HONORÉ DE BALZAC

MASSIMILLA DONI

Honoré Balzac

Massimilla Doni

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=25020667
Massimilla Doni:

Honoré de Balzac
Massimilla Doni

DEDICATION

To Jacques Strunz

MY DEAR STRUNZ: – I should be ungrateful if I did not set your name at the head of one of the two tales I could never have written but for your patient kindness and care. Accept this as my grateful acknowledgment of the readiness with which you tried – perhaps not very successfully – to initiate me into the mysteries of musical knowledge. You have at least taught me what difficulties and what labor genius must bury in those poems which procure us transcendental pleasures. You have also afforded me the satisfaction of laughing more than once at the expense of a self-styled connoisseur. Some have taxed me with ignorance, not knowing that I have taken counsel of one of our best musical critics, and had the benefit of your conscientious help. I have, perhaps, been an inaccurate amanuensis. If this were the case, I should be the traitorous translator without knowing it, and I yet hope to sign myself

always one of your friends.
DE BALZAC.

As all who are learned in such matters know, the Venetian aristocracy is the first in Europe. Its *Libro d'Oro* dates from before the Crusades, from a time when Venice, a survivor of Imperial and Christian Rome which had flung itself into the waters to escape the Barbarians, was already powerful and illustrious, and the head of the political and commercial world.

With a few rare exceptions this brilliant nobility has fallen into utter ruin. Among the gondoliers who serve the English – to whom history here reads the lesson of their future fate – there are descendants of long dead Doges whose names are older than those of sovereigns. On some bridge, as you glide past it, if you are ever in Venice, you may admire some lovely girl in rags, a poor child belonging, perhaps, to one of the most famous patrician families. When a nation of kings has fallen so low, naturally some curious characters will be met with. It is not surprising that sparks should flash out among the ashes.

These reflections, intended to justify the singularity of the persons who figure in this narrative, shall not be indulged in any longer, for there is nothing more intolerable than the stale reminiscences of those who insist on talking about Venice after so many great poets and petty travelers. The interest of the tale requires only this record of the most startling contrast in the life of man: the dignity and poverty which are conspicuous there in some of the men as they are in most of the houses.

The nobles of Venice and of Geneva, like those of Poland in former times, bore no titles. To be named Quirini, Doria, Brignole, Morosini, Sauli, Mocenigo, Fieschi, Cornaro, or Spinola, was enough for the pride of the haughtiest. But all things become corrupt. At the present day some of these families have titles.

And even at a time when the nobles of the aristocratic republics were all equal, the title of Prince was, in fact, given at Genoa to a member of the Doria family, who were sovereigns of the principality of Amalfi, and a similar title was in use at Venice, justified by ancient inheritance from Facino Cane, Prince of Varese. The Grimaldi, who assumed sovereignty, did not take possession of Monaco till much later.

The last Cane of the elder branch vanished from Venice thirty years before the fall of the Republic, condemned for various crimes more or less criminal. The branch on whom this nominal principality then devolved, the Cane Memmi, sank into poverty during the fatal period between 1796 and 1814. In the twentieth year of the present century they were represented only by a young man whose name was Emilio, and an old palace which is regarded as one of the chief ornaments of the Grand Canal. This son of Venice the Fair had for his whole fortune this useless Palazzo, and fifteen hundred francs a year derived from a country house on the Brenta, the last plot of the lands his family had formerly owned on *terra firma*, and sold to the Austrian government. This little income spared our handsome Emilio the

ignominy of accepting, as many nobles did, the indemnity of a franc a day, due to every impoverished patrician under the stipulations of the cession to Austria.

At the beginning of winter, this young gentleman was still lingering in a country house situated at the base of the Tyrolese Alps, and purchased in the previous spring by the Duchess Cataneo. The house, erected by Palladio for the Piepolo family, is a square building of the finest style of architecture. There is a stately staircase with a marble portico on each side; the vestibules are crowded with frescoes, and made light by sky-blue ceilings across which graceful figures float amid ornament rich in design, but so well proportioned that the building carries it, as a woman carries her head-dress, with an ease that charms the eye; in short, the grace and dignity that characterize the *Procuratie* in the piazetta at Venice. Stone walls, admirably decorated, keep the rooms at a pleasantly cool temperature. Verandas outside, painted in fresco, screen off the glare. The flooring throughout is the old Venetian inlay of marbles, cut into unfading flowers.

