ANNIE VIVANTI

THE DEVOURERS

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Vivanti A.

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Содержание

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PREFACE

There was a man, and he had a canary. He said, "What a dear little canary! I wish it were an eagle." God said to him: "If you give your heart to it to feed on, it will become an eagle." So the man gave his heart to it to feed on. And it became an eagle, and plucked his eyes out.

There was a woman, and she had a kitten. She said: "What a dear little kitten! I wish it were a tiger." God said to her: "If you give your life's blood to it to drink, it will become a tiger." So the woman gave her life's blood to it to drink. And it became a tiger, and tore her to pieces.

There was a man and a woman, and they had a child. They said: "What a dear little child! We wish it were a genius." …

BOOK I

I-I

The baby opened its eyes and said: "I am hungry."

Nothing moved in the silent, shadowy room, and the baby repeated its brief inarticulate cry. There were hurrying footsteps; light arms raised it, and a laughing voice soothed it with senseless, sweet-sounding words. Then its cheek was laid on a cool young breast, and all was tepid tenderness and mild delight. Soon, on the wave of a light-swinging breath, it drooped into sleep again.

Edith Avory had hurried home across the meadow from the children's party at the vicarage, her pendant plaits flying, her straw hat aslant, and now she entered the dining-room of the Grey House fluttered and breathless.

"Have they come?" she asked of Florence, who was laying the cloth for tea.

"Yes, dear," answered the maid.

"Where are they? Where is the baby?" and, without waiting for an answer, the child ran out of the room and helter-skeltered upstairs.

In front of the nursery she stopped. It was her own room, but through the closed door she had heard a weak, shrill cry that plucked at her heart. Slowly she opened the door, then paused on the threshold, startled and disappointed.

Near the window, gazing out across the verdant Hertfordshire fields, sat a large, square-faced woman in pink print, and on her lap, face downward, wrapped in flannel, lay a baby. The nurse was slapping it on the back with quick, regular pats. Edith saw the soles of two little red feet, and at the other end a small, oblong head, covered with soft black hair.

"Oh dear!" said Edith. "Is *that* the baby?"

"Please shut the door, miss," said the nurse.

"I thought babies had yellow hair, with long muslin dresses and blue bows," faltered Edith.

The square-faced nurse did not answer, but continued pat—pat—pat with her large hand on the small round back.

Edith stepped a little nearer. "Why do you do that?" she asked.

The woman looked the little girl up and down before she answered. Then she said, "Wind," and went on patting.

Edith wondered what that meant. Did it refer to the weather? or was it, perhaps, a slangy servant's way of saying, "Leave me alone" or "Hold your tongue"?

"Has the baby's mother come too?" she asked.

"Yes," said the nurse; "and when you go out, will you please shut the door behind you?"

Edith did so.

She heard voices in her mother's room, and looked in. Sitting near her mother on the sofa was a girl dressed in black, with black hair, like the baby's. She was crying bitterly into a small black-edged handkerchief.

"Oh, Edith dear," said her mother, "that's right! Come here. This is your sister Valeria. Kiss her, and tell her not to cry."

"But where is the baby's mother?" said Edith, glad to gain time before kissing the wet, unknown face.

The girl in mourning lifted her eyes, dark and swimming, from the handkerchief. "It is me," she said, with a swift, shining smile, and one of her tears rolled into a dimple and stopped there. "What a dear little girl for my baby to play with!" she added, and kissed Edith on both cheeks.

"That size baby cannot play," said Edith, drying her face with the back of her hand. "And the woman was hitting it!"

"Hitting it!" cried the girl in black, jumping up.

"Hitting it!" cried Edith's mother.

And they both hurried out.

Edith, left alone, looked round the familiar room. On her mother's bed lay a little flannel blanket like the one the baby was wearing, and a baby's cap, and some knitted socks, and a rubber rattle. On a chair was a black jacket and a hat trimmed with crape and dull black cherries. Edith squeezed one of the cherries, which broke stickily. Then she went to the looking-glass and tried the hat on. Her long small face looked back at her gravely under the caliginous head-dress, as she shook her head from side to side, to make it totter and tilt. "When I am a widow I shall wear a thing like this," she said to herself, and then dropped it from her head upon the chair. She quickly squeezed another cherry, and went out to look at the baby.

It was in the nursery in its grandmother's arms, being danced up and down; its fist was in its mouth, and its large eyes stared at nothing. Its mother, the girl in black, was on her knees before it, clapping her hands and saying: "Cara! Cara! Cara! Bella! Bella! Bella!" Wilson, the nurse, with her back to them, was emptying Edith's chest of drawers, and putting all Edith's things neatly folded upon the table, ready to be taken to a little room upstairs that was henceforth to be hers. For the baby needed Edith's room.

The little girl soon tired of looking, and went down to the garden. Passing the verandah, she could hear the gardener laughing and talking with Florence. He was saying:

"Now, of course, Miss Edith's nose is quite put out of joint."

Florence said: "I'm afraid so, poor lamb!"

Edith ran to the shrubbery, and put her hand to her nose. It did not hurt her; it felt much the same as usual. Still, she was anxious and vaguely disturbed. "I must tell the Brown boy," she said, and went to the kitchen-garden to look for him.

There he was, on his knees, patting mould round the strawberry-plants; a good deal of earth was on his face and in his rusty hair.

"Good-evening," said Edith, stopping near him, with her hands behind her.

"Hullo!" said the gardener's boy, looking up.

"They've come," said Edith.

"Have they?" and Jim Brown sat back on his heels and cleaned his fingers on his trousers.

"The baby is black," said Edith.

"Sakes alive!" said Jim, opening large light eyes that seemed to have dropped into his face by mistake.

"It has got black hair," continued Edith, "and a red face."

"Oh, Miss Edith, you are a goose!" said the Brown boy. "That's all right. I thought you meant it was all black, because of its mother being a foreigner."

Edith shook her head. "It's not all right. Babies should have golden hair."

"What is the mother like?" asked Jim.

"She's black, too; and the nurse is horrid. And what is the matter with my nose?"

"Eh?" said Jim Brown.

"Yes. Look at my nose. What's wrong with it?"

The Brown boy looked at it. Then he looked closer. Little by little an expression of horror came over his face. "Oh!" he exclaimed. "Oh my! Just think of it!"

"What? What is it?" cried Edith. "It was all right just now." And as the boy kept staring at her nose with growing amazement, she screamed: "Tell me what it is! Tell me, or I'll hit you!"

Then the Brown boy got up and danced round her in a frenzy of horror at what was the matter with her nose; so she took a small stone and threw it at him. Whereupon he went back to his strawberry-plants, and declined to speak to her any more.

When he saw her walking forlornly away with her hand to her nose, and her two plaits dangling despondently behind, he felt sorry, and called her back.

"I was only larking, Miss Edith. Your nose is all right." So she was comforted, and sat down on the grass to talk to him.

"Valeria speaks Italian to the baby, and they have come to stay always," she said. "The baby is going to have my room, and I am going to be upstairs near Florence. We are all going to dress in black, because of my brother Tom having died. And mamma has been crying about it for the last four days. And that baby is my niece."

"Your brother, Master Tom, was the favourite with them all, wasn't he?" said Jim.

"Oh, yes," said Edith. "There were so many of us that, of course, the middle ones were liked best."

"I don't quite see that," said Jim.

"Oh, well," explained Edith, "I suppose they were tired of the old ones, and did not want the new ones, so that's why. Anyhow," she added, "it doesn't matter. They're all dead now."

Then she helped him with the strawberry-plants until it was time for tea.

Her grandfather came to call her in—a tall, stately figure, shuffling slowly down the gravel path. Edith ran to meet him, and put her warm fingers into his cool, shrivelled hand. Together they walked towards the house.

"Have you seen them, grandpapa?" she asked, curvetting round him, as he proceeded at gentle pace across the lawn.

"Seen whom, my dear?" asked the old gentleman.

"Valeria and the baby."

"What baby?" said the grandfather, stopping to rest and listen.

"Why, Tom's baby, grandpapa," said Edith. "You know—the baby of Tom who is dead. It has come to stay here with its mother and nurse. Her name is Wilson."

"Dear me!" said the grandfather, and walked on a few steps.

Then he paused again. "So Tom is dead."

"Oh, you knew that long ago. I told you so."

"So you did," said the old gentleman. He took off his skullcap, and passed his hand over his soft white hair. "Which Tom is that—my son Tom or his son Tom?"

"Both Toms," said Edith. "They're both dead. One died four days ago, and the other died six years ago, and you oughtn't to mix them up like that. One was my papa and your son, and the other was his son and the baby's papa. Now don't forget that again."

"No, my dear," said the grandfather. Then, after a while: "And you say his name is Wilson?"

"Whose name?" exclaimed Edith.

"Why, my dear, how should I know?" said the grandfather.

Then Edith laughed, and the old gentleman laughed with her.

"Never mind," said Edith. "Come in and see the baby—your son Tom's son's baby."

"Your son's Tom's sons," murmured the grandfather, stopping again to think. "Tom's sons your son's Tom's sons … Where do I put in the baby?"

Edith awoke in the middle of the night, listening and alert. "What is that?" she said, sitting up in bed.

Florence's voice came from the adjoining room: "Go to sleep, my lamb. It's only the baby."

"Why does it scream like that?"

"It must have got turned round like," explained Florence sleepily.

"Then why don't they turn it straight again?" asked Edith.

"Oh, Miss Edith," replied Florence impatiently, "do go to sleep. When a baby gets 'turned round,' it means that it sleeps all day and screams all night."

And so it did.

II

A gentle blue February was slipping out when March tore in with screaming winds and rushing rains. He pushed the diffident greenness back, and went whistling rudely across the lands. The chilly drenched season stood still. One morning Spring peeped round the corner and dropped a crocus or two and a primrose or two. She whisked off again, with the wind after her, but looked in later between two showers. And suddenly, one day, there she was, enthroned and garlanded. Frost-spangles melted at her feet, and the larks rose.

Valeria borrowed Edith's garden-hat, tied it under her chin with a black ribbon, and went out into the young sunshine across the fields. Around her was the gloss of recent green, pushing upwards to the immature blue of the sky. And Tom, her husband, was dead.

Tom lay in the dark, away from it all, under it all, in the distant little cemetery of Nervi, where the sea that he loved shone and danced within a stone's-throw of his folded hands.

Tom's folded hands! That was all she could see of him when she closed her eyes and tried to recall him. She could not remember his face. Try as she would, shutting her eyes with concentrated will, the well-known features wavered and slipped away; and nothing remained before her but those dull white hands as she had seen them last—terrible, unapproachable hands!

Were those the hands Tom was so particular about and rather vain of—the hands she had patted and laid her cheek against? Were those hands—fixed, cessated, all-relinquishing—the hands that had painted the Italian landscapes she loved, and the other pictures she hated, because in them all stood Carlotta of Trastevere, rippling-haired, bare, and deliberate? Were those the hands that had rowed her and Uncle Giacomo in the little boat *Luisa* on the Lake Maggiore?—the hands that had grasped hers suddenly at the Madonna del Monte the day she had put on her light blue dress, with the sailor collar and scarlet tie? She seemed to hear him say, with his droll English accent: "Volete essere sposina mia?" And she had laughed and answered him in the only two English words she knew, and which he himself had taught her across the table d'hôte: "Please! Thank you!" Then they had both laughed, until Zio Giacomo had said that the Madonna would punish them.

The Madonna had punished them. She had struck him down in his twenty-sixth year, a few months after they were married, shattering his youth like a bubble of glass. Valeria had heard him, day after day, night after night, coughing his life away in little hard coughs and clearings of his throat; then in racking paroxysms that left him breathless and spent; then in a loose, easy cough that he scarcely noticed. They had gone from Florence, where it was too windy, to Nervi, where it was too hot; from Nice, where it was too noisy, to Airolo, where it was too dull; then, with a rush of hope, with hurried packing of coats and shawls, of paint brushes and colours, of skates and snowshoes, they had journeyed up to Davos. And there the sun shone, and the baby was born; and Tom Avory went skating and bob-sleighing, and gained six pounds in eight weeks.

Then one day an American woman, whose son was dying, said to Valeria: "It is bad for your baby to stay up here. Send her away, or when she is fifteen she will start coughing too."

"Send her away!" Yes, the baby must be sent away. The deadly swarm of germs from all the stricken lungs seemed to Valeria to envelope her and her child like a cloud—the cloud of death. She could feel it, see it, taste it. The smell of it was on her pillow at night; the sheets and blankets exhaled it; her food was impregnated with it. She herself was full-grown, and strong and sound; but her baby—her fragile, rose-bud baby—was Tom's child, too! All Tom's brothers and sisters, except one little girl called Edith, who was in England, had died in their adolescence—one in Bournemouth; one in Torquay; one in Cannes; one, Tom's favourite sister, Sally, in Nervi—all fleeing from the death they carried within them. Now Davos had saved Tom. But the baby must be sent away.

They consulted three doctors. One said there was no hurry; another said there was no danger; the third said there was no knowing.

Valeria and Tom determined that they would not take risks. One snowy day they travelled down to Landquart. There Tom was to leave them and return to Davos. But the baby was crying, and Valeria was crying; so Tom jumped into the train after them, and said he would see them as far as Zürich, where Uncle Giacomo would be waiting to take them to Italy.

