

The Widow's Lodger

"I should not be surprised," she said, smoothing Mary's long, rich hair caressingly, "to see a change by the morning; she rested so well last night."

"You were right in your predictions before," he said, touching the white face on the pillow gently with his lips. "I hope it may be so again."

Mrs. Allenby did not leave her charge all the day. She slept and rested for a few hours in the early evening, and then resumed her vigil. By midnight the house was quiet and the gas turned out—the only light to be seen was in the sick chamber and Mr. Parker's room. He had his reading-lamp before him, and sat studying a treatise on toxicology. The door of his room was partly open.

The hours passed slowly, but he had a sense of drowsiness. A church clock in a neighboring square chimed the quarters and struck the hours until it had told three past midnight—the time he knew for Mary's sedative—the hour at which she nearly always woke. She had been so accustomed to her medicine at this time that she woke by the force of habit to take it.

Strangely enough she did not awake on this occasion, and Mrs. Allenby, after looking at her attentively and meditatively, drew a long breath, and went to the table near her couch, divided from Mary's bedstead by a heavy screen of many folds. She poured the medicine out with a steady hand, set the bottle down, and then took a small phial from the bosom of her dress. From this she measured a certain number of drops, counting them carefully as they fell into the glass.

As she replaced the stopper, a stifled cry rose to her lips, for both her hands were seized from behind, as the terrible eyes of the mulatto looked into her own.

CHAPTER XV. HOW IT ENDED.

Just as she was, with the poisoned medicine in one hand and the poison itself in the other, Sensi forced Mrs. Allenby into the next room, step by step. The wretched woman would have screamed for help—her dread of him was stronger for the moment than the dread of discovery—but with the fascination of those terrible eyes upon her she could not utter a sound.

As he passed the landing he sent his voice down the staircase, scarcely above a whisper, but it went through the house.

"Mr. Parker.—"Mr. Parker!"

The student heard it, so did the old gentleman, so did George Hyde. Fearing the worst, they went upstairs almost together, but Mr. Parker alone knew the meaning of what they saw.

"What is it?" Mr. Barker asked. "My child—my darling!—Arthur's wife! Is she—?"

"Safe, I hope," said Mr. Parker, quietly, "and likely to recover now that we know the cause of her disease. And she," he went on, crying bitterly, "is Margaret's mother! How can she be told of this?"

So far they could understand nothing, for Mr. Parker could not say another word. Sensi, however, did not lose his presence of mind. Now that there were witnesses present he released Mrs. Allenby, and placed the glass of medicine and the phial on the table. These told their own story to Dr. Hyde.

"Tell them," Mr. Parker said to the mulatto; "I cannot."

The mulatto told them, more clearly perhaps than the student could have done; and, through the horror which had come upon him, Mr. Barker could only notice the singular stillness which had come upon his sister-in-law. She did not move or speak when he asked her if the fearful tale were true. She only replied with a slow inclination of the head.

When Mr. Barker rose to his full height Mrs. Allenby knew him at once; he was, in nothing, like the shambling, high-shouldered figure she had seen once or twice going up and down the stairs. The hideous blue spectacles were in his pocket, and he no longer made a pretence of being afflicted with the gout, and, in spite of her stricken faculties, she saw that Mary's eccentric lodger and Michael Allenby were the same man.

What he might have said no one could tell, but he began in a way that showed the full measure of his anger. George Hyde stopped him, however, and lifted the heavy figure of Mrs. Allenby in the chair. She fell back again limp and helpless.

"You need not say a word," he said to Michael. "Heaven has punished her."

"What is the matter with her?"

"Paralysis—hopeless and incurable."

And so it was. The sudden shock of the two swift and silent hands which grasped her own, when she thought herself alone, and the deadly ferocity of the mulatto's terrible eyes had done their work, and Mrs. Allenby was paralysed from head to foot; the brain was clear and active, and that added to her punishment.

"And she is Margaret's mother," Mr. Parker said again. "How can we tell her?"

"She never must be told," said Michael, gravely. "This is a secret to be kept by ourselves. I can trust you and George, and I can answer for Sensi. You have behaved with rare good sense and discretion, Mr. Parker. Does that wretched woman understand me, George, when I tell her for her children's sake, no one will ever know how this happened."