The furniture, like that of all Italian palaces, was rich with handsome silks, judiciously employed, and valuable pictures favorably hung; some by the Genoese priest, known as *il Capucino*, several by Leonardo da Vinci, Carlo Dolci, Tintoretto, and Titian.

The shelving gardens were full of the marvels where money has been turned into rocky grottoes and patterns of shells, – the very madness of craftsmanship, – terraces laid out by the fairies,

arbors of sterner aspect, where the cypress on its tall trunk, the triangular pines, and the melancholy olive mingled pleasingly with orange trees, bays, and myrtles, and clear pools in which blue or russet fishes swam. Whatever may be said in favor of the natural or English garden, these trees, pruned into parasols, and yews fantastically clipped; this luxury of art so skilfully combined with that of nature in Court dress; those cascades over marble steps where the water spreads so shyly, a filmy scarf swept aside by the wind and immediately renewed; those bronzed metal figures speechlessly inhabiting the silent grove; that lordly palace, an object in the landscape from every side, raising its light outline at the foot of the Alps, – all the living thoughts which animate the stone, the bronze, and the trees, or express themselves in garden plots, – this lavish prodigality was in perfect keeping with the loves of a duchess and a handsome youth, for they are a poem far removed from the coarse ends of brutal nature.

Any one with a soul for fantasy would have looked to see, on one of those noble flights of steps, standing by a vase with medallions in bas-relief, a negro boy swathed about the loins with scarlet stuff, and holding in one hand a parasol over the Duchess' head, and in the other the train of her long skirt, while she listened to Emilio Memmi. And how far grander the Venetian would have looked in such a dress as the Senators wore whom Titian painted.

But alas! in this fairy palace, not unlike that of the Peschieri at Genoa, the Duchess Cataneo obeyed the edicts of Victorine and

the Paris fashions. She had on a muslin dress and broad straw hat, pretty shot silk shoes, thread lace stockings that a breath of air would have blown away; and over her shoulders a black lace shawl. But the thing which no one could ever understand in Paris, where women are sheathed in their dresses as a dragon-fly is cased in its annular armor, was the perfect freedom with which this lovely daughter of Tuscany wore her French attire; she had Italianized it. A Frenchwoman treats her shirt with the greatest seriousness; an Italian never thinks about it; she does not attempt self-protection by some prim glance, for she knows that she is safe in that of a devoted love, a passion as sacred and serious in her eyes as in those of others.

At eleven in the forenoon, after a walk, and by the side of a table still strewn with the remains of an elegant breakfast, the Duchess, lounging in an easy-chair, left her lover the master of these muslin draperies, without a frown each time he moved. Emilio, seated at her side, held one of her hands between his, gazing at her with utter absorption. Ask not whether they loved; they loved only too well. They were not reading out of the same book, like Paolo and Francesca; far from it, Emilio dared not say: "Let us read." The gleam of those eyes, those glistening gray irises streaked with threads of gold that started from the centre like rifts of light, giving her gaze a soft, star-like radiance, thrilled him with nervous rapture that was almost a spasm. Sometimes the mere sight of the splendid black hair that crowned the adored head, bound by a simple gold fillet, and falling in satin tresses on

each side of a spacious brow, was enough to give him a ringing in his ears, the wild tide of the blood rushing through his veins as if it must burst his heart. By what obscure phenomenon did his soul so overmaster his body that he was no longer conscious of his independent self, but was wholly one with this woman at the least word she spoke in that voice which disturbed the very sources of life in him? If, in utter seclusion, a woman of moderate charms can, by being constantly studied, seem supreme and imposing, perhaps one so magnificently handsome as the Duchess could fascinate to stupidity a youth in whom rapture found some fresh incitement; for she had really absorbed his young soul.

Massimilla, the heiress of the Doni, of Florence, had married the Sicilian Duke Cataneo. Her mother, since dead, had hoped, by promoting this marriage, to leave her rich and happy, according to Florentine custom. She had concluded that her daughter, emerging from a convent to embark in life, would achieve, under the laws of love, that second union of heart with heart which, to an Italian woman, is all in all. But Massimilla Doni had acquired in her convent a real taste for a religious life, and, when she had pledged her troth to Duke Cataneo, she was Christianly content to be his wife.

This was an untenable position. Cataneo, who only looked for a duchess, thought himself ridiculous as a husband; and, when Massimilla complained of this indifference, he calmly bid her look about her for a *cavaliere servente*, even offering his services to introduce to her some youths from whom to choose. The

Duchess wept; the Duke made his bow.