"Then you will be all right, helpless ones," he said, putting his arm round them both, as the little train carried them down towards the mists. And he gave his baby-girl a finger to clutch.

But Tom never reached Zürich. What reached Zürich was stern and awful, with limp, falling limbs and blood-stained mouth. The baby cried, and Valeria cried, and crowds and officials gathered round them. But Tom could help his helpless ones no more.

His will was found in his breast-pocket. "Sposina mia, with all my worldly goods I thee endow. Take our baby to England. Bury me in Nervi, near Sally. I have been very happy.—Tom."

These things Valeria Avory remembered as she walked in the soft English sunshine, crying under Edith's garden-hat. When she reached a little bridge across an angry stream, she leaned over the parapet to look at the water, and the borrowed hat fell off and floated away.

Valeria ran down the bank after it, but it was in midstream, resting lightly against a protruding stone. She threw sticks and pebbles at it, and it moved off and sailed on, with one black ribbon, like a thin arm, stretched behind it. Valeria ran along the sloping bank, sliding on slippery grass and wet stones; and the hat quivered and curtseyed away buoyantly on the miniature waves. When the stream elbowed off towards the wood, the hat bobbed along with it, and so did Valeria. As she and the stream and the hat turned the corner, she heard an exclamation of surprise, and, raising her flushed face, she saw a young man, in grey tweeds, fishing on the other side of the water.

The young man said: "Hang it all! Good-bye, trout!" And Valeria said: "Can you catch my hat?"

He caught it with great difficulty, holding it with the thick end of his rod, and flattering it towards him with patient manœuvres.

"My trout!" he murmured. "I had been after that fat fellow for three days." Then he dragged the large splashing hat out of the water and held it up. "Here's your hat." It had never been a beautiful hat; it was a dreary-looking thing that Edith had had much wear out of. It had not the appearance of a hat worth fishing three days for.

"Oh, thank you so much! How shall I reach it?" said Valeria, extending a small muddy hand from her side of the stream.

"I suppose I must bring it across," said the young man, still holding the dripping adornment at arm's length.

"Oh no!" said Valeria. "Throw it."

The young man laughed, and said: "Don't try to catch! It will give you a cold." He flung the hat across, and it fell flat and sodden at Valeria's feet.

"Oh dear!" she said, picking it up, with puckered brows, while the black tulle ruffles fell from it, soft and soaking. "What shall I do with it now? I can't put it on. And I don't think I can carry it, walking along these slippery banks."

"Well, throw it back again," said the young man, "and I'll carry it for you."

So she threw the heavy melancholy thing at him, and they walked along, with the water between them, smiling at each other. On the bridge they met, and shook hands.

"I am sorry about your fishes," she said.

"My fishes?" He laughed. "Oh, never mind them. I am sorry about your hat." Then, noting the damp ringlets on her forehead and the dimple in her cheek, he added: "What will you put on when you come to-morrow?"

"To-morrow?" she asked, raising simple eyes.

"Yes; will you?" he said, blushing a little, for he was very young. "At this time"—he looked at his watch—"about eleven o'clock?"

Valeria blushed, too—a sudden crimson flush that left her face white and waxen. "Is it eleven o'clock?" she exclaimed. "Are you sure?"

"Yes; what is the matter?"

"The baby!" gasped Valeria. "I had forgotten the baby!" And she turned and ran down the bridge and across the fields, her black gown flying, the wet hat flapping at her side.

She reached home breathless. The nurse was on the verandah, waiting. "Am I late, Wilson?" she panted.

"Yes, madam," said the nurse, with tight and acid lips.

"How is baby?" gasped Valeria.

"The baby," said the woman, gazing at her, sphinx-like and severe, "is hungry."

III

The young man went to fish in the little stream every day, but he only caught his fat trout. The dimpled girl in mourning did not come again. His holiday was ended, and he returned to his rooms in London, but he left a love-letter for Valeria on the bank, pinned to the crumpled black ruffle that had fallen off her hat, and with a stone on it to keep it down.

Valeria found the love-letter. She had stayed indoors a week, repenting. Then Spring and her youth joined hands, and drew her out of doors and across the fields again. She went, blushing and faltering, with a bunch of violets pinned at her belt. No one saw her but a tail-flicking, windy-haired pony in a meadow, who frisked suddenly after her and made her shiver.

Close to the stream her eye caught the tattered black ruffle and the note pinned to it. The young man wrote that his name was Frederick Allen; that he was reading for the Bar and writing for newspapers. He said that she had haunting eyes, and that they would probably never meet again. He wondered whether she had found the baby, and where she had forgotten it, and what baby it was. And she *might* have turned round just once to wave him farewell! He hoped she would not be displeased if he said that he loved her, and would never forget her. Would she tell him her name? Only her name! Please, please! He was hers in utter devotion, Frederick.

Valeria went back in a dream and looked up the word "haunting" in her English-Italian Dictionary. She did not remember his eyes: they were blue, she thought, or perhaps brown. But his face was clear and sunburnt, and his smooth-parted hair was bright when he took off his hat on the bridge.

She thought she would simply return his letter. Then she decided that she would add a few words of rebuke. Finally one rainy day, when everybody had seemed cross, and Edith had answered rudely, and the baby had screamed for Wilson who was not there, Valeria, with qualms and twinges, took a sheet of paper and wrote her name on it. The paper had a black border. Valeria suddenly fell on her knees and kissed the black border, and prayed that Tom might forgive her. Then she burned it, and went to her baby, who was quarrelling with everything and trying to kill an India-rubber sheep.

Yet one day in April—an April swooning with soft suggestions, urging its own evanescence and the fleeting sweetness of life—Mr. Frederick Allen, in his London lodgings, received two letters instead of one. Hannah, the pert maid who brought them to his room, lingered while he opened them. In the first was a cheque for six guineas from a periodical; in the other was a visiting-card:

VALERIA NINA AVORY.

"Who the dickens …?" he said, turning the card over. "Here!" and he threw it across to Hannah. "Here's a French modiste, or something, if you want falals!"

Then, as he had received six guineas when he had only expected four, he shut up his law-book, pinched Hannah's cheek en *passant*, and went out for a day up the river with the man next door.

The card was thrown into the coal-box, and the kitchen-maid burnt it. And that is all.

April brought the baby a tooth.

May brought it another tooth, and gave a wave to its hair. June took away its bibs, and gave it a smile with a dimple copied from Valeria's. July brought it short lace frocks and a word or two. August stood it upright and exultant, with its back to the wall; and September sent it tottering and trilling into its mother's arms.

Its name was Giovanna Desiderata Felicita.

"I cannot remember that," said the grandfather. "Call him Tom."

"But, grandpapa, it is a girl," said Edith.

"I know, my dear. You have told me so before," said the old gentleman testily. He had become very irritable since there had been so much noise in the house.

"Well, what girl's name can you remember?" asked Mrs. Avory, patting her old father's hand, and frowning at her daughter, Edith.

"None—none at all," said the old man.

"Come now, come now, dear!" said Mrs. Avory. "Can you remember Annie, or Mary?"

"No, I cannot," said her father.

Then Edith suggested "Jane," and Valeria "Camilla." And Florence, who was laying the cloth, said: "Try him with 'Nellie' or 'Katy.'" But the old gentleman peevishly refused to remember any of those names.

And for months he called the baby Tom.

One day at dinner he said: "Where is Nancy?"

Mrs. Avory and Edith glanced at each other, and Valeria looked up in surprise.

"Where is Nancy?" repeated the grandfather impatiently.

Mrs. Avory coughed. Then she laid her hand gently on his sleeve. "Nancy is in heaven," she said softly.

"What!" cried the old gentleman, throwing down his table-napkin and glaring round the table.

"Your dear little daughter Nancy died many, many years ago," said Mrs. Avory.

The old gentleman rose. "It is not true!" he said with shaking voice. "She was here this morning. I saw her." Then his lips trembled, and he began to cry.

Valeria suddenly started up and ran from the room. In a moment she was back again, with her baby in its pink nightdress, kicking and crowing in her arms.

"Here's Nancy!" she said, with a little break in her voice.

"Why, of course!" cried Edith, clapping her hands. "Don't cry, grandpapa. Here's Nancy."

"Yes," said Mrs. Avory. "See, father dear, here's Nancy!"

The old man looked up, and his dim blue eyes met and held the sparkling eyes of the child. Long and deeply he looked into the limpid depths that returned his unwavering gaze.

"Yes, here's Nancy," said the old man.

So the baby was Nancy ever after.

IV

When Nancy had three candles round her birthday-cake, and was pulling crackers with her eyes shut, and her mother's hands pressed tightly over her ears, Edith put her elbows on the table, and said:

"What is Nancy going to be?"

"Good," answered Nancy quickly—"veddy good. Another cwacker."

So she got another cracker, and Edith repeated her question.

Mrs. Avory said: "What do you mean?"

"Well," said Edith, whose two plaits had melted into one, with a large black bow fastened irrelevantly to the wrong end of it, "you don't want her to be just a girl, do you?"

Valeria blushed, and said: "I have often thought I should like her to be a genius."

Edith nodded approval, and Mrs. Avory looked dubiously at the little figure, now discreetly dragging the tablecloth down in an attempt to reach the crackers. Nancy noted the soft look, and sidled round to her grandmother.

"Hold my ears," she said, "and give me a cwacker."

Mrs. Avory patted the small head, and smoothed out the blue ribbon that tied up the tuft of black curls.

"Why do you want me to hold your ears?"

"Because I am afwaid of the cwackers."

"Then why do you want the crackers?"

"Because I like them."

"But why do you like them?"

"Because I am afwaid of them!" and Nancy smiled bewitchingly.

Everybody found this an astonishingly profound reply, and the question of Nancy's genius recurred constantly in the conversation.

Edith said: "Of course, it will be painting. Her father, poor dear Tom, was such a wonderful landscape-painter. And I believe he did some splendid figures, too."

Mrs. Avory concurred; but Valeria shook her head and changed colour. "Oh, I hope not!" she said, instant tears gathering in her eyes.

Mrs. Avory looked hurt. "Why not, Valeria?" she said.

"Oh, the smell," sobbed Valeria; "and the models … and I could not bear it. Oh, my Tom—my dear Tom!" And she sobbed convulsively, with her head on Mrs. Avory's shoulder, and with Edith's arm round her.

Nancy screamed loud, and had to be taken away to the nursery, where Fräulein Müller, the German successor of Wilson, shook her.

"Could it not be music?" said Valeria, after a while, drying her eyes dejectedly. "My mother was a great musician; she played the harp, and composed lovely songs. When she died, and I went to live in Milan with Uncle Giacomo, I used to play all Chopin's mazurkas and impromptus to him, although he said he hated music if anyone else played.... And, then, when I married …"—Valeria's sobs burst forth again—"dear Tom … said …"

Edith intervened quickly. "I certainly think it ought to be music;" and she kissed Valeria's hot face. "The kiddy sings 'Onward, Christian Soldiers,' and 'Schlaf, Kindchen' in perfect tune. Fräulein was telling me so, and said how remarkable it was."

So Nancy was sent for again, and was brought in by Fräulein, who had a scratch on her cheek.

Nancy was told to sing, "Schlaf, Kindchen, schlaf, da draussen steht ein Schaf," and she did so with very bad grace and not much voice. But loud and servile applause from everyone, including Fräulein, gratified her, and she volunteered her entire repertoire, comprising "There'll be razors a-

flyin' in the air," which she had learned incidentally from the attractive and supercilious gardener's boy, Jim Brown.

So it was decided that Nancy should be a great musician, and a piano with a small keyboard was obtained for her at once. A number of books on theory and harmony were bought, and Edith said Valeria was to read them carefully, and to teach Nancy without letting her notice it. But Nancy noticed it. And at last she used to cry and stamp her feet as soon as she saw her mother come into the room.

Fräulein, with much diplomacy, and according to a German book on education, taught her her notes and her alphabet at the same time; but the result was confusion. Nancy insisted on spelling words at the piano, and could find no "o" for dog, and no "t" for cat, and no anything; while the Italian Valeria added obscurity and bewilderment by calling "d" *re*, and "g" *sol*, and "b" *c*. Nancy became sour and suspicious. In everything that was said to her she scented a trap for the conveying of musical knowledge, and she trusted no one, and would speak to no one but Jim Brown and the grandfather.

At last she lit upon a device that afflicted and horrified her tormentors. One day, when her mother was drawing little men, that turned out to be semibreves, Nancy, speechless with anger, put her hand to her soft hair, and dragged out a handful of it. Valeria gave a cry; she opened the little fist, and saw the soft black fluff lying there.

"Oh, baby, baby! how could you!" she cried. "What a dreadful thing! How can you grieve your poor mother so!"

That ended the musical education. Every time that a note lifted its black head over Nancy's horizon, up went her hand, and she pulled out a tuft of her hair. Then she opened her fist and showed it. Books on harmony were put away; the piano was locked. No more Beethoven or Schumann was sung to her in the guise of lullabies by Fräulein at night; but her old friend, "Baby Bunting," returned, and accompanied her, as of old, when she sailed down the stream of sleep, afloat on the darkness.

