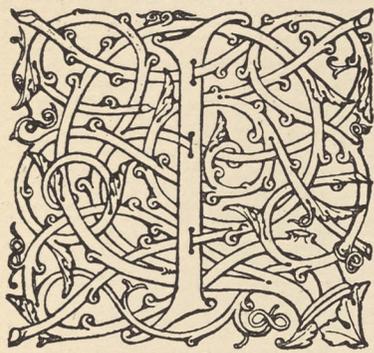


THE WRITING ON THE WALL



It was when Sandro Pazzo had seen Diana Rossi for the third time, upon his fourth visit to the painter Bonaventura, that he thought of her as possible inmate of that old grey castello high up in the Umbrian hills, visited by few save the birds at early dawn and sunset; on the shoulder of a ridge it stood, buttressed well and loop-holed; its one tall watch tower looked down the valleys and caught the first sun-rays on its face from over that marsh-land where Arno flowed seawards. Fifty years before, his people had held it against the Florentine soldiery, and when peace came with honour, it ceased to be a refuge for the bold spoilers whose son he was. A fine lonely place to guard a fair woman in, and he desired with all his smouldering heart the beauty of Diana Rossi.

It was to him evident that she was passionately fond of that ascetic young painter, who lived easily within the limits of his earnings and had painted her fair face into the glory of Madonnas and Saints;—it seemed evident also to this Sandro that such asceticism was not destined to exist much longer in the glow of her frequent presence, though it was much to be doubted whether, in the impending conflict between the spirit and the flesh, the spirit might not at last painfully win back its high, solitary life again. Bonaventura, in the pure aims of his first youth, had achieved so successfully the joy of artistic creation that it was doubtful whether other things could finally prevail against it, even Diana, who was to that creation one of the most powerful aids. Single-hearted enthusiast, he worked from morning till nightfall among his panels and paints, often too sang tunefully as his hand moved, while Diana sat before him, weary of last night's pleasure and feasting, envying the simple happiness of the man who lived hermit in gay Florence. A slight bond of cousinship was between them, but no true bond of race. His blood flowed with Northern calmness, hers ran with Southern changings of languor and fierce energy. Thus it was reposeful to her, when tired of the crowded life elsewhere, to come hither and sit in the cool painting-room, and to see the repetitions of her growing in beauty and colour, while she tuned his little cithara and touched faint melodies hardly heard in the far corner where he sat. His welcome, so cheerful and unchanging, refreshed her ear after the flattery of the rich youths from Pisa who wore jewels in their sword-hilts and fur on their mantles. In fine, the plain self-contained life had a passing charm for her luxurious senses, and Sandro Pazzo saw in her eyes, when the painter spoke to her, a look, of which he knew the meaning.

True it was that, by some caprice of blood which made it none the less when it came, a passion for the young man was arising within her. Only by a caprice of sudden change from things naturally most pleasing to the pleasure-loving heart could this be, that the ruddy-haired girl, bold-

eyed, fond of sumptuous places and of revelry, should care to come here to her cousin's bare room, where the gentle, bloodless enthusiast sat working, wrapped in a thick mantle, save in the very hottest days of summer. But so it was; often and often had he made his canvas precious with her beauty, and thus it was a regular custom of her life that she should sit there during two or three afternoons of each week. He was not of a mind or bodily make to join in the banquets her father gave to his clients and customers in the double part of banker and goldsmith, so he visited the Rossis at odd times, when his work was done. And there was in him so little of the worldling, that he and his worldly cousin became friends, in an accidental, easy-going sort of way. Neither had first sought it. His mind was so enwrapped by the enthusiasm for his art that he had no room therein for other passion or impression;—if anything so came to him it was as a picture, and as such he would paint his way through it, loving the picture at last so dearly that he had but a faint feeling remaining for the original human creature whence he had drawn his ideal.

Indeed, it is not natural that such a one should care greatly for his raw material when there is always the finished result of his labour in the future; be that as it may, Diana produced no effect upon Bonaventura other than that of a friendly feeling for a valuable assistant, for this she was, now that his type of Madonna was becoming famous. And this gave him a unique position in her eyes. The influence upon her was good, for she had been a spoiled child and was now a wilful woman, and to respect anything was much. For some unknown cause the respect had gone hand in hand with easy comradeship till now, and Sandro Pazzo, who had studied men and women in many other cities, saw that the comradeship was, on her side, no more.