Massimilla looked about her at the world that crowded round her; her mother took her to the Pergola, to some ambassadors' drawing-rooms, to the Cascine – wherever handsome young men of fashion were to be met; she saw none to her mind, and determined to travel. Then she lost her mother, inherited her property, assumed mourning, and made her way to Venice. There she saw Emilio, who, as he went past her opera box, exchanged with her a flash of inquiry.

This was all. The Venetian was thunderstruck, while a voice in the Duchess' ear called out: "This is he!"

Anywhere else two persons more prudent and less guileless would have studied and examined each other; but these two ignorances mingled like two masses of homogeneous matter, which, when they meet, form but one. Massimilla was at once and thenceforth Venetian. She bought the palazzo she had rented on the Canareggio; and then, not knowing how to invest her wealth, she had purchased Rivalta, the country-place where she was now staying.

Emilio, being introduced to the Duchess by the Signora Vulpato, waited very respectfully on the lady in her box all through the winter. Never was love more ardent in two souls, or more bashful in its advances. The two children were afraid of each other. Massimilla was no coquette. She had no second string to her bow, no *secondo*, no *terzo*, no *patito*. Satisfied with a smile and a word, she admired her Venetian youth, with his pointed

face, his long, thin nose, his black eyes, and noble brow; but, in spite of her artless encouragement, he never went to her house till they had spent three months in getting used to each other.

Then summer brought its Eastern sky. The Duchess lamented having to go alone to Rivalta. Emilio, at once happy and uneasy at the thought of being alone with her, had accompanied Massimilla to her retreat. And now this pretty pair had been there for six months.

Massimilla, now twenty, had not sacrificed her religious principles to her passion without a struggle. Still they had yielded, though tardily; and at this moment she would have been ready to consummate the love union for which her mother had prepared her, as Emilio sat there holding her beautiful, aristocratic hand, – long, white, and sheeny, ending in fine, rosy nails, as if she had procured from Asia some of the henna with which the Sultan's wives dye their fingertips.

A misfortune, of which she was unconscious, but which was torture to Emilio, kept up a singular barrier between them. Massimilla, young as she was, had the majestic bearing which mythological tradition ascribes to Juno, the only goddess to whom it does not give a lover; for Diana, the chaste Diana, loved! Jupiter alone could hold his own with his divine better-half, on whom many English ladies model themselves.

Emilio set his mistress far too high ever to touch her. A year hence, perhaps, he might not be a victim to this noble error which attacks none but very young or very old men. But as the archer

who shoots beyond the mark is as far from it as he whose arrow falls short of it, the Duchess found herself between a husband who knew he was so far from reaching the target, that he had ceased to try for it, and a lover who was carried so much past it on the white wings of an angel, that he could not get back to it. Massimilla could be happy with desire, not imagining its issue; but her lover, distressful in his happiness, would sometimes obtain from his beloved a promise that led her to the edge of what many women call "the gulf," and thus found himself obliged to be satisfied with plucking the flowers at the edge, incapable of daring more than to pull off their petals, and smother his torture in his heart.

They had wandered out together that morning, repeating such a hymn of love as the birds warbled in the branches. On their return, the youth, whose situation can only be described by comparing him to the cherubs represented by painters as having only a head and wings, had been so impassioned as to venture to hint a doubt as to the Duchess' entire devotion, so as to bring her to the point of saying: "What proof do you need?"

The question had been asked with a royal air, and Memmi had ardently kissed the beautiful and guileless hand. Then he suddenly started up in a rage with himself, and left the Duchess. Massimilla remained in her indolent attitude on the sofa; but she wept, wondering how, young and handsome as she was, she could fail to please Emilio. Memmi, on the other hand, knocked his head against the tree-trunks like a hooded crow.

But at this moment a servant came in pursuit of the young Venetian to deliver a letter brought by express messenger.

Marco Vendramini, – a name also pronounced Vendramin, in the Venetian dialect, which drops many final letters, – his only friend, wrote to tell him that Facino Cane, Prince of Varese, had died in a hospital in Paris. Proofs of his death had come to hand, and the Cane-Memmi were Princes of Varese. In the eyes of the two young men a title without wealth being worthless, Vendramin also informed Emilio, as a far more important fact, of the engagement at the *Fenice* of the famous tenor Genovese, and the no less famous Signora Tinti.

