

“Gina Montani” by Ellen Price Wood

Text taken from *Adam Grainger and Other Stories*, London: Macmillan and Co., 1900. 185 – 247.

Double-click underlined words or phrases for explanatory notes.

PART THE FIRST

I.

IN one of the sunniest spots of sunny Tuscany, that favoured department of Italy, may still be seen the ruins of a strong, ancient-built castle, or palace, surrounded by extensive grounds now run to waste; and which was, a century or two ago, one of the proudest buildings in that balmy land.

It was on an evening of delicious coolness, there so coveted, that a cavalier issued on horseback from the gates of the castle, which was then at the acme of its pride and strength. Numerous retainers stood on either side by the drawbridge, their heads bared to the evening sun, until the horseman should have passed; but he went forth unattended: and then the men resumed their caps, and swung to the draw bridge, as he urged his horse to a quick pace. It was the lord of that stately castle, the young inheritor of the lands of Visinara. His form, tall and graceful, was bent occasionally to the very neck of his horse, in acknowledgment of the homage that was universally paid him, though he sat his steed proudly, as if conscious that such bearing befitted the descendant of one of Italia's noblest families. In years he had numbered scarcely more than a quarter of a century, and yet on his beautiful features might be traced a shade, which told of perplexity and care.

Turning down a narrow and not much frequented way which branched off from the main road, a mile or two distant from his residence, he at length came in view of one of those pretty places, partly mansion, partly cottage, and partly temple, at that period to be seen in Italy; but which we *now* meet with rarely, saving in pictures. Fastening the bridle of his charger to a tree, he walked towards the house, and passing down the colonnade which ran along the south side of it, entered one of the rooms through the open window.

A lady, young and beautiful, sat there alone. She had delicate features, and a fair, open countenance, the complexion of which resembled more that of an English than an Italian one, inasmuch as a fine, transparent colour was glowing on the cheeks. The expression of her eyes was mild and sweet, and her hair, of a chestnut brown, fell in curls upon her neck, according to the fashion of the times. She started visibly at sight of the count, and her tongue gave utterance to words, but what she apparently knew not.

“So you have returned, signor?”

“At last, Gina,” was the count's answer, as he stole his arm round her slender waist, and essayed to draw her affectionately towards him.

“Unhand me, Count di Visinara!” she impetuously exclaimed, moving away; and her whole form trembled with agitation.

He stood irresolute; aghast at the reception from her who was his early and dearest love.

“Are you out of your senses?” was his exclamation.

“No, but I soon shall be. Better for insanity to fall upon me, than experience the wretchedness of these last few days.”

“My love, my love, what mean you?”

“*My love!* call you *me* your love, Count di Visinara! Be silent, hypocrite! I know you now. Cajoled that I have been in listening to you so long!”

“Gina !”

“And so the honourable Count di Visinara has amused his leisure hours in making love to Gina Montani!” she cried, vehemently. “The lordly chieftain who—”

“Be silent, Gina!” he interrupted. “Before you continue your strange accusations, tell me the origin of them. My love has never wandered from you.”

“Yet you are seeking a wife in the heiress of Della Ripa!” was her quick retort. “Ah, Sir Count, your complexion changes now!”

Gina Montani was right: the flush of excitement on his face had turned to paleness.

“Your long and repeated journeys, for days together, are now explained,” she continued. “It was well to tell me business took you from home.”

“I have had business to transact with the Prince of Della Ripa,” he replied, boldly, recovering his equanimity.

“And to combine business with pleasure,” she answered, with a curl of her delicate lip, “you have been wont to linger by the side of his daughter.”

“And what though I have sometimes seen the Lady Adelaide?” he rejoined. “I have no love for her.”

Gina was silent awhile, as if struggling with her strong emotion, and then spoke calmly.

“My mother has enjoined me, times out of mind, not to suffer your continued visits here, for that you would never speak of marriage. You never will, Giovanni.”

“Turn to my faith, Gina,” he exclaimed, with emotion, “and I will marry thee to-morrow.”

“They say you are about to marry Adelaide of Della Ripa,” she replied, passing by his own words with a gesture.

“They deceive you, Gina.”

“You deceive me,” she answered, passionately; “you upon whose veracity I would have staked my life. And this is to be my reward!”

“You are like all your sex, Gina—when their jealousy is aroused, good-bye to reason. One and all are alike.”

“Can you say that in this case my suspicions are unfounded?”

“Gina,” he answered, as he once again would have drawn her to his heart, “let us not waste the hours in vain recriminations. *I have no love for Adelaide of Della Ripa.*”

He spoke with the emphasis of truth, and she suffered herself to believe him. How credulous is the heart of a woman when she loves!

They sat in the garden when the heat of the sun had passed; her hand in his, her ear bent to his honeyed words. In one sense they were true enough, those whispers, for his love was all hers: and once more they were happy together as of old.

But this was not to last. As the weeks and the months flew on, the visits of the count grew few and far between. He made long stays at the territory of Della Ripa, and people told it as a fact, no longer disputable, that he was about to make a bride of the Lady Adelaide.

They had come strangers into Tuscany, the Signora Montani and her daughter, but a year or two before. The signora was in deep grief for the loss of her husband, she was also in ill health, and they lived the most secluded life, making no acquaintances. They were scarcely known by name or by sight; and, saving the Count di Visinara, no visitors were ever found there. The signora was of northern extraction, and of the Reformed faith, and had reared her daughter in the principles of the latter, which of itself would cause them to court seclusion, at that period, in Italy. And the Lord of Visinara, independent and haughty as he was by nature and by position, would not have dared to take Gina Montani to be his wedded wife.

II.

IT was on a calm moonlight night that a closely-wrapped-up form stood in the deep shade of a grove of cypress-trees, within the gates of the Castle of Visinara, anxiously watching.

Parties passed and repassed, and the figure stirred not; but now there came one, the very echo of whose footsteps had command in it, and the form advanced stealthily, and glided out of its hiding-place, right upon the path of the Lord of Visinara. He stood still, and faced the intruder.

“Who are you?—and what do you do here?”

“I came to bid you farewell, Sir Count; to wish you joy of your marriage!” And, throwing back the mantle and hood, Gina Montani’s fragile form stood out to view.

“You here, Gina!”

“Ay ; I have struggled long—long. Pride, resentment, jealousy—I have struggled fiercely with them; but all are forgotten in my unhappy love.”

He drew her closely to him, as in their happy days.

“You depart to-morrow morning on your way to bring home your bride. I have seen your preparations—I have watched the movements of your retainers. No farewell was given me—no word offered of consolation—no last visit vouchsafed.”

It would seem that he could not gainsay her words, for he made no reply.

“Know you how long it is since we met?” she continued; “how long— —”

“Reproach me not,” he interrupted. “I have suffered more than you. And, for a farewell visit, I did not dare to trust myself.”

“And so this is to be the end of your enduring love, that you said was to be mine, and only mine, until death!”

“And before Heaven I spoke the truth. I have never loved—I never shall love but you. Yet, Gina what would you have me do? I may not speak to you of marriage; and it is necessary to my position that I wed.”

“*She* is of your own rank, therefore you have wooed her?”

“And of my own faith. Difference of rank may be overcome; of faith, never.”

“Oh, that the time had come when God’s children shall be all of one mind, of one faith!” she uttered. “In later ages, this peace may be upon the earth”

“Would it were, Gina! Or that you and I had never met him!”

“What, do *you* wish it!” she retorted. “You, who voluntarily sever yourself from me!”

“I have acted an honourable part, Gina,” he cried, striding to and fro, in his agitation.

“*Honourable*, did you say?”

“Ay, honourable. You were growing too dear to me, and I could not speak of marriage to you.”

There was a long pause. She was standing against one of the cypress-trees, the moon, through an opening above, casting its light upon her pure face, down which were coursing tears of anguish.

“So henceforth we must be brother and sister,” he whispered.

“Brother and sister,” she repeated, in a moaning voice, pressing the cold tree against her aching temples.