"Bye, Baby Bunting,
Father's gone a-hunting,
To shoot a rabbit for its skin,
To wrap little Baby Bunting in."

… Nancy sat on the grass, nursing her doll, and watching three small rampant feathers on Fräulein Müller's hat, nodding, like little plumes on a hearse, in time with something she was reading.

"What are you reading?" asked Nancy.

Fräulein Müller went on nodding, and read aloud: "'Shine out, little het, sunning over with gurls.'"

"What?" said Nancy.

"'Shine out, little het, sunning over with gurls,'" repeated Fräulein Müller.

"What does mean 'sunning over with girls'?" cried Nancy, frowning.

"Gurls, gurls—hair-gurls!" explained Fräulein.

"*Curls!* Are you sure it is curls?" said Nancy, dropping her doll in the grass, and folding her hands. "Read it again. Slowly."

"'Shine out, little het,'" repeated Fräulein. And Nancy said it after her. "'Shine out, little head, shine out, little head … sunning over with curls.'"

Then she said to her governess: "Say that over and over and over again, until I tell you not to;" and she shut her eyes.

"Aber warum?" asked Fräulein Müller.

Nancy did not open her eyes nor answer.

"Komische Kleine," said Fräulein; and added, in order to practise her English, "Comic small!" Then she did as she was told.

That night Nancy quarrelled with "Baby Bunting." She sat up in bed with flushed cheeks and small, tight fists, and said to Fräulein Müller: "Do not tell me that any more."

Fräulein, who had been droning on in the dusk over her knitting, and thinking that at this hour in Düsseldorf her sister and mother were eating *belegte Brödchen*, looked up in surprise.

"What it is, mein Liebchen?"

"Do not tell me any more about that rabbit. I cannot hear about him any more. You keep on —you keep on till I am ill."

Fräulein Müller was much troubled in suggesting other songs. She tried one or two with scant success.

Nancy sat up again. "All those silly words tease me. Sing without saying them."

So Fräulein hummed uncertain tunes with her lips closed, and she was just drifting into Beethoven, when Nancy sat up once more:

"Oh, don't do that!" she said. "Say words without those silly noises. Say pretty words until I go to sleep."

So Fräulein, after she had tried all the words she could think of, took Lenau's poems from her own bookshelf, and read Nancy to sleep. On the following evenings she read the "Waldlieder," and then "Mischka," until it was finished. Then she started Uhland; and after Uhland, Körner, and Freiligrath, and Lessing.

Who knows what Nancy heard? Who knows what visions and fancies she took with her to her dreams? In the little sleep-boat where Baby Bunting used to be with her, now sat a row of German poets, long of hair, wild of eye, fulgent of epithet. Night after night, for months and years, little Nancy drifted off to her slumber with lyric and lay, with ode and epic, lulled by cadenced rhythm and resonant rhyme. On one of these nights the poets cast a spell over her. They rowed her little boat out so far that it never quite touched shore again.

And Nancy never quite awoke from her dreams.

V

In Milan the cross-grained old architect, Giacomo Tirindelli, Valeria's "Zio Giacomo," stout of figure and short of leg, got up in the middle of the night and went to his son Antonio's room.

The room was empty. He had expected this, but he was none the less incensed. He went to the window and threw the shutters open. Milan slept. Silent and deserted, Via Principe Amedeo lay at his feet. Every alternate lamp already extinguished showed that it was past twelve o'clock; and a dreary cat wandered across the road, making the street emptier for its presence.

Zio Giacomo closed the window, and walked angrily up and down his son's room. On the walls, on the mantelpiece, on the desk, were photographs—Nunziata Villari as Theodora, in stiff regal robes; Nunziata Villari as Cleopatra, clad in jewels; Nunziata Villari as Marguerite Gautier, in her nightdress, or so it appeared to Zio Giacomo's angry eyes; Villari as Norah; Villari as Sappho; Villari as Francesca. Then, in a corner, in an old frame, the portrait of a little girl: *"My Cousin Valeria, twelve years old."* Zio Giacomo stopped with a short angry sigh before the picture of his favourite niece, whom he had hoped one day to call his daughter. "Foolish girl," he grumbled, "to marry that idiotic Englishman instead of my stupid, disobedient son–" Then another profile of Nunziata Villari caught his eye, and then again Nunziata Villari, all hair and smile.... Zio Giacomo had time to learn the strange, strong face by heart before he heard the street-door fall to, and his son's footsteps on the stairs.

Antonio, who from the street had seen the light in his room, entered with a cheerful smile. "Well, father," he said, "why are you not asleep?" He received the inevitable counter-question with a little Latin gesture of both hands (the gesture that Theodora specially liked!). "Well, father dear, I am twenty-three, and you are—you are not;" and he patted his father's small shoulder and laughed (his best laugh—the laugh that Cleopatra could not resist).

"Jeune homme qui veille, vieillard qui dort, sont tous deux près de la mort," quoted his father, in deep stern tones.

"Eh! father mine, if life is to be short, let it be pleasant," said Antonio, lighting a cigarette.

Giacomo sat very straight; his dressing-gown was tight, and his feet were chilly. His good-looking, good-tempered son irritated him.

"Are you not ashamed?" he said, pointing a dramatic forefinger at the row of portraits. "She is an old woman of fifty!"

"Thirty-eight," said Antonio, seating himself in the armchair.

"An actress! a masquerading mountebank, whom every porter with a franc in his pocket can see when he will; a creature whose husband has run away from her to the ends of the earth–"

"To South America," interpolated Antonio.

–"With the cook." And Zio Giacomo snorted with indignation.

"I am afraid her cooking *is* bad," said Antonio; and he blew rings of smoke and puckered up his young red mouth in the way that made Phædra flutter and droop her passion-shaded lids.

"I have enough of it," said his father, "and we leave for England to-morrow."

"For England? To-morrow?" Antonio started up. "You don't mean it! You can't mean it, father! Why to England?"

"I telegraphed yesterday to Hertfordshire. I told your cousin Valeria we should come to see them; and she has answered that she is delighted, and her mother is delighted, and everybody is delighted." Zio Giacomo nodded a stubborn head. "We shall stay in England three months, six months, until you have recovered from your folly."

"Ah! because of Cousin Valeria. I see!" and Antonio laughed. "Oh, father, father! you dear old dreamer! Are you at the old dream again? It cannot be, believe me; it was a foolish idea of yours

years ago. Valeria was all eyes for her Englishman then, and is probably all tears for him now. Stay here and be comfortable, father!"

But his father would not stay there, and he would not be comfortable. He went away shaking his head, and losing his slipper on the way, and dropping candle-grease all over the carpet in stooping to pick it up. A sore and angry Zio Giacomo got into bed, and tried to read the *Secolo*, and listened to hear if the street-door banged again.

It banged again.

One o'clock struck as Antonio turned down Via Monte Napoleone, and when he rang the bell at No. 36, the *portinaio* kept him waiting ten minutes. Then Marietta, the maid, kept him waiting fifteen minutes on the landing before she opened the door; and then the Signora kept him waiting fifteen eternities until she appeared, white-faced and frightened, draped in white satin, with her hair bundled up anyhow—or nearly anyhow—on the top of her head.

Antonio took both her hands and kissed them, and pressed them to his eyes, and told her he was leaving to-morrow—no, to-day—to-day! In a few hours! For ever! For England! And what would she do? She would be false! She would betray him! She was infamous! He knew it! And would she die with him now?

She gave the little Tosca scream, and turned from him with the second act "Dame aux Camelias" shiver, and stepped back like Fedora, and finally flung herself, like Francesca, upon his breast. Then she whispered five words to him, and sent him home.

She called Marietta, who loosened her hair again, and plaited it, and put away what was not wanted, and gave her the lanoline; and she greased her face and went to bed like Nunziata Villari, aged thirty-eight.

But Antonio went through the nocturnal streets, repeating the five words: "London. In May. Twelve performances." And this was March.

Enough! He would live through it somehow. "Aber fragt mich nur nicht wie," he said to himself, for he knew enough German to quote Heine's "Buch der Lieder," and he had read "Die Jungfrau von Orleans" in the original, in order to discuss it with La Villari.

La Villari liked to discuss her rôles with him. She also practised her attitudes and tried her gestures on him without his knowing it. He always responded, as a violin that one holds in one's hand thrills and responds when another violin is played. When she was studying Giovanna d'Arco, he felt that he was le Chevalier Bayard, and he dreamed of an heroic life and an epic death. When she was preparing herself for the rôle of Clelia, and practising the attitudes of that famous adventuress, he became a sceptic and a *noceur*, and gave Zio Giacomo qualms for three weeks by keeping late hours and gambling all night at the Patriottica. When she took up the rôle of Messalina, and for purposes of practice assumed Messalina attitudes and expounded Messalina views, he drifted into a period of extreme demoralization, and became perverted and blasphemous. But during the six weeks in which she arrayed her mind in the candid lines of La Samaritana, he became once more spiritual and pure: he gave up the Patriottica and the Café Biffi, and went to early Mass every morning.

"You funny boy!" said Villari to him one day. "You will do foolish things in your life. Why don't you work?"

"I don't know," said Antonio. "I am in the wrong set, I suppose. And, besides, there is no time. After a canter on the Bastioni in the morning, it is lunch-time; and after luncheon one reads or goes out; and then it is visiting-time—the Marchesa Adda expects one every Monday, and the Della Rocca every Tuesday, and somebody else every Wednesday.... Then it is dinner-time and theatre-time and bed-time. And there you are!"

"It is a pity," said La Villari, kindly maternal, forgetting to be Messalina, or Giovanna, or anyone else. "You have no character. You are nice; you are good to look at; you are not stupid. But your nose is, as one would say, a nose of putty—yes, of putty! And anyone can twist it here and there.

Take care! You will suffer much, or you will make other people suffer. Noses of putty," she added thoughtfully, "are fountains of grief."

Zio Giacomo was one whose nose was not of putty. Much as he hated journeys, many as were the things that he always lost on them, sorely as his presence was needed in his office, where the drawings for a new town hall were lying in expectant heaps on his desk, he had made up his mind to start for England, and start they should. He packed off his motherless daughter, the tall and flippant Clarissa, to a convent school in Paris, bade good-bye to his sister Carlotta and to his niece Adèle, and scrambled wrathfully into the train for Chiasso, followed by the unruffled Antonio.

Antonio seemed to enjoy the trip; and soon Zio Giacomo found himself wondering why they had taken it. Was the tale that his niece Adèle had told him about Antonio's infatuation for the actress all foolish nonsense? Adèle was always exaggerating.

Zio Giacomo watched his son with growing anger. Antonio was cheerful and debonair. Antonio slept when his father was awake; Antonio ate when his father was sick. By the time they reached Dover Giacomo, who knew no word of English but *rosbif* and the *Times*, was utterly broken. But Antonio twisted up his young moustache, and ran his fingers through his tight black curls, and made long eyes at the English girls, who smiled, and then passed hurriedly, pretending they had not seen him.

VI

At Charing Cross to meet them were Valeria and Edith—both charming, small-waisted, and self-conscious. Valeria flung herself with Latin demonstrativeness into her old uncle's arms, while Edith tried not to be ashamed of the noise the Italian new-comers made and of the attention they attracted. When, later, they were all four in the train on their way to Wareside, she gave herself up entirely to the rapture of watching Uncle Giacomo's gestures and Cousin Antonio's eyes. Cousin Antonio, whom Valeria addressed as Nino, spoke to her in what he called "banana-English," and was so amusing that she laughed until she coughed, and coughed until she cried; and then they all said they would not laugh any more. And altogether it was a delightful journey.

When they alighted at the peaceful country station, there was Mrs. Avory and little Nancy and the grandfather awaiting them; and there were more greetings and more noise. And when the carriage reached the Grey House, Fräulein stood at the door step, all blushes and confusion, with a little talcum-powder sketchily distributed over her face, and her newly-refreshed Italian vocabulary issuing jerkily from her.

They were a very cheerful party at tea; everybody spoke at once, even the old grandfather, who kept on inquiring, "Who are they—who are they?"—addressing himself chiefly to Zio Giacomo—at intervals during the entire afternoon. Towards evening Nancy became excited and unmanageable, and Mrs. Avory went to bed with a headache. But Fräulein entertained Zio Giacomo, and Nino sat at the piano and sang Neapolitan songs to Valeria and Edith, who listened, sitting on one stool, with arms interlaced.

Then followed days of tennis and croquet, of picnics and teas with the Vicar's pretty daughters and the Squire's awkward sons. Mrs. Avory had only brief glimpses of Valeria and Edith darting indoors and out again; running up to their rooms to change their skirts; calling through the house for their racquets. Zio Giacomo walked about the garden, giving advice to Fräulein about the cultivation of tomatoes, and wondering why English people never ate macaroni.

"Nor *Knodel*," said Fräulein.

"Nor *risotto*," said Zio Giacomo.

"Nor *Leberwurst*," said Fräulein.

"Nor *cappelletti al sugo*," said Zio Giacomo.

"It is so as with the etucation," said Fräulein. "The etucation is again already quite wrong; not only the eating and the cooking of the foot...." And so they rambled along. And Zio Giacomo was homesick.