Without waiting to finish the letter, which he crumpled up and put in his pocket, Emilio ran to communicate this great news to the Duchess, forgetting his heraldic honors.

The Duchess knew nothing of the strange story which made la Tinti an object of curiosity in Italy, and Emilio briefly repeated it.

This illustrious singer had been a mere inn-servant, whose wonderful voice had captivated a great Sicilian nobleman on his travels. The girl's beauty – she was then twelve years old – being worthy of her voice, the gentleman had had the moderation to have brought her up, as Louis XV. had Mademoiselle de Romans educated. He had waited patiently till Clara's voice had been fully trained by a famous professor, and till she was sixteen, before taking toll of the treasure so carefully cultivated.

La Tinti had made her debut the year before, and had enchanted the three most fastidious capitals of Italy.

"I am perfectly certain that her great nobleman is not my husband," said the Duchess.

The horses were ordered, and the Duchess set out at once for Venice, to be present at the opening of the winter season.

So one fine evening in November, the new Prince of Varese was crossing the lagoon from Mestre to Venice, between the lines of stakes painted with Austrian colors, which mark out the channel for gondolas as conceded by the custom-house. As he watched Massimilla's gondola, navigated by men in livery, and cutting through the water a few yards in front, poor Emilio, with only an old gondolier who had been his father's servant in the days when Venice was still a living city, could not repress the bitter reflections suggested to him by the assumption of his title.

"What a mockery of fortune! A prince – with fifteen hundred francs a year! Master of one of the finest palaces in the world, and unable to sell the statues, stairs, paintings, sculpture, which an Austrian decree had made inalienable! To live on a foundation of piles of campeachy wood worth nearly a million of francs, and have no furniture! To own sumptuous galleries, and live in an attic above the topmost arabesque cornice constructed of marble brought from the Morea – the land which a Memmius had marched over as conqueror in the time of the Romans! To see his ancestors in effigy on their tombs of precious marbles in one of the most splendid churches in Venice, and in a chapel graced with pictures by Titian and Tintoretto, by Palma, Bellini, Paul Veronese – and to be prohibited from selling a marble Memmi

to the English for bread for the living Prince Varese! Genovese, the famous tenor, could get in one season, by his warbling, the capital of an income on which this son of the Memmi could live – this descendant of Roman senators as venerable as Caesar and Sylla. Genovese may smoke an Eastern hookah, and the Prince of Varese cannot even have enough cigars!"

He tossed the end he was smoking into the sea. The Prince of Varese found cigars at the Duchess Cataneo's; how gladly would he have laid the treasures of the world at her feet! She studied all his caprices, and was happy to gratify them. He made his only meal at her house – his supper; for all his money was spent in clothes and his place in the *Fenice*. He had also to pay a hundred francs a year as wages to his father's old gondolier; and he, to serve him for that sum, had to live exclusively on rice. Also he kept enough to take a cup of black coffee every morning at Florian's to keep himself up till the evening in a state of nervous excitement, and this habit, carried to excess, he hoped would in due time kill him, as Vendramin relied on opium.

"And I am a prince!"

As he spoke the words, Emilio Memmi tossed Marco Vendramin's letter into the lagoon without even reading it to the end, and it floated away like a paper boat launched by a child.

"But Emilio," he went on to himself, "is but three and twenty. He is a better man than Lord Wellington with the gout, than the paralyzed Regent, than the epileptic royal family of Austria, than the King of France – "

But as he thought of the King of France Emilio's brow was knit, his ivory skin burned yellower, tears gathered in his black eyes and hung to his long lashes; he raised a hand worthy to be painted by Titian to push back his thick brown hair, and gazed again at Massimilla's gondola.

"And this insolent mockery of fate is carried even into my love affair," said he to himself. "My heart and imagination are full of precious gifts; Massimilla will have none of them; she is a Florentine, and she will throw me over. I have to sit by her side like ice, while her voice and her looks fire me with heavenly sensations! As I watch her gondola a few hundred feet away from my own I feel as if a hot iron were set on my heart. An invisible fluid courses through my frame and scorches my nerves, a cloud dims my sight, the air seems to me to glow as it did at Rivalta when the sunlight came through a red silk blind, and I, without her knowing it, could admire her lost in dreams, with her subtle smile like that of Leonardo's Mona Lisa. Well, either my Highness will end my days by a pistol-shot, or the heir of the Cane will follow old Carmagnola's advice; we will be sailors, pirates; and it will be amusing to see how long we can live without being hanged."