“After awhile, Gina, when time shall have subdued our feelings. Until then we may not meet.”

She was startled by the words into sudden pain.

“Will you not come here? Shall we never see you, here?”

“Nay, Gina, I must not do so great wrong to the Lady Adelaide.”

“So great wrong!” she exclaimed, in amazement. “Not real wrong, I am aware. But I shall undertake at the altar to love and cherish her; and though I cannot do the one, I will the other. Knowing that I cannot love her, I would be doubly careful of her feelings.”

“I see, I see,” interrupted the young lady, indignantly; “*her* feelings must be respected, whilst mine——”

“And for my own sake,” he added, in a whisper.

“And my poor sick mother, to whom your visits have been as a balm? But I see: I see. Farewell, Giovanni.”

“One word yet, Gina,” he said, detaining her. “You will probably hear of me much—foremost in the chase, gayest in the ball-room, last at the banquet—the gay, fortunate Lord of Visinara; and when you do so, remember that that gay lord wears about him a secret chain, suspected by and known to none—a chain, some links of which will remain entwined around his heart to his dying day, though the gilding that made it precious must from this time moulder away. Know you what the chain is, Gina?”

The suffocating sobs were rising in her throat, and she made no answer.

“*His love for you.* Fare thee well, my dearest and best. Nay, another instant; it is our last embrace in this world.”

III.

IT was a princely cavalcade that bore the heiress of Della Ripa to her new territories, and all eyes looked out upon it. The armour of the warlike retainers of the house of Visinara sparkled in the sun, and the more peaceful servitors were attired with a gorgeousness that would have done honour to an Eastern clime. The old Chief of Della Ripa, than whom one more fierce and brave never existed in all Italy, had that morning given his daughter's hand to Giovanni of Visinara; and as she neared the castle that was henceforth to be her home, every point from which a view of the procession could be obtained was seized upon.

“By my patron saint, but it is a goodly sight!” exclaimed one of a group of maidens, gathered at a window beneath which the bridal cavalcade was prancing. “Only look at Master Pietro, the seneschal.” “And at the steel points of the halberds — how they shine in the crimson of the setting sun.”

“Nay, rather look at these lovely dames that follow—the Lady Adelaide's tire-women. By the sacred relics! if her beauty exceed that of her maidens, it must be rare to look upon. See the gold and purple of their palfreys' horsecloths waving in the air.”

“Hist! hist! it is the Count of Visinara in his emblazoned carriage! How haughtily he sits; but the Visinara is a haughty race. And—yes—see—by his side—oh, how lovely! Signora Montani, look! That face might win a kingdom.”

Gina Montani, who stood in the corner of the lattice, shielded from view by its massive frame, may possibly have heard, but she answered not.

“Say what you will of his pride, he is the handsomest man that ever lived,” exclaimed a damsel, enthusiastically. “Look at him now—he sits bare-headed, his plumed cap resting on his knee—where will you find a face and form like that?”

“What is *she* like?” interrupted an old duenna, snappishly, who, standing behind, could not as yet obtain a view of the coveted sight; “we know enough of his looks, let us hear something of hers, But you girls are ever the same: if a troop of sister angels came down from heaven, and a graceless cavalier appeared at the other side, you would turn your backs to the angels and your eyes upon him. Is she as handsome as the young Lady Beatrice, the count's sister, who married away a year ago?”

“Oh, mother, she is not like her. Beatrice of Visinara had a warm countenance, with eyes black as the darkest night, and brilliant as a diamond aigrette.”

“And are the wife's not black?” screamed out the duenna. “They ought to be: her blood is pure Italian.”

“They are blue as heaven's sky, and her face is dazzling to behold from its extreme fairness, and her golden hair droops in curls almost to her waist—it is a band of diamonds, you observe, that confines it from the temples. But you can see her now, mother: remember you one half so lovely?”

“Dio mio!” uttered the woman, startled at the beautiful vision that now came within her sight; “the Lord of Visinara has not sacrificed his liberty for nothing.”

“Mark you her rich white dress, mother, with its corsage of diamonds, and the sleeves looped up to the elbow with lace and jewels? And over it, nearly hiding her fair neck, is a mantle of blue velvet, clasped by a diamond star. And see, she is taking her glove off, and her hand is raised to her cheek—small and delicate it is too, as befitteth her rank and beauty. And—look!—he lays his own upon it as she drops it, but she would draw it from him to replace the glove. Now he bends to speak to her, and she steals a glance at him with her blushing cheeks and her eyes full of love. And now he is bowing to the people—hark how they shout, 'Long life to the Lady Adelaide—long life and happiness to the Count and Countess of Visinara!’”

“She is very beautiful, Bianca; but—”

“Ay, what? You are a reader of countenances, madre mia; what see you there?”

“That she is proud and self-willed. And woe be to any who may hereafter look upon her handsome husband with an eye of favour, for she loves him.”

"Can there be a doubt of that?" echoed Bianca: "has she not married him? And look at his attractions: see this goodly lot of cavaliers speeding on to join his banquet; can any there compare with him?"

"Chi é stracco di bonaccie, si mariti," answered the old lady. "Have you, Bianca, yet to learn that the comeliest mates oftentimes bring anything but love to the altar?"

Bianca made a grimace, as if she doubted: "It would have come sure enough, then," she said, aloud; "for none could be brought into daily contact with one so attractive and not learn to love him."

"And who should this be in a saintly habit, following the bridal equipage on his mule? Surely the spiritual director of the Lady Adelaide—the Father Anselmo it must be, that we have heard speak of. A faithful man, but stern, it is told; and so his countenance would betray. Bend your heads in reverence, my children: the holy man is bestowing his blessings."

"How savage I should be were I the Lady Beatrice, not to be able to come to the wedding," broke in the giddy Bianca. "She reckoned fully upon it, they say, and had caused her dress to be prepared—one to rival the bride's in splendour."

"She has enough to do with her newly-born infant," mumbled the good duenna. "Gaiety first, care afterwards; a christening usually follows a wedding. Come, girls, there's nothing more to see."

"Nay, mother mine, some of these dames that follow, guests for the banquet, lack not beauty."

"Pish," uttered a fair young girl, who had hitherto been silent; "it would be waste of time to look at their faces after the Lady Adelaide's."

"Who is that going away? The Signora; Montani? Why, it has not all passed, signora. She is gone, I declare! What a curious girl she seems, that."

"Do you know what they say?" cried little Lisa, Bianca's cousin.

"What do they say?"

"That her mother is a descendant of those dreadful people over the sea, who have no religion, the heretics."

The pious duenna boxed her niece's ears. "You sinful little monkey, to utter such heresy!" she cried, when anger allowed her to speak.

"They do say so!" sobbed the young lady, dancing about with the passion she dared not otherwise vent. "And people *do* say," she continued, out of bravado, and smarting under the pain, "that they are heretics themselves: or else why do they never come to mass?"

The old Signora Montani is nearly bedridden: how could she get to mass? "laughed Bianca.

"Don't answer her, Bianca. If she says such a thing here again—if she insinuates that the Signora Gina, knowing herself to be in such league with the Evil One, would dare to put her head inside a faithful house such as this, I will cause her to do public penance—the wicked little calumniator!" concluded the good duenna, adding a few finishing strokes upon Lisa's ear.

IV.

LONG lasted the bridal banquet, and merrily it sped. Ere its conclusion, and when the hours were drawing towards midnight, the young Lady Adelaide, attended by her maidens, was conducted to her dressing-chamber, according to the custom of the times and of the country.

She sat down in front of a large mirror whilst they disrobed her. They took the circlet of diamonds from her head, the jewels from her neck and arms, and then removed the elegant bridal dress; and there she sat, in a dressing-robe of cambric and lace, while they brushed and braided her beautiful hair.

