



Nisida

NISIDA--1825

If our readers, tempted by the Italian proverb about seeing Naples and then dying, were to ask us what is the most favourable moment for visiting the enchanted city, we should advise them to land at the mole, or at Mergellina, on a fine summer day and at the hour when some solemn procession is moving out of the cathedral. Nothing can give an idea of the profound and simple-hearted emotion of this populace, which has enough poetry in its soul to believe in its own happiness. The whole town adorns herself and attires herself like a bride for her wedding; the dark facades of marble and granite disappear beneath hangings of silk and festoons of flowers; the wealthy display their dazzling luxury, the poor drape themselves proudly in their rags. Everything is light, harmony, and perfume; the sound is like the hum of an immense hive, interrupted by a thousandfold outcry of joy impossible to describe. The bells repeat their sonorous sequences in every key; the arcades echo afar with the triumphal marches of military bands; the sellers of sherbet and water-melons sing out their deafening flourish from throats of copper. People form into groups; they meet, question, gesticulate; there are gleaming looks, eloquent gestures, picturesque attitudes; there is a general animation, an unknown charm, an indefinable intoxication. Earth is very near to heaven, and it is easy to understand that, if God were to banish death from this delightful spot, the Neapolitans would desire no other paradise.

The story that we are about to tell opens with one of these magical pictures. It was the Day of the Assumption in the year 1825; the sun had been up some four or five hours, and the long Via da Forcella, lighted from end to end by its slanting rays, cut the town in two, like a ribbon of watered silk. The lava pavement, carefully cleaned, shone like any mosaic, and the royal troops, with their proudly waving plumes, made a double living hedge on each side of the street. The balconies, windows, and terraces, the stands with their unsubstantial balustrades, and the wooden galleries set up during the night, were loaded with spectators, and looked not unlike the boxes of a theatre. An immense crowd, forming a medley of the brightest colours, invaded the reserved space and broke through the military barriers, here and there, like an overflowing torrent. These intrepid sightseers, nailed to their places, would have waited half their lives without giving the least sign of impatience.

At last, about noon, a cannon-shot was heard, and a cry of general satisfaction followed it. It was the signal that the procession had crossed the threshold of the church. In the same moment a charge of carabineers swept off the people who were obstructing the middle of the street, the regiments of the line opened floodgates for the overflowing crowd, and soon nothing remained on the causeway but some scared dog, shouted at by the people, hunted off by the soldiers, and fleeing at full speed. The procession came out through the Via di Vescovato. First came the guilds of merchants and craftsmen, the hatters, weavers, bakers, butchers, cutlers, and goldsmiths. They wore the prescribed dress: black coats, knee breeches, low shoes and silver buckles. As the countenances of these gentlemen offered nothing very interesting to the multitude, whisperings arose, little by little, among the spectators, then some bold spirits ventured a jest or two upon the fattest or the baldest of the townsmen, and at last the boldest of the lazzaroni slipped between the soldiers' legs to collect the wax that was running down from the lighted tapers.

After the craftsmen, the religious orders marched past, from the Dominicans to the Carthusians, from the Carmelites to the Capuchins. They advanced slowly, their eyes cast down, their step austere, their hands on their hearts; some faces were rubicund and shining, with large cheek-bones and rounded chins, herculean heads upon bullnecks; some, thin and livid, with cheeks hollowed by suffering and penitence, and with the look of living ghosts; in short, here were the two sides of monastic life.

Nisida

At this moment, Nunziata and Gelsomina, two charming damsels, taking advantage of an old corporal's politeness, pushed forward their pretty heads into the first rank. The break in the line was conspicuous; but the sly warrior seemed just a little lax in the matter of discipline.

"Oh, there is Father Bruno!" said Gelsomina suddenly. "Good-day, Father Bruno."

"Hush, cousin! People do not talk to the procession."

"How absurd! He is my confessor. May I not say good-morning to my confessor?"

"Silence, chatterboxes!"

"Who was that spoke?"

"Oh, my dear, it was Brother Cucuzza, the begging friar."

"Where is he? where is he?"

"There he is, along there, laughing into his beard. How bold he is!"

"Ah, God in heaven! If we were to dream of him---"

While the two cousins were pouring out endless comments upon the Capuchins and their beards, the capes of the canons and the surplices of the seminarists, the 'feroci' came running across from the other side to re-establish order with the help of their gun-stocks.

"By the blood of my patron saint," cried a stentorian voice, "if I catch you between my finger and thumb, I will straighten your back for the rest of your days."

"Who are you falling out with, Gennaro?"

"With this accursed hunchback, who has been worrying my back for the last hour, as though he could see through it."

"It is a shame," returned the hunchback in a tone of lamentation; "I have been here since last night, I slept out of doors to keep my place, and here is this abominable giant comes to stick himself in front of me like an obelisk."

The hunchback was lying like a Jew, but the crowd rose unanimously against the obelisk. He was, in one way, their superior, and majorities are always made up of pigmies.

"Hi! Come down from your stand!"

"Hi! get off your pedestal!"

"Off with your hat!"

"Down with your head!"

"Sit down!"

"Lie down!"

This revival of curiosity expressing itself in invectives evidently betokened the crisis of the show. And indeed the chapters of canons, the clergy and bishops, the pages and chamberlains, the representatives of the city, and the gentlemen of the king's chamber now appeared, and finally the king himself, who, bare-headed and carrying a taper, followed the magnificent statue of the Virgin. The contrast was striking: after the grey-headed monks and pale novices came brilliant young captains, affronting heaven with the points of their moustaches,

Nisida

riddling the latticed windows with killing glances, following the procession in an absent-minded way, and interrupting the holy hymns with scraps of most unorthodox conversation.

"Did you notice, my dear Doria, how like a monkey the old Marchesa d'Acquasparta takes her raspberry ice?"