The Prince lighted another cigar, and watched the curls of smoke as the wind wafted them away, as though he saw in their arabesques an echo of this last thought.

In the distance he could now perceive the mauresque pinnacles that crowned his palazzo, and he was sadder than ever. The

Duchess' gondola had vanished in the Canareggio.

These fantastic pictures of a romantic and perilous existence, as the outcome of his love, went out with his cigar, and his lady's gondola no longer traced his path. Then he saw the present in its real light: a palace without a soul, a soul that had no effect on the body, a principality without money, an empty body and a full heart – a thousand heartbreaking contradictions. The hapless youth mourned for Venice as she had been, – as did Vendramini, even more bitterly, for it was a great and common sorrow, a similar destiny, that had engendered such a warm friendship between these two young men, the wreckage of two illustrious families.

Emilio could not help dreaming of a time when the palazzo Memmi poured out light from every window, and rang with music carried far away over the Adriatic tide; when hundreds of gondolas might be seen tied up to its mooring-posts, while graceful masked figures and the magnates of the Republic crowded up the steps kissed by the waters; when its halls and gallery were full of a throng of intriguers or their dupes; when the great banqueting-hall, filled with merry feasters, and the upper balconies furnished with musicians, seemed to harbor all Venice coming and going on the great staircase that rang with laughter.

The chisels of the greatest artists of many centuries had sculptured the bronze brackets supporting long-necked or pot-bellied Chinese vases, and the candelabra for a thousand tapers. Every country had furnished some contribution to the splendor

that decked the walls and ceilings. But now the panels were stripped of the handsome hangings, the melancholy ceilings were speechless and sad. No Turkey carpets, no lustres bright with flowers, no statues, no pictures, no more joy, no money – the great means to enjoyment! Venice, the London of the Middle Ages, was falling stone by stone, man by man. The ominous green weed which the sea washes and kisses at the foot of every palace, was in the Prince's eyes, a black fringe hung by nature as an omen of death.

And finally, a great English poet had rushed down on Venice like a raven on a corpse, to croak out in lyric poetry – the first and last utterance of social man – the burden of a *de profundis*. English poetry! Flung in the face of the city that had given birth to Italian poetry! Poor Venice!

Conceive, then, of the young man's amazement when roused from such meditations by Carmagnola's cry:

"Serenissimo, the palazzo is on fire, or the old Doges have risen from their tombs! There are lights in the windows of the upper floor!"

Prince Emilio fancied that his dream was realized by the touch of a magic wand. It was dusk, and the old gondolier could by tying up his gondola to the top step, help his young master to land without being seen by the bustling servants in the palazzo, some of whom were buzzing about the landing-place like bees at the door of a hive. Emilio stole into the great hall, whence rose the finest flight of stairs in all Venice, up which he lightly ran to

investigate the cause of this strange bustle.

A whole tribe of workmen were hurriedly completing the furnishing and redecoration of the palace. The first floor, worthy of the antique glories of Venice, displayed to Emilio's waking eyes the magnificence of which he had just been dreaming, and the fairy had exercised admirable taste. Splendor worthy of a parvenu sovereign was to be seen even in the smallest details. Emilio wandered about without remark from anybody, and surprise followed on surprise.

Curious, then, to know what was going forward on the second floor, he went up, and found everything finished. The unknown laborers, commissioned by a wizard to revive the marvels of the Arabian nights in behalf of an impoverished Italian prince, were exchanging some inferior articles of furniture brought in for the nonce. Prince Emilio made his way into the bedroom, which smiled on him like a shell just deserted by Venus. The room was so charmingly pretty, so daintily smart, so full of elegant contrivance, that he straightway seated himself in an armchair of gilt wood, in front of which a most appetizing cold supper stood ready, and, without more ado, proceeded to eat.

"In all the world there is no one but Massimilla who would have thought of this surprise," thought he. "She heard that I was now a prince; Duke Cataneo is perhaps dead, and has left her his fortune; she is twice as rich as she was; she will marry me – "

And he ate in a way that would have roused the envy of an invalid Croesus, if he could have seen him; and he drank floods

of capital port wine.

"Now I understand the knowing little air she put on as she said, 'Till this evening!' Perhaps she means to come and break the spell. What a fine bed! and in the bed-place such a pretty lamp! Quite a Florentine idea!"

