saw no reason why that good food should be wasted.

After her supper, she took her distaff and went and sat on the low wall which divided the church ground from the road, and gossiped with anyone of the villagers who chanced to come by. No one was ever too much occupied not to have leisure to talk in Marca, and the church wall was a favourite gathering place for the sunburnt women with faces like leather under their broad summer hats, or their woollen winter kerchiefs, who came and went to and from the fields or the well or the washing reservoir, with its broad stone tanks brimming with brown water under a vine-covered pergola, where the hapless linen was wont to be beaten and banged as though it were so many sheets of cast-iron. And here with her gossips and friends, Candida could not help letting fall little words—stray sentences—which revealed the trouble her mind was in as to the change in her master. She was devoted to him, but her devotion was not so strong as her love of mystery and her impatience of anything which opposed a barrier to her curiosity. She was not conscious that she said a syllable which could have affected his reputation, yet her neighbours all went away from her with the idea that there was something wrong in the Presbytery, and that, if she had chosen, the priest's housekeeper could have told some very strange tales.

Since the days of the miller's murder, a vague feeling against Don Gesualdo had been growing up in Marca. A man who does not cackle and scream and roar till he is hoarse at the slightest thing which happens, is always unnatural and suspicious in the eyes

of an Italian community. The people of Marca began to remember that he had some foreign blood in him, and that he had always been more friendly with the wife of Tasso Tassilo than has been meet in one of his calling.

Falko Melegari had been denied admittance to her by the authorities. They were not sure that he, as her lover, had not some complicity in the crime committed; and, moreover, his impetuous and inconsiderate language to the Judge of Instruction at the preliminary investigation had been so fierce and so unwise that it had prejudiced against him all officers of the law. This exclusion of him heightened the misery he felt, and moved him also to a querulous impatience with the Vicar of San Bartolo for being allowed to see her.

“Those black snakes slip and slide in anywhere,” he thought, savagely, and his contempt for and dislike of ecclesiastics, which the manner and character of Gesualdo had held in abeyance, revived in its pristine force.

In Easter-time, Gesualdo was always greatly fatigued; and when Easter came round this year, and the sins of Marca were poured into his ear: little, sordid, mean sins of which the narration wearied and sickened him, they seemed more loathsome to him than they had ever done. There was such likeness and such repetition in the confessions of all of them—greed, avarice, dishonesty, fornication; the scale never varied, and the story told kept always at the same low level of petty and coarse things. Their Confessor heard with a tired mind and a sick heart, and, as he gave them absolution, shuddered at the

doubts of the infallibility of his church, which for the first time passed with dread terror through his thoughts. The whole world seemed to him changing. He felt as though the solid earth itself were giving way beneath his feet. His large eyes had a startled and frightened look in them, and his face grew thinner every day.

It was after the last office in this Easter week, when a man came through the evening shadows towards the church. His name was Emilio Raffagiolo, but he was always known as the Girellone the rover. Such nicknames replace the baptismal names of the country people till the latter are almost forgotten, whilst the family name is scarcely ever employed at all in rural communities. The Girellone was a carter, who had been in service at the water-mill for some few months. He was a man of thirty or thereabouts, with a dusky face and a shock head of hair, and hazel eyes, dull and yet cunning. He was dressed now in his festal attire, and he had a round hat set on one side of his head; he doffed it as he entered the church. He could not read or write, and his ideas of his creed were hazy and curious; the church represented to him a thing with virtue in it, like a charm or a bunch of herbs; it was only necessary, he thought, to observe certain formulæ of it to be safe within it; conduct outside it was of no consequence. Nothing on earth can equal in confusion and indistinctness the views of the Italian rustic as regards his religion. The priest is to him as the medicine man to the savage; but he has ceased to respect his councils whilst retaining a superstitious feeling about his office. This man, doffing his hat, entered the



church and approached the confessional crossing himself as he did so. Gesualdo, with a sigh, prepared to receive his confession, although the hour was unusual, and the many services of the day had fatigued him until his head swam and his vision was clouded. But at no time had he ever availed himself of any excuse of time or physical weakness to avoid the duties of his office. Recognising the carter, he wearily awaited the usual tale of low vice and petty sins, some drunkenness, or theft, or lust, gratified in some unholy way, and resigned himself wearily to follow the confused repetitions with which the rustic of every country answers questions or narrates circumstances. His conscience smote him for his apathy. Ought not the soul of this clumsy, wine-soddened boor to be as dear to him as that of lovelier creatures?

The man answered the usual priestly interrogations sullenly and at random; he could not help doing what he did, because superstition drove him to it, and was stronger for the time than any other thing; but he was angered at his own conscience and afraid of what he did; his limbs trembled, and his tongue seemed to him to swell and grow larger than his mouth, and refuse to move as he said at length in a thick, choked voice:

“It was I who killed him!”

“Who?” asked Gesualdo, whilst his own heart stood still. Without hearing the answer he knew what it would be.

“Tasso, the miller; my master,” said the carter; and, having confessed thus far, he recovered confidence and courage, and, in the rude, involved, garrulous utterances common to his kind, he leaned his

mouth closer to Gesualdo's ear, and told, with a curious sort of pride in the accomplishment of it, why and how it had been done.

"I wanted to go to South America," he muttered. "I have a cousin there, and he says one makes money fast and works little. I had often wished to take Tassilo's money, but I was always afraid. He locked it up as soon as he took any, were it ever so little, and it never saw light again till it went to the bank or was paid away for her finery. He wasted many a good fifty franc note on her back.