"Her nose takes the colour of the ice. What fine bird is showing off to her?"

"It is the Cyrenian."

"I beg your pardon! I have not seen that name in the Golden Book."

"He helps the poor marquis to bear his cross."

The officer's profane allusion was lost in the prolonged murmur of admiration that suddenly rose from the crowd, and every gaze was turned upon one of the young girls who was strewing flowers before the holy Madonna. She was an exquisite creature. Her head glowing in the sun shine, her feet hidden amid roses and broom-blossom, she rose, tall and fair, from a pale cloud of incense, like some seraphic apparition. Her hair, of velvet blackness, fell in curls half-way down her shoulders; her brow, white as alabaster and polished as a mirror, reflected the rays of the sun; her beautiful and finely arched black eye-brows melted into the opal of her temples; her eyelids were fast down, and the curled black fringe of lashes veiled a glowing and liquid glance of divine emotion; the nose, straight, slender, and cut by two easy nostrils, gave to her profile that character of antique beauty which is vanishing day by day from the earth. A calm and serene smile, one of those smiles that have already left the soul and not yet reached the lips, lifted the corners of her mouth with a pure expression of infinite beatitude and gentleness. Nothing could be more perfect than the chin that completed the faultless oval of this radiant countenance; her neck of a dead white, joined her bosom in a delicious curve, and supported her head gracefully like the stalk of a flower moved by a gentle breeze. A bodice of crimson velvet spotted with gold outlined her delicate and finely curved figure, and held in by means of a handsome gold lace the countless folds of a full and flowing skirt, that fell to her feet like those severe robes in which the Byzantine painters preferred to drape their angels. She was indeed a marvel, and so rare and modest of beauty had not been seen within the memory of man.

Among those who had gazed most persistently at her was observed the young Prince of Brancaleone, one of the foremost nobles of the kingdom. Handsome, rich, and brave, he had, at five-and-twenty, outdone the lists of all known Don Juans. Fashionable young women spoke very ill of him and adored him in secret; the most virtuous made it their rule to fly from him, so impossible did resistance appear. All the young madcaps had chosen him for their model; for his triumphs robbed many a Miltiades of sleep, and with better cause. In short, to get an idea of this lucky individual, it will be enough to know that as a seducer he was the most perfect thing that the devil had succeeded in inventing in this progressive century. The prince was dressed out for the occasion in a sufficiently grotesque costume, which he wore with ironic gravity and cavalier ease. A black satin doublet, knee breeches, embroidered stockings, and shoes with gold buckles, formed the main portions of his dress, over which trailed a long brocaded open-sleeved robe lined with ermine, and a magnificent diamond-hilted sword. On account of his rank he enjoyed the rare distinction of carrying one of the six gilded staves that supported the plumed and embroidered canopy.

As soon as the procession moved on again, Eligi of Brancaleone gave a side glance to a little man as red as a lobster, who was walking almost at his side, and carrying in his right hand, with all the solemnity that he could muster, his excellency's hat. He was a footman in gold-laced livery, and we beg leave to give a brief sketch of his history. Trespolo was the child of poor but thieving parents, and on that account

Nisida

was early left an orphan. Being at leisure, he studied life from an eminently social aspect. If we are to believe a certain ancient sage, we are all in the world to solve a problem: as to Trespolo, he desired to live without doing anything; that was his problem. He was, in turn, a sacristan, a juggler, an apothecary's assistant, and a cicerone, and he got tired of all these callings. Begging was, to his mind, too hard work, and it was more trouble to be a thief than to be an honest man. Finally he decided in favour of contemplative philosophy. He had a passionate preference for the horizontal position, and found the greatest pleasure in the world in watching the shooting of stars. Unfortunately, in the course of his meditations this deserving man came near to dying of hunger; which would have been a great pity, for he was beginning to accustom himself not to eat anything. But as he was predestined by nature to play a small part in our story, God showed him grace for that time, and sent to his assistance--not one of His angels, the rogue was not worthy of that, but--one of Brancaleone's hunting dogs. The noble animal sniffed round the philosopher, and uttered a little charitable growl that would have done credit to one of the brethren of Mount St. Bernard. The prince, who was returning in triumph from hunting, and who, by good luck, had that day killed a bear and ruined a countess, had an odd inclination to do a good deed. He approached the plebeian who was about to pass into the condition of a corpse, stirred the thing with his foot, and seeing that there was still a little hope, bade his people bring him along.

From that day onward, Trespolo saw the dream of his life nearly realised. Something rather above a footman and rather below a house steward, he became the confidant of his master, who found his talents most useful; for this Trespolo was as sharp as a demon and almost as artful as a woman. The prince, who, like an intelligent man as he was, had divined that genius is naturally indolent, asked nothing of him but advice; when tiresome people wanted thrashing, he saw to that matter himself, and, indeed, he was the equal of any two at such work. As nothing in this lower world, however, is complete, Trespolo had strange moments amid this life of delights; from time to time his happiness was disturbed by panics that greatly diverted his master; he would mutter incoherent words, stifle violent sighs, and lose his appetite. The root of the matter was that the poor fellow was afraid of going to hell. The matter was very simple: he was afraid of everything; and, besides, it had often been preached to him that the Devil never allowed a moment's rest to those who were ill-advised enough to fall into his clutches. Trespolo was in one of his good moods of repentance, when the prince, after gazing on the young girl with the fierce eagerness of a vulture about to swoop upon its prey, turned to speak to his intimate adviser. The poor servant understood his master's abominable design, and not wishing to share the guilt of a sacrilegious conversation, opened his eyes very wide and turned them up to heaven in ecstatic contemplation. The prince coughed, stamped his foot, moved his sword so as to hit Trespolo's legs, but could not get from him any sign of attention, so absorbed did he appear in celestial thoughts. Brancaleone would have liked to wring his neck, but both his hands were occupied by the staff of the canopy; and besides, the king was present.

