

FAREWELL NIKOLA

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'FAREWELL, NIKOLA'



"He swept his fingers over the strings ... and commenced to sing." (Page 140.)

'Farewell, Nikola'

BY

GUY BOOTHBY

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THE EGYPTIAN,' ETC.

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'FAREWELL, NIKOLA'

CHAPTER I

We were in Venice; Venice the silent and mysterious; the one European city of which I never tire. My wife had not enjoyed good health for some months past, and for this reason we had been wintering in Southern Italy. After that we had come slowly north, spending a month in Florence, and a fortnight in Rome *en route*, until we found ourselves in Venice, occupying a suite of apartments at Galaghetti's famous hotel overlooking the Grand Canal. Our party was a small one; it consisted of my wife, her friend, Gertrude Trevor, and myself, Richard Hatteras, once of the South Sea Islands, but now of the New Forest, Hampshire, England. It may account for our fondness of Venice when I say that four years previous we had spent the greater part of our honeymoon there. Whatever the cause may have been, however, there could be no sort of doubt that the grand old city, with its palaces and churches, its associations stretching back to long-forgotten centuries, and its silent waterways, possessed a great fascination for us. We were never tired of exploring it, finding something to interest us in even the most out-of-the-way corners. In Miss Trevor we possessed a charming companion, a vital necessity, as you will admit, when people travel together. She was an uncommon girl in more ways than one; a girl, so it seems to me, England alone is able to produce. She could not be described as a pretty girl, but then the word "pretty" is one that sometimes comes perilously near carrying contempt with it; one does not speak of Venus de Medici as pretty, nor would one describe the Apollo Belvedere as very nice-looking. That Miss Trevor was exceedingly handsome would, I fancy, be generally admitted. At any rate she would command attention wherever she might go, and that is an advantage which few of us possess. Should a more detailed description of her be necessary, I might add that she was tall and dark, with black hair and large luminous eyes that haunted one, and were suggestive of a southern ancestor. She was the daughter, and indeed the only child, of the well-known Dean of Bedminster, and this was the first time she had visited Italy, or that she had been abroad. The wonders of the Art Country were all new to her, and in consequence our wanderings were one long succession of delight. Every day added some new pleasure to her experiences, while each night saw a life desire gratified.

In my humble opinion, to understand Italy properly one should not presume to visit her until after the first blush of youth has departed, and then only when one has prepared oneself to properly appreciate her many beauties. Venice, above all others, is a city that must be taken seriously. To come at a proper spirit of the place one must be in a reverent mood. Cheap jokes and Cockney laughter are as unsuited to the place, where Falieri yielded his life, as a downcast face would be in Nice at carnival time. On the afternoon of the particular day from which I date my story, we had been to the island of Murano to pay a visit to the famous glass factories of which it is the home. By the time we reached Venice once more it was nearly sunset. Having something like an hour to spare we made our way, at my wife's suggestion, to the Florian *café* on the piazza of Saint Mark in order to watch the people. As usual the place was crowded, and at first glance it looked as if we should be unable to find sufficient vacant chairs. Fortune favoured us, however, and when we had seated ourselves and I had ordered coffee, we gave ourselves up to the enjoyment of what is perhaps one of the most amusing scenes in Venice. To a thoughtful mind the Great Square must at all times be an object of absorbing interest. I have seen it at every hour, and under almost every aspect: at break of day, when one has it to oneself and is able to enjoy its beauty undisturbed; at midday, when the importunate shop-keepers endeavour to seduce one into entering their doors (by tales of the marvels therein); at sunset, when the *cafés* are crowded, the band plays, and all is merriment; and last, but not least, at midnight, when the moon is sailing above Saint Mark's, the square is full of strange shadows, and the only sound to be heard is the cry of a gull on the lagoon, or the "*Sa Premi*" of some

belated gondolier.

"This is the moment to which I have looked forward all my life," said Miss Trevor, as she sat back in her chair and watched the animated crowd before her. "Look at that pretty little boy with the pigeons flocking round him. What a picture he would make if one only had a camera."

"If you care to have a photo of him one can easily be obtained," I remarked. "Any one of these enterprising photographers would be only too pleased to take one for you for a few centissimi. I regret to say that many of our countrymen have a weakness for being taken in that way."

"Fancy Septimus Brown, of Tooting," my wife remarked, "a typical English paterfamilias, with a green veil, blue spectacles, and white umbrella, daring to ask the sun to record his image with the pigeons of St. Mark's clustering about his venerable head. Can't you picture the pride of that worthy gentleman's family when they produce the album on Sunday afternoons and show it to their friends? 'This is pa,' the eldest girl will probably remark, 'when he was travelling in Venice' (as if Venice were a country in which one must be perpetually moving on), 'and that's how the pigeons came down to him to be fed. Isn't it splendid of him?' Papa, who has never ventured beyond Brighton beach before, will be a person of importance from that moment."

"You forget one circumstance, however," Miss Trevor replied, who enjoyed an argument, and for this reason contradicted my wife on principle, "that in allowing himself to be taken at all, Brown of Tooting has advanced a step. For the moment he dared to throw off his insularity, as the picture at which you are laughing is indisputable testimony. Do you think he would dare to be photographed in a similar fashion in his own market-place, standing outside his shop-door with his assistants watching him from behind the counter? I am quite sure he would not!"

"A very excellent argument," I answered. "Unfortunately, however, it carries with it its own refutation. The mere fact that Brown takes the photograph home to show to his friends goes a long way towards proving that he is still as insular as when he set out. If he did not consider himself of sufficient importance to shut out a portion of Saint Mark's with his voluminous personality, he would not have employed the photographer at all, in which case we are no further advanced than before."

These little sparring-matches were a source of great amusement to us. The Cockney tourist was Miss Trevor's *bête noir*. And upon this failing my wife and I loved to twit her. On the whole I rather fancy she liked being teased by us.

We had finished our coffee and were still idly watching the people about us when I noticed that my wife had turned a little pale. I was about to remark upon it, when she uttered an exclamation as if something had startled her.

"Good gracious! Dick," she cried, "surely it is not possible. It must be a mistake."

"What is it cannot be possible?" I inquired. "What do you think you see?"

I glanced in the direction she indicated, but could recognize no one with whom I was acquainted. An English clergyman and his daughter were sitting near the entrance to the *café*, and some officers in uniform were on the other side of them again, but still my wife was looking in the same direction and with an equally startled face. I placed my hand upon her arm. It was a long time since I had seen her so agitated.

"Come, darling," I said, "tell me what it is that troubles you."

"Look," she answered, "can you see the table a little to the right of that at which those officers are seated?"

I was about to reply in the affirmative, but the shock I received deprived me of speech. The person to whom my wife referred had risen from his chair, and was in the act of walking towards us. I looked at him, looked away, and then looked again. No! there was no room for doubt; the likeness was unmistakable. I should have known him anywhere. *He was Doctor Nikola*; the man who had played such an important part in our life's drama. Five years had elapsed since I had last seen him, but in that time he was scarcely changed at all. It was the same tall, thin figure; the same sallow, clean-shaven face; the same piercing black eyes. As he drew nearer I noticed that his hair was a little more grey, that he looked slightly older; otherwise he was unchanged. But why was he coming to us? Surely he did not mean to speak to us? After the manner in which he had treated us in by-gone days I scarcely knew how to receive him. He on his side, however, was quite self-possessed. Raising his hat with that easy grace that always distinguished him, he advanced and held out his hand to my wife.

"My dear Lady Hatteras," he began in his most conciliatory tone, "I felt sure you would recognize me. Observing that you had not forgotten me, I took the liberty of coming to pay my respects to you."

Then before my wife could reply he had turned to me and was holding out his hand. For a moment I had half determined not to take it, but when his glittering eyes looked into mine I changed my mind and shook hands with him more cordially than I should ever have thought it possible for me to do. Having thus broken the ice, and as we had to all intents and purposes permitted him to derive the impression that we were prepared to forgive the Past, nothing remained for us but to introduce him to Miss Trevor. From the moment that he had approached us she had been watching him covertly, and that he had produced a decided impression upon her was easily seen. For the first time since we had known her she, usually so staid and unimpressible, was nervous and ill at ease. The introduction effected she drew back a little, and pretended to be absorbed in watching a party of our fellow-countrymen who had taken their places at a table a short distance from us. For my part I do not mind confessing that I was by no means comfortable. I remembered my bitter hatred of Nikola in days gone by. I recalled that terrible house in Port Said, and thought of the night on the island when I had rescued my wife from his clutches. In my estimation then he had been a villain of the deepest dye, and yet here he was sitting beside me as calm and collected, and apparently as interested in the *résumé* of our travels in Italy that my wife was giving him, as if we had been bosom friends throughout our lives. In any one else it would have been a piece of marvellous effrontery; in Nikola's case, however, it did not strike one in the same light. As I have so often remarked, he seemed incapable of acting like any other human being. His extraordinary personality lent a glamour to his simplest actions, and demanded for them an attention they would scarcely have received had he been less endowed.

"Have you been long in Venice?" my wife inquired when she had completed the record of our doings, feeling that she must say something.

"I seldom remain anywhere for very long," he answered, with one of his curious smiles. "I come and go like a Will-o'-the-wisp; I am here to-day and gone to-morrow."

It may have been an unfortunate remark, but I could not help uttering it.

"For instance, you are in London to-day," I said, "in Port Said next week, and in the South Sea Islands a couple of months later."

He was not in the least disconcerted.

"Ah! I see you have not forgotten our South Sea adventure," he replied cheerfully. "How long ago it seems, does it not? To me it is like a chapter out of another life." Then, turning to Miss Trevor, who of course had heard the story of our dealings with him sufficiently often to be weary of it, he added, "I hope you are not altogether disposed to think ill of me. Perhaps some day you will be able to persuade Lady Hatteras to forgive me, that is to say if she has not already done so. Yet I do not know why I should plead for pardon, seeing that I am far from being in a repentant mood. As a matter of fact I am very much afraid that, should the necessity arise, I should be compelled to act as I did then."

"Then let us pray most fervently that the necessity may never arise," I answered. "I for one do not entertain a very pleasant recollection of that time."

I spoke so seriously that my wife looked sharply up at me. Fearing, I suppose, that I might commit myself, she added quickly—

"I trust it may not. For I can assure you, Doctor Nikola, that my inclinations lie much nearer Bond Street than the South Sea Islands."

All this time Miss Trevor said nothing, but I could tell from the expression upon her face that Nikola interested her more than she would have been willing to admit.

"Is it permissible to ask where you are staying?" he inquired, breaking the silence and speaking as if it were a point upon which he was most anxious to be assured.

"At Galaghetti's," I answered. "While in Venice we always make it our home."

"Ah! the good Galaghetti," said Nikola softly. "It is a long time since I last had the pleasure of seeing him. I fancy, however, he would remember me. I was able to do him a slight service some time ago, and I have always understood that he possesses a retentive memory."

Then, doubtless feeling that he had stayed long enough, he rose and prepared to take leave of us.

"Perhaps, Lady Hatteras, you will permit me to do myself the honour of calling upon you?" he said.

"We shall be very pleased to see you," my wife replied, though with no real cordiality.

He then bowed to Miss Trevor, and shook hands with myself.

"Good-bye, Hatteras," he continued. "I shall hope soon to see you again. I expect we have lots of news for each other, and doubtless you will be interested to learn the history and subsequent adventures of that peculiar little stick which caused you so much anxiety, and myself so much trouble, five years ago. My address is the Palace Revecce, in the Rio del Consiglio, where, needless to say, I shall be delighted to see you if you care to pay me a visit."

I thanked him for his invitation, and promised that I would call upon him.

Then with a bow he took his departure, leaving behind him a sensation of something missing, something that could not be replaced. To sit down and continue the conversation where he had broken into it was out of the question. We accordingly rose, and after I had discharged the bill, strolled across the piazza towards the lagoon. Observing that Miss Trevor was still very silent, I inquired the cause.

"If you really want me to tell you, I can only account for it by saying that your friend, Doctor Nikola, has occasioned it," she answered. "I don't know why it should be so, but that man has made a curious

impression upon me."

"He seems to affect every one in a different manner," I said, and for some reason made no further comment upon her speech.

When we had called a gondola, and were on our way back to our hotel, she referred to the subject again.

"I think I ought to tell you that it is not the first time I have seen Doctor Nikola," she said. "You may remember that yesterday, while Phyllis was lying down, I went out to do some shopping. I cannot describe exactly which direction I took, save that I went towards the Rialto. It is sufficient that in the end I reached a chemist's shop. It was only a small place, and very dark, so dark indeed that I did not see that it contained another customer until I was really inside. Then I noticed a tall man busily engaged in conversation with the shopman. He was declaiming against some drugs he had purchased there on the previous day, and demanding that for the future they should be of better quality, otherwise he would be compelled to take his patronage elsewhere. In the middle of this harangue he turned round, and I was permitted an opportunity of seeing his face. He was none other than your friend, Doctor Nikola."

"But, my dear Gertrude," said Phyllis, "with all due respect to your narrative, I do not see that the mere fact of your having met Doctor Nikola in a chemist's shop yesterday, and your having been introduced to him to-day, should have caused you so much concern."

"I do not know why it should," she answered, "but it is a fact, nevertheless. Ever since I saw him yesterday, his face, with its terrible eyes, has haunted me. I dreamt of it last night. All day long I have had it before me, and now, as if to add to the strangeness of the coincidence, he proves to be the man of whom you have so often told me—your demoniacal, fascinating Nikola. You must admit that it is very strange."

"A coincidence, a mere coincidence, that is all," I replied. "Nikola possesses an extraordinary face, and it must have impressed itself more deeply upon you than the average countenance is happy enough to do."

Whether my explanation satisfied her or not, she said no more upon the subject. But that our strange meeting with Nikola had had an extraordinary effect upon her was plainly observable. As a rule she was as bright and merry a companion as one could wish to have; on this particular evening, however, she was not herself at all. It was the more annoying for the reason that I was anxious that she should shine on this occasion, as I was expecting an old friend, who was going to spend a few days with us in Venice. That friend was none other than the Duke of Glenbarth, who previous to his succession to the Dukedom had been known as the Marquis of Beckenham, and who, as the readers of the history of my adventures with Doctor Nikola may remember, figured as a very important factor in that strange affair. Ever since the day when I had the good fortune to render him a signal service in the bay of a certain south-coast watering-place, and from the time that he had accepted my invitation to join us in Venice, I had looked forward to his coming with the greatest possible eagerness. As it happened it was well-nigh seven o'clock by the time we reached our hotel. Without pausing in the hall further than to examine the letter-rack, we ascended to our rooms on the floor above. My wife and Miss Trevor had gone to their apartments, and I was about to follow their example as soon as I had obtained something from the sitting-room.

"A nice sort of host, a very nice host," said a laughing voice as I entered. "He invites me to stay with him, and is not at home to bid me welcome. My dear old Dick, how are you?"

"My dear fellow," I cried, hastening forward to greet him, "I must beg your pardon ten thousand times. I had not the least idea that you would be here so early. We have been sitting on the piazza, and did not hurry home."

"You needn't apologize," he answered. "For once an Italian train was before its time. And now tell me about yourself. How is your wife, how are you, and what sort of holiday are you having?"

I answered his questions to the best of my ability, keeping back my most important item as a surprise for him.

"And now," I said, "it is time to dress for dinner. But before you do so, I have some important news for you. Who do you think is in Venice?"

Needless to say he mentioned every one but the right person.

"You had better give it up, you will never guess," I said. "Who is the most unlikely person you would expect to see in Venice at the present moment?"

"Old Macpherson, my solicitor," he replied promptly. "The rascal would no more think of crossing the Channel than he would contemplate standing on his head in the middle of the Strand. It must be Macpherson."

"Nonsense," I cried. "I don't know Macpherson in the first place, and I doubt if he would interest me in the second. No! no! this man is neither a Scotchman nor a lawyer. He is an individual bearing the name of Nikola."

I had quite expected to surprise him, but I scarcely looked for such an outbreak of astonishment.

"What?" he cried, in amazement. "You must be joking. You don't mean to say that you have seen Nikola again?"

"I not only mean that I have seen him," I replied, "but I will go further than that, and say that he was sitting on the piazza with us not more than half-an-hour ago. What do you think his appearance in Venice means?"

"I don't know what to think," he replied, with an expression of almost comic bewilderment upon his face. "It seems impossible, and yet you don't look as if you were joking."

"I tell you the news in all sober earnestness," I answered, dropping my bantering tone. "It is a fact that Nikola is in Venice, and, what is more, that he has given me his address. He has invited me to call upon him, and if you like we will go together. What do you say?"

"I shall have to take time to think about it," Glenbarth replied seriously. "I don't suppose for a moment he has any intention of abducting me again; nevertheless, I am not going to give him the opportunity. By Jove, how that fellow's face comes back to me. It haunts me!"

"Miss Trevor has been complaining of the same thing," I said.

"Miss Trevor?" the Duke repeated. "And pray who may Miss Trevor be?"

"A friend of my wife's," I answered. "She has been travelling with us for the last few months. I think you will like her. And now come along with me and I'll show you your room. I suppose your man has discovered it by this time?"

"Stevens would find it if this hotel were constructed on the same principle as the maze at Hampton Court," he answered. "He has the virtue of persistence, and when he wants to find a thing he secures the person who would be the most likely to tell him, and sticks to him until his desire has been gratified."

It turned out as he had predicted, and three-quarters of an hour later our quartet sat down to dinner. My wife and Glenbarth, by virtue of an old friendship, agreed remarkably well, while Miss Trevor, now somewhat recovered from her Nikola indisposition, was more like her old self. It was a beautiful night, and after dinner it was proposed, seconded, and carried unanimously, that we should charter a gondola and go for a row upon the canal. On our homeward voyage the gondolier, by some strange chance, turned into the Rio del Consiglio.

"Perhaps you can tell me which is the Palace Revecce?" I said to the man.

He pointed to a building we were in the act of approaching.

"There it is, signor," he said. "At one time it was a very great palace but now—" here he shrugged his shoulders to enable us to understand that its glory had departed from it. Not another word was said upon the subject, but I noticed that all our faces turned in the direction of the building. With the exception of one solitary window it was in total darkness. As I looked at the latter I wondered whether Nikola were in the room, and if so, what he was doing? Was he poring over some of his curious books, trying some new experiment in chemistry, or putting to the test some theory such as I had found him at work upon in that curious house in Port Said? A few minutes later we had left the Rio del Consiglio behind us, had turned to the right, and were making our way back by another watery thoroughfare towards the Grand Canal.

"Thanks to your proposition we have had a delightful evening," Miss Trevor said, as we paused to say good-night at the foot of the staircase a quarter of an hour or so later. "I have enjoyed myself immensely."

"You should not tell him that, dear," said my wife. "You know how conceited he is already. He will take all the credit, and be unbearable for days afterwards." Then turning to me, she added, "You are going to smoke, I suppose?"

"I had thought of doing so," I replied; and then added with mock humility, "If you do not wish it of course I will not do so. I was only going to keep Glenbarth company."

They laughed and bade us good-night, and when we had seen them depart in the direction of their rooms we lit our cigars and passed into the balcony outside.

At this hour of the night the Grand Canal looked very still and beautiful, and we both felt in the humour for confidences.

"Do you know, Hatteras," said Glenbarth, after the few moments' pause that followed our arrival in the open air, "that Nikola's turning up in Venice at this particular juncture savours to me a little of the uncanny. What his mission may be, of course I cannot tell, but that it is some diabolical thing or another I haven't a doubt."

"One thing is quite certain," I answered, "he would hardly be here without an object, and, after our dealings with him in the past, I am prepared to admit that I don't trust him any more than you do."

"And now that he has asked you to call upon him what are you going to do?"

I paused before I replied. The question involved greater responsibilities than were at first glance apparent. Knowing Nikola so well, I had not the least desire or intention to be drawn into any of the plots or machinations he was so fond of working against other people. I must confess, nevertheless, that I could not help feeling a large amount of curiosity as to the subsequent history of that little stick, to obtain which he had spent so much money, and had risked so many lives.

"Yes, I think I shall call upon him," I said reflectively, as if I had not quite made up my mind. "Surely to see him once more could do no harm? Good heavens! what an extraordinary fellow he is! Fancy you or I being afraid of any other man as we are afraid of him, for mind you, I know that you stand quite as much in awe of him as I do. Why, do you know when my eyes fell upon him this afternoon I felt a return of the old dread his presence used to cause in me five years ago! The effect he had upon Miss Trevor was also very singular, when you come to think of it."

"By the way, Hatteras, talking of Miss Trevor, what an awfully nice girl she is. I don't know when I have ever met a nicer. Who is she?"

"She is the daughter of the Dean of Bedminster," I answered; "a splendid old fellow."

"I like his daughter," the Duke remarked. "Yes, I must say that I like her very much."

I was glad to hear this, for I had my own little dreams, and my wife, who, by the way, is a born matchmaker, had long ago come to a similar conclusion.

"She is a very nice girl," I replied, "and what is more, she is as good as she is nice." Then I continued, "He will be indeed a lucky man who wins Gertrude Trevor for his wife. And now, since our cigars are finished, what do you say to bed? It is growing late, and I expect you are tired after your journey."

"I am quite ready," he answered. "I shall sleep like a top. I only hope and pray that I shall not dream of Nikola."



CHAPTER II

Whether it was our excursion upon the canal that was responsible for it I cannot say; the fact, however, remains, that next morning every member of our party was late for breakfast. My wife and I were the first to put in an appearance, Glenbarth followed shortly after, and Miss Trevor was last of all. It struck me that the girl looked a little pale as she approached the window to bid me good-morning, and as she prided herself upon her punctuality, I jestingly reproved her for her late rising.

"I am afraid your gondola excursion proved too much for you," I said, in a bantering tone, "or perhaps you dreamt of Doctor Nikola."

I expected her to declare in her usual vehement fashion that she would not waste her time dreaming of any man, but to my combined astonishment and horror her eyes filled with tears, until she was compelled to turn her head away in order to hide them from me. It was all so unexpected that I did not know what to think. As may be supposed, I had not the slightest intention of giving her pain, nor could I quite see how I managed to do so. It was plain, however, that my thoughtless speech had been the means of upsetting her, and I was heartily sorry for my indiscretion. Fortunately my wife had not overheard what had passed between us.

"Is he teasing you again, Gertrude?" she said, as she slipped her arm through her friend's. "Take my advice and have nothing to do with him. Treat him with contempt. Besides, the coffee is getting cold, and that is a very much more important matter. Let us sit down to breakfast."

Nothing could have been more opportune. We took our places at the table, and by the time the servant had handed the first dishes Miss Trevor had recovered herself sufficiently to be able to look me in the face, and to join in the conversation without the likelihood of a catastrophe. Still there could be no doubt that she was far from being in a happy frame of mind. I said as much to my wife afterwards, when we were alone together.

"She told me she had had a very bad night," the little woman replied. "Our meeting with Doctor Nikola yesterday on the piazza upset her for some reason or another. She said that she had dreamt of nothing else. As you know she is very highly strung, and when you think of the descriptions we have given her of him, it is scarcely to be wondered at that she should attach an exaggerated importance to our unexpected meeting with him. That is the real explanation of the mystery. One thing, however, is quite certain; in her present state of mind she must see no more of him than can be helped. It might upset her altogether. Oh, why did he come here to spoil our holiday?"

"I cannot see that he has spoilt it, my dear," I returned, putting my arm round her waist and leading her to the window. "The girl will very soon recover from her fit of depression, and afterwards will be as merry as a marriage-bell. By the way, I don't know why I should think of it just now, but talking of marriage-bells reminds me that Glenbarth told me last night that he thought Gertrude one of the nicest girls he had ever met."

"I am delighted to hear it," my wife answered. "And still more delighted to think that he has such good sense. Do you know, I have set my heart upon that coming to something. No! you needn't shake your head. For very many reasons it would be a most desirable match."

"For my own part I believe it was for no other reason that you bothered me into inviting him to join our

party here. You are a matchmaker. I challenge you to refute the accusation."

"I shall not attempt to do so," she retorted with considerable hauteur. "It is always a waste of time to argue with you. At any rate you must agree with me that Gertrude would make an ideal duchess."

"So you have travelled as far as that, have you?" I inquired. "I must say that you jump to conclusions very quickly. Because Glenbarth happens to have said in confidence to me (a confidence I am willing to admit I have shamefully abused) that he considers Gertrude Trevor a very charming girl, it does not follow that he has the very slightest intention of asking her to be his wife. Why should he?"

"If he doesn't he is not fit to sit in the House of Lords," she answered, as if that ought to clinch the argument. "Fancy a man posing as one of our hereditary legislators who doesn't know how to seize such a golden opportunity. As a good churchwoman I pray for the nobility every Sunday morning; and if not knowing where to look for the best wife in the world may be taken as a weakness, and it undoubtedly is, then all I can say is, that they require all the praying for they can get!"

"But I should like to know, how is he going to marry the best wife in the world?" I asked.

"By asking her," she retorted. "He doesn't surely suppose she is going to ask him?"

"If he values his life he'd better not do that!" I said savagely. "He will have to answer for it to me if he does!"

"Ah," she answered, her lips curling, "I thought as much. You are jealous of him. You don't want him to ask her because you fancy that if he does your reign will be over. A nice admission for a married man, I must say!"

"I presume you mean because I refuse to allow him to flirt with my wife?"

"I mean nothing of the kind, and you know it. How dare you say, Dick, that I flirt with the Duke?"

"Because you have confessed it," I answered with a grin of triumph, for I had got her cornered at last. "Did you not say, only a moment ago, that if he did not know where to find the best wife in the world he was unfit to sit in the House of Lords? Did you not say that he ought to be ashamed of himself if he did not ask her to be his wife? Answer that, my lady."

"I admit that I did say it; but you know very well that I referred to Gertrude Trevor!"

"Gertrude Trevor is not yet a wife. The best wife in the world is beside me now; and since you are already proved to be in the wrong you must perforce pay the penalty."

She was in the act of doing so when Gertrude entered the room.

"Oh, dear," she began, hesitating in pretended consternation, "is there never to be an end of it?"

"An end of what?" demanded my wife with some little asperity, for she does not like her little endearments to be witnessed by other people.

"Of this billing and cooing," the other replied. "You two insane creatures have been married more than four years, and yet a third person can never enter the room without finding you love-making. I declare it upsets all one's theories of marriage. One of my most cherished ideas was that this sort of thing ceased with the honeymoon, and that the couple invariably lead a cat-and-dog life for the remainder of their

existence."

"So they do," my wife answered unblushingly. "And what can you expect when one is a great silly creature who will not learn to jump away and be looking innocently out of the window when he hears the handle turned? Never marry, Gertrude. Mark my words: you will repent it if you do!"

"Well, for ingratitude and cool impudence, that surpasses everything!" I said in astonishment. "Why, you audacious creature, not more than five minutes ago you were inviting me to co-operate in the noble task of finding a husband for Miss Trevor!"

"Richard, how can you stand there and say such things?" she ejaculated. "Gertrude, my dear, I insist that you come away at once. I don't know what he will say next."

Miss Trevor laughed.

"I like to hear you two squabbling," she said. "Please go on, it amuses me!"

"Yes, I will certainly go on," I returned. "Perhaps you heard her declare that she fears what I may say next. Of course she does. Allow me to tell you, Lady Hatteras, that you are a coward. If the truth were known, it would be found that you are trembling in your shoes at this moment. For two centimes, paid down, I would turn Queen's evidence, and reveal the whole plot."

"You had better not, sir," she replied, shaking a warning finger at me. "In that case the letters from home shall be withheld from you, and you will not know how your son and heir is progressing."

"I capitulate," I answered. "Threatened by such awful punishment I dare say no more. Miss Gertrude, will you not intercede for me?"

"I think that you scarcely deserve it," she retorted. "Even now you are keeping something back from me."

"Never mind, my dear, we'll let him off this time with a caution," said my wife, "provided he promises not to offend again. And now let us settle what we are going to do to-day."

When this important matter had been arranged, it was reported to us that the ladies were to spend the morning shopping, leaving the Duke and myself free to follow our own inclinations. Accordingly, when we had seen them safely on their way to the Merceria, we held a smoking council to arrange how we should pass the hours until lunch-time. As we discovered afterwards, we both had a certain thought in our minds, which for some reason we scarcely liked to broach to each other. It was settled, however, just as we desired, but in a fashion we least expected.

We were seated in the balcony outside our room, watching the animated traffic on the Grand Canal below, when a servant came in search of us and handed me a note. One glance at the characteristic writing was sufficient to show me that it was from Doctor Nikola. I opened it with an eagerness that I did not attempt to conceal, and read as follows—

"DEAR HATTERAS,

"If you have nothing more important on hand this morning, can you spare the time to come and see me? As I understand the Duke of Glenbarth is with you, will you not bring him also? It will be very pleasant to have a chat upon by-gone days, and, what is more, I fancy this old house will interest you.

"Yours very truly,

"What do you say?" I inquired, when I had finished reading, "shall we go?"

"Let us do so by all means," the Duke replied. "It will be very interesting to meet Nikola once more. There is one thing, however, that puzzles me; how did he become aware of my arrival in Venice? You say he was with you on the piazza last night, so that he could not have been at the railway station, and as I haven't been outside since I came, except for the row after dinner, I confess it puzzles me."

"You should know by this time that it is useless to wonder how Nikola acquires his knowledge," I replied. "For my own part I should like to discover *his* reason for being in Venice. I am very curious on that point."

Glenbarth shook his head solemnly.

"If Nikola does not want us to know," he argued, "we shall leave his house as wise as we entered it. If he *does* let us know, I shall begin to grow suspicious, for in that case it is a thousand pounds to this half-smoked cigar that we shall be called upon to render him assistance. However, if you are prepared to run the risk I will do so also."

"In that case," I said, rising from my chair and tossing what remained of my cigar into the water below, "let us get ready and be off. We may change our minds."

Ten minutes later we had chartered a gondola and were on our way to the Palace Revecce.

As a general rule when one sets out to pay a morning call one is not the victim of any particular nervousness; on this occasion however both Glenbarth and I, as we confessed to each other afterwards, were distinctly conscious of being in a condition which would be described by persons of mature years as an unpleasant state of expectancy, but which by school-boys is denominated "funk." The Duke, I noticed, fidgeted with his cigar, allowed it to go out, and then sat with it in his mouth unlighted. There was a far-away look on his handsome face that told me that he was recalling some of the events connected with the time when he had been in Nikola's company. This proved to be the case, for as we turned from the Grand Canal into the street in which the palace is situated, he said—

"By the way, Hatteras, I wonder what became of Baxter, Prendergrast, and those other fellows?"

"Nikola may be able to tell us," I answered. Then I added after a short pause, "By Jove, what strange times those were."

"Not half so strange to my thinking as our finding Nikola in Venice," Glenbarth replied. "That is the coincidence that astonishes me. But see, here we are."

As he spoke the gondola drew up at the steps of the Palace Revecce, and we prepared to step ashore. As we did so I noticed that the armorial bearings of the family still decorated the posts on either side of the door, but by the light of day the palace did not look nearly so imposing as it had done by moonlight the night before. One thing about it was certainly peculiar. When we ordered the gondolier to wait for us he shook his head. Not for anything would he remain there longer than was necessary to set us down. I accordingly paid him off, and when we had ascended the steps we entered the building. On pushing open the door we found ourselves standing in a handsome courtyard, in the centre of which was a well, its coping elegantly carved with a design of fruit and flowers. A broad stone staircase at the further end led up to the floor above, but this, as was the case with everything else, showed unmistakable signs of having

been allowed to fall to decay. As no concierge was to be seen, and there was no one in sight of whom we might make inquiries, we scarcely knew how to proceed. Indeed, we were just wondering whether we should take our chance and explore the lower regions in search of Nikola, when he appeared at the head of the staircase and greeted us.

"Good-morning," he said, "pray come up. I must apologize for not having been down-stairs to receive you."

By the time he had finished speaking he had reached us, and was shaking hands with Glenbarth with the heartiness of an old friend.

"Let me offer you a hearty welcome to Venice," he said to Glenbarth after he had shaken hands with myself. Then looking at him once more, he added, "If you will permit me to say so, you have changed a great deal since we last saw each other."

"And you, scarcely at all," Glenbarth replied.

"It is strange that I should not have done so," Nikola answered, I thought a little sadly, "for I think I may say without any fear of boasting that, since we parted at Pipa Lannu, I have passed through sufficient to change a dozen men. But we will not talk of that here. Let us come up to my room, which is the only place in this great house that is in the least degree comfortable."

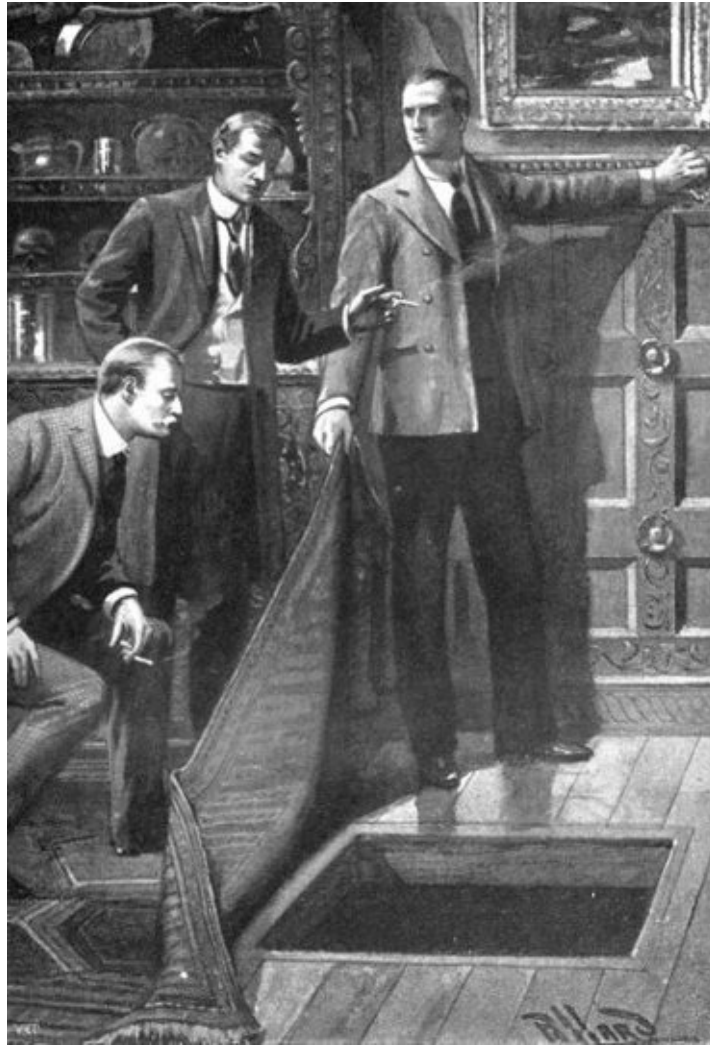
So saying he led the way up the stairs, and then along a corridor, which had once been beautifully frescoed, but which was now sadly given over to damp and decay. At last, reaching a room in the front of the building, he threw open the door and invited us to enter. And here I might digress for a moment to remark, that of all the men I have ever met, Nikola possessed the faculty of being able to make himself comfortable wherever he might be, in the greatest degree. He would have been at home anywhere. As a matter of fact this particular apartment was furnished in a style that caused me considerable surprise. The room itself was large and lofty, while the walls were beautifully frescoed, the work of one Andrea Bunopelli, of whom I shall have more to say anon. The furniture was simple, but extremely good; a massive oak writing-table stood beside one wall, another covered with books and papers was opposite it, several easy-chairs were placed here and there, another table in the centre of the room supported various chemical paraphernalia, while books of all sorts and descriptions, in all languages and bindings, were to be discovered in every direction.

"After what you have seen of the rest of the house, this strikes you as being more homelike, does it not?" Nikola inquired, as he noticed the look of astonishment upon our faces. "It is a queer old place, and the more I see of it the stranger it becomes. Some time ago, and quite by chance, I became acquainted with its history; I do not mean the political history of the respective families that have occupied it; you can find that in any guide-book. I mean the real, inner history of the house itself, embracing not a few of the deeds which have taken place inside its walls. I wonder if you would be interested if I were to tell you that in this very room, in the year fifteen hundred and eleven, one of the most repellent and cold-blooded murders of the Middle Ages took place. Perhaps now that you have the scene before you you would like to hear the story. You would? In that case pray sit down. Let me offer you this chair, Duke," he continued, and as he spoke he wheeled forward a handsomely carved chair from beside his writing-table. "Here, Hatteras, is one for you. I myself will take up my position here, so that I may be better able to retain your attention for my narrative."

So saying he stood between us on the strip of polished floor which showed between two heavy oriental rugs.