There are some strongly blended natures on which extremes of joy or of grief have a soporific effect. Now on a youth so compounded that he could idealize his mistress to the point of ceasing to think of her as a woman, this sudden incursion of wealth had the effect of a dose of opium. When the Prince had drunk the whole of the bottle of port, eaten half a fish and some portion of a French pate, he felt an irresistible longing for bed. Perhaps he was suffering from a double intoxication. So he pulled off the counterpane, opened the bed, undressed in a pretty dressing-room, and lay down to meditate on destiny.

"I forgot poor Carmagnola," said he; "but my cook and butler will have provided for him."

At this juncture, a waiting-woman came in, lightly humming an air from the *Barbiere*. She tossed a woman's dress on a chair, a whole outfit for the night, and said as she did so:

"Here they come!"

And in fact a few minutes later a young lady came in, dressed in the latest French style, who might have sat for some English fancy portrait engraved for a *Forget-me-not*, a *Belle Assemblee*, or a *Book of Beauty*.

The Prince shivered with delight and with fear, for, as you

know, he was in love with Massimilla. But, in spite of this faith in love which fired his blood, and which of old inspired the painters of Spain, which gave Italy her Madonnas, created Michael Angelo's statues and Ghilberti's doors of the Baptistery, – desire had him in its toils, and agitated him without infusing into his heart that warm, ethereal glow which he felt at a look or a word from the Duchess. His soul, his heart, his reason, every impulse of his will, revolted at the thought of an infidelity; and yet that brutal, unreasoning infidelity domineered over his spirit. But the woman was not alone.

The Prince saw one of those figures in which nobody believes when they are transferred from real life, where we wonder at them, to the imaginary existence of a more or less literary description. The dress of this stranger, like that of all Neapolitans, displayed five colors, if the black of his hat may count for a color; his trousers were olive-brown, his red waistcoat shone with gilt buttons, his coat was greenish, and his linen was more yellow than white. This personage seemed to have made it his business to verify the Neapolitan as represented by Gerolamo on the stage of his puppet show. His eyes looked like glass beads. His nose, like the ace of clubs, was horribly long and bulbous; in fact, it did its best to conceal an opening which it would be an insult to the human countenance to call a mouth; within, three or four tusks were visible, endowed, as it seemed, with a proper motion and fitting into each other. His fleshy ears drooped by their own weight, giving the creature a whimsical resemblance

to a dog.

His complexion, tainted, no doubt, by various metallic infusions as prescribed by some Hippocrates, verged on black. A pointed skull, scarcely covered by a few straight hairs like spun glass, crowned this forbidding face with red spots. Finally, though the man was very thin and of medium height, he had long arms and broad shoulders.

In spite of these hideous details, and though he looked fully seventy, he did not lack a certain cyclopean dignity; he had aristocratic manners and the confident demeanor of a rich man.

Any one who could have found courage enough to study him, would have seen his history written by base passions on this noble clay degraded to mud. Here was the man of high birth, who, rich from his earliest youth, had given up his body to debauchery for the sake of extravagant enjoyment. And debauchery had destroyed the human being and made another after its own image. Thousands of bottles of wine had disappeared under the purple archway of that preposterous nose, and left their dregs on his lips. Long and slow digestion had destroyed his teeth. His eyes had grown dim under the lamps of the gaming table. The blood tainted with impurities had vitiated the nervous system. The expenditure of force in the task of digestion had undermined his intellect. Finally, amours had thinned his hair. Each vice, like a greedy heir, had stamped possession on some part of the living body.

Those who watch nature detect her in jests of the shrewdest

irony. For instance, she places toads in the neighborhood of flowers, as she had placed this man by the side of this rose of love.

"Will you play the violin this evening, my dear Duke?" asked the woman, as she unhooked a cord to let a handsome curtain fall over the door.

"Play the violin!" thought Prince Emilio. "What can have happened to my palazzo? Am I awake? Here I am, in that woman's bed, and she certainly thinks herself at home – she has taken off her cloak! Have I, like Vendramin, inhaled opium, and am I in the midst of one of those dreams in which he sees Venice as it was three centuries ago?"

The unknown fair one, seated in front of a dressing-table blazing with wax lights, was unfastening her frippery with the utmost calmness.

"Ring for Giulia," said she; "I want to get my dress off."

At that instant, the Duke noticed that the supper had been disturbed; he looked round the room, and discovered the Prince's trousers hanging over a chair at the foot of the bed.