As they were thus engaged, the lady's eyes ran round and round the costly chamber. The furniture and appurtenances were of the most recherche description: it had been the count's pleasure so to decorate it for his bride. One article in particular attracted her admiration. It was a small, but costly cabinet of malachite marble, exquisitely mounted in silver, and had been a present to the count from a Russian despot. In the inner part was a fixed mirror, encircled by a large frame of silver, and on the projecting slab stood open essence-bottles of pure crystal in silver frames, emitting various perfumes. As she continued to look at this novelty—the marble called malachite was even more rare and costly in those days than it is in ours—she perceived lying by the side of the

scent-bottles, a piece of folded paper. Wondering what it could be, she desired one of the ladies to bring it to her. It proved to be a sealed letter, and was addressed to herself.

The conscious blush of love rose to her cheeks, for she deemed it was some communication or present from her husband. She opened it, and the contents instantly caught her eye, in the soft, pure light which the lamps shed over the apartment: —

“TO THE LADY ADELAIDE, COUNTESS OF VISINARA.

“You fancy yourself the beloved of Giovanni, Count of Visinara, but retire not to your rest this night, lady, in any such vain imagining. The heart of the count has long been given to another, and you know, by your love for him, that such passion—that of first love—can never change its object. Had he met you in earlier life, it might have been otherwise. He marries you, for your lineage is a high one, and she, in the world's eye and in that of his own haughty race, was no fitting mate for him.”

The bridegroom was still at the banquet, for some of his guests drank deeply, when a hasty summons came to him. Quitting the hall, he found standing outside two of his bride's attendants.

“Sir Count, the Lady Adelaide——”

“Has retired?” he observed, finding they hesitated, yet feeling somewhat surprised at so speedy a summons.

“Nay, signor, not retired, but——”

“But what? Speak out.”

“We were disrobing the Lady Adelaide, Sir Count, when she saw in the chamber a note addressed to her. And—and—she read it, and fainted, in spite of the essence we poured on her hands and brow.”

“A note! –fainted!” ejaculated the count.

“It was an insulting letter, signor; for Irene, the youngest of the Lady Adelaide's attendants, read the first line or two of it aloud, before we could prevent her, it having fallen, open, to the floor. Our lady is yet insensible, and the Signora Lucrezia desires us to acquaint you, my lord.”

Without another word he turned from them, and, passing through the various corridors, entered the dressing-chamber. The Lady Adelaide was still motionless, but a faint colouring had begun to appear in her face.

“What is this, signora?” demanded the count of the chief attendant, Lucrezia.

“It must be owing to this letter, Sir Count, which was waiting for her on the cabinet,” was the lady's reply, holding out the open note. “The Lady Adelaide fainted while she was perusing it.”

“Fold it up,” interrupted the count, “and replace it there.” And Lucrezia did as she was bid.

“You may now go,” said Giovanni to the attendants, advancing to support his bride himself, as she revived. “When the countess has need of you, you shall be summoned.”

“You have read that letter?” were the first connected words of the Lady Adelaide.

“Nay, my love, surely not without your permission. Will you that I read it?”

She motioned in the affirmative. A guilty, glowing colour came over his face as he read. From whom did it come? That it alluded to Gina Montani there was no doubt. He felt sure, or thought he did, that Gina had no act or part in so dishonourable a trick. Yet what may not be expected from a jealous woman? Now came his trial.

“Was it not enough to make me ill?” demanded Adelaide. And he stammered something by way of answer.

“Giovanni,” she exclaimed, passionately, “deceive me not. Tell me what I have to fear: how much of your love is left for me—if any.”

He tried to soothe her. He told her an enemy must have done this: and he mentioned Gina Montani, though not by name. He said that he had sometimes visited her house, but not to love, and that the letter must allude to this.

“You *say* you did not love her!” she cried, resentment in her tone, as she listened to the tale.

For a single second he hesitated. But for her own sake he felt it to be his duty to lull her suspicions. The flush of shame rose to his brow for he deemed a falsehood dishonourable.

“In truth I did not. My love is yours, Adelaide.”

“Why did you visit her?”

"I can hardly tell you. I hardly know myself; want of thought—or of occupation probably."

"You surely did not wrong her?" was the next whispered question as she turned her face from him.

"Wrong *her!* Did you know her, you could not admit the possibility of the idea," he answered, resentment in his tone now. "She is of gentle birth, has been carefully reared, and is as innocent as you are."

"Who is she?—what is her name?"

"Adelaide, let us forget the subject: I have told you I loved her not: and I should not have mentioned this at all, but that I can think of nothing else to which that diabolical letter can have alluded. Believe me, my own wife"—and he drew her to him as he spoke—"that I have not done you so great an injury as to marry where I could not love."

"Oh," she exclaimed, wringing her hands, "that this cruel news had not been given me! Giovanni," she continued, vehemently, and half sinking on her knees before him, "deceive me not. If there be aught of truth in this accusation, let me depart. I am your wife but in name; a slight ceremony only has passed between us, and we both know how readily, with such influence as ours, the Church at Rome would dissolve that. Suffer me to depart ere I shall be indeed your wife."

"Adelaide," he replied, mournfully, as he held her, "I thought you loved me."

"I do—I do. None can know how passionately. My very life is bound up in yours; but it is because I so love you, that I could not brook a rival."

"You have no rival, .Adelaide. You never shall have one."

"I mean not a rival in the vulgar acceptance of the term," she replied, a shade of haughtiness mingling with her tone—"but one in your heart—your mind. This I could not bear."

"Adelaide, hear me. Some enemy, wishing to do me a foul injury, has thrust himself between us: but, rely on it, they are but false cowards who stab in the dark. I have sought you these many months; I have striven to gain your love; I have now made you mine. Talk not of separation, Adelaide."

She burst into a passionate fit of weeping. "Adelaide," he whispered, as he fondly clasped her to his heart, "believe that I love you; believe that you have no rival, and that I will give you none. I have made you my wife—the wife of my bosom: you are, and ever shall be, my only love."

Sweet words! And the Lady Adelaide suffered her disturbed mind to yield to them, resolutely thrusting away the dreadful thought that the heart of her attractive husband could ever have been given to another.

V.

MONTHS elapsed, and the Lady Adelaide was the happiest of the happy, although now and again the remembrance of that anonymous letter would flit into her mind like a dream. That most rare felicity was indeed hers, of passionately idolizing one from whom she need never be separated by night or by day. But how was it with him? Love is almost the only passion which cannot be called forth or turned aside at will, and though the Count di Visinara treated his wife, and ever would so treat her, with the most anxious affection, though he strove with all his might and main to love her, his rebellious heart was still true to Gina Montani.

But now the count had to leave home on business; to remain away fifteen days. In those earlier times women could not accompany their lords everywhere, as they may in these; and when Giovanni rode away from his castle gates, the Lady Adelaide sank in solitude upon the arm of one of her costly sofas, all rich with brocaded velvet; and though not a tear dimmed her eye, or a line of pain marked her forehead, to tell of suppressed feelings, it seemed to her that her heart was breaking.

It was on the morrow. News was brought to the countess that one craved admission to her—a maiden, young and beautiful, the servitor said; and the Lady Adelaide ordered her to be admitted.

Young and beautiful indeed, and so she looked, as, with downcast eyes, the visitor was ushered in. *You* know her, reader, though the Lady Adelaide did not. She began to stammer out an incoherent explanation: that news had reached her of the retirement of one of the Lady Adelaide's attendants, and of her wish to fill the vacant place.

“What is your name?” inquired the countess; already taken, as the young are apt to be, with the prepossessing manners and appearance of her visitor.

“Signora, it is Gina Montani.”

“And in whose household have you resided?”

A deep shade rose to Gina's face. “Madam, as yet only in my mother's. But she is dead and I am alone in the world. I have heard much of the Countess of Visinara's gentleness and worth, and I should wish to serve her.”

Some further conversation, a few preliminary arrangements, and Gina Montani was installed at the castle as one of the countess's maids in waiting. A somewhat contradistinctive term, be it understood, to a *waiting-maid*; these attendants of high-born gentlewomen being then made, in a great degree, their companions. Gina speedily rose in favour. Her manners were gentle and unassuming; and there was ever a sadness about her which, coupled with her great beauty, rendered her eminently interesting.