Now here it was that Sandro, being too cunning, made his mistake. He thought that Bonaventura must be one of her many adorers, under a mask of coldness,—thought that the visits of Diana to him were but a way of intrigue, bolder than those usual. He was wrong. He could not understand that man, who, though young and kindly, was thoroughly and virtuously simple in his life, partly from his very feeble frame, which at times was tortured by prostrating illness, partly from real purity of heart. Such folk are rare, yet they do exist, as do other strange things in this earth, and Sandro's mistake was in applying common worldly wisdom to the judgment of him. Men such as Sandro can see worldly motive in the simplest and most innocent of mortals; the price they pay for their knowledge of men's badness is the frequent blindness to the gold streak amongst the worthless stone. To them it is but brass, if indeed they see it. For this reason Sandro chose to expend the strength of secret hatred on Bonaventura, as time went on and he felt himself to be growing older.

Sandro Pazzo's full name was Alessandro Patezzi, Count of Castello-calvo. No one called him Pazzo when he was by, because it was a nickname, given on account of his odd fondness for curious medical and

alchemic studies. Never had he been quite like other men, though none could attribute to him the ascetic life of Bonaventura. He had stayed long in Padua and learned much lore in that place, he had travelled much, eastward, westward, always in a secret, solitary fashion, speaking little of his experience, even when asked to do so, and taking no part in the petty wars and state schemes which occupied most nobles, great and small. Which, however, did not prevent his knowing much of what was doing and keeping on friendly terms with the ruling powers, for Mad Sandro did not wish to be brought to poverty through any neglect of the things so important to most men.

Thus his madness, as it was called, did not bring upon him the contempt of his fellows, but, on the contrary, a respect which became mingled with fear on the increase of acquaintance. The Count of Castellocalvo was like most other nobles, a man best not offended.

He spent his summer-time at his castle up in the hills, where cool winds wafted down the valley. There he read the books he had collected and passed the time in his own devices, in a separate tower or a certain room cut into the rock, and peeping out by one window over the cliff-edge into the vale below, a cool and pleasant place on hot days. Before he knew Diana Rossi he had been wrapped up in his pursuits, indeed much as Bonaventura, but more passionately in that his temperament was ardent and his frame that of the wiry mountaineer parents whence he was born. Since the death of his young wife many years ago, he had effectually tamed his sorrow for her loss by his violent studies, and now as his manhood hovered on the border of old age, behold! the acquaintance with Diana had been potent to inflame him with passions of youth.

So he schemed and plotted, and at last became very friendly with Diana and her cousin; frequently did he visit the painter's room in the warm afternoon, and as often as not would lend his face to Bonaventura for one of the Magi Kings in a Nativity picture. When the sitting was ended he would tell travellers' tales, or they would sing all together while Diana touched the cithara, and had it not been for his passion he could have felt that such pleasant comradeship was as good a thing as a man might desire in life.

For when you become a traveller and set foot every night in a strange hostelry, it is then that you shall come to put away the taciturnity of the absorbed scholar. A man talks little to those whom he has known all his life, or to those whom he has cause for disliking. But when he has voyaged somewhat over land and sea, and come into perilous places and passed through many tedious ones, and found how large a share of a traveller's, ay, or of any other man's life, is ruled by the accident of chance acquaintance, then it is that he comes to prize the pleasure of talking easily and at random with his fellow men and women. Would that sunny day in some German city have left so pleasant a remembrance in Sandro's mind had the old book bought under the arcades drawn no one of the passers-by to stop and chat with the queerly-garbed foreigner? And even if Meister Albrecht Dürer had taken the other turning

and had not met him after all, might not some other man of scholarly taste have spoken to Sandro and, in the momentary crossing of their life-path, discussed Paracelsian mysteries with him? How barren, by comparison, would that day have been had no one spoken. And what pleasanter thing for three such travellers on the journey of life as the scholar-nobleman Sandro, the incomparable painter Bonaventura, and the beautiful woman Diana Rossi, . . . that they should meet for many days in a room filled with the presence of fine work and should regale one another with tales, jests, and all manner of good conversation!

Yet perhaps it is but in mortal nature that, having a good thing, man should at once proceed to mar it. Thus the passion-inflamed Sandro regularly met his friends, and while adding his part to the cheerfulness of the hours, meditated how to get his desire, and watched the right moment to remove the innocent painter without suspicion.

For he was not so foolish as to tell Diana of what burned at his heart. He knew that she was not now in the temper to listen to such a thing from him, let alone show him any favour. Day by day he watched her, and noted the tones of her voice as she spoke to Bonaventura, and the tremor that ever and anon ran through its melody as with a subtle pain. Sandro would have given his castle and his fortune to have had her speak so to him, for it meant that the passion for Bonaventura was working sorely within her. But the painter was cheerful ever and serenely unknowing of it; the speech which Diana addressed to him alone he answered as if it had come from the two, so that after awhile he was the most frequent of the three to speak. Meanwhile his work went on and his fame grew apace.