"For some reasons," he began, "I regret that the story I have to tell should run upon such familiar lines. I fancy, however, that the *dénouement* will prove sufficiently original to merit your attention. The year fifteen hundred and nine, the same which found the French victorious at Agnadello, and the Venetian Republic at the commencement of that decline from which it has never recovered, saw this house in its glory. The owner, the illustrious Francesco del Revecce, was a sailor, and had the honour of commanding one of the many fleets of the Republic. He was an ambitious man, a good fighter, and as such twice defeated the fleet of the League of Camberi. It was after the last of these victories that he married the beautiful daughter of the Duke of Levano, one of the most bitter enemies of the Council of Ten. The husband being rich, famous, and still young enough to be admired for his personal attractions; the bride one of the wealthiest, as well as one of the most beautiful women in the Republic, it appeared as if all must be well with them for the remainder of their lives. A series of dazzling *fêtes*, to which all the noblest and most distinguished of the city were invited, celebrated their nuptials and their possession of this house. Yet with it all the woman was perhaps the most unhappy individual in the universe. Unknown to her husband and her father she had long since given her love elsewhere; she was passionately attached to young Andrea Bunopelli, the man by whom the frescoes of this room were painted. Finding that Fate demanded her renunciation of Bunopelli, and her marriage to Revecce, she resolved to see no more of the man to whom she had given her heart. Love, however, proved stronger than her sense of duty, and while her husband, by order of the Senate, had put to sea once more in order to drive back the French, who were threatening the Adriatic, Bunopelli put into operation the scheme that was ultimately to prove their mutual undoing. Unfortunately for Revecce he was not successful in his venture, and by and by news reached Venice that his fleet had been destroyed, and that he himself had been taken prisoner. 'Now,' said the astute Bunopelli, 'is the time to act.' He accordingly took pens, paper, and his ink-horn, and in this very room concocted a letter which purported to bear the signature of the commander of the French forces, into whose hands the Venetian admiral had fallen and then was. Its meaning was plain enough. It proved that for a large sum of money Revecce had agreed to surrender the Venetian fleet, and, in order to secure his own safety, in case the Republic should lay hands on him afterwards, it was to be supposed that he himself had only been taken prisoner after a desperate resistance, as had really been the case. The letter was written, and that night the painter himself dropped it into the lion's mouth. Revecce might return now as soon as he pleased. His fate was prepared for him. Meanwhile the guilty pair spent the time as happily as was possible under the circumstances, knowing full well that should the man against whom they had plotted return to Venice, it would only be to find himself arrested, and with the certainty, on the evidence of the incriminating letter, of being immediately condemned to death. Weeks and months went by. At last Revecce, worn almost to a skeleton by reason of his long imprisonment, *did* manage to escape. In the guise of a common fisherman he returned to Venice; reached his own house, where a faithful servant recognized him and admitted him to the palace. From the latter's lips he learnt all that had transpired during his absence, and was informed of the villainous plot that had been prepared against him. His wrath knew no bounds; but with it all he was prudent. He was aware that if his presence in the city were discovered, nothing could save him from arrest. He accordingly hid himself in his own house and watched the course of events. What he saw was sufficient to confirm his worst suspicion. His wife was unfaithful to him, and her paramour was the man to whom he had been so kind a friend, and so generous a benefactor. Then when the time was ripe, assisted only by his servant, the same who had admitted him to his house, he descended upon the unhappy couple. Under threats of instant death he extorted from them a written confession of their treachery. After having made them secure, he departed for the council-chamber and demanded to be heard. He was the victim of a conspiracy, he declared, and to prove that what he said was true he produced the confession he had that day obtained. He had many powerful friends, and by their influence an immediate pardon was granted him, while permission was also given him to deal with his enemies as he might consider most desirable. He accordingly returned to this house with a scheme he was

prepared to put into instant execution. It is not a pretty story, but it certainly lends an interest to this room. The painter he imprisoned here."



"He pressed a spring in the wall."

So saying Nikola stooped and drew back one of the rugs to which I have already referred. The square outline of a trap-door showed itself in the floor. He pressed a spring in the wall behind him, and the lid shot back, swung round, and disappeared, showing the black abyss below. A smell of damp vaults came up to us. Then, when he had closed the trap-door again, Nikola drew the carpet back to its old position.

"The wretched man died slowly of starvation in that hole, and the woman, living in this room above, was compelled to listen to his agony without being permitted the means of saving him. Can you imagine the scene? The dying wretch below, doing his best to die like a man in order not to distress the woman he loved, and the outraged husband calmly pursuing his studies, regardless of both."

He looked from one to the other of us and his eyes burnt like living coals.

"It was brutish, it was hellish," cried Glenbarth, upon whom either the story, or Nikola's manner of narrating it, had produced an extraordinary effect. "Why did the woman allow it to continue? Was she mad that she did not summon assistance? Surely the Authorities of a State which prided itself upon its enlightenment, even in those dark ages, would not have tolerated such a thing?"

"You must bear in mind the fact that the Republic had given the husband permission to avenge his wrongs," said Nikola very quietly. "Besides, the woman could not cry out for the reason that her tongue had been torn out at the roots. When both were dead their bodies were tied together and thrown into the canal, and the same day Revecce set sail again, to ultimately perish in a storm off the coast of Sicily. Now

you know one of the many stories connected with this old room. There are others in which that trap-door has played an equally important part. I fear, however, none of them can boast so dramatic a setting as that I have just narrated to you."

"How, knowing all this, you can live in the house passes my comprehension," gasped Glenbarth. "I don't think I am a coward, but I tell you candidly that I would not spend a night here, after what you have told me, for anything the world could give me."

"But surely you don't suppose that what happened in this room upwards of three hundred years ago could have any effect upon a living being to-day?" said Nikola, with what I could not help thinking was a double meaning. "Let me tell you, that far from being unpleasant it has decided advantages. As a matter of fact it gives me the opportunity of being free to do what I like. That is my greatest safeguard. I can go away for five years, if I please, and leave the most valuable of my things lying about, and come back to the discovery that nothing is missing. I am not pestered by tourists who ask to see the frescoes, for the simple reason that the guides take very good care not to tell them the legend of the house, lest they may be called upon to take them over it. Many of the gondoliers will not stop here after nightfall, and the few who are brave enough to do so, invariably cross themselves before reaching, and after leaving it."

"I do not wonder at it," I said. "Taken altogether it is the most dismal dwelling I have ever set foot in. Do you mean to tell me that you live alone in it?"

"Not entirely," he replied. "I have companions: an old man who comes in once a day to attend to my simple wants, and my ever-faithful friend——"

"Apollyon," I cried, forestalling what he was about to say.

"Exactly, Apollyon. I am glad to see that you remember him."

He uttered a low whistle, and a moment later the great beast that I remembered so well stalked solemnly into the room, and began to rub himself against the leg of his master's chair.

"Poor old fellow," continued Nikola, picking him up and gently stroking him, "he is growing very feeble. Perhaps it is not to be wondered at, for he is already far past the average age of the feline race. He has been in many strange places, and has seen many queer things since last we met, but never anything much stranger than he has witnessed in this room."

"What do you mean?" I inquired. "What has the cat seen in this room that is so strange?"

"Objects that we are not yet permitted to see," Nikola answered gravely. "When all is quiet at night, and I am working at that table, he lies curled up in yonder chair. For a time he will sleep contentedly, then I see him lift his head and watch something, or somebody, I cannot say which, moving about in the room. At first I came to the conclusion that it must be a bat, or some night bird, but that theory exploded. Bats do not remain at the same exact distance from the floor, nor do they stand stationary behind a man's chair for any length of time. The hour will come, however, when it will be possible for us to see these things; I am on the track even now."

Had I not known Nikola, and if I had not remembered some very curious experiments he had performed for my special benefit two years before, I should have inclined to the belief that he was boasting. I knew him too well, however, to deem it possible that he would waste his time in such an idle fashion.

"Do you mean to say," I asked, "that you really think that in time it will be possible for us to see things

which at present we have no notion of? That we shall be able to look into the world we have always been taught to consider Unknowable?"

"I do mean it," he replied. "And though you may scarcely believe it, it was for the sake of the information necessary to that end that I pestered Mr. Wetherall in Sydney, imprisoned you in Port Said, and carried the lady, who is now your wife, away to the island in the South Seas."

"This is most interesting," I said, while Glenbarth drew his chair a little closer.

"Pray tell us some of your adventures since we last saw you," he put in. "You may imagine how eager we are to hear."

Thereupon Nikola furnished us with a detailed description of all that he had been through since that momentous day when he had obtained possession of the stick that had been bequeathed to Mr. Wetherall by China Pete. He told us how, armed with this talisman, he had set out for China, where he engaged a man named Bruce, who must have been as plucky as Nikola himself, and together they started off in search of an almost unknown monastery in Thibet. He described with a wealth of exciting detail the perilous adventures they had passed through, and how near they had been to losing their lives in attempting to obtain possession of a certain curious book in which were set forth the most wonderful secrets relating to the laws of Life and Death. He told us of their hair-breadth escapes on the journey back to civilization, and showed how they were followed to England by a mysterious Chinaman, whose undoubted mission was to avenge the robbery, and to obtain possession of the book. At this moment he paused, and I found an opportunity of asking him whether he had the book in his possession now.

"Would you care to see it?" he inquired. "If so, I will show it to you."

On our answering in the affirmative he crossed to his writing-table, unlocked a drawer, and took from it a small curiously bound book, the pages of which were yellow with age, and the writing so faded that it was almost impossible to decipher it.

"And now that you have plotted and planned, and suffered so much to obtain possession of this book, what use has it been to you?" I inquired, with almost a feeling of awe, for it seemed impossible that a man could have endured so much for so trifling a return.

"In dabbling with such matters," Nikola returned, "one of the first lessons one learns is not to expect immediate results. There is the collected wisdom of untold ages in that little volume, and when I have mastered the secret it contains, I shall, like the eaters of the forbidden fruit, possess a knowledge of all things, Good and Evil."

Replacing the book in the drawer he continued his narrative, told us of his great attempt to probe the secret of Existence, and explained to us his endeavour to put new life into a body already worn out by age.

"I was unsuccessful in what I set out to accomplish," he said, "but I advanced so far that I was able to restore the man his youth again. What I failed to do was to give him the power of thought or will. It was the brain that was too much for me, that vital part of man without which he is nothing. When I have mastered that secret I shall try again, and then, perhaps, I shall succeed. But there is much to be accomplished first. Only I know how much!"

I looked at him in amazement. Was he jesting, or did he really suppose that it was possible for him, or any other son of man, to restore youth, and by so doing to prolong life perpetually? Yet he spoke with all his

usual earnestness, and seemed as convinced of the truth of what he said as if he were narrating some well-known fact. I did not know what to think.

At last, seeing the bewilderment on our faces, I suppose, he smiled, and rising from his chair reminded us that if we had been bored we had only ourselves to thank for it. He accordingly changed the conversation by inquiring whether we had made any arrangements for that evening. I replied that so far as I knew we had not, whereupon he came forward with a proposition.

"In that case," said he, "if you will allow me to act as your guide to Venice, I think I could show you a side of the city you have never seen before. I know her as thoroughly as any man living, and I think I may safely promise that your party will spend an interesting couple of hours. What have you to say to my proposal?"

"I am quite sure we shall be delighted," I replied, though not without certain misgivings. "But I think I had better not decide until I have seen my wife. If she has made no other arrangements, at what hour shall we start?"

"At what time do you dine?" he inquired.

"At seven o'clock," I replied. "Perhaps we might be able to persuade you to give us the pleasure of your company?"

"I thank you," he answered. "I fear I must decline, however. I am hermit-like in my habits so far as meals are concerned. If you will allow me I will call for you, shall we say at half-past eight? The moon will have risen by that time, and we should spend a most enjoyable evening."

"At half-past eight," I said, "unless you hear to the contrary," and then rose from my chair. Glenbarth followed my example, and we accordingly bade Nikola good-bye. Despite our protest, he insisted on accompanying us down the great staircase to the courtyard below, his terrible cat following close upon his heels. Hailing a gondola, we bade the man take us back to our hotel. For some minutes after we had said good-bye to Nikola we sat in silence as the boat skimmed over the placid water.

"Well, what is your opinion of Nikola now?" I said, as we turned from the Rio del Consiglio into the Grand Canal once more. "Has he grown any more commonplace, think you, since you last saw him?"

"On the contrary, he is stranger than ever," Glenbarth replied. "I have never met any other man who resembled him in the slightest degree. What a ghastly story that was! His dramatic telling of it made it appear so real that towards the end of it I was almost convinced that I could hear the groans of the poor wretch in the pit below, and see the woman wringing her hands and moaning in the room in which we were sitting. Why he should have told it to us is what I cannot understand, neither can I make out what his reasons can be for living in that house."

"Nikola's actions are like himself, entirely inexplicable," he answered. "But that he has some motive beyond the desire he expressed for peace and quiet, I have not the shadow of a doubt."

"And now with regard to to-night," said the Duke, I am afraid a little pettishly. "I was surprised when you accepted his offer. Do you think Lady Hatteras and Miss Trevor will care about such an excursion?"

"That is a question I cannot answer at present," I replied. "We must leave it to them to decide. For my own part, I can scarcely imagine anything more interesting."

When we reached Galaghetti's I informed my wife and Miss Trevor of Nikola's offer, half expecting that the latter, from the manner in which she had behaved at the mere mention of his name that morning, would decline to accompany us, and, therefore, that the excursion would fall through. To my surprise, however, she did nothing of the kind. She fell in with the idea at once, and, so far as we could see, without reluctance of any kind.

There was nothing for it, therefore, under these circumstances, but for me to fall back upon the old commonplace, and declare that women are difficult creatures to understand.



CHAPTER III

In the previous chapter I recorded the surprise I felt at Miss Trevor's acceptance of Doctor Nikola's invitation to a gondola excursion. Almost as suddenly as she had shown her fear of him, she had recovered her tranquillity, and the result, as I have stated, was complete perplexity on my part. With a united desire to reserve our energies for the evening, we did not arrange a long excursion for that afternoon, but contented ourselves with a visit to the church of SS. Giovanni e Paolo. Miss Trevor was quite recovered by this time, and in very good spirits. She and Glenbarth were on the most friendly terms, consequently my wife was a most happy woman.

"Isn't it nice to see them together?" she whispered, as we crossed the hall and went down the steps to our gondola. "They are suited to each other almost as—well, if I really wanted to pay you a compliment, which you don't deserve, I should say as we are. Do you notice how prettily she gives him her hand so that he may help her into the boat?"

"I do," I answered grimly. "And it only shows the wickedness of the girl. She is as capable of getting into the boat without assistance as he is."

"And yet you help her yourself every time you get the chance," my wife retorted. "I have observed you take the greatest care that she should not fall, even when the step has been one of only a few inches, and I have been left to get down by myself. Perhaps you cannot recall that day at Capri?"

"I have the happiest recollections of it," I replied. "I helped her quite half-a-dozen times."

"And yet you grudge that poor boy the opportunities that you yourself were once so eager to enjoy. You cannot deny it."

"I am not going to attempt to deny it," I returned. "I *do* grudge him his chances. And why shouldn't I? Has she not the second prettiest hands, and the second neatest ankle, in all Europe?"

My wife looked up at me with a suspicion of a smile hovering round her mouth. When she does that her dimples are charming.

"And the neatest?" she inquired, as if she had not guessed. Women can do that sort of thing with excellent effect.

"Lady Hatteras, may I help you into the gondola?" I said politely, and for some reason, best known to herself, the reply appeared to satisfy her.

Of one thing there could be no sort of doubt. Miss Trevor had taken a decided liking to Glenbarth, and the young fellow's delight in her company was more than equal to it. By my wife's orders I left them together as much as possible during the afternoon, that is to say as far as was consistent with the duties of an observant chaperon. For instance, while we were in the right aisle of the church, examining the mausoleum of the Doge, Pietro Mocenningo, and the statues of Lombardi, they were in the choir proper, before the famous tomb of Andrea Vendramin, considered by many to be the finest of its kind in Venice. As we entered the choir, they departed into the left transept. I fancy, however, Glenbarth must have been a little chagrined when she, playing her hand according to the recognized rules, suggested that they should turn back in search of us. Back they came accordingly, to be received by my wife with a speech that still further revealed to me the duplicity of women.

"You are two naughty children," she said, with fairly simulated wrath. "Where on earth have you been? We have been looking for you everywhere!"

"You are so slow," put in Miss Trevor, and then she added, without a quaver in her voice or blush upon her cheek, "We dawdled about in order to let you catch us up."

I thought it was time for me to interfere.

"Perhaps I should remind you young people that at the present moment you are in a church," I said. "Would it not be as well, do you think, for you to preserve those pretty little prevarications until you are in the gondola? You will be able to quarrel in greater comfort there. It will also give Phyllis time to collect her thoughts, and to prepare a new indictment."

My wife treated me to a look that would have annihilated another man. After that I washed my hands of them and turned to the copy of Titian's *Martyrdom of Saint Peter*, which Victor Emmanuel had presented to the church in place of the original, which had been destroyed. Later on we made our way, by a long series of tortuous thoroughfares, to the piazza of Saint Mark, where we intended to sit in front of Florian's *café* and watch the people until it was time for us to return and dress for dinner.

As I have already said, Miss Trevor had all the afternoon been in the best of spirits. Nothing could have been happier than her demeanour when we left the church, yet when we reached the piazza everything was changed. Apparently she was not really unhappy, nor did she look about her in the frightened way that had struck me so unpleasantly on the previous evening. It was only her manner that was strange. At first she was silent, then, as if she were afraid we might notice it, she set herself to talk as if she were so doing for mere talking's sake. Then, without any apparent reason, she became as silent as a mouse once more. Remembering what had happened that morning before breakfast, I did not question her, nor did I attempt to rally her upon the subject. To have done either would have been to have risked a recurrence of the catastrophe we had so narrowly escaped earlier in the day. I accordingly left her alone, and my wife, in the hope of distracting her attention, entered upon an amusing argument with Glenbarth upon the evils attendant upon excessive smoking, which was the young man's one, and, so far as I knew, only failing. Unable to combat her assertions he appealed to me for protection.

"Take my part, there's a good fellow," he said pathetically. "I am not strong enough to stand against Lady Hatteras alone."

"No," I returned; "you must fight your own battles. When I see a chance of having a little peace I like to grasp it. I am going to take Miss Trevor to Maya's shop on the other side of the piazza, in search of new photographs. We will leave you to quarrel in comfort here."

So saying Miss Trevor and I left them and made our way to the famous shop, where I purchased for her a number of photographs, of which she had expressed her admiration a few days before. After that we rejoined my wife and Glenbarth and returned to our hotel for dinner.

Nikola, as you may remember, had arranged to call for us with his gondola at half-past eight, and ten minutes before that time I suggested that the ladies should prepare themselves for the excursion. I bade them wrap up well, for I knew by experience that it is seldom warm upon the water at night. When they had left us the Duke and I strolled into the balcony.

"I hope to goodness Nikola won't frighten Miss Trevor this evening," said my companion, after we had been there a few moments. (I noticed that he spoke with an anxiety that was by no means usual with him.)

"She is awfully sensitive, you know, and when he likes he can curdle the very marrow in your bones. I shouldn't have liked her to have heard that story he told us this morning. I suppose there is no fear of his repeating it to-night?"

"I should not think so," I returned. "Nikola has more tact in his little finger than you and I have in our whole bodies. He would be scarcely likely to make such a mistake. No, I rather fancy that to-night we shall see a new side of his character. For my own part I am prepared to confess that I am looking forward to the excursion with a good deal of pleasure."

"I am glad to hear it," Glenbarth replied, as I thought with a savour of sarcasm in his voice. "I only hope you won't have reason to regret it."

This little speech set me thinking. Was it possible that Glenbarth was jealous of Nikola? Surely he could not be foolish enough for that. That Miss Trevor had made an impression upon him was apparent, but it was full early for him to grow jealous, and particularly of such a man.

While I was thinking of this the ladies entered the room, and at the same moment we heard Nikola's gondola draw up at the steps. I thought Miss Trevor looked a little pale, but though still very quiet she was more cheerful than she had been before dinner.

"Our guide has arrived," I remarked, as I closed the windows behind us. "We had better go down to the hall. Miss Trevor, if you will accompany me, the Duke will bring Phyllis. We must not keep Nikola waiting."

We accordingly left our apartments and proceeded down-stairs.

"I trust you are looking forward to your excursion, Miss Trevor?" I said as we descended the stairs. "If I am not mistaken you will see Venice to-night under circumstances such as you could never have dreamed of before."

"I do not doubt it," she answered simply. "It will be a night to remember."

Little did she guess how true her prophecy was destined to be. It was indeed a night that every member of the party would remember all his, or her, life long. When we had reached the hall, Nikola had just entered it, and was in the act of sending up a servant to announce his arrival. He shook hands with my wife, then with Miss Trevor, afterwards with Glenbarth and myself. His hand was, as usual, as cold as ice and his face was deathly pale. His tall, lithe figure was concealed by his voluminous coat, but what was lost in one direction was compensated for by the mystery that it imparted to his personality. For some reason I thought of Mephistopheles as I looked at him, and in many ways the illustration does not seem an altogether inapt one.

"Permit me to express the gratification I feel that you have consented to allow me to be your guide this evening, Lady Hatteras," he said as he conducted my wife towards the boat. "While it is an impertinence on my part to imagine that I can add to your enjoyment of Venice, I fancy it is, nevertheless, in my power to show you a side of the city with which you are not as yet acquainted. The night being so beautiful, and believing that you would wish to see all you can, I have brought a gondola without a cabin. I trust I did not do wrong."

"I am sure it will be delightful," my wife answered. "It would have been unendurable on such a beautiful evening to be cooped up in a close cabin. Besides, we should have seen nothing."

By this time we were on the steps, at the foot of which the gondola in question, a large one of its class, was lying. As soon as we had boarded her the gondolier bent to his oar, the boat shot out into the stream, and the excursion, which, as I have said, we were each of us to remember all our lives, had commenced. If I shut my eyes now I can recall the whole scene: the still moonlit waters of the canal, the houses on one side of which were brilliantly illuminated by the moon, the other being entirely in the shadow. When we were in mid-stream a boat decorated with lanterns passed us. It contained a merry party, whose progress was enlivened by the strains of the invariable *Finiculi Finicula*. The words and the tune ring in my memory even now. Years before we had grown heartily sick of the song, now however it possessed a charm that was quite its own.

"How pretty it is," remarked my wife and Miss Trevor almost simultaneously. And the former added, "I could never have believed that it possessed such a wealth of tenderness."

"Might it not be the association that is responsible?" put in Nikola gravely. "You have probably heard that song at some time when you have been so happy that all the world has seemed the same. Hearing it to-night has unconsciously recalled that association, and *Finiculi Finicula*, once so despised, immediately becomes a melody that touches your heart-strings, and so wins for itself a place in your regard that it can never altogether lose."

We had crossed the canal by this time; the gondola with the singers proceeding towards the Rialto bridge. The echo of the music still lingered in our ears, and seemed the sweeter by the reason of the distance that separated us from it. Turning to the gondolier, who in the moonlight presented a picturesque figure in the stern of the boat, Nikola said something in Italian. The boat's head was immediately turned in the direction of a side-street, and a moment later we entered it. It is not my intention, nor would it be possible for me, to attempt to furnish you with a definite description of the route we followed. In the daytime I flatter myself that I have a knowledge of the Venice of the tourist; if you were to give me a pencil and paper I believe I should be able to draw a rough outline of the city, and to place St. Mark's Cathedral, Galaghetti's Hotel, the Rialto bridge, the Arsenal, and certainly the railway station, in something like their proper positions. But at night, when I have left the Grand Canal, the city becomes a sealed book to me. On this particular evening every street, when once we had left the fashionable quarter behind us, seemed alike. There was the same darkness, the same silence, and the same reflection of the lights in the water. Occasionally we happened upon places where business was still being transacted, and where the noise of voices smote the air with a vehemence that was like sacrilege. A few moments would then elapse, and then we were plunged into a silence that was almost unearthly. All this time Nikola kept us continually interested. Here was a house with a history as old as Venice itself; there the home of a famous painter; yonder the birthplace of a poet or a soldier, who had fought his way to fame by pen or by sword. On one side of the street was the first dwelling of one who had been a plebeian and had died a Doge; while on the other side was that of a man who had given his life to save his friend. Nor were Nikola's illustrations confined to the past alone. Men whose names were household words to us had preceded us, and had seen Venice as we were seeing it now. Of each he could tell us something we had never heard before. It was the perfect mastery of his subject, like that of a man who plays upon an instrument of which he has made a lifelong study, that astonished us. He could rouse in our hearts such emotions as he pleased; could induce us to pity at one moment, and to loathing at the next; could make us see the city with his eyes, and in a measure to love it with his own love. That Nikola *did* entertain a deep affection for it was as certain as his knowledge of its history.

"I think I may say now," he said, when we had been absent from the hotel for upwards of an hour, "that I have furnished you with a superficial idea of the city. Let me attempt after this to show you something of

its inner life. That it will repay you I think you will admit when you have seen it."

Once more he gave the gondolier an order. Without a word the man entered a narrow street on the right, then turned to the left, after which to the right again. What were we going to see next? That it would be something interesting I had not the least doubt. Presently the gondolier made an indescribable movement with his oar, the first signal that he was about to stop. With two strokes he brought the boat alongside the steps, and Nikola, who was the first to spring out, assisted the ladies to alight. We were now in a portion of Venice with which I was entirely unacquainted. The houses were old and lofty, though sadly fallen to decay. Where shops existed business was still being carried on, but the majority of the owners of the houses in the neighbourhood appeared to be early birds, for no lights were visible in their dwellings. Once or twice men approached us and stared insolently at the ladies of our party. One of these, more impertinent than his companions, placed his hand upon Miss Trevor's arm. In a second, without any apparent effort, Nikola had laid him upon his back.

"Do not be afraid, Miss Trevor," he said; "the fellow has only forgotten himself for a moment."

So saying he approached the man, who scrambled to his feet, and addressed him in a low voice.

"No, no, your excellency," the rascal whined; "for the pity of the blessed saints. Had I known it was you I would not have dared."

Nikola said something in a whisper to him; what it was I have not the least idea, but its effect was certainly excellent, for the man slunk away without another word.

After this little incident we continued our walk without further opposition, took several turnings, and at last found ourselves standing before a low doorway. That it was closely barred on the inside was evident from the sounds that followed when, in response to Nikola's knocks, some one commenced to open it. Presently an old man looked out. At first he seemed surprised to see us, but when his eyes fell upon Nikola all was changed. With a low bow he invited him, in Russian, to enter.

Crossing the threshold we found ourselves in a church of the smallest possible description. By the dim light a priest could be seen officiating at the high altar, and there were possibly a dozen worshippers present. There was an air of secrecy about it all, the light, the voices, and the precautions taken to prevent a stranger entering, that appealed to my curiosity. As we turned to leave the building the little man who had admitted us crept up to Nikola's side and said something in a low voice to him. Nikola replied, and at the same time patted the man affectionately upon the shoulder. Then with the same obsequious respect the latter opened the door once more, and permitted us to pass out, quickly barring it behind us afterwards however.

"You have seen many churches during your stay in Venice, Lady Hatteras," Nikola remarked, as we made our way back towards the gondola, "I doubt very much, however, whether you have ever entered a stranger place of worship than that."

"I know that I have not," my wife replied. "Pray who were the people we saw there? And why was so much secrecy observed?"

"Because nearly all the poor souls you saw there are either suspected or wanted by the Russian Government. They are fugitives from injustice, if I may so express it, and it is for that reason that they are compelled to worship, as well as live, in hiding."

"But who are they?"

"Nihilists," Nikola answered. "A poor, hot-headed lot of people, who, seeing their country drifting in a wrong direction, have taken it into their heads to try and remedy matters by drastic measures. Finding their efforts hopeless, their properties confiscated, and they themselves in danger of death, or exile, which is worse, they have fled from Russia. Some of them, the richest, manage to get to England, some come to Venice, but knowing that the Italian police will turn them out *sans cérémonie* if they discover them, they are compelled to remain in hiding until they are in a position to proceed elsewhere."

"And you help them?" asked Miss Trevor in a strange voice, as if his answer were a foregone conclusion.

"What makes you think that?" Nikola inquired.

"Because the doorkeeper knew you, and you spoke so kindly to him."

"The poor fellow has a son," Nikola replied; "a hot-headed young rascal who has got into trouble in Moscow. If he is caught he will without doubt go to Siberia for the rest of his life. But he will *not* be caught."

Once more Miss Trevor spoke as if with authority, and in the same hushed voice.

"You have saved him?"

"He *has* been saved," Nikola replied. "He left for America this morning. The old fellow was merely expressing to me the gratification he felt at having got him out of such a difficulty. Now, here is our gondola. Let us get into it. We still have much to see, and time is not standing still with us."

Once more we took our places, and once more the gondola proceeded on its way. To furnish you with a complete *résumé* of all we saw would take too long, and would occupy too great a space. Let it suffice that we visited places, the mere existence of which I had never heard of before.

One thing impressed me throughout. Wherever we went Nikola was known, and not only known, but feared and respected. His face was a key that opened every lock, and in his company the ladies were as safe, in the roughest parts of Venice, as if they had been surrounded by a troop of soldiery. When we had seen all that he was able to show us it was nearly midnight, and time for us to be getting back to our hotel.

"I trust I have not tired you?" he said, as the ladies took their places in the gondola for the last time.

"Not in the least," both answered at once, and I fancy my wife spoke not only for herself but also for Miss Trevor when she continued, "we have spent a most delightful evening."

"You must not praise the performance until the epilogue is spoken," Nikola answered. "I have still one more item on my programme."

As he said this the gondola drew up at some steps, where a solitary figure was standing, apparently waiting for us. He wore a cloak and carried a somewhat bulky object in his hand. As soon as the boat came alongside Nikola sprang out and approached him. To our surprise he helped him into the gondola and placed him in the stern.

"To-night, Luigi," he said, "you must sing your best for the honour of the city."

The young man replied in an undertone, and then the gondola passed down a by-street and a moment later we were back in the Grand Canal. There was not a breath of air, and the moon shone full and clear upon the placid water. Never had Venice appeared more beautiful. Away to the right was the piazza, with the

Cathedral of Saint Mark; on our left were the shadows of the islands. The silence of Venice, and there is no silence in the world like it, lay upon everything. The only sound to be heard was the dripping of the water from the gondolier's oar as it rose and fell in rhythmic motion. Then the musician drew his fingers across the strings of his guitar, and after a little prelude commenced to sing. The song he had chosen was the *Salve d'amora* from *Faust*, surely one of the most delightful melodies that has ever occurred to the brain of a musician. Before he had sung a dozen bars we were entranced. Though not a strong tenor his voice was one of the most perfect I have ever heard. It was of the purest quality, so rich and sweet that the greatest connoisseur could not tire of it. The beauty of the evening, the silence of the lagoon, and the perfectness of the surroundings, helped it to appeal to us as no music had ever done before. It was a significant proof of the effect produced upon us, that when he ceased not one of us spoke for some moments. Our hearts were too full for words. By the time we had recovered ourselves the gondola had drawn up at the steps of the hotel, and we had disembarked. The Duke and I desired to reward the musician; Nikola however begged us to do nothing of the kind.

"He sings to-night to please me," he said. "It would hurt him beyond words were you to offer him any other reward."

After that there was nothing more to be said, except to thank him in the best Italian we could muster for the treat he had given us.

"Why on earth does he not try his fortune upon the stage?" asked my wife, when we had disembarked from the gondola and had assembled on the steps. "With such a voice he might achieve a European reputation."

"Alas," answered Nikola, "he will never do that. Did you notice his infirmity?"

Phyllis replied that she had not observed anything extraordinary about him.

"The poor fellow is blind," Nikola answered very quietly. "He is a singing-bird shut up always in the dark. And now, good-night. I have trespassed too long upon your time already."

He bowed low to the ladies, shook hands with the Duke and myself, and then, before we had time to thank him for the delightful evening he had given us, was in his gondola once more and out in mid-stream. We watched him until he had disappeared in the direction of the Rio del Consiglio, after we entered the hotel and made our way to our own sitting-room.

"I cannot say when I have enjoyed myself so much," said my wife, as we stood talking together before bidding each other good-night.

"It has been delightful," said Glenbarth, whose little attack of jealousy seemed to have quite left him. "Have you enjoyed it, Hatteras?"

I said something in reply, I cannot remember what, but I recollect that, as I did so, I glanced at Miss Trevor's face. It was still very pale, but her eyes shone with extraordinary brilliance.

"I hope you have had a pleasant evening," I said to her a few moments later, when we were alone together.

"Yes, I think I can say that I have," she answered, with a far-away look upon her face. "The music was exquisite. The thought of it haunts me still."

Then, having bade me good-night, she went off with my wife, leaving me to attempt to understand why she had replied as she had done.

"And what do you think of it, my friend?" I inquired of Glenbarth, when we had taken our cigars out into the balcony.

"I am extremely glad we went," he returned quickly. "There can be no doubt that you were right when you said that it would show us Nikola's character in a new light. Did you notice with what respect he was treated by everybody we met, and how anxious they were not to run the risk of offending him?"

"Of course I noticed it, and you may be sure I drew my own conclusions from it," I replied.

"And those conclusions were?"

"That Nikola's character is even more inexplicable than before."

After that we smoked in silence for some time. At last I rose and tossed what remained of my cigar over the rails into the dark waters below.

"It is getting late," I said. "Don't you think we had better bid each other good-night?"

"Perhaps we had, and yet I don't feel a bit tired."

"Are you quite sure that you have had a pleasant day?"

"Quite sure," he said, with a laugh. "The only thing I regret is having heard that wretched story this morning. Do you recall the gusto with which Nikola related it?"

I replied in the affirmative, and asked him his reason for referring to it now.

"Because I could not help thinking of it this evening, when his voice was so pleasant and his manner so kind. When I picture him going back to that house to-night, to that dreadful room, to sleep alone in that great building, it fairly makes me shudder. Good-night, old fellow. You have treated me royally to-day; I could scarcely have had more sensations compressed into my waking hours if I'd been a king."



CHAPTER IV

After our excursion through Venice with Nikola by night, an interval of a week elapsed before we saw anything of him. During that time matters, so far as our party was concerned, progressed with the smoothness of a well-regulated clock. In my own mind I had not the shadow of a doubt that Glenbarth was head over ears in love with Gertrude Trevor. He followed her about wherever she went; seemed never to tire of paying her attention, and whenever we were alone together, endeavoured to inveigle me into a discussion of her merits. That she had faults nothing would convince him.

Whether she reciprocated his good-feeling was a matter which, to my mind, there existed a considerable amount of doubt. Women are proverbially more secretive in these affairs than men, and if Miss Trevor entertained a warmer feeling than friendship for the young Duke, she certainly managed to conceal it admirably. More than once, I believe, my wife endeavoured to sound her upon the subject. She had to confess herself beaten, however. Miss Trevor liked the Duke of Glenbarth very much; she was quite agreed that he had not an atom of conceit in his constitution; he gave himself no airs; moreover, she was prepared to meet my wife half-way, and to say that she thought it a pity he did not marry. No, she had never heard that there was an American millionaire girl, extremely beautiful, and accomplished beyond the average, who was pining to throw her millions and herself at his feet! "And then," added my wife, in a tone that seemed to suggest that she considered it my fault that the matter had not been brought to a successful conclusion long since, "what do you think she said? 'Why on earth doesn't he marry this American? So many men of title do now-a-days.' What do you think of that? I can tell you, Dick, I could have shaken her!"

"My dear little woman," I said in reply, "will nothing convince you that you are playing with fire? If you are not very careful you will burn your fingers. Gertrude is almost as clever as you are. She sees that you are trying to pump her, and very naturally declines to be pumped. You would feel as she does were you in her position."

"I do not know why you should say I am trying to pump her," she answered with considerable dignity. "I consider it a very uncalled-for expression."

"Well, my dear," I answered, "if you are going to attempt to improve your position by splitting straws, then I must stop."

The episode I have just described had taken place after we had retired for the night, and at a time when I am far from being at my best. My wife, on the other hand, as I have repeatedly noticed, is invariably wide-awake at that hour. Moreover she has an established belief that it would be an impossibility for her to obtain any rest until she has cleared up all matters of mystery that may have attracted her attention during the day. I generally fall asleep before she is half-way through, and for this reason I am told that I lack interest in what most nearly concerns our welfare.

"One would at least imagine that you could remain awake to discuss events of so much importance to us and to those about us," I have known her say. "I have observed that you can talk about horses, hunting, and shooting, with your bachelor friends until two or three o'clock in the morning without falling asleep, but when your wife is anxious to ask your opinion about something that does not concern your amusements, then you must needs go to sleep."

"My dear," I replied, "when all is said and done we are but human. You know as well as I do, that if a man were to come to me when I had settled down for the night, and were to tell me that he knew where to lay his hand upon the finest horse in England, and where he could put me on to ten coveys of partridges within a couple of hundred yards of my own front door, that he could even tell me the winner of the Derby, I should answer him as I am now answering you."

"And your reply would be?"