The wretched woman made a sign that she did understand.

"Her motive," he went on, "though it must ever be a matter of conjecture, can easily be arrived at by me. Her hatred of Mary, and her desire to take possession of Arthur's boy and my money led her to this."

Though he had not spoken to her, Mrs. Allenby responded with the same sign, a slow tremulous and forward motion of the head.

"She nursed Mary through the fever," he continued, "the better to throw us off our guard, and prepare the way for the present diabolical piece of treachery. You see how it has recoiled upon herself. Should Mary live I could almost forgive her."

Should Mary live! George stole into the room, and came back in a moment.

"Mary is asleep," he said.

"And without that cruel poison in her veins," said the old man. "May Heaven help us in our work of bringing her back to health. I have told you, George, it was through this woman's letters to me I first conceived the idea of coming here in disguise to see for myself what Arthur's wife was like. She," and he pointed to the stricken figure in the chair, "told me this girl was lowly-born and ill-bred, the child of a miserable, drunken, literary hack, and that she herself was suspected of being worse."

Dr. Hyde shuddered.

"Of course," Michael said, "I did not know. I only knew that when I left England my old friend Lennard was a scholarly gentleman, whose only fault was his poverty. I could not tell how far he may have drifted, but I could not believe that he had done so, and I know now from his own child's lips, one of the best and purest girls that ever lived, and only equalled in the beauty of her mind by my niece Margaret, that his life was a martyrdom. I also know how nobly she behaved; and so this woman's treachery and sin failed and have found her out."

The drooping figure in the chair seemed to shrink into itself at this, and her head fell forward heavily. They sent for her daughters and wrongfully told them that their mother had given way, worn out with nursing, and they never knew the truth.

But it was in this time of trial that one character gave evidence of a generous patience and filial affection hitherto hidden entirely. Victoria took the care of her mother upon herself. She was jealous, almost savagely so, of any interference on Margaret's part. Mrs. Allenby lived for many years, and Victoria never left her. No one could interpret those mute signs and inarticulate sounds so well, and to the end of her days Miss Allenby hated Mary as the cause of the calamity which had overtaken her mother.

Mary lived, and made George Hyde a proudly happy man; and Uncle Michael, with princely generosity, established Mr. Mortimer Postlethwaite Parker in a practice, insisting, as a humorous condition, that he should marry Margaret. It is believed even to this day that he played the part of match-maker—some say he went so far as to threaten his niece, if she rejected the dearest fellow in the world next to George Hyde. George had taken Arthur's place in the old man's heart.

But no one ever took the place held there by Arthur's little son. As the boy grew out of babyhood he became more and more attached to Unky Bako, and as the years went on, when other little ones came to Mary and George, the boy lived almost entirely with Uncle Michael.

When Mary was told the truth she was not greatly surprised.

"I did not quite think that," she said; "though I always thought there was something strange about you, Uncle Michael; and though I love my Uncle Michael very dearly, I should not have cared for him half so much if he had not been so curiously like my eccentric lodger!"

It soon became an easy matter for those who had known him as Mr. Barker to speak of him as Uncle Michael, but never with little Arthur; as Unky Bako the old man began, and as Unky Bako he remained, and perhaps there was no name he loved so well to hear.

Sensi stayed with them to the last, faithful as a dog, gentle, affectionate, and grateful always.

MY LADY'S LOVE.

An Italian Love Story in Which Figure a Countess and a Street-Musician.

How cold and gray the skies are, with never a glimmer of sunlight for two weeks past—O Dio mio, can this be Italy in summertime, with breezes sweeping down from the hills with the freshness and sharpness of winter. No flower-girls around the fountains—even the crowd in the Pincio dwindled to a few grand carriages and fewer pedestrians. Little Beppino, standing near the gateway of the great Farnese Palace, grumbled to himself about the weather, and draws his ragged jacket closer on his shoulders.

Yet he is not so little—one should call him slight—a lad of barely 18, with swarthy cheeks and strong, sturdy, yet slender limbs, graceful as a young deer when he moves; with eyes of deep blue which seem to look away beyond the noise and clamor of a city to the peaceful mountains, where there is rest and quiet and the eternal snows.