"Clarina, I will not ring!" cried the Duke, in a shrill voice of fury. "I will not play the violin this evening, nor tomorrow, nor ever again – "

"Ta, ta, ta, ta!" sang Clarina, on the four octaves of the same note, leaping from one to the next with the ease of a nightingale.

"In spite of that voice, which would make your patron saint Clara envious, you are really too impudent, you rascally hussy!"

"You have not brought me up to listen to such abuse," said she, with some pride.

"Have I brought you up to hide a man in your bed? You are unworthy alike of my generosity and of my hatred – "

"A man in my bed!" exclaimed Clarina, hastily looking round.

"And after daring to eat our supper, as if he were at home," added the Duke.

"But am I not at home?" cried Emilio. "I am the Prince of Varese; this palace is mine."

As he spoke, Emilio sat up in bed, his handsome and noble Venetian head framed in the flowing hangings.

At first Clarina laughed – one of those irrepressible fits of laughter which seize a girl when she meets with an adventure comic beyond all conception. But her laughter ceased as she saw the young man, who, as has been said, was remarkably handsome, though but lightly attired; the madness that possessed Emilio seized her, too, and, as she had no one to adore, no sense of reason bridled her sudden fancy – a Sicilian woman in love.

"Although this is the palazzo Memmi, I will thank your Highness to quit," said the Duke, assuming the cold irony of a polished gentleman. "I am at home here."

"Let me tell you, Monsieur le Duc, that you are in my room, not in your own," said Clarina, rousing herself from her amazement. "If you have any doubts of my virtue, at any rate give me the benefit of my crime – "

"Doubts! Say proof positive, my lady!"

"I swear to you that I am innocent," replied Clarina.

"What, then, do I see in that bed?" asked the Duke.

"Old Ogre!" cried Clarina. "If you believe your eyes rather than my assertion, you have ceased to love me. Go, and do not weary my ears! Do you hear? Go, Monsieur le Duc. This young Prince will repay you the million francs I have cost you, if you insist."

"I will repay nothing," said Emilio in an undertone.

"There is nothing due! A million is cheap for Clara Tinti when a man is so ugly. Now, go," said she to the Duke. "You dismissed me; now I dismiss you. We are quits."

At a gesture on Cataneo's part, as he seemed inclined to dispute this order, which was given with an action worthy of Semiramis, – the part in which la Tinti had won her fame, – the prima donna flew at the old ape and put him out of the room.

"If you do not leave me in quiet this evening, we never meet again. And my *never* counts for more than yours," she added.

"Quiet!" retorted the Duke, with a bitter laugh. "Dear idol, it strikes me that I am leaving you *agitata*!"

The Duke departed.

His mean spirit was no surprise to Emilio.

Every man who has accustomed himself to some particular taste, chosen from among the various effects of love, in harmony with his own nature, knows that no consideration can stop a man who has allowed his passions to become a habit.

Clarina bounded like a fawn from the door to the bed.

"A prince, and poor, young, and handsome!" cried she. "Why, it is a fairy tale!"

The Sicilian perched herself on the bed with the artless freedom of an animal, the yearning of a plant for the sun, the airy motion of a branch waltzing to the breeze. As she unbuttoned the wristbands of her sleeves, she began to sing, not in the pitch that won her the applause of an audience at the *Fenice*, but in a warble tender with emotion. Her song was a zephyr carrying the caresses of her love to the heart.

She stole a glance at Emilio, who was as much embarrassed as she; for this woman of the stage had lost all the boldness that had sparkled in her eyes and given decision to her voice and gestures when she dismissed the Duke. She was as humble as a courtesan who has fallen in love.

To picture la Tinti you must recall one of our best French singers when she came out in *Il Fazzoletto*, an opera by Garcia that was then being played by an Italian company at the theatre in the Rue Lauvois. She was so beautiful that a Naples guardsman, having failed to win a hearing, killed himself in despair. The prima donna of the *Fenice* had the same refinement of features, the same elegant figure, and was equally young; but she had in addition the warm blood of Sicily that gave a glow to her loveliness. Her voice was fuller and richer, and she had that air of native majesty that is characteristic of Italian women.

La Tinti – whose name also resembled that which the French singer assumed – was now seventeen, and the poor Prince three-

and-twenty. What mocking hand had thought it sport to bring the match so near the powder? A fragrant room hung with rose-colored silk and brilliant with wax lights, a bed dressed in lace, a silent palace, and Venice! Two young and beautiful creatures! every ravishment at once.

Emilio snatched up his trousers, jumped out of bed, escaped into the dressing-room, put on his clothes, came back and hurried to the door.