I am afraid the pains I had been at to illustrate my own argument must have proved too much for me, for I was informed in the morning that I had talked a vast amount of nonsense about seeing Nikola concerning a new pigeon-trap, and had then resigned myself to the arms of Morpheus. If there should be any husbands whose experience have run on similar lines, I should be glad to hear from them. But to return to my story.

One evening, exactly a week after Glenbarth's arrival in Venice, I was dressing for dinner when a letter was brought to me. Much to my surprise I found it was from Nikola, and in it he inquired whether it would be possible for me to spare the time to come and see him that evening. It appeared that he was anxious to discuss a certain important matter with me. I noticed, however, that he did not mention what that matter was. In a postscript he asked me, as a favour to himself, to come alone.

Having read the letter I stood for a few moments with it in my hand, wondering what I should do. I was not altogether anxious to go out that evening; on the other hand I had a strange craving to see Nikola once more. The suggestion that he desired to consult me upon a matter of importance flattered my vanity, particularly as it was of such a nature that he did not desire the presence of a third person. "Yes," I thought, "after all I will go." Accordingly I wrote a note to him saying that, if the hour would suit him, I hoped to be with him at half-past nine o'clock. Then I continued my dressing and presently went down to dinner.

During the progress of the meal I mentioned the fact that I had received the letter in question, and asked my friends if they would excuse me if I went round in the course of the evening to find out what it was that Nikola had to say to me. Perhaps by virtue of my early training, perhaps by natural instinct, I am a keen observer of trifles. On this occasion I noticed that from the moment I mentioned the fact of my having received a letter from Nikola, Miss Trevor ate scarcely any more dinner. Upon my mentioning his name she had looked at me with a startled expression upon her face. She said nothing, however, but I observed that her left hand, which she had a trick of keeping below the table as much as possible, was for some moments busily engaged in picking pieces from the roll beside her plate. For some reason she had suddenly grown nervous again, but why she should have done so passes my comprehension. When the ladies had retired, and we were sitting together over our wine, Glenbarth returned to the subject of my visit that evening.

"By Jove, my dear fellow," he said, "I don't envy you your excursion to that house. Don't you feel a bit nervous about it yourself?"

I shook my head.

"Why should I?" I asked. "If the truth must be told I am a good deal more afraid of Nikola than I am of his house. I don't fancy on the present occasion, however, I have any reason to dread either."

"Well," said the Duke with a laugh, "if you are not home by breakfast-time to-morrow morning I shall bring the police round, and look down that trap-door. You'll take a revolver with you of course?"

"I shall do nothing of the kind," I replied. "I am quite able to take care of myself without having recourse to fire-arms."

Nevertheless, when I went up to my room to change my coat, prior to leaving the house, I took a small revolver from my dressing-case and weighed it in my hand. "Shall I take it or shall I not?" was the question I asked myself. Eventually I shook my head and replaced it in its hiding-place. Then, switching off the electric light, I made for the door, only to return, re-open the dressing-case, and take out the revolver. Without further argument I slipped it into the pocket of my coat and then left the room.

A quarter of an hour later my gondolier had turned into the Rio del Consiglio, and was approaching the Palace Revecce. The house was in deep shadow, and looked very dark and lonesome. The gondolier seemed to be of the same opinion, for he was anxious to set me down, to collect his fare, and to get away again as soon as possible. Standing in the porch I rang the great bell which Nikola had pointed out to me, and which we had not observed on the morning of our first visit. It clanged and echoed somewhere in the rearmost portion of the house, intensifying the loneliness of the situation and adding a new element of mystery to that abominable dwelling. In spite of my boast to Glenbarth I was not altogether at my ease. It was one thing to pretend that I had no objection to the place when I was seated in a well-lighted room, with a glass of port at my hand, and a stalwart friend opposite; it was quite another, however, to be standing in the dark at that ancient portal, with the black water of the canal at my feet and the anticipation of that sombre room ahead. Then I heard the sound of footsteps crossing the courtyard, and a moment later Nikola himself stood before me and invited me to enter. A solitary lamp had been placed upon the coping of the wall, and its fitful light illuminated the courtyard, throwing long shadows across the pavement and making it look even drearier and more unwholesome than when I had last seen it. After we had shaken hands we made our way in silence up the great staircase, our steps echoing along the stone corridors with startling reverberations. How thankful I was at last to reach the warm, well-lit room, despite the story Nikola had told us about it, I must leave you to imagine.

"Please sit down," said Nikola, pushing a chair forward for my occupation. "It is exceedingly kind of you to have complied with my request. I trust Lady Hatteras and Miss Trevor are well?"

"Thank you, they are both well," I replied. "They both begged to be remembered to you."

Nikola bowed his thanks, and then, when he had placed a box of excellent cigars at my elbow, prepared and lighted a cigarette for himself. All this time I was occupying myself wondering why he had asked me to come to him that evening, and what the upshot of the interview was to be. Knowing him as I did, I was aware that his actions were never motiveless. Everything he did was to be accounted for by some very good reason. After he had tendered his thanks to me for coming to see him, he was silent for some minutes, for so long indeed that I began to wonder whether he had forgotten my presence. In order to attract his attention I commented upon the fact that we had not seen him for more than a week.

"I have been away," he answered, with what was plainly an attempt to pull himself together. "Business of a most important nature called me to the south of Italy, to Naples in fact, and I only returned this morning."

Once more he was silent. Then leaning towards me and speaking with even greater impressiveness than he had yet done, he continued—

"Hatteras, I am going to ask you a question, and then, with your permission, I should like to tell you a story."

Not knowing what else to do I simply bowed. I was more than ever convinced that Nikola was going to

make use of me.

"Have you ever wondered," he began, still looking me straight in the face, and speaking with great earnestness, "what it was first made me the man I am?"

I replied to the effect that I had often wondered, but naturally had never been able to come to a satisfactory conclusion.

"Some day you shall know the history of my life," he answered. "But not just yet. There is much to be done before then. And now I am going to give you the story I promised you. You will see why I have told it to you when I have finished."

He rose from his chair and began to pace the room. I had never seen Nikola so agitated before. When he turned and faced me again his eyes shone like diamonds, while his body quivered with suppressed excitement.

"Hatteras," he went on, when he had somewhat mastered his emotion, "I doubt very much if ever in this world's history there has been a man who has suffered more than I have done. As I said just now, the whole story I cannot tell you at present. Some day it will come in its proper place and you will know everything. In the meantime——"

He paused for a few moments and then continued abruptly—

"The story concerns a woman, a native of this city; the last of an impoverished, but ancient family. She married a man many years her senior, whom she did not love. When they had been married just over four years her husband died, leaving her with one child to fight the battles of the world alone. The boy was nearly three years old, a sturdy, clever little urchin, who, up to that time, had never known the meaning of the word trouble. Then there came to Venice a man, a Spaniard, as handsome as a serpent, and as cruel. After a while he made the woman believe that he loved her. She returned his affection, and in due time they were married. A month later he was appointed Governor of one of the Spanish islands off the American coast—a post he had long been eager to obtain. When he departed to take up his position it was arranged that, as soon as all was prepared, the woman and her child should follow him. They did so, and at length reached the island and took up their abode, not at the palace, as the woman had expected, but in the native city. For the Governor feared, or pretended to fear, that, as his marriage had not been made public at first, it might compromise his position. The woman, however, who loved him, was content, for her one thought was to promote his happiness. At first the man made believe to be overjoyed at having her with him once again, then, little by little, he showed that he was tired of her. Another woman had attracted his fancy, and he had transferred his affections to her. The other heard of it. Her southern blood was roused, for though she had been poor, she was, as I have said, the descendant of one of the oldest Venetian families. As his wife she endeavoured to defend herself, then came the crushing blow, delivered with all the brutality of a savage nature.

"'You are not my wife,' he said. 'I had already a wife living when I married you.'"

"She left him without another word and went away to hide her shame. Six months later the fever took her and she died. Thus the boy was left, at five years old, without a friend or protector in the world. Happily, however, a humble couple took compassion on him, and, after a time, determined to bring him up as their own. The old man was a great scholar, and had devoted all his life to the exhaustive study of the occult sciences. To educate the boy, when he grew old enough to understand, was his one delight. He was never weary of teaching him, nor did the boy ever tire of learning. It was a mutual labour of love. Seven years

later saw both the lad's benefactors at rest in the little churchyard beneath the palms, and the boy himself homeless once more. But he was not destined to remain so for very long; the priest, who had buried his adopted parents, spoke to the Governor, little dreaming what he was doing, of the boy's pitiable condition. It was as if the devil had prompted him, for the Spaniard was anxious to find a playfellow for his son, a lad two years the other's junior. It struck him that the waif would fill the position admirably. He was accordingly deported to the palace to enter upon the most miserable period of his life. His likeness to his mother was unmistakable, and when he noticed it, the Governor, who had learned the secret, hated him for it, as only those hate who are conscious of their wrong-doing. From that moment his cruelty knew no bounds. The boy was powerless to defend himself. All that he could do was to loathe his oppressor with all the intensity of his fiery nature, and to pray that the day might come when he should be able to repay. To his own son the Governor was passionately attached. In his eyes the latter could do no wrong. For any of his misdeeds it was the stranger who bore the punishment. On the least excuse he was stripped and beaten like a slave. The Governor's son, knowing his power, and the other's inordinate sensitiveness, derived his chief pleasure in inventing new cruelties for him. To describe all that followed would be impossible. When nothing else would rouse him, it was easy to bring him to an ungovernable pitch of fury by insulting his mother's name, with whose history the servants had, by this time, made their master's son acquainted. Once, driven into a paroxysm of fury by the other's insults, the lad picked up a knife and rushed at his tormentor with the intention of stabbing him. His attempt, however, failed, and the boy, foaming at the mouth, was carried before the Governor. I will spare you a description of the punishment that was meted out for his offence. Let it suffice that there are times even now, when the mere thought of it is sufficient to bring—but there—why should I continue in this strain? All that I am telling you happened many years ago, but the memory remains clear and distinct, while the desire for vengeance is as keen as if it had happened but yesterday. What is more, the end is coming, as surely as the lad once hoped and prophesied it would."

Nikola paused for a moment and sank into his chair. I had never seen him so affected. His face was deathly pale, while his eyes blazed like living coals.

"What became of the boy at last?" I inquired, knowing all the while that he had been speaking of himself.

"He escaped from the island, and went out into the world. The Governor is dead; he has gone to meet the woman, or women, he has so cruelly wronged. His son has climbed the ladder of Fame, but he has never lost, as his record shows, the cruel heart he possessed as a boy. Do you remember the story of the Revolution in the Republic of Equinata?"

I shook my head.

"The Republics of South America indulge so constantly in their little amusements that it is difficult for an outsider to remember every particular one," I answered.

"Well, let me tell you about it. When the Republic of Equinata suffered from its first Revolution, this man was its President. But for his tyranny and injustice it would not have taken place. He it was who, finding that the Rebellion was spreading, captured a certain town, and bade the eldest son of each of the influential families wait upon him at his headquarters on the morning following its capitulation. His excuse was that he desired them as hostages for their parents' good behaviour. As it was, however, to wreak his vengeance on the city, which had opposed him, instead of siding with him, he placed them against a wall and shot them down by the half-dozen. But he was not destined to succeed. Gradually he was driven back upon his Capital, his troops deserting day by day. Then, one night he boarded a ship that was waiting for him in the harbour, and from that moment Equinata saw him no more. It was not until

some days afterwards that it was discovered that he had despatched vast sums of money, which he had misappropriated, out of the country, ahead of him. Where he is now hiding I am the only man who knows. I have tracked him to his lair, and I am waiting—waiting—waiting—for the moment to arrive when the innocent blood that has so long cried to Heaven will be avenged. Let him look to himself when that day arrives. For as there is a God above us, he will be punished as man was never punished before."

The expression upon his face as he said this was little short of devilish; the ghastly pallor of his skin, the dark, glittering eyes, and his jet-black hair made up a picture that will never fade from my memory.

"God help his enemy if they should meet," I said to myself. Then his mood suddenly changed, and he was once more the quiet, suave Nikola to whom I had become accustomed. Every sign of passion had vanished from his face. A transformation more complete could scarcely have been imagined.

"My dear fellow," he said, without a trace of emotion in his voice, "you must really forgive me for having bored you with my long story. I cannot think what made me do so, unless it is that I have been brooding over it all day, and felt the need of a confidant. You will make an allowance for me, will you not?"

"Most willingly," I answered. "If the story you have told me concerns yourself, you have my most heartfelt sympathy. You have suffered indeed."

He stopped for a moment in his restless walk up and down the room, and eyed me carefully as if he were trying to read my thoughts.

"Suffered?" he said at last, and then paused. "Yes, I have suffered—but others have suffered more. But do not let us talk of it. I was foolish to have touched upon it, for I know by experience the effect it produces upon me."

As he spoke he crossed to the window, which he threw open. It was a glorious night, and the sound of women's voices singing reached us from the Grand Canal. On the other side of the watery highway the houses looked strangely mysterious in the weird light. At that moment I felt more drawn towards Nikola than I had ever done before. The man's loneliness, his sufferings, had a note of singular pathos for me. I forgot the injuries he had done me, and before I knew what I was doing, I had placed my hand upon his shoulder.

"Nikola," I said, "if I were to try I could not make you understand how truly sorry I am for you. The life you lead is so unlike that of any other man. You see only the worst side of Human Nature. Why not leave this terrible gloom? Give up these experiments upon which you are always engaged, and live only in the pure air of the commonplace every-day world. Your very surroundings—this house, for instance—are not like those of other men. Believe me, there are other things worth living for besides the Science which binds you in its chains. If you could learn to love a good woman——"

"My dear Hatteras," he put in, more softly than I had ever heard him speak, "woman's love is not for me. As you say, I am lonely in the world, God knows how lonely, yet lonely I must be content to remain." Then leaning his hands upon the window-sill, he looked out upon the silent night, and I heard him mutter to himself, "Yes, lonely to the End." After that he closed the window abruptly, and turning to me, asked how long we contemplated remaining in Venice.

"I cannot say yet," I answered, "the change is doing my wife so much good that I am anxious to prolong our stay. At first we thought of going to the South of France, but that idea has been abandoned, and we may be here another month."

"A month," he said to himself, as if he were reflecting upon something; then he added somewhat inconsequently, "You should be able to see a great deal of Venice in a month."

"And how long will you be here?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"It is impossible to say," he answered. "I never know my own mind for two days together. I may be here another week, or I may be here a year. Somehow, I have a conviction, I cannot say why, that this will prove to be my last visit to Venice. I should be sorry never to see it again, yet what must be, must. Destiny will have its way, whatever we may say or do to the contrary."

At that moment there was the sound of a bell clanging in the courtyard below. At such an hour it had an awe-inspiring sound, and I know that I shuddered as I heard it.

"Who can it be?" said Nikola, turning towards the door. "This is somewhat late for calling hours. Will you excuse me if I go down and find out the meaning of it?"

"Do so, by all means," I answered. "I think I must be going also. It is getting late."

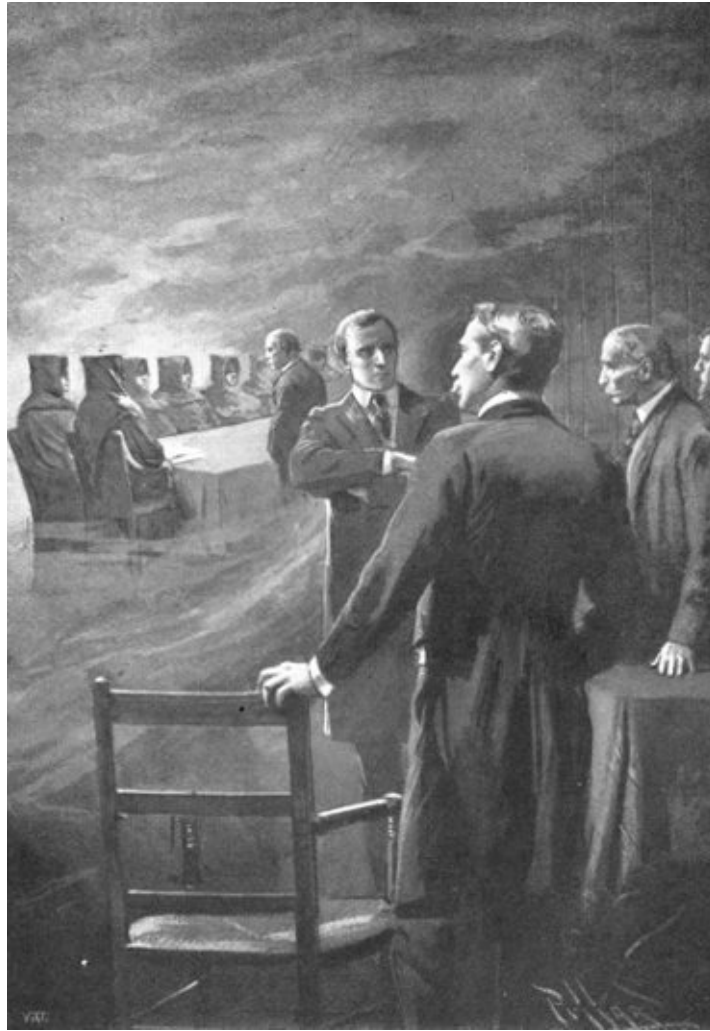
"No, no," he said, "stay a little longer. If it is as I suspect, I fancy I shall be able to show you something that may interest you. Endeavour to make yourself comfortable until I return. I shall not be away many minutes."

So saying, he left me, closing the door behind him. When I was alone, I lit a cigar and strolled to the window, which I opened. My worst enemy could not call me a coward, but I must confess that I derived no pleasure from being in that room alone. The memory of what lay under that oriental rug was vividly impressed upon my memory. In my mind I could smell the vaults below, and it would have required only a very small stretch of the imagination to have fancied I could hear the groans of the dying man proceeding from it. Then a feeling of curiosity came over me to see who Nikola's visitor was. By leaning well out of the window, I could look down on the great door below. At the foot of the steps a gondola was drawn up, but I was unable to see whether there was any one in it or not. Who was Nikola's mysterious caller, and what made him come at such an hour? Knowing the superstitious horror in which the house was held by the populace of Venice, I felt that whoever he was, he must have had an imperative reason for his visit. I was still turning the subject over in my mind, when the door opened and Nikola entered, followed by two men. One was tall and swarthy, wore a short black beard, and had a crafty expression upon his face. The other was about middle height, very broad, and was the possessor of a bullet-head covered with close-cropped hair. Both were of the lower class, and their nationality was unmistakable. Turning to me, Nikola said in English—

"It is as I expected. Now, if you care to study character, here is your opportunity. The taller man is a Police Agent, the other the chief of a notorious Secret Society. I should first explain that within the last two or three days I have been helping a young Italian of rather advanced views, not to put too fine a point upon it, to leave the country for America. This dog has dared to try to upset my plans. Immediately I heard of it I sent word to him, by means of our friend here, that he was to present himself here before twelve o'clock to-night without fail. From his action it would appear that he is more frightened of me than he is of the Secret Society. That is as it should be; for I intend to teach him a little lesson which will prevent him from interfering with my plans in the future. You were talking of my science just now, and advising me to abandon it. Could the life you offer me give me the power I possess now? Could the respectability of Clapham recompense me for the knowledge with which the East can furnish me?"

Then turning to the Police Agent he addressed him in Italian, speaking so fast that it was impossible for me to follow him. From what little I could make out, however, I gathered that he was rating him for daring to interfere with his concerns. When, at the end of three or four minutes, he paused and spoke more slowly, this was the gist of his speech—

"You know me and the power I control. You are aware that those who thwart me, or who interfere with me and my concerns, do so at their own risk. Since no harm has come of it, thanks to certain good friends, I will forgive on this occasion, but let it happen again and this is what your end will be."



"Presently a picture shaped itself in the cloud."

As he spoke he took from his pocket a small glass bottle with a gold top, not unlike a vinaigrette, and emptied some of the white powder it contained into the palm of his hand. Turning down the lamp he dropped this into the chimney. A green flame shot up for a moment, which was succeeded by a cloud of perfumed smoke that filled the room so completely that for a moment it was impossible for us to see each other. Presently a picture shaped itself in the cloud and held my attention spell-bound. Little by little it developed until I was able to make out a room, or rather I should say a vault, in which upwards of a dozen men were seated at a long table. They were all masked, and without exception were clad in long monkish robes with cowls of black cloth. Presently a sign was made by the man at the head of the table, an individual with a venerable grey beard, and two more black figures entered, who led a man between them. Their prisoner was none other than the Police Agent whom Nikola had warned. He looked thinner, however, and was evidently much frightened by his position. Once more the man at the head of the table raised his hand, and there entered at the other side an old man, with white hair and a long beard of the same colour. Unlike the others he wore no cowl, nor was he masked. From his gestures I could see that he was addressing those seated at the table, and, as he pointed to the prisoner, a look of undying hatred spread over his face. Then the man at the head of the table rose, and though I could hear nothing of what he said, I gathered that he was addressing his brethren concerning the case. When he had finished, and each of the assembly had voted by holding up his hand, he turned to the prisoner. As he did so the scene vanished instantly and another took its place.

It was a small room that I looked upon now, furnished only with a bed, a table, and a chair. At the door

was a man who had figured as a prisoner in the previous picture, but now sadly changed. He seemed to have shrunk to half his former size, his face was pinched by starvation, his eyes were sunken, but there was an even greater look of terror in them than had been there before. Opening the door of the room he listened, and then shut and locked it again. It was as if he were afraid to go out, and yet knew that if he remained where he was, he must perish of starvation. Gradually the room began to grow dark, and the terrified wretch paced restlessly up and down, listening at the door every now and then. Once more the picture vanished as its companion had done, and a third took its place. This proved to be a narrow street-scene by moonlight. On either side the houses towered up towards the sky, and since there was no one about, it was plain that the night was far advanced. Presently, creeping along in the shadow, on the left-hand side, searching among the refuse and garbage of the street for food, came the man I had seen afraid to leave his attic. Times out of number he looked swiftly behind him, as if he thought it possible that he might be followed. He was but little more than half-way up the street, and was stooping to pick up something, when two dark figures emerged from a passage on the left, and swiftly approached him. Before he had time to defend himself, they were upon him, and a moment later he was lying stretched out upon his back in the middle of the street, a dead man. The moon shone down full and clear upon his face, the memory of which makes me shudder even now. Then the picture faded away and the room was light once more. Instinctively I looked at the Police Agent. His usually swarthy face was deathly pale, and from the great beads of perspiration that stood upon his forehead, I gathered that he had seen the picture too.

"Now," said Nikola, addressing him, "you have seen what is in store for you if you persist in pitting yourself against me. You recognized that grey-haired man, who had appealed to the Council against you. Then, rest assured of this! So surely as you continue your present conduct, so surely will the doom I have just revealed to you overtake you. Now go, and remember what I have said."

Turning to the smaller man, Nikola placed his hand in a kindly fashion upon his shoulder.

"You have done well, Tomasso," he said, "and I am pleased with you. Drop our friend here at the usual place, and see that some one keeps an eye on him. I don't think, however, he will dare to offend again."

On hearing this, the two men left the room and descended to the courtyard together, and I could easily imagine with what delight one of them would leave the house. When they had gone, Nikola, who was standing at the window, turned to me, saying—

"What do you think of my conjuring?"

I knew not what answer to make that would satisfy him. The whole thing seemed so impossible that, had it not been for the pungent odour that still lingered in the room, I could have believed I had fallen asleep and dreamed it all.

"You can give me no explanation, then?" said Nikola, with one of his inscrutable smiles. "And yet, having accumulated this power, this knowledge, call it what you will, you would still bid me give up Science. Come, my friend, you have seen something of what I can do; would you be brave enough to try, with my help, to look into what is called The Great Unknown, and see what the Future has in store for you? I fancy it could be done. Are you to be tempted to see your own end?"

"No, no," I cried, "I will have nothing to do with such an unholy thing. Good heavens, man! from that moment life would be unendurable!"

"You think so, do you?" he said slowly, still keeping his eyes fixed on me. "And yet I have tried it myself."

"My God, Nikola!" I answered in amazement, for I knew him well enough to feel sure that he was not talking idly, "you don't mean to tell me that you know what your own end is going to be?"

"Exactly," he answered. "I have seen it all. It is not pleasant; but I think I may say without vanity that it will be an end worthy of myself."

"But now that you know it, can you not avert it?"

"Nothing can be averted," he answered solemnly. "As I said before these men entered, what must be, must. What does Schiller say? '*Noch niemand entfloh dem verhangten Geschick.*'"

"And you were brave enough to look?"

"Does it require so much bravery, do you think? Believe me, there are things which require more."

"What do you mean?"

"Ah! I cannot tell you now," he answered, shaking his head. "Some day you will know."

Then there was a silence for a few seconds, during which we both stood looking down at the moonlit water below. At last, having consulted my watch and seeing how late it was, I told him that it was time for me to bid him good-night.

"I am very grateful to you for coming, Hatteras," he said. "It has cheered me up. It does me good to see you. Through you I get a whiff of that other life of which you spoke a while back. I want to make you like me, and I fancy I am succeeding."

Then we left the room together, and went down the stairs to the courtyard below. Side by side we stood upon the steps waiting for a gondola to put in an appearance. It was some time before one came in sight, but when it did so I hailed it, and then shook Nikola by the hand and bade him good-night.

"Good-night," he answered. "Pray remember me kindly to Lady Hatteras and to—Miss Trevor."

The little pause before Miss Trevor's name caused me to look at him in some surprise. He noticed it and spoke at once.

"You may think it strange of me to say so," he said, "but I cannot help feeling interested in that young lady. Impossible though it may seem, I have a well-founded conviction that in some way her star is destined to cross mine, and before very long. I have only seen her twice in my life in the flesh; but many years ago her presence on the earth was revealed to me, and I was warned that some day we should meet. What that meeting will mean to me it is impossible to say, but in its own good time Fate will doubtless tell me. And now, once more, good-night."

"Good-night," I answered mechanically, for I was too much surprised by his words to think what I was saying. Then I entered the gondola and bade the man take me back to my hotel.

"Surely Nikola has taken leave of his senses," I said to myself as I was rowed along. "Gertrude Trevor was the very last person in the world that I should have expected Nikola to make such a statement about."

At this point, however, I remembered how curiously she had been affected by their first meeting, and my mind began to be troubled concerning her.

"Let us hope and pray that Nikola doesn't take it into his head to imagine himself in love with her," I

continued to myself. "If he were to do so I scarcely know what the consequences would be."

Then, with a touch of the absurd, I wondered what her father, the eminently respected dean, would say to having Nikola for a son-in-law. By the time I had reached this point in my reverie the gondola had drawn up at the steps of the hotel.

My wife and Miss Trevor had gone to bed, but Glenbarth was sitting up for me.

"Well, you have paid him a long visit, in all conscience," he said a little reproachfully. Then he added, with what was intended to be a touch of sarcasm, "I hope you have spent a pleasant evening?"

"I am not quite so certain about that," I replied.

"Indeed. Then what have you discovered?"

"One thing of importance," I answered; "that Nikola grows more and more inscrutable every day."



CHAPTER V

The more I thought upon my strange visit to the Palace Revecce that evening, the more puzzled I was by it. It had so many sides, and each so complex, that I scarcely knew which presented the most curious feature. What Nikola's real reason had been for inviting me to call upon him, and why he should have told me the story, which I felt quite certain was that of his own life, was more than I could understand. Moreover, why, having told it me, he should have so suddenly requested me to think no more about it, only added to my bewilderment. The incident of the two men, and the extraordinary conjuring trick, for conjuring trick it certainly was in the real meaning of the word, he had shown us, did not help to elucidate matters. If the truth must be told it rather added to the mystery than detracted from it. To sum it all up, I found, when I endeavoured to fit the pieces of the puzzle together, remembering also his strange remark concerning Miss Trevor, that I was as far from coming to any conclusion as I had been at the beginning.

"You can have no idea how nervous I have been on your account to-night," said my wife, when I reached her room. "After dinner the Duke gave us a description of Doctor Nikola's room, and told us its history. When I thought of your being there alone with him, I must confess I felt almost inclined to send a message to you imploring you to come home."

"That would have been a great mistake, my dear," I answered. "You would have offended Nikola, and we don't want to do that. I am sorry the Duke told you that terrible story. He should not have frightened you with it. What did Gertrude Trevor think of it?"

"She did not say anything about it," my wife replied. "But I could see that she was as frightened as I was. I am quite sure you would not get either of us to go there, however pressing Doctor Nikola's invitation might be. Now tell me what he wanted to see you about."

"He felt lonely and wanted some society," I answered, having resolved that on no account would I tell her all the truth concerning my visit to the Palace Revecce. "He also wanted me to witness something connected with a scheme he has originated for enabling people to get out of the country unobserved by the police. Before I left he gave me a good example of the power he possessed."

I then described to her the arrival of the two men and the lesson Nikola had read to the Police Agent. The portion dealing with the conjuring trick I omitted. No good could have accrued from frightening her, and I knew that the sort of description I should be able to give of it would not be sufficiently impressive to enable her to see it in the light I desired. In any other way it would have struck her as ridiculous.

"The man grows more and more extraordinary every day," she said. "And not the least extraordinary thing about him is the way he affects other people. For my own part I must confess that, while I fear him, I like him; the Duke is frankly afraid of him; you are interested and repelled in turn; while Gertrude, I fancy, regards him as a sort of supernatural being, who may turn one into a horse or a dog at a moment's notice, while Senor Galaghetti, with whom I had a short conversation to-day concerning him, was so enthusiastic in his praises that for once words failed him. He had never met any one so wonderful, he declared. He would lay down his life for him. It would appear that, on one occasion, when Nikola was staying at the hotel, he cured Galaghetti's eldest child of diphtheria. The child was at the last gasp and the doctors had given her up, when Nikola made his appearance upon the scene. What he did, or how he did it, Galaghetti did not tell me, but it must have been something decidedly irregular, for the other doctors were aghast and left the house in a body. The child, however, rallied from that moment, and, as Galaghetti proudly

informed me, 'is now de artiste of great repute upon de pianoforte in Paris.' I have never heard of her, but it would appear that Galaghetti not only attributes her life, but also her musical success, to the fact that Nikola was staying in the hotel at the time when the child was taken ill. The Duke was with me when Galaghetti told me this, and, when he heard it, he turned away with an exclamation that sounded very like 'humbug!' I do hope that Doctor Nikola and the Duke won't quarrel?"

As she put this in the form of a question, I felt inclined to reply with the expression the Duke had used. I did not do so, however, but contented myself with assuring her that she need have no fears upon that score. A surprise, however, was in store for me.

"What have they to quarrel about?" I asked. "They have nothing in common."

"That only proves how blind you are to what goes on around you," my wife replied. "Have you not noticed that they *both admire Gertrude Trevor*?"

Falling so pat upon my own thoughts, this gave me food for serious reflection.

"How do you know that Nikola admires her?" I asked, a little sharply, I fear, for when one has uncomfortable suspicions one is not always best pleased to find that another shares them. A double suspicion might be described as almost amounting to a certainty.

"I am confident of it," she replied. "Did you not notice his manner towards her on the night of our excursion? It was most marked."

"My dear girl," I said irritably, "if you are going to begin this sort of thing, you don't know where you will find yourself in the end. Nikola has been a wanderer all his life. He has met people of every nationality, of every rank and description. It is scarcely probable, charming though I am prepared to admit she is, that he would be attracted by our friend. Besides, I had it from his own lips this morning that he will never marry."

"You may be just as certain as you please," she answered. "Nevertheless, I adhere to my opinion."

Knowing what was in my own mind, and feeling that if the argument continued I might let something slip that I should regret, I withdrew from the field, and, having questioned her concerning certain news she had received from England that day, bade her good-night.

Next morning we paid a visit to the Palace of the Doges, and spent a pleasant and instructive couple of hours in the various rooms. Whatever *Nikola's* feelings may have been, there was by this time not the least doubt that the Duke admired Miss Trevor. Though the lad had known her for so short a time he was already head over ears in love. I think Gertrude was aware of the fact, and I feel sure that she liked him, but whether the time was not yet ripe, or her feminine instinct warned her to play her fish for a while before attempting to land him, I cannot say; at any rate she more than once availed herself of an opportunity and moved away from him to take her place at my side. As you may suppose, Glenbarth was not rendered any the happier by these manœuvres; indeed, by the time we left the Palace, he was as miserable a human being as could have been found in all Venice. Before lunch, however, she relented a little towards him, and when we sat down to the meal in question our friend had in some measure recovered his former spirits. Not so my wife, however; though I did not guess it, I was in for a wiggling.

"How could you treat the poor fellow so badly?" she said indignantly, when we were alone together afterwards. "If you are not very careful you'll spoil everything."

"Spoil what?" I inquired, as if I did not understand to what she alluded. "You have lately developed a habit of speaking in riddles."

"Fiddle-de-dee!" she answered scornfully, "you know very well to what I allude. I think your conduct at the Palace this morning was disgraceful. You, a married man and a father, to try and spoil the pleasure of that poor young man."

"But she began it," I answered in self-defence. "Did you not see that she preferred my company to his?"

"Of course that was only make-believe," my wife replied. "You are as well aware of that as I am."

"I know nothing of the kind," I returned. "If the girl does not know her own mind, then it is safer that she should pretend, as she did to-day."

"She was not pretending. You know that Gertrude Trevor is as honest as the day."

"Then you admit that she was only playing her fish?" I said.

"If you are going to be vulgar I shall leave you," she retorted; "I don't know what you mean by 'playing her fish.' Gertrude only came to you because she did not want to allow her liking for the Duke to appear too conspicuous."

"It's the same thing in the end," I answered. "Believe me it is! You describe it as not making her conduct appear too conspicuous, while I call it 'playing her fish.' I have the best possible recollection of a young lady who used to play quoits with me on the deck of the *Orotava* a good many years ago. One day—we were approaching Naples at the time—she played game after game with the doctor, and snubbed me unmercifully."

"You know very well that I didn't mean it," she answered, with a stamp of her foot. "You know I had to act as I did."

"I don't mind admitting that," I replied. "Nevertheless, you were playing your fish. That night after dinner you forgave me and——"

She slipped her arm through mine and gave it a hug. I could afford to be generous.

"Those were dear old days, were they not? I, for one, am not going to quarrel about them. Now let us go and find the others."

We discovered them in the balcony, listening to some musicians in a gondola below. Miss Trevor plainly hailed our coming with delight; the Duke, however, was by no means so well pleased. He did his best, however, to conceal his chagrin. Going to the edge of the balcony I looked down at the boat. The musicians were four in number, two men and two girls, and, at the moment of our putting in an appearance, one of them was singing the "Ave Maria" from the *Cavalleria Rusticana*, in a manner that I had seldom heard it sung before. She was a handsome girl, and knew the value of her good looks. Beside her stood a man with a guitar, and I gave a start as I looked at him. Did my eyes deceive me, or was this the man who had accompanied the Police Agent to Nikola's residence on the previous evening? I looked again and felt sure that I could not be mistaken. He possessed the same bullet-head with the close-cropped hair, the same clean-shaven face, and the same peculiarly square shoulders. No! I felt sure that he was the man. But if so, what was he doing here under our windows? One thing was quite apparent; if he recognized me, he did not give me evidence of the fact. He played and looked up at us without the

slightest sign of recognition. To all intents and purposes he was the picture of indifference. While they were performing I recalled the scene of the previous night, and wondered what had become of the police officer, and what the man below me had thought of the curious trick Nikola had performed? It was only when they had finished their entertainment and, having received our reward, were about to move away that I received any information to the effect that the man had recognized me.

"Illustrious Senora, Seniorita, and Senors, I thank you," he said, politely lifting his hat as he spoke. "Our performance has been successful, and the obstacle which threatened it at one time has been removed."

The gondola then passed on, and I turned to the Duke as if for an explanation.

"At first the hall-porter was not inclined to let them sing here," the Duke remarked, "but Miss Trevor wanted to hear them, so I sent word down that I wished them to remain."

In spite of the explanation I understood to what the man had referred, but for the life of me I could not arrive at his reason for visiting our hotel that day. I argued that it might have been all a matter of chance, but I soon put that idea aside as absurd. The coincidence was too remarkable.

At lunch my wife announced that she had heard that morning that Lady Beltringham, the wife of our neighbour in the Forest, was in Venice, and staying at a certain hotel further along the Grand Canal.

"Gertrude and I are going to call upon her this afternoon," she said, "so that you two gentlemen must amuse yourselves as best you can without us."

"That is very easily done," I answered; "the Duke is going to have his hair cut, and I am going to witness the atrocity. You may expect to see him return not unlike that man with the guitar in the boat this morning."

"By the way," said Glenbarth, "that reminds me that I was going to point out a curious thing to you concerning that man. Did you notice, Miss Trevor, that when we were alone together in the balcony he did not once touch his instrument, but directly Hatteras and Lady Hatteras arrived, he jumped up and began to play?"