Suddenly Valeria was homesick too. It began on the first day of the tennis tournament—a resplendent light-blue day. Nino said that the sky matched Edith's dress and also her eyes, which reminded him of Lake Como. Their partnership was very successful; Edith, airy and swift, darted and flashed across the court, playing almost impossible balls. In the evening, as she lay back in the rocking-chair, pale and sweet, with her shimmering hair about her, Nino called her a tired butterfly, and sang "La Farfalla" to her. Valeria was miserable. She said it was homesickness. She felt that she was homesick for the sun of Italy and the language of Italy; homesick for people with loud voices and easy gesticulations and excitable temperaments; homesick for people with dark eyes and dark hair.

On the second day of the tournament, at tea on the Vicar's lawn, she became still more homesick. Her partner was offering her cress-sandwiches, and telling her that it was very warm for April, and that last year in April it had been much colder. Meanwhile, she could see Nino at the other side of the lawn tuning a guitar that had been brought to him; he was laughing and playing chords on it with his teaspoon. Edith and two other girls stood near him; their three fair heads shone in the sunlight. Suddenly Valeria felt as if she could not breathe in England any more. She said to herself that it must be the well-bred voices, the conversation about the weather, the trimness, the tidiness, the

tea, the tennis, that were insufferable to her chagrined heart. Meanwhile her dark eyes rested upon Nino and upon the three blonde heads, inclined towards him, and glistening in different sheens of gold. She felt hot tears pricking her eyes.

That evening in her room, as they were preparing for bed, Edith talked to her sister-in-law through the open door. "What fun everything is, Val, isn't it?" she said, shaking out her light locks, and brushing them until they crackled and flew, and stood out like pale fire round her face. "Life is a delightful institution!"

As no answer came from Valeria's room, Edith looked in. Valeria was lying on her bed, still in her pink evening dress, with her face hidden in the pillow.

"Why? What has happened, dear?" asked Edith, bending over the dark bowed head.

"Oh, I hate everything!" murmured Valeria. "That horrid tennis, and those horrid girls, always laughing, always laughing, always laughing."

Edith sat down beside her. "But we laughed, too—at least, I know *I* did! And as for Nino, he laughed all the time."

"That is it," cried Valeria, sitting up, tearful and indignant. "In Italy Nino never laughed. In Italy we do not laugh for nothing, just to show our teeth and pretend we are vivacious."

Edith was astonished. She sat for a long while looking at Valeria's disconsolate figure, and thinking matters over. Quite suddenly she bent down and kissed Valeria, and said: "Don't cry." So Valeria, who had left off crying, began to cry again. And still more she cried when she raised her head and saw Edith's shower of scintillant hair, and the two little Lakes of Como brimming over with limpid tears. They kissed each other, and called themselves silly and goose-like; and then they laughed and kissed each other again, and went to bed.

Valeria fell asleep.

But Edith lay thinking in the dark.

She got up quite early, and took little Nancy primrosing in the woods; so Nino and Valeria went to the tennis tournament alone. A fat, torpid girl took Edith's place, and Valeria laughed all the morning.

Edith and Nancy came in from the woods late for luncheon. When they appeared, Nino looked up at Edith in surprise. Mrs. Avory said: "Edith, my dear, what have you done? You look a sight!"

"Do I?" said Edith. "Why, this is the famous North-German coiffure Fräulein has made me."

Valeria's face had flushed. "You ought not to have let her drag your hair back so tight," she said. And Mrs. Avory added: "I thought you had given that ugly brown dress away long ago."

Then Nancy spoke of the primroses and Nino of the tennis; and Edith kept and adopted the North-German coiffure. She dropped out of the tournament because it gave her a pain in her shoulders, and she went for long walks with Nancy.

Nancy was good company. Edith grew to look for ward to the walks and to the warm clasp of Nancy's little hand in hers, and the sound of Nancy's treble voice beside her. Nancy asked few questions. She preferred not to know what things were. She had never liked fireworks after she had seen them in the day-time packed in a box. What! they were not baby stars? All Fräulein's definitions of things and of phenomena were painful to her mind as to her ear. But the seventeen years of Edith and the eight springtimes of the child kept step harmoniously. Nancy's dawning spirit, urged by a presaging flame, pressed forward to its morning; while Edith's early day, chilled by an unseen blight, turned back, and stopped before its noon. Her springtide faded before its flowering.

Thus the two girl-souls met, and their love bloomed upwards in concord like two flames.

On Easter Sunday Fräulein entered late for luncheon, and Nancy did not come at all. Fräulein apologized for her: "Nancy is in the summer-house writing a poetry. She says she will not have any lunch."

Mrs. Avory laughed, and Nino said: "What is the poetry about?"

"I think," replied Fräulein, shaking out her table-napkin, and tucking it carefully into her collar, "it is about her broken doll and her dead canary."

"Is the canary dead?" exclaimed Valeria. "Why did you not tell me?"

"She shall have a new doll," said Mrs. Avory, "at once."

"But it isn't—she hasn't—they are not!" explained Fräulein, much confused. "Only she says she cannot write a poetry about things that are not broken and dead."

The old grandfather, who now rarely spoke, raised his head, and said mournfully, "Broken and dead—broken and dead," and went on repeating the words all through lunch, until he was coaxed and scolded into silence.

There was much excitement over Nancy's poem that afternoon. It was read aloud by Edith, and then by Valeria, and then by Fräulein, and then again by Edith. Valeria improvised a translation of it into Italian for Zio Giacomo and Nino; and then it was read aloud once more by Edith. Everybody laughed and wept; and then Valeria kissed everybody. Nancy was a genius! They had always known it. Zio Giacomo said that it was in his brother's family; whereupon Mrs. Avory said, "Indeed?" and raised her eyebrows and felt hurt. But how—said Valeria—had it come into Nancy's head to write a poem? And what if she were never to be able to write another? Such things had happened. Could she try again and write something else? Just now! Oh, anything!… Saying how she wrote this poem, for instance!

So little Nancy, all flushed and wild and charming, extemporized in Fräulein's note-book:

"This morning in the orchard
I chased the fluttering birds:
The winging, singing things I caught—
Were words!

"This morning in the garden
Where the red creeper climbs,
The vagrant, fragrant things I plucked—
Were rhymes!

"This morning in the...."

Nancy looked up and bit her lip. "This morning—in the what?"

"In the garden," suggested Valeria.

"I have already said that," frowned Nancy.

Zio Giacomo suggested "kitchen," and was told to keep quiet. Edith said "woodlands," and that was adopted. Then Nancy found out that she wanted something quite different, and could they give her a rhyme for "verse"?

"Curse," said Nino.

"Disburse," said Fräulein.

"Oh, that is not poetic, but rather the reverse!" cried Nancy.

"Terse," said Edith.

"Purse," said Nino.

"Hearse," said the old grandfather gloomily.

Nancy laughed. "We go from bad to worse," she exclaimed, dimpling and blushing. "Wait a minute."

"And if I cage the birdlings...."

"What birdlings?" said Fräulein.

"Why, the words that I caught in the orchard," said Nancy hurriedly.

Everybody looked vague. "Why do you want to cage them?" asked Fräulein, who had a tidy mind.

"Because," said Nancy excitedly, making her reasons while she spoke, "words must not be allowed to fly about anyhow as they like—they must be caught, and shut in lines; they must be caged by the—by the–"

"The rhythm," suggested Edith.

"What is that?" said Nancy.

"The measure, the time, as in music."

"Yes, that's it!" said Nancy.

"And if the flowers I nurse...."

"The flowers are the rhymes, of course," explained Nancy, flourishing her pencil triumphantly.

"And if the flowers I nurse,
The rambling, scrambling things I write—
Are verse!"

"Beautiful! wonderful!" cried everybody; and Uncle Giacomo and Nino clapped their hands a long time, as if they were at the theatre.

When they left off, Mrs. Avory said: "I do not quite like those last lines. They are not clear. But, of course, they are quite good enough for poetry!" she added. And everyone agreed. Mrs. Avory said she thought they ought to have somebody, some poet, down from London at once to teach the child seriously. And Fräulein went into long details about publishers in Berlin, and how careful one must be if one prints a volume of poems not to let them cheat you.

From that day onward the spirit of Nancy's inspiration ruled the house. Everybody was silent when she came into the room, lest her ideas should be disturbed; meals must wait until Nancy had finished thinking. When Nancy frowned and passed her hand across her forehead in a little quick gesture she often used, Edith would quietly shut the windows and the doors, so that nothing should disturb the little poetess, and no butterfly-thought of hers should fly away. Valeria hovered round, usually followed by Nino; and Fräulein, in the library, read long chapters of Dante to Zio Giacomo, whether he slept or not, in order, as she put it in her diary: "(*a*) To practise my Italian; (*b*) to keep in the house the atmosphere of the Spirit of Poetry."

But the grandfather, who could not understand the silence and the irregular meals, thought that somebody had died, and wandered drearily about, opening doors to see if he could find out who it was. And he frequently made Mrs. Avory turn sick and chilly by asking her suddenly, when she sat at her work, "Who is dead in the house?"

VII

Meanwhile Nunziata Villari in Milan was flustering the maid Marietta over the packing of her trunks, and getting ready to leave for her twelve performances in England.

Nino had written to her twice a day during the first week of his absence; every two days during the second week; only once in the third week; and in this, the fourth week, not at all. "Some stupid English girl has turned his nose of putty from me," mused La Villari, and scolded Marietta for what she had packed, and for what she had not packed, and for how she had packed it. But La Villari was mistaken. No stupid English girl had turned Nino's nose of putty from her. Edith, who might have done so had she willed, had chosen to stab his nascent passion with the hairpins that fixed the North-German coiffure at its most unbecoming angle half-way up her head. She had left him to himself, and gone off primrosing with Nancy, whose love—the blind, far-seeing love of a child—depended not on a tendril of hair, or the tint of a cheek, or the glance of an eye.

Nino, standing alone, looking vaguely round for adoration, met Valeria's deep eyes fixed on him; and, suddenly remembering that this little cousin of his had been destined to his arms since both their childhood, he let his heart respond to her timid call. As she bent her head over a letter to her cousin Adèle, Nino watched her with narrowing eyes. Had Fate not sent Tom Avory, the tall and leisurely Englishman, bronzed and fair, sauntering into her life and his years ago, painting pictures, quoting poets, rowing her and Zio Giacomo about the lake, this dark, graceful head, thought Nino would have found its resting-place against his own breast; the little dimpled hand, the slender shoulders—all would belong to him. Had he not always loved her? He asked himself the question in all sincerity, quite forgetting his brief and violent fancy for Cousin Adèle, and his longer and more violent passion for Nunziata Villari. True, he would never have noticed Adèle had she not sighed at him first. And he would certainly never have loved La Villari had she not looked at him first. But now—Adèle was nowhere; and La Villari was in Milan packing her trunks; and here was Valeria, with her dark head and her dimples.

"Valerietta!" he said; and she raised her eyes. "It is May-day. Come out into the fields."

So Valeria put away her letter, and went to look for her hat. As she passed the schoolroom she heard voices, and peeped in. There was her little Nancy, pen in hand, wild-eyed and happy, and Edith bending over her, reading half-aloud what the inspired child-poet had just written.

"I am going into the fields with Nino," said Valeria. "Edith dear, won't you come, too?"

"Oh no! It is too windy," said her sister-in-law. "The wind takes my breath away and makes me cough. Besides, Nancy could not spare me."

"No!" said Nancy, laying her pink cheek against Edith's arm and smiling, "I could not spare her!"

Valeria laughed, and blew a kiss to them both. Then she ran upstairs for her hat, and went out across the fields with Nino.

Adjoining the schoolroom was the drawing-room where Mrs. Avory and the grandfather were sitting together in silence. "Sally's cough is worse," said the grandfather suddenly.

(The Fates were spinning. *"Here is a black thread,"* said One. *"Weave it in,"* said the Other. And the Third sharpened her scissors.)

"Sally's cough is worse," said the grandfather again.

Mrs. Avory looked up from her crocheting. "Hush, father dear!" she said.

"I said Sally's cough is worse," repeated the old man. "I hear it every night."

"No, dear; no, dear," said Mrs. Avory. "Not poor Sally. Sally has been at rest many years. Perhaps you mean Edith. She has a little cold."

"I know Sally's cough," said the old man.

Mrs. Avory put her work down and folded her hands. A slow, icy shiver crept over her and enveloped her like a wet sheet.

"Sally is my favourite grandchild," continued her father, shaking his white head. "Poor little Sally—poor little Sally!"

Mrs. Avory sat still. Terror, heavy and cold, crawled like a snake into her heart. "Edith! It is Edith!" she said.

"It is Sally!" cried the old man, rising to his feet. "I remember Sally's cough, and in the night I hear it."

There was a moment's silence. Then in the schoolroom Edith coughed. The grandfather came close to his daughter. "There," he whispered, "that is Sally. And you told me she was dead."

Mrs. Avory rose tremblingly to her feet. In her eyes was the vision of her tragic children, all torn to death by the shuddering and insidious Ill that crouched in their breasts and clutched at their throats, and sprang upon them and strangled them when they reached the threshold of their youth. And now Edith, too? Edith, her last-born!

She raised her eyes of Madre Dolorosa to her father's face. Then she fell fainting before him, her grey head at his feet.