VI.

THE Lady Adelaide stood at the eastern window of the purple-room—so called from its magnificent hangings—watching eagerly for the appearance of her husband, it being the day and hour of his expected return. So had she stood since the morning. Ah! what pleasure is there in this world like that of watching for a beloved one? At the opposite end of the apartment sat her ladies, engaged upon some fancy work, then in vogue.

“Come hither, Lucrezia,” said the lady at length.

“Discern you yon groups of trees in the distance, through which glimpses of the highway may be distinguished? See you aught?”

“Nothing but the road, my lady. And yet, now I look attentively, there seems to be a movement, as of a body of horsemen. It should be the count, madam, and his followers.”

“I think it is, Lucrezia,” said the Lady Adelaide, calmly, not suffering her emotion to appear in the presence of her maidens, for that haughty girl brooked not that others should read her deep love for Giovanni. “You may return to your embroidery.”

The Count di Visinara rode at a sharp trot towards his home, followed by his retainers. When near enough to see his wife at the window, he quickened the pace to a gallop, after taking off his plumed cap, and waving his hand towards her in the distance. She pressed her heart to still its throbbing, as she heard him rattle over the drawbridge.

She was turning to leave the apartment to welcome him, when he entered, so great haste had he made. Without observing that she was not alone, he threw his arms round her, fondly drew aside her fair golden curls, and kissed her repeatedly. She drew back, the glowing crimson overspreading her face; and then the count turned and saw they were not alone. At the extreme end of the apartment, out of hearing, but within sight, were the damsels seated over their embroidery.

“Gina,” murmured one of the girls, still pursuing her work, “what has made you turn so pale! You are as white as Juliette's dress.”

“Is the Signora Montani ill?” demanded Lucrezia sharply; for she liked not Gina.

“A sudden pain—a spasm in my side,” gasped poor Gina. “It is over now.”

“Is he not an attractive man?” whispered another of the ladies in Gina's ear.

“He?”

“The Count di Visinara. I suppose you never saw him before? They are well matched for beauty, he and the Lady Adelaide.”

“Pray attend to your work, and let this gossiping cease,” exclaimed Lucrezia, angrily.

Giovanni and his wife remained at the window, their backs towards the damsels. She suffered her hand to remain in his—they could not see *that*—and conversed with him in confidential tones. Then she began chattering to him of her new attendant, saying how lovely she was, how pleasing and sad and gentle.

In the midst of this, a servant announced the mid-day meal.

“Now you shall see my favourite,” she exclaimed, as he took her hand to conduct her to the banquet-hall. “I will stop as I pass them, to look at their work, and you shall tell me if you do not think her very beautiful.”

“Scarcely, Adelaide, when beside you.”

“She is about my age,” ran on Adelaide, whose spirits were raised to exuberance. But it had never entered the mind of that haughty lady to imagine the possibility of the Lord of Visinara, *her husband*, looking upon any attendant of hers with real admiration, or she might not have discussed their personal merits.

“How goes on the work, Lucrezia?” demanded the Lady Adelaide, halting close to her attendants.

“Favourably, madam,” answered the signora, rising from her seat. “That is a beautiful part that you are engaged upon, Gina. Bring it forward, that we may exhibit our handiwork to my lord.”

Gina Montani, without raising her eyes, and trembling inwardly and outwardly, rose, and advanced with the embroidery. The Signora Lucrezia, detecting her curious agitation, was regarding her, covertly.

“Is it not a handsome pattern?” exclaimed Adelaide, her thoughts now really occupied with the beauty of the work. “And I was so industrious while you were away, Giovanni. I did a good portion of this myself—I did, indeed; all the shadings of the rosebuds are my doing, and those interlaces of silver.”

But, raising her pretty face to his, eager for his meed of approbation, Adelaide was startled at its look. It had turned to a frightful pallor.

“Oh, Giovanni, you are ill! My husband, what is it? Giovanni—”

“It is nothing,” interrupted the count, leading her hurriedly from the room. “I rode hard, and the sun was hot. A cup of wine will restore me.”

But not less awake to this emotion of the count's than she had been to Gina's, was the Signora Lucrezia, and she came to the conclusion that there was some unaccountable mystery at the bottom of it. Which mystery she forthwith, as a matter of course, determined to do all in her power to solve.

VII.

DAYS passed. The count had not yet seen Gina alone, though he had sought for the opportunity; but one morning when he entered the embroidery-room—so-called—Gina sat there alone, sorting silks. He did not observe her at first, and, being in search of his wife, called to her.

“Adelaide?”

“The Lady Adelaide is not here, signor,” was Gina's reply, as she rose from her seat.

“Gina,” he said, advancing cautiously, and speaking in an undertone, “what in the name of all that was foolish brought you here—an inmate of my house—the attendant of the Lady Adelaide?”

“You shall hear the truth,” she gasped, leaning against the wall for support. “I have lived all these months in my dreary home, unseeing you, uncared for, knowing only that you were happy with another. Giovanni, can you picture what I endured! My mother died—you may have heard of it—and her relations sent to ask me to go into their distant country, and would have comforted me; but I would not go. I remained on here, alone, to be near you. Oh, it was long, long! I struggled much with my unhappy passion. My very soul was wearing away with despair. I would see you pass sometimes at a distance with your retainers—and that was heaven to me. Then came a thought into my mind; I wrestled with it, and would have driven it away—but there it was, ever haunting me. It may be that my better angel sent it there; it may be that the Evil One, who is ever tempting us for ill, urged it on.”

“What mean you?” he inquired.

“It suggested,” she continued, in a low voice, “that if but to see you at a distance and at rare intervals, could almost compensate for my life of misery, what bliss would be mine were I living under the roof of your own home, liable to see you perhaps even once a-day! Hence you find me numbered amongst your wife's waiting-maids. And blame me not, Giovanni,” she hastily concluded, seeing him about to interrupt her; “you are the cause of all, for you sought and gained my love. And such love! I think none can have ever known such. It is

the one task of my life to suppress it. The fiercest jealousy of the Lady Adelaide torments my heart—and yet I must suppress it. Giovanni, you have brought this anguish upon me, so blame me not.”

“It is a dangerous proceeding, Gina. I was becoming reconciled to our separation; but now—it will be dangerous for both of us.”

“Ay,” she answered, bitterly, “you had all. Friends, revelry, a wife of rare beauty, the chase, the bustle of an immense household—in short, what had you not to aid your mental struggles? I but my home of solitude, and the jealous pictures, self, but ever inflicted, of your happiness with the Lady Adelaide.”

“I still love you, Gina,” he repeated. “But you know that I can show it not.”

“Do I ask you to show it?—think you I would permit you to show it?” she reiterated quickly. “No, I did not come here to sow discord in your house-hold. Suffer me to live on unnoticed, as of these last few days; but, oh! drive me not away from you.”

“Gina, Gina, this will never do. I mistrust my own powers of endurance; ay, and of concealment.”

“You can think of me but as the waiting-maid of your lady,” she interrupted, in a tone of bitterness. “In time you will solely regard me as such.”

“There would be another obstacle,” he added, his voice sinking to a whisper. “How could you live in my household, and not conform to the usages of our faith? Believe me, Gina, it is a plan that will never answer.”

She burst into tears: beseeching him not to drive her away. And to the tears he, against his better judgment, yielded.

“But you understand,” he said, somewhat sternly, “that from this moment all confidence ceases between us: we must be to each other as strangers.”

“Even so,” she acquiesced. “Yet if you deem that my enduring affection deserves requital, give me at times a look as of old; a smile, unperceived by others, but acknowledged by, and too dear to, my own heart. I ask no more than that. It will be a token that you have not driven away all remembrance of our once youthful love, though it is at an end for ever.”