"Look you, the night before the feast of Peter and Paul, he had received seven hundred francs in the day for wheat, and I saw him lock it up in his bureau and say to his wife that he should take it to the town next day. That was in the forenoon. At even-tide they had a worse quarrel than usual. She taunted him and he threatened her. In the dawn I was listening to hear him astir. He was up before dawn, and he unbarred and opened the millhouse himself and called to the foreman, and he said he was going to town and told us what we were to do. 'I shall be away all day,' he said. It was still dusky. I stole out after him without the men seeing. I said to myself I would take this money from him as he went along the cross roads to take the diligence at Sant 'Arteero. I did not say to myself I would kill him, but I resolved to get the money. It was enough to take one out to America and keep one awhile when one got out there. So I made up my mind. Money is at the bottom of most things. I followed him half a mile before I could get my courage up. He did not see me because of the canes. He was crossing that grass

where the trees are so thick, when I said to myself: 'Now or never!' Then I sprang on him and stabbed him under the shoulder. He fell like a stone. I searched him, but there was nothing in his pockets except a revolver loaded. I think he had only made a feint of going to the town, thinking to come back and find the lovers together. I buried the knife under a poplar a few yards off where he fell. I could have thrown it in the river, but they say things which have killed people always float. You will find it if you dig for it under the big poplar tree that they call the Grand Duke's, because they say Pietro Leopoldo sat under it once on a time. There was a little blood on the blade but there was none anywhere else, for he bled inwardly. They do if you strike right. I was a butcher's lad once, and I used to kill the oxen, and I know. That is all. When I found the old rogue had no money with him I could have killed him a score of times over. I cannot think how it was that he left home without it, unless it was, as I say, that he meant to go back unknown and unawares and surprise his wife with Melegari. That must have been it, I think. For greedy as he was over his money, he was greedier still over his wife. I turned him over on his back, and left him lying there, and I went back to the mill and began my day's work, till the people came and wakened her and told the tale: then I left off work and came and looked on like the rest of them. That is all."

The man who made the confession was calm and unmoved: the priest who heard it was sick with horror, pale to the lips with agitation and anguish.

"But his wife is accused! She may be condemned!" he cried, in agony.

"I know that," said the man, stolidly. "But you cannot tell of me. I have told you under the seal of confession."

It was quite true; come what would, Gesualdo could never reveal what he had heard. His eyes swam, his head reeled, a deadly sickness came upon him; all his short life simple and harmless things had been around him; he had been told of the crimes of men, but he had never been touched by them; he had known of the sins of the world, but he had never realised them. The sense that the murderer of Tasso Tassillo was within a hand's breadth of him, that these eyes which stared at him, this voice which spoke to him, were those of the actual assassin, that it was possible and yet utterly impossible for him to help justice and save innocence—all this overcame him with its overwhelming burden of horror and of divided duty. He lost all consciousness as he knelt there and fell heavily forward on the wood-work of the confessional.

His teachers had said aright in the days of his noviciate, that he would never be of stern enough stuff to deal with the realities of life.

When he recovered his senses, sight and sound and sensibility all returning to him slowly and with a strange, numb, pricking pain in his limbs and his body and his brain, the church was quite dark, and the man who had confessed his crime to him was gone.

Gesualdo gathered himself up with effort, and sat down on the wooden seat and tried to think. He was bitterly ashamed of his own weakness. What was he

worth, he, shepherd and leader of men, if at the first word of horror which affrighted him he fainted as women faint, and failed to speak in answer the condemnation which should have been spoken? Was it for such cowardice as this that they had annointed him and received him as a servitor of the Church?

His first impulse was to go and relate his feebleness and failure to his Bishop; the next he remembered that even so much support as this he must not seek; to no living being must he tell this wretched blood secret.

The law which respects nothing would not respect the secrets of the confessional; but he knew that all the human law in the world could not alter his own bondage to the duty he had with his own will accepted.

It was past midnight when, with trembling limbs, he groped his way out of the porch of his church and found the entrance of the Presbytery and climbed the stone stairs to his own chamber.

Candida opened her door, and thrust her head through the aperture, and cried to him.

"Where have you been mooning all this while and the lamp burning to waste and your good bed yawning for you? You are not a strong man enough to keep these hours, and for a priest they are not decent ones."

"Peace, woman," said Gesualdo, in a tone which she had never heard from him. He went within and closed the door. He longed for the light of dawn, and yet he dreaded it.

When the dawn came it brought nothing to him except the knowledge that the real murderer was there, within a quarter of a mile of him, and yet could not be denounced by him to justice even to save the guilt-

less. The usual occupations of a week day claimed his time, and he went through them all with mechanical precision, but he spoke all his words as in a dream, and the red sanded bricks of his house, the deal table, with the black coffee and the round loaf set out on it, the stone sink at which Candida was washing endive and cutting lettuces, the old men and women who came and went telling their troubles garrulously and begging for pence, the sunshine which streamed in over the threshold, the poultry which picked up the crumbs off the floor, all these homely and familiar things seemed unreal to him, and were seen as through a mist.

This little narrow dwelling with the black cypress shadows falling athwart it, which had once seemed to him the abode of perfect peace, now seemed to imprison him, till his heart failed and died within him.