Out in the fields, that were alight with daisies, Nino took Valeria's hand and drew her arm through his. "Little cousin," he said, "do you remember how I loved you when you were twelve years old, and scorned me?"

"Yes," laughed Valeria; "and how I loved you when you were sixteen, and had forgotten me."

"But, again," said Nino, "how I loved you when you were eighteen, and refused me."

Valeria looked at him with timorous eyes. "And now I am twenty-seven and a half, and you are only twenty-three."

"True," said Nino. "How young you are! The woman I love is thirty-eight years old."

Valeria's face paled; then it flushed rose-pink, and she laughed. "Thirty-eight! Nearly forty? I don't believe it!" All her pretty teeth shone, and the dimple dipped in her cheek.

"I hardly believe it myself," said Nino, laughing.

"Perhaps it is not true, after all."

Did Zio Giacomo in the library hear with his astral ear his son's gratifying assertion? Fräulein certainly thought that she saw him smile in his sleep, while through her careful lips "Conte Ukolino," in the thirty-third canto of the "Inferno," gnawed noisomely at the Archbishop's ravaged skull.

"Are you sure that she is not seventeen?" asked Valeria, biting a blade of grass, and glancing up sideways at her cousin's face.

Nino stopped. "'She?' Who? Why? Who is seventeen?" he asked.

"Edith," breathed Valeria.

Nino shook his head. "No, not Edith, poor little thing!" Then he bent forward and kissed Valeria decisively and authoritatively long before she expected it.

"Why did you call Edith a poor little thing?" asked Valeria, when she had forgiven him, and been kissed again.

Nino looked grave, and tapped his chest with his finger. *"È tisica!"* he said.

Valeria started back, and dragged her hands from his. "Tisica!" Her heart stopped beating, and then galloped off like a bolting horse. "Tisica!" In the terrible half-forgotten word the memory of Tom and the tragic past flamed up again. Yes; Edith had a cough. But everybody in England coughed. Edith—Edith, with her fair hair and pink cheeks! It was not true! It could not be true. Sweet, darling Edith, with the hideous North-German coiffure that she had made for Valeria's sake! Edith, little Nancy's best friend! Ah, *Nancy!* … Valeria's thought, like some maddened quarry, darted off in another direction. Nancy! Nancy! She was with Edith now! She was always with Edith, laughing, talking, bending over the same book, kissing her good-night and good-morning.

"I must go back," said Valeria suddenly, with a face grown pinched and small. Nino held her tight.

"What is it, love of mine?" he said.

"The baby!" gasped Valeria, with a sob. Nancy was the baby again. The baby that had to be taken away from danger—from Tom first, and now from Edith. It was the baby for whom she had run across these fields one morning years ago, tripping and stumbling in her haste, leaving what perhaps was love behind her, lest the baby should be hungry, lest the baby should cry. And now again she ran, tripping and stumbling in her haste, leaving what perhaps was love behind her. Nancy must be saved. What if it were too late! What if Nancy had already breathed the blight? If Nancy, too, were soon to begin to cough … to cough, and clear her throat, and perspire in the night, and have her temperature taken twice a day, and then one day—one day her eyes frightened, her fists clenched, and her mouth full of blood.... Valeria held her hands to her cheeks, crying aloud, as she tottered and ran across the flowering fields.

When she reached the garden there was Nancy, standing on the swing, alone—swinging and singing, with her curls all ablow.

"Fräulein came out and called Edith away," said the child, with a little pout. "She said I was not to come. Perhaps somebody has arrived. Could it be the poet from London?"

"Not yet, dear," said Valeria, voiceless, and with hammering heart. She embraced the little black legs standing on the swing, and laid her throbbing temple against the child's pinafore. "Ave Maria, Mater Dei, Ora pro nobis," she murmured.

"Go out of the way, mother dear, and see how high I swing," said Nancy. Valeria stepped aside; then she saw Fräulein's face appear at the drawing-room window and Fräulein's hand beckoning to her to come in.

"I must go indoors for a moment. Don't swing too high, darling," cried Valeria, and hurried into the house.

When she entered the drawing-room her heart stood still. Mrs. Avory was on the sofa, with grey lips and trembling hands. Fräulein stood by her, holding smelling-salts and a saucer of vinegar; while Edith, kneeling beside her, was crying: "Mother darling! mother darling! are you better?" In a corner stood the grandfather and Zio Giacomo, looking bewildered and alarmed.

"What has happened?" cried Valeria.

"She fainted," whispered Edith, with a sob, as she kissed and chafed the cold hands. Then her mother's arm went round her neck, and her mother's tears rained on her.

"Edith, my little girl, my own little girl!" she cried.

Valeria wept with her, and Edith wept too, little knowing the reason of her mother's tears.

… Out in the garden Nancy was alone, swinging and singing, with her curls all ablow, when the German poet's spell came over her.

"Die linden Lüfte sind erwacht,
Sie säuseln und wehen Tag und Nacht,
Sie kommen von allen Enden...."

The poets murmured it in her ear. Through the darkening trees beyond the lawn she could see a gilt line where the sunset struck its light in the sky.

"Die Welt wird schöner mit jeden Tag,
Man weiss nicht was noch werden mag,
Das Blühen will nicht enden!"

Nancy slipped from the swing. The poets were whispering and urging. Had not Fräulein in yesterday's lessons taught her the wonderful fact that the world was a round star, swinging in the blue, with other stars above it and below it? If one walked to the edge of the world, just to where it curves downward into roundness, and if one bent forward—holding to a tree, perhaps, so as not to fall—surely one would be able to look down into the sky and see the stars circling beneath one's feet! Nancy felt that she must go to the edge of the world and look down. The edge of the world! She could see it! It was behind the trees beyond Millpond Farm, where the sun had dipped down and left the horizon ablaze. So Nancy went out of her garden to go to the edge of the world.

When Mrs. Avory had been tenderly helped to a seat in the garden, and had had a footstool and a pillow, and some eau de Cologne, Edith said:

"Where is Nancy?"

"Where is Nancy?" said Valeria.

Fräulein called through the garden and through the house. Then Valeria called through the house and through the garden, and Edith ran upstairs, and through all the rooms and into the attics, and down again into the garden and to the summer-house and the shrubbery. Nino came in, and was sent to the village to see if Nancy was there. But Nancy was not there, nor had anyone seen her. Zio Giacomo and the stable-boy set out in one direction, and Jim Brown in another. Nino went across the fields towards the station—you could hear his call and his whistle for miles—and Florence went out and past the chapel along the road to Fern Glen. Valeria, wringing her hands, ran out after Florence, telling Edith to stay in, and mind and take care of Mrs. Avory and the grandfather.

But Edith put on her hat, and said to Mrs. Avory: "I shall be back directly. Stay here quite quietly, mother dear, and mind you get Fräulein to look after you and grandfather."

But her mother would not let her go alone. No, no; she would go, too! So they both started out towards Baker's End, telling Fräulein to mind and stay indoors, and look after grandfather.

But Fräulein, who had recently read "Misunderstood," was suddenly seized by a horrible thought regarding the water-lilies on Castlebury Pond, and she went out quickly, just stopping to tell the cook to prepare dinner and to mind and look after the grandfather. But the cook ran across to Smith's Farm, and the scullery-maid went with her.

The grandfather remained alone in the silent house.

(The Fates were spinning. *"Here is a black thread. Weave it in."*)

The grandfather was alone in the silent house. He called his daughter; he called Valeria, and Edith, and Nancy. Then he remembered that Nancy was lost. He called Sally; he called Tom; he rang the bells. Nobody came; nobody answered. Then again he remembered that Nancy was lost, and that everyone had gone to look for her. He opened the front-door and walked down the avenue; he opened the gate and looked up and down the deserted road. Then he stepped out and turned to the left, away from the village, and went towards the cross-roads at Heather's Farm; but before he reached them he crossed the field to the left, and went past Wakeley's Ditch towards the heath.

The sun had dropped out of sight, and night, soft-footed and grey, was stealing like a cat across the meadows; and Jim Brown had found Nancy on Three Cedars Hill when the old grandfather left the heath and turned his slow footsteps into the dark and silent fields. He saw something waving and moving against the sky.

"That is Nancy," he said, and called her. But it was a threshing-machine, covered with black cloths that moved in the wind. And the grandfather hurried a little when he passed it. He said aloud: "I am eighty-seven years old." He felt that nothing would hurt him that knew this, and the threshing-machine let him pass, and did not follow with its waving rags, as he had feared. Then some sheep penned in a fold startled him, running towards him with soft hoofs, bleating and standing still suddenly, with black faces turned towards him. As he tottered on something started up and ran away from him, and then it ran after him and darted past him. He was chilled with fear.

"I am eighty-seven years old. It is not right that I should be alone in the night," he said; and he began to cry whiningly like a little child. But nobody heard him, and he was afraid of the noises he made.

He turned to go home, and passed the shrouded machine again, and then in a field to the right he saw someone standing and moving.

"Have you seen Nancy?" he cried. "Hullo! Good-evening! Is Nancy there?"

The figure in the field beckoned to him, and he went stumbling in the ruts. When he got near, he said: "I am eighty-seven years old."

The figure waved both arms, greatly impressed; and the grandfather sat down on the ground, for he was tired.

Nancy had reached home, and the lights were lit and voices rang through the house; but the grandfather sat on the hill-side in the dark, and talked to the scarecrow.

"When you go home, sir, I shall go with you," said the grandfather, and the scarecrow made no objection. "You will tell me when you are ready to go."

But as the figure waved to him to wait, the grandfather tried not to be cross. "All right, all right," he said. "I am in no hurry." But it was very cold.

Suddenly across the hill, with long light steps, came Tom, and Tom's son Tom; and all his dead grandchildren came down the hill with long, light steps and sat around him. And the darker it grew the closer they sat. Sally, who was the favourite, laid her head against his arm, and he could touch her cool face with his hand.

He asked if they had seen Nancy, but they had not; and he asked Sally how her cough was. But they all laughed softly, and did not answer. The threshing-machine passed, waving its wings, and his dead children sat with him through the night. Before dawn they rose up and left him, crossing the hill again with light, long steps.

But the scarecrow stayed with him till he slept.

(*"Cut the thread,"* said Fate.)

I-VIII

A fortnight after the funeral Nino twisted up his moustache and went to London. His father had made no objection; indeed, Zio Giacomo himself found everything exaggeratedly doleful, and Valeria, in her black dress, going about the house with the expression of a hunted cat, annoyed him exceedingly. She was always jumping up in the midst of any conversation, and running out to look for Nancy.

What if Fräulein happened to be busy with Mrs. Avory or with the servants? said her uncle angrily. Surely there was Edith always with the child, petting her and spoiling her. Valeria need not worry so! But Valeria worried. She paid no attention to Zio Giacomo, never even gave him the promised *minestrone freddo* on his birthday, and Nino might have ceased to exist so far as she was concerned. She seemed to be always looking at Nancy or looking at Edith. When the two sat happily together, reading or talking, she would call Nancy with a rough strained voice, hurriedly sending the child on some useless errand, or keeping her by her side and making long foolish talk with her. Edith sometimes looked up in surprise when Valeria called the child away from her so suddenly and so sternly; but seeing Valeria's pale and anxious face, then glancing over to Nino, who usually looked bored and absent-minded, Edith thought of lovers' quarrels, and asked no questions.

But there was no lovers' quarrel between Nino and Valeria. In Valeria's terror-stricken heart maternal love had pushed all else aside, and only one thought possessed her—the thought of keeping Nancy out of danger, out of reach of Edith's light breath, out of reach of Edith's tender kisses; while Nino, seeing her with little Nancy on her lap or at her side all day, gradually grew to look upon her in the light of Valeria the mother, and lost sight of her as Valeria the betrothed. A child on its mother's breast forbids and restrains passion.

One evening he took up a paper and improved his English by reading the news. The news interested him. It was on the following day that he twisted up his moustache and went to London. He had dinner at Pagani's. There he met Carlo Fioretti, an old fellow-student of his at Pavia, who was dining with a golden-haired Englishwoman at a table near to his. They invited him to drink coffee and *pousse-café* with them, and Fioretti told Nino that he was doctor to the Italian colony in London, and getting on splendidly. And would he join them at the comedy later on? Nino was sorry—he was really desolated!—but he could not. He was going to the Garrick.

"Oh," cried the fair lady, "to be sure! La Villari is playing there to-night, isn't she? Wonderful creature!" Then she shook an arch forefinger at Fioretti. "Why did you not think of taking me to hear her?"

Fioretti promised to take her the next day, and the day after, and every day, and for ever! Then Nino took his leave with much bowing and hand-kissing, and Fioretti accompanied him as far as the door.

"Who is she?" said Nino.

"A lady of title," said Fioretti. "Divorced."

"Deliziosa," said Nino.

"Milionaria," said Fioretti. And having quickly shaken hands with Nino, he hurried back to her.

The seven mourning women in Cossa's tragedy were already chanting their woes when Nino entered the theatre and took his seat in the fourth row of the stalls. His heart opened to the swing and cadence of the Italian words, to the loud sweetness of the Italian voices, to the graceful violence of the Italian gestures. His Latin blood thrilled in understanding and response.