This confirmed my suspicions. I had quite come to the conclusion by this time that the man had only made his appearance before the hotel in order to be certain of my address. Yet, I had to ask myself, if he were in Nikola's employ, why should he have been anxious to do so?

An hour later the ladies departed on their polite errand, and the Duke and I were left together. He was not what I should call a good companion. He was in an irritable mood, and nothing I could do or say seemed to comfort him. I knew very well what was the matter, and when we had exhausted English politics, the rise and fall of Venice, Ruskin, and the advantages of foreign travel, I mentioned incidentally the name of Miss Trevor. The frown vanished from his face, and he answered like a coherent mortal.

"Look here, Hatteras," he said, with a fine burst of confidence, "you and I have been friends for a good many years, and I think we know each other about as well as two men can do."

"That is so," I answered, wondering what he was driving at; "we have been through some strange adventures together, and should certainly know each other. I hope that you are not going to propose that we should depart on some harum-scarum expedition like that you wanted me to join you in last year, to the Pamirs, was it not? If so, I can tell you once and for all that my lady won't hear of it."

"Confound the Pamirs!" he replied angrily. "Is it likely that I should think of going there just now? You

misunderstand my meaning entirely. What I want is a sympathetic friend, who can enter into my troubles, and if possible help me out of them."

For the life of me I could not forbear from teasing him for a little longer.

"My dear old fellow," I said, "you know that I will do anything I possibly can to help you. Take my advice and get rid of the man at once. As I told you in my letter to you before you left England, it is only misplaced kindness to keep him on. You know very well that he has been unfaithful to you for some years past. Then why allow him to continue in his wrong-doing? The smash will come sooner or later."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Well, I suppose your trouble is connected with the agent you were telling me of yesterday. The man who, it was discovered, had been cooking the accounts, selling your game, pocketing the proceeds, and generally feathering his own nest at your expense."

An ominous frown gathered upon my friend's forehead.

"Upon my word," he said, "I really believe you are taking leave of your senses. Do you think I am bothering myself at such a time about that wretched Mitchell? Let him sell every beast upon the farms, every head of game, and, in point of fact, let him swindle me as he likes, and I wouldn't give a second thought to him."

"I am very sorry," I answered penitently, rolling the leaf of my cigar. "Then it was the yacht you were thinking about? You have had what I consider a very good offer for her. Let her go! You are rich enough to be able to build another, and the work will amuse you. You want employment of some sort."

"I am not thinking of the yacht either," he growled. "You know that as well as I do."

"How should I know it?" I answered. "I am not able to tell what is in your mind. I do not happen to be like Nikola."

"You are singularly obtuse to-day," he asserted, throwing what remained of his cigar into the Canal and taking another from his case.

"Look here," I said, "you're pitching into me because I can't appreciate your position. Now how am I likely to be able to do so, considering that you've told me nothing about it? Before we left London you informed me that the place you had purchased in Warwickshire was going to prove your chief worry in life. I said, 'sell it again.' Then you found that your agent in Yorkshire was not what he might be. I advised you to get rid of him. You would not do so because of his family. Then you confessed in a most lugubrious fashion that your yacht was practically becoming unseaworthy by reason of her age. I suggested that you should sell her to Deeside, who likes her, or part with her for a junk. You vowed you would not do so because she was a favourite. Now you are unhappy, and I naturally suppose that it must be one of those things which is causing you uneasiness. You scout the idea. What, therefore, am I to believe? Upon my word, my friend, if I did not remember that you have always declared your abhorrence of the Sex, I should begin to think you must be in love."

He looked at me out of the corner of his eye. I pretended not to notice it, however, and still rolled the leaf of my cigar.

"Would it be such a very mad thing if I did fall in love?" he asked at last. "My father did so before me,

and I believe my grandfather did also. You, yourself, committed the same indiscretion."

"And you have seen the miserable result?"

"I have observed one of the happiest couples in the world," he replied. "But, joking apart, Hatteras, I want to talk the matter over with you seriously. I don't mind telling you at once, as between friend and friend, that I want to marry Miss Trevor."

I endeavoured to look surprised, but I fear the attempt was a failure.

"May I remind you," I said, "that you have known her barely a week? I don't want to discourage you, but is not your affection of rather quick growth?"

"It is, but it does not mean that I am any the less sincere. I tell you candidly, Dick, I have never seen such a girl in my life. She would make any man happy."

"Very likely, but would any man make her happy?"

His face fell, and he shifted uneasily in his chair.

"Confound you," he said, "you put everything in a new light. Why should I not be able to make her happy? There are lots of women who would give their lives to be a Duchess!"

"I admit that," I answered. "I don't fancy, however, your rank will make much difference with Miss Trevor. When a woman is a lady, and in love, she doesn't mind very much whether the object of her affections is a Duke or a chimney-sweep. Don't make the mistake of believing that a Dukedom counts for everything where the heart is concerned. We outsiders should have no chance at all if that were the case."

"But, Hatteras," he said, "I didn't mean that. I'm not such a cad as to imagine that Miss Trevor would marry me simply because I happen to have a handle to my name. I want to put the matter plainly before you. I have told you that I love her, do you think there is any chance of her taking a liking to me?"

"Now that you have told me what is in your mind," I answered, "I can safely state my opinion. Mind you, I know nothing about the young lady's ideas, but if I were a young woman, and an exceedingly presentable young man—you may thank me for the compliment afterwards—were to lay his heart at my feet, especially when that heart is served up on strawberry leaves and five-pound notes, I fancy I should be inclined to think twice before I discouraged his advances. Whether Miss Trevor will do so, however, is quite another matter."

"Then you are not able to give me any encouragement?"

"I will wish you God-speed upon your enterprise," I said, "if that is any satisfaction to you. I cannot do more."

As I said it I held out my hand, which he took and shook.

"God bless you, old man," he said, "you don't know what all this means to me. I've suffered agonies these last two days. I believe I should go mad if it continued. Yesterday she was kindness itself. To-day she will scarcely speak to me. I believe Lady Hatteras takes my side?"

I was not to be caught napping.

"You must remember that Lady Hatteras herself is an impressionable young woman," I answered. "She

likes you and believes in you, and because she does she thinks her friend ought to do so also. Now look here, your Grace——"

"You needn't put on any side of that kind," he answered reproachfully.

"I believe I am talking to the Duke of Glenbarth," I returned.

"You are talking to your old friend, the man who went round the world with you, if that's what you mean," he answered. "What is it you have to say?"

"I want you to plainly understand that Miss Trevor is my guest. I want you also to try to realize, however difficult it may be, that you have only known her a very short time. She is a particularly nice girl, as you yourself have admitted. It would be scarcely fair, therefore, if I were to permit you to give her the impression that you were in love with her until you have really made up your mind. Think it well over. Take another week, or shall we say a fortnight? A month would be better still."

He groaned in despair.

"You might as well say a year while you are about it. What is the use of my waiting even a week when I know my own mind already?"

"Because you must give your affection time to set. Take a week. If at the end of that time you are still as much in earnest as you are now, well, the matter will be worth thinking about. You can then speak to the young lady or not, as you please. On the other hand, should your opinion have changed, then I have been your only confidant, and no harm has been done. If she accepts you, I can honestly say that no one will be more delighted than myself. If not, you must look elsewhere, and then she must marry the man she likes better. Do you agree?"

"As I can't help myself I suppose I must," he answered. "But my position during the next week is not likely to be a very cheerful one."

"I don't at all see why," I replied. "Lots of others have been compelled to do their courting under harder auspices. Myself for instance. Here you are staying in the same house as the object of your affections. You meet her almost every hour of the day; you have innumerable opportunities of paying your court to her, and yet with all these advantages you abuse your lot."

"I know I am an ungrateful beast," he said. "But, by Jove, Dick, when one is as much in love as I am, and with the most adorable woman in the world, and matters don't seem to go right, one ought to be excused if one feels inclined to quarrel with somebody."

"Quarrel away with all your heart," I answered. "And now I am going down with you to the hairdresser. After that we'll go to the piazza."

"I suppose I must," he said, rising from his chair with a fine air of resignation. "Though what fun you can discover in that crowd I cannot for the life of me imagine."

I did not remind him that on the previous afternoon he had declared it to be the most amusing sight in Europe. That would have been an unfair advantage to have taken, particularly as I had punished him enough already. We accordingly procured our hats and sticks, and having secured a gondola, set off. It was a lovely afternoon, and the Grand Canal was crowded. As we passed the entrance to the Rio del Consiglio, I stole a glance at the Palace Revecce. No gondola was at the door, so whether Nikola was at

home or abroad I could not say. When Glenbarth had been operated upon we proceeded to the piazza of Saint Mark, which we reached somewhat before the usual afternoon promenade. The band had not commenced to play, and the idlers were few in number. Having engaged two chairs at one of the tables we sat down and ordered coffee. The duke was plainly ill at ease. He fretted and fidgeted continually. His eyes scarcely wandered from the steps of the lagoon, and every gondola that drew up received his scrutinizing attention. When at last two ladies disembarked and made their way across the stones towards Florian's *café*, where we were seated, I thought he would have made an exhibition of himself.

Lady Beltringham, it would appear, had arrived, but was so fatigued by her long journey that she was unable to receive visitors.

"We returned almost immediately to the hotel," said my wife reproachfully. "We thought you would have waited for us there."

Glenbarth looked at me as if nothing I could ever do would make up for the enormity of my offence. He then described to Miss Trevor some wonderful photographs he had discovered that morning in a certain shop on the other side of the piazza. She questioned him concerning them, and I suggested that they should go off and overhaul them. This they did, and when they had departed my wife produced some letters for me she had taken from the rack at the hotel. I looked at the writing upon the envelope of the first, but for a moment could not recall where or when I had seen it before. Then I opened it and withdrew the contents.

"Why, it's from George Anstruther," I exclaimed when I had examined the signature. "He is in Algiers."

"But what is the letter about?" my wife inquired. "You have not heard from him for so long."

"I'll read it," I said, and began as follows—

"MY DEAR HATTERAS,

"Here I am in the most charming place on the whole Mediterranean, and I ought to know, for I've seen and loathed all the others. My villa overlooks the sea, and my yacht rides at anchor in the bay. There are many nice people here, and not the least pleasant is my very good friend, Don Josè de Martinos, who is leaving to-day for his first visit to Venice, *viâ* Nice, and I understand from him that he is to stay at your hotel. He is a delightful creature; has seen much of the world, and if you will admit him to the circle of your acquaintance, I don't think you will regret it. I need not bore either myself or you by repeating the hackneyed phrase to the effect that any civility you show him will be considered a kindness to myself, etc., etc. Remember me most kindly to Lady Hatteras, and

"Believe me to be,

"Ever sincerely yours,

"GEORGE ANSTRUTHER."

My wife uttered a little cry of vexation.

"Pleasant though he may prove, I cannot help saying that I am sorry Don Josè Martinos is coming," she said. "Our little party of four was so happily arranged, and who knows but that a fifth may upset its peace altogether?"

"But he is Anstruther's friend," I said in expostulation. "One must be civil to one's friends' friends."

"I do not at all see why," she answered. "Because we like Mr. Anstruther it does not follow that we shall like his friend."

At that moment the young couple were to be observed crossing the piazza in our direction. Glenbarth carried a parcel under his arm.

"I don't think there is much doubt about that affair," said my wife, as she regarded them approvingly.

"Don't be too sure," I answered. "There is many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip, and there is another old saying to the effect that those who live longest see most."

One is sometimes oracular even in jest.

CHAPTER VI

On the following day, having sent my servant to inquire, I was informed that the Don Josè de Martinos had arrived at the hotel, and had engaged rooms on the floor above our own. Accordingly, after luncheon I ascended to the rooms in question, and asked whether he would receive me. I had scarcely waited more than a minute before he made his appearance. He paused on the threshold to give an order to his man, and while he did so, I was permitted an opportunity of taking stock of him. He was a tall, muscular man of between thirty-five and forty years of age. His appearance did not betray so much of his Spanish origin as I had expected. Indeed, it would have been difficult to have given him a nationality. I noticed that his beard, which he wore closely clipped, was not innocent of the touch of Time. His face was a powerful one, but at first glance I was not altogether prepossessed in its favour. His hands and feet were small, the former particularly so for a man of his size and build. Moreover, he was faultlessly dressed, and carried himself with the air of a man of the world and of good breeding.

"Sir Richard Hatteras," he said, as he crossed the room to greet me, "this is kind of you indeed. My friend, Anstruther, informed me that you were in Venice, and was good enough to take upon himself the responsibility of introducing me to you."

His voice was strong and musical, and he pronounced every word (he spoke excellent English) as if it had a value of its own. I inquired after Anstruther's health, which for some time past had been precarious, and it was with satisfaction that I learnt of the improvement that had taken place in it.

"You would scarcely know him now," said Martinos. "He looks quite strong again. But permit me to offer you a cigar. We Spaniards say that we cannot talk unless we smoke; you English that you cannot smoke if you talk."

As he said this he handed me a box of cigars.

"I fancy you will like them," he said. "The tobacco was grown upon my own estate in Cuba; for that reason I can guarantee their purity."

The weed I selected was excellent, in fact one of the best cigars I had ever smoked. While he was lighting his I stole another glance at him. Decidedly he was a handsome man, but—here was the stumbling-block—there was something, I cannot say what, about him that I did not altogether like. It was not a crafty face, far from it. The eyes were well placed; the mouth from what one could see of it under his black moustache was well moulded, with white, even teeth; the nose was slightly aquiline; and the chin large, firm, and square. Nevertheless, there was something about it that did not suit my fancy. Once I told myself it was a cruel face, yet the singularly winning smile that followed a remark of mine a moment later went some way towards disabusing my mind upon that point.

"Lady Hatteras, I understood from Senor Anstruther, is with you," he said, after we had talked of other things.

"She is down-stairs at this moment," I answered. "We are a party of four—Miss Trevor (the daughter of the Dean of Bedminster), the Duke of Glenbarth, my wife, and myself. I hope you will permit me the pleasure of introducing you to them at an early date."

"I shall be most happy," he replied. "I am particularly fond of Venice, but, when all is said and done, one

must have companions to enjoy it thoroughly."

I had been given to understand that this was his first visit to the Queen of the Adriatic, but I did not comment upon the fact.

"One is inclined to believe that Adam would have enjoyed the Garden of Eden if it had not been for Eve," I remarked, with a smile.

"Poor Adam," he answered, "I have always thought him a much-abused man. Unlike ourselves, he was without experience; he had a companion forced upon him who worked his ruin, and his loss on the transaction was not only physical but financial."

"How long do you contemplate remaining in Venice?" I asked, after the little pause that followed his last speech.

"I scarcely know," he answered. "My movements are most erratic. I am that most unfortunate of God's creatures, a wanderer on the face of the earth. I have no relations and few friends. I roam about as the fancy takes me, remain in a place as long as it pleases me, and then, like the Arab in the poem, silently take up my tent and move on as soon as the city I happen to be in at the time has lost its charm. I possess a *pied-à-terre* of four rooms in Cairo, I have lived amongst the Khabyles in the desert, and with the Armenians in the mountains. To sum it up, I have the instincts of the Wandering Jew, and fortunately the means of gratifying them."

What it was I cannot say, but there was something in his speech that grated upon my feelings. Whether what he had said were true or not, I am not in a position to affirm, but the impression I received was that he was talking for effect, and every one will know what that means.

"As you are such a globe-trotter," I said, "I suppose there is scarcely a portion of the world that you have not visited?"

"I have perhaps had more than my share of travelling," he answered. "I think I can safely say that, with the exception of South America, I have visited every portion of the known globe."

"You have never been in South America then?" I asked in some surprise.

"Never," he replied, and immediately changed the conversation by inquiring whether I had met certain of Anstruther's friends who were supposed to be on their way to Venice. A few minutes later, after having given him an invitation to dinner on the next evening, I bade him good-bye and left him. On my return my wife was eager to question me concerning him, but as things stood I did not feel capable of giving her a detailed reply. There are some acquaintances who, one feels, will prove friends from the outset; there are others who fill one from the first with a vague distrust. Not that I altogether distrusted Martinos, I had not seen enough of him to do that; at the same time, however, I could not conscientiously say, as I have already observed, that I was altogether prepossessed in his favour.

The following morning he accepted my invitation for that evening, and punctually at half-past seven he made his appearance in the drawing-room. I introduced him to my wife, and also to Miss Trevor when she joined us.

"My husband tells me that you are a great traveller," said Phyllis, after they had seated themselves. "He says you know the world as we know London."

"Your husband does me too much honour," he answered modestly. "From what I have heard of you, you must know the world almost as well as I do. My friend, Anstruther, has told me a romantic story about you. Something connected with a South Sea island, and a mysterious personage named——"

He paused for a moment as if to remember the name.

"Nikola," I said; "you do not happen to have met him, I suppose?"

"To my knowledge, never," he answered. "It is a strange surname."

At that moment Glenbarth entered the room, and I introduced the two men to each other. For some reason of my own I was quite prepared to find that the Duke would not take a fancy to our new acquaintance, nor was I destined to be disappointed. Before dinner was half over I could see that he had a great difficulty in being civil to the stranger. Had Martinos not been our guest, I doubt very much whether he would have been able to control himself. And yet the Spaniard laid himself out in every way to please. His attentions were paid chiefly to my wife, I do not believe that he addressed Miss Trevor more than a dozen times throughout the meal. Notwithstanding this fact, Glenbarth regarded him with evident animosity, insomuch that Miss Trevor more than once looked at him with an expression of positive alarm upon her face. She had not seen him in this humour before, and though she may have had her suspicions as to the reason of it, it was plain that she was far from approving of his line of action. When the ladies withdrew, and the wine was being circulated, I endeavoured to draw the two men into greater harmony with each other. The attempt, however, was unsuccessful. More than once Glenbarth said things which bordered on rudeness, until I began to feel angry with him. On one occasion, happening to look up suddenly from the cigar which I was cutting, I detected a look upon the Spaniard's face that startled me. It however showed me one thing, and that was the fact that despite his genial behaviour, Martinos had not been blind to the young man's treatment of himself, and also that, should a time ever arrive when he would have a chance of doing Glenbarth a mischief, he would not be forgetful of the debt he owed him. Matters were not much better when we adjourned to the drawing-room. Glenbarth, according to custom, seated himself beside Miss Trevor, and studiously ignored the Spaniard. I was more sorry for this than I could say. It was the behaviour of a school-boy, not that of a man of the world; and the worst part of it was, that it was doing Glenbarth no sort of good in the eyes of the person with whom he wished to stand best. The truth was the poor lad was far from being himself. He was suffering from an acute attack of a disease which has not yet received the proper attention of Science—the disease of first love. So overwhelmed was he by his passion, that he could not bear any stranger even to look upon the object of his adoration. Later in the evening matters reached their climax, when my wife asked the Don to sing.

"I feel sure that you *do* sing," she said in that artless way which women often affect.

"I try sometimes to amuse my friends," said he, and begging us to excuse him he retired to his own rooms, to presently return with a large Spanish guitar. Having taken a seat near the window, and when he had swept his fingers over the strings in a few preliminary chords, he commenced to sing. He was the possessor of a rich baritone, which he used with excellent effect. My wife was delighted, and asked him to sing again. Miss Trevor also expressed her delight, and seconded my wife's proposal. This was altogether too much for Glenbarth. Muttering something about a severe headache he hurriedly left the room. My wife and I exchanged glances, but Martinos and Miss Trevor did not appear to notice his absence. This time he sang a Spanish fishing-song, but I did not pay much attention to it. A little later the Don, having thanked us for our hospitality, took his departure, and when Miss Trevor had said good-night to us, and had retired to her own room, my wife and I were left alone together.

"What could have made the Duke behave like that?" she said.

"He is madly in love, my dear, and also madly jealous," I answered. "I hope and trust, however, that he is not going to repeat this performance."

"If he does he will imperil any chance he has of winning Gertrude's love," she replied. "He will also place us in a decidedly awkward position."

"Let this be a lesson to you, my dear, never to play with fire again," I replied. "You bring two inflammable people together, and wonder that there should be an explosion."

"Well, I'm really very angry with him. I don't know what the Don Josè must have thought."

"Probably he thought nothing about it," I replied. "You mustn't be too angry with Glenbarth, however. Leave him to me, and I'll talk to him. To-morrow, I promise you, he'll be sorry for himself. If I know anything of women, Gertrude will make him wish he had acted differently."

"I don't think she will bother about the matter. She has too much sense."

"Very well; we shall see."

I then bade her go to bed, promising myself to sit up for Glenbarth, who, I discovered, had gone out. It was nearly midnight when he returned. I noticed that every trace of ill-humour had vanished from his face, and that he was quite himself once more.

"My dear Dick," he said, "I don't know how to apologize for my ridiculous and rude behaviour of to-night. I am more ashamed of myself than I can say. I behaved like a child."

Because he happened to be in a repentant mood I was not going to let him off the chastising I felt that I ought to give him.

"A nice sort of young fellow you are, upon my word," I said, putting down the paper I had been reading as I spoke. "I've a very good mind to tell you exactly what I think of you."

"It would be only wasting your time," he returned. "For you can't think half as badly of me as I do of myself. I can't imagine what made me do it."

"Can't you?" I said. "Well, I can, and as you are pretty certain to catch it in one particular quarter to-morrow, I fancy, on mature reflection, that I can afford to forgive you. The man had done you no harm; he not only did not interfere with you, but he was not trespassing upon your——"

"Don't speak of him," said the young fellow, flaring up at once. "If I think of him I shall get angry again. I can't bear the look of the beggar."

"Steady, my young friend, steady," I returned. "You mustn't call other people's friends by that name."

"He is not your friend," said Glenbarth excitedly. "You've never seen him until to-night, and you've known me ever since I was about so high."

"I began to imagine you only 'so high' this evening," I said. "It's a good thing for you that the wife has gone to bed, or I fancy you would have heard something that would have made your ears tingle. After the foolish manner of women, she has come to the conclusion that she would like you to marry Miss Trevor."

"God bless her!" he said fervently. "I knew that she was my friend."

"In that case you would probably have enjoyed a friend's privilege, had you been here to-night before she retired, and have received a dressing-down that is usually reserved for her husband. I live in hopes that you may get it to-morrow."

"Bosh!" he answered. "And now, if you have forgiven me, I think I will go to bed. I've had enough of myself for one day."

With that we shook hands, and bade each other good-night. At his bedroom door he stopped me.

"Do you think she will forgive me?" he asked, as humbly as would a boy who had been caught stealing sugar-plums.

"My wife," I answered. "Yes, I think it is very probable that she will."

"No, no; how dense you are; I mean——" Here he nodded his head in the direction of the room occupied by Miss Trevor.

"You'll have to find out that for yourself," I replied, and then went on to my dressing-room.

"That will give your Grace something to think about all night," I said, as I took off my coat.

As it turned out, I was destined to be fairly accurate in the prophecy I had made concerning Miss Trevor's treatment of Glenbarth on the morrow. At breakfast she did not altogether ignore him, but when I say that she devoted the larger share of her attention to myself, those of my readers who are married, and have probably had the same experience, will understand. My wife, on the other hand, was affability itself, and from her behaviour toward him appeared to be quite willing to forgive and forget the unfortunate episode of the previous evening. I chuckled to myself, but said nothing. He was not at the end of his punishment yet.

All that day we saw nothing of Martinos. Whether he remained at home or went abroad we could not say. On returning to the hotel to lunch, however, we discovered a basket of roses in the drawing-room, with the Don's card tied to the handle.

"Oh, what lovely flowers!" cried my wife in an ecstasy. "Look, Gertrude, are they not beautiful?"

Miss Trevor cordially admired them; and in order, I suppose, that Glenbarth's punishment might be the more complete, begged for a bud to wear herself. One was given her, while I watched Glenbarth's face over the top of the letter I was reading at the moment. My heart was touched by his miserable face, and when he and my wife had left the room to prepare for lunch, I determined to put in a good word for him.

"Miss Gertrude," I said, "as an old friend I have a favour to ask of you. Do you think you can grant it?"

"You must first tell me what it is," she said, with a smile upon her face. "I know from experience that you are not to be trusted."

"A nice sort of character for a family man," I protested. "Lady Hatteras has been telling tales, I can see."

"Your wife would never tell a tale of any one, particularly of you," she asserted. "But what would you ask of me?"

"Only a plea for human happiness," I said with mock gravity. "I have seen absolute despair written

indelibly on a certain human countenance to-day, and the sight has troubled me ever since. Are you aware that there is a poor young man in this hotel, whose face opens like a daisy to the sun when you smile upon him, and closes in the darkness of your neglect?"

"How absurd you are!"

"Why am I absurd?"

"Because you talk in this fashion."

"Will you smile upon him again? He has suffered a great deal these last two days."

"Really you are too ridiculous. I don't know what you mean."

"That is not the truth, Miss Trevor, and you know it."

"But what have I done wrong?"

"That business with the rose just now, for instance, was cruel, to say the least of it."

"Really, Sir Richard, you *do* say such foolish things. If I want a rose to wear surely I may have one. But I must not stay talking to you, it's five-and-twenty minutes past one. I must go and get ready for lunch."

I held open the door for her, and as she passed I said—

"You will do what I ask? Just to please me?"

"I don't know what you mean, but I will think it over," she replied, and then departed to her room.

She must have done as she promised, for the rose was absent from her dress when she sat down to lunch. Glenbarth noticed it, and from that moment his drooping spirits revived.

That afternoon my wife and I went down to meet the P. and O. mail-boat, in order to discover some friends who were on their way to Egypt. As neither the Duke of Glenbarth nor Miss Trevor were acquainted with them they were excused from attendance. When we joined them it was plain that all traces of trouble had been removed, and in consequence the Duke was basking in the seventh heaven of happiness. Had I asked the young man at that moment for half his estates I believe he would willingly have given them to me. He would have done so even more willingly had he known that it was to my agency that he owed the wondrous change in his affairs. For some reason of her own Miss Trevor was also in the best of spirits. My wife was happy because her turtle-doves were happy, and I beamed upon them all with the complacency of the God out of the machine.

All this time I had been wondering as to the reason why we had not heard or seen anything of Nikola. Why I should have expected to do so I cannot say, but after the events of three evenings ago, I had entertained a vague hope that I should have seen him, or that he would have communicated with me in some form or another. We were to see him, however, before very long.

We had arranged to visit the Academy on our return from the mail-boat, where my wife was anxious to renew her acquaintance with the Titans. For my own part I am prepared to admit that my knowledge of the pictures is not sufficiently cultivated to enable me to derive any pleasure from the constant perusal of these Masters. Phyllis and Miss Trevor, however, managed to discover a source of considerable satisfaction in them. When we left the gallery, we made our way, according to custom, in the direction of

the piazza of Saint Mark. We had not advanced very far upon our walk, however, before I chanced to turn round, to discover, striding after us, no less a person than our new acquaintance, Don José Martinos. He bowed to the ladies, shook hands with myself, and nodded to the Duke.

"If you are proceeding in the direction of the piazza, will you permit me to accompany you?" he asked, and that permission having been given by my wife, we continued our walk. What Glenbarth thought of it I do not know, but as he had Miss Trevor to himself, I do not see that he had anything to complain of. On reaching Florian's *café*, we took our customary seats, the Don placing himself next to my wife, and laying himself out to be agreeable. Once he addressed Glenbarth, and I was astonished to see the conciliatory manner that the other adopted towards him.

"Now that he sees that he has nothing to fear, perhaps he will not be so jealous," I said to myself, and indeed it appeared as if this were likely to be the case. I was more relieved by this discovery than I could say. As we should probably be some time in Venice, and the Don had arrived with the same intention, and we were to be located in the same hotel, it was of the utmost importance to our mutual comforts that there should be no friction between the two men. But enough of this subject for the present. There are other matters to be considered. In the first place I must put on record a curious circumstance. In the light of after events it bears a strange significance, and he would be a courageous man who would dare to say that he could explain it.

It must be borne in mind, in order that the importance of what I am now about to describe may be plainly understood, that Miss Trevor was seated facing me, that is to say, with her back towards the Cathedral of St. Mark. She was in the best of spirits, and at the moment was engaged in an animated discussion with my wife on the effect of Ancient Art upon her *bête noir*, the Cockney tourist. Suddenly, without any apparent reason, her face grew deathly pale, and she came to a sudden stop in the middle of a sentence. Fortunately no one noticed it but my wife and myself, and as she was herself again in a moment, we neither of us called attention to it. A moment later I glanced across the square, and to my amazement saw no less a person than Doctor Nikola approaching us. Was it possible that Miss Trevor, in some extraordinary manner, had become aware of his proximity to her, or was it only one of those strange coincidences that are so difficult to explain away? I did not know what to think then, nor, as a matter of fact, do I now.

Reaching our party, Nikola raised his hat to the ladies.

"I fear, Lady Hatteras," he said, "that I must have incurred your displeasure for keeping your husband so long away from you the other night. If so, I hope you will forgive me."

"I will endeavour to do so," said my wife with a smile, "but you must be very careful how you offend again."

Then turning to Miss Trevor, he said, "I hope you will grant me your gracious intercession, Miss Trevor?"

"I will do my best for you," she answered, with a seriousness that made my wife and I look at her.

Then Nikola shook hands with Glenbarth, and glanced at the Don.

"Permit me to introduce you to Don José de Martinos, Doctor Nikola," I said; "he has lately arrived from Algiers."

The two men bowed gravely to each other.

"You are fond of travelling, I presume, Senor," said Nikola, fixing his eyes upon the Don.

"I have seen a considerable portion of the world," the other answered. "I have seen the Midnight Sun at Cape North and the drift ice off the Horn."

"And have not found it all barren," Nikola remarked gravely.

From that moment the conversation flowed smoothly. Miss Trevor had quite recovered herself, and I could see that the Don was intensely interested in Nikola. And indeed on this particular occasion the latter exerted himself to the utmost to please. I will admit, however, that something not unlike a shudder passed over me as I contrasted his present affability with his manner when he had threatened the unfortunate Police Agent a few nights before. Now he was a suave, pleasant-mannered man of the world, then he figured almost as an avenging angel; now he discussed modern literature, then I had heard him threaten a human being with the direst penalties that it was possible for man to inflict. When it was time for us to return to our hotel, Nikola rose and bade us good-bye.

"I hope you will permit me the pleasure of seeing more of you while you are in Venice," said Nikola, addressing the Don. "If you are an admirer of the old palaces of this wonderful city, and our friends will accompany you, I shall be delighted to show you my own poor abode. It possesses points of interest that many of the other palaces lack, and, though it has fallen somewhat to decay, I fancy you will admit that the fact does not altogether detract from its interest."

"I shall hasten to avail myself of the opportunity you are kind enough to offer me," the other replied, after which they bowed ceremoniously to each other and parted.

"Your friend is an extraordinary man," said the Don as we walked towards the steps. "I have never met a more interesting person. Does he altogether reside in Venice?"

"Oh dear, no," I replied. "If one were asked to say where Nikola had his abode it would be almost necessary to say 'in the world.' I myself met him first in London, afterwards in Egypt, then in Australia, and later on in the South Sea Islands. Now we are together again in Venice. I have good reason for knowing that he is also familiar with China and Thibet. He himself confesses to a knowledge of Africa and Central America."

"To Central America?" said the Don quickly. "Pray what part of Central America does he know?"

"That I am unable to say," I replied. "I have never questioned him upon the subject."

From that moment the Don almost exclusively addressed himself to my wife, and did not refer to Nikola again. We parted in the hall of the hotel. Next morning we saw him for a few moments at the post-office, but at no other time during the day. On the following day he accompanied us on an excursion to Chioggia, and dined with us afterwards. Though I knew that Glenbarth still disliked him, his hostility was so veiled as to be scarcely noticeable. Towards the end of the evening a note was brought to me. One glance at the handwriting upon the envelope was sufficient to show me that it was from Nikola. It ran as follows—

"MY DEAR HATTERAS,

"Remembering your friend Don Martinos' desire to see my poor palace, I have written to ask him if he will dine with me to-morrow evening at eight o'clock. If I can persuade you and the Duke of Glenbarth to give me the pleasure of your society, I need scarcely say that you will be adding to my delight.

"Sincerely yours,

"NIKOLA."

"You have not of course received your letter yet," I said, addressing the Don. "What do you say to the invitation?"

"I shall accept it only too willingly," he answered without delay. "Provided, of course, you will go too."

"Have you any objection to raise, Duke?" I asked, addressing Glenbarth.

I could see that he was not very anxious to go, but under the circumstances he could not very well refuse.

"I shall be very happy," he answered.

And for once in his life he deliberately said what he knew to be untrue.



CHAPTER VII

"You surely are not going to dine with Doctor Nikola in that strange house?" said my wife, when we were alone together that night. "After what the Duke has told us, I wonder that you can be so foolish."

"My dear girl," I answered, "I don't see the force of your argument. I shan't be the first who has eaten a meal in the house in question, and I don't suppose I shall be the last. What do you think will happen to me? Do you think that we have returned to the times of the Borgias, and that Nikola will poison us? No, I am looking forward to a very enjoyable and instructive evening."

"While we are sitting at home, wondering if the table is disappearing bodily into the vaults and taking you with it, or whether Nikola is charging the side-dishes with some of his abominable chemistry, by which you will be put to sleep for three months, or otherwise experimenting upon you in the interests of what he calls Science. I don't think it is at all kind of you to go."

"Dear girl," I answered, "are you not a little unreasonable? Knowing that de Martinos has but lately arrived in Venice, also that he is a friend of ours—for did he not meet him when in our company?—it is only natural that Nikola should desire to show him some courtesy. In spite of its decay, the Palace Revecce is an exceedingly beautiful building, and when he heard that Martinos would like to visit it, he invited him to dinner. What could be more natural? This is the nineteenth century!"

"I am sure I don't mind what century it is," she replied. "Still I adhere to what I said just now. I am sorry you are going."

"In that case I am sorry also," I answered, "but as the matter stands I fail to see how I can get out of it. I could not let the Duke and Martinos go alone, so what can I do?"

"I suppose you will have to go," she replied ruefully. "I have a presentiment, however, that trouble will result from it."

With that the subject was dropped, and it was not until the following morning, when I was smoking with Glenbarth after breakfast, that it cropped up again.

"Look here, Dick," said my companion then. "What about this dinner at Nikola's house to-night? You seemed to be very keen on going last night; are you of the same mind this morning?"

"Why not?" I answered. "My wife does not like the notion, but I am looking forward to seeing Nikola play the host. The last time I dined with him, you must remember, was in Port Said, and then the banquet could scarcely be described as a pleasant one. What is more, I am anxious to see what effect Nikola and his house will produce upon our friend the Don."

"I wish he'd get rid of him altogether," my companion replied. "I dislike the fellow more and more every time I see him."

"Why should you? He does you no harm!"

"It's not that," said Glenbarth. "My dislike to him is instinctive; just as one shudders when one looks into the face of a snake, or as one is repelled by a toad or a rat. In spite of his present apparent respectability, I should not be at all surprised to hear that at some period of his career he had committed murders

innumerable."

"Nonsense, nonsense," I replied, "you must not imagine such things as that. You were jealous when you first saw him, because you thought he was going to come between you and Miss Trevor. You have never been able to overcome the feeling, and this continued dislike is the result. You must fight against it. Doubtless, when you have seen more of him, you will like him better."

"I shall never like him better than I do now," he answered, with conviction. "As they say in the plays, 'my gorge rises at him!' If you saw him in the light I do, you would not let Lady Hatteras——"

"My dear fellow," I began, rising from my chair and interrupting him, "this is theatrical and very ridiculous, and I assume the right of an old friend to tell you so. If you prefer not to go to-night, I'll make some excuse for you, but don't, for goodness' sake, go and make things unpleasant for us all while you're there."

"I have no desire to do so," he replied stiffly. "What is more, I am not going to let you go alone. Write your letter and accept for us both. Bother Nikola and Martinos as well, I wish they were both on the other side of the world."

I thereupon wrote a note to Nikola accepting, on Glenbarth's behalf and my own, his invitation to dinner for that evening. Then I dismissed the matter from my mind for the time being. An hour or so later my wife came to me with a serious face.

"I am afraid, Dick, that there is something the matter with Gertrude," she said. "She has gone to her room to lie down, complaining of a very bad headache and a numbness in all her limbs. I have done what I can for her, but if she does not get better by lunch-time, I think I shall send for a doctor."

As, by lunch-time, she was no better, the services of an English doctor were called in. His report to my wife was certainly a puzzling one. He declared he could discover nothing the matter with the girl, nor anything to account for the mysterious symptoms.

"Is she usually of an excitable disposition?" he inquired, when we discussed the matter together in the drawing-room.

"Not in the least," I replied. "I should say she is what might be called a very evenly-dispositioned woman."

He asked one or two other questions and then took leave of us, promising to call again next day.

"I cannot understand it at all," said my wife when he had gone; "Gertrude seemed so well last night. Now she lies upon her bed and complains of this continued pain in her head and the numbness in all her limbs. Her hands and feet are as cold as ice, and her face is as white as a sheet of note-paper."