His old battered cap covers completely the dark hair which curls lightly over his head. The brow is a trifle low, the mouth is rather large, and the lips too

thick, but there is a beauty of expression in the eyes forever looking to the distance, and a gentleness of gesture and a subtle grace of motion which show that a drop of pure patrician blood mingles with the common stock in his coarse purple veins.

He has been playing for a party up in the Via Mascherone, and one of the gay ladies there paid him with a kiss instead of soldi. And now Beppino curses himself heartily for not refusing the one and demanding the other, for kisses will not buy the supper he is almost starving for, and soldi would.

However, it is over, and he will not play there again. Those grand dames have no sympathy with such as he—how could they, when they talked so openly of their hostess ruining young Prince Ferrar, just come to his majority, and everything spent within the year? Well, he was glad now that she had not given him the soldi, since it was not absolutely hers to give; you see he was too young to reason very correctly, and he did not appreciate kisses. It was past 4, and so cold. But it was colder yet in the little garret-room he called his home. Should he go on to the Piazza di Spagna, where there were generally some Americans and English inside of Piale's Library, who always listened when he played? Or should he go to his garret?

While in such indecision the doors of the palace opened, and a lady with two gentlemen came down the steps.

She was tall and dark, with a haughty, indifferent look on her handsome features. Her eyes were half veiled with their heavy lashes, and she kept them on the ground as she came along, but she smiled once at something one of the men said, and O how cruelly the lips curled even at a light jest.

Half way to her carriage she suddenly stopped, for her eyes fell on Beppino. "Merely one of the lazzaroni," said the man with the blonde beard, and opened the carriage door with a low bow.

"Mon ami, I will look at him if I please, and as long as I please," answered the lady imperiously.

"Chere Comtesse," the man replied, with a shrug of the shoulders, "don't for worlds get that malady which is so unfashionable for your sex—philanthropy. It generally comes to women with age—like religion does. We all believe you to be under 30. Let no undue manifestation of the quality I have mentioned destroy that belief."

The other man—the one with dark hair and tawny skin, in a uniform of blue, with white and yellow braiding, such as the Garde Imperiale of the Second Empire used to wear—laughed brutally, and struck Beppino with his cane.

"Victor!" cried the Comtesse, sternly. "I won't have him abused, and I will be philanthropic—for once."

She raised her eyes this time from their haughty, indifferent languor, and turned them full on Beppino. Her hand was outstretched to him—he saw a gold piece shining in the cold, gray light.

He flushed deeply, he knew not why, for he had often taken gold before, why should he flash then—he, a poor little beggar, whose sole idea of living was to ramble through the streets the day long, watching like a hungry hawk for far less than she held out to him.

"There will be another for you tomorrow," said his lady, looking at him for a moment. "Will you come?"

"Ah, Miladi!" cried Beppino, "I will play for you night and day for this, but I cannot take it and not play."

"O, Diavolo!" muttered the dark man called Victor, "we don't want any concert in the street. Get out, you vagabond!"

"Give him your address, chere amie, in case he would like to call," said he of the blonde beard, ironically.

"I'll take you at your word, Baron," said the Comtesse, and drawing a card from her pocket she gave it to Beppino.

"There is my address. Come to me the day after to-morrow."

Then she got into her carriage, and the men followed laughing. Beppino stood motionless for a long time. Should he come there again on the morrow, and would she be there also, and would there be another gold-piece, which was most important of all?

Then he sighed. Ah, no. Doubtless she would forget. It was only a whim of my lady's to be charitable. It was quite likely such a whim would be quickly supplanted by others less noble and good.

Still, he must wander somewhere on the morrow, and the pavement by the great palace was much the same as any. The French Embassy were occupying it now, and there were always some young Frenchmen going and coming who liked much to listen to martial music, in time of peace especially, when they could make their cigarettes at ease and join in the chorus of "Aux armes, Citoyens!"

The gold-piece was not all spent for a feast that evening, but the greater part of it prudently laid by for other days, also, when kisses were given in place of soldi, for Beppino had small faith in her ladyship's word.

At 5 o'clock the next day he stood again by the gateway of the palace. The Comtesse again came out, but she was alone. She approached Beppino, and put her small, gloved hand on his shoulder. Its light touch sent a sudden thrill through his slender frame, and involuntarily his eyes drooped before her steady gaze.