He smiled sadly now in answer, and they parted by different doors. He to seek his wife, she the solitude of her chamber. And no sooner had the sound of their footsteps died away in the gallery, than out of a closet in the room stepped the Signora Lucrezia, her eyes and mouth wide open, and her hair standing on end.

“May all the saints reject me if ever I met with such a plot as this!” she ejaculated. “I knew there was something underhand about her, but who would have suspected this! So the innocent-faced madam is nothing but a she-wolf in sheep's petticoats! That dreadful letter is explained now. May I die unabsolved if ever I met with the like of this! It is her fault, the wicked one; not his. She must have bewitched him with her false face. If my baby mistress did but know it! *Her rival*—and she showering down favours on her! A pretty life the count will lead between the two, dear good man!—and neither of them fit to tie his shoes. I'll keep my eyes and ears open: there will be an explosion some day, or my name is not Lucrezia Andrini.”

PART THE SECOND.

I.

THERE was much bustle and commotion in the Castle of Visinara. Servitors ran hither and thither, the tire-maidens stood in groups to gossip with each other, messengers were despatched in various directions, and skilful leeches and experienced nurses were brought in. Then came a long silence. Voices were hushed and footsteps muffled; the apartments of the countess were darkened, and naught was heard saving the issued whisper, or the stealthy tread of the sick-chamber. The Lady Adelaide was ill.

Hours elapsed—hours of intolerable suspense to the Lord of Visinara; and then were heard deep, heartfelt congratulations; but they were spoken in a whisper, for the lady was still in danger, and had suffered almost unto death. There was born an heir to Visinara. And as Giovanni, Count of Visinara, bent over his child, and embraced its young mother, he felt repaid for all he had suffered in voluntarily severing himself from Gina Montani. From that time he forgot her or something very like it. And for this he could not be condemned, for it lay in the line of honour and of duty. Yet it was another proof, if one were wanting, of the fickle nature of man's love. It has been well compared to words written on the sands.

Many weeks elapsed ere the Lady Adelaide was allowed to join in the gaities and festal meetings of the land. A two days' fête, given at the Capella Palace, was the signal for her reappearance in the world. It was to be of great magnificence, and she consented to attend it on the morning of the second day. She placed herself in front of the large mirror in her dressing-chamber whilst she was prepared for the visit, the same mirror before which she had sat on the evening of her wedding-day. The Signora Lucrezia and Gina were alone present. The former was arranging her fair silken tresses, whilst Gina handed the signora the articles required for the task: The count entered, dressed.

"Giovanni," exclaimed Adelaide, "Lucrezia thinks that I should wear something in my hair—a wreath, or my diamond coronet; but I feel tired already, and wish the dressing was over. Need I be teased with ornaments?"

"My sweet wife, wear what you best like. *You* need no superficial adorning."

"You hear, Lucrezia: make haste and finish. You may put aside the diamond casket, Gina. Oh, there's my darling!" continued the countess, hearing the baby pass the door with its nurse. "Call him in."

The count himself opened the door, and took his infant.

"The precious, precious child!" exclaimed Adelaide, bending over the infant, which he placed on her knees. "Giovanni," she added, looking up eagerly to her husband's face, "do you think there ever was so lovely a babe sent on earth?"

He smiled at her earnestness—men are never so rapturously blind in the worship of their first-born as women. But he stooped down, and fondly pressed his lips upon her forehead, while he played with the little hand of the infant. She yielded to the temptation of suffering her face to rest for a moment close to his.

"But it grows late," resumed the young mother. "Take the baby to its nurse, Lucrezia;" and she kissed it fifty times as she resigned it.

The count had chanced to draw behind his wife: and there stood Gina. He was struck by the pallid sorrow of her countenance. Ill-fated Gina! and he had been so absorbed these weeks in his new happiness!

A rush of pity, mingled perhaps with self-reproach, penetrated his heart. In that moment he remembered her last words at the interview in the embroidery-room, and gave her a look—the look she had coveted.

It was not to be mistaken. Love—love, pure and tender—gleamed from his eyes; and Gina answered him with a smile which told her thanks. Had any one been looking on, they could scarcely fail to become aware of their mutual love, or of a secret understanding between them.

And one was looking on. In the large glass before her the Lady Adelaide had distinctly seen the reflection of all that took place. Her countenance became white as death, and her anger was terrible.

"You may retire for the present," she said in a calm, subdued tone, to the startled Gina, upon whose mind flashed somewhat of the truth. "Tell the Signora Lucrezia not to return until I call for her."

To describe the scene that ensued would be difficult. The shock to the young wife's feelings had been very great. That her husband was faithless to her, not only in deed but in heart, she never doubted. It was in vain he endeavoured to explain all; she listened to him not. To her, he seemed to be uttering falsehoods, which but increased his treachery. Gina had once spoken of her fierce jealousy: but what was hers compared with the Lady Adelaide's? In the midst of her explosion of passion, Lucrezia, who had misunderstood her lady's prohibitory message, entered, and stood aghast: until admonished from the room again by a haughty wave of the count's hand.

He departed for the Capella fête alone. His wife refused to go.

"Mercy! mercy!" she moaned in anguish, as she remained alone in her apartments. "To be thus required by Giovanni—whom I so loved! My husband—my own husband! Is it possible that a man can be guilty of treachery so deep? Would that I had died ere I knew his faithlessness. To introduce her into our home, into my very presence, an attendant on my person. That I should be so degraded! Surely a wife, young and beautiful, was

never treated as I have been. Lowered in the eyes of my own servants; insulted by him who ought to have guarded me from insult; laughed at—ridiculed by *her!* Oh! terrible! terrible!”

The Lady Adelaide had taken up a wrong and exaggerated view of the case. Rising as she spoke the last words, she unlocked the bright green cabinet, that of malachite marble already spoken of, and took from thence a small box of silver gilt. Touching the secret spring of this, she drew forth a letter, opened, and read it:—

“TO THE LADY ADELAIDE, COUNTESS OF VISINARA.

“You fancy yourself the beloved of Giovanni, Count of Visinara, but retire not to your rest this night, lady, in any such vain imagining. The heart of the count has long been given to another, and you know, by your love for him, that such passion—that of first love—can never change its object. Had he met you in earlier life, it might have been otherwise. He marries you, for your lineage is a high one, and she, in the world's eye and in that of his own haughty race, was no fitting mate for him.”

“Ay,” she shuddered, “it is explained now. So, Gina Montani was this beloved one. I am his by sufferance—she, by love. Holy Mother, have mercy on my brain! I *know* they love—I see it all too plainly. And I could believe his deceitful explanation, and trust him. I *told* him I believed it on our wedding-night. *He did not know why he went to her house; habit, he supposed, or want of occupation.* Oh, shame on his false words! Shame on my own credulity!”

None of us can forget the stanzas in Collins's “Ode to the Passions:”—

“Thy numbers, Jealousy, to nought were fixed,
Sad proof of thy distressful state:
Of differing themes the veering song was mixed,
And now it courted love—now, raving, called on hate.”

And calling, indeed, upon hate, as she strode her chamber in a frenzy near akin to madness, was the Lady Adelaide, when her attendant, Lucrezia, entered.

“My dear lady,” she exclaimed, bursting into tears, false as those of a crocodile, “my dear, dear young lady, I cannot know that you are thus suffering, and keep away from your presence. Pardon me for intruding upon you against orders.”

The Lady Adelaide smoothed her brow, and the lines of her face resumed their haughtiness, as she imperiously motioned Lucrezia to quit the room. The heart most awake to the miseries of life wears to the world the coldest surface; and it was not in the Lady Adelaide's nature to betray aught of her emotions to any living being; saving, perhaps, to her husband.

“Nay, my lady, suffer me to remain yet a moment. At least, while I disclose what I know of that viper.”

The Lady Adelaide started; but she suppressed all excitement, and set herself to listen. Lucrezia began her tale—an exaggerated account of the interview she had been a witness to between the Lord of Visinara and Gina Montani. The countess listened to its conclusion, and a low moan escaped her.

“What think you now, madam, she deserves?”