During the afternoon Miss Trevor determined to get up, only to be compelled to return to bed again. Her headache had left her, but the strange numbness still remained. She seemed incapable, so my wife informed me, of using her limbs. The effect upon the Duke may be better imagined than described. His face was the picture of desolation, and his anxiety was all the greater inasmuch as he was precluded from giving vent to it in speech. I am afraid that, at this period of his life, the young gentleman's temper was by no means as placid as we were accustomed to consider it. He was given to flaring up without the slightest warning, and to looking upon himself and his own little world in a light that was very far removed from cheerful. Realizing that we could do no good at home, I took him out in the afternoon, and was given to

understand that I was quite without heart, because, when we had been an hour abroad, I refused to return to the hotel.

"I wonder if there is anything that Miss Trevor would like," he said, as we crossed the piazza of Saint Mark. "It could be sent up to her, you know, in your name."

"You might send her some flowers," I answered. "You could then send them from yourself."

"By Jove, that's the very thing. You do have some good ideas sometimes."

"Thank you," I said quietly. "Approbation from Sir Hubert Stanley is praise indeed."

"Bother your silly quotations!" he retorted. "Let's get back to that flower-shop."

We did so, and thereupon that reckless youth spent upon flowers what would have kept me in cigars for a month. Having paid for them and given orders that they should be sent to the Hotel Galaghetti at once, we left the shop. When we stood outside, I had to answer all sorts of questions as to whether I thought she would like them, whether it would not have been better to have chosen more of one sort than another, and whether the scent would not be too strong for a sick-room. After that he felt doubtful whether the shopkeeper would send them in time, and felt half inclined to return in order to impress this fact upon the man. Let it be counted to me for righteousness that I bore with him patiently, remembering my own feeling at a similar stage in my career. When we reached the hotel on our return, we discovered that the patient was somewhat better. She had had a short sleep, and it had refreshed her. My wife was going to sit with her during the evening, and knowing this, I felt that we might go out with clear consciences.

At a quarter to seven we retired to our rooms to dress, and at a quarter past the hour were ready to start. When we reached the hall, we found the Don awaiting us there. He was dressed with the greatest care, and presented a not unhandsome figure. He shook hands cordially with me and bowed to Glenbarth, who had made no sign of offering him his hand. Previous to setting out, I had extorted from that young man his promise that he would behave with courtesy towards the other during the evening.

"You can't expect me to treat the fellow as a friend," he had said in reply, "but I will give you my word that I'll be civil to him—if that's what you want."

And with this assurance I was perforce compelled to be content.

Having taken our places in the gondola which was waiting for us, we set off.

"I had the pleasure of seeing Doctor Nikola this morning," said Martinos, as we turned into the Rio del Consiglio. "He did me the honour of calling upon me."

I gave a start of surprise on hearing this.

"Indeed," I replied. "And at what hour was that?"

"Exactly at eleven o'clock," the Don answered. "I remember the time because I was in the act of going out, and we encountered each other in the hall."

Now it is a singular thing, a coincidence if you like, but it was almost on the stroke of eleven that Miss Trevor had been seized with her mysterious illness. At a quarter past the hour she felt so poorly as to be compelled to retire to her room. Of course there could be no connection between the two affairs, but it was certainly a coincidence of a nature calculated to afford me ample food for reflection. A few moments

later the gondola drew up at the steps of the Palace Revecce. Almost at the same instant the door opened and we entered the house. The courtyard had been lighted in preparation for our coming, and, following the man who had admitted us, we ascended the stone staircase to the corridor above. Though not so dismal as when I had last seen it, lighted only by Nikola's lantern, it was still sufficiently awesome to create a decided impression upon the Don.

"You were certainly not wrong when you described it as a lonely building," he said, as we passed along the corridor to Nikola's room.

As he said this the door opened, and Nikola stood before us. He shook hands with the Duke first, afterwards with the Don, and then with myself.

"Let me offer you a hearty welcome," he began. "Pray enter."

We followed him into the room I have already described, and the door was closed behind us. It was in this apartment that I had expected we should dine, but I discovered that this was not to be the case. The tables were still littered with papers, books, and scientific apparatus, just as when I had last seen it. Glenbarth seated himself in a chair by the window, but I noticed that his eyes wandered continually to the oriental rug upon the floor by the fireplace. He was doubtless thinking of the vaults below, and, as I could easily imagine, wishing himself anywhere else than where he was. The black cat, Apollyon, which was curled up in an arm-chair, regarded us for a few seconds with attentive eyes, as if to make sure of our identities, and then returned to his slumbers. The windows were open, I remember, and the moon was just rising above the house-tops opposite. I had just gone to the casement, and was looking down upon the still waters below, when the tapestry of the wall on the right hand was drawn aside by the man who had admitted us to the house, who informed Nikola in Italian that dinner was upon the table.

"In that case let us go in to it," said our host. "Perhaps your Grace will be kind enough to lead the way."

Glenbarth did as he was requested, and we followed him, to find ourselves in a large, handsome apartment, which had once been richly frescoed, but was now, like the rest of the palace, sadly fallen to decay. In the centre of the room was a small oval table, well illuminated by a silver lamp, which diffused a soft light upon the board, the remainder of the room being in heavy shadow. The decorations, the napery, and the glass and silver, were, as I could see at one glance, unique. Three men-servants awaited our coming, though where they hailed from and how Nikola had induced them to enter the palace, I could not understand. Nikola, as our host, occupied one end of the table; Glenbarth, being the principal guest of the evening, was given the chair on his left; the Don took that on the right, while I faced him at the further end. How, or by whom, the dinner was cooked was another mystery. Nikola had told us on the occasion of our first visit, that he possessed no servants, and that such cooking as he required was done for him by an old man who came in once every day. Yet the dinner he gave us on this particular occasion was worthy of the finest *chef* in Europe. It was perfect in every particular. Though Nikola scarcely touched anything, he did the honours of his table royally, and with a grace that was quite in keeping with the situation. Had my wife and Miss Trevor been present, they might, for all the terrors they had anticipated for us, very well have imagined themselves in the dining-room of some old English country mansion, waited upon by the family butler, and taken in to dinner by the Bishop and Rural Dean. The Nikola I had seen when I had last visited the house was as distant from our present host as if he had never existed. When I looked at him, I could scarcely believe that he had ever been anything else but the most delightful man of my acquaintance.

"As a great traveller, Don Josè," he said, addressing the guest on his right hand, "you have of course dined in a great number of countries, and I expect under a variety of startling circumstances. Now tell me, what

is your most pleasant recollection of a meal?"

"That which I managed to obtain after the fall of Valparaiso," said Martinos. "We had been without food for two days, that is to say, without a decent meal, when I chanced upon a house where breakfast had been abandoned without being touched. I can see it now. Ye gods! it was delightful. And not the less so because the old rascal we were after had managed to make his escape."

"You were in opposition to Balmaceda, then?" said Nikola quietly.

Martinosa paused for a moment before he answered.

"Yes, against Balmaceda," he replied. "I wonder whether the old villain really died, and if so what became of his money."

"That is a question one would like to have settled concerning a good many people," Glenbarth put in.

"There was that man up in the Central States, the Republic of—ah! what was its name?—Equinata," said Nikola. "I don't know whether you remember the story."

"Do you mean the fellow who shot those unfortunate young men?" I asked. "The man you were telling me of the other night."

"The same," Nikola replied. "Well, he managed to fly his country, taking with him something like two million dollars. From that moment he has never been heard of, and as a matter of fact I do not suppose he ever will be. After all, luck has a great deal to do with things in this world."

"Permit me to pour out a libation to the God of Chance," said Martinos. "He has served me well."

"I think we can all subscribe to that," said Nikola. "You, Sir Richard, would not be the happy man you are had it not been for a stroke of good fortune which shipwrecked you on one island in the Pacific instead of another. You, my dear Duke, would certainly have been drowned in Bournemouth Bay had not our friend Hatteras chanced to be an early riser, and to have taken a certain cruise before breakfast; while you, Don Martinos, would in all probability not be my guest to-night had not——"

The Spaniard looked sharply at him as if he feared what he was about to hear.

"Had not what happened?" he asked.

"Had President Balmaceda won his day," was the quiet reply. "He did not do so, however, and so we four sit here to-night. Certainly, a libation to the God of Chance."

At last the dinner came to an end, and the servants withdrew, having placed the wine upon the table. The conversation drifted from one subject to another until it reached the history of the palace in which we were then the guests. For the Spaniard's information Nikola related it in detail. He did not lay any particular emphasis upon it, however, as he had done upon the story he had told the Duke and myself concerning the room in which he had received us. He merely narrated it in a matter-of-fact way, as if it were one in which he was only remotely interested. Yet I could not help thinking that he fixed his eyes more keenly than usual on the Spaniard, who sat sipping his wine and listening with an expression of polite attention upon his sallow face. When the wine had been circulated for the last time, Nikola suggested that we should leave the dining-room and return to his own sitting-room.

"I do not feel at home in this room," he said by way of explanation; "for that reason I never use it. I usually

partake of such food as I need in the next, and allow the rest of the house to fall undisturbed into that decay which you see about you."

With that we rose from the table and returned to the room in which he had received us. A box of cigars was produced and handed round; Nikola made coffee with his own hands at a table in the corner, and then I awaited the further developments that I knew would come. Presently Nikola began to speak of the history of Venice. As I had already had good reason to know, he had made a perfect study of it, particularly of the part played in it by the Revecce family. He dealt with particular emphasis upon the betrayal through the Lion's Mouth, and then, with an apology to Glenbarth and myself for boring us with it again, referred to the tragedy of the vaults below the room in which we were then seated. Once more he drew back the carpet and the murderous trap-door opened. A cold draught, suggestive of unspeakable horrors, came up to us.

"And there the starving wretch died with the moans of the woman he loved sounding in his ears from the room above," said Nikola. "Does it not seem that you can hear them now? For my part, I think they will echo through all eternity."

If he had been an actor what a wonderful tragedian he would have made! As he stood before us pointing down into the abyss he held us spell-bound. As for Martinos, all the accumulated superstition of the centuries seemed to be concentrated in him, and he watched Nikola's face as if he were fascinated beyond the power of movement.

"Come," Nikola began at last, closing the trap-door and placing the rug upon it as he spoke, "you have heard the history of the house. You shall now do more than that! You shall see it!"

Fixing his eyes upon us he made two or three passes in the air with his long white hands. Meanwhile, it seemed to me as if he were looking into my brain. I tried to avert my eyes, but without success. They were chained to his face, and I could not remove them. Then an overwhelming feeling of drowsiness took possession of me, and I must have lost consciousness, for I have no recollection of anything until I found myself in a place I thought for a moment I had never seen before. And yet after a time I recognized it. It was a bright day in the early spring, the fresh breeze coming over the islands from the open sea was rippling the water of the lagoons. I looked at my surroundings. I was in Venice, and yet it was not the Venice with which I was familiar. I was standing with Nikola upon the steps of a house, the building of which was well-nigh completed. It was a magnificent edifice, and I could easily understand the pride of the owner as he stood in his gondola and surveyed it from the stretch of open water opposite. He was a tall and handsome man, and wore a doublet and hose, shoes with large bows, and a cloak trimmed with fur. There was also a chain of gold suspended round his neck. Beside him was a man whom I rightly guessed to be the architect, for presently the taller man placed his hand upon his shoulder and praised him for the work he had done, vowing that it was admirable. Then, at a signal, the gondolier gave a stroke of his oar and the little vessel shot across to the steps, where they landed close to where I was standing. I stepped back in order that they might pass, but they took no sort of notice of my presence. Passing on, they entered the house.

"They do not see us," said Nikola, who was beside me. "Let us enter and hear what the famous Admiral Francesco del Revecce thinks of his property."

We accordingly did so to find ourselves in a magnificent courtyard. In the centre of this courtyard was a well, upon which a carver in stone was putting the finishing touches to a design of leaves and fruit. From here led a staircase, and this we ascended. In the different rooms artists were to be observed at work

upon the walls, depicting sea-fights, episodes in the history of the Republic, and of the famous master of the house. Before each the owner paused, bestowing approval, giving advice, or suggesting such alteration or improvement as he considered needful. In his company we visited the kitchens, the pantler's offices, and penetrated even to the dungeons below the water-level. Then we once more ascended to the courtyard, and stood at the great doors while the owner took his departure in his barge, pleased beyond measure with his new abode. Then the scene changed.

Once more I stood before the house with Nikola. It was night, but it was not dark, for great cressets flared on either side of the door, and a hundred torches helped to illuminate the scene. All the Great World of Venice was making its way to the Palace Revecce that night. The first of the series of gorgeous *fêtes* given to celebrate the nuptials of Francesco del Revecce, the most famous sailor of the Republic, who had twice defeated the French fleet, and who had that day married the daughter of the Duke of Levano, was in progress. The bridegroom was still comparatively young, he was also rich and powerful; the bride was one of the greatest heiresses of Venice, besides being one of its fairest daughters. Their new home was as beautiful as money and the taste of the period could make it. Small wonder was it, therefore, that the world hastened to pay court to them.

"Let us once more enter and look about us," said Nikola.

"One moment," I answered, drawing him back a step as he was in the act of coming into collision with a beautiful girl who had just disembarked from her gondola upon the arm of a grey-haired man.

"You need have no fear," he replied. "You forget that we are Spirits in a Spirit World, and that they are not conscious of our presence."

And indeed this appeared to be the case, for no one recognized us, and more than once I saw people approach Nikola, and, scarcely believable though it may seem, walk through him without being the least aware of the fact.

On this occasion the great courtyard was brilliantly illuminated. Scores of beautiful figures were ascending the stairs continually, while strains of music sounded from the rooms above.

"Let us ascend," said Nikola, "and see the pageant there."

It was indeed a sumptuous entertainment, and when we entered the great reception-rooms, no fairer scene could have been witnessed in Venice. I looked upon the bridegroom and his bride, and recognized the former as being the man I had seen praising the architect on the skill he had displayed in the building of the palace. He was more bravely attired now, however, than on that occasion, and did the honours of his house with the ease and assurance of one accustomed to uphold the dignity of his name and position in the world. His bride was a beautiful girl, with a pale, sweet face, and eyes that haunted one long after they had looked at them. She was doing her best to appear happy before her guests, but in my own heart I knew that such was not the case. Knowing what was before her, I realized something of the misery that was weighing so heavily upon her heart. Surrounding her were the proudest citizens of the proudest Republic of all time. There was not one who did not do her honour, and among the women who were her guests that night, how many were there who envied her good fortune? Then the scene once more changed.

This time the room was that with which I was best acquainted, the same in which Nikola had taken up his abode. The frescoes upon the walls and ceilings were barely dry, and Revecce was at sea again, opposing his old enemy the French, who once more threatened an attack upon the city. It was towards evening, and the red glow of the sunset shone upon a woman's face, as she stood beside the table at which a man was

writing. I at once recognized her as Revecce's bride. The man himself was young and handsome, and when he looked up at the woman and smiled, the love-light shone in her eyes, as it had not done when she had looked upon Revecce. There was no need for Nikola to tell me that he was Andrea Bunopelli, the artist to whose skill the room owed its paintings.

"Art thou sure 'twill be safe, love?" asked the woman in a low voice, as she placed her hand upon his shoulder. "Remember 'tis death to bring a false accusation against a citizen of the Republic, and 'twill be worse when 'tis against the great Revecce."

"I have borne that in mind," the man answered. "But there is nought to fear, dear love. The writing will not be suspected, and I will drop it in the Lion's Mouth myself,—and then?"

Her only answer was to bend over him and kiss him. He scattered the sand upon the letter he had written, and when it was dry, folded it up and placed it in his bosom. Then he kissed the woman once more and prepared to leave the room. The whole scene was so real that I could have sworn that he saw me as I stood watching him.

"Do not linger," she said in farewell. "I shall know no peace till you return."

Drawing aside the curtain he disappeared, and then once more the scene changed.

A cold wind blew across the lagoon, and there was a suspicion of coming thunder in the air. A haggard, ragged tatterdemalion was standing on the steps of a small door of the palace. Presently it was opened to him by an ancient servant, who asked his business, and would have driven him away. When he had whispered something to him, however, the other realized that it was his master, whom he thought to be a prisoner in the hands of the French. Then, amazed beyond measure, the man admitted him. Having before me the discovery he was about to make, I looked at him with pity, and when he stumbled and almost fell, I hastened forward to pick him up, but only clasped air. At last, when his servant had told him everything, he followed him to a distant portion of the palace, where he was destined to remain hidden for some days, taking advantage of the many secret passages the palace contained, and by so doing confirming his suspicions. His wife was unfaithful to him, and the man who had wrought his dishonour was the man to whom he had been so kind and generous a benefactor. I seemed to crouch by his side time after time in the narrow passage behind the arras, watching through a secret opening the love-making going on within. I could see the figure beside me quiver with rage and hate, until I thought he would burst in upon them, and then the old servant would lead him away, his finger upon his lips. How many times I stood with him there I cannot say, it is sufficient that at last he could bear the pain no longer, and, throwing open the secret door, entered the room and confronted the man and woman. As I write, I can recall the trembling figures of the guilty pair, and the woman's shriek rings in my ears even now. I can see Bunopelli rising from the table, at which he had been seated, with the death-look in his face. Within an hour the confession of the crime they had perpetrated against Revecce had been written and signed, and they were separated and made secure until the time for punishment should arrive. Then, for the first time since he had arrived in Venice, he ordered his barge and set off for the Council Chamber to look his accusers in the face and to demand the right to punish those who had betrayed him.



"Throwing open the secret door ... he confronted them."

When he returned his face was grim and set, and there was a look in his eyes that had not been there before. He ascended to the room in which there was the trap-door in the floor, and presently the wretched couple were brought before him. In vain Bunopelli pleaded for mercy for the woman. There was no mercy to be obtained there. I would have pleaded for them too, but I was powerless to make myself heard. I saw the great beads of perspiration that stood upon the man's brow, the look of agonizing entreaty in the woman's face, and the relentless decision on her husband's countenance. Nothing could save them now. The man was torn, crying to the last for mercy for her, from the woman's side, the trap-door gave a click, and he disappeared. Then they laid hands upon the woman, and I saw them force open her mouth—but I cannot set down the rest. My tongue clove to the roof of my mouth, and though I rushed forward in the hope of preventing their horrible task, my efforts were as useless as before. Then, with the pitiless smile still upon the husband's face, and the moans ascending from the vault below, and the woman with.... The scene changed.

When I saw it again a stream of bright sunshine was flooding the room. It was still the same apartment, and yet in a sense not the same. The frescoes were faded upon the walls, there was a vast difference in the shape and make of the furniture, and in certain other things, but it was nevertheless the room in which Francesco del Revecce had taken his terrible revenge. A tall and beautiful woman, some thirty years of age, was standing beside the window holding a letter in her hand. She had finished the perusal of it and was lingering with it in her hand, looking lovingly upon the signature. At last she raised it to her lips and kissed it passionately. Then, crossing to a cradle at the further end of the room, she knelt beside it and looked down at the child it contained. She had bent her head in prayer, and was still praying, when with a start I awoke to find myself sitting beside Glenbarth and the Don in the room in which we had been

smoking after dinner. Nikola was standing before the fireplace, and there was a look like that of death upon his face. It was not until afterwards that the Spaniard and Glenbarth informed me that they had witnessed exactly what I had seen. Both, however, were at a loss to understand the meaning of the last picture, and, having my own thoughts in my mind, I was not to be tempted into explaining it to them. That it was Nikola's own mother, and that this house was her property, and the same in which the infamous governor of the Spanish Colony had made his love known to her, I could now see. And if anything were wanting to confirm my suspicions, Nikola's face, when my senses returned to me, was sufficient to do so.

"Let me get out of this house," cried the Duke thickly. "I cannot breathe while I am in it. Take me away, Hatteras; for God's sake take me away!"

I had already risen to my feet and had hastened to his side.

"I think it would be better that we should be going, Doctor Nikola," I said, turning to our host.

The Spaniard, on his side, did not utter a word. He was so dazed as to be beyond the power of speech. But Nikola did not seem to comprehend what I said. Never before had I seen such a look upon his face. His complexion was always white, now, however, it was scarcely human. For my own part I knew what was passing in his mind, but I could give no utterance to it.

"Come," I said to my companions, "let us return to our hotel."

They rose and began to move mechanically towards the door. The Duke had scarcely reached it, however, before Nikola, with what I could see was a violent effort, recovered his self-possession.

"You must forgive me," he said in almost his usual voice. "I had for the moment forgotten my duties as host. I fear you have had but a poor evening."

When we had donned our hats and cloaks, we accompanied him down-stairs through the house, which was now as silent as the grave, to the great doors upon the steps. Having hailed a gondola we entered it, after wishing Nikola "good-night." He shook hands with Glenbarth and myself, but I noticed that he did not offer to do so with the Don. Then we shot out into the middle of the canal and had presently turned the corner and were making our way towards our hotel. I am perfectly certain that during the journey not one of us spoke. The events of the evening had proved too much for us, and conversation was impossible. We bade Martinos "good-night" in the hall, and then the Duke and I ascended to our own apartments. Spirits had been placed upon the table, and I noticed that the Duke helped himself to almost twice his usual quantity. He looked as if he needed it.

"My God, Dick," he said, "did you see what happened in that room? Did you see that woman kneeling with the——"

He put down his glass hurriedly and walked to the window. I could sympathize with him, for had I not seen the same thing myself?

"It's certain, Dick," he said, when he returned a few moments later, "that, were I to see much more of Nikola in that house, I should go mad. But why did he let me see it? Why? Why? For Heaven's sake answer me."

How could I tell him the thought that was in my own mind? How could I reveal to him the awful fear that was slowly but surely taking possession of me? Why had Nikola invited the Don to his house? Why had he shown him the picture of that terrible crime? Like Glenbarth I could only ask the same question—Why?

Why? Why?



CHAPTER VIII

Before Glenbarth and I parted on the terrible evening described in the previous chapter, we had made a contract with each other to say nothing about what we had seen to the ladies. For this reason, when my wife endeavoured to interrogate me concerning our entertainment, I furnished her with an elaborate description of the dinner itself; spoke of the marvellous cooking, and I hope gave her a fairly accurate account of the *menu*, or rather so much of it as I could remember.

"I suppose I must confess to defeat then," she said, when I had exhausted my powers of narration. "I had a settled conviction that something out of the common would have occurred. You seem simply to have had a good dinner, to have smoked some excellent cigars, and the rest to have been bounded merely by the commonplace. For once I fear Doctor Nikola has not acted up to his reputation."

If she had known the truth, I wonder what she would have said? Long after she had bade me good-night I lay awake ruminating on the different events of the evening. The memory of what I had seen in that awful room was still as fresh with me as if I were still watching it. And yet, I asked myself, why should I worry so much about it? Nikola had willed that his audience should see certain things. We had done so. It was no more concerned with the supernatural than I was myself. Any man who had the power could have impressed us in the same way. But though I told myself all this, I must confess that I was by no means convinced. I knew in my heart that the whole thing had been too real to be merely a matter of make-believe. No human brain could have invented the ghastly horrors of that room in such complete detail. Even to think of it now, is to bring the scene almost too vividly before me; and when I lay awake at night I seem to hear the shrieks of the wretched woman, and the moans of the man perishing in the vaults below.

On my retiring to rest my wife had informed me that she fancied Miss Trevor had been slightly better that evening. She had slept peacefully for upwards of an hour, and seemed much refreshed by it.

"Her maid is going to spend the night in her room," said Phyllis; "I have told her that, if she sees any change in Gertrude's condition, she is to let me know at once. I do hope that she may be herself again to-morrow."

This, however, was unhappily not destined to be the case; for a little before three o'clock, there was a tapping upon our bedroom door. Guessing who it would be, my wife went to it, and, having opened it a little, was informed that Miss Trevor was worse.

"I must go to her at once," said Phyllis, and, having clothed herself warmly, for the night was cold, she departed to our guest's room.

"I am really afraid that there is something very serious the matter with her," she said, when she returned after about a quarter of an hour's absence. "She is in a high state of fever, and is inclined to be delirious. Don't you think we had better send for the doctor?"

"I will have a messenger despatched to him at once if you think it necessary," I returned. "Poor girl, I wonder what on earth it can be?"

"Perhaps the doctor will be able to tell us now," said my wife. "The symptoms are more fully developed, and he should surely be able to make his diagnosis. But I must not stay here talking. I must go back to her."

When she had departed, I dressed myself and went down to the hall in search of the night watchman. He

undertook to find a messenger to go and fetch the doctor, and, when I had seen him despatched on his errand, I returned to the drawing-room, switched on the electric light, and tried to interest myself in a book until the medico should arrive. I was not very successful, however, for interesting though I was given to understand the book was, I found my thoughts continually leaving it and returning to the house in the Rio del Consiglio. I wondered what Nikola was doing at that moment, and fancied I could picture him still at work, late though the hour was. At last, tiring of the book and wanting something else to occupy my thoughts, I went to the window and drew back the shutters. It was a beautiful morning, and the myriad stars overhead were reflected in the black waters of the canal like the lamps of a large town. Not a sound was to be heard; it might have been a City of the Dead, so still was it. As I stood looking across the water, I thought of the city's past history, of her ancient grandeur, of her wondrous art, and of the great men who had been her children. There was a tremendous lesson to be learnt from her Fall if one could only master it. I was interrupted in my reverie by the entrance of the doctor, whom I had told the night watchman to conduct to my presence immediately upon his arrival.

"I am sorry to bring you out at this time of the night, doctor," I said; "but the fact is, Miss Trevor is much worse. My wife spent the greater part of the evening with her, and informed me on my return from a dinner that she was better. Three-quarters of an hour ago, however, her maid, who had been sleeping in her room, came to us with the news that a change for the worse had set in. This being the case, I thought it better to send for you at once."

"You did quite right, my dear sir, quite right," the medico replied. "There is nothing like promptness in these matters. Perhaps I had better see her without further delay."

With that I conducted him to the door of Miss Trevor's room. He knocked upon it, was admitted by my wife, and then disappeared from my gaze. Something like half-an-hour elapsed before he returned to me in the drawing-room. When he did so his face looked grave and troubled.

"What do you think of her condition now, doctor?" I asked.

"She is certainly in a state of high fever," he answered. "Her pulse is very high, and she is inclined to be delirious. At the same time I am bound to confess to you that I am at a loss to understand the reason of it. The case puzzled me considerably yesterday, but I am even more puzzled by it now. There are various symptoms that I can neither account for nor explain. One thing, however, is quite certain—the young lady must have a trained nurse, and, with your permission, I will see that one comes in after breakfast. Lady Hatteras is not strong enough for the task."

"I am quite with you there," I answered. "And I am vastly obliged to you for putting your foot down. At the same time, will you tell me whether you deem it necessary for me to summon her father from England?"

"So far as I can see at present, I do not think there is any immediate need," he replied. "Should I see any reason for so doing, I would at once tell you. I have given a prescription to Lady Hatteras, and furnished her with the name of a reliable chemist. I shall return between nine and ten o'clock, and shall hope to have better news for you then."

"I sincerely trust you may," I said. "As you may suppose, her illness has been a great shock to us."

I then escorted him down-stairs and afterwards returned to my bedroom. The news which he had given me of Miss Trevor's condition was most distressing, and made me feel more anxious than I cared to admit. At seven o'clock I saw my wife for a few minutes, but, as before, she had no good news to give me.

"She is quite delirious now," she said, "and talks continually of some great trouble which she fears is going to befall her; implores me to help her to escape from it, but will not say definitely what it is. It goes to my heart to hear her, and to know that I cannot comfort her."

"You must be careful what you are doing," I replied. "The doctor has promised to bring a trained nurse with him after breakfast, who will relieve you of the responsibility. I inquired whether he thought we had better send for her father, and it is in a way encouraging to know that, so far, he does not think there is any necessity for such an extreme step. In the meantime, however, I think I will write to the Dean and tell him how matters stand. It will prepare him, but I am afraid it will give the poor old gentleman a sad fright."

"It could not give him a greater fright than it has done us," said Phyllis. "I do not know why I should do so, but I cannot help thinking that I am to blame in some way."

"What nonsense, my dear girl," I replied. "I am sure you have nothing whatsoever to reproach yourself with. Far from it. You must not worry yourself about it, or we shall be having you upon our hands before long. You must remember that you are yourself far from strong."

"I am quite myself again now," she answered. "It is only on account of your anxiety that I treat myself as an invalid." Then she added, "I wonder what the Duke will say when he hears the news?"

"He was very nearly off his head yesterday," I answered. "He will be neither to hold nor to bind to-day."

She was silent for a few moments, then she said thoughtfully—

"Do you know, Dick, it may seem strange to you, but I do not mind saying that I attribute all this trouble to Nikola."

"Good gracious," I cried, in well-simulated amazement, "why on earth to Nikola?"

"Because, as was the case five years ago, it has been all trouble since we met him. You remember how he affected Gertrude at the outset. She was far from being herself on the night of our tour through the city, and now in her delirium she talks continually of his dreadful house, and from what she says, and the way she behaves, I cannot help feeling inclined to believe that she imagines herself to be seeing some of the dreadful events which have occurred or are occurring in it."

"God help her," I said to myself. And then I continued aloud to my wife, "Doubtless Nikola's extraordinary personality has affected her in some measure, as it does other people, but you are surely not going to jump to the conclusion that because she has spoken to him he is necessarily responsible for her illness? That would be the wildest flight of fancy."

"And yet, do you know," she continued, "I have made a curious discovery."

"What is that?" I asked, not without some asperity, for, having so much on my mind, I was not in the humour for fresh discoveries.

She paused for a moment before she replied. Doubtless she expected that I would receive it with scepticism, if not with laughter; and Phyllis, ever since I have known her, has a distinct fear of ridicule.

"You may laugh at me if you please," she said, "yet the coincidence is too extraordinary to be left unnoticed. Do you happen to be aware, Dick, that Doctor Nikola called at this hotel at exactly eleven o'clock?"

I almost betrayed myself in my surprise. This was the last question I expected her to put to me.

"Yes," I answered, with an endeavour to appear calm, "I do happen to be aware of that fact. He merely paid a visit of courtesy to the Don, prior to the other's accepting his hospitality. I see nothing remarkable in that. I did the same myself, if you remember."

"Of course I know that," she replied, "but there is more to come. Are you also aware that it was at the very moment of his arrival in the house that Gertrude was taken ill? What do you think of that?"

She put this question to me with an air of triumph, as if it were one that no argument on my part could refute. At any rate, I did not attempt the task.

"I think nothing of it," I replied. "You may remember that you once fell down in a dead faint within a few minutes of the vicar's arrival at our house at home. Would you therefore have me suppose that it was on account of his arrival that you were taken ill? Why should you attribute Miss Trevor's illness to Nikola's courtesy to our friend the Don?"

"I beg that you will not call him our friend," said Phyllis with considerable dignity. "I do not like the man."

I did not tell her that the Duke was equally outspoken concerning our companion. I could see that they would put their heads together, and that trouble would be the inevitable result. Like a wise husband I held my peace, knowing that whatever I might say would not better the situation.

Half-an-hour later it was my unhappy lot to have to inform Glenbarth of Miss Trevor's condition.

"I told you yesterday that it was a matter not to be trifled with," he said, as if I were personally responsible for her grave condition. "The doctor evidently doesn't understand the case, and what you ought to do, if you have any regard for her life, is to send a telegram at once to London, ordering competent advice."

"The Dean of Bedminster has a salary of eight hundred pounds per annum," I answered quietly. "Such a man as you would want me to send for would require a fee of some hundreds of guineas to make such a journey."

"And you would allow her to die for the sake of a few paltry pounds?" he cried. "Good heavens, Dick, I never thought you were a money-grabber."

"I am glad you did not," I answered. "It is of her father I am thinking. Besides, I do not know that the doctor here is as ignorant as you say. He has a most complicated and unusual case to deal with, and I honour him for admitting the fact that he does not understand it. Many men in his profession would have thrown dust in our eyes, and have pretended to a perfect knowledge of the case."

The young man did not see it in the same light as I did, and was plainly of the opinion that we were not doing what we might for the woman he loved. My wife, however, took him in hand after breakfast, and talked quietly but firmly to him. She succeeded where I had failed, and when I returned from an excursion to the chemist's, where I had the prescriptions made up, I found him in a tolerably reasonable frame of mind.

At a quarter to ten the doctor put in an appearance once more, and, after a careful inspection of his patient, informed me that it was his opinion that a consultant should be called in. This was done, and to our

dismay the result came no nearer elucidating the mystery than before. The case was such a one as had never entered into the experience of either man. To all intents and purposes there was nothing that would in any way account for the patient's condition. The fever had left her, and she complained of no pain, while her mind, save for occasional relapses, was clear enough. They were certain it was not a case of paralysis, yet she was incapable of moving, or of doing anything to help herself. The duration of her illness was not sufficient to justify her extreme weakness, nor to account for the presence of certain other symptoms. There was nothing for it, therefore, but for us to possess our souls in patience and to wait the turn of events. When the doctors had departed I went in search of Glenbarth, and gave him their report. The poor fellow was far from being consoled by it. He had hoped to receive good news, and their inability to give a satisfactory decision only confirmed his belief in their incompetency. Had I permitted him to do so, he would have telegraphed at once for the best medical advice in Europe, and would have expended half his own princely revenues in an attempt to make her herself once more. It was difficult to convince him that he had not the right to heap liabilities on the old gentleman's shoulder, which, in honour bound, he would feel he must repay.

I will not bore my readers with the abusive arguments against society, and social etiquette, with which he favoured me in reply to my speech. The poor fellow was beside himself with anxiety, and it was difficult to make him understand that, because he had not placed a narrow band of gold upon a certain pretty finger, he was debarred from saving the life of the owner of that self-same finger. Towards nightfall it was certain that Miss Trevor's condition was gradually going from bad to worse. With the closing of the day the delirium had returned, and the fever had also come with it. We spent a wretchedly anxious night, and in the morning, at the conclusion of his first visit, the doctor informed me that, in his opinion, it would be advisable that I should telegraph to the young lady's father. This was an extreme step, and, needless to say, it caused me great alarm. It was all so sudden that it was scarcely possible to realize the extent of the calamity. Only two days before Miss Trevor had been as well as any of us, and certainly in stronger health than my wife. Now she was lying, if not at death's door, at least at no great distance from that grim portal. Immediately this sad intelligence was made known to me I hastened to the telegraph-office, and despatched a message to the Dean, asking him to come to us with all possible speed. Before luncheon I received a reply to the effect that he had already started. Then we sat ourselves down to wait and to watch, hoping almost against hope that this beautiful, happy young life might be spared to us. All this time we had seen nothing of the Don or of Nikola. The former, however, had heard of Miss Trevor's illness, and sent polite messages as to her condition. I did not tell Glenbarth of this, for the young man had sufficient to think of just then without my adding to his worries.

I must pass on now to describe to you the arrival of the Dean of Bedminster in Venice. Feeling that he would be anxious to question me concerning his daughter's condition, I made a point of going to meet him alone. Needless to say he was much agitated on seeing me, and implored me to give him the latest bulletin.

"God's will be done," he said quietly, when he had heard all I had to tell him. "I did not receive your letter," he remarked, as we made our way from the station in the direction of Galaghetti's hotel, "so that you will understand that I know nothing of the nature of poor Gertrude's illness. What does the doctor say is the matter with her?"

I then informed him how the case stood, and of the uncertainty felt by the two members of the medical profession I had called in. "Surely that is very singular, is it not?" he asked, when I had finished. "There are not many diseases left that they are unable to diagnose."

"In this case, however, I fear they are at a loss to assign a name to it," I said. "However, you will be able

very soon to see her for yourself, and to draw your own conclusions."

The meeting between the worthy old gentleman and his daughter was on his side affecting in the extreme. She did not recognize him, nor did she know my wife. When he joined me in the drawing-room a quarter of an hour or so later his grief was pitiful to witness. While we were talking Glenbarth entered, and I introduced them to each other. The Dean knew nothing of the latter's infatuation for his daughter, but I fancy, after a time, he must have guessed that there was something in the wind from the other's extraordinary sympathy with him in his trial. As it happened the old gentleman had not arrived any too soon. That afternoon Miss Trevor was decidedly worse, and the medical men expressed their gravest fears for her safety. All that day and the next we waited in suspense, but there was no material change. Nature was fighting her battle stubbornly, inch by inch. The girl did not seem any worse, nor was there any visible improvement. On the doctor's advice a third physician was called in, but with no greater success than before. Then on one never-to-be-forgotten afternoon the first doctor took me on one side and informed me that in his opinion, and those of his colleagues, it would not be wise to cherish any further hopes. The patient was undeniably weaker, and was growing more so every hour. With a heart surcharged with sorrow I went to the Dean's room and broke the news to him. The poor old man heard me out in silence, and then walked to the window and looked down upon the Grand Canal. After a while he turned, and coming back to me once more laid his hand upon my arm.