At last they were drawing nearer to the church of St. Clara, where the Neapolitan kings were buried, and where several princesses of the blood, exchanging the crown for the veil, have gone to bury themselves alive. The nuns, novices, and abbess, hidden behind shutters, were throwing flowers upon the procession. A bunch fell at the feet of the Prince of Brancaleone.

"Trespolo, pick up that nosegay," said the prince, so audibly that his servant had no further excuse. "It is from Sister Theresa," he added, in a low voice; "constancy is only to be found, nowadays, in a convent."

Trespolo picked up the nosegay and came towards his master, looking like a man who was being strangled.

"Who is that girl?" the latter asked him shortly.

Nisida

"Which one?" stammered the servant.

"Forsooth! The one walking in front of us."

"I don't know her, my lord."

"You must find out something about her before this evening."

"I shall have to go rather far afield."

"Then you do know her, you intolerable rascal! I have half a mind to have you hanged like a dog."

"For pity's sake, my lord, think of the salvation of your soul, of your eternal life."

"I advise you to think of your temporal life. What is her name?"

"She is called Nisida, and is the prettiest girl in the island that she is named after. She is innocence itself. Her father is only a poor fisherman, but I can assure your excellency that in his island he is respected like a king."

"Indeed!" replied the prince, with an ironical smile. "I must own, to my great shame, that I have never visited the little island of Nisida. You will have a boat ready for me to-morrow, and then we will see."

He interrupted himself suddenly, for the king was looking at him; and calling up the most sonorous bass notes that he could find in the depths of his throat, he continued with an inspired air, "Genitori genitoque laus et jubilatio."

"Amen," replied the serving-man in a ringing voice.

Nisida, the beloved daughter of Solomon, the fisherman, was, as we have said, the loveliest flower of the island from which she derived her name. That island is the most charming spot, the most delicious nook with which we are acquainted; it is a basket of greenery set delicately amid the pure and transparent waters of the gulf, a hill wooded with orange trees and oleanders, and crowned at the summit by a marble castle. All around extends the fairy-like prospect of that immense amphitheatre, one of the mightiest wonders of creation. There lies Naples, the voluptuous syren, reclining carelessly on the seashore; there, Portici, Castellamare, and Sorrento, the very names of which awaken in the imagination a thousand thoughts of poetry and love; there are Pausilippo, Baiae, Puozzoli, and those vast plains, where the ancients fancied their Elysium, sacred solitudes which one might suppose peopled by the men of former days, where the earth echoes under foot like an empty grave, and the air has unknown sounds and strange melodies.

Solomon's hut stood in that part of the island which, turning its back to the capital, beholds afar the blue crests of Capri. Nothing could be simpler or brighter. The brick walls were hung with ivy greener than emeralds, and enamelled with white bell-flowers; on the ground floor was a fairly spacious apartment, in which the men slept and the family took their meals; on the floor above was Nisida's little maidenly room, full of coolness, shadows, and mystery, and lighted by a single casement that looked over the gulf; above this room was a terrace of the Italian kind, the four pillars of which were wreathed with vine branches, while its vine-clad arbour and wide parapet were overgrown with moss and wild flowers. A little hedge of hawthorn, which had been respected for ages, made a kind of rampart around the fisherman's premises, and defended his house better than deep moats and castellated walls could have done. The boldest roisterers of the place would have preferred to fight before the parsonage and in the precincts of the church rather than in front of Solomon's little enclosure. Otherwise, this was the meeting place of the

Nisida

whole island. Every evening, precisely at the same hour, the good women of the neighbourhood came to knit their woollen caps and tell the news. Groups of little children, naked, brown, and as mischievous as little imps, sported about, rolling on the grass and throwing handfuls of sand into the other's eyes, heedless of the risk of blinding, while their mothers were engrossed in that grave gossip which marks the dwellers in villages. These gatherings occurred daily before the fisherman's house; they formed a tacit and almost involuntary homage, consecrated by custom, and of which no one had ever taken special account; the envy that rules in small communities would soon have suppressed them. The influence which old Solomon had over his equals had grown so simply and naturally, that no one found any fault with it, and it had only attracted notice when everyone was benefiting by it, like those fine trees whose growth is only observed when we profit by their shade. If any dispute arose in the island, the two opponents preferred to abide by the judgment of the fisherman instead of going before the court; he was fortunate enough or clever enough to send away both parties satisfied. He knew what remedies to prescribe better than any physician, for it seldom happened that he or his had not felt the same ailments, and his knowledge, founded on personal experience, produced the most excellent results. Moreover, he had no interest, as ordinary doctors have, in prolonging illnesses. For many years past the only formality recognised as a guarantee for the inviolability of a contract had been the intervention of the fisherman. Each party shook hands with Solomon, and the thing was done. They would rather have thrown themselves into Vesuvius at the moment of its most violent eruption than have broken so solemn an agreement. At the period when our story opens, it was impossible to find any person in the island who had not felt the effects of the fisherman's generosity, and that without needing to confess to him any necessities. As it was the custom for the little populace of Nisida to spend its leisure hours before Solomon's cottage, the old man, while he walked slowly among the different groups, humming his favourite song, discovered moral and physical weaknesses as he passed; and the same evening he or his daughter would certainly be seen coming mysteriously to bestow a benefit upon every sufferer, to lay a balm upon every wound. In short, he united in his person all those occupations whose business is to help mankind. Lawyers, doctors, and the notary, all the vultures of civilisation, had beaten a retreat before the patriarchal benevolence of the fisherman. Even the priest had capitulated.