“*To die!*” burst from the pale lips of the unhappy lady.

“To die,” acquiesced Lucrezia, calmly. “No other punishment would meet her guilt; and no other, that I am aware of, could be devised to bring you security for the future.”

“Oh! tempt me not,” cried the lady, wringing her hands. “I spoke hastily.”

“And wisely, madam,” put in Lucrezia. “Give but the orders.”

“How can I?” demanded the Lady Adelaide, once more pacing the room, in her anguish; “how could I ever rest afterwards, with so great a guilt upon my soul?”

“It will be no guilt, lady.”

“Lucrezia!”

“I have made it my business to inquire much about this girl—to ascertain her history. I thought it my duty to do so, and very soon I should have laid the whole matter before you.”

“Well?”

“You may destroy her, madam, as you would destroy that little bird there in its golden cage, without sin and without compunction.”

“Oh, Lucrezia, Lucrezia! once more I say unto thee, Tempt me not. Wicked and artful though she is, she is still one of God's creatures.”

“Scarcely, my lady,” answered the bigoted woman, with a gesture which spoke of deep scorn for the culprit. “I have cause to believe—good cause,” she repeated, lowering her voice, and looking round, as if she feared the very walls might hear the fearful words she was about to utter, “that she is one of those lost creatures who are enemies to our faith and to Heaven: a descendant of the Saxons, and an apostate.”

“*What* say you?” gasped the Lady Adelaide.

“That we have been harbouring a heretic, madam,” continued Lucrezia, her passion rising. “No wonder that evil has fallen upon this house.”

“Go to the cell of Father Anselmo,” shivered the Lady Adelaide, “and pray his holiness to step hither. This doubt shall at once be set at rest.”

II.

GINA MONTANI, her head aching with suspense and anxiety, was shut up alone in her chamber, when she received a summons to attend her mistress. Obeying at once, she found the confessor, Father Anselmo, sitting there, by the side of the countess. He cast his eyes steadfastly upon Gina, as if examining her features.

“Never, my daughter, never!” he said, at length, turning to the countess. “I can take upon myself to assert that this damsel of thine has never once appeared before me to be shriven.”

“Examine her,” was the reply of the lady.

“Daughter,” said the priest, turning to Gina, “for so I would fain call thee, what faith is it that thou professest?”

Gina raised her hand to her burning temples. She saw that all was discovered. But when she removed it, the perplexity in her face had cleared away, and her resolution was taken.

“The truth, the truth,” she murmured; “for good, or for ill, I will tell it now. I am not a Roman Catholic,” she answered timidly.

The Lady Adelaide crossed herself, as if for protection from the words: she had been reared in all the bigotry and superstition of the times. Gina grasped the arm of the chair against which she was standing. She was endeavouring to steel her heart to bravery; but in those days, and in that country, such a scene was a terrible ordeal.

“Dost thou not worship the One True God?” asked the priest, looking with compassion upon the sad and unhappy girl.

“I worship the one True God,” replied Gina, solemnly, joining her hands in a reverent attitude. “But we—we—do not recognize the Pope.”

“And yet, child, to him it is given to mediate between man and Heaven. Hast thou yet to learn,” continued the priest, troubled and aghast, “that in the next world there is a place of torture kept for unbelievers—a gulf of burning flames, to be extinguished never?”

“We are told there is such a place,” she answered, struggling with her tears, for the interview was becoming too painful. “May the infinite love and mercy of God keep both you and me from it!”

“Thou art bold,” he cried. “Whence hast thou imbibed these doctrines?”

“My mother wedded with an Italian,” answered Gina; “but she was born on the free soil of England, and reared in its Reformed Faith.”

“And this mother of thine, child: where may she be?”

“She is dead,” gasped Gina, bursting into tears. “I have no guide now but my Bible.”

Now, it is well known that in those ages in Italy the Bible was regarded as a very unfit book to be read indiscriminately by the people. The priest shook his head. To the Lady Adelaide and to Lucrezia, Gina's confessions brought absolute horror.

"She is hopeless," gasped the former.

"I fear me so, my daughter. At least, at present," added the priest; some benevolent idea crossing his mind that perhaps he might by his teachings redeem her. "Fetch me thy Bible, child," he said to Gina. "I will take care of it for a time."

She took it out of a pocket underneath her gown. An English Bible. The priest could not read it.

"Dost thou speak this language, then, daughter?"

"It is familiar to me as my own," replied Gina.

"Oh, father, father!" cried the Lady Adelaide sinking at his feet, after Gina had been despatched to her chamber, and giving vent involuntarily to sobs of agony, "she has dared to come between me and my husband—he has known her long, it seems. If she should taint him with this dreadful heresy?"

Father Anselmo did not like the suggestion. Giovanni of Visinara was a true servant of his Church and a liberal benefactor. In his perplexity, he made for the moment no rejoinder.

"It will not be a crime to remove her, father," faltered the Lady Adelaide.

"*Crime!*" repeated the priest. "Canst thou connect the word with any such procedure? It is, on the contrary, a measure needful to be taken."

But the probability is that the speaker never supposed that any measure, more stringent than that of removing her from the castle, was contemplated.

"To remove her in *any way*," persisted the lady, in a whisper. "Yet the world might call it by—by an ugly name."

"Certainly, in any way," assented the father. "By force, if necessary."

"Thou wilt then grant me absolution beforehand, holy father," implored the Lady Adelaide, the tears streaming from her eyes.

"For all that thou canst do, my child," he smiled. "Thou hast not been used to these troublous duties; thy life has been one of peace and sunshine."

"Oh true, true! I have been too happy. My waiting-woman, Lucrezia, says she has a plan, holy father, to—to—to effect it, by which all scandal may be avoided. She waits only for my orders."

"Thou canst give them, my daughter."

And the Lady Adelaide, believing that she had received sanction for the worst, for so terrible a deed that she had not dared to allude to it in words—and in that reticence may have lain the fatal misapprehension—summoned Lucrezia to her when the priest had departed.

III.

THE castle was wrapped in silence, it being past the hour at which the household retired to repose. Gina Montani was in her night-dress, though as yet she had not touched her hair, which remained in long curls, as she had worn it in the day. Suspense and agitation caused her movements to be slow, to linger; and she sat at her dressing-table in a musing attitude her head resting on her hand, wondering what would be the ending to all that the day had brought forth. She had dismissed her attendant an hour ago.

With a deep sigh she rose to continue her preparations for rest, when the door softly opened, and the Signora Lucrezia appeared.

"You need not prepare yourself for bed," observed Lucrezia, in a low, distinct whisper; "another sort of bed is preparing for you."

"What do you mean?" demanded the startled girl.

"That you are this night to die."

Gina shrieked.

"I may tell you," interrupted the lady, "that screams and resistance will be wholly useless. Your doom is irrevocable, therefore it may save you trouble to be silent."

"You are speaking falsely to me. I have done nothing to deserve death."

"Equivocation will be alike unavailing," repeated Lucrezia. "And if you ask what you have done—you have dared to step with your ill-placed passion between my lord and the Lady Adelaide: you have brought discredit upon the faith of this house and of the land."

"I have disturbed no one's faith," returned Gina; "I wish to disturb none. It is true I love Giovanni, Count di Visinara, but I loved him long ere he saw the Lady Adelaide."

"What!" cried the signora, her brow darkening, "do you dare to avow your shame to my face?"

"It is no shame," answered Gina, sadly; "there is nothing of guilt in such a love as mine."

"Follow me," repeated Lucrezia. "You have no time to waste in lamentations."

"By whose orders do I die?" demanded the indignant girl. "Not by *his*; and no one else has a right to condemn me."

Lucrezia expected this, and was prepared. Alas, that the Lord of Visinara should that day have inadvertently left his signet-ring behind him!

"Do you know this, ring?" demanded Lucrezia, holding out the jewel.

"Too well. It is the Count of Visinara's."

"You may then know who has condemned you."

"But the count is at the Capella Palace. He is not yet back from the fêtes."