"If it is the Lord's will that I lose her, what can I do but submit?" he said. "When shall I be allowed to see her?"

"I will make inquiries," I answered, and hastened away in search of the doctor. As I passed along the passage I met Galagheti. The little man had been deeply grieved to hear the sad intelligence, and hastened in search of me at once.

"M'lord," said he, for do what I would I could never cure him of the habit, "believe me it is not so hopeless, though they say so, if you will but listen to me. There is Doctor Nikola, your friend! He could cure her if you went to him. Did he not cure my child?"

I gave a start of surprise. I will confess that the idea had occurred to me, but I had never given the probability of putting it into execution a thought. Why should it not be done? Galagheti had reminded me how Nikola had cured his child when she lay at the point of death, and the other doctors of Venice had given her up. He was so enthusiastic in his praises of the doctor that I felt almost inclined to risk it. When I reached the drawing-room Glenbarth hastened towards me.

"What news?" he inquired, his anxiety showing itself plainly upon his face.

I shook my head.

"For God's sake don't trifle with me," he cried. "You can have no idea what I am suffering."

Feeling that it would be better if I told him everything, I made a clean breast of it. He heard me out before he spoke.

"She must not die," he said, with the fierceness of despair. "If there is any power on earth that can be invoked, it shall be brought to bear. Can you not think of anything? Try! Remember that every second is of importance."

"Would it be safe to try Nikola?" I inquired, looking him steadfastly in the face. "Galagheti is wild for me to do so."

In spite of his dislike to Nikola, Glenbarth jumped at the suggestion as a drowning man clutches at a straw.

"Let us find him at once," he cried, seizing me by the arm. "If any one can save her he is the man. Let us go to him without a moment's delay."

"No, no," I answered, "that will never do. Even in a case of such gravity the proprieties must be observed. I must consult the doctors before calling in another."

I regret very much to say that here the Duke made use of some language that was neither parliamentary nor courteous to those amiable gentlemen.

I sought them out and placed the matter before them. To the idea of calling in a fourth consultant they had not the least objection, though they were all of the opinion that it could do no good. When, however, I mentioned the fact that that consultant's name was Nikola, I could plainly see that a storm was rising.

"Gentlemen," I said, "you must forgive me if I speak plainly and to the point. You have given us to understand that your patient's case is hopeless. Now I have had considerable experience of Doctor Nikola's skill, and I feel that we should not be justified in withholding him from our counsel, if he will consent to be called in. I have no desire to act contrary to medical etiquette, but we must remember that the patient's life comes before aught else."

One doctor looked at the other, and all shook their heads.

"I fear," said the tallest of them, who invariably acted as spokesman, "that if the services of the gentleman in question are called in, it will be necessary for my colleagues and myself to abandon our interest in the case. I do not of course know how far your knowledge extends, but I hope you will allow me to say, sir, that the most curious stories are circulated both as to the behaviour and the attainments of this Doctor Nikola."

Though I knew it to be true, his words nettled me. And yet I had such a deeply-rooted belief in Nikola that, although they were determined to give up the case, I felt we should still be equally, if not more, powerful without them.

"I sincerely hope, gentlemen," I said, "that you will not do as you propose. Nevertheless, I feel that I should not be myself acting rightly if I were to allow your professional prejudices to stand in the way of my friend's recovery."

"In that case I fear there is nothing left to us but to most reluctantly withdraw," said one of the men.

"You are determined?"

"Quite determined," they replied together. Then the tallest added, "We much regret it, but our decision is irrevocable."

Ten minutes later they had left the hotel in a huff, and I found myself seated upon the horns of a serious dilemma. What would my position be if Nikola's presence should exercise a bad effect upon the patient, or if he should decline to render us assistance? In that case I should have offended the best doctors in Venice, and should in all probability have killed her. It was a nice position to be placed in. One thing, however, was as certain as anything could be, and that was the fact that there was no time to lose. My wife was seriously alarmed when I informed her of my decision, but both Glenbarth and I felt that we

were acting for the best, and the Dean sided with us.

"Since you deem it necessary, go in search of Doctor Nikola at once," said my wife, when the latter had left us. "Implore him to come without delay; in another hour it may be too late." Then in a heart-broken whisper she added, "She is growing weaker every moment. Oh, Dick, Heaven grant that we are not acting wrongly, and that he may be able to save her."

"I feel convinced that we are doing right," I answered. "And now I will go in search of Nikola, and if possible bring him back with me."

"God grant you may be successful in your search," said Glenbarth, wringing my hand. "If Nikola saves her I will do anything he may ask, and still be grateful to him all the days of my life."

Then I set off upon my errand.



CHAPTER IX

With a heart as heavy as lead I made my way down-stairs, and having chartered a gondola, bade the man take me to the Palace Revecce with all possible haste. Old Galaghetti, who stood upon the steps, nodded vehement approval, and rubbed his hands with delight as he thought of the triumph his great doctor must inevitably achieve. As I left the hotel I looked back at it with a feeling of genuine sorrow. Only a few days before our party had all been so happy together, and now one was stricken down with a mysterious malady that, so far as I could see, was likely to end in her death. Whether the gondolier had been admonished by Galaghetti to make haste, and was anxious to do so in sympathy with my trouble, I cannot say; the fact, however, remains that we accomplished the distance that separated the hotel from the palace in what could have been little more than half the time usually taken. My star was still in the ascendant when we reached the palace, for when I had disembarked at the steps, the old man who did menial service for Nikola, had just opened it and looked out. I inquired whether his master was at home, and, if so, whether I could see him? He evidently realized that my Italian was of the most rudimentary description, for it was necessary for me to repeat my question three or four times before he could comprehend my meaning. When at last he did so, he pointed up the stairs to signify that Nikola *was* at home, and also that, if I desired to see him, I had better go in search of him. I immediately did so, and hastened up the stairs to the room I have already described, and of which I entertained such ghastly recollections. I knocked upon the door, and a well-known voice bade me in English to "come in." I was in too great a haste to fulfil my mission to observe at the time the significance these words contained. It was not until afterwards that I remembered the fact that, as we approached the palace, I had looked up at Nikola's window and had seen no sign of him there. As I had not rung the bell, but had been admitted by the old man-servant, how could he have become aware of my presence? But, as I say, I thought of all that afterwards. For the moment the only desire I had was to inform Nikola of my errand.

Upon my entering the room I found Nikola standing before a table on which were glasses, test-tubes, and various chemical paraphernalia. He was engaged in pouring some dark-coloured liquid into a graduating glass, and when he spoke it was without looking round at me.

"I am very glad to see you, my dear Hatteras," he said. "It is kind of you to take pity on my loneliness. If you don't mind sitting down for a few moments, and lighting a cigar—you'll find the box on the table—I shall have finished this, and then we can talk."

"But I am afraid I can't wait," I answered. "I have come on the most important business. There is not a moment to lose."

"In that case I am to suppose that Miss Trevor is worse," he said, putting down the bottle from which he had been pouring, and afterwards replacing the glass stopper with the same hand. "I was afraid it might be so."

"How do you know that she is ill?" I asked, not a little surprised to hear that he was aware of our trouble.

"I manage to know a good many things," he replied. "I was aware that she was ill, and have been wondering how long it would be before I was called in. The other doctors don't like my interference, I suppose?"

"They certainly do not," I answered. "But they have done no good for her."

"And you think I may be able to help you?" he inquired, looking at me over the graduating glass with his strange, dark eyes.

"I certainly do," I replied.

"I am your debtor for the compliment."

"And you will come?"

"You really wish it?"

"I believe it is the only thing that will save her life," I answered. "But you must come quickly, or it will be too late. She was sinking when I left the hotel."

With a hand that never shook he poured the contents of the glass into a small phial, and then placed the latter in his pocket.

"I am at your disposal now," he answered. "We will set off as soon as you like. As you say, we must lose no time."

"But will it not be necessary for you to take some drugs with you?" I asked.

"I am taking this one," he replied, placing his hat upon his head as he spoke.

I remembered that he had been making his prescription up as I entered the room. Had he then intended calling to see her, even supposing I had not come to ask his assistance? I had no chance of putting the question to him, however.

"Have you a gondola below?" he asked, as we went down the stairs.

I replied in the affirmative; and when we gained the hall door we descended the steps and took our places in it. On reaching the hotel I conducted him to the drawing-room, where we found the Dean and Glenbarth eagerly awaiting our coming. I presented the former to Nikola, and then went off to inform my wife of his arrival. She accompanied me back to the drawing-room, and when she entered the room Nikola crossed it to receive her. Though she looked at him in a frightened way I thought his manner soon put her at her ease.

"Perhaps you will be kind enough to take me to my patient," he said, when they had greeted each other. "As the case is so serious, I had better lose no time in seeing her."

He followed my wife from the room, and then we sat down to await his verdict, with what anxiety you may imagine.



"He laid his hand upon her forehead."

Of all that transpired during his stay with Miss Trevor I can only speak from hearsay. My wife, however, was unfortunately too agitated to remember everything that occurred. She informed me that on entering the room he advanced very quietly towards the bed, and for a few moments stood looking down at the frail burden it supported. Then he felt her pulse, lifted the lids of her eyes, and for a space during which a man might have counted fifty slowly, laid his hand upon her forehead. Then, turning to the nurse, who had of course heard of the withdrawal of the other doctors, he bade her bring him a wine-glass of iced water. She disappeared, and while she was absent Nikola sat by the bedside holding the sick girl's hand, and never for a moment taking his eyes from her face. Presently the woman returned, bringing the water as directed. He took it from her, and going to the window poured from a phial, which he had taken from his pocket, some twenty drops of the dark liquid it contained. Then with a spoon he gave her nearly half of the contents of the glass. This done he once more seated himself beside the bed, and waited patiently for the result. Several times within the next half-hour he bent over the recumbent figure, and was evidently surprised at not seeing some change which he expected would take place. At the end of that time he gave her another spoonful of the liquid, and once more sat down to watch. When an hour had passed he permitted a sigh of satisfaction to escape him, then, turning to my wife, whose anxiety was plainly expressed upon her face, he said—

"I think, Lady Hatteras, that you may tell them that she will not die. There is still much to be done, but I pledge my word that she will live."

The reaction was too much for my wife; she felt as if she were choking, then she turned giddy, and at last was possessed with a frantic desire to cry. Softly leaving the room, she came in search of us. The moment

that she opened the door of the drawing-room, and I looked upon her face, I knew that there was good news for us.

"What does he say about her?" cried the Duke, forgetting the Dean's presence, while the latter rose and drew a step nearer, without speaking a word.

"There is good news," she said, fumbling with her handkerchief in a suspicious manner. "Doctor Nikola says she will live."

"Thank God," we all said in one breath. And Glenbarth murmured something more that I did not catch.

So implicit was our belief in Nikola that, as you have doubtless observed, we accepted his verdict without a second thought. I kissed my wife, and then shook hands solemnly with the Dean. The Duke had meanwhile vanished, presumably to his own apartment, where he could meditate on certain matters undisturbed. After that Phyllis left us and returned to the sick-room, where she found Nikola still seated beside the bed, just as she had left him. So far as she could judge, Miss Trevor did not appear to be any different, though perhaps she did not breathe as heavily as she had hitherto done. Nikola, however, appeared to be well satisfied. He nodded approvingly to Phyllis as she entered, and then returned to his contemplation of his patient once more. In this fashion hour after hour went by. Once during each my wife would come to me with reassuring bulletins. "Miss Trevor was, if anything, a little better, she did not seem so restless as before." "The fever seemed to be abating;" and then, towards nine o'clock that night, "at last Gertrude was sleeping peacefully." It was not, however, until nearly midnight that Nikola himself made his appearance.

"The worst is over," he said, approaching the Dean; "your daughter is now asleep, and will only require watching for the next two hours. At the end of that time I shall return, and shall hope to find a decided improvement in her condition."

"I can never thank you enough, my dear sir," said the worthy old clergyman, shaking the other by the hand while the tears ran down his wrinkled cheeks. "But for your wonderful skill there can be no sort of doubt that she would be lost to us now. She is my only child, my ewe lamb, and may Heaven bless you for your goodness to me."

I thought that Nikola looked at him rather curiously as he said this. It was the first time I had seen Nikola brought into the society of a dignitary of the English Church, and I was anxious to see how the pair comported themselves under the circumstances. A couple more diametrically opposite could be scarcely imagined. They were as oil and water, and could scarcely be expected to assimilate.

"Sir, I should have been less than human if I had not done everything possible to save that beautiful young life," said Nikola, with what was to me the suggestion of a double meaning in his speech. "And now you must permit me to bid you good-bye for the present. In two hours I shall return again."

Thinking he might prefer to remain near his patient, I pressed him to stay at the hotel, offering to do all that lay in my power to make him comfortable. But he would not hear of such a thing.

"As you should be aware by this time, I never rest away from my own house," he answered, in a tone that settled the matter once and for all. "If anything should occur in the meantime, send for me and I will come at once. I do not apprehend any change, however."

When he had gone I went in search of the Duke and found him in his own room.

"Dick," he said, "look at me and tell me if you can see any difference. I feel as though I had passed through years of suffering. Another week would have made an old man of me. How is she now?"

"Progressing famously," I answered. "You need not look so sceptical, for this must surely be the case, since Nikola has gone home to take some rest and will not return for two hours."

He wrung my hand on hearing this.

"How little I dreamt," he said, "when we were confined in that wretched room in Port Said, and when he played that trick upon me in Sydney, that some day he was destined to do me the greatest service any man has ever done me in my life. Didn't I tell you that those other medicos did not know what they were doing, and that Nikola is the greatest doctor in the world?"

I admitted that he had given me the first assurance, but I was not quite so certain about the latter. Then, realizing how he must be feeling, I proposed that we should row down the canal for a breath of fresh sea air. At first the Duke was for refusing the invitation, eventually however he assented, and when we had induced the Dean to accompany us we set off. When we reached the hotel once more it was to discover that Nikola had returned, and that he had again taken up his watch in the sick-room. He remained there all night, passing hour after hour at the bedside, without, so my wife asserted, moving, save to give the medicine, and without apparently feeling the least fatigue.

It was not until between seven and eight o'clock next morning that I caught a glimpse of him. He was in the dining-room then, partaking of a small cup of black coffee, into which he had poured some curious decoction of his own. For my part I have never yet been able to discover how Nikola managed to keep body and soul together on his frugal fare.

"How is the patient this morning?" I asked, when we had greeted each other.

"Out of danger," he replied, slowly stirring his coffee as he spoke. "She will continue to progress now. I hope you are satisfied that I have done all I can in her interests?"

"I am more than satisfied," I answered. "I am deeply grateful. As her father said yesterday, if it had not been for you, Nikola, she must inevitably have succumbed. She will have cause to bless your name for the remainder of her existence."

He looked at me very curiously as I said this.

"Do you think she will do that?" he asked, with unusual emphasis. "Do you think it will please her to remember that she owes her life to *me*?"

"I am sure she will always be deeply grateful," I replied, somewhat ambiguously. "I fancy you know that yourself."

"And your wife? What does she say?"

"She thinks you are certainly the greatest of all doctors," I answered, with a laugh. "I feel that I ought to be jealous, but strangely enough I'm not."

"And yet I have done nothing so very wonderful," he continued, almost as if he were talking to himself. "But that those other blind worms are content to go on digging in their mud, when they should be seeking the light in another direction, they could do as much as I have done. By the way, have you seen our friend, Don Martinos, since you dined together at my house?"

I replied to the effect that I had not done so, but reported that the Don had sent repeated messages of sympathy to us during Miss Trevor's illness. I then inquired whether Nikola had seen him?

"I saw him yesterday morning," he replied. "We devoted upwards of four hours to exploring the city together."

I could not help wondering how the Don had enjoyed the excursion, but, needless to remark, I did not say anything on this score to my companion.

That night Nikola was again in attendance upon his patient. Next day she was decidedly better; she recognized her father and my wife, and every hour was becoming more and more like her former self.

"Was she surprised when she regained consciousness to find Nikola at her bedside?" I inquired of Phyllis when the great news was reported to me.

"Strangely enough she was not," Phyllis replied. "I fully expected, remembering my previous suspicions, that it would have a bad effect upon her, but it did nothing of the kind. It was just as if she had expected to find him there."

"And what were his first words to her?"

"I hope you are feeling better, Miss Trevor," he said, and she replied, 'Much better,' that was all. It was as commonplace as could be."

Next day Nikola only looked in twice, the day after once, and at the end of the week informed me that she stood in no further need of his attention.

"How shall we ever be able to reward you, Nikola?" I asked, for about the hundredth time, as we stood together in the corridor outside the sick-room.

"I have no desire to be rewarded," he answered. "It is enough for me to see Miss Trevor restored to health. Endeavour, if you can, to recall a certain conversation we had together respecting the lady in question on the evening that I narrated to you the story concerning the boy, who was so badly treated by the Spanish Governor. Did I not tell you then that our Destinies were inextricably woven together? I informed you that it had been revealed to me many years ago that we should meet; should you feel surprised, therefore, if I told you that I had also been warned of this illness?"

Once more I found myself staring at him in amazement.

"You are surprised? Believe me, however astonishing it may seem, it is quite true. I knew that Miss Trevor would come into my life; I knew also that it would be my lot to save her from death. What is more, I know that in the end the one thing, which has seemed to me most desirable in life, will be taken from me by her hands."

"I am afraid I cannot follow you," I said.

"Perhaps not, but you will be able to some day," he answered. "That moment has not yet arrived. In the meantime watch and wait, for before we know it it will be upon us."

Then, with a look that was destined to haunt me for many a long day, he bade me farewell, and left the hotel.

CHAPTER X

To the joy of every one, by the Thursday following Miss Trevor was sufficiently recovered to be able to leave her room. It was a happy day for every one concerned, particularly for the Duke, who came nearer presenting the appearance of an amiable lunatic on that occasion than I had ever seen him before. Why my wife should have encouraged him in his extravagance I cannot say, but the fact remains that she allowed him to go out with her that morning with the professed idea of purchasing a few flowers to decorate the drawing-room for the invalid's reception. So great was their extravagance that the room more resembled a hot-house, or a flower-show, than a civilized apartment. I pointed this out to my wife with a gentle remonstrance, and was informed that, being a mere husband, I knew nothing at all about the matter. I trust that I preserved my balance and lived up to my reputation for sanity in the midst of this general excitement, though I am prepared to confess that I was scarcely myself when the triumphal procession, consisting of my wife and the Dean, set off to the invalid's apartment to escort her in. When she appeared it was like a ghost of her former self, and a poor wan ghost too. Her father, of course, she had already seen, but neither I nor Glenbarth had of course had the honour of meeting her since she was taken ill. She received him very graciously, and was kind enough to thank me for the little I had done for her. We seated her between us in a comfortable chair, placed a footstool under her feet, and then, in order that she should not have too much excitement, and that she might rest quietly, the Dean, the Duke, and myself were sent about our business for an hour. When we returned, a basket of exquisite roses stood on the table, and on examining it the card of Don Josè de Martinos was found to be attached to it.

It is some proof of the anxiety that Glenbarth felt not to do anything that might worry her, when I say that he read the card and noted the giver without betraying the least trace of annoyance. It is true that he afterwards furnished me with his opinion of the giver for presuming to send them, but the casual observer would have declared, had he been present to observe the manner in which he behaved when he had first seen the gift, that he had taken no interest in the matter at all.

Next day Miss Trevor was permitted to get up a little earlier, and on the day following a little earlier still. In the meantime more flowers had arrived from the Don, while he himself had twice made personal inquiries as to the progress she was making. It was not until the third day of her convalescence that Nikola called to see his patient. I was sitting alone with her at the time, my wife and our other two guests having gone shopping in the Merceria. I was idly cutting a copy of a Tauchnitz publication that I had procured for her on the previous day. The weather was steadily growing warmer, and, for this reason, the windows were open and a flood of brilliant sunshine was streaming into the room. From the canal outside came the sounds of rippling laughter, then an unmistakably American voice called out, "Say, girls, what do you think of Venice now you're here?" Then another voice replied, "Plenty of water about, but they don't seem to wash their buildings much." Miss Trevor was about to speak, in fact she had opened her lips to do so, when a strange expression appeared upon her face. She closed her eyes for a moment, and I began to fear that she was ill. When she opened them again I was struck by a strange fact; the eyes were certainly there, but there was no sort of life in them. They were like those of a sleep-walker who, while his eyes are open, sees nothing of things about him. A moment later there was a knock at the door, and Doctor Nikola, escorted by a servant, entered the room. Wishing us "good-morning," he crossed the room and shook hands with Miss Trevor, afterwards with myself.

"You are certainly looking better," he said, addressing his patient, and placing his finger and thumb upon her wrist as he spoke.

"I am much better," she answered, but for some reason without her usual animation.

"In that case I think this will be the last visit I shall pay you in my professional capacity," he said. "You have been an excellent patient, and in the interests of what our friend Sir Richard here calls Science, permit me to offer you my grateful thanks."

"It is I who should thank you," she answered, as if she were repeating some lesson she had learnt by heart.

"I trust then, on the principle that one seldom or never acts as one should, that you will not do it," he replied, with a smile. "I am amply rewarded by observing that the flush of health is returning to your cheeks."

He then inquired after my wife's health, bade me be careful of her for the reason that, since I had behaved so outrageously towards them, no other doctors in Venice would attend her, should she be taken ill, and then rose to bid us adieu.

"This is a very short visit," I said. "Cannot we persuade you to give us a little more of your society?"

"I fear not," he answered. "I am developing quite a practice in Venice, and my time is no longer my own."

"You have other patients?" I asked, in some surprise, for I did not think he would condescend to such a thing.

"I have your friend, Don Martinos, now upon my hands," he said. "The good Galaghetti is so abominably grateful for what I did for his child, that he will insist on trying to draw me into experimenting upon other people."

"Would it be indiscreet to ask what is the matter with the Don?" I said. "He does not look like a man who would be likely to be an invalid."

"I do not think there is so very much wrong with him," Nikola replied vaguely. "At any rate it is not anything that cannot be very easily put right."

When he left the room I accompanied him down the corridor as far as the hall.

"The fact of the matter is," he began, when we were alone together, "our friend the Don has been running the machinery of life a little too fast of late. I am told that he lost no less a sum than fifty thousand pounds in English money last week, and certainly his nerves are not what they once were."

"He is a gambler, then?" I said.

"An inveterate gambler, I should say," Nikola answered. "And when a Spaniard takes to that sort of amusement, he generally does it most thoroughly."

Whatever the Don's illness may have been, it certainly had made its mark upon his appearance. I chanced to meet him that afternoon on the Rialto bridge, and was thunderstruck at the change. The man's face was white, and his eyes had dark rings under them, that to my thinking spoke for an enfeebled heart. When he stopped to speak to me, I noticed that his hands trembled as though he were afflicted with St. Vitus's dance.

"I hope Miss Trevor is better," he said, after I had commented upon the fact that I had not seen him of late.

"Much better," I answered. "In fact, she may now be said to be convalescent. I was sorry to hear from

Doctor Nikola, however, that you yourself are not quite the thing."

"Nerves, only nerves," he answered, with what was almost a frightened look in his eyes. "Doctor Nikola will set me right in no time, I am sure of that. I have had a run of beastly luck lately, and it has upset me more than I can say."

I knew to what he referred, but I did not betray my knowledge. After that he bade me farewell, and continued his walk. That evening another exquisite basket of flowers arrived for Miss Trevor. There was no card attached to it, but as the Duke denied all knowledge of it, I felt certain as to whence it came. On the day following, for the first time since her illness, Miss Trevor was able to leave the house and to go for a short airing upon the canal. We were rejoiced to take her, and made arrangements for her comfort, but there was one young man who was more attentive than all the rest of the party put together. Would Miss Trevor like another cushion? Was she quite sure that she was comfortable? Would she have preferred a gondola to a barca? I said nothing, but I wondered what the Dean thought, for he is an observant old gentleman. As for the young lady herself, she accepted the other's attentions with the most charming good-humour, and thus all went merry as marriage-bells. On the day following she went out again, and on the afternoon of the next day felt so much stronger as to express a desire to walk for a short time on the piazza of St. Mark. We accordingly landed at the well-known steps, and strolled slowly towards the cathedral. It was a lovely afternoon, the air being soft and warm, with a gentle breeze blowing in from the sea.

It is needless for me to say that Glenbarth was in the Seventh Heaven of Delight, and was already beginning to drop sundry little confidences into my ear. Her illness had ruined the opportunity he had hoped to have had, but he was going to make up for it now. Indeed it looked very much as if she had at last made up her mind concerning him, but, having had one experience of the sex, I was not going to assure myself that all was satisfactory until a definite announcement was made by the lady herself. As it turned out it was just as well that I did so, for that afternoon, not altogether unexpectedly I must confess, was destined to prove the truth of the old saying that the course of true love never runs smooth. Miss Trevor, with the Duke on one side and my wife on the other, was slowly passing across the great square, when a man suddenly appeared before us from one of the shops on our right. This individual was none other than the Don Josè de Martinos, who raised his hat politely to the ladies and expressed his delight at seeing Miss Trevor abroad once more. As usual, he was faultlessly dressed, and on the whole looked somewhat better in health than he had done when I had last seen him. By some means, I scarcely know how it was done, he managed to slip in between my wife and Miss Trevor, and in this order we made our way towards our usual resting-place, Florian's *café*. Never, since we had known him, had the Don exerted himself so much to please. The Duke, however, did not seem satisfied. His high spirits had entirely left him, and, in consequence, he was now as quiet as he had been talkative before. It was plain to all of us that the Don admired Miss Trevor, and that he wanted her to become aware of the fact. Next morning he made an excuse and joined our party again. At this the Duke's anger knew no bounds. Personally I must confess that I was sorry for the young fellow. It was very hard upon him, just as he was progressing so favourably, that another should appear upon the scene and distract the lady's attention. Yet there was only one way of ending it, if only he could summon up sufficient courage to do it. I fear, however, that he was either too uncertain as to the result, or that he dreaded his fate, should she consign him to the Outer Darkness, too much to put it into execution. For this reason he had to submit to sharing her smiles with the Spaniard, which, if only he could have understood it, was an excellent thing for his patience, and a salutary trial for his character.

Meanwhile my wife looked on in despair.

"I thought it was all settled," she said pathetically, on one occasion, "and now they are as far off as ever. Why on earth does that troublesome man come between them?"

"Because he has quite as much right to be there as the other," I answered. "If the Duke wants her, let him ask her, but that's just what he won't do. The whole matter should have been settled by now."

"It's all very well for you to say that," she returned. "The poor boy would have done it before Gertrude was taken ill, but that you opposed him."

"And a very proper proceeding too," I answered. "Miss Trevor was under my charge, and I was certainly not going to let any young man, doubtless very desirable, but who had only known her two days, propose to her, get sent about his business, render it impossible for our party to continue together, and by so doing take all the pleasure out of our holiday."

"So it was only of yourself you were thinking?" she returned, with that wonderful inconsistency that is such a marked trait in her character. "Why do you urge him now to do it?"

"Because Miss Gertrude is no longer under my charge," I answered. "Her father is here, and is able to look after her." Then an idea occurred to me, and I acted upon it at once.

"When you come to think of it, my dear," I said, as if I had been carefully considering the question, "why should the Don not make Gertrude as good a husband as Glenbarth? He is rich, doubtless comes of a very good family, and would certainly make a very presentable figure in society."

She stared at me aghast.

"Well," she said in astonishment, "I must say that I think you are a loyal friend. You know that the Duke has set his heart on marrying her, and yet you are championing the cause of his rival. I should never have thought it of you, Dick."

I hastened to assure her that I was not in earnest, but for a moment I almost fancy she thought I was.

"If you are on the Duke's side I wonder that you encourage Don Martinos to continue his visits," she went on, after the other matter had been satisfactorily settled. "I cannot tell you how much I dislike him. I feel that I would rather see Gertrude married to a crossing-sweeper than to that man. How she can even tolerate him, I do not know. I find it very difficult to do so."

"Poor Don," I said, "he does not appear to have made a very good impression. In common justice I must admit that, so far as I am concerned, he has been invariably extremely civil."

"Because he wants your interest. You are the head of the house."

"It is a pretty fiction—let it pass however."

She pretended not to notice my gibe.

"He is gambling away every halfpenny he possesses."

I regarded her with unfeigned astonishment. How could she have become aware of this fact? I put the question to her.

"Some one connected with the hotel told my maid, Phillipa," she answered. "They say he never returns to the hotel until between two and three in the morning."

"He is not married," I retorted.

She vouchsafed no remark to this speech, but, bidding me keep my eyes open, and beware lest there should be trouble between the two men, left me to my own thoughts.

The warning she had given me was not a futile one, for it needed only half an eye to see that Glenbarth and Martinos were desperately jealous of one another. They eyed each other when they met as if, at any moment, they were prepared to fly at each other's throats. Once the Duke's behaviour was such as to warrant my speaking to him upon the subject when we were alone together.

"My dear fellow," I said, "I must ask you to keep yourself in hand. I don't like having to talk to you, but I have to remember that there are ladies in the case."

"Then why on earth doesn't Martinos keep out of my way?" he asked angrily. "You pitch into me for getting riled, but you don't see how villainously rude he is to me. He contradicts me as often as he can, and, for the rest of the time, treats me as if I were a child."

"In return you treat him as if he were an outsider, and had no right to look at, much less to speak to, Miss Trevor. Nevertheless he is our friend—or if he is not our friend, he has at least been introduced to us by a friend. Now I have no desire that you should quarrel at all, but if you must do so, let it be when you are alone together, and also when you are out of the hotel."

I had no idea how literally my words were to be taken.

That night, according to a custom he had of late adopted, Martinos put in an appearance after dinner, and brought his guitar with him. As he bade us "good-evening" I looked at the Duke's face. It was pale and set as if he had at last come to an understanding with himself. Presently my wife and I sang a duet together, in a fashion that pointed very plainly to the fact that our thoughts were elsewhere. Miss Trevor thanked us in a tone that showed me that she also had given but small attention to our performance. Then Gertrude sang a song of Tosti's very prettily, and was rewarded with enthusiastic applause. After this the Don was called upon to perform. He took up his guitar, and having tuned it, struck a few chords and began to sing. Though I look back upon that moment now with real pain, I must confess that I do not think I had ever heard him sing better; the merry laughter of the song suited his voice to perfection. It was plainly a comic ditty with some absurd imitations of the farm-yard at the end of each verse. When he had finished, my wife politely asked him to give us a translation of the words. Fate willed that she should ask, I suppose, and also that he should answer it.

"It is a story of a foolish young man who loved a fair maid," he replied, speaking with the utmost deliberation. "Unfortunately, however, he was afraid to tell her of his love. He pined to be with her, yet, whenever he was desirous of declaring his passion, his courage failed him at the last moment, and he was compelled to talk of the most commonplace things, such as the animals upon his father's farm. At last she, tiring of such a laggard, sent him away in disgust to learn how to woo. In the meantime she married a man who was better acquainted with his business."

Whether the song was exactly as he described it, I am not in a position to say; the fact, however, remains that at least four of our party saw the insinuation and bitterly resented it. I saw the Duke's face flush and then go pale. I thought for a moment that he was going to say something, but he contented himself by picking up a book from the table at his side, and glancing carelessly at it. I could guess, by the way his hands gripped it, something of the storm that was raging in his breast. My wife, meanwhile, had turned the conversation into another channel by asking the Dean what he had thought of a certain old church he had

visited that morning. This gave a little relief, but not very much. Ten minutes later the Don rose and bade us "good-night." With a sneer on his face, he even extended his good wish to the Duke, who bowed, but did not reply. When he had gone, my wife gave the signal for a general dispersal, and Glenbarth and I were presently left in the drawing-room alone. I half expected an immediate outburst, but to my surprise he said nothing on the subject. I had no intention of referring to it unless he did, and so the matter remained for the time in abeyance. After a conversation on general topics, lasting perhaps a quarter of an hour, we wished each other "good-night," and retired to our respective rooms. When I entered my wife's room later, I was prepared for the discussion which I knew was inevitable.

"What do you think of your friend now?" she asked, with a touch of sarcasm thrown into the word "friend." "You of course heard how he insulted the Duke?"

"I noticed that he did a very foolish thing, not only for his own interests with us, but also for several other reasons. You may rely upon it that if ever he had any chance with Gertrude——"

"He never had the remotest chance, I can promise you that," my wife interrupted.

"I say if ever he had a chance with Gertrude, he has lost it now. Surely that should satisfy you."

"It does not satisfy me that he should be rude to our guest at any time, but I am particularly averse to his insulting him in our presence."

"You need not worry yourself," I said. "In all probability you will see no more of him. I shall convey a hint to him upon the subject. It will not be pleasant for Anstruther's sake."

"Mr. Anstruther should have known better than to have sent him to us," she replied. "There is one thing I am devoutly thankful for, and that is that the Duke took it so beautifully. He might have been angry, and have made a scene. Indeed I should not have blamed him, had he done so."

I did not ask her, for reasons of my own, whether she was sure that his Grace of Glenbarth was not angry. I must confess that I was rendered more uneasy by the quiet way he had taken it, than if he had burst into an explosion. Concealed fires are invariably more dangerous than open ones.

Next morning after breakfast, while we were smoking together in the balcony, a note was brought to Glenbarth. He took it, opened it, and when he had read the contents, thrust it hastily into his pocket.

"No answer," he said, as he lit a cigar, and I thought his hand trembled a little as he put the match to it.

His face was certainly paler than usual, and there was a far-away look in his eyes that showed me that it was not the canal or the houses opposite that he was looking upon.

"There is something behind all this, and I must find out what it is," I said to myself. "Surely he can't be going to make a fool of himself."

I knew, however, that my chance of getting anything satisfactory out of him lay in saying nothing about the matter just then. I must play my game in another fashion.

"What do you say if we run down to Rome next week?" I asked, after a little pause. "My wife and Miss Trevor seem to think they would enjoy it. There are lots of people we know there just now."

"I shall be very pleased," he answered, but with a visible effort.

At any other time he would have jumped eagerly at the suggestion. Decidedly there was something wrong! At luncheon he was preoccupied, so much so that I could see Miss Trevor wondered what was the matter. Had she known the terrible suspicion that was growing in my own mind, I wonder what she would have said, and also how she would have acted?

That afternoon the ladies resolved to remain at home, and the Dean decided to stay with them. In consequence, the Duke and I went out together. He was still as quiet as he had been in the morning, but as yet I had not been able to screw up my courage to such a pitch as to be able to put the question to him. Once, however, I asked the reason for his quietness, and received the evasive reply "that he was not feeling quite up to the mark that day."

This time I came a little nearer the point.

"You are not worrying about that wretched fellow's rudeness, I hope?" I said, looking him fairly and squarely in the face.

"Not in the least," he answered. "Why should I be?"

"Well, because I know you are hot-tempered," I returned, rather puzzled to find an explanation for him.

"Oh, I'll have it out with him at some time or another, I have no doubt," he continued, and then changed the subject by referring to some letters he had had from home that day.

When later we returned to the hotel for afternoon tea, we found the two ladies eagerly awaiting our coming. From the moment that he entered the room, Miss Trevor was graciousness itself to the young man. She smiled upon him, and encouraged him, until he scarcely knew whether he was standing upon his head or his heels. I fancy she was anxious to compensate him for the Don's rudeness to him.

That evening we all complained of feeling tired, and accordingly went to bed early. I was the latest of the party, and my own man had not left my dressing-room more than a minute before he returned with the information that the Duke's valet would be glad if he could have a few words with me.

"Send him in," I said, and forthwith the man made his appearance.

"What is it, Henry?" I inquired. "Is your master not well?"

"I don't know what's wrong with his Grace, sir," the man replied. "I'm very much frightened about him, and I thought I would come to you at once."

"Why, what is the matter? He seemed well enough when I bade him good-night, half-an-hour or so ago."

"It isn't that, sir. He's well enough in his body," said the man. "There's something else behind it all. I know, sir, you won't mind my coming to you. I didn't know what else to do."

"You had better tell me everything, then I shall know how to act. What do you think is the reason of it?"

"Well, sir, it's like this," Henry went on. "His Grace has been very quiet all day. He wrote a lot of letters this morning and put them in his dispatch-box. 'I'll tell you what to do with them later, Henry,' he said when he had finished. Well, I didn't think very much of that, but when to-night he asked me what I had made up my mind to do with myself if ever I should leave his service, and told me that he had put it down in his will that I was to have five hundred pounds if he should die before I left him, I began to think there was something the matter. Well, sir, I took his things to-night, and was in the act of leaving the room, when

he called me back. 'I'm going out early for a swim in the sea to-morrow morning,' he said, 'but I shan't say anything to Sir Richard Hatteras about it, because I happen to know that he thinks the currents about here are dangerous. Well, one never knows what may turn up,' he goes on to say, 'and if, by any chance, Henry—though I hope such a thing will not happen—I should be caught, and should not return, I want you to give this letter to Sir Richard. But remember this, you are on no account to touch it until mid-day. Do you understand?' I told him that I did, but I was so frightened, sir, by what he said, that I made up my mind to come and see you at once."