Now the fresh warmth of the late spring was past, and the hot days had for some while been on the city, when on a certain afternoon the three friends met in the painter's room. It was the first time after an interval, which was caused by the severe illness of Bonaventura, who now again sat at his easel, looking weak and ghost-like, but happy in his work as ever. He had sent messages to his two friends, for they were now very dear to him, and one of them was coming,—prepared for business.

This was Sandro, the first to enter, his face, so baked and meagre, with its worn character deeply stamped round the mouth and eyebrows, looking at once strangely old and strangely youthful. For in his eyes lived the brilliant hunger of expectation, and the eyes are fed by the heart.

"Ah! greeting, my friend!" said he; "the sun has roasted me rarely. I am glad to be here."

Bonaventura looked up smiling, and waved his brush in reply.

"You are welcome," he said, "very welcome. The wine stands on that shelf at your right hand; I thought you might desire something to wash the dust out of your mouth; have you any fresh songs? Sing something, pray, and I will sketch you meanwhile. For I have an idea."

Sandro drank and wiped his mouth. "Well, well. What shall it be?" So, as the painter made no reply, but chose a piece of paper and took his quill in hand, Sandro jangled a chord or two, and as in thought he slowly glided into this strain:

Tell me, O Hills, and tell, ye merry Birds,
Tell me, O Brook, that tinklest down the stone,
Know ye the sorrow that my heart engirds,
Hopeless to love, and brood on Love alone?
 Know ye what woe Love silent must endure,
 And is there aught that such a pain may cure?

To me replied the Hills, replied the Birds,
Replied the Brook that murmured by the stone,
"Alas, a hopeless Fate thy heart engirds
If one thou offerest Love for thee hath none.
 We know what woe Love lonely must endure,
 We know of Naught that such a pain may cure."

"Bellissima!" murmured Diana's voice from the doorway, and Sandro's hand trembled as he rose and placed the cithara in her arms.

"It is very sweet indeed," said Bonaventura, "—and so *very* applicable to you, my friend!" and he laughed gently, but suddenly stopped on finding that the others did not accompany his mirth. Only Sandro's mouth spread out into the line of a smile without creating one, and Diana bent her head over the instrument and tuned a false note.

"Will it please you to sit down as you were, just for a moment, Messer Sandro?" asked the painter in his most courteous tone, for he saw he had made some mistake, and, though no courtier, was not so foolish as to lay stress upon it by asking pardon in Diana's presence,—“it is a fine pose, and you shall see in a day or two what I intend with it. Indeed there is no reason why I should not tell you now. I am going to turn you into an angel, Messer Sandro, by putting some flowing drapery on your form and pair of wings on your back. The other day when I looked at your face as King Melchior I said to myself, 'surely this is not quite the best which I have seen in my friend's face?' and then I could not tell why I thought so, for King Melchior was a scholar like yourself, and had travelled much. I thought about this all the time of my sickness, without coming to the reason. But yesterday evening I found what my thought contained, it was the memory of what you had told me of your voyage to the East, and of the good men who dwelt in the mountains of the wilderness. And it then seemed to me that it was fittest to paint you as the angel who sat at the entrance of our Lord's Sepulchre and told them who came of the wonderful things they had not before known.”

"See," he went on, arising and showing the little sketch, besides which he had roughly indicated the idea of the picture, "do you not think it better than the other of King Melchior?"

Diana sat playing a lively air on the cithara, a melody of the streets, but she raised her eyes as Bonaventura walked across the floor to her and Sandro, and cast a glance at it. "How quick you are!" she said, and went on playing as before. She also looked full into his eyes for one moment, and Bonaventura was puzzled at the look, its bold intensity, and the sudden wistfulness which clouded it all at once.

She dropped her gaze before the placid wonderment of his face, and struck some random notes. Glancing at Sandro, the painter saw him watching her with eyes that seemed to burn. All for an instant only; then Sandro took the sketch and commented on it pleasantly, praising the clever drawing of his face in this new character.

"I did not know I had such inspirations in me," said he, "but certainly I like your rendering, and it is a sweet idea of the angel at the entrance of the grotto singing consolation to those who come seeking for their Master. Will *you* not sing something to us, Ma Donna?"

And Diana sang, sweetly and skilfully, a song of the villages which lie up beyond Samminiato, and when she had ended, there fell a silence, during which Sandro poured out wine for his two friends.