"Not back!" returned Lucrezia, scornfully. "Heard you not the clatter of the men? Some of them had imbibed largely of the Capella wine, I trow. I bring this ring from him I say: a proof that he has condemned you."

"Oh, Giovanni!" wailed Gina, as she sank prostrate on the floor in her anguish, and no longer doubting, "this from you!" All idea of resistance vanished with the thought that it was him she so loved who doomed her to destruction. "How long is it since he returned?"

"I came not to waste the moments in idle words," said Lucrezia, brazening out her falsehoods. "It is sufficient for you to know that he *has* returned, and has given the orders that you seem inclined to resist."

"Implore him to come to me for one moment, for a last farewell."

"I may not ask it. He is with the Lady Adelaide."

"First, my happiness, then, my life; both sacrificed to appease the Lady Adelaide! Oh, Giovanni! false, but dear Giovanni——"

"I have no orders to call those who will use violence," interrupted the signora, "but I must do so if you delay to follow me."

"I am about to dress myself," returned Gina.

"The dress you have on will serve as well as another. And better: for a night-gown bears some resemblance to a shroud."

"One moment for prayer," was the next imploring petition.

"Prayer for you!" broke contemptuously from the signora.

"A single moment for prayer," reiterated the victim. "If I am, indeed, about to meet my Maker, I stand fearfully in need of it; for I have of late worshipped one, more perhaps than I have Him."

"Prayer for you, you heretic!" contemptuously retorted Lucrezia, who, in her own way, was very much of a saint.

Yet still Gina repeated it. "A few moments for prayer—in mercy! "

"Then pray away where you are going," was the impatient answer. "You will have time enough, and to spare—minutes, and hours. Perhaps days."

The signora evidently took a strange pleasure in urging on the death of Gina Montani. What could be the reason? Women in general are not so frightfully cruel. The truth was, that she herself loved the count. The giddy Bianca had said, when watching the bridal cavalcade, that none could be brought into daily contact with one so attractive as he, and not learn to love him. So had it proved with Lucrezia. Being the favourite attendant of her mistress, she was much with her, and consequently daily and frequently in the company of Giovanni. He had many a gay word and passing jest for her, for he was by nature a gallant, free-spoken man; and this had brought forth its result. Whilst he never gave a thought to her but as of one who waited on his wife, he became to her heart dangerously dear; and her jealousy of Gina, arising first of all from the interview she had witnessed in the embroidery-room, now at least equalled that of the Lady Adelaide.

Pushing the unfortunate girl on before her, Lucrezia silently passed onwards to the more remote parts of the castle. She bore a lantern in her hand which emitted a dim, uncertain light. At length they came to a passage a little beyond the chapel, far removed from the habited apartments; and in the middle of this were two male forms, busily occupied at work of some description. A lantern, similar to the one Lucrezia carried, was hanging high up against the opposite wall; another stood on the ground. Gina stopped and shivered; but Lucrezia touched her arm, and she walked on.

They were nearing the men, who were habited as monks, probably for disguise, their faces shielded beneath cowls, when the signora halted and pressed her hand upon her brow, as if in thought. Presently she turned to Gina. A second lie was in her mouth; but how was the ill-fated young lady to know it?

“*He* sent you a message,” she whispered. “It is his last request to you. Will you receive it?”

The unhappy victim looked up eagerly.

“He requests, then, by his love for you—by the remembrance of the happy moments you once spent together, that you neither resist nor scream.”

Her heart was too full to speak; but she bowed her head in acquiescence. Lucrezia moved to go on.

“How is my life to be taken? By the dagger? By blows?”

“By neither—by nothing. Not a hair of your head will be touched.”

“Ah! I might have guessed. It is by poison.”

“It will be taken by *nothing* I tell you. Why do you not listen to me?”

“You speak in riddles,” said Gina, faintly. “But I will bear my fate, whatever it may be.”

“And in silence? *He* asks it by your mutual love.”

“All, all, for his sake,” she answered. “Tell him, that as I have loved, so will I obey him to the last.”

Lucrezia walked on, and Gina followed. Whether she understood the manner of her death, might be a question; but, faithful to the imagined wish of her lover, she uttered neither remonstrance nor cry. The clock was upon the stroke of one, when smothered groans of fear and anguish told that her punishment had begun; she understood it then: but no louder sound broke the midnight silence, or carried the appalling deed to the inhabitants of the castle. An hour passed before all was completed; they were long in doing their deed of vengeance; and when it was over, Gina Montani had been removed from the world for ever.

“Madam, she is gone!” was the salutation of Lucrezia, her teeth chattering, and her face the hue of a corpse, when she entered the chamber of her mistress.

The Lady Adelaide had not retired to rest. She was pacing her apartment in unutterable misery. The social conditions of life, its forms and objects, were to her as nothing since her terrible awaking to reality. Morning had dawned before the return of the Lord of Visinara. The festivities had lasted long. He was fatigued both in body and mind, and, throwing himself upon a couch, sank to sleep. An unusual disturbance and commotion aroused him. The household, struck with amazement and terror, were telling a strange tale: one that, for the moment, drove the life-blood from his heart. The wicked dealing of Gina Montani had been brought to light on the previous day. What these wicked dealings consisted of, no one professed to be able to define, except that Gina had confessed in the presence of the good Father Anselmo that she was in league with the Evil One. And the Evil One had appeared in the night, and had run away with her—a just reward.

In those times, a reputed visit of his Satanic Majesty *in propria personâ* would have been likely to obtain more credence than it could in these; but it would probably be going too far to say that the Lord of Visinara participated in the belief of his horror-stricken household: neither could he trace any positive foundation for the assertion. Gina was gone. To say the least of it, Satan or no Satan, her disappearance was mysterious in the extreme. The maid who waited on her testified that she assisted Gina to undress on the previous night. In proof of which, the garments she had taken off were found in the chamber. The remainder of her clothes were also in their places undisturbed; the only article missing being a night-dress, which the attendant in question said she saw her put on; and her bed had not been slept in. Giovanni spoke to his wife, but she observed a cold, haughty silence, confessing to nothing: it was quite useless to question her. The house was searched and searched, and the neighbourhood, for miles round, scoured; but no trace or tidings of her whatever could be obtained. And yet, strange to say, in passing on that first morning through the remote corridors, the count fancied he heard her voice pronounce his name in a tone of imploring agony. Whether this was but fancy, or whether she had indeed called to him, he never knew, then or later. He searched himself in every nook and corner, but nothing came of it.

After a time, peace was once more restored between him and his wife: but the perfect bliss of her once secure love for him had ceased for ever. As to Lucrezia, she seemed to have acquired a scared kind of look and manner; was more devout at prayers than before, and offered up no end of candles.
And so the time passed on.

IV.

IT was the hour of midnight. In the nursery at the castle sat the head-nurse, holding on her lap the dying heir of Visinara, now some eight or ten months old. Until about nine days previously, he had been a fine, healthy child, but from that time a wasting fever had attacked him. It had left him pale and cold; ill unto death.

The Lady Adelaide, her eyes blinded with tears, knelt beside him, gazing on his colourless face. The count himself was gently rubbing his little hands, to try and excite some warmth in them.

“Do you not think he looks a little, a *very* little better?” demanded the lady, anxiously.

The nurse hesitated. She did not think so, but she was unwilling to say what she thought.

“His hands—are they any warmer, Giovanni?”

The count shook his head. The Lady Adelaide pressed her lips upon the infant's damp forehead, and burst into renewed tears.

“You will be ill, Adelaide,” said her husband. “This incessant watching is bad for you. Let me persuade you to take an hour's rest.”

She motioned in the negative.

“Indeed, madam, but you ought to do so,” interposed Lucrezia, who was present. “These many nights you have passed without sleep; and your health so delicate!”

“Lie down—lie down, my love,” he interposed, “if only for a short time.”