In the dead of night, at the end of the week, moved by an unconquerable impulse, which had haunted him the whole seven days, he rose and lit a lantern and let himself out of his own door noiselessly, stealthily, as though he were on some guilty errand, and took the sexton's spade from the tool house and went across the black shadows which stretched over the grass, towards the place where the body of Tasso Tassilo had lain dead. In the moonlight there stood tall and straight a column of green leaves, it was the stately Lombardy poplar, which was spared by the hatchet, because Marca was, so far as it understood anything, loyal in its regret for the days that were gone. Many birds which had been for hours sound asleep in its boughs flew out with a great whirr of wings and with chirps of terror as the footfall of

Gesualdo awakened and alarmed them. He set his lanthorn down on the ground, for the rays of the moon did not penetrate as far as the deep gloom the poplars threw around them, and began to dig. He dug some little time without success, then his spade struck against something which shone amidst the dry clay soil: it was the knife. He took it up with a shudder. There were dark red spots on the steel blade. It was a narrow slightly curved knife about six inches long, such a knife as every Italian of the lower classes carries every day, and with which most Italian murders are committed.

He looked at it long. If the inanimate thing could but have spoken, could but have told, the act which it had done!

He, kneeling on the ground, gazed at it with a sickening fascination; then he replaced it deeper down in the ground, and with his spade smoothed the earth with which he covered it. The soil was so dry that it did not show much trace of having been disturbed. Gravely he returned homeward, convinced now of the truth of the confession made to him. Some men met him on the road, country lads driving cattle early to a distant fair; they saluted him with respect, but laughed when they had passed him.

What had his reverence, they wondered, been doing with a spade this time of night? Did he dig for treasure? There was a tradition in the country side of sacks of ducats which had been buried by the river to save them from the French troops in the time of the invasion by the First Consul.

Gesualdo unconscious of their comments went home, put the spade back in the toolhouse, unlocked

his church, entered and prayed long; then waking his sleepy *capellano*, bade him rise, and set the bell ringing for the first mass. The man got up, grumbling because it was still quite dark; and next day talked to his neighbours about the queer ways of his vicar; how he would walk all night about his room, sometimes get up and go out in the dead of night even, he complained that his own health and patience would soon give way; an uneasy feeling grew up in the village, some gossips even suggested that the bishop should be spoken to in the town; but every one was fearful of being the first to take such a step, and no one was sure how so great a person could be approached, and the matter remained in abeyance. But the disquietude and the antagonism which the manner and appearance of their priest had created grew with the growth of the year, and with it also the impression that he knew more of the miller's assassination than he would ever say.

A horrible sense of being this man's accomplice grew also upon himself; the bond of silence which he kept perforce with this wretch seemed to him to make him so. His slender strength and sensitive nerves ill fitted him to sustain so heavy a burden, so horrible a knowledge.

"It has come to chastise me because I have thought of her too often, have been moved by her too warmly," he told himself; and his soul shrank within him at what appeared the greatness of his own guilt.

Since receiving the confession of the carter he did not dare to seek an interview with Generosa. He did not dare to look on her agonised eyes and feel that he knew what could set her free, and yet must never tell



it. He trembled, lest in sight of the suffering of this woman, who possessed such power to move and weaken him, he should be untrue to his holy office, should let the secret he had to keep escape him. Like all timid and vacillating tempers, he sought refuge in procrastination.

All unconscious of the growth of public feeling against him, and wrapt in that absorption which comes from one dominant idea, he pursued the routine of his parochial life, and went through all the ceremonies of his office, hardly more conscious of what he did than the candles which his sacristan lighted. The confession made to him haunted him night and day. He saw it, as it were, written in letters of blood on the blank, white walls of his bedchamber, of his sacristy, of his church itself. The murderer was there, at large, unknown to all; at work like any other man in the clear, sweet sunshine, talking and laughing, eating and drinking, waking and sleeping, yet as unsuspected as a child unborn. And all the while Generosa was in prison. There was only one chance left; if she should be acquitted by her judges. But even then the slur and stain of an imputed, though unproven, crime would always rest upon her and make her future dark, her name a by-word in her birthplace. Yet, after what her lover had said, no mere acquittal, leaving doubt and suspicion behind it, would give her back to the light and joy of life. Every man's hand would be against her: every child would point at her as the woman who had been accused of the assassination of her husband.

One day he sought Falco Melegari when the latter was making up the accounts of his stewardship at an old bureau in a deep window-embrasure of the villa.

"You know that the date of the trial is fixed for the tenth of next month?" he said, in a low, stifled voice.

The young man, leaning back in his wooden chair, gave a sign of assent.

"And you?" said Gesualdo, with a curious expression in his eyes, "if they absolve her, will you have the courage to prove your own belief in her innocence? Will you marry her when she is set free?"

The question was abrupt and unlooked for; Falko changed colour; he hesitated.

"You will not!" said Gesualdo.

"I have not said so," answered the young man, evasively. "I do not know that she would exact it."

Exact it! Gesualdo did not know much of human nature, but he knew what the use of that cold word implied.

"I thought you loved her! I mistook," he said, bitterly. A rosy flush came for a moment on the wax-like pallor of his face.

Falko Melegari looked at him insolently.

"A churchman should not meddle with these things! Love her! I love her—yes. It ruins my life to think of her yonder. I would cut off my right arm to save her; but to marry her if she come out absolved—that is another thing; one's name a by-word, one's credulity laughed at, one's neighbours shy of one—that is another thing, I say. It will not be enough for her judges to acquit her; that will not prove her innocence to all the people here, or to my people at home in my own country."

He rose and pushed his heavy chair away impatiently; he was ashamed of his own words, but in the most impetuous Italian natures prudence and self-

love are always the strongest instincts. Gesualdo looked at him with a great scorn in the depths of his dark, deep, luminous eyes. This handsome and virile lover seemed to him a very poor creature; a coward and faithless

“In the depths of your soul you doubt her yourself!” he said, with severity and contempt, as he turned away from the writing table, and went out through the windows into the garden beyond.