"Why do you not make Madonna Diana your angel, instead of me?" he asked as the red fluid bubbled forth; it was in the shadowed end of the room that he now stood, and neither Diana nor Bonaventura saw that something else dropped from his hand into one of the long glasses. There was something too of sarcasm in his tone, but the painter looked up from his work to which he had returned, took the glass given him and said simply,

"I will tell you, my friend. It is one of my strange ideas. Madonna Diana is as beautiful as an angel, it is true, but she has not explored the perilous passages of this world as you have. I wish my angel to be one who has been in many terrible places during his fleshly life, and has been scarred by the talons of the Evil One. His was no easy victory over malign things, and there have been times when he has been defeated, but now that he has attained to an honoured part in the guard of our Lord, he is the fittest to watch in that dreary place of tombs the body of One who has also fought and conquered. Have I said enough?"

Sandro's face suddenly quivered all over; he raised his hand. But the painter drank his glass to the bottom, paused a moment in thought, then placed it by. Meditatively he resumed his work, and for a long time nothing broke the silence but the faint tinkle of the silver cords.

At last Sandro arose and bowed. "I must depart," he said, and so was gone.

Then Diana laid the instrument aside and sat with folded hands for a little space, very still. The painter looked up from his work with a sigh, thinking of something. "Alas! I am sorry for him, for the good he contains," he began to murmur, when his glance fell upon the motionless beautiful figure, watching him with eyes of smouldering flame.

Directly their looks met, the flame burst into blaze; it was the first time for weeks that they had been alone together, and she was a bold,

wilful woman. She stood up, smiled at him, then suddenly tossed back her hair, so that a red-goldenness glimmered around, and cried, half laughing, half sobbing "Beautiful as an angel—as an angel! Oh, my cousin! Why have you not said it before? Yet I love you better for it too!"

The young painter as suddenly understood, and a gentle trouble filled his face. But he stepped to her and took her hand. It must not go further, for the sake of her parents as well as herself. Besides, all would end before very long, now.

"Madonna," he said soothingly, yet with a coldness which chilled her horribly, "do not, do not be angry with me. You are indeed the most wonderfully beautiful of women, and you are offering me the greatest of honours, but I am only half a human being and I cannot love you as a strong man should. You are to me the sweetest and kindest of maidens, but that is all I can feel. When half of a man belongs to the other world, so that at times he knows how little more remains to him of this, what can he give to such a queen as you?"

"You are cold and cruel!" she said, weeping, and dragged her hand away.

"Not cold or cruel," he replied, "but dying fast, and desiring only to add one more testimony to that Paradise I hope the Great Master of all things will allow me to enter."

She gasped and stared at him, saying "What?"

"I knew I should not live out this year, in any case," he replied, "and I was at times sorely afraid that my suffering might overturn my reason before departure. But as soon as I drank the wine just now I knew that my life had come to a few days' limit. My heart grieves heavily that any friend should have found a cause of offence in a few light words, yet for myself I do not grieve, for I shall have a speedy release from this uncertain and often-troubled body. And it is best so for us, Diana. Your parents could not have cared for a poor suitor like myself, even had I been less of a shadow and more of a man. Farewell, dear cousin, farewell, and let me paint my last picture in peace."

She fell on her knees before him and would have flung her arms round him, but he knelt also, and raised both her hands and his to a crucifix on the wall.

After a little she rose, and silently went away. They met no more, and she did not understand more of his words than that he would have none of her, and that somehow she could not hate him for it.

But one day, as she was sitting with her father and mother and many guests, some from north and some from south, but all men rich and loving merriment, and the board was cleared and all were hushed to hear her sing,—a bell began tolling heavily from the church hard by. And in that heated air, with every window and door ajar to catch any passing coolness, that doleful noise disturbed them very much, more and more, so that the whole place seemed full of it. Very rarely was any one buried in that churchyard, for its Campo Santo was small, and it was customary

for the citizens to take all dead outside the walls of the city. But there were some who lay there, in the holy earth brought from Jerusalem, and over their graves grew luxuriantly the strange Eastern flowers whose seeds had come overseas in that soil, men of goodly life and well-stored mind, who had served the cause of the Holy Church worthily, though they did not wear the monk's gown. Very few they were, but every one a famous, honoured name.