And at length she was induced to comply, the nurse undertaking to let her know if there should be the slightest change in the child. Giovanni passed his arm round his wife to lead her from the chamber, for she was painfully weak; but they had scarcely gone ten steps from the door, when a prolonged, shrill scream, as of one in unutterable terror, reached their ears. They rushed back again.

The nurse sat, her dilating eyes fixed on one corner of the room, her face rigid with horror. It was she who had screamed.

“My child! my child!” groaned the Lady Adelaide.

“Nurse, what in the name of terror is the matter?” exclaimed the count, perceiving no alteration in the infant. “You look as if you had seen a spectre!”

“I have seen one,” shuddered the nurse.

“What *have* you been dreaming of?” he returned, angrily.

“As true as that we are all assembled here, my lord,” continued the nurse, solemnly, “I saw the spirit of Gina Montani!”

A change came over the Lord of Visinara's countenance, but he spoke not. The Lady Adelaide clung to her husband in fear; while Lucrezia, who had been listening in perplexed amazement, darted into the midst of the group, and laid hold of the nurse's chair.

“What absurdity!” exclaimed the count, recovering himself. “How could such an idea enter your head?”

“Were it the last word I had to speak, my lord,” continued the woman, “and to my dying day, I will maintain what I assert. I saw Gina Montani. She stood in a night-dress, *there*, where the lamp casts its shade.”

“Nonsense,” repeated the count, abstractedly. But Lucrezia was white, and shook convulsively.

At this moment, a wild, frantic sob burst from the Lady Adelaide. The child was dead!

V.

MANY months again slipped by, with little to distinguish them saving the decreasing strength of the Lady Adelaide. She had been wasting slowly away ever since the shock given to her heart at discovering her husband's love for Gina Montani. She loved him passionately, and she *knew* her love must be unrequited; for the affections once bestowed, as his had been, can never be recalled and given to another. The illness of the mind wrought upon the body. She became worse and worse; and after the birth of a second child, it was evident that she was sinking rapidly.

She lay upon the stately bed in her magnificent chamber, about which were scattered many articles consecrated to her girlhood, or to her happy bridal, and, as such, precious. Seated by the bedside was her husband, one of his hands clasping hers. In the other hand he held a cambric handkerchief, with which he occasionally wiped her languid brow.

"Bear with me a little longer, my husband. But a short time."

"Bear with you, Adelaide!" he repeated. "Would to Heaven you might be spared to me!"

"It is impossible," she sighed, pressing his hand upon her wasted bosom.

"Adelaide"—he hesitated, after a while—"I would ask you a question. A question which, if you can, I entreat that you will answer."

She looked at him inquiringly, and he resumed, in a low voice: "What became of Gina Montani?"

Even amidst the pallid hue of death, a hectic colour flushed her cheeks at the words. She gasped with agitation before she could speak.

"Bring not up that subject now; the only one that came between us to disturb our peace; the one to which I am indebted for my death. I am lying dying before you, Giovanni, and you can think but of her."

"My love, why will you so misunderstand me?"

"These thoughts excite me dreadfully," she continued. "Let us banish them, if you would have peace visit me in dying."

"May your death be far away yet," he sighed.

"Ah! I trust so! A little longer—a few days with you and my dear child!" And the count clasped his hands together as he silently echoed her prayer.

"Will you reach me my lazuli casket?" she continued. "I have put a few trinkets into it, to leave as tokens of remembrance. I must show you how I wish them bestowed."

He rose from his seat, and looked about the room; but he could not find the jewel-case.

"The small one, Giovanni," she said; "not my diamond casket. I thought it was in the mosaic cabinet. Or perhaps they may have taken it into my dressing-room."

He went into the adjoining apartment, and had found the missing casket, when a wild shriek from her lips smote upon his ear. In an instant he had gained the bedside, and was supporting her. The attendants came running in.

"My dearest Adelaide! What is it that excites you thus?"

But his inquiries were in vain. She lay in his arms sobbing convulsively, and clinging to him in some terrible fear. Broken words came from her at length.

"I looked up—when you were away—and saw there, in that darkened recess—*her*. I did—I did, Giovanni!"

"Whom?" he said, becoming very pale.

"Her—Gina Montani. She was in white—a long dress it seemed. Oh! Giovanni, leave me not again."

"I will never leave you, Adelaide. But, this—it must have been a fancy—an illusion of the imagination. We had just been speaking of her."

"You remember," she sobbed, "the night our child died—nurse saw her also. It may——"

The lady's voice failed her, and her husband started, for a rapid change was taking place in her countenance.

"I am dying, Giovanni," she uttered, clinging to him, and trembling to the utmost extent of nervous terror. "Oh, support me! A doctor—a priest—Father Anselmo—where are they? He would give me absolution, he said: then why does the remembrance come back again now? It would not have been done without my

sanction. Giovanni, my husband—protect and love our child—desert him never. Giovanni, where are you? My sight is going—Giovanni——“

Her voice died away, and the count bowed his head down in his anguish, whilst the attendants pressed forward to look at her countenance. The Lady Adelaide had passed from amongst the living.

VI.

IT was many years after the death of the Lady Adelaide, that several workmen were engaged making some extensive alterations in the Castle of Visinara, preparatory to the second marriage of its lord, who was about to espouse the lovely Elena di Capella. They were taking down the walls of a remote passage, or corridor, leading out of the chapel.

Standing, looking on, was the count, still to all appearance youthful, though he was in reality some years past thirty. By his side stood a fair boy of seven years old. It was the heir of Visinara. He was an open-hearted, engaging child, with a smiling countenance, on which might be traced his father's features, whilst he had inherited his mother's soft blue eyes and her sunny hair.

“What a long while you are!” exclaimed the child, boyishly impatient to see the walls come down. “You should hit harder.”

“The walls are very thick, Alberto,” observed his father. “All these niches, which have been blocked up, and in the olden time contained statues, have to come down also.”

“They are taking down a niche now, are they not, papa?”

“Not yet. They are removing the wall which has been built before it. It appears fresher, too, than the rest; of more recent date.”

“It seems extraordinarily fresh, Sir Count,” observed one of the workmen. “The materials are old, but it has certainly been rebuilt within a few years—within ten, I should say.”

“Not it,” laughed the count. “These corridors have not been touched during my lifetime.”

“This portion of them has, my lord, you may rely upon it.”

As the workman spoke, the remainder came down with a tremendous crash, leaving the niche exposed to view. There was no statue there—but the corpse of the unfortunate Gina Montani, standing upright in her night-dress, was revealed to their sight. It was nearly as fresh as if she had departed but yesterday, having been excluded from the air. The features, it is true, were scarcely to be recognized, but the hair—the long brown curls falling on her neck—was the same as ever.

This was her horrible death, then—*to be walled up alive*.

The Count di Visinara grew sick and faint as he gazed. Before he had time to collect his startled thoughts, the child was pulling at his arm.

“Papa, take me away. What is that dreadful thing, there? You look white and cold, too, not as you always do. Oh, what is it? Dear, dear papa, take me from here.”

The workmen were affrighted, and shook with fear—perhaps more frightened though less shocked than the count. But one of them, partially recovering himself, touched the corpse with an implement he had been using for his work, and down it came, a heap of dust.

The Lord of Visinara turned, and with steps that tottered under him, bore his child back to the castle.

VII.

You may hear in Italy, unto this day, various versions of this tradition. One will tell you that the Lord of Visinara offered moneys and treasures, even to the half of his possessions, unto the fathers of the Church, if they would lay the troubled spirit of Gina Montani; but that, although the monks tried hard, they could not do it. Another version goes, that the Church did not try, because she had died a heretic. However that may have been, all agree

in one respect—that the ghost *was not* laid. That it never would be, and never could be, but still wanders to haunt the descendants of the Lady Adelaide.

Several of these descendants still exist in Tuscany, though greatly reduced in station. And the accredited belief is, that whenever death is going to remove one of them, the spirit of the ill-fated Gina Montani appears and shows itself to them when they are dying.

First posted online 26 February 2005.
www.litgothic.com