On the morrow of the Feast of the Assumption, Solomon was sitting, as his habit was, on a stone bench in front of his house, his legs crossed and his arms carelessly stretched out. At the first glance you would have taken him for sixty at the outside, though he was really over eighty. He had all his teeth, which were as white as pearls, and showed them proudly. His brow, calm and restful beneath its crown of abundant white hair, was as firm and polished as marble; not a wrinkle ruffled the corner of his eye, and the gem-like lustre of his blue orbs revealed a freshness of soul and an eternal youth such as fable grants to the sea-gods. He displayed his bare arms and muscular neck with an old man's vanity. Never had a gloomy idea, an evil prepossession, or a keen remorse, arisen to disturb his long and peaceful life. He had never seen a tear flow near him without hurrying to wipe it; poor though he was, he had succeeded in pouring out benefits that all the kings of the earth could not have bought with their gold; ignorant though he was, he had spoken to his fellows the only language that they could understand, the language of the heart. One single drop of bitterness had mingled with his inexhaustible stream of happiness; one grief only had clouded his sunny life--the death of his wife--and moreover he had forgotten that.

All the affections of his soul were turned upon Nisida, whose birth had caused her mother's death; he loved her with that immoderate love that old people have for the youngest of their children. At the present moment he was gazing upon her with an air of profound rapture, and watching her come and go, as she now joined the groups of children and scolded them for games too dangerous or too noisy; now seated herself on the grass beside their mothers and took part with grave and thoughtful

Nisida

interest in their talk. Nisida was more beautiful thus than she had been the day before; with the vaporous cloud of perfume that had folded her round from head to foot had disappeared all that mystic poetry which put a sort of constraint upon her admirers and obliged them to lower their glances. She had become a daughter of Eve again without losing anything of her charm. Simply dressed, as she usually was on work-days, she was distinguishable among her companions only by her amazing beauty and by the dazzling whiteness of her skin. Her beautiful black hair was twisted in plaits around the little dagger of chased silver, that has lately been imported into Paris by that right of conquest which the pretty women of Paris have over the fashions of all countries, like the English over the sea.

Nisida was adored by her young friends, all the mothers had adopted her with pride; she was the glory of the island. The opinion of her superiority was shared by everyone to such a degree, that if some bold young man, forgetting the distance which divided him from the maiden, dared speak a little too loudly of his pretensions, he became the laughing-stock of his companions. Even the past masters of tarentella dancing were out of countenance before the daughter of Solomon, and did not dare to seek her as a partner. Only a few singers from Amalfi or Sorrento, attracted by the rare beauty of this angelic creature, ventured to sigh out their passion, carefully veiled beneath the most delicate allusions. But they seldom reached the last verse of their song; at every sound they stopped short, threw down their triangles and their mandolines, and took flight like scared nightingales.

One only had courage enough or passion enough to brave the mockery; this was Bastiano, the most formidable diver of that coast. He also sang, but with a deep and hollow voice; his chant was mournful and his melodies full of sadness. He never accompanied himself upon any instrument, and never retired without concluding his song. That day he was gloomier than usual; he was standing upright, as though by enchantment, upon a bare and slippery rock, and he cast scornful glances upon the women who were looking at him and laughing. The sun, which was plunging into the sea like a globe of fire, shed its light full upon his stern features, and the evening breeze, as it lightly rippled the billows, set the fluttering reeds waving at his feet. Absorbed by dark thoughts, he sang, in the musical language of his country, these sad words:--

"O window, that wert used to shine in the night like an open eye, how dark thou art! Alas, alas! my poor sister is ill.

"Her mother, all in tears, stoops towards me and says, 'Thy poor sister is dead and buried.'

"Jesus! Jesus! Have pity on me! You stab me to the heart.

"Tell me, good neighbours, how it happened; repeat to me her last words.

"She had a burning thirst, and refused to drink because thou wast not there to give her water from thy hand.

"Oh, my sister! Oh, my sister!

"She refused her mother's kiss, because thou wast not there to embrace her.

"Oh, my sister! Oh, my sister!

"She wept until her last breath, because thou wast not there to dry her tears.

"Oh, my sister! Oh, my sister!

"We placed on her brow her wreath of orange-flowers, we covered her with a veil as white as snow; we laid her gently in her coffin.

Nisida

"Thanks, good neighbours. I will go and be with her.

"Two angels came down from heaven and bore her away on their wings. Mary Magdalene came to meet her at the gate of heaven.

"Thanks, good neighbours. I will go and be with her.

"There, she was seated in a place of glory, a chaplet of rubies was given to her, and she is singing her rosary with the Virgin.

"Thanks, good neighbours. I will go and be with her."

As he finished the last words of his melancholy refrain, he flung himself from the top of his rock into the sea, as though he really desired to engulf himself. Nisida and the other women gave a cry of terror, for during some minutes the diver failed to reappear upon the surface.

"Are you out of your senses?" cried a young man who had suddenly appeared, unobserved among the women. "why, what are you afraid of? You know very well that Bastiano is always doing things of this sort. But do not be alarmed: all the fishes in the Mediterranean will be drowned before any harm comes to him. Water is his natural element. Good-day, sister; good-day, father."

The young fisherman kissed Nisida on the forehead, drew near to his father, and, bowing his handsome head before him, took off his red cap and respectfully kissed the old man's hand. He came thus to ask his blessing every evening before putting out to sea, where he often spent the night fishing from his boat.

"May God bless thee, my Gabriel!" said the old man in a tone of emotion, as he slowly passed his hand over his son's black curls, and a tear came into his eye. Then, rising solemnly and addressing the groups around him, he added in a voice full of dignity and of gentleness. "Come, my children, it is time to separate. The young to work, the old to rest. There is the angelus ringing."

Everybody knelt, and after a short prayer each went on his way. Nisida, after having given her father the last daily attentions, went up to her room, replenished the oil in the lamp that burned day and night before the Virgin, and, leaning her elbow on the window ledge, divided the branches of jasmine which hung like perfumed curtains, began to gaze out at the sea, and seemed lost in a deep, sweet reverie.