Suddenly Villari was on the stage, and no one else existed. Fervid and lovely, keen and lithe, soon she held in her small, hot hands the hearts of the cool English audience, tightening their nerves, swaying and drawing them into paths of unaccustomed passion. Nino sat still with quick heart-beats, wondering if she would see him.

He remembered the first time that her eyes had met his at the Manzoni in Milan four years ago. She was playing Sappho. He was with his cousin Adèle and Aunt Carlotta in one of the front rows, and they were laughing at the vehemence of the love-scene in the second act, when suddenly he saw that Villari was looking at him. Yes, at him! She gazed at him long and deliberately, while Jean was sobbing at her feet, and she said Daudet's famous words, "Toi tu ne marchais pas encore, que moi déjà je roulais dans les bras des hommes," with her deep and steadfast eyes fixed on Nino's face. She had said the words in French in the midst of the Italian play, for she was whimsical and wilful, and did as she pleased. Then she had turned away, and gone on with her part without noticing him any more. Cousin Adèle had been acid and sarcastic all the evening. The next day—how well he remembered it all!—he had sent Villari flowers, as she intended that he should, and a week after that he had sent her a bracelet, having sold Aunt Carlotta and Adèle's piano during their absence in order to do so.

Now she was before him once more, fervid and lovely, keen and lithe, and Nino sat motionless, with quick heart-beats, wondering if she would see him.

Suddenly she looked straight at him, with long and deliberate gaze—so long, indeed, that he thought everyone must notice it, and he could hardly breathe for the violence of his rushing veins. When the curtain fell he sent his card to her dressing-room, but she did not receive him, nor did she do so at the end of the play. The next day he sent her flowers, as she had intended that he should, but when he called at her hotel she was out. He sat through nine of her twelve performances, and still she would not see him, for she was thirty-eight and wily, and knew men's hearts. She also knew her own, and had more than once thought that she detected symptoms of what she called a *grande passion*, a *toquade*, for this curly-headed, vehement young Nino with the light laugh and the violent eyes. Nunziata Villari dreaded her grand passions. She knew of old how disastrous they were, how unbecoming to her complexion, how ruinous to her affairs, how gnawing during their process, how painful at their end. And she especially dreaded a grand passion for Nino, remembering that he was one who had a nose of putty, and would probably be a fountain of grief. So night after night Nino sat in his stall and watched her, and counted the days that remained before she would go away again. Every night she was different—she was Sappho and Magdalen; she was Norah and Fedora; she was Phædra and Desdemona. Every night she was before him, laughing or weeping, loving or hating, dying delicate deaths. She was terrible and sweet, fierce and alluring; she embraced and she killed; she was resplendent Purity, she was emblazoned Sin; she was das *Ewig Weibliche*, the immortal mistress of all lovers, the ever-desiring and the ever-desired.

When, after her tenth performance, he was allowed to see her in her dressing-room, he could not speak. Without a word of greeting, without responding to her smile, he dropped into a chair and hid his face in his hands, to the great amusement of Marietta the maid.

But Nunziata Villari was not amused. She suddenly realized that she had been acting for this Nino every night, that especially for him she had sobbed and raved, she had laughed and languished; and as she saw him sitting there with his face in his hands, she felt in her heart the intermittent throb that she recognized and dreaded. It was the *grande passion;* it was the *toquade*. "Ça y est!" she said. "Now I am in love again."

And she was.

IX

In Wareside Fräulein still read Dante to the unwitting Uncle Giacomo. The apple-blossoms fluttered and the sun shone. Butterflies, like blow-away flowers, flitted past Edith as she lay on a couch in the sunshine, too lazy to move, and too peaceful to read; while little Nancy ruffled up her hair and puckered her brow, frightened and gladdened at once by the luxuriance of words and ideas that sang in her brain, that romped out in lines and paired off in rhymes, like children dancing.

And the two mothers sat in the shade and watched.

When Edith called Nancy, and the child ran to her, Valeria's lips tightened, and soon she would call the little girl to her side and keep her. Then Mrs. Avory's face grew hard, and her heart was bitter with grief. She would rise quickly and go to Edith, trying to divert her thoughts by some futile question about her crochet, or a book, or the colour of the sky. Edith would answer, wondering a little, and shut her eyes, too lazy to think.

Over their children's heads the two mothers' glances met, hostile and hard, each shielding her own, each defending and each accusing.

"Edith is ill," said Valeria's eyes. "Nancy must not be near her."

"Edith is ill," said Mrs. Avory's eyes, "but she must not know it."

"Nancy must not be endangered."

"Edith must not be hurt."

"Mother," pipes up Nancy's treble voice suddenly, "do you think May is a girl?"

"Who is May, dear?"

"Why, the month of May. Do you think it is a girl with roses in her arms, dancing across the lands, and touching the hedges into flower?"

"Yes, dear; I think so."

"Or do you think it is a boy, with curls falling over his eyes, wilful and naughty, who drags the little leaves out from the trees, and tosses the birds across the sky, whirling and piping?"

"Yes, I think so, dear."

"Oh, mother, you are not listening!" cries Nancy, and scampers off, improvising as she goes:

"Says May: 'I am a girl!
May is short for Margaret,
Margaret or Daisy.
The petals of a jessamine
No boy's hand could unfurl!'

Says May: 'I am a girl.'
"Says May: 'I am a boy!

May is short for …'"

"For what?" thinks Nancy, frowning impatiently at the word that will not come. Then she skips gaily on across the grass:

"Says May: 'I am a boy!
May is short for Marmaduke,
As all the world should know!
I taught the birds their trills and shakes,
No girl could whistle so!'

"So May the girl, and May the boy, they quarrel all day long;
While the flowers stop their budding, and the birds forget their song.
And God says: 'Now, to punish you, I'll hang out the new moon
And take and bundle both of you into the month of June.'"

"Of course, May is *not* short for Marmaduke," muses Nancy, "but that cannot be helped."

… On her couch on the lawn Edith opened her eyes and said: "Nancy? Where is Nancy?"

Valeria sprang up. "Is there anything you want, Edith dear?"

"No; I should like Nancy. I love to see her, and I am too lazy to run after her."

"I will call her," said Valeria.

At this unexpected reply Mrs. Avory raised eyes shining with gratitude to her daughter-in-law's face.

Valeria found her little girl declaiming verses to the trees in the orchard. She knelt down on the grass to fasten the small button-shoe, and said, without raising her face: "Nancy, you are to go to Edith; but, Nancy, *you are not to kiss her.*"

"Oh, mother! has she been naughty?"

"No." Valeria remained on her knees, and put her arm round the child. "Edith is ill," she said slowly.

"Then I will kiss her double," cried Nancy, flushing.

"Nancy, Nancy, try to understand," said Valeria. "Edith is ill, as your father was, and he died; and as her sisters were, and they died. And if you kiss her, you may get ill, too, and die. And every time you kiss her—oh, Nancy, Nancy, child of mine, it is a sword struck into your mother's heart!"

There was a long pause. "And if I refuse to kiss her, will that not be a sword struck into her heart?" asked Nancy.

"Yes," said Valeria.

"And if a sword is in Edith's heart, there will be a sword in grandmother's heart, too?"

"Yes," said Valeria.

A long pause; then Nancy said: "There is a sword for every heart.... I could make a beautiful poetry about that." Her eyes were large, and saw nothing—not her mother, not Edith who was ill—but the bleeding heart of the world, sword-struck and gigantic, and in her ears the lines began to swing and flow.

"Mother of God, help us!" sighed Valeria, shaking her head. "Go to Edith."

Nancy went; and she kissed Edith, because she had forgotten all that her mother had said.

Presently Zio Giacomo came out to them with an open letter in his hand. It was a letter from Nino, and Zio Giacomo's wrath knew no bounds. He called Nino a perfidious traitor and a foolish viper, and an imbecile and the son of an imbecile. He called Valeria a blundering and insensate one, who might have stopped Nino, and kept Nino, and married Nino, and made him behave himself; and Nino was an angel, and no husband would ever be such an angel as Nino would have been as a husband to Valeria. And now the triple extract of insensate imbecility had gone off with an actress, a perfidious, senile snake, who had followed him to England, and it was all Valeria's fault, and Fräulein's fault. Yes, Fräulein was an absurd, moon-struck, German creature, who had turned him, Zio Giacomo, into a preposterous, doddering idiot by reading preposterous, senseless, twaddling Dante's "Inferno" to him all day long.

Fräulein wept, and Valeria wept; but that did not help Zio Giacomo. Nor did it bring back Nino from San Remo, where he was strolling under palm-trees with La Villari; and La Villari was smiling and sighing and melting in the throes of her new *toquade*.

X

Nino, before leaving London, had borrowed some money from Fioretti, who had borrowed it from the lady of title; then he had written to Nunziata Villari's impresario, and cancelled all her engagements; then he wrote to his father, and said he was sorry, and to Valeria, and said he was a miserable hound. After that he started for the Riviera with Nunziata, who was meek and docile and lovely in her incredible hats and unverisimilar gowns.

They were happy in San Remo; but as May was ended, and the weather was hot, Nino suggested spending June in Switzerland; so they went to Lucerne and up to Bürgenstock.

The large hotel was already filled with English-speaking people, and the striking Italian couple was much looked at and discussed. At luncheon their table was set next to a family of Americans—father, mother, and three lovely daughters with no manners. The three girls shook their curls, and laughed in their handkerchiefs, and made inaudible remarks to each other about the new arrivals. In the evening they all three appeared in rose-silk dresses, low-necked and tight-waisted—even the youngest, who looked scarcely fourteen. They carried three Teddy-bears to table with them, and were noisy and giggling and ill-mannered; but their beauty was indescribable. The two eldest wore their red-gold curls pinned on the top of their heads with immense black bows, whereas the youngest had her flowing hair parted in the middle, and it fell like a sheet of gilt water to her waist.

Nino, who sat facing them, twisted up his moustache, and forgot to offer sweets to Nunziata; and Nunziata laughed and talked, and was charming, biting her red lips until they were scarlet, and turning her rings round and round on her delicate fingers.

Then she said—oh, quite casually!—that she had received a letter from Count Jerace that afternoon. Count Jerace? The name of the handsome Neapolitan *viveur* always grated upon Nino, and he became angry, and made many stinging remarks; whereupon Nunziata, still sweet and patient, biting her red lips until they were scarlet, and turning her rings round and round on her delicate fingers, said that Jerace thought of coming to Bürgenstock towards the end of the week.

Nino pushed his plate aside, and said he would leave the place to-morrow. Then Nunziata laughed and said: "So will I!" and Nino called her an angel, and finished his dinner peacefully.

They left the next day.

They went to Engelberg. In Engelberg there were golf-links and tennis-courts, and English girls in shirt-waists and sailor hats—laughing girls, blushing girls, twittering girls. Engelberg was full of them. Nunziata soon got a letter to say that the Count was thinking of coming to Engelberg, and Nino took her on to Interlaken.

But all Switzerland was a-flower with girlhood. Everybody in the world seemed to be seventeen or eighteen years old. Nunziata would say nervously a hundred times a day:

"What a lovely girl!"

And Nino would ask: "What girl?"

"Why, the girl that just passed us."

Nino had not seen her.

"But you must have seen her," insisted Nunziata.

No; Nino had not seen anybody. He never did. But Nunziata saw everyone. Every uptilted profile, every golden head, every flower-like figure, every curve of every young cheek, struck thorns and splinters into her hurting heart. She wore her incredible gowns and her unverisimilar hats, but they seemed strange and out of place in Switzerland; and the brief-skirted, tennis-playing girls, passing in twos and threes in the cruel June sunshine, with their arms round each other's waists, would turn and look after her and smile.

Soon Nunziata felt that what had been a caprice for four years, while she had had her rôles and her audiences, her impresarios and her critics, her adorers and her enemies to distract her, was

a caprice no longer. What had been merely a *toquade*, to laugh at and to talk about, was no more a *toquade*. The fire had flamed up, and was a conflagration; it was, indeed, *la grande passion*. And Nino was alone in her world. Nino was not Nino to her any more. He was youth itself, he was love, he was life, he was all that she had had in the fulness of her past, all that would soon slip from her for ever. And her heart grew bitter, as does the heart of every woman who is older than the man she loves. Her thirty-eight years were to her as a wound of shame. Sometimes, when he looked at her, she would bend forward and put her hands over his eyes. "Don't look at me! don't look at me!" And when he laughed and drew her hands aside, she murmured: "Your eyes are my enemies. I dread them." For she knew that his eyes would gaze upon and desire all the beauty and the youngness of the world.

Late one afternoon they sat on their balcony, while an Italian orchestra in the gardens beneath them played some Sicilian music that they loved.

Nunziata spoke her thought. "Are you not tiring of me, Nino? Oh, Nino! are you sure you are not tiring of me yet?"

"Yet?" exclaimed Nino. "I shall never tire of you—never!"

"Ils faisaient d'éternels serments!…" murmured Nunziata, with a bitter smile.

Nino grasped her white helpless hands. "Why will you not be happy?" he said; for he knew her heart.

"I do not know," said Nunziata.

"You are unhappy. I feel it—I feel it all through the day, even when you laugh," said Nino. "Would you be happier without me?"

"Neither with you nor without you can I live," said Nunziata.