"You are here as I told you, as I knew you would be," she said as if talking softly to herself.

Then she appeared to remember the object which had prompted this obedience, and drawing from her pocket a

gold piece she offered it in silence.

Timidly, hesitatingly, Beppino regarded it. Some inexplicable feeling urged him to reject it, but the other would soon be spent, and times were dull, and so many would proffer kisses instead of soldi, as that grand dame did yesterday, though why he could not tell, being a modest lad and placing no value whatever on his wonderful advantages of face and figure, and—and so he would take it, with many thanks and blessings on the beautiful giver. But his face burned hotly as his fingers closed upon it, and he saw that she still gazed at him as steadily as ever.

"Will you come to me to-morrow?" she asked abruptly.

"Will I come?" he answered earnestly. "O, Miladi, I will come and play for you, or do anything you tell me, for my gratefulness." There was a passionate ring in his voice which seemed to please her, for she smiled—not the smile she had given the day before to the Boccaccio-like story which the gentleman in blue and yellow had been relating, but a smile full of gentleness, and—Beppo thought—compassion.

"Very well," she said. "See that you do come. I am not accustomed to—being disappointed." She had almost said disobeyed, but something in his face, his manner, had strangely inclined her towards him, and she could not be rough to him as she often was to—the others. Besides, he was not in bondage yet, and he might rebel.

The next day near evening Beppo took his way towards the spot indicated by the address on the card.

My lady's villa was a long way off from the crowded Pincio and the streets which were most familiar to his footsteps, and once he paused uncertain whether he had found the right road or not. Several men were coming out of a gateway which opened into a garden dense with trees and shrubs, in the midst of which Beppo could discern a small stonehouse.

He looked at the card. Surely this was the place, yet he would not venture in while the richly-dressed gentlemen—nobles, may be—were lounging around the gate.

Finally they shook hands and separated, and two came down the shady path by Beppo.

"Diavolo!" cried one, who was evidently much intoxicated, for his gait was unsteady and he clung to his companion for evident support. "What's the little rascal doing? Cospetto! but we'll take him back with us and have a dance with my lady before the ball begins to-night—eh, Marco?"

The one addressed as Marco looked at Beppo closely, and asked why he was there at that hour and where he was going.

"I am going to the Comtesse de Charnean," replied the lad.

"No use for baggage there," said the man who had spoken first. "We're pretty much the same ourselves—eh, Marco? And we—we've been turned off in consequence."

"But Miladi sent for me, and so I am going," answered Beppo boldly, endeavoring to push past them.

The one called Marco caught him by the shoulder and held him at arm's length.

"Sent for you, did she?" he ejaculated. "Then go, in God's name, though I never thought she'd fancy such as you."

With brutal roughness he thrust Beppo from him, and the two went on laughing boisterously.

Beppo looked after them wonderingly—he could not comprehend their words—then passed on to the gate and along the path bordered with yellow anemones which stretched out on both sides like broad strips of meadow.

The footman seemed to know him, for he was not repulsed—far from it—for with the utmost deference the man ushered him into a small salon, and said that my lady would presently be down.

The rich carpet was like softest velvet to his feet—soft like the moss which grew on the hillsides, but the fragrance of Nature was wanting. Instead, there seemed a strange odor of stale tobacco and perfume mingled together, and the atmosphere of the room was very close.

But Beppo did not notice or comment on that unfavorably. There was invariably a smell of tobacco in the few houses where he played, and sometimes the granddames smoked before his face and drank iced wines and sherbet with the avidity of troopers.

But surely my lady did not do those things?

He caught himself speculating as to the probability of her having done so or not, and straightway took up his violin and ran his finger over the strings and hummed a little air from "Figaro" to banish from his mind such disloyal thoughts towards one who had already been to him a benefactress.

The velvet curtains at the lower end of the room were carefully pushed aside, and in their dim shadow stood my lady, and her eyes fell on the slender figure by the window with the same intent expression with which they had regarded him the previous day.

She was a woman of apparently 26 or 27, but in reality much older, with features which would have impressed even an ordinary observer with a sudden sense of their owner's marked individuality. The square, broad chin gave proof of vigor and determination, but it was white and dimpled. The mouth was rather large, but beautifully formed lips and delicate curves about it tempered the harsher lines which it showed perceptibly when in repose.