“No, as God lives, I do not doubt her,” cried Falko Melegari. “Not for an hour, not for a moment. But to make others believe—that is more difficult. I will maintain her and befriend her always if they set her free; but marry her—take her to my people—have everyone say that my wife had been in gaol on suspicion of murder—that I could not do: no man would do it who had a reputation to lose. One loves for love’s sake, but one marries for the world’s.”

He spoke to empty air; there was no one to hear him but the little green lizards who had slid out of their holes in the stone under the window-step. Gesualdo had gone across the rough grass of the garden, and had passed out of sight beyond the tall hedge of rose-laurel.

The young man resumed his writing, but he was restless and uneasy, and could not continue his calculations of debit and audit of loss and profit. He took his gun, whistled his dog, and went up towards the hills, where hares were to be found in the heather and snipes under the gorse. His temper was ruffled, and his mind in great irritation against his late companion; he felt angrily that he must have appeared a poltroon, and a poor and unmanly lover in the eyes

of the churchman. Yet he had only spoken, he felt sure, as any other man would have done in his place.

In the sympathy of their common affliction, his heart had warmed for awhile to Gesualdo, as to the only one who like himself cared for the fate of Tasso Tassilo's wife; but now that suspicion had entered into him, there returned with it all his detestation of the church and all the secular hatreds which the gentle character of the priest of Marca had for a time lulled in him.

"Of course, he is a liar and a hypocrite," he thought, savagely. "Perhaps he was a murderer as well!"

He knew that the idea was a kind of madness. Gesualdo had never been known to hurt a fly; indeed, his aversion to even see pain inflicted had made him often the laughing-stock of the children of Marca when he had rescued birds or locusts or frogs from their tormenting fingers, and forbade them to throw stones at the lambs or kids they drove to pasture. "They are not baptised," the children had often said, with a grin, and Gesualdo had often answered: "The good God baptised them himself."

It was utter madness to suppose that such a man, tender as a woman, timid as a sheep, gentle as a spaniel, could possibly have stabbed Tasso Tassilo to the death within a few roods of his own church, almost on holy ground itself. And yet the idea grew and grew in the mind of Generosa's lover until it acquired all the force of an actual conviction. We welcome no supposition so eagerly as one which accords with and intensifies our own prejudices. He neglected his duties and occupations to brood over this one suspicion, and put together all the trifles which he

could remember in confirmation of it. It haunted him wherever he was; at wine fair, at horse market, at cattle sale, in the corn field, amongst the vines, surrounded by his peasantry at noonday, or alone in the wild deserted garden of the villa by moonlight.

In his pain and fury, it was a solace to him to turn his hatred on to some living creature. As he sat alone and thought over all which had passed (as he did think of it night and day always), many a trifle rose to his mind which seemed to him to confirm his wild and vague suspicions of the vicar of San Bartolo. Himself a free thinker, it appeared natural to suspect any kind of crime in a member of the priesthood. The Italian sceptic is as narrow and as arrogant in his free thought as the Italian believer in his bigotry. Melegari was a good-hearted young man, and kind, and gay, and generous by nature; but he had the prejudices of his time and of his school. These prejudices made him ready to believe that a priest was always fit food at heart for the galleys or the scaffold; a mass of concealed iniquity covered by his cloth.

"I believe you know more of it than any one," he said roughly, one day when he passed the priest on a narrow field-path, while his eyes flashed suspiciously, over the downcast face of Gesualdo, who shrank a little as if he had received a blow, and was silent.

He had spoken on an unconsidered impulse, and would have been unable to say what his own meaning really was; but as he saw the embarrassment and observed the silence of his companion, what he had uttered at hazard seemed to him curiously confirmed and strengthened.

"If you know anything which could save her

and you do not speak," he said, passionately, "may all the devils you believe in torture you through all eternity."

Gesualdo still kept silent. He made the sign of the cross nervously, and went on his way.

"Curse all these priests," said the young man, bitterly, looking after him. "If one could only deal with them as one does with other men!—but in their vileness and their feebleness they are covered by their frock like women."

He was beside himself with rage and misery and the chafing sense of his own impotence; he was young and strong and ardently enamoured, and yet he could do no more to save the woman he loved from eternal separation from him than if he had been an idiot or an infant, than if he had had no heart in his breast and no blood in his veins.

Whenever he met the vicar afterwards he did not even touch his hat, and ceased those outward observances of respect to the church which he had always given before to please his master, who liked such example to be set by the steward to the peasantry.

"If Ser Baldo send me away for it, so he must do," he thought. "I will never set foot in the church again. I should choke that accursed Parocco with his own wafer."

For suspicion is a poisonous weed which, if left to grow unchecked, soon reaches maturity, and Falko Melegari soon persuaded himself that his own suspicion was a truth, which only lacked time and testimony to become as clear to all eyes as it was to his.

## IV.

MEANTIME, Gesualdo was striving with the utmost force that was in him to persuade the real criminal to confess publicly what he had told under the seal of confession. He saw the man secretly, and used every argument with which the doctrines of his church and his own intense desires could supply him. But there is no obstinacy so dogged, no egotism so impenetrable, no shield against persuasion so absolute, as the stolid ignorance and self-love of a low mind. The Girellone turned a deaf ear to all censure as to all entreaty; he was stolidly indifferent to all the woe that he had caused and would cause if he remained silent. What was all that to him? The thought of the miller's widow shut up in prison pleased him; he had hated her as he had seen her in what he called her finery, going by him in the sunshine, with all her bravery of pearl necklace, of silver hairpins, of gold watch and chain. Many and many a time he had thirsted to snatch at them and pull them off her. What right had she to them, she, a daughter of naked hungry folks, who dug and carted sea and river sand for a living. She was no better than himself! Now and then, Generosa had called him, in her careless, imperious fashion, to draw water or carry wood for her, and when she had done so she never had taken the trouble to bid him good day or to say a good-natured word. His pride was hurt, and he had had much ado to restrain himself from calling her a daughter of beggars, a worm of the sand. Like her own people, he was pleased that she should now find her fine clothes

and her jewelled trinkets of no avail to her, and that she should weep the light out of her big eyes, and the rosebloom off her peach-like cheeks in the squalor and nausea of a town prison.