At this very time, a little boat, rowed silently by two oarsmen, touched shore on the other side of the island. It had become quite dark. A little man first landed cautiously, and respectfully offered his hand to another individual, who, scorning that feeble support, leapt easily ashore.

"Well, knave," he cried, "are my looks to your taste?"

"Your lordship is perfect."

"I flatter myself I am. It is true that, in order to make the transformation complete, I chose the very oldest coat that displayed its rags in a Jew's shop."

"Your lordship looks like a heathen god engaged in a love affair. Jupiter has sheathed his thunderbolts and Apollo has pocketed his rays."

"A truce to your mythology. And, to begin with, I forbid you to call me 'your lordship.'"

"Yes, your lordship."

"If my information that I have procured during the day is correct, the

Nisida

house must be on the other side of the island, in a most remote and lonely spot. Walk at a certain distance, and do not trouble yourself about me, for I know my part by heart."

The young Prince of Brancaleone, whom, in spite of the darkness of the night, our readers will already have recognised, advanced towards the fisherman's house, with as little noise as possible, walked up and down several times upon the shore, and, after having briefly reconnoitred the place that he wished to attack, waited quietly for the moon to rise and light up the scene that he had prepared. He was not obliged to exercise his patience very long, for the darkness gradually disappeared, and Solomon's little house was bathed in silvery light. Then he approached with timid steps, lifted towards the casement a look of entreaty, and began to sigh with all the power of his lungs. The young girl, called suddenly from her meditations by the appearance of this strange person, raised herself sharply and prepared to close the shutters.

"Stay, charming Nisida!" cried the prince, in the manner of a man overcome by irresistible passion.

"What do you want with me, signor?" answered the maiden, amazed to hear herself called by name.

"To adore you as a Madonna is adored, and to make you aware of my sighs."

Nisida looked at him steadily, and, after a moment or two of reflection, asked suddenly, as though in response to some secret thought, "Do you belong to this country, or are you a foreigner?"

"I arrived in this island," replied the prince without hesitation, "at the moment when the sun was writing his farewell to the earth and dipping the rays that serves as his pen into the shadow that serves as his inkstand."

"And who are you?" returned the young girl, not at all understanding these strange words.

"Alas! I am but a poor student, but I may become a great poet like Tasso, whose verses you often hear sung by a departing fisherman who sends his thrilling music as a last farewell that returns to die on the beach."

"I do not know whether I am doing wrong to speak to you, but at least I will be frank with you," said Nisida, blushing; "I have the misfortune to be the richest girl on the island."

"Your father will not be inexorable," returned the prince ardently; "one word from you, light of my eyes, goddess of my heart, and I will work night and day, never pausing nor slackening, and will render myself worthy to possess the treasure that God has revealed to my dazzled eyes, and, from being poor and obscure as you see me, I will become rich and powerful."

"I have stayed too long listening to talk that a maiden should not hear; permit me, signor, to withdraw."

"Have pity on me, my cruel enemy! what have I done to you that you should thus leave me with death in my soul? You do not know that, for months past, I have been following you everywhere like a shadow, that I prowled round your home at night, stifling my sighs lest they should disturb your peaceful slumber. You are afraid, perhaps, to let yourself be touched, at a first meeting, by a poor wretch who adores you. Alas! Juliet was young and beautiful like you, and she did not need many entreaties to take pity on Romeo."

Nisida suffered a sad and thoughtful look to fall upon this handsome young man who spoke to her in so gentle a voice, and withdrew without

Nisida

further reply, that she might not humiliate his poverty.

The prince made great efforts to suppress a strong inclination towards laughter, and, very well satisfied with this opening, turned his steps towards the spot where he had left his servant. Trespolo, after having emptied a bottle of lacryma with which he had provided himself for any emergency, had looked long around him to choose a spot where the grass was especially high and thick, and had laid himself down to a sound sleep, murmuring as he did so, this sublime observation, "O laziness, but for the sin of Adam you would be a virtue!"

The young girl could not close her eyes during the whole night after the conversation that she had held with the stranger. His sudden appearance, his strange dress and odd speech, had awakened in her an uncertain feeling that had been lying asleep in the bottom of her heart. She was at this time in all the vigour of her youth and of her resplendent beauty. Nisida was not one of the weak and timid natures that are broken by suffering or domineered over by tyranny. Far otherwise: everything around her had contributed towards shaping for her a calm and serene destiny; her simple, tender soul had unfolded in an atmosphere of peace and happiness. If she had not hitherto loved, it was the fault, not of her coldness but of the extreme timidity shown by the inhabitants of her island. The blind depth of respect that surrounded the old fisherman had drawn around his daughter a barrier of esteem and submission that no one dared to cross. By means of thrift and labour Solomon had succeeded in creating for himself a prosperity that put the poverty of the other fishermen to the blush. No one had asked for Nisida because no one thought he deserved her. The only admirer who had dared to show his passion openly was Bastiano, the most devoted and dearest friend of Gabriel; but Bastiano did not please her. So, trusting in her beauty, upheld by the mysterious hope that never deserts youth, she had resigned herself to wait, like some princess who knows that her betrothed will come from a far country.

On the day of the Assumption she had left her island for the first time in her life, chance having chosen her among the maidens of the kingdom vowed by their mothers to the special protection of the Virgin. But, overwhelmed by the weight of a position so new to her, blushing and confused under the eyes of an immense crowd, she had scarcely dared to raise her wondering looks, and the splendours of the town had passed before her like a dream, leaving but a vague remembrance.

When she perceived the presence of this handsome young man, so slenderly and elegantly built, whose noble and calm demeanour contrasted with the timidity and awkwardness of her other admirers, she felt herself inwardly disturbed, and no doubt she would have believed that her prince had come, if she had been unpleasantly struck by the poverty of his dress. She had, nevertheless, allowed herself to listen to him longer than she ought to have done, and she drew back with her bosom heavy, her cheek on fire, and her heart rent by an ache that was both dull and sharp.