The orchestra was playing Lola's song, and her soul was filled with the hunger of the unattainable and the thirst of death; then, as it was late, she got up with a little sigh, and having powdered her face and patted her hair, and said a little prayer to the Madonna, she slipped her arm through his, and they went down to dinner together.

"I promise I shall not be so foolish again!" she said. "It is absurd; it is morbid!"

But after dinner a girl from Budapest was asked if she would dance. The girl laughed and hesitated; then she vanished for a few minutes, during which time Nunziata turned faint and sick. The girl reappeared, barefooted and lightly draped; then she danced. She danced like the incarnation of spring, and she looked like a blossom blown from the almond-tree. And Nunziata was morbid again.

Nino was in despair. He looked gloomy, and sighed, and quoted Verlaine:

"Mourons ensemble, voulez-vous?"

She laughed a little broken laugh, and quoted the succeeding line:

"Oh! la folle idée!"

And she did not quite mean her laugh, as he did not quite mean his sigh.

Thus the two lovers toyed lightly with thoughts of the grave, while far away, at the Grey House, Death had uncovered his face, and was knocking at the door.

Mrs. Avory had awakened one morning to find the last of her daughters pale, with blood-stained lips, fighting for breath. A doctor, summoned in haste, had said: "Davos!" A knighted specialist from London had repeated: "Davos!"

In less than a week the house was dismantled, the trunks packed, the servants dismissed. Fräulein, all tears, had migrated into an American family staying in the neighbourhood; Valeria, pale and trembling, and little Nancy, sobbing, and clinging to Edith's neck, had said "Good-bye, good-bye!" and had left for Italy with Uncle Giacomo. The tragic mother and daughter turned their steps to the mountains alone.

XI

Davos glistened clear and keen-cut in the winter sunshine, and Edith lay on the southern terrace of the Belvedere, with a rug tucked round her and a parasol over her head. She was happy. Her mother had just brought her a letter from Nancy. Her little niece Nancy, waiting in Italy—waiting just for a short time until Edith should be quite well again—wrote a letter of love and longing, and told Edith to get well quickly. Life without Edith, she wrote, was a horrid nightmare. Italy without Edith was a green splash and a name on the map, but did not really exist at all. Aunt Carlotta and Cousin Adèle were very kind people with loud voices, but she did not understand them, and did not want to understand them. All she wanted was to be with Edith again. She had written two poems in Italian, which her mother said were better than anything she had ever written before. And good-bye—and oh! let Edith get well quickly, and let them be together in England again. There was a tender postscript from Valeria telling her to be good and get well quickly.

Yes, yes; Edith felt that she would get well quickly. Her temperature was up, and the slight prickle of fever in her blood gave her a sensation of eagerness, almost of hurry, as if she were hastening through illness to health, and she felt gladly and intensely alive. She pressed little Nancy's letter to her lips, and lay back in her chair.

Hers was the last but one of a long row of couches on the southern terrace of the Belvedere. On either side of her were other reclining figures. Next to her on the right was a Russian girl, a few years older than herself, with a pinched and hectic face. On her left was Fritz Klasen, a German, twenty-four years old, ruddy and broad-shouldered. His blue eyes were open when Edith turned her face towards him.

"How do you like Davos?" he said.

Edith answered: "Very much," and the young man nodded and smiled.

The Russian girl opened her black eyes and looked at Edith. "Have you just come up?" she asked.

Edith said: "Yes; we arrived three days ago. How long have you been here?"

"Four years," said the girl, and shut her eyes again.

Edith turned her head to the young German, and exchanged with him a pitying glance.

"And you?" she asked him.

"I have been here eight months. I am quite well. I am going home in May."

The Russian opened her dark eyes again, but did not speak.

"Are you going to the dance to-night?" said the young man after a while.

"A dance? Where?" asked Edith.

"Here, in the hotel—in the big ball-room. We have a dance here every Wednesday, and the Grand Hotel has one every Saturday. Great fun." And he cleared his throat and hummed "La Valse Bleue."

Edith went into the ball-room that evening, and although she did not dance, she enjoyed herself very much. Mrs. Avory repeatedly asked her if she was tired. "No, mother—no." There was a wild feverish excitement all round her that she felt and shared without understanding it—the excitement of the *danse macabre*.

Fritz Klasen came to where she sat, and, striking his heels together, introduced himself to her and to her mother.

"I had no idea Davos was so gay," said Mrs. Avory, raising her light gentle eyes to the young man's face.

"Gayest place in the world," he said. "No time to mope."

A girl in strawberry silk came rushing to him. "Lancers," she said, and took his arm. They went off hurriedly, sliding like children on the polished floor.

"He does not look ill," said Mrs. Avory.

"Nor does she," said Edith.

"No one does." And the mother gazed at the laughing, dancing crowd, and wondered if they all had within them the gnawing horror that she knew was shut in her daughter's fragile breast.

"Have you noticed," she said, "that nobody coughs?"

"It is true," said Edith. "Nobody coughs."

After a short silence Mrs. Avory said: "Probably most of them are here for the winter sports."

For a long time she believed this. Young faces with pink cheeks and vivid eyes, and laughter, much laughter, surrounded her. There were balls and concerts, routs and bazaars, and everywhere the vivid eyes, and the pink cheeks, and the laughter. The only strange thing that Mrs. Avory noticed about her new friends was that when she said good-night to them, and shook hands with them, their hands were strange to the touch, and gave her a little shock.

They were not like the hands of other people that one clasps and thinks not of. "Good-night," to one. "What a hot hand!" she would think. "Good-night," to another. "What a cold, moist hand!" Hands of fire, and hands of ice; arid hands, that felt brittle to the touch; humid hands, which made her palms creep; weak, wet hands, from which her own recoiled. Each told their tragic tale. But the faces laughed, and the feet danced, and nobody coughed.

Edith soon stopped coughing, too. The doctor had forbidden it. She coughed in the night, when no one except her mother heard. The months swung past, promising and not fulfilling, but promising again, and Edith went to her fate submissive, with light tread.

One thing only tore at her soul—the longing to see Nancy. Nancy, Nancy, Nancy! She would say the name to herself a hundred times a day, and close her eyes to try and picture the little face, and the tuft of black curls on the top of the buoyant head. Her feverish hands felt vacant and aching for the touch of the soft, warm fingers she had held. Mrs. Avory comforted her. In the spring, or at latest in the summer, Edith should see Nancy again. Edith would be quite well in a month or two if she ate many raw eggs and was brave.

So Edith ate raw eggs and was brave.

Spring climbed up the five thousand feet and reached Davos at the end of May. Fritz Klasen was leaving. He was going back to Leipzig.

"Good-bye, good-bye."

He walked round the verandah at the resting-hour, shaking hands with everyone, saying, "Gute Besserung," and "Auf wiedersehen in Deutschland," to two or three Germans.

When he reached the Russian girl she was asleep. But Edith said: "Good-bye; I am so glad—I am so glad for you!"

When he had passed she saw that the Russian girl's eyes were open, and fixed on her.

"Did you speak?" said Edith.

"No," said the Russian in her strange, empty voice; "I thought."

Edith smiled. "What did you think?"

"I thought, why do you lie?"

Edith sat up, flushing, and her breath went a little shorter. "What?" she said.

Rosalia Antonowa kept her deep eyes on Edith's face.

"You said you were glad that he was going. Perhaps you meant it," she said. "You are here so short a time; but in a year, in two years, or four years, your lips will not be able to say that, and your heart will turn sick when another goes away, and you know that you will never go—never." Her bistre lids closed.

Edith tried to find something comforting to say to her.

"Davos is so beautiful, one ought not to mind. Surely you must love all this blue and white loveliness—the mountains, and the snow, and the sun."

"Oh, the mountains!" murmured Rosalia, with clenched teeth. "The mountains, weighing on my breast, and the snow freezing and choking me, and the sun blazing and blinding me. Oh!"—she raised her thin fist to the towering immensity round her—"oh, this unspeakable, this monstrous prison of death!"

Just then a Belgian girl passed, with pale lips and a tiny waist. She stopped to ask Antonowa how she was.

"Ill," said the Russian curtly.

When the girl had passed she spoke again to Edith. "And you will know what they mean when they ask you how you are. It is not the '*comment ça va?*' of the rest of the world. No; here they mean it. They want to know. 'How are you? Are you better? Are you getting better more quickly than I am? Surely you are worse than I am! What! no hæmorrhage for a month? No temperature? That is good.' And then you see the hatred looking out of their eyes."

"Oh, I don't think so," said Edith.

The Russian kept silent for a while; then she said: "Klasen will come back again. He is not cured. The doctor told him not to go. He will soon come back again."

He came back four months later. Edith was pained to see how grey and dull his face looked. Now he would have to stay two or three years more. But he said he did not mind; he was happy.

He had been married a month, and his wife was with him. He introduced his girl-wife to Edith and to Mrs. Avory on the day following his arrival. She was a gentle blonde of nineteen, a blue-blooded flower of German aristocracy, who had married Klasen against her parents' will.

"I shall cure him," she said.

The summer was magnificent. She went out a great deal for long walks and steep climbs, and she sang at all parties and concerts, for she had a lovely young voice, all trills and runs like a lark's. She would sit on the verandah at resting-time beside her husband, and near Edith, for he had his old place again, and then after a while she would kiss his forehead and run off to pay calls, or to practise, or to drive down to Klosters.

Klasen's bright blue eyes would follow her. The Russian from her couch looked at him and read his thoughts. She read: "I married that I might not be alone—alone with my ill and my terror in the night and in the day—but I am still alone. When my wife is with me, and I cough, she says: 'Poor darling!' When in the night I choke and perspire, she turns in her sleep, and says: 'Poor darling!' and goes to sleep again. And I am alone with my ill and my terror."

The Russian girl thought that Klasen's blue eyes burned with something that was not all love.

After a time the girl-wife practised less, and paid fewer calls. She said she had lost weight, and one day with her husband she went to see the doctor.

Yes, there was something—oh, very slight, very slight!—at the apex of the left lung. So a couch was brought out for her on the terrace near her husband, and she rested in the afternoons with a rug tucked round her and a parasol over her head.

Fritz held the little hand with the new wedding-ring still bright upon it. When she coughed he said: "Poor darling!" And he was no more alone. In the day-time they laughed, and were very cheerful; in the night Fritz slept better; but his wife lay awake, and thought of her sister and her two little brothers safely at home with her father and mother in Berlin.

Sometimes holiday-makers and sport-lovers came up to Davos for a fortnight or a month, especially in the winter. Mrs. Avory noticed that they laughed much less than the invalids did. When they hurried through the lounge with their skates and skis, Klasen would say:

"See how they overdo things. They wear themselves out skiing, skating, curling, bobsleighing. Yes," he would add, nodding to his wife and to Edith, "almost everyone who comes here as a sportsman returns here as an invalid."

His little laugh made Edith shiver. Sometimes the girl-wife would bend forward.

"See, Fritz; two more have arrived to-day!"

"Do you think they are tourists?"

"Oh no, no; they are ill." And in the young eyes that gazed upon the new-comers was no sorrow.

The months and the years swung round, and Edith passed along them with light and ever lighter tread. And still and always the longing for Nancy tore at her heart with poisoned teeth. Every hour of her day was bitter with longing for the sound of the childish voice, the touch of the soft, warm hand. She sometimes thought: "If I were dying, Valeria would let Nancy come here to say good-bye." Then again she thought:

"If Nancy came I should recover. I cannot eat enough now to get strong because I am so often near to crying; but if Nancy were here I should not cry. I should eat much more; I should not feel so sad; I should go out for walks with her. I know I should recover...."

But Nancy was in Italy in the house of Aunt Carlotta and Cousin Adèle, and Edith's letters were not given to her, lest the paper over which Edith had bent should carry poison in its love-laden pages.

Nancy now spoke Italian and wrote Italian poems. She went out for walks with Adèle, and Adèle held the soft, warm hand and heard the sweet treble voice. Adèle kept the house quiet and the meals waiting when Nancy was writing; and when Nancy frowned and passed her hand across her forehead with the little quick gesture she often used, Adèle laughed her loud Milanese laugh that drove all the butterfly-thoughts away. Adèle tidied Nancy's things and threw away the dried primroses Edith had picked with her in the Hertfordshire woods, and gave the string of blue beads Edith had put round Nancy's neck the day she left for Davos to the hall-porter's child, and she tore up all the poems Nancy had written in England, because they were old things that nobody could understand.

Thus, as the months and the years swung round, Edith went from Nancy's memory. Softly, slowly, with light tread, the girl-figure passed from her recollection and was gone; for children and poets are forgetful and selfish, and a child who is a poet is doubly selfish, and doubly forgetful.

When Nancy was fifteen, Zardo, the Milan publisher, accepted her first book—"A Cycle of Lyrics." By the post that brought the first proofs to the little poet came also a letter, black-edged, from Switzerland, for her mother.

"Mother, mother!" cried Nancy, drawing the printed pages from the large envelope, and shaking them out before her, "Look, the proofs, the proofs! This is my book, my own book!"

And she lifted all the rough sheets to her face and kissed them.

But Valeria had opened the black-edged letter, and was gazing at it, pale, with tears in her eyes.

"Nancy," she said, "Edith is dead."

"Oh, mother dear!" exclaimed Nancy, "I am so sorry!" And she bent over her mother and kissed her. Then she went back to her proofs and turned over the first page.