This was disturbing intelligence indeed. From what he said there could be no doubt that the Don and Glenbarth contemplated fighting a duel. In that case what was to be done? To attempt to reason with the Duke in his present humour would be absurd, besides his honour was at stake, and, though I am totally against duels, that counts for something.

"I am glad you told me this, Henry," I said, "for now I shall know how to act. Don't worry about your master's safety. Leave him to me. He is safe in my hands. He shall have his swim to-morrow morning, but I shall take very good care that he is watched. You may go to bed with an easy heart, and don't think about that letter. It will not be needed, for he will come to no harm."

The man thanked me civilly and withdrew, considerably relieved in his mind by his interview with me. Then I sat myself down to think the matter out. What was I to do? Doubtless the Don was an experienced duellist, while Glenbarth, though a very fair shot with a rifle or fowling-piece, would have no chance against him with the pistol or the sword. It was by no means an enviable position for a man to be placed in, and I fully realized my responsibility in the matter. I felt that I needed help, but to whom should I apply for it? The Dean would be worse than useless; while to go to the Don and to ask him to sacrifice his honour to our friendship for Glenbarth would be to run the risk of being shown the door. Then I thought of Nikola, and made up my mind to go to him at once. Since the Duke had spoken of leaving the hotel early in the morning, there could be no doubt as to the hour of the meeting. In that case there was no time to be lost. I thereupon went to explain matters to my wife.

"I had a suspicion that this would happen," she said, when she had heard me out. "Oh, Dick! you must stop it without fail. I should never forgive myself if anything were to happen to him while he is our guest. Go to Doctor Nikola at once and tell him everything, and implore him to help us as he has helped us before."

Thus encouraged, I left her, and went back to my dressing-room to complete my attire. This done I descended to the hall to endeavour to obtain a gondola. Good fortune favoured me, for the American party who had but lately arrived at the hotel, had just returned from the theatre. I engaged the man who had brought them, and told him to take me to the Palace Revecce with all possible speed.

"It's a late hour, Senor," he replied, "and I'd rather go anywhere than to that house in the Rio del Consiglio."

"You will be well paid for your trouble and also for your fear," I replied as I got into the boat.

Next moment we were on our way. A light was burning in Nikola's room as we drew up at the palace steps. I bade the gondolier wait for me, and to ensure his doing so, refused to pay him until my return. Then I rang the bell, and was rewarded in a few minutes by hearing Nikola's footsteps on the flag-stones of the courtyard. When the door opened he was vastly surprised at seeing me; he soon recovered his equilibrium, however. It took more than a small surprise to upset Nikola. He invited me to enter.

"I hope there is nothing wrong," he said politely. "Otherwise how am I to account for this late call?"

"Something is very wrong indeed," I said. "I have come to consult you, and to ask for your assistance."

By this time he had reached his own room—that horrible room I remembered so well.

"The fact of the matter is," I said, seating myself in the chair he offered me as I spoke, "the Duke of Glenbarth and Don de Martinos have arranged to fight a duel soon after daybreak."

"To fight a duel?" Nikola repeated. "So it has come to this, has it? Well, what do you want me to do?"

"Surely it is needless for me to say," I replied. "I want you to help me to stop it. You like the Duke, I know. Surely you will not allow that brave young life to be sacrificed by that Spaniard?"

"From the way you speak it would appear that *you* do not care for Martinos?" Nikola replied.

"I frankly confess that I do not," I replied. "He was introduced to me by a personal friend, but none of my party care very much for him. And now this new affair only adds to our dislike. He insulted the Duke most unwarrantably in my drawing-room last night, and this duel is the result."

"Always the same, always the same," Nikola muttered to himself. "But the end is coming, and his evil deeds will bear their own fruit." Then turning to me, he said aloud—"Since you wish it, I will help you. Don Josè is a magnificent shot, and he would place a bullet in the Duke's anatomy wherever he might choose to receive it. The issue would never for one moment be in doubt."

"But how do you know the Don is such a good shot?" I inquired with considerable surprise, for until the moment that I had introduced them to each other I had no idea that they had ever met.

"I know more about him than you think," he answered, fixing his glittering eyes upon me. "But now to business. If they fight at daybreak there is not much time to be lost."

He went to his writing-table at the other side of the room and wrote a few lines on a sheet of note-paper. Placing it in an envelope he inquired whether I had told my gondolier to wait. Upon my answering in the affirmative, he left me and went down-stairs.

"What have you done?" I inquired when he returned.

"I have sent word to an agent I sometimes employ," he said. "He will keep his eyes open. Now you had better get back to your hotel and to bed. Sleep secure on my promise that the two men shall not fight. When you are called, take the gondola you will find awaiting you outside the hotel, and I will meet you at a certain place. Now let me wish you a good-night."

He conducted me to the hall below and saw me into the gondola. Then saying something to the gondolier that I did not catch, he bade me adieu, and I returned to the hotel. Punctually at five o'clock I was awakened by a tapping at my bedroom door. I dressed, donned a cloak, for the morning was cold, and descended to the hall. The night watchman informed me that a gondola was awaiting me at the steps, and conducted me to it. Without a word I got in, and the little craft shot out into the canal. We entered a narrow street on the other side, took two or three turnings to right and left, and at last came to a standstill at some steps that I had never noticed before. A tall figure, wrapped in a black cloak, was awaiting us there. It was Nikola! Entering the gondola he took his place at my side. Then once more we set off.

At the same moment, so Nikola informed me, Glenbarth was leaving the hotel.

CHAPTER XI

When I had picked up Nikola we continued our voyage. Dawn was just breaking, and Venice appeared very strange and uncanny in the weird morning light. A cold wind was blowing in from the sea, and when I experienced its sharpness, I could not help feeling thankful that I had the foresight to bring my cloak.

"How do you know where the meeting is to take place?" I asked, after we had been travelling a few minutes.

"Because, when I am unable to find things out for myself, I have agents who can do it for me," he replied. "What would appear difficult, in reality is very simple. To reach the place in question it would be necessary for them to employ gondolas, and for the reason that, as you are aware, there are not many plying in the streets of Venice at such an early hour, it would be incumbent upon them to bespeak them beforehand. A few inquiries among the gondoliers elicited the information I wanted. That point satisfactorily settled, the rest was easy."

"And you think we shall be there in time to prevent the meeting?" I asked.

"We shall be at the rendezvous before they are," he answered. "And I have promised you they shall not fight."

Comforted by this reassuring news, I settled myself down to watch the tortuous thoroughfares through which we were passing. Presently we passed the church of St. Maria del Formosa, and later the Ducal Palace, thence out into the commencement of the Grand Canal itself. It was then that Nikola urged the gondoliers, for we had two, to greater speed. Under their powerful strokes the light little craft sped over the smooth bay, passed the island of St. Georgio Maggiore, and then turned almost due south. Then I thought of Glenbarth, and wondered what his feelings were at that moment. At last I began to have an inkling of our destination. We were proceeding in the direction of the Lido, and it was upon the sandy beach that separates the lagoons and Venice from the open sea that the duel was to be fought. Presently we landed, and Nikola said something to the gondoliers, who turned their craft and moved slowly away. After walking along the sands for some distance, we hid ourselves at a place where it was possible to see the strip of beach, while we ourselves remained hidden.

"They will not be here before another ten minutes," said Nikola, consulting his watch; "we had a good start of them."

Seating ourselves we awaited their arrival, and while we did so, Nikola talked of the value set upon human life by the inhabitants of different countries. No one was more competent to speak on such a subject than he, for he had seen it in every clime and in every phase. He spoke with a bitterness and a greater scorn for the petty vanities and aims of men than I had ever noticed in him before. Suddenly he stopped, and looking towards the left said—

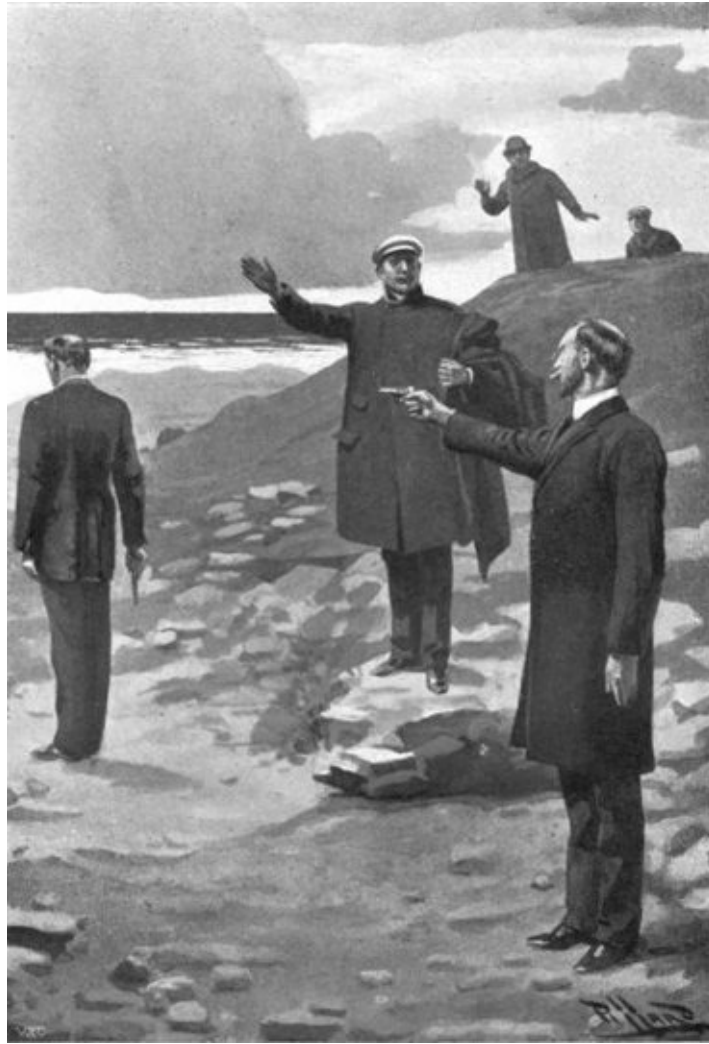
"If I am not mistaken, the Duke of Glenbarth has arrived."

I looked in the direction indicated, and was able to descry the tall figure of the Duke coming along the sands. A little later two other persons made their appearance and followed him. One was undoubtedly the Don, but who was the third? As they drew closer, I discovered that he was unknown to me; not so to Nikola, however.

"Burmaceda," he said to himself, and there was an ugly sneer upon his face.

The Duke bowed ceremoniously to the two men, and the stranger, having returned his salute, knelt upon the sand, and proceeded to open a box he had brought with him. From it he produced a pair of pistols which he loaded with ostentatious care. This work finished, he took them by their barrels and gave Glenbarth his choice. The Spaniard, I noticed, was dressed entirely in black, not showing a particle of white; the Duke was attired very much as usual. When each had taken a pistol, the stranger measured the distance upon the sands and allotted them their respective positions. By this time I was in such a fever of excitement that Nikola laid his hand upon my arm to restrain me.

"Wait," he whispered. "Have I not pledged you my word that your friend shall not be hurt? Do not interrupt them yet. I have my suspicions, and am anxious to confirm them."



"Put down your pistols," said Nikola."

I accordingly waited, but though it was only for a few seconds it seemed to me an eternity. The two men were in position, and the stranger, I gathered, was giving them their final instructions. They were to stand with their faces turned from each other, and at the word of command were to wheel round and fire. In a flash I saw what Nikola had in his mind. The stranger was favouring the Don, for while Glenbarth would have faithfully carried out his portion of the contract, the Spaniard did not turn at all, a fact which his opponent was scarcely likely to become aware of, seeing that he would in all probability have a bullet in his heart before he would have had time to realize the trick that had been played upon him. The stranger had raised his hand above his head, and was about to give the signal, when Nikola sprang from beside me, and in a loud voice called to them to "stop." I rose to my feet at the same instant, and followed him across the sands to where the men stood.

"Put down your pistols, gentlemen," said Nikola in a voice that rang like a trumpet-call. "I forbid the duel. Your Grace, the challenge comes from you, I beg that you will apologize to Don Martinos for having sent it."

"I shall do nothing of the kind," the Duke returned.

On learning this Nikola took him on one side and talked earnestly with him for a few minutes. Then, still with his hand upon the other's arm, he led him back to where we were standing.

"I express my regret for having challenged you," said Glenbarth, but with no good grace.

"I thank you, your Grace," said Nikola. Then turning to the Don, he went on—"And now, Don Martinos, I hope you will apologize to the Duke for the insults that occasioned the challenge."

With an oath the Spaniard vowed that he was the last man to do anything of the kind. He had never apologized to any man in his life, and he was not going to do so now, with more to the same effect. Then Nikola fixed his glittering eyes upon him. His voice, however, when he spoke was as conciliatory as ever.

"To oblige *me* you will do it," he said, and then drawing a little closer to him he murmured something that we could not hear. The effect upon the Don was magical. His face turned a leaden hue, and for a moment I thought he would have fallen, but he recovered his self-possession with an effort, and muttered the apology Nikola had demanded of him.

"I thank you, gentlemen," said Nikola. "Now, with your permission, we will return to the city." Here he wheeled round upon the stranger, and continued:—"This is not the first of these little affairs in which you have played a part. You have been warned before, profit by it, for the time may come when it will be too late. Remember Pietro Sallomi."

I do not know who Pietro Sallomi may have been, but I know that the mere mention of his name was sufficient to take all the swagger out of the stranger. He fell to pieces like a house of cards.

"Now, gentlemen, let us be moving," said Nikola, and taking the Don with him he set off quickly in the direction of the spot where we had disembarked from the gondola. I followed with the Duke.

"My dear boy," I said, as we walked along, "why on earth did you do it? Is your life of so little value to yourself or to your friends, that you try to throw it away in this reckless fashion?"

"I am the most miserable brute on the face of the earth," he replied. "I think it would have been far better for me had I been shot back there."

"Look here, Glenbarth," I said with some anger, "if you talk nonsense in this manner, I shall begin to think that you are not accountable for your actions. What on earth have you to be so unhappy about?"

"You know very well," he answered gloomily.

"You are making yourself miserable because Miss Trevor will not marry you," I said. "You have not asked her, how therefore can you tell?"

"But she seems to prefer Don Martinos," he went on.

"Fiddlesticks!" I answered. "I'm quite certain she hasn't thought of him in that way. Now, I am going to talk plainly to you. I have made up my mind that we leave to-day for Rome. We shall spend a fortnight there, and you should have a fair opportunity of putting the question to Miss Trevor. If you can't do it in that time, well, all I can say is, that you are not the man I took you for. You must remember one thing, however: I'll have no more of this nonsense. It's all very well for a Spanish braggart to go swaggering about the world, endeavouring to put bullets into inoffensive people, but it's not the thing for an English gentleman."

"I'm sorry, Dick. Try to forgive me. You won't tell Lady Hatteras, will you?"

"She knows it already," I answered. "I don't fancy you would get much sympathy from her. Try for a moment to picture what their feelings would have been—mine may be left out of the question—if you had been lying dead on the beach yonder. Think of your relations at home. What would they have said and thought? And for what?"

"Because he insulted me," Glenbarth replied. "Was I to put up with that?"

"You should have treated him with the contempt he merited. But there, do not let us discuss the matter any further. All's well that ends well; and I don't think we shall see much more of the Don."

When we reached the gondolas Nikola took me aside.

"You had better return to the city with the Duke in one," he said; "I will take the Don back in another."

"And what about the other fellow?" I inquired.

"Let him swim if he likes," said Nikola, with a shrug of his shoulders. "By the way, I suppose you saw what took place back yonder?"

I nodded.

"Then say nothing about it," he replied. "Such matters are best kept to one's self."

It was a very sober-minded and reflective young man that sat down to breakfast with us that morning. My wife, seeing how matters stood, laid herself out to be especially kind to him. So affable indeed was she, that Miss Trevor regarded her with considerable surprise. During the meal the journey to Rome was discussed, and it was decided that I should telegraph for our old rooms, and that we should leave Venice at half-past two. This arrangement was duly carried out, and nightfall saw us well advanced on our journey to the capital. The journey is so well known that I need not attempt to describe it here. Only one incident struck me as remarkable about it. No sooner had we crossed the railway-bridge that unites Venice with the mainland, than Miss Trevor's lethargy, if I may so describe it, suddenly left her. She seemed to be her old self instantly. It was as though she had at last thrown off the load under which she had so long been staggering. She laughed and joked with my wife, teased her father, and was even inclined to be flippant with the head of the family. After the events of the morning the effect upon the Duke was just what was wanted.

In due course we reached Rome, and installed ourselves at our old quarters in the Piazza Barberini. From that moment the time we had allowed ourselves sped by on lightning wings. We seemed scarcely to have got there before it was time to go back to Venice. It was unfortunately necessary for the Dean to return to England, at the end of our stay in Rome, and though it was considerably out of his way, he proposed journeying thither by way of Venice. The change had certainly done his daughter good. She was quite her old self once more, and the listless, preoccupied air that had taken such a hold upon her in Venice had entirely disappeared.

"Make the most of the Eternal City," my wife announced at dinner on the eve of our departure, "for to-morrow morning you will look your last upon it. The dragon who has us in his power has issued his decree, and, like the laws of the Medes and Persians, it changeth not."

"A dragon?" I answered. "You should say the family scapegoat! I protest to you, my dear Dean, that it is most unfair. If it is some disagreeable duty to be performed, then it is by my order; if it is something that will bestow happiness upon another, then it is my lady that gets the credit."

"A very proper arrangement," said my wife, "as I am sure the Dean will agree with me."

"I agree with you in everything," replied the polite old gentleman. "Could I do otherwise?"

"I appeal to the Duke, then. Is it your Grace's opinion that a husband should of necessity take upon himself

the properties of a dragon?"

Even that wretched young man would not stand by an old friend.

"I am not going to be drawn into an argument with you," he said. "If Lady Hatteras calls you a dragon, then a dragon you must remain until the end of the chapter, so far as I am concerned."

"Phyllis is always right," answered Miss Trevor unblushingly.

"I give in," I said in mock despair. "If you are all against me, I am undone."

It was a beautiful moonlight night when we rose from dinner, and it was arranged that our last evening in Rome should be spent in a visit to the Colosseum. A carriage was immediately ordered, and when the ladies had wrapped themselves up warmly we set off. To those unfortunate individuals who have not had an opportunity of visiting that ancient structure, I can only justify my incompetency by saying that it would be well-nigh impossible to furnish a description that would give them an adequate idea of the feeling of awe it inspires in one. By moonlight it presents a picture that for solemn grandeur is, to my thinking, without its equal in the world. Pompeii by moonlight suggests reflections. The great square of St. Mark's in Venice seen by the same mellow light is a sight never to be forgotten; but in my humble opinion the Colosseum eclipses them all. We entered it and stood in the great ring looking up at the tiers of seats, and recalling its Past. The Dean was profoundly impressed, and spoke of the men who had given up their lives in martyrdom within those great walls.

"How many of the crowd gathered here to witness the agony of the tortured Christians," he said, "believed that the very religion which they so heartily despised was destined to sway the world, and to see the mighty Colosseum and the mightier Power that built it, a ruin? It is a wonderful thought."

After the Dean's speech we crossed to a spot where a better view was obtainable. It was only then that we discovered that the Duke and Miss Trevor were not of our party. When, however, it was time to return they emerged from the shadow and followed us out. Both were unusually silent, and my wife, putting two and two together in her own fashion, came to the conclusion that they had quarrelled. When, later on, the Duke and I were alone together, and the ladies and the Dean had retired to their respective rooms, I was about to take him to task when he stopped me.

"Dick, old man," he said with a solemnity that could not have been greater had he been telling me of some great tragedy, "I want you to give me your congratulations. Miss Trevor has consented to become my wife."

I was so surprised that I scarcely knew what to do or say.

"Good gracious, man!—then why are you so downcast?" I replied. "I had made up my mind that she had refused you!"

"I am far from being downcast," he said as solemnly as before. "I am the happiest man in the world. Can't you understand how I feel? Somehow—now that it is over, and I have won her—it seems so great a thing that it almost overwhelms me. You don't know, Dick, how proud I am that she should have taken me!"

"And so you ought to be," I said enthusiastically. "You'll have a splendid wife, and I know you'll make a good husband."

"I don't deserve it, Dick," he continued in humiliating self-abasement. "She is too good for me, much too

good."

"I remember that I said the same thing myself," I replied. "Come to me in five years' time and let me hear what you have to say then."

"Confound you," he answered; "why do you talk like that?"

"Because it's the way of the world, my lad," I answered. "But there, you'll learn all for yourself soon enough. Now let me order a whisky-and-potash for you, and then off you go to bed."

"A whisky-and-potash?" he cried, with horror depicted on his face. "Do you think I'm going to drink whisky on the night that she has accepted me? You must be mad."

"Well, have your own way," I answered. "For my own part, I have no such scruples. I have been married too long."

I rang the bell, and, when my refreshment was brought to me, drank it slowly, as became a philosopher.

It would appear that Miss Trevor had already told my wife, for I was destined to listen to a considerable amount of information concerning it before I was allowed to close my eyes that night.

"I always said that they were suited to each other," she observed. "She will make an ideal Duchess, and I think he may consider himself a very lucky fellow. What did he say about it?"

"He admitted that he was not nearly good enough for her."

"That was nice of him. And what did you say?"

"I told him to come to me in five years' time and let me hear what he had to say then," I answered with a yawn.

I had an idea that I should get into trouble over that remark, and I was not mistaken. I was told that it was an unfeeling thing to have said, that it was not the sort of idea to put into a young man's head at such a time, and that if every one had such a good wife as some other people she could name, they would have reason to thank their good fortune.

"If I am not mistaken, you told me you were not good enough for me when I accepted you," she retorted. "What do you say now?"

"Exactly what I said then," I answered diplomatically. "I am not good enough for you. You should have married the Dean."

"Don't be absurd. The Dean is a dear old thing, but is old enough to be my father."

"He will be Glenbarth's father-in-law directly," I said with a chuckle, "and then that young man will have to drink his claret and listen to his sermons. In consideration of that I will forgive him all his sins against me."

Then I fell asleep, to dream that I was a rival of St. George chasing a dragon over the seats of the Colosseum; to find, when I had run him to earth, that he had assumed human shape, and was no other than my old friend the Dean of Bedminster.

Next morning the young couple's behaviour at breakfast was circumspection itself. The worthy old Dean

ate his breakfast unconscious of the shell that was to be dropped into his camp an hour later, while my wife purred approval over the teapot. Meanwhile I wondered what Nikola would have to say when he heard of the engagement. After the meal was over we left the Duke and Dean together. Somehow, I don't think Glenbarth was exactly at his ease, but when he reappeared half-an-hour later and shook me by the hand, he vowed that the old gentleman was the biggest trump in the world, and that I was the next. From this I gathered that the matter had been satisfactorily settled, and that, so far as parental consent was concerned, Miss Gertrude Trevor was likely to become the Duchess of Glenbarth without any unnecessary delay. Though there was not much time to spare before our train started, there was still sufficient for the lovers to make a journey to the Piazza di Trevi, where a magnificent diamond ring was purchased to celebrate the engagement. A bracelet that would have made any woman's mouth water was also dedicated to the same purpose. A memorial bracelet on the Etruscan model was next purchased for my wife, and was handed to her later on by her grateful friends.

"You did so much for us," said the Duke simply, when Miss Trevor made the presentation.

My lady thereupon kissed Miss Trevor and thanked the Duke, while I looked on in amazement.

"Come, now," I said, "I call that scarcely fair. Is the poor dragon to receive nothing? I was under the impression that I had done more than any one to bring about this happy result."

"You shall have our gratitude," Miss Trevor replied. "That would be so nice, wouldn't it?"

"We'll see what the Duke says in five years," I answered, and with this Parthian shot I left them.

Next morning we reached Venice. The journey had been a very pleasant one, but I must say that I was not sorry when it was over. The picture of two young lovers, gazing with devotion into each other's eyes hour after hour, is apt to pall upon one. We had left Mestre behind us, and were approaching the bridge I have described before as connecting Venice with the mainland, when I noticed that Gertrude Trevor had suddenly become silent and preoccupied. She had a headache, she declared to my wife, but thought it would soon pass off. On reaching the railway-station we chartered a barca to take us to our hotel. When we reached it, Galaghetti was on the steps to receive us. His honest face beamed with satisfaction, and the compliments he paid my wife when she set foot upon the steps, were such as to cover her with confusion. I directed my party to go up-stairs, and then drew the old man on one side.

"Don Josè de Martinos?" I asked, knowing that it was sufficient merely to mention his name.

"He is gone, my lord," Galaghetti replied. "Since he was a friend of yours, I am sorry I could keep him no longer. Perhaps your lordship does not know that he has gambled all his money away, and that he has not even enough left to discharge his indebtedness to me."

"I certainly did not know it," I replied. "And I am sorry to hear it. Where is he now?"

"I could not say," Galaghetti replied. "But doubtless I could find out if your lordship desires to know."

"You need not do that," I answered. "I merely asked out of curiosity. Don Martinos was no friend of mine."

Then, bidding him good-day, I made my way up-stairs, turning over in my mind what I had heard. I was not at all surprised to hear that the Don had come to grief, though I had not expected that the catastrophe would happen in so short a time. It was satisfactory to know, however, that in all probability he would never trouble us again.

That afternoon, according to custom, we spent an hour at Florian's *café*. The Duke and Gertrude strolled up and down, while my wife drew my attention to their happiness. I had on several occasions sang Glenbarth's praises to the Dean, and as a result the old gentleman was charmed with his future son-in-law, and seemed to think that the summit of his ambition had been achieved. During our sojourn on the piazza I kept my eyes open, for I was in hopes of seeing Nikola, but I saw nothing of him. If I was not successful in that way, however, I was more so in another. I had found a budget of letters awaiting me on my return from Rome, and as two of them necessitated my sending telegrams to England, I allowed the rest of the party to return to hotel by boat, while I made my way to the telegraph-office. Having sent them off, I walked on to the Rio del Barcaroli, engaged a gondola there, and was about to step into it, when I became aware of a man watching me. He proved to be none other than the Spaniard, Don Martinos, but so great was the change in him that for a moment I scarcely recognized him. Though only a fortnight had elapsed since I had last seen him, he had shrunk to what was only a shadow of his former self. His face was of a pasty, fishy whiteness, and his eyes had a light in them that I had not seen there before. For the moment I thought he had been drinking, and that his unnatural appearance was the result. Remembering his murderous intention on the morning of the frustrated duel, I felt inclined not to speak to him. My pity, however, got the better of me, and I bade him good-day. He did not return my salutation, however, but looked at me as if I were some one he had seen before, but could not remember where. I then addressed him by name.

In reply he beckoned to me to follow him out of earshot of the gondolier.

"I cannot remember your name," he said, gripping me by the arm, "but I know that I have met you before. I cannot remember anything now because—because——" Here he paused and put his hand to his forehead as if he were in pain. I endeavoured to make him understand who I was, but without success. He shook his head and looked at me, talking for a moment in Italian, then in Spanish, with interludes of English. A more pitiable condition for a man to get into could scarcely be imagined. At last I tried him with a question I thought might have some effect upon him.

"Have you met Doctor Nikola lately?" I inquired.

The effect it produced upon him was instantaneous. He shrunk from me as if he had been struck, and, leaning against the wall of the house behind him, trembled like an aspen leaf. For a man usually so self-assertive—one might almost say so aggressive—here was a terrible change. I was more than ever at a loss to account for it. He was the last man I should have thought would have been taken in such a way.

"Don't tell him; you must not tell him, promise me that you will not do so," he whispered in English. "He would punish me if he knew, and—and——" Here he fell to whimpering like a child who feared chastisement. It was not a pretty exhibition, and I was more shocked by it than I can say. At this juncture I remembered the fact that he was without means, and as my heart had been touched by his pathetic condition, I was anxious to render him such assistance as was in my power. For this reason I endeavoured to press a loan upon him, telling him that he could repay me when things brightened.

"No, no," he answered, with a flash of his old spirit; then he added in a whisper, "He would know of it!"

"Who would know of it?" I asked.

"Doctor Nikola," he answered. Then laying his hand upon my arm again, and placing his mouth close to my ear as if he were anxious to make sure that no one else should hear, he went on, "I would rather die of starvation in the streets than fall into his hands. Look at me," he continued, after a moment's pause. "Look what I am! I tell you he has got me body and soul. I cannot escape from him. I have no will but his, and he is killing me inch by inch. I have tried to escape, but it is impossible. If I were on the other side of the

world and he wanted me I should be obliged to come." Then with another change as swift as thought he began to defy Nikola, vowing that he *would* go away, and that nothing should ever induce him to see him again. But a moment later he was back in his old condition once more.

"Farewell, Senor," he whispered. "I must be going. There is no time to lose. He is awaiting me."

"But you have not told me where you are living now?"

"Cannot you guess?" he answered, still in the same curious voice. "My home is the Palace Revecce in the Rio del Consiglio."

Here was surprise indeed! The Don had gone to live with Nikola. Was it kindness that had induced the latter to take him in? If not, what were his reasons for so doing?



CHAPTER XII

As may be supposed my meeting with the Don afforded me abundant food for reflection. Was it true, as he had said, that in his hour of distress Nikola had afforded him an asylum? and if so, why was the latter doing so? I knew Nikola too well by this time to doubt that he had some good and sufficient reason for his action. Lurking at the back of my mind was a hideous suspicion that, although I tried my hardest not to think of it, would not allow itself to be banished altogether. I could not but remember the story Nikola had told me on that eventful evening concerning his early life, and the chance remark he had let fall one day that he knew more about the man, Don Martinos, than I supposed, only tended to confirm it. If that were so, and he still cherished, as I had not the least doubt he did—for Nikola was one who never forgave or forgot,—the same undying hatred and desire for vengeance against his old enemy, the son of his mother's betrayer, then there was—but here I was compelled to stop. I could not go on. The death-like face of the man I had just left rose before my mind's eye like an accusing angel, whereupon I made a resolution that I would think no more of him nor would I say anything to any member of our party concerning my meeting with him that afternoon. It is superfluous to remark that the latter resolve was more easily kept than the former.

The first dinner in Venice after our return was far from being a success. Miss Gertrude's headache, instead of leaving her, had become so bad that she was compelled to go forthwith to bed, leaving Glenbarth in despair, and the rest of our party as low-spirited as possible. Next morning she declared she was a little better, though she complained of having passed a wretched night.

"I had such horrible dreams," she told my wife, "that when I woke up I scarcely dared close my eyes again."

"I cannot remember quite what she said she dreamt," said Phyllis when she told me the story; "but I know that it had something to do with Doctor Nikola and his dreadful house, and that it frightened her terribly."

The girl certainly looked pale and haggard, and not a bit like the happy creature who had stepped into the train at Rome.

"Heaven grant that there is not more trouble ahead," I said to myself, as I smoked my pipe and thought over the matter. "I am beginning to wish we had not come to Venice at all. In that case we should not have seen Nikola or the Don, Miss Trevor would not have been in this state, and I should not have been haunted day and night with this horrible suspicion of foul play."

It was no use, however, talking of what might or might not have happened. It was sufficient that the things I have narrated *had* come to pass, and I must endeavour to derive what satisfaction I could from the reflection that I had done all that was possible under the circumstances.

On the day following our return to Venice, the Dean of Bedminster set off for England. I fancy he was sorry to go, and of one thing I am quite sure, and that was that we regretted losing him. It was arranged that, as soon as we returned to England, we should pay him a visit at Bedminster, and that the Duke should accompany us. Transparently honest though he was in all things, I fancy the old gentleman had a touch of vanity in his composition, and I could quite understand that he would be anxious to show off his future son-in-law before the society of his quiet cathedral town.

On the night following his departure, I had the most terrible dream I have had in my life. Though some

time has elapsed since then, I can still recall the fright it gave me. My wife declares that she could see the effect of it upon my face for more than a day afterwards. But this, I think, is going a little too far. I am willing, however, to admit that it made a very great impression upon me at the time—the more so for the reason that it touched my thought, and I was quite at a loss to understand it. It was night, I remember, and I had just entered the Palace Revecce. I must have been invisible, for, though I stood in the room with Nikola, he did not appear to be aware of my presence. As usual he was at work upon some of his chemical experiments. Then I looked at his face, and saw that it wore an expression that I had never seen there before. I can describe it best by saying that it was one of absolute cruelty, unrelieved by even the smallest gleam of pity. And yet it was not cruelty in the accepted meaning of the word, so much as an overwhelming desire to punish and avenge. I am quite aware, on reading over what I have just written, that my inability to convey the exact impression renders my meaning obscure. Yet I can do no more. It was a look beyond the power of my pen to describe. Presently he put down the glass he held in his hand, and looked up with his head a little on one side, as if he were listening for some sound in the adjoining room. There was a shuffling footstep in the corridor outside, and then the door opened and there entered a figure so awful that I shrank back from it appalled. It was Don Martinos, and yet it was not the Don. The face and the height were perhaps the same, but the man himself was—oh, so different. On seeing Nikola he shambled forward, rather than walked, and dropped in a heap at his feet, clutching at his knees, and making a feeble whining noise, not unlike that of an animal in pain.

"Get up," said Nikola sternly, and as he said it he pointed to a couch on the further side of the room.



"He crawled upon the floor like a dog."

The man went and stretched himself out upon it as if in obedience to some unspoken command. Nikola followed him, and having exposed the other's chest, took from the table what looked like a hypodermic syringe, filled it from one of the graduated glasses upon the table, and injected the contents beneath the prostrate man's skin. An immediate and violent fit of trembling was the result, followed by awful contortions of the face. Then suddenly he stiffened himself out and lay like one dead. Taking his watch from his pocket Nikola made a careful note of the time. So vivid was my dream that I can even remember hearing the ticking of the watch. Minute after minute went by, until at last the Don opened his eyes. Then I realized that the man was no longer a human being, but an animal. He uttered horrible noises in his throat, that were not unlike the short, sharp bark of a wolf, and when Nikola bade him move he crawled upon the floor like a dog. After that he retreated to a corner, where he crouched and glowered upon his master, as if he were prepared at any moment to spring upon him and drag him down. As one throws a bone to a dog so did Nikola toss him food. He devoured it ravenously, as would a starving cur. There was foam at the corners of his mouth, and the light of madness in his eyes. Nikola returned to the table and began to pour some liquid into a glass. So busily occupied was he, that he did not see the thing, I cannot call it a man, in the corner, get on to his feet. He had taken up a small tube and was stirring the contents of the glass with it, when the other was less than a couple of feet from him. I tried to warn him of his danger, only to find that I could not utter a word. Then the object sprang upon him and clawed at his throat. He turned, and, a moment later, the madman was lying, whining feebly, upon the floor, and Nikola was wiping the blood from a scratch on the left-hand side of his throat. At that moment I awoke to find myself sitting up in bed, with the perspiration streaming down my face.

"I have had such an awful dream!" I said, in answer to my wife's startled inquiry as to what was the matter. "I don't know that I have ever been so frightened before."

"You are trembling now," said my wife. "Try not to think of it, dear. Remember it was only a dream."

That it was something more than a mere dream I felt certain. It was so complete and dovetailed so exactly with my horrible suspicions that I could not altogether consign it to the realms of fancy. Fearing a repetition if I attempted to go to sleep again, I switched on the electric light and endeavoured to interest myself in a book, but it was of no use. The face of the poor brute I had seen crouching in the corner haunted me continually, and would not be dispelled. Never in my life before had I been so thankful to see the dawn. At breakfast my wife commented upon my dream. Miss Trevor, however, said nothing. She became quieter and more distracted every day. Towards the evening Glenbarth spoke to me concerning her.

"I don't know what to make of it all," he said anxiously. "She assures me that she is perfectly well and happy, but seeing the condition she is in, I can scarcely believe that. It is as much as I can do to get a word out of her. If I didn't know that she loves me I should begin to imagine that she regretted having promised to be my wife."

"I don't think you need be afraid of that," I answered. "One has only to look at her face to see how deeply attached she is to you. The truth of the whole matter is, my dear fellow, I have come to the conclusion that we have had enough of Venice. Nikola is at the bottom of our troubles, and the sooner we see the last of him the better it will be for all parties concerned."

"Hear, hear, to that," he answered fervently. "Deeply grateful though I am to him for what he did when Gertrude was ill, I can honestly say that I never want to see him again."

At luncheon that day I accordingly broached the subject of our return to England. It was received by my

wife and the Duke with unfeigned satisfaction, and by Miss Trevor with what appeared to be approval. It struck me, however, that she did not seem so anxious to leave as I expected she would be. This somewhat puzzled me, but I was not destined to remain very long in ignorance of the reason.

That afternoon I happened to be left alone with her for some little time. We talked for a while on a variety of topics, but I could see all the time that there was something she was desirous of saying to me, though she could not quite make up her mind how to commence. At last she rose, and crossing the room took a chair by my side.