"If my father does not wish me to marry him," she said to herself, tormented by the first remorseful feeling of her life. "I shall have done wrong to speak to him. And yet he is so handsome!"

Then she knelt before the Virgin, who was her only confidante, the poor child having never known her mother, and tried to tell her the torments of her soul; but she could not achieve her prayer. The thoughts became entangled within her brain, and she surprised herself uttering strange words. But, assuredly, the Holy Virgin must have taken pity upon her lovely devotee, for she rose with the impression of a consoling thought, resolved to confide everything to her father.

"I cannot have a moment's doubt," she said to herself, as she unlaced her bodice, "of my father's affection. Well, then, if he forbids me to speak to him, it will be for my good. And indeed, I have seen him but this once," she added, as she threw herself upon the bed, "and now

Nisida

I think of it, I consider him very bold to dare to speak to me. I am almost inclined to laugh at him. How confidently he brought out his nonsense, how absurdly he rolled his eyes! They are really very fine, those eyes of his, and so is his mouth, and his forehead and his hair. He does not suspect that I noticed his hands, which are really very white, when he raised them to heaven, like a madman, as he walked up and down by the sea. Come, come, is he going to prevent my sleeping? I will not see him again!" she cried, drawing the sheet over her head like an angry child. Then she began to laugh to herself over her lover's dress, and meditated long upon what her companions would say to it. Suddenly her brow contracted painfully, a frightful thought had stolen into her mind, she shuddered from head to foot. "Suppose he were to think someone else prettier than me? Men are so foolish! Certainly, it is too hot, and I shall not sleep to-night."

Then she sat up in her bed, and continued her monologue--which we will spare the reader--till the morning. Scarcely had the first rays of light filtered through the interlacing branches of jasmine and wavered into the room, when Nisida dressed herself hurriedly, and went as usual to present her forehead to her father's kiss. The old man at once observed the depression and weariness left by a sleepless night upon his daughter's face, and parting with an eager and anxious hand the beautiful black hair that fell over her cheeks, he asked her, "what is the matter, my child? Thou hast not slept well?"

"I have not slept at all," answered Nisida, smiling, to reassure her father; "I am perfectly well, but I have something to confess to you."

"Speak quickly, child; I am dying with impatience."

"Perhaps I have done wrong; but I want you to promise beforehand not to scold me."

"You know very well that I spoil you," said the old man, with a caress; "I shall not begin to be stern to-day."

"A young man who does not belong to this island, and whose name I do not know, spoke to me yesterday evening when I was taking the air at my window."

"And what was he so eager to say to you, my dear Nisida?"

"He begged me to speak to you in his favour."

"I am listening. What can I do for him?"

"Order me to marry him."

"And should you obey willingly?"

"I think so, father," the girl candidly replied. "As to other things, you yourself must judge in your wisdom; for I wanted to speak to you before coming to know him, so as not to go on with a conversation that you might not approve. But there is a hindrance."

"You know that I do not recognise any when it is a question of making my daughter happy."

"He is poor, father."

"Well, all the more reason for me to like him. There is work here for everybody, and my table can spare a place for another son. He is young, he has arms; no doubt he has some calling."

"He is a poet."

"No matter; tell him to come and speak to me, and if he is an honest lad, I promise you, my child, that I will do anything in the world to

Nisida

promote your happiness."

Nisida embraced her father effusively, and was beside herself with joy all day, waiting impatiently for the evening in order to give the young man such splendid news. Eligi Brancaleone was but moderately flattered, as you will easily believe, by the fisherman's magnanimous intentions towards him; but like the finished seducer that he was, he appeared enchanted at them. Recollecting his character as a fantastical student and an out-at-elbows poet, he fell upon his knees and shouted a thanksgiving to the planet Venus; then, addressing the young girl, he added, in a calmer voice, that he was going to write immediately to his own father, who in a week's time would come to make his formal proposal; until then, he begged, as a favour, that he might not present himself to Solomon nor to any person at all in the island, and assigned as a pretext a certain degree of shame which he felt on account of his old clothes, assuring his beloved that his father would bring him a complete outfit for the wedding-day.

While the ill-starred girl was thus walking in terrifying security at the edge of the precipice, Trespolo, following his master's wishes, had established himself in the island as a pilgrim from Jerusalem. Playing his part and sprinkling his conversation with biblical phrases, which came to him readily, in his character of ex-sacristan, he distributed abundance of charms, wood of the true Cross and milk of the Blessed Virgin, and all those other inexhaustible treasures on which the eager devotion of worthy people daily feeds. His relics were the more evidently authentic in that he did not sell any of them, and, bearing his poverty in a holy manner, thanked the faithful and declined their alms. Only, out of regard for the established virtue of Solomon, he had consented to break bread with the fisherman, and went to take meals with him with the regularity of a cenobite. His abstinence aroused universal surprise: a crust dipped in water, a few nuts or figs sufficed to keep this holy man alive--to prevent him, that is to say, from dying. Furthermore, he entertained Nisida by his tales of his travels and by his mysterious predictions. Unfortunately, he only appeared towards evening; for he spent the rest of the day in austerities and in prayers--in other words, in drinking like a Turk and snoring like a buffalo.

On the morning of the seventh day, after the promise given by the prince to the fisherman's daughter, Brancaleone came into his servant's room, and, shaking him roughly, cried in his ear, "Up, odious marmot!"

Trespolo, awakened suddenly, rubbed his eyes in alarm. The dead, sleeping peacefully at the bottom of their coffins, will be less annoyed at the last day when the trump of Judgment comes to drag them from their slumbers. Fear having, however, immediately dispersed the dark clouds that overspread his countenance, he sat up, and asked with an appearance of bewilderment--

"What is the matter, your excellency?"