Gesualdo, with all the force which a profound conviction that he speaks the truth lends to any speaker, wrestled for the soul of this dogged brute, and warned him of the punishment everlasting which would await him if he persisted in his refusal to surrender himself to justice. But he might as well have spoken to the great millstones at rest in the river water. Why then had this wretch cast the burden of his vile secret on innocent shoulders? It was the most poignant anguish to him that he could awaken no sense of guilt in the conscience of the criminal. The man had come to him partly from a vague superstitious impulse, remnant of a credulity instilled into him in childhood, and partly from the want to *sfogare* himself, as he called it, to tell his story to someone, which is characteristic of all weak minds in times of trouble and peril. It had relieved him to drag the priest in to sharing his own guilty consciousness; he was half proud and half afraid of the manner in which he had slain his master, and bitterly incensed that he had done the deed for nothing; but beyond this he had no other emotion except that he was glad that Generosa should suffer through and for it.

"You will burn forever if you persist in such hideous wickedness," said Gesualdo again and again to him.

"I will take my chance of that," said the man. "Hell is far off, and the galleys are near."

"But if you do not believe in my power to absolve



you or leave you accursed, why did you ever confess to me?" cried Gesualdo.

"Because one must clear one's breast to somebody when one has a thing like that on one's mind," answered the Girellone, "and I know you cannot tell of it again."

And from that position nothing moved him. No entreaties, threats, arguments, denunciations stirred him a hair's-breath. He had confessed *per sfogarsi*: that was all.

But one night after Gesualdo had thus spoken to him, vague fears assailed him, terrors material not spiritual; he had parted with his secret; who could tell that it might not come out like a sleuth hound and find him and denounce him? He had told it to be at peace, but he was not at peace. He feared every instant to have the hand of the law upon him. Whenever he heard the trot of the carabinieri's horses going through the village or saw the white belts and cocked hats of gendarmes in the sunlight of the fields, a cold tremour of terror seized him lest the priest should after all have told. He knew that it was impossible, and yet he was afraid.

He counted up the money he had saved, a little roll of filthy and crumpled bank notes for very small amounts, and wondered if they would be enough to take him across to America. They were very few, but his fear compelled him to trust to them. He invented a story of remittances which he had received from his brother, and told his fellow labourers and his employer that he was invited to join that brother; and then he packed up his few clothes and went. At the mill and in the village they talked a little of it, saying that the

Girellone was in luck, but that they for their parts would not care to go so far. Gesualdo heard of his flight in the course of the day.

“My God!—gone away!—out of the country?” he cried, involuntarily, with white lips.

The people who heard him wondered. “What could it matter to him that a carter had gone to seek his fortunes over the seas?”

The Girellone had not been either such a good worker or such a good boon companion that any one at the mill or in the village should greatly regret him.

“America gets all our rubbish,” said the people. “Much good may it do her.”

Meantime, the man took his way across the country and, sometimes by walking, sometimes by lifts in waggons, sometimes by helping charcoal burners on the road, made his way, without spending much, to the sea coast, and in the port of Leghorn took his passage in an emigrant ship then loading there. The green canebrakes and peaceful millet fields of Marca saw him no more.

But he had left the burden of his blood-guiltiness behind him, and it lay on the guiltless soul with the weight of the world.

So long as the man had remained in Marca there had been always a hope present with Gesualdo that he would persuade him to confess in a court of justice what he had confessed to the church, or that some sequence of accidents would lead up to the discovery of his guilt. But with the ruffian gone across the seas, lost in that utter darkness which swallows up the lives of the poor and obscure when once they have left the hamlet in which their names mean something

to their neighbours, this one hope was quenched; and Gesualdo in agony reproached himself with not having prevailed in his struggle for the wretch's soul; with not having been eloquent enough, or wise enough, or stern enough to awe him into declaration of his ghastly secret to the law.

His failure seemed to him a sign of Heaven's wrath against himself.

"How dare I," he thought, "how dare I, feeble and timid and useless as I am, call myself a servant of God, or attempt to minister to other souls?"

He had thought, like an imbecile, as he told himself, to be able to awaken the conscience and compel the public confession of this man, and the possibility of flight had never presented itself to his mind, natural and simple as had been such a course to a creature without remorse, continually haunted by personal fears of punishment. He, he alone on earth, knew the man's guilt; he, he alone had the power to save Generosa, and could not use the power because the secrecy of his holy office was fastened on him like an iron padlock on his lips.

The days passed him like nightmares; he did his duties mechanically, scarcely consciously; the frightful alternative which was set before him seemed to parch up the very springs of life itself. He knew that he must look strangely in the eyes of the people; his voice sounded strangely in his own ears; he began to feel that he was unworthy to administer the blessed bread to the living, to give the last unction to the dying: he knew that he was not at fault, and yet he felt that he was accursed. Choose what he would he must commit some hateful sin.