"Sir Richard, I am going to ask a favour of you," she said, with a far-away look in her eyes.

"Let me assure you that it is granted before you ask it," I replied. "Will you tell me what it is?"

"It may appear strange to you," she said, "but I have a conviction, absurd, superstitious, or whatever you may term it, that some great misfortune will befall me if I leave Venice just yet. I am not my own mistress, and must stay. I want you to arrange it."

This was a nice sort of shell to have dropped into one's camp, particularly at such a time and under such circumstances, and I scarcely knew what reply to make.

"But what possible misfortune could befall you?" I asked.

"I cannot say," she replied. "I am only certain that I must remain for a little while longer. You can have no idea what I have suffered lately. Bear with me, Sir Richard." Here she lifted a face of piteous entreaty to me, which I was powerless to resist, adding, "I implore you not to be angry with me."

"Is it likely that I should be angry with you, Miss Gertrude?" I replied. "Why should I be? If you really desire to remain for a little longer there is nothing to prevent it. But you must not allow yourself to become ill again. Believe me it is only your imagination that is playing tricks with you."

"Ah! you do not know everything," she answered. "Every night I have such terrible dreams that I have come to dread going to bed."

I thought of my own dream on the previous night, and could well understand how she felt. After her last remark she was silent for some moments. That there was something still to come, I could see, but what it was I had no more idea than a child. At last she spoke.

"Sir Richard," she said, "would you mind very much if I were to ask you a most important question? I scarcely like to do so, but I know that you are my friend, and that you will give me good advice."

"I will endeavour to do so," I replied. "What is the question you wish to ask me?"

"It is about my engagement," she replied. "You know how good and unselfish the Duke is, and how truly he believes in me. I could not bear to bring trouble upon him, but in love there should be no secrets—nothing should be hidden one from the other. Yet I feel that I am hiding so much—can you understand what I mean?"

"In a great measure," I answered, "but I should like to do so thoroughly. Miss Gertrude, if I may hazard a guess, I should say that you have been dreaming about Doctor Nikola again?"

"Yes," she answered after a moment's hesitation. "Absurd though it may be, I can think of no one else. He weighs upon my spirits like lead, and yet I know that I should be grateful to him for all he did for me when

I was so ill. But for him I should not be alive now."

"I am afraid that you have been allowing the thought of your recent danger to lie too heavily upon your mind," I continued. "Remember that this is the nineteenth century, and that there are no such things as you think Nikola would have you believe."

"When I know that there are?" she asked, looking at me reproachfully. "Ah, Sir Richard," she continued, "if you knew all that I do you would pity me. But no one will ever know, and I cannot tell them. But one thing is quite certain. I must stay in Venice for the present—happen what may. Something tells me so, day and night. And when I think of the Duke my heart well-nigh breaks for fear I should bring trouble upon him."

I did my best to comfort her; promised that if she really desired to remain in Venice I would arrange it for her, and by so doing committed myself to a policy that I very well knew, when I came to consider it later, was not expedient, and very far from being judicious. Regarded seriously in a sober commonplace light, the whole affair seems too absurd, and yet at the time nothing could possibly have been more real or earnest. When she had heard me out, she thanked me very prettily for the interest I had taken, and then with a little sigh, that went to my heart, left the room. Later in the afternoon I broke the news to my wife, and told her of the promise I had given Gertrude.

"But what does it all mean, Dick?" she asked, looking at me with startled eyes. "What is it she fears will happen if she goes away from Venice?"

"That is what I cannot get her to say," I replied. "Indeed I am not altogether certain that she knows herself. It's a most perplexing business, and I wish to goodness I had never had anything to do with it. The better plan, I think, would be to humour her, keep her as cheerful as we can, and when the proper time arrives, get her away from Venice and home to England as quickly as we can."

My wife agreed with me on this point, and our course of action was thereupon settled.

Later in the afternoon I made a resolution. My own suspicions concerning the wretched Martinos were growing so intolerable that I could bear them no longer. The memory of the dream I had had on the previous night was never absent from my thoughts, and I felt that unless I could set matters right once and for all, and convince myself that they were not as I suspected with Anstruther's friend, I should be unable to close my eyes when next I went to bed. For this reason I determined to set off to the Palace Revecce at once, and to have an interview with Nikola in the hope of being able to extort some information from him.

"Perhaps after all," I argued, "I am worrying myself unnecessarily. There may be no connection between Martinos and that South American."

I determined, however, to set the matter at rest that afternoon. Accordingly at four o'clock I made an excuse and departed for the Rio del Consiglio.

It was a dark, cloudy afternoon, and the house, as I approached it, looked drearier, if such a thing were possible, than I had ever seen it. I disembarked from my gondola at the steps, and having bade the man wait for me, which he did on the other side of the street, I rang the bell. The same old servant whom I remembered having seen on a previous occasion answered it, and informed me that his master was not at home, but that he expected him every minute. I determined to wait for him and ascended the stairs to his room. The windows were open, and from where I stood I could watch the gondolier placidly eating his bread and onions on the other side of the street. So far as I could see there was no change in the room

itself. The centre table as usual was littered with papers and books, that near the window was covered with chemical apparatus, while the old black cat was fast asleep upon the couch on the other side. The oriental rug, described in another place, covered the ominous trap-door so that no portion of it could be seen. I was still standing at the window looking down upon the canal below, when the door at the further end softly opened and a face looked in at me. Good heavens! I can even now feel the horror which swept over me. It was the countenance of Don Martinos, but so changed, even from what it had been when I had seen him in the Rio del Barcaroli, that I scarcely recognized it. It was like the face of an animal and of a madman, if such could be combined. He looked at me and then withdrew, closing the door behind him, only to re-open it a few moments later. Having apparently made sure that I was alone, he crept in, and, crossing the room, approached me. For a moment I was at a loss how to act. I was not afraid that the poor wretch might do me any mischief, but my whole being shrank from him with a physical revulsion beyond all description in words. I can understand now something of the dislike my wife and the Duke declared they entertained for him. On tip-toe, with his finger to his lips, as if to enjoin silence, he crept towards me, muttering something in Spanish that I could not understand; then in English he continued—

"Hush, Senor, cannot you see them?"

He pointed his hand in various directions as if he could see the figures of men and women moving about the apartment. Once he bowed low as if to some imaginary dignitary, drawing back at the same time, as if to permit him to pass. Then turning to me he continued, "Do you know who that is? No! Then I will tell you. Senor, that is the most noble Admiral Revecce, the owner of this house."

Then for a short time he stood silent, picking feebly at his fingers and regarding me ever and anon from the corner of his eye. Suddenly there was a sharp quick step in the corridor outside, the handle of the door turned, and Nikola entered the room. As his glance fell upon the wretched being at my side a look not unlike that I had seen in my dream flashed into his countenance. It was gone again, however, as suddenly as it had come, and he was advancing to greet me with all his old politeness. It was then that the folly of my errand was borne in upon me. Even if my suspicions were correct what could I do, and what chance could I hope to have of being able to induce Nikola to confide in me? Meanwhile he had pointed to the door, and Martinos, trembling in every limb, was slinking towards it like a whipped hound. At that moment I made a discovery that I confess came near to depriving me of my presence of mind altogether. You can judge of its value for yourself when I say, that extending to the lobe of Nikola's left ear half-way down and across his throat was a newly-made scar, just such an one, in fact, as would be made by a hand with sharp finger-nails clutching at it. Could my dream have been true, after all?

"I cannot tell you how delighted I am to see you, my dear Sir Richard," said Nikola as he seated himself. "I understood that you had returned to Venice."

Having out-grown the desire to learn how Nikola had become aware of anything, I merely agreed that we had returned, and then took the chair he offered me.

When all the circumstances are taken into consideration, I really think that that moment was certainly the most embarrassing of my life. Nikola's eyes were fixed steadily upon mine, and I could see in them what was almost an expression of malicious amusement. As usual he was making capital out of my awkwardness, and as I knew that I could do no good, I felt that there was nothing for it but for me to submit. Then the miserable Spaniard's face rose before my mind's eye, and I felt that I could not abandon him, without an effort, to what I knew would be his fate. Nikola brought me up to the mark even quicker than I expected.

"It is very plain," he said, with a satirical smile playing round his thin lips, "that you have come with the intention of saying something important to me. What is it?"

At this I rose from my chair and went across the room to where he was sitting. Placing my hand upon his shoulder I looked down into his face, took courage, and began.

"Doctor Nikola," I said, "you and I have known each other for many years now. We have seen some strange things together, one of us perhaps less willingly than the other. But I venture to think, however, that we have never stood on stranger or more dangerous ground than we do to-night."

"I am afraid I am scarcely able to follow your meaning," he replied.

I knew that this was not the case, but I was equally convinced that to argue the question with him would be worse than useless.

"Do you remember the night on which you told me that story concerning the woman who lived in this house, who was betrayed by the Spaniard, and who died on that Spanish island?" I asked.

He rose hurriedly from his chair and went to the window. I heard him catch his breath, and knew that I had moved him at last.

"What of it?" he inquired, turning on me sharply as he spoke.

"Only that I have come to see you concerning the *dénouement* of that story," I answered. "I have come because I cannot possibly stay away. You have no idea how deeply I have been thinking over this matter. Do you think I cannot see through it and read between the lines? You told it to me because in some inscrutable fashion of your own you had become aware that Don Martinos would bring a letter of introduction to me from my friend Anstruther. Remember it was I who introduced him to you! Do you think that I did not notice the expression that came into your face whenever you looked at him? Later my suspicions were aroused. The Don was a Spaniard, he was rich, and he had made the mistake of admitting that while he had been in Chili he had never been in Equinata. You persuaded me to bring him to this house, and here you obtained your first influence over him."

"My dear Hatteras," said Nikola, "you are presupposing a great deal. And you get beyond my depth. Don't you think it would be wiser if you were to stick to plain facts?"

"My suppositions are stronger than my facts," I answered. "You laid yourself out to meet him, and your influence over him became greater every day. It could be seen in his face. He was fascinated, and could not escape. Then he began to gamble, and found his money slipping through his fingers like water through a sieve."

"You have come to the conclusion, then, that I am responsible for that also?"

"I do not say that it was your doing exactly," I said, gathering courage from the calmness of his manner and the attention he was giving me. "But it fits in too well with the whole scheme to free you entirely from responsibility. Then look at the change that began to come over the man himself. His faculties were leaving him one by one, being wiped out, just as a school-boy wipes his lesson from a slate. If he had been an old man I should have said that it was the commencement of his second childhood; but he is still a comparatively young man."

"You forget that while he had been gambling he had also been drinking heavily. May not debauchery tell

its own tale?"

"It is not debauchery that has brought about this terrible change. Who knows that better than yourself? After the duel, which you providentially prevented, we went to Rome for a fortnight. On the afternoon of our return I met him near the telegraph-office. At first glance I scarcely recognized him, so terrible was the change in his appearance. If ever a poor wretch was on the verge of idiotcy he was that one. Moreover, he informed me that he was living with you. Why should the fact that he was so doing produce such a result? I cannot say! I dare not try to understand it! But, for pity's sake, Nikola, by all you hold dear I implore you to solve the riddle. Last night I had a dream!"

"You are perhaps a believer in dreams?" he remarked very quietly, as if the question scarcely interested him.

"This dream was of a description such as I have never had in my life before," I answered, disregarding the sneer, and then told it to him, increasing rather than lessening the abominable details. He heard me out without moving a muscle of his face, and it was only when I had reached the climax and paused that he spoke.

"This is a strange rigmarole you tell me," he said. "Fortunately you confess that it was only a dream."

"Doctor Nikola," I cried, "it was more than a dream. To prove it, let me ask you how you received that long scratch that shows upon your neck and throat?"

I pointed my finger at it, but Nikola returned my gaze still without a flicker of his eyelids.

"What if I do admit it?" he began. "What if your dream were correct? What difference would it make?"

I looked at him in amazement. To tell the truth I was more astonished by his admission of the correctness of my suspicions than I should have been had he denied them altogether. As it was, I was too much overcome to be able to answer him for a few moments.

"Come," he said, "answer my question. What if I do admit the truth of all you say?"

"You confess then that the whole business has been one long scheme to entrap this wretched man, and to get him into your power?"

"'Tis," he answered, still keeping his eyes fixed upon me. "You see I am candid! Go on!"

My brain began to reel under the strain placed upon it. Since he had owned to it, what was I to do? What could I say?

"Sir Richard Hatteras," said Nikola, approaching a little nearer to me, resting one hand upon the table and speaking very impressively, "I wonder if it has struck you that you are a brave man to come to me to-day and to say this to me? In the whole circle of the men I know I may declare with truth that I am not aware of one other who would do so much. What is this man to you that you should befriend him? He would have robbed you of your dearest friend without a second thought, as he would rob you of your wife if the idea occurred to him. He is without bowels of compassion; the blood of thousands stains his hands and cries aloud for vengeance. He is a fugitive from justice, a thief, a liar, and a traitor to the country he swore to govern as an honest man. On a certain little island on the other side of the world there is a lonely churchyard, and in that churchyard a still lonelier grave. In it lies the body of a woman—my mother. In this very room that woman was betrayed by his father. So in this room also shall that betrayal be avenged.

I have waited all my life; the opportunity has been long in coming. Now, however, it has arrived, and I am decreed by Fate to be the instrument of Vengeance!"

I am a tall man, but as he said this Nikola seemed to tower over me, his face set hard as a rock, his eyes blazing like living coals, and his voice trembling under the influence of his passion. Little by little I was growing to think as he did, and to look upon Martinos as he saw him.

"But this cannot go—it cannot go on," I repeated, in a last feeble protest against the horror of the thing. "Surely you could not find it in your heart to treat a fellow-creature so?"

"He is no fellow-creature of yours or mine," Nikola retorted sternly, as if he were rebuking a childish mistake. "Would you call the man who shot down those innocent young men of Equinata, before their mothers' eyes, a fellow-creature? Is it possible that the son of the man who so cruelly wronged and betrayed the trusting woman he first saw in this room, who led her across the seas to desert her, and to send her to her grave, could be called a man? I will give you one more instance of his barbarity."

So saying, he threw off the black velvet coat he was wearing, and drawing up his right shirt-sleeve, bade me examine his arm. I saw that from the shoulder to the elbow it was covered with the scars of old wounds, strange white marks, in pairs, and each about half-an-inch long.

"Those scars," he went on, "were made by his orders, and with hot pincers, when I was a boy. And as his negro servants made them he laughed and taunted me with my mother's shame. No! No! This is no man—rather a dangerous animal, that were best out of the way. It has been told me that you and I shall only meet twice more. Let those meetings lead you to think better of me. The time is not far distant when I must leave the world! When that hour arrives there is a lonely monastery in a range of eastern mountains, upon which no Englishman has ever set his foot. Of that monastery I shall become an inmate. No one outside its walls will ever look upon my face again. There I shall work out my Destiny, and, if I have sinned, be sure I shall receive my punishment at those hands that alone can bestow it. Now leave me!"

God help me for the coward I am, but the fact remains that I left him without another word.



CHAPTER XIII

If I were offered my heart's desire in return for so doing, I could not tell you how I got home after my interview with Nikola at the Palace Revecce. I was unconscious of everything save that I had gone to Nikola's house in the hope of being able to save the life of a man, whom I had the best of reasons for hating, and that at the last moment I had turned coward and fled the field. No humiliation could have been more complete. Nikola had won a victory, and I knew it, and despaired of retrieving it. On reaching the hotel I was about to disembark from my gondola, when a voice hailed me from another craft, proceeding in the direction I had come.

"Dick Hatteras, as I'm a sinner!" it cried. "Don't you know me, Dick?"

I turned to see a face I well remembered smiling at me from the gondola. I immediately bade my own man put me out into the stream, which he did, and presently the two gondolas lay side by side. The man who had hailed me was none other than George Beckworth, a Queensland sugar-planter, with whom I had been on terms of the most intimate friendship in bygone days. And as there was a lady seated beside him, I derived the impression that he had married since I had last seen him.

"This is indeed a surprise," he said, as we shook hands. "By the way, let me introduce you to my wife, Dick." He said this with all the pride of a newly-married man. "My dear, this is my old friend, Dick Hatteras, of whom I have so often spoken to you. What are you doing in Venice, Dick?"

"I have my wife and some friends travelling with me," I answered. "We are staying at Galaghetti's hotel yonder. Cannot you and your wife dine with us to-night?"

"Impossible, I am afraid," he answered. "We sail to-night in the P. and O. boat. Won't you come and dine with us?"

"That is equally impossible," I replied. "We have friends with us. But I should like to see something more of you before you go, and if you will allow me I'll run down after dinner for a chat about old times."

"I shall be delighted," he answered. "Be sure that you do not forget it."

Having assured him that I would not permit it to escape my memory, I bade him "good-bye," and then returned to my hotel. A more fortunate meeting could scarcely have occurred, for now I was furnished with an excellent excuse for leaving my party, and for being alone for a time. Once more I felt that I was a coward for not daring to face my fellow-men. Under the circumstances, however, I knew that it was impossible. I could no more have spent the evening listening to Glenbarth's happy laughter than I could have jumped the Grand Canal. For the time being the society of my fellow-creatures was absolutely distasteful to me. On ascending to my rooms I discovered my wife and the Duke in the drawing-room, and was informed by the latter that Miss Trevor had again been compelled to retire to her room with a severe headache.

"In that case I am afraid you will only be a small party for dinner," I said. "I am going to ask you to excuse me. You have often heard me speak, my dear, of George Beckworth, the Queensland sugar-planter, with whom I used to be on such friendly terms in the old days?"

My wife admitted that she remembered hearing me speak of the gentleman in question.

"Well, he is in Venice," I replied, "and he sails to-night by the P. and O. boat for Colombo. As it is the last time I shall be likely to see him for many years, I feel sure you will not mind my accepting his invitation?"

"Of course not, if the Duke will excuse you," she said, and, when the question was put to him, Glenbarth willingly consented to do so.

I accordingly went to my room to make my toilet. Then, having bade my wife "good-bye," I chartered a gondola and ordered the man to row me to the piazza of Saint Mark. Thence I set off for a walk through the city, caring little in which way I went. It was growing dark by this time, and I knew there was little chance of my being recognized, or of my recognizing any one else. All the time, however, my memory was haunted by the recollection of that room at the Palace Revecce, and of what was in all probability going on in it. My gorge rose at the idea—all my manhood revolted from it. A loathing of Nikola, such as I had never known before, was succeeded by a deathly chill, as I realized how impotent I was to avert the catastrophe. What could I do? To have attempted to stay him in his course would have been worse than useless, while to have appealed to the Authorities would only have had the effect of putting myself in direct opposition to him, and who knew what would happen then? I looked at it from another point of view. Why should I be so anxious to interfere on the wretched Spaniard's behalf? I had seen his murderous intention on the morning of the frustrated duel; I had heard from Nikola of the assassination of those unfortunate lads in Equinata; moreover, I was well aware that he was a thief, and also a traitor to his country. Why should he not be punished as he deserved, and why should not Nikola be his executioner? I endeavoured to convince myself that this was only fit and proper retribution, but this argument was no more successful than the last had been.

Arguing in this way I walked on and on, turning to right or left, just as the fancy took me. Presently I found myself in a portion of the town into which I had never hitherto penetrated. At the moment of which I am about to write, I was standing in a narrow lane, paved with large stones, having high dismal houses on either hand. Suddenly an old man turned the corner and approached me. As he passed, I saw his face, and recognized an individual to whom Nikola had spoken in the little church on that memorable evening when he had taken us on a tour of inspection through the city. He was visibly agitated, and was moreover in hot haste. For some reason that I cannot explain, nor, I suppose, shall I ever be able to do so, an intense desire to follow him took possession of me. It must have been more than a desire, for I felt that I must go with him whether I wished to or not. I accordingly dived into the house after him, and followed him along the passage and up the rickety flight of stairs that ascended from it. Having attained one floor we continued our ascent; the sounds of voices reached us from the different rooms, but we saw no one. On the second landing the old man paused before a door, opened it very softly, and entered. I followed him, and looked about me. It was a pathetic scene that met my eyes. The room was a poor one, and scantily furnished. A rough table and a narrow bed were its only furniture. On the latter a young man was lying, and kneeling on the floor beside him, holding the thin hands in his own, was no less a person than Doctor Nikola himself. I saw that he was aware of my presence, but he took no more notice of me than if I had not existed.

"You called me too late, my poor Antonio," he said, addressing the old man I had followed. "Nothing can save him now. He was dying when I arrived."

On hearing this the old man fell on his knees beside the bed and burst into a flood of weeping. Nikola placed his hand with a kindly gesture upon the other's shoulder, and at the moment that he did so the man upon the bed expired.

"Do not grieve for him, my friend," said Nikola. "Believe me, it was hopeless from the first. He is better as it is."

Then, with all the gentleness of a woman, he proceeded to comfort the old man, whose only son lay dead upon the bed. I knew no more of the story than what I had seen, nor have I heard more of it since, but I had been permitted to see another side of his character, and one which, in the light of existing circumstances, was not to be denied. He had scarcely finished his kindly offices before there was a heavy step outside, and a black-browed priest entered the room. He looked from Nikola to myself, and then at the dead man upon the bed.

"Farewell, my good Antonio," said Nikola. "Have no fear. Remember that your future is my care."

Then, having said something in an undertone to the priest, he placed his hand upon my arm and led me from the room. When we had left them he murmured in a voice not unlike that in which he had addressed the old man, "Hatteras, this is another lesson. Is it so difficult to learn?"

I do not pretend that I made any answer. We passed down the stairs together, and, when we reached the street, stood for a moment at the house-door.

"You will not be able to understand me," he said; "nevertheless, I tell you that the end is brought nearer by that one scene. It will not be long before it comes now. All things considered, I do not know that I shall regret it."

Then, without another word, he strode away into the darkness, leaving me to place what construction I pleased upon his last speech. For some moments I stood where he had left me, pondering over his words, and then set off in the direction I had come. As may be imagined, I felt even less inclined than before for the happy, jovial party I knew I should find on board the steamer, but I had given my promise, and could not get out of it. When I reached the piazza of St. Mark once more I went to the steps and hailed a gondola, telling the man to take me to the P. and O. vessel then lying at anchor in the harbour. He did so, and I made my way up the accommodation-ladder to the deck above, to find that the passengers in the first saloon had just finished their dinner, and were making their appearance on the promenade deck. I inquired of the steward for Mr. Beckworth, and discovered him in the act of lighting a cigar at the smoking-room door.

He greeted me effusively, and begged me to remain where I was while he went in search of his wife. When she arrived, I found her to be a pretty little woman, with big brown eyes, and a sympathetic manner. She was good enough to say that she had heard such a lot concerning me from her husband, and had always looked forward to making my acquaintance. I accepted a cigar from Beckworth's case, and we then adjourned to the smoking-room for a long talk together. When we had comfortably installed ourselves, my friend's flow of conversation commenced, and I was made aware of all the principal events that had occurred in Queensland since my departure, was favoured with his opinion of England, which he had never before visited, and was furnished with the details as to how he had met his wife, and of the happy event with which their courtship had been concluded.

"Altogether," he said, "taking one thing with another, I don't know that you'd be able to find a much happier fellow in the world than I am at this moment."

I said I was glad to hear it, and as I did so contrasted his breezy, happy-go-lucky manner with those of certain other people I had been brought in contact with that day. My interview with him must have done me good, for I stayed on, and the hour was consequently late when I left the ship. Indeed, it wanted only a few minutes of eleven o'clock as I went down the accommodation-ladder to the gondola, which I had ordered to come for me at ten.

"Galagheti's hotel," I said to the man, "and as quickly as you can."

When I had bade my friends "good-bye" and left the ship, I felt comparatively cheerful, but no sooner had the silence of Venice closed in upon me again than all my old despondency returned to me. A foreboding of coming misfortune settled upon me, and do what I would I could not shake it off.

When I reached the hotel I found that my party had retired to rest. My wife was sleeping quietly, and not feeling inclined for bed, and dreading lest if I did go I might be assailed by more dreams of a similar description to that I had had on the previous night, I resolved to go back to the drawing-room and read there for a time. This plan I carried into execution, and taking up a new book in which I was very much interested, seated myself in an easy-chair and determined to peruse it. I found some difficulty, however, in concentrating my attention upon it. My thoughts continually reverted to my interview that afternoon with Nikola, and also to the scene I had witnessed in the poorer quarter after dark. I suppose eventually I must have fallen asleep, for I remember nothing else until I awoke to find myself sitting up and listening to a light step in the corridor outside. I looked at my watch to discover that the time was exactly a quarter to one. In that case, as we monopolized the whole of the corridor, who could it be? In order to find out I went to the door, and softly opened it. A dim light was always left in the passage throughout the night, and by it I was able to see a tall and graceful figure, which I instantly recognized, making for the secondary stairs at the further end. Now these stairs, so I had been given to understand, led to another portion of the hotel into which I had never penetrated. Why, therefore, Miss Trevor was using them at such an hour, and, above all, dressed for going out, I could not for the life of me determine. I could see that, if I was anxious to find out, I must be quick; so, turning swiftly into the room again, I picked up my hat and set off in pursuit. As the sequel will prove, it was, perhaps, as well that I did so.

By the time I reached the top of the stairs she was at the bottom, and was speeding along another passage to the right. At the end of this was a door, the fastenings of which she undid, with an ease and assurance that bewildered me. So certain was she of her whereabouts, and so easily did she manipulate the heavy door, that I felt inclined to believe that she must have used that passage many times before. At last she opened it and passed out into the darkness, drawing it to after her. I had paused to watch her; now I hastened on even faster than before, fearing that, if I were not careful, I might lose her outside. Having passed the door I found myself in a narrow lane, bounded on either side by high walls, and some fifty or sixty yards in extent. The lane, in its turn, opened into a small square, out of which led two or three other narrow streets. She turned to the left and passed down one of these; I followed close upon her heels. Of all the strange experiences to which our stay in Venice had given rise, this was certainly one of the most remarkable. That Gertrude Trevor, the honest English girl, the daughter of a dignitary of the Church and a prospective bishop, should leave her hotel in the middle of the night in order to wander about streets with which she was most imperfectly acquainted, was a mystery I found difficult to solve. When she had crossed a bridge, which spanned a small canal, she once more turned to the left, passed along the footway before a dilapidated palace, and then entered a narrow passage on the right. The buildings hereabouts were all large, and, as a natural consequence, the streets were so dark that I had some difficulty in keeping her in sight. As a matter of fact she had stopped, and I was almost upon her before I became aware of it. Even then she did not seem to realize my presence. She was standing before a small door, which she was endeavouring to push open. At last she succeeded, and without hesitation began to descend some steps inside. Once more I took up the chase, though where we were, and what we were going to do there, I had not the least idea. The small yard in which we found ourselves was stone-paved, and for this reason I wondered that she did not hear my footsteps. It is certain, however, that she did not, for she made for a door I could just discern on the opposite side to that by which we had entered, without turning her head. It was at this point that I began to wish I had brought a revolver or some weapon with me. When she was about to open the door I have just mentioned, I called her softly by name, and implored her to wait for me, but still she took no notice. Could she be a somnambulist? I asked myself. But if this were so, why

had she chosen this particular house? Having passed the door we stood in a second and larger courtyard, and it was then that the whole mystery became apparent to me. *The house to which I had followed her was the Palace Revecce, and she was on her way to Nikola!* But for what reason? Was this a trick of Nikola's, or had her terrible dreams taken such a hold upon her that she was not responsible for her actions? Either alternative was bad enough. Pausing for a moment in the courtyard beside the well, she turned quickly to her right hand and began to ascend the stairs towards that awful room, which, so far as I knew, she had never visited before. When she reached it I scarcely knew how to act. Should I enter behind her and accuse Nikola of having enticed her there, or should I wait outside and overhear what transpired between them? At last I made up my mind to adopt the latter course, and, when she had entered, I accordingly remained outside and waited for her. Through the half-open door I could see Nikola, stooping over what looked like a microscope at a side-table. He looked up as Miss Trevor entered, and uttered a cry of surprise. As I heard this a sigh of relief escaped me, for his action proved to me that her visit had not been anticipated.

"Miss Trevor!" he said, moving forward to greet her, "what does this mean? How did you get here?"

"I have come to you," she faltered, "because I could not remain away. I have come to you that I may beg of you that wretched man's life. Doctor Nikola, I implore you to spare him!"

"My dear young lady," said Nikola, with a softness in his voice that reminded me of that I had heard in the death-chamber a few hours before, "you cannot understand what you are doing. You must let me take you back to your friends. You should not be here at this hour of the night."

"But I was bound to come—don't I tell you I could not remain away? Spare him! Oh! for God's sake, spare him!"

"You do not know what you are asking. You are not yourself to-night."

"I only know that I am thinking of you," she answered. "You must not do it! You are so great, so powerful, that you can afford to forgive. Take my life rather than harm him. I will yield it gladly to save you from this sin."

"To—save—me," I heard him mutter to himself. "She would save me!"

"God would never forgive," she continued, still in the same dreamy voice.

He moved away from her, and from where I stood I could see how agitated he was. For some moments she knelt, looking up at him, with arms outstretched in supplication; then he said something to her in a low voice, which I could not catch. Her answer, however, was plain to me.

"Yes, I have known it always in my dreams," she said.

"And knowing that, you would still wish me to pardon him?"



"She knelt, with arms outstretched, in supplication."

"In the name of God I would urge you to do so," she answered. "The safety of your soul depends upon it."

Once more Nikola turned away and paced the room.

"Are you aware that Sir Richard Hatteras was here on the same errand this afternoon?" he asked.

"I know it," she replied, though how she could have done so I could not conceive, nor have I been able to do so since.

"And does he know that you have come to me now asking me to forgive?"

"He knows it," she answered, as before. "He followed me here."

As she had never looked behind her, how had she known this also?

Then Nikola approached the door and threw it open.

"Come in, Hatteras," he said. "Your presence is discovered."

"For heaven's sake, Nikola, tell me what this means," I cried, seeing that the girl did not turn towards me. "Is she asleep, or have you brought your diabolical influence upon her?"

"She is not asleep, and yet she is not conscious of her actions," he answered. "There is something in this that passes our philosophy. Had I any idea that she contemplated such a thing, I would have used every effort to prevent it. Miss Trevor, believe me, you must go home with Sir Richard," he continued, tenderly

raising the girl to her feet as he spoke.

"I cannot go until you have sworn to forgive," was her reply.

"I must have time to think," he answered. "In the morning you will know everything. Trust me until then, and remember always that while Nikola lives he will be grateful."

Then he assisted me to conduct her down-stairs, and across the two courtyards, to the little postern door through which we had entered the palace.

"Have no fear for her," he said, addressing me. "She will go home as she came. And in the morning she will remember nothing of what has transpired."

Then taking her hand in his he raised it to his lips, and a moment later had bade me farewell, and had vanished into the palace once more.

As I tracked her from the hotel, so I followed her back to it again. I was none the less anxious, however. If only Nikola would abandon his purpose, and release his enemy, her action and my anxiety would not be in vain. But would he do so, and in the event of his doing this, would his prophecy that Miss Trevor would, in the morning, remember nothing of what had transpired, prove true?

Turning, twisting as before, we proceeded on our way. My chief fear was that the door through which we had made our exit would be found to be shut on our return. Happily, however, this did not prove to be the case. I saw Miss Trevor enter, and then swiftly followed her. She hastened down the passage, ascended the stairs, passed along the corridor, and made her way to her own room. As soon as I had made certain that she was safely there, I went on to my own dressing-room, and on entering my wife's apartment had the good fortune to find her still asleep. I was still more thankful in the morning when I discovered she had not missed me, and being satisfied on this point, I decided to say nothing whatsoever concerning our adventure.

Miss Trevor was the last to put in an appearance at breakfast, and, as you may suppose, I scanned her face with some anxiety. She looked pale and worn, but it was evident from her manner when she greeted me, that she had not the least idea what she had done during the night. Nikola's promise had proved to be true, and for that reason I was more determined than ever to keep my information to myself. Events could not have turned out more fortunately for all parties concerned.

Shortly after breakfast a letter was handed to me, and, glancing at the writing, I saw that it was from Nikola. I was alone at the time of receiving it, a fact for which I was grateful. I will leave you to imagine with what impatience I opened it. It was short, and merely contained a request that I would call at the Palace Revecce before noon that day, if I could spare the hour. I decided to do so, and I reached the palace twenty minutes or so before the appointed time. The old servitor, who by this time had become familiar with my face, opened the door and permitted me to enter. I inquired if Doctor Nikola were at home, and to my surprise was informed that he was not.

"Perhaps your Excellency would like to see the other Senor?" the old man asked, pointing up the stairs.

I was about to decline this invitation with all possible haste, when a voice I recognized as that of the Don greeted me from the gallery above.

"Won't you come up-stairs, Sir Richard?" it said. "I have a letter for you, from my friend, Doctor Nikola!"

I could scarcely believe the evidence of my eyes and ears, and when I reached the room of which I had such terrible recollections, my surprise was intensified rather than lessened. Martinos had undergone a complete metamorphosis. In outward appearance he was no longer the same person, who only the day before had filled me with such terrible repulsions. If such a thing could be believed, he was more like his old self—as I had first seen him.

"Where is Doctor Nikola?" I inquired, when I had looked round the room and noticed the absence of the chemical paraphernalia, the multitude of books, and the general change in it.

"He went away early this morning," the Don replied. "He left a letter for you, and requested me to give it you as soon as you should call. I have much pleasure in doing so now."

I took it and placed it almost mechanically in my pocket.

"Are you aware when he will return?" I asked.

"He will never do so," Martinos replied. "I heard the old man below wailing this morning, because he had lost the best master he had ever had."

"And you?"

"I am ruined, as you know," he said, without any reference to his illness, "but the good doctor has been good enough to place twenty thousand lira to my credit, and I shall go elsewhere and attempt to double it."

He must have been much better, for he smiled in the old deceitful way as he said this. Remembering what I knew of him, I turned from the man in disgust, and bidding him good-day, left the room which I hoped never to see again as long as I might live. In the courtyard I encountered the old caretaker once more.

"So the Senor Nikola has gone away never to return?" I said.

"That is so, Senor," said the old man with a heavy sigh. "He has left me a rich man, but I do not like to think that I shall never see him again."

Sitting down upon the edge of the well I took from my pocket the letter the Don had handed me.

"Farewell, friend Hatteras," it began. "By the time you receive this I shall have left Venice, never more to set foot in it. We shall not meet again. I go to the Fate which claims me, and of which I told you. Think of me sometimes, and, if it be possible, with kindness,

"NIKOLA."

I rose and moved towards the door, placing a gold piece in the old man's hand as I passed him. Then, with a last look at the courtyard, I went down the steps and took my place in the gondola, with a feeling of sadness in my heart for the sad Destiny of the most wonderful man I had ever known.



CHAPTER XIV

Next day, much to Galaghetti's sorrow, we suddenly brought our stay in Venice to a conclusion, and set off for Paris. The Queen of the Adriatic had lost her charm for us, and for once in our lives we were not sorry to say good-bye to her. The train left the station, crossed the bridge to the mainland, and was presently speeding on her way across Europe. Ever since the morning Miss Trevor's spirits had been steadily improving. She seemed to have become her old self in a few hours, and Glenbarth's delight was beautiful to witness. He had been through a good deal, poor fellow, and deserved some recompense for it. We had been upwards of an hour upon our way, when my wife made a curious remark.

"Good gracious!" she said, "in our hurry to get away we have quite forgotten to say good-bye to Doctor Nikola!"

I saw Miss Trevor give a little shudder.

"Do you know," she said, "I had such a curious dream about him last night. I dreamt that I saw him standing in the courtyard of a great building on a mountain-side. He was dressed in a strange sort of yellow gown, not unlike that worn by the Buddhist priests, and was worn almost to a shadow and looked very old. He approached me, and taking my hands, said something that, in the commonplace light of day, doesn't seem to have much sense in it. But I know it affected me very much at the time."

"What was it?" I asked, trying to keep my voice steady.

"It was this," she answered—"Remember that I have forgiven; it is for you to forget." What could he have meant?"

"Since it is only a dream, it is impossible to say," observed my wife, and thus saved me the danger of attempting a solution.

To bring my long narrative to a conclusion I might say that the Duke and Miss Trevor were married last May. They spent their honeymoon yachting to the West Indies. Some one proposed that they should visit Venice; indeed, the Earl of Sellingbourne, who had lately purchased the Palace Revecce, and had furnished it, by the way, from the Tottenham Court Road, placed it at their disposal. From what I have been told I gather that he was somewhat ill-pleased because his offer was not accepted.

When the wind howls round the house at night and the world seems very lonely, I sometimes try to picture a monastery on a mountain-side, and then, in my fancy, I see a yellow-robed, mysterious figure, whose dark, searching eyes look into mine with a light that is no longer of this world. To him I cry—

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