These were his thoughts while dressing: —

"Massimilla, beloved daughter of the Doni, in whom Italian beauty is an hereditary prerogative, you who are worthy of the portrait of *Margherita*, one of the few canvases painted entirely by Raphael to his glory! My beautiful and saintly mistress, shall I not have deserved you if I fly from this abyss of flowers? Should I be worthy of you if I profaned a heart that is wholly yours? No; I will not fall into the vulgar snare laid for me by my rebellious senses! This girl has her Duke, mine be my Duchess!"

As he lifted the curtain, he heard a moan. The heroic lover looked round and saw Clarina on her knees, her face hidden in the bed, choking with sobs. Is it to be believed? The singer was lovelier kneeling thus, her face invisible, than even in her confusion with a glowing countenance. Her hair, which had fallen over her shoulders, her Magdalen-like attitude, the disorder of her half-unfastened dress, – the whole picture had been composed by the devil, who, as is well known, is a fine colorist.

The Prince put his arm round the weeping girl, who slipped

from him like a snake, and clung to one foot, pressing it to her beautiful bosom.

"Will you explain to me," said he, shaking his foot to free it from her embrace, "how you happen to be in my palazzo? How the impoverished Emilio Memmi – "

"Emilio Memmi!" cried Tinti, rising. "You said you were a Prince."

"A Prince since yesterday."

"You are in love with the Duchess Cataneo!" said she, looking at him from head to foot.

Emilio stood mute, seeing that the prima dona was smiling at him through her tears.

"Your Highness does not know that the man who had me trained for the stage – that the Duke – is Cataneo himself. And your friend Vendramini, thinking to do you a service, let him this palace for a thousand crowns, for the period of my season at the *Fenice*. Dear idol of my heart!" she went on, taking his hand and drawing him towards her, "why do you fly from one for whom many a man would run the risk of broken bones? Love, you see, is always love. It is the same everywhere; it is the sun of our souls; we can warm ourselves whenever it shines, and here – now – it is full noonday. If to-morrow you are not satisfied, kill me! But I shall survive, for I am a real beauty!"

Emilio decided on remaining. When he signified his consent by a nod the impulse of delight that sent a shiver through Clarina seemed to him like a light from hell. Love had never before

appeared to him in so impressive a form.

At that moment Carmagnola whistled loudly.

"What can he want of me?" said the Prince.

But bewildered by love, Emilio paid no heed to the gondolier's repeated signals.

If you have never traveled in Switzerland you may perhaps read this description with pleasure; and if you have clambered among those mountains you will not be sorry to be reminded of the scenery.

In that sublime land, in the heart of a mass of rock riven by a gorge, – a valley as wide as the Avenue de Neuilly in Paris, but a hundred fathoms deep and broken into ravines, – flows a torrent coming from some tremendous height of the Saint-Gothard on the Simplon, which has formed a pool, I know not how many yards deep or how many feet long and wide, hemmed in by splintered cliffs of granite on which meadows find a place, with fir-trees between them, and enormous elms, and where violets also grow, and strawberries. Here and there stands a chalet and at the window you may see the rosy face of a yellow-haired Swiss girl. According to the moods of the sky the water in this tarn is blue and green, but as a sapphire is blue, as an emerald is green. Well, nothing in the world can give such an idea of depth, peace, immensity, heavenly love, and eternal happiness – to the most heedless traveler, the most hurried courier, the most commonplace tradesman – as this liquid diamond into which the snow, gathering from the highest Alps, trickles through a

natural channel hidden under the trees and eaten through the rock, escaping below through a gap without a sound. The watery sheet overhanging the fall glides so gently that no ripple is to be seen on the surface which mirrors the chaise as you drive past. The postboy smacks his whip; you turn past a crag; you cross a bridge: suddenly there is a terrific uproar of cascades tumbling together one upon another. The water, taking a mighty leap, is broken into a hundred falls, dashed to spray on the boulders; it sparkles in a myriad jets against a mass that has fallen from the heights that tower over the ravine exactly in the middle of the road that has been so irresistibly cut by the most formidable of active forces.

If you have formed a clear idea of this landscape, you will see in those sleeping waters the image of Emilio's love for the Duchess, and in the cascades leaping like a flock of sheep, an idea of his passion shared with la Tinti. In the midst of his torrent of love a rock stood up against which the torrent broke. The Prince, like Sisyphus, was constantly under the stone.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.