So, the clangour of the constantly tolling bell seeming endless, and preventing the full enjoyment of music, Luigi Rossi stood up and begged his guests' pardon for the same, proposing that they should go round to the other side of the house, into the garden, and there carry on their conviviality. To this they agreed, and soon were settled beneath the cypress shadow, hearing the bell indeed, but faintly, so that the noise of talk or the sound of song overpowered it altogether; many things they sang, now one, now another, and many hearts beat hard and quickly as Diana's rich voice caressed their ears in that hot shadow.

Indeed, to look at her, gleaming ruddy-golden against the dusky green foliage, as she gazed into every heart by turns with those eyes of hers, so languorous yet so expressive of veiled delight in that admiration which all must give her,—she was indeed a very enchantress, like that Queen Armida of whom the poet Tasso sings. Or rather, as she stood with silken folds spanning her shapely breast like the bands of a corselet, and her bare arms so strong and firm with all their beauty, singing in tones full and deep, never shrill, flinging the notes across the flowers and upturned faces till they echoed distantly and wandered among the laced branches like mysterious birds,—she seemed like the most enthralling of that excellent (albeit mad) poet's creations, the warrior maiden Clorinda. So that Count Sandro could have bent his head and burst his heart with the sweet agony which shook him,—nor was he the only one that day who was so moved.

All this while the bell tolled, but no one heeded it any longer. Then as evening came on the gathering dissolved, some going homewards to prepare for a night-festa, some otherways, until the afternoon's merrymaking was finished, and Diana went to her chamber. There came to her a servant with a sealed letter, and placed a picture before her, saying that it had been given to him for her by the servant of Messer Bonaventura the painter, who had died a day ago by a return of his former illness.

At that she felt as if some unseen hand had dealt her a fierce blow, and turned as white as the wall hard by. When the man was gone she lay for a long time on her bed and wept, not for Bonaventura, but for herself, loving a youth who had thought no more lovingly of her than of a comrade or a favourite dog or some other thing which is a pleasant part of one's daily life. Nor could she now be angry, because the man was dead and had shown that his words were no concealment of slight to her beauty, but stern truth. Thus after awhile she recovered, and the passion passed like mist away; and she read his letter with a certain

melancholy, yet also with a certain relief of heart that it said nothing which might cause others to ask questions.

"I, Bonaventura, being conscious that my end is very near, request the noble lady Diana Rossi to accept the last picture I have wrought, as a remembrance of the very many pleasant gatherings in my studio. But I request that the noble lady (hoping that she will yet remember me sometimes in her prayers) will not speak of my death to the others who assembled on those occasions. For above all things do I desire that the recollection of me should be joyous and not sad."

That evening her parents noted her to be less gay than usual, and before they could ask her the cause she showed to them the picture and letter, at which they also grieved a little, for they considered him a worthy man. When also they heard that it was for him the bell of S. Paolo had rung that day to their disturbance, they wondered that a man now so famous in the city should have died so suddenly without any one knowing it sooner,—and it gave them much to talk of until more company came in for the evening, and with the business of entertainment the death of Bonaventura was forgotten.

The next day Diana went to the Campo Santo of S. Paolo. and saw the painter's grave. It was by his own wish that he was buried in that ground, and his fame was such as fitted him for the place. Yet even as Diana looked at the piece of turned-up earth she felt the remembrance of Bonaventura to be less in her than it had been, only felt too that she would never again meet such a man who could, without any effort on his part, move her so much, and then while repelling her yet cause no hatred. Indeed, the more she thought on it the less could she tell why she had been so drawn forth, so presently departed to think of other things, and henceforward to remember him only as a picture she liked but could not understand. So little of a man of this earth had the painter been, and so soon do those of Southern blood forget their grief.

That same day Sandro also came thither, with regret in his heart for the man his passion had driven him to send out of this life. It is not every one who would come thus to see his victim's grave, but though Sandro knew quite well that, could he have the last month over again, he would act not a whit differently, yet he also felt sorry that the pleasant little gatherings were at an end. In addition to this he had a letter from the departed, as had Diana, and this is what it said:

"It has been a great grief to me, friend of mine, that I should by my speech so deeply wound you as to cause you to do—so much. I would have asked your pardon privately, had chance allowed. Yet you have unwittingly done me a service, for I have often of late been troubled by the fear that I must die in madness, so heavy were the pains of my various maladies, and now the end is soon and speedy, instead of a terrible tedious waiting for it."

There was no signature, or name of any kind. Sandro was touched by such considerateness, and brought a nosegay to place on the earth. This done, he stood there meditating, no longer about the painter, but

about his chance of getting Diana from her parents. Possibly they might be willing enough, but not she. He resolved to try in three days' time, and then again by-and-by, and then again after that, until by persistence he had worn down all opposition. The chief thing was to keep other men away, which would not be hard, for most were afraid of him and he knew it very well.