"The matter is that I will have you flayed alive a little if you do not leave off that execrable habit of sleeping twenty hours in the day."

"I was not asleep, prince!" cried the servant boldly, as he sprang out of bed; "I was reflecting---"

"Listen to me," said the prince in a severe tone; "you were once employed, I believe, in a chemist's shop?"

"Yes, my lord, and I left because my employer had the scandalous barbarity to make me pound drugs, which tired my arms horribly."

"Here is a phial containing a solution of opium."

"Mercy!" cried Trespolo, falling on his knees.

Nisida

"Get up, idiot, and pay great attention to what I am going to say to you. This little fool of a Nisida persists in wanting me to speak to her father. I made her believe that I was going away this evening to fetch my papers. There is no time to lose. They know you very well at the fisherman's. You will pour this liquid into their wine; your life will answer for your not giving them a larger dose than enough to produce a deep sleep. You will take care to prepare me a good ladder for to-night; after which you will go and wait for me in my boat, where you will find Numa and Bonaroux. They have my orders. I shall not want you in scaling the fortress; I have my Campo Basso dagger."

"But, my lord---" stammered Trespolo, astounded.

"No difficulties!" cried the prince, stamping his foot furiously, "or, by my father's death, I will cure you, once for all, of your scruples." And he turned on his heel with the air of a man who is certain that people will be very careful not to disobey his orders.

The unhappy Trespolo fulfilled his master's injunctions punctually. With him fear was the guiding principle. That evening the fisherman's supper table was hopelessly dull, and the sham pilgrim tried in vain to enliven it by factitious cheerfulness. Nisida was preoccupied by her lover's departure, and Solomon, sharing unconsciously in his daughter's grief, swallowed but a drop or two of wine, to avoid resisting the repeated urgency of his guest. Gabriel had set out in the morning for Sorrento and was not to return for two or three days; his absence tended to increase the old man's melancholy. As soon as Trespolo had retired, the fisherman yielded to his fatigue. Nisida, with her arms hanging by her sides, her head heavy and her heart oppressed by a sad presentiment, had scarcely strength to go up to her room, and after having mechanically trimmed the lamp, sank on her bed as pale and stiff as a corpse.

The storm was breaking out with violence; one of those terrible storms seen only in the South, when the congregated clouds, parting suddenly, shed torrents of rain and of hail, and threaten another deluge. The roar of the thunder drew nearer and was like the noise of a cannonade. The gulf, lately so calm and smooth that the island was reflected as in a mirror, had suddenly darkened; the furiously leaping waves flung themselves together like wild horses; the island quaked, shaken by terrible shocks. Even the boldest fishermen had drawn their boats ashore, and, shut within their cabins, encouraged as best they could their frightened wives and children.

Amid the deep darkness that overspread the sea Nisida's lamp could be seen gleaming clear and limpid, as it burned before the Madonna. Two boats, without rudders, sails, or oars, tossed by the waves, beaten by the winds, were whirling above the abyss; two men were in these two boats, their muscles tense, their breasts bare, their hair flying. They gazed haughtily on the sea, and braved the tempest.

"Once more, I beg you," cried one of these men, "fear not for me, Gabriel; I promise you that with my two broken oars and a little perseverance I shall get to Torre before daybreak."

"You are mad, Bastiano; we have not been able ever since the morning to get near Vico, and have been obliged to keep tacking about; your skill and strength have been able to do nothing against this frightful hurricane which has driven us back to this point."

"It is the first time you have ever refused to go with me," remarked the young man.

"Well, yes, my dear Bastiano, I do not know how it is, but to-night I feel drawn to the island by an irresistible power. The winds have been unchained to bring me back to it in spite of myself, and I will own to you, even though it should make me seem like a madman in your eyes, that this simple and ordinary event appears to me like an order from heaven. Do you see that lamp shining over there?"

Nisida

"I know it," answered Bastiano, suppressing a sigh.

"It was lighted before the Virgin one the day when my sister was born, and for eighteen year it has never ceased to burn, night and day. It was my mother's vow. You do not know, my dear Bastiano, you cannot know how many torturing thoughts that vow recalls to me. My poor mother called me to her deathbed and told me a frightful tale, a horrible secret, which weighs on my soul like a cloak of lead, and of which I can only relieve myself by confiding it to a friend. When her painful story was ended she asked to see and to embrace my sister, who was just born; then with her trembling hand, already chilled by the approach of death, she desired to light the lamp herself. 'Remember,' these were her last words, 'remember, Gabriel, that your sister is vowed to the Madonna. As long as this light shines before the blessed image of the Virgin, your sister will be in no danger.' You can understand now why, at night, when we are crossing the gulf, my eyes are always fixed on that lamp. I have a belief that nothing could shake, which is that on the day that light goes out my sister's soul will have taken flight to heaven."

"Well," cried Bastiano in an abrupt tone that betrayed the emotion of his heart, "if you prefer to stay, I will go alone."

"Farewell," said Gabriel, without turning aside his eyes from the window towards which he felt himself drawn by a fascination for which he could not account. Bastiano disappeared, and Nisida's brother, assisted by the waves, was drawing nearer and nearer to the shore, when, at all once, he uttered a terrible cry which sounded above the noise of the tempest.

The star had just been extinguished; the lamp had been blown out.

"My sister is dead!" cried Gabriel and, leaping into the sea, he cleft the waves with the rapidity of lightning.