The day appointed for the trial came; it was the tenth of May. A hot day, with the bees booming amongst the acacia flowers, and the green tree-frogs shouting joyously above in the ilex tops, and the lizards running in and out of the china-rose hedges on the highways. Many people of Marca were summoned as witnesses, and these went to the town in mule carts or crazy chaises, with the farm-horse put in the shafts, and grumbled because they would lose their day's labour in their fields, and yet were pleasantly excited at the idea of seeing Generosa in the prisoner's dock, and being able themselves to tell all they knew, and a great deal that they did not know.

Falko Melegari rode over at dawn by himself, and Gesualdo with his housekeeper and sacristan, who were all summoned to give testimony, went, as they had no choice but to do, by the diligence, which started from Sant' Arturo, and rolled through the dusty roads and over the bridges and past the wayside shrines and shops and forges, across the country to the town.

The Vicar never spoke throughout the four weary hours during which the rickety and crowded vehicle, with its poor, starved, bruised beasts, rumbled on its road through the lovely shadows and cool sunlight of the early morning. He held his breviary in his hand for form's sake, and, seeing him thus absorbed in holy meditation as they thought, his garrulous neighbours did not disturb him, but chattered amongst themselves, filling the honeysuckle scented air with the odours of garlic and wine and coarse tobacco.

Candida glanced at him anxiously from time to time haunted by, she could not have said what, a vague presentiment of ill. His face looked very

strange, she thought, and his closely-locked lips were white as the lips of a corpse. When the diligence was driven over the stones of the town, all the passengers by it descended at the first wine house which they saw on the piazza to eat and drink, but he, with never a word, motioned his housekeeper aside when she would have pressed food on him, and went into the great church of the place to pray alone.

The town was hot and dusty and sparsely peopled. It had brown walls and large brick palaces untenanted, and ancient towers, also of brick, pointing high to heaven. It was a place dear to the memory of lovers of art for the sake of some fine paintings of the Senese school which hung in its churches, and was occasionally visited by strangers for sake of these; but for the most part it was utterly forgotten by the world; and its bridge of many arches, said to have been builded by Augustus, seldom resounded to any other echoes than those of the heavy wheels of the hay or corn waggons coming in from the pastoral country around.

The Court-house, where all great trials took place, stood in one of the bare, silent, dusty squares of the town. It had once been the ancient palace of the Podestà, and had the machicolated walls, the turreted towers, and the vast stairways and frescoed chambers of a larger and statelier time than ours. The hall of justice was a vast chamber pillared with marble, vaulted and painted, sombre and grand; it was closely thronged with country folks; there was a scent of hay, of garlic, of smoking pipes hastily thrust into trouser pockets, of unwashed flesh steaming hotly in the crowd and the close air. The judge was there with his officers, a Renaissance figure in black square cap and

black gown. The accused was behind the cage assigned to such prisoners, guarded by carabinieri, and by the jailers. Gesualdo looked in once from a distant doorway; then, with a noise in his ears like the sound of the sea, and a deadly sickness on him, he stayed without in the audience chamber, where a breath of air came to him up one of the staircases, there waiting until his name was called.

The trial began. Everything was the same as it had been in the preliminary examination which had preceded her committal on the charge of murder. The same depositions were made now that had then been made. In the interval, the people of Marca had forgotten a good deal, so added somewhat of their own invention to make up for the deficiency; but, on the whole, the testimony was the same, given with that large looseness of statement and absolute indifference to fact, so characteristic of the Italian mind, the judge, from habit, sifting the chaff from the wheat in the evidence with unerring skill, and following with admirable patience the tortuous windings and the hazy imagination of the peasants he examined.

The examination of Gesualdo did not come on until the third day. These seventy or eighty hours of suspense were terrible to him. He scarcely broke his fast, or was conscious of what he did. The whole of the time was passed by him listening in the court of justice or praying in the churches. When at last he was summoned, a cold sweat bathed his face and hair; his hands trembled; he answered the interrogation of the judge and of the advocates almost at random; his replies seemed scarcely to be that of a rational being; he passionately affirmed her innocence with delirious

repetition and emphasis, which produced on the minds of the examiners the contrary effect to that which he endeavoured to create.

"This priest knows that she is guilty," thought the president. "He knows it—perhaps he knows even more—perhaps he was her accomplice."

His evidence, his aspect, his wild and contradictory words, did as much harm to her cause as he ignorantly strove to do good. From other witnesses of Marca the judge had learned that a great friendship had always been seen to exist between the vicar of San Bartolo and Generosa Fè, and that on the morning when the murder was discovered, the priest had removed the body of the dead man to the sacristy, forestalling the officers of justice, and disturbing the scene of the murder. A strong impression against him was created beforehand in the audience and on the bench; and his pallid, agitated countenance, his incoherent words, his wild eyes, which incessantly sought the face of the prisoner, all gave him the appearance of a man conscious of some guilt himself, and driven out of his mind by fear. The president cross-examined him without mercy, censured him, railed at him, and did his uttermost to extract the truth which he believed that Gesualdo concealed; but to no avail; incoherent and half-insane as he seemed, he said no syllable which could betray that which he really knew. Only when his eyes rested on Generosa there was such an agony in them that she herself was startled by it.

"Who would ever have dreamt that he would have cared so much?" she thought. "But he was always a tender soul; he always pitied the birds in the traps, and the oxen that went to the slaughter."

Reproved and censured without stint, for the president knew that to insult a priest was to merit promotion in high quarters, Gesualdo was at last permitted to escape from his place of torture. Blind and sick he got away through the crowd, past the officials, down the stairs, and out into the hot air. The piazza was thronged with people who could not find standing room in the court-house. The murmur of their rapid and loud voices was like the noise of a sea on his ears; they had all the same burden. They all repeated like one man the same words: "They will condemn her," and then wondered what sentence she would receive. Whether a score of years of seclusion, or a lifetime.