The little nosegay on the painter's grave withered fast in the fierce glare of the hot weather, now pouring day by day more heavily on the city, and his memory in men's hearts withered as fast. A few brief days after his burial the only creature who had any thought of the thin placid face was Diana, and that only when her eyes fell upon the picture he had given her; strange as it may seem, directly he died her passion for him melted away, and could find no sufficient mind's image by which to live. Remained only the spiritual portion of her former feeling, which in such a woman was small indeed. She remembered him only as a strange man, whom she must trust and respect entirely, were he still alive. Such was the variability of her mind that she came near to laughing at last, when the thought of his face, so puzzled and wistful at her sudden love-making, flitted for an instant before her. How all the other young men would have leaped at such a chance! Perhaps she would not have said what she did, had she not a feeling that he was the most innocent and temperate of mortals. Then, ceasing from her mirth as she had ceased from her grief, in her usual sudden way, she hung the "good cousin's" picture again on the nail and scanned it while combing out her great locks for the evening festa. And much she thought of the gay youths with fur round their mantles, youths of hot, amorous temper. All of them were rich, and one of rank. And then there was the elderly Count of Castellocalvo who told such interesting tales. She wished for the first time that he were rather younger and sighed at the passing memory that the pleasant meetings had ceased in the studio three streets away.

These were the thoughts suggested by the picture, a sketch rather than a finished work, but having genius. There by a rock-sepulchre such as most other painters represented it, sat an angel with the face of Sandro, idealised with the expression which the poor painter had thought the most significant of Sandro's real nature, and more youthful, but very resembling. The three Maries were all Diana in this way or that, but only in the chief one was the whole likeness, with the full lines of figure and red-gold hair, carried out to completeness.

Thus the dead hand of Bonaventura was causing what Sandro wished, and made her think much about one whom she had formerly noticed little more than one does any acquaintance often seen,—and so that evening, when Sandro spoke to her, instead of returning merely the civil reply which has no meaning, she conversed with him at length. True, the subject was their mutual regret for Bonaventura, and the Count, when he found that Diana appeared so strangely indifferent to the painter's memory, turned with a graceful sentence to other things. He was much

surprised at this, not believing it possible for her to so forget her cousin. But their talking went on and he was in heaven during the duration of it, seeing that at last she was interested in him as not with others. That night he decided that it was time for him to speak to her parents, so as to prevent other offers; also he thought that they probably would be glad to make alliance with a rich noble. And so in truth it proved.

Everything went smoothly and in proper form. Diana seemed a little surprised when informed that the Count of Castellocalvo wished to make her his wife, but as the other suitors were no richer and of lesser name, after a short while she agreed, and became his bride.

Sandro was a changed man from that time. He became generous and genial, he became a byword for uxoriousness, and even did he begin to grow fat. And so the winter passed, and with the spring the Countess del Castellocalvo, who had hitherto allowed herself to be adored with sufficient complaisance, began to be weary of the indulgent old man. For now she saw him to be old indeed, and his continual fondness grew tedious to her; most of all did she regret the gay gatherings which Sandro strove to lessen as he began to feel the pangs of jealousy. She took little care to soothe his irritation when the circle of gallants who had hung round her the whole evening had gone homewards; and at length Sandro, the man of many rough experiences, found himself sometimes quailing before the coarse vigour of her tongue when her anger was touched. For she was no timid or sensitive soul, nor ignorant of the brutalities of speech, nor sparing in their use when she might choose.

Worst of all, Sandro felt the weakness of old age now upon him, and every one of these quarrels made him feel how much less he was than once he had been, till at length he came to acquiesce sullenly in her freedom of life, and cast down his eyes when men looked at him with smiles of jesting pity as he passed them in the street. For it was now well known that his wife counted off her lovers upon her fingers.

Now he thought again the old thought of his lonely castello up in the hills, and meditated how he could get her there and hold her in the way most pleasant to his nature, under lock and key. For days he brooded over it, and as the hot weather began to come in once more, he spoke to her in her pleasant moods of the delightful country she had never seen, cool and airy, much visited by the rich nobles when Florence had grown too hot for pleasure. Until, by often doing this, he heard her say at last, "Why have we never yet been to Castellocalvo, my husband? What is the use of a cool retreat up in those beautiful hills if you never go there? And how hot it is getting to be here! Cristo! but I feel stifled!"

Then Sandro rejoiced, but was cunning in his reply.