The brow was low, and gently receded beneath the hair, which fell over it in

wavy masses. The eyes were deep and lustrous, but burning ever with a dim, monotonous light, as if the hauteur which overshadowed her whole countenance had its abiding place in them.

The head was well shaped save for the fact that there was more behind the ears than one usually finds save in those completely given over by Nature and habit to material pleasures.

But it seemed as if there was a sense of restraint—of instinctive repression upon her as she stood in the presence of that poor little beggar, and hesitated ere she tried the effect of her soft, seductive beauty upon him. Some subtle feeling emanating from the better spirit which often strove with numerous others within her for supremacy, cast a softened influence upon the wayward woman of the world.

With a far different manner from the one she had intended to assume she glided towards him, and spoke, and told him he was welcome.

He gratefully kissed the hand she gave him, then held it in his own a moment, and seeing she said nothing, raised it to his lips again.

"I—I have come to play a little," he ventured timidly.

She started—the intentness of her look vanished. She shrugged her shoulders and smiled—the smile that Beppo did not like and could not bear to see.

"Eh bien, are you so soon tired of being idle? Then play me something—what you will."

She sat down on a low sofa near and motioned Beppo to proceed with his self-imposed task at once.

His fingers and bow flew over the strings of the violin with loving touch. But a strain from an old song of his early home in the mountains brought a bright color to my lady's face and a sudden quiver to her voice.

"Where did you learn that?" she asked, interrupting him with a gesture of annoyance.

"Oh, far, far off, in Serra—in Tuscany, miladi, when I was a little lad," he answered, and went on.

When the music ceased he looked at her questioningly, and when she did not answer he asked if there were others she would have him play which she liked better, but she only shook her head.

"Don't I please you, miladi?" he asked, disappointedly.

"Yes; but that is enough. I don't care for mountain music. When you come again have something else, mon enfant."

He did not understand her French phrases, and he did not like the hard, metallic sound of her voice, which had been so gentle and sweet in its greeting, but he only said: "When shall I come again?" She considered for a moment, then answered:

"I am at home every evening at this time. You may come again to-morrow." She waved her hand with a careless gesture, then turned her back on him as he left the room.

Beppo went away thoroughly satisfied. How kind to let one little tune pay for the two gold pieces! And then how good she had been to him, though to be sure her humor had been so quick to change. But then one can never depend on a woman's humors, and Beppo had not played among them these ten years without finding that out.

But she was different from those in the Via Mascherone—he took peculiar satisfaction in repeating that to himself, though he could not say in what particular, circumstantial evidence being strong against her, for the house smelt fearfully of tobacco; and then that big drunken fellow who had spoken to him near the gate—well, he could not comprehend it all; but he would not wrong her by so much as an evil thought.

Not only the next day did Beppo go to the Comtesse de Charnean's villa, but many days thereafter, and the gold pieces were plenty, and he lived like a Prince among his ragged comrades. "I do not like such smell of smoke around," he said one evening when the atmosphere was unusually stifling and close. "I cannot play where the fresh air does not come." There was not the slightest fault to be found with the atmosphere of the villa after that.

In his dull way he saw that she strove to please him, to gain his favor and friendship, though why they should be of any consequence to a great lady like the Comtesse he could not guess, and did not trouble his head with vain imaginings.

One night he was later than usual. A noisy crowd around the Church of St. Clement detained him, and it was past 9 when he entered the small salon.

The heavy chandeliers were ablaze with light, and she stood directly under them. She was clad in a ball costume of creamy satin with rare jewels flashing on her breast and arms.

Beppo paused on the threshold at that vision of beauty met his gaze. She smiled, and stretched out her hand to him, and blinded, bewildered, he went slowly towards her.

He bowed, and said bashfully: "Ah, miladi is so charming!" But that was not enough for her. Deeply in love with Beppo, she longed for the admiration which only love can give.

"I want to be charming—to you," she murmured, and drew him to her, so near that he felt her hot breath on his forehead. "Why will you not understand?" she said, her arm resting caressingly on his neck. "Caro, caro, why are you blind to me?"

Never blind to her beauty—oh no. Could he be blind to her love, so freely offered, too?

[To be Continued.]