Gesualdo went through the chattering, curious, cruel throng, barbarous with that barbarity of the populace, which in all countries sees with glee a bull die, a wrestler drop, a malefactor ascend the scaffold, or a rat scour the streets soaked in petroleum and burning alive. The dead man had been nothing to them, and his wife had done none of them any harm, yet there was not a man or a woman, a youth or a girl, in the crowd, who would not have felt that he or she was defrauded of his entertainment if she were acquitted by her judges, although yet there was a general sense amongst them that she had done no more than had been natural, and no more than had been her right.

The dark, slender, emaciated figure of the priest glided through their excited and boisterous groups; the air had the heat of summer, the sky above was blue and cloudless, the brown brick walls on church and palace seemed baking in the light of the sun. In



the corner of the square was a fountain, relic of the old times when the town had been a place of pageantry and power; beautiful pale green water, cold and fresh, leaping and flowing around marble dolphins. Gesualdo stooped and drank thirstily, as though he would never cease to drink, then went on his way and pushed aside the leathern curtain of the church door and entered into the coolness and solitude of that place of refuge.

There he stretched himself before the cross in prayer, and wept bitter, burning, unavailing tears for the burden which he bore of another's sin and his own helplessness beneath it, which seemed to him like a greater crime.

But even at the very altar of his God peace was denied him. Hurried, loud, impetuous steps from heavy boots fell on the old, worn, marble floor of the church, and Falko Melegari strode up behind him, and laid a heavy hand upon his shoulders. The young man's face was deeply flushed, his eyes were savage, his breath was quick and uneven; he had no heed for the sanctity of the place or of his companion.

"Get up and hear me," he said, roughly. "They all say the verdict will be against her; you heard them."

Gesualdo made a gesture of assent.

"Very well, then," said the steward, through his clenched teeth, "if it be so indeed, I swear, as you and I live, that I will denounce you to the judges in her stead."

Gesualdo did not speak. He stood in a meditative attitude with his arms folded on his chest. He did not express either surprise or indignation.

"I will denounce you," repeated Melegari, made

more furious by his silence. "What did you do at night under the Grand Duke's poplars? Why did you carry in and screen the corpse? Does not the whole village talk of your strange ways and your altered habits? There is more than enough against you to send to the galleys a score of better men than you. Anyhow, I will denounce you if you do not make a clean breast of all you know to the President to-morrow. You are either the assassin or the accomplice, you accursed, black-coated hypocrite!"

A slight flush rose on the waxen pallor of Gesualdo's face, but he still kept silence.

The young man, watching him with eyes of hatred, saw guilt in that obstinate and mulish dumbness.

"You dare not deny it, trained liar though you be!" he said, with passionate scorn. "Oh, wretched cur, who ventures to call yourself a servitor of heaven, you would let her drag all her years out in misery to save your own miserable, puling, sexless, worthless life! Well! hear me and understand. No one can say that I do not keep my word, and here, by the cross which hangs above us, I take my oath that if you do not tell all you know to-morrow, should she be condemned, I will denounce you to the law, and if the law fail to do justice, I will kill you as Tasso Tassilo was killed. May I die childless, penniless, and accursed if my hand fail!"

Then, with no other word, he strode from the church, the golden afternoon sunshine streaming through the stained windows above and falling on his fair hair, his flushed face, his flaming eyes, till his common humanity seemed all transfigured. He looked like the avenging angel of Tintaretto's Paradise.

Gesualdo stood immovable in the deserted church; his arms crossed on his breast, his head bent. A great resolve, a mighty inspiration, had descended on him with the furious words of his foe. Light had come to him as from heaven itself. He could not give up the secret which had been confided to him in the confessional, but he could give up himself. His brain was filled with legends of sacrifice and martyrdom. Why might he not become one of that holy band of martyrs?

Nay, he was too humble to place himself beside them even in thought. The utmost he could do, he knew, would be only expiation for what seemed to him his ineffaceable sin in letting any [human affection, however harmless, unselfish, and distant, stain the singleness and purity of his devotion to his vows. He had been but a peasant boy until he had taken his tender heart and his ignorant mind to the seminary, and he had been born with the soul of a S. Francis, of a San Rocco, of a S. John, out of place, out of time in the world he lived in, and in which the passions of faith and of sacrifice were as strong as are the passions of lust and of selfishness in other natures. The spiritual world was to him a reality, and the earth, with its merciless and greedy peoples, its plague of lusts, its suffering hearts, its endless injustice, an unreal and hideous dream.

To his temper, the sacrifice which suddenly rose before him as his duty appeared one which would reconcile him at once to the Deity he had offended and the humanity he was tempted to betray. To his mind, enfeebled and exhausted by long fasting of the body and denial of every natural indulgence, such sacrifice

of self seemed an imperious command from heaven. He would drag out his own life in misery and obloquy indeed; but what of that? Had not the great martyrs and founders of his church endured as much or more? Was it not by such torture voluntarily accepted and endured on earth that the grace of God was won?

He would tell a lie, indeed; he would draw down ignominy on the name of the church; he would make men believe that an anointed priest was a common murderer, swayed by low and jealous hatreds; but of this he did not think. In the tension and perplexity of his tortured soul, the vision of a sacrifice in which he would be the only sufferer, in which the woman would be saved, and the secret told to him be preserved, appeared as a heaven-sent solution of the doubts and difficulties in his path. Stretched in agonised prayer before one of the side altars of the church, he imagined the afternoon sunbeams streaming through the high window on his face to be the light of a celestial world, and in the hush and heat of the incense-scented air he believed that he heard a voice which cried to him, "By suffering all things are made pure."