"Oh yes, it is a cool spot," he said, "there is a fair woodland hard by, and little brooks flowing down; the breeze comes straight in from the river mouth and you can at times smell the salt. And the view is wide; you look over the cliff-edge right into the valley far down and see the boats and

ships passing to Pisa. But I do not care to go, I want to stay here in Florence."

At this tantalization she stamped her foot, saying, "Why! every one else is going into the hills. Do you want to be here all alone?"

"Yes, I like it, and we have had as much company as I desire. I want to stay here and study, as I used to do."

"Do you, my husband? And pray what am I to do to pass the time? I tell you I *will* not be kept here to roast on a gridiron! If you will stay, I will not. I will go, and take my friends with me, and leave you here alone. Do you like that?"

"Well," said Sandro as if grumbling, "I suppose I must allow you your will. When shall it be?"

"Now you are good!" said Diana very sweetly, "and I will give you a kiss. We will go to-morrow. Do you not see how much better it is for you to let me have my own way?"

"Truly I do," said Sandro with a grim smile.

And indeed Diana could not complain of any hindrance on the part of her old husband, that day. There was a great gathering that evening, and Sandro was blithe as a wrinkled man could be, while his wife drank merrily with her court of youths at the other end of the long table. Several times that evening he met her in the groves of their garden, dealing out a ready response of smiles, laughter, and the hot talk in which her soul delighted, but there was no more sullenness on his brow, none whatever. Many of his guests began to pity him somewhat, and listened charitably to his garrulity.

In truth he was very content with himself, for he had gained what he wished; she was coming up into the mountains with him, and once there, with a few well-paid guards, he would have her safe, and could do as he pleased,—starve her into humility or experiment on her with love-philtres.

A messenger had gone up thither as soon as he knew that she had set her heart on it, and all was ready. Once up there, and Luigi Rossi would have no power to interfere between his daughter and her husband. So that last evening in Florence was a very gay one, and Diana received as much adoration as she desired. The only annoyance, and a serious one this, was the intense heat that oozed out of the sun-saturated stones and earth without the faintest breath of breeze to lessen its strength. There were rumours of plague in the low-lying villages, and most folk told Diana that they envied her for her possession in the hills, for mayhap the scourge might visit Florence,—God avert it!

With early dawn the cavalcade set forth through the slumbering streets and the Roman gate was unbarred to let it pass. The captain of the guard was a friend of the Countess, and as she and her train filed through he saluted her with "a rividerla," to which she responded laughingly. She was very gay at that fresh hour, and the echo of her voice came back as the party travelled seawards by the road skirting the river, leaving the captain disconsolate and wondering where in this

empty season he could find another house for his entertainment and another lady for his compliments.

Sandro rode by her and entered into her mood, which suited him well, jesting and enduring meekly the wilfulness of her replies. She made no secret of her dominance over him, turning him to ridicule before the servants, and it all made the journey pleasant to her. Thus they followed the river awhile, and about midday came to a village of the marsh flats. Here they stayed for meal and siesta, and while the sun was hot overhead, a vision came to Sandro in the dark room where he and his lady reposed.

It seemed to him that he was lying wrapped in his mantle, half asleep and still watching the shadowed face of the sleeping Diana, loving her with his old hunger as her breast gently rose and fell, when he became aware of a figure, sitting at her feet and gazing at her with grave solicitude. But there was no desire in him to rise and order the man away, for he saw by the thin features and pale eyes that it was their dead friend Bonaventura, sitting as he had seen him last in life, only that his hands were crossed upon his lap and there was no smile upon his face.

For a long time the figure sat thus sighing but with no word, and, as the minutes passed, the face of Diana grew troubled and at last her eyes opened. And seeing the shape of the man she once had loved she sat up and stretched forth her hand, with a strange light shining in her eyes. But the figure shook its head sorrowfully and placed her hand back, so that she sank down as she was before, looking at him with love returned. Then a terrible odour came floating in at the window, and the figure waved its hands as if trying to ward something away from her, and then fell back as if some mighty power had pushed it. Then it covered its face with its thin fingers, as if in great grief, and faded into nothingness, and a darkness came over Sandro, so that he knew no more till he awoke with that strange odour still in the place, and going to the window he saw a man lying against the wall, stricken with plague.