"She died on Thursday morning," sobbed Valeria. "And oh, Nancy, she loved you so!"

But Nancy had not heard. Before her lay her first printed poem. The narrow verses on the wide white sheet looked to her like a slender pathway.

And along this pathway went Nancy with starry matutinal eyes, beyond the reach of love and the call of Death, leading her dreams far out past the brief arch of Fame, into the shining plains of Immortality.

XII

So Valeria had her wish. Her child was a genius, and a genius recognized and glorified as only Latin countries glorify and recognize their own. Nancy stepped from the twilight of the nursery into the blinding uproar of celebrity, and her young feet walked dizzily on the heights. She was interviewed and quoted, imitated and translated, envied and adored. She had as many enemies as a Cabinet Minister, and as many inamorati as a *première danseuse*.

To the Signora Carlotta's tidy apartment in Corso Venezia came all the poets of Italy. They sat round Nancy and read their verses to her, and the criticisms of their verses, and their answers to the criticisms. There were tempestuous poets with pointed beards, and successful poets with turned-up moustaches; there were lonely, unprinted poets, and careless, unwashed poets; there was also a poet who stole an umbrella and an overcoat from the hall. Aunt Carlotta said it was the Futurist, but Adèle felt sure it was the Singer of the Verb of Magnificent Sterility, the one with the red and evil eyes.

Soon came a letter from Rome bearing the arms of the royal house. Her Majesty the Queen desired to hear Giovanna Desiderata read her poems at the Quirinal at half-past four o'clock of next Friday afternoon. The house was in a flutter. Everywhere and at all hours, in the intervals of packing trunks, Aunt Carlotta, Adèle, Valeria, and Nancy practised deep curtseying and kissing of hand, and wondered if they had to say "Your Majesty" every time they spoke, or only casually once or twice. They started for Rome at once. A gorgeous dress and plumed hat was bought for Nancy, a white veil was tied for the first time over her childish face, and in very tight white gloves, holding the small volume of her poems, she went with trembling heart—accompanied by Valeria, Carlotta, and Adèle in large feather boas—to the Quirinal.

A gentle-voiced, simply-gowned lady-in-waiting received them, and smiled a little as she explained that only Nancy was expected and could be received. Nancy was then told to remove her veil and her right-hand glove. Carlotta, Valeria, and Adèle embraced her as if she were leaving them for a week, and made the sign of the cross on her forehead; then the lady-in-waiting conducted her through a succession of yellow rooms, of blue rooms, of red rooms, into the white and gold room where the Queen awaited her.

More gentle-voiced and more simply gowned than her lady-in-waiting, the Queen, standing beside a table laden with flowers, moved to meet the little figure in the huge plumed hat. Nancy forgot the practised curtsey and the rehearsed salute. She clasped and held the gracious hand extended to her, and suddenly, as the awed, childish eyes filled with tears, the Queen bent forward and kissed her....

It was late and almost dark when Nancy returned, dream-like, with pale lips, to her mother, her aunt, and her cousin, who were having a nervous meal of sand wiches and wines with a gentleman in uniform standing beside them, and two powdered footmen waiting on them. They all three hurriedly put on their boas as soon as Nancy appeared, and they left, escorted and bowed out by the gentleman in uniform. "Probably the Duke of Aosta," said Aunt Carlotta vaguely. Another powdered footman conducted them to the royal automobile in which they returned to the hotel.

Nancy was disappointing in her description of everything. She sat in the dusky carriage with her eyes shut, holding her mother's hand. She could not tell Aunt Carlotta what she had eaten. Tea? Yes, tea. And cakes? Yes, cakes. But what kind of cakes, and what else? She did not remember. And she could not tell Adèle how the Queen was dressed. In white? No, not in white. Was it silk? She did not know. What rings did the Queen wear, and what brooch? Nancy could not remember. And had she said "Your Majesty" to her, or "Signora"? Nancy did not know. Neither, she thought. Then her mother asked timidly: "Did she like your poems?" And Nancy tightened the clasp on her mother's hand and said, "Yes."

Carlotta and Adèle were convinced that Nancy had made a fiasco of the visit and of the reading. She had blundered over the greeting, and had forgotten to say "Maestà." But they talked to everybody

in the hotel about their afternoon at the Quirinal, and pretended not to be surprised when the hall-porter brought to them at the luncheon-table a packet containing three pictures of the Queen with her signature, one for each; and for Nancy a jewel-case, with crown and monogram, containing a brooch of blue enamel with the royal initial in diamonds.

Nancy bought a diary, and wrote on the first page the date and a name—the name of a flower, the name of the Queen.

They returned to Milan in a dream. A crowd of friends awaited them at the station, foremost among them Zio Giacomo, shorter of breath and quicker of temper than ever, and beside him the returned prodigal, Nino, who had never been seen and seldom been heard of for the past eight years. Adèle turned crimson, and Valeria turned white as the well-remembered dark eyes smiled at them from the handsome, sunburnt face; and Nino turned up his moustache and helped them to alight from the train, and kissed them all loudly on both cheeks. Nancy did not remember him at all. She looked at him gravely while he rapidly described to her a pink pinafore she used to wear in England eight years ago, and a Punch-and-Judy show, stage-managed by a Fräulein Something or other, and a dimple just like her mother's that she then possessed. Immediately the dimple reappeared, dipping sweetly in the young curved cheek, and Valeria smiled with tears in her eyes and kissed Nancy. Then Nino kissed Valeria and kissed Nancy, and then he kissed Adèle, too, who was acidly looking on. At last Zio Giacomo, growing very impatient, hurried them off the crowded platform and into cabs and carriages. They drove home, Nino crushing in at the last moment with Valeria, Carlotta, and Nancy. He did not ask about the Queen, nor did he tell them anything about his own long absence; but he quoted Baudelaire and Mallarmé to them all the way home in a low resonant voice broken by the jolts of the carriage. He did not quote Nancy's poems. "They are sacro sanct," he said. "My lips are unworthy." Then he drifted into Richepin:

"Voici mon sang et ma chair,
Bois et mange!"

he said, looking straight before him at Valeria. And Valeria turned pale again, uselessly, hopelessly; for the eyes that looked at her did not see her.

Zio Giacomo and Nino stayed with them to dinner, and two of the poets, a successful one and an unwashed one, came later in the evening.

"What do you think of D'Annunzio?" asked Nino of Nancy, when the poets had stopped a moment to take breath.

"I have not read him. I have read nobody and nothing," said Nancy.

"That is right," cried Marvasi, the unwashed, nodding his rusty head and clapping his dusty fingers. "Read nothing, and retain your originality."

"Read everything," cried Cesare Raffaelli, "and cultivate form."

During the discussion that followed, the din of the two poets' voices built a wall of solitude round Nino and Nancy.

"How old are you?" asked Nino, looking at her mild forehead, where the dark eyebrows lay over her light grey eyes like quiet wings.

"Sixteen," said Nancy; and the dimple dipped.

Nino did not return her smile. "Sixteen!" he said. And because his eyes were used to the line of a fading cheek and the bitterness of a tired mouth, his heart fell, love-struck and conquered, before Nancy's cool and innocent youth. It was inevitable.

"Sixteen!" he repeated, looking at her, grave and wondering. "Is anybody in the world sixteen?"

And it was not the inspired author of the poems over which half Italy raved, but the little girl with the wing-like eyebrows, that his wonder went to; and it was the chilly little hand of the maiden, not the pulse of the poet, that shook his heart loose from those other white, well-remembered hands,

where the blue veins, soft and slightly turgid, marked the slower course of the blood—those sad blue veins which moved his pity and strangled his desire.

"May I call you by your right name?" he asked. "'Nancy' seems so—geographical."

Nancy laughed. "Call me as you will."

"*Desiderata*" he said slowly, and the colour left his face as he pronounced it.

That evening Nancy wrote on the second page of her diary the date, and a name; then she scratched the name out again, and the Queen remained in the book alone.

Every morning since the visit to the Quirinal Nancy's chocolate and her letters were brought in to her at eight o'clock by Adèle herself, who regarded it now as an office of honour to wait on the little Sappho of Italy. She came in, in dressing-gown and slippers, with her long black hair in a plait, and placed the dainty tray by Nancy's bed; then she opened the shutters and came back to sit beside Nancy, and open her correspondence for her. Nancy the while, like a lazy princess, sipped her chocolate, with her little finger in the air. Newspaper cuttings about Nancy were read first; requests for autographs were carefully put aside for Adèle to answer. Adèle said that she could write Nancy's auto graph more like Nancy than Nancy herself. Then poems and love-letters were read and commented upon with peals of laughter—and business letters were put aside and not read at all.

So many people came and spoke to Nancy of what she had written that she had no time to write anything new. But her brain was stimulated by all the modernists and symbolists and futurists who recited their works to her; and in the long lamp-lit evenings, while Aunt Carlotta was playing briscola with Zio Giacomo, Nino read Carducci's "Odi Barbare" to the three listening women—Valeria, Adèle, and Nancy—who sat in their large armchairs with drooping lids and folded hands, like a triptichi of the seasons of love.

Valeria always sat a little apart in the shadow, and if anyone spoke to her she replied softly and smiled wanly. Valeria's dimple had slipped into a little line on her cheek. Valeria herself was not Valeria any more. She was Nancy's mother. She had moved back into the shadow, where mothers sit with kind eyes that no one gazes into, and sweet mouths that no one kisses, and white hands that bless and renunciate. The baby had pushed her there. Gently, inexorably, with the first outstretching of the tiny fist, with the first soft pressure of the pink fragile fingers against the maternal breast, the child had pushed the mother from her place in the sunlight—gently, inexorably, out of love, out of joy, out of life—into the shadow where mothers sit with eyes whose tears no one kisses away, with heart-beats that no one counts. Nancy sooner than others had taken her own high place in the sun; for if most children are like robin redbreasts, slayers of their old, Genius, the devourer, is like an eagle that springs full-fledged, with careless, devastating wings, from the nest of a dove.

"Nancy," cried Adèle, bursting into her cousin's room one afternoon, "here is an Englishman to see you. Come quickly. I cannot understand a word he says."

"Oh, send mother to him," said Nancy. "I have forgotten all my English. Besides, I must read this noxious Gabriele to the end."

"Your mother has gone out. Do come!" And Adèle gave Nancy's hair a little pull on each side and a pat on the top, and hurried her to the drawing-room, where the Englishman was waiting. He rose, a stern-looking, clean-shaven man, with friendly eyes in a hard face.

Nancy put out her hand and said: "Buon giorno."

He answered: "How do you do? My Italian is very poor. May I speak English?"

Nancy dimpled. "You may speak it, but I may not understand it," she said.

But she understood him. He had written a critical essay on her book, with prose translations of some of the lyrics, and wished to close the article with an *aperçu* of her literary aims and intentions. What work was she doing at present! What message–?

"Nothing," said Nancy, with a little helpless Latin gesture of her hands. "I am doing nothing."

"*Peccato!*" said the Englishman. And he added: "I mean your Italian word in both senses—a pity and a sin."

Nancy nodded, and looked wistful.

"Why are you not working?" asked her visitor severely.

Nancy repeated the little helpless gesture. "I don't know," she said; then she smiled. "In Italy we talk so much. We say all the beautiful things we might write. That is why Italian literature is so poor, and Italian cafés so interesting. As for our thoughts, when we have said them they are gone—blown away like the fluff of the dandelions I used to tell the time by when I was a little girl in England."

That childish reminiscence brought her very near to him, and he told her about his mother and his younger sister, who lived in Kent, in an old-fashioned house in the midst of a great garden.

"You make me homesick for England," said Nancy.

Mr. Kingsley looked pleased. "Do you remember England?" he asked.

"No," said Nancy; "I am always homesick for things that I have forgotten, or for things that I never have known." And she smiled, but in her eyes wavered the nostalgic loneliness of the dreamer's soul.

The Englishman cleared his throat, and said in a practical voice: "I hope that you will work very hard, and do great things."

She tried to. She got up early the next morning, and wrote in her diary, "*Incipit vita nova!*" and she made an elaborate time-table for every hour of the day; then she made a list of the things she intended to write—subjects and ideas that had stirred in her mind for months past, but had been scattered by distracting visits, dispersed in futile conversations. She felt impatient and happy and eager. On the large white sheet of paper which lay before her, like a wonderful unexplored country full of resplendent possibilities, she traced with reverent forefinger the sign of the cross.

Some one knocked at the door. It was Clarissa della Rocca, Nino's married sister, tall, trim, and sleek in magnificent clothes.

"*Mes amours!*" she exclaimed, embracing Nancy, and pressing her long chin quickly against Nancy's cheek. "Do put on your hat and come for a drive with me. Aldo has come from America. He is downstairs in the stanhope. He is trying my husband's new sorrels, and so, of course, I insisted on going with him. Now I am frightened, and I have nobody to scream to and to catch hold of."

"Catch hold of Aldo, whoever he may be," said Nancy, laughing.

"He is my brother-in-law. But I can't," said Clarissa, waving explanatory mauve-gloved hands; "he is driving. Besides, he is horribly cross. Have you never seen him? He is Carlo's youngest brother. Do come. He will be much nicer if you are there."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.