He was not a wise, or strong, or educated man. He had the heart of a poet and the mind of a child. There was a courage in him to which sacrifice was welcome, and there was a credulity in him which made all exaggeration of simple faith possible. He was young and ignorant and weak; yet at the core of his heart there was a dim heroism: he could suffer and be mute; and in the depths of his heart he loved this woman better than himself; with a love which in his belief made him accursed for all time.

When he at last arose and went out of the church doors his mind was made up to the course that he would take; an immense calm had descended upon the unrest of his soul.

The day was done, the sun had set, the scarlet flame of its afterglow bathed all the rusty walls and dusty ground with colours of glory. The crowd had dispersed; there was no sound in the deserted square except the ripple of the water as it fell from the dolphins' mouths into the marble basin. As he heard that sweet familiar murmur of the falling stream, the tears rose in his eyes, and blotted out the flame-like pomp and beauty of the skies. Never again would he hear the water of the Marca river rushing in cool autumn days past the poplar stems and the primrose roots upon its mossy banks; never again would he hear in the place of his birth the grey-green waves of Arno sweeping through the canebrakes to the sea.

At three of the clock on the following day the judgment was given in the court.

Generosa Fè was decreed guilty of the murder of her husband, and sentenced to twenty years of solitary confinement. She dropped like a stone when she heard the sentence, and was carried out from the court insensible. Her lover, when he heard it, gave a roar of anguish like that of some great beast in torment, and dashed his head against the wall and struggled like a mad bull in the hands of the men who tried to hold him. Gesualdo waiting without on the head of the great staircase did not even change countenance; to him this bitterness, as of the bitterness of death had been long past; he had been long certain what the verdict would be; and he had many hours before resolved on his own part.

A great calm had come upon his soul, and his face had that tranquillity which comes alone from a soul which is at peace within itself.

The sultry afternoon shed its yellow light on the brown and grey and dusty town; the crowd poured out of the court-house, excited, contrite, voluble, pushing and bawling at one another, ready to take the side of the condemned creature now that she was the victim of the law. The priest alone of them all did not move; he remained sitting on the upright chair under a sculptured allegory of Justice and Equity which was on the arch above his head, and with the golden light of sunset falling down on him through the high casement above. He paid no heed to the hurrying of the crowd, to the tramp of guards, to the haste of clerks and officials eager to finish their day's work and get away to their wine and dominoes at the taverns. His hands mechanically held his breviary; his lips mechanically repeated a Latin formula of prayer. When all the people were gone, one of the custodians of the place touched his arm, telling him that they were about to close the doors, he raised his eyes like one who is wakened from a trance, and to the man said quietly:

"I would see the president of the court for a moment quite alone. Is it possible?"

After many demurs and much delay they brought him into the presence of the judge in a small chamber of the great palace.

"What do you want with me?" asked the judge, looking nervously at the white face and the wild eyes of his unbidden visitant.

Gesualdo answered: "I am come to tell you that you have condemned an innocent woman."

The judge looked at him with sardonic derision and contempt.

"What more?" he asked. "If she be innocent, will you tell me who is guilty?"

"I am," replied the priest.

\* \* \* \* \*

At his trial he never spoke.

With his head bowed and his hands clasped, he stood in the cage where she had stood, and never replied by any single word to the repeated interrogations of his judges. Many witnesses were called, and all they said testified to the apparent truth of his self-accusation. Those who had always vaguely suspected him, all those who had seen him close the door of the sacristy on the crowd when he had borne the murdered man within, the mule drivers who had seen him digging at night under the great poplars, the sacristan who had been awakened by him that same night so early, even his old housekeeper, though she swore that he was a lamb, a saint, an angel, a creature too good for earth, a holy man whose mind was distraught by fasting, by visions, these all, either wilfully or ignorantly, bore witness which confirmed his own confession. The men of law had the mould and grass dug up under the Grand Duke's poplar, and when the blood-stained knife was found therein, the very earth, it seemed, yielded up testimony against him.

In the end, after many weeks of investigation, Generosa was released and he was sentenced in her place.

Her lover married her, and they went to live in his own country in the Lombard plains, and were happy and prosperous, and the village of Marca and the waters of its cane-shadowed stream knew them no more.

Sometimes she would say to her husband: "I cannot think that he was guilty; there was some mystery in it." And her husband always laughed and said in answer: "He was guilty, be sure; it was I who frightened him into confession; those black rats of the church have livers as white as their coats are black."

Generosa did not wholly believe, but she thrust the grain of doubt away from her and played with her handsome children. And, after all, she mused, what doubt could there be? Did not Don Gesualdo himself reveal his guilt, and had he not always cared for her, and was not the whole population of Marca willing to bear witness that they had always suspected him and had only held their peace out of respect for the Church?

He himself lived two long years amongst the galley slaves of the western coast; all that time he never spoke; and he was considered by the authorities to be insane. Then, in the damp and cold of the third winter, his lungs decayed, his frail strength gave way; he died of what they called consumption in the spring of the year. In his last moments there was seen a light of unspeakable ecstasy upon his face, a smile of unspeakable rapture on his mouth.

"*Laus Deus libera me!*" he murmured, as he died.

A bird came and sang at the narrow casement of his prison cell as his spirit passed away. It was a nightingale: perchance one of those who had once sung to him in the summer nights from the wild-rose hedge at Marca.

THE END.