At this he was very angry, and called in the host of the house, and asked him why he had been so careless as to allow such a living corpse to come into his courtyard. At which the host was full of apologies, and blamed others who were in his employ, saying that it was their neglect and not his that had permitted the wanderer's entrance. No one had the courage to go and touch the creature to turn him out upon the road, until one or two men went and so goaded him with long sharpened poles that at last he was fain to rise and get off as fast as he could, much moaning and complaining that no one would let him rest. So they chased him away into the marshes a little lower down, where he fell at last, unable to move for all their goadings, and died there, as they could see. Therefore they took all the dry wood and canes and reeds which they could find, and threw them over his corpse, hardly yet cold, and set them on fire, so that by eventide there was no plague left from

the fire's purifying influence. For when the plague hovers near, every man must band with his neighbour against such a foe.

Meantime Count Sandro and his wife departed in great wrath from the village, and travelled on and on up into the hills, through one valley after another, through groves of stone-pine that fringed the hillsides and stood out dusky against the sky as the sun began to settle down behind the ridges, through broad sunny spaces of open pasture-slope, and on into the shadow of the hills again. All this time they went upwards, till at last they came into a high valley, down whose centre flowed a brook with a whispering fall of cool waters, and saw, at the end of a long rock-shoulder on their leftward, the square tower and other buildings of the Castello Calvo, with a little village some distance away. The Castello was in the strong slanting sunlight, but the shades were on the valley. And at sight of his home, the master took a horn and blew a call, sending the echoes far to front and behind, and presently this was answered from the tower-top. Then they pushed on, and by sunset were in its courtyard.

It was a strong, snug place, and Sandro laughed as the gatebars rattled into the staples behind them. Diana laughed also—her first laugh since the hour when she had seen the vision of her dead love Bonaventura. She had been silent and thoughtful during all the interspace, and so had Sandro; neither had vented their anger in words, and in each mind came a suspicion of the other, for which neither could give a reason. Diana also wished to know if Sandro had seen the vision, while Sandro felt that there was some calamity hovering, yet neither would open heart to the other. Then Diana felt uneasy with a foreboding of death, for she understood that the kindly spirit of the man she had loved had not availed to fight against the Terror that lay outside her window at midday, and at the fresh sight of Bonaventura the little of seriousness in her was stirred to life, he being a human being she had ever respected and deeply cared for, though since his death she had forgotten him in the way of her nature, and led her life in the reckless fashion most loved by gay dames of that day.

So they rode into the castle court, and as the clang of hoofs on the stones ceased and Sandro laughed to think that she was now shut up in safety,—she suddenly hated him fiercely in her heart, for she saw by his manner that he had won some victory over her.

And in the next instant came a fiery shudder through her, which she knew to be the forerunner of the Plague,—and therewith she looked right into his eyes and laughed too, for she knew him to be in her hand. So they entered the hall, and sat there supping in comfort, till she said she would retire to rest. Then her waiting-woman came and accompanied her to her room, where presently also came Sandro.

When he entered, she rose and held out her hands to him, and whispered loving words. At which he was filled with such delight that his brain reeled, and he babbled, being suffocated with the power of her beauty on his heart, and he forgot all that happened lately, his jealousy

and shame before men, and folding his arms round her he kissed her countless times, while she kissed and fondled him in return till a faint odour arose.

Then Diana suddenly leaped up from her languorous loving and pushed him away, and spat upon him, telling him, as he stood amazed, that she hated him, and knew why he had laughed at her on entering, and that in revenge she had given him the Plague to die of. Then a madness came on her and she seized the lamp and dashed it out of the window so that it could be heard falling far down the cliff. And then she fell back, reviling him and taunting him with his age and foolishness, bewailing the memory of Bonaventura and weeping because there was no hope of seeing him again,—till her voice failed and she died, while Sandro listened in terror, all his old courage gone. And he sat there in the dark till daydawn, with shivers of fire running through him, and cursing her lying there so silent, having no hope of his own life. Then in the dawn he thought of his deed to his friend the painter, and how little pleasure he had had in return for so much toil of evil contrivance, and how much torture of mind, wondering how he could have been so infatuated in his elder years as to kill a good friend and take a young wife, and rising with pain, he went to the wall and began to scratch upon it with his dagger, groaning in great misery, until, as the sun filled the vales, he fell down and died, all alone, for no one came near when they became aware of the Plague odour by his door.

When at last came some who dared to bury them, they read this writing upon the wall.

“I implore thee, Bonaventura, to forgive me for my evil deed to thee. I am punished now for not living wisely in that way which the years had shown me to be best.

“We spoke of the soul, oh friend whom I killed, and I fear now the fate that awaits it. The corpse of Diana laughs at me in death; she has had her pleasure of me, as I forced her to do, and now I must bear the burden of her sins and mine. Be merciful to me, and do not come to watch me when the devils are taking their due.”

W. DELAPLAINE SCULL.