The storm had redoubled its intensity; long lines of lightning, rending the sides of the clouds, bathed everything in their tawny and intermittent light. The fisherman perceived a ladder leaning against the front of his home, seized it with a convulsive hand, and in three bounds flung himself into the room. The prince felt himself strangely moved on making his way into this pure and silent retreat. The calm and gentle gaze of the Virgin who seemed to be protecting the rest of the sleeping girl, that perfume of innocence shed around the maidenly couch, that lamp, open-eyed amid the shadows, like a soul in prayer, had inspired the seducer with an unknown distress. Irritated by what he called an absurd cowardice, he had extinguished the obtrusive light, and was advancing towards the bed, and addressing unspoken reproaches to himself, when Gabriel swooped upon him with a wounded tiger's fierce gnashing of the teeth.

Brancaleone, by a bold and rapid movement that showed no common degree of skill and bravery, while struggling in the grasp of his powerful adversary, drew forth in his right hand a long dagger with a fine barbed blade. Gabriel smiled scornfully, snatched the weapon from him, and even as he stooped to break it across his knee, gave the prince a furious blow with his head that made him stagger and sent him rolling on the floor, three paces away; then, leaning over his poor sister and gazing on her with hungry eyes, by the passing gleam of a flash, "Dead!" he repeated, wringing his arms in despair,--"dead!"

In the fearful paroxysm that compressed his throat he could find no other words to assuage his rage or to pour forth his woe. His hair, which the storm had flattened, rose on his head, the marrow of his bones was chilled, and he felt his tears rush back upon his heart. It was a terrible moment; he forgot that the murderer still lived.

The prince, however, whose admirable composure did not for a moment desert him, had risen, bruised and bleeding. Pale and trembling with rage, he sought everywhere for a weapon with which to avenge himself.

Nisida

Gabriel returned towards him gloomier and more ominous than ever, and grasping his neck with an iron hand, dragged him into the room where the old man was sleeping.

"Father! father! father!" he cried in a piercing voice, "here is the Bastard who Has just murdered Nisida!"

The old man, who had drunk but a few drops of the narcotic potion, was awakened by this cry which echoed through his soul; he arose as though moved by a spring, flung off his coverings, and with that promptitude of action that God has bestowed upon mothers in moments of danger, event up to his daughter's room, found a light, knelt on the edge of the bed, and began to test his child's pulse and watch her breathing with mortal anxiety.

All! this had passed in less time than we have taken in telling it. Brancaleone by an unheard-of effort had freed himself from the hands of the young fisherman, and suddenly resuming his princely pride, said in a loud voice, "You shall not kill me without listening to me."

Gabriel would have overwhelmed him with Bitter reproaches, but, unable to utter a single word, he burst into tears.

"Your sifter is not dead," said the prince, with cold dignity; "she is merely asleep. You can assure yourself of it, and meanwhile I undertake, upon my Honour, not to move a single step away."

These words were pronounced with such an accent of truth that the fisherman was struck by them. An unexpected gleam of hope suddenly dawned in his thoughts; he cast upon the stranger a glance of hate and distrust, and muttered in a muffled voice, "Do not flatter yourself, in any case, that you will be able to escape me."

Then he went up to his sister's room, and approaching the old man, asked tremblingly, "well, father?"

Solomon thrust him gently aside with the solicitude of a mother removing some buzzing insect from her child's cradle, and, making a sign to enjoin silence, added in a low voice, "She is neither dead nor poisoned. Some philtre has been given to her for a bad purpose. Her breathing is even, and she cannot fail to recover from her lethargy."

Gabriel, reassured about Nisida's life, returned silently to the ground floor where he had left the seducer. His manner was grave and gloomy; he was coming now not to rend the murderer of his sister with his hands, but to elucidate a treacherous and infamous mystery, and to avenge his honour which had been basely attacked. He opened wide the double entrance door that admitted daylight to the apartment in which, on the few nights that he spent at home, he was accustomed to sleep with his father. The rain had just stopped, a ray of moonlight pierced the clouds, and all at once made its way into the room. The fisherman adjusted his dripping garments, walked towards the stranger, who awaited him without stirring, and after having gazed upon him haughtily, said, "Now you are going to explain your presence in our house."

"I confess," said the prince, in an easy tone and with the most insolent assurance, "that appearances are against me. It is the fate of lovers to be treated as thieves. But although I have not the advantage of being known to you, I am betrothed to the fair Nisida--with your father's approval, of course. Now, as I have the misfortune to possess very hardhearted parents, they have had the cruelty to refuse me their consent. Love led me astray, and I was about to be guilty of a fault for which a young man like you ought to have some indulgence. Furthermore, it was nothing but a mere attempt at an abduction, with the best intentions in the world, I swear, and I am ready to atone for everything if you will agree to give me your hand and call me your brother."

"I will agree to call you a coward and a betrayer!" replied Gabriel,

Nisida

whose face had begun to glow, as he heard his sister spoken of with such impudent levity. "If it is thus that insults are avenged in towns, we fishers have a different plan. Ah! so you flattered yourself with the thought of bringing desolation and disgrace into our home, and of paying infamous assassins to come and share an old man's bread so as to poison his daughter, of stealing by night, like a brigand, armed with a dagger, into my sister's room, and of being let off by marrying the most beautiful woman in the kingdom!"

The prince made a movement.

"Listen," continued Gabriel: "I could break you as I broke your dagger just now; but I have pity on you. I see that you can do nothing with your hands, neither defend yourself nor work. Go, I begin to understand; you are a braggart, my fine sir; your poverty is usurped; you have decked yourself in these poor clothes, but you are unworthy of them."

He suffered a glance of crushing contempt to fall upon the prince, then going to a cupboard hidden in the wall, he drew out a rifle and an axe.

"Here," said he, "are all the weapons in the house; choose."

A flash of joy illuminated the countenance of the prince, who had hitherto suppressed his rage. He seized the rifle eagerly, drew three steps backward, and drawing himself up to his full height, said, "You would have done better to lend me this weapon at the beginning; for then I would have been spared from witnessing your silly vapourings and frantic convulsions. Thanks, young-man; one of my servants will bring you back your gun. Farewell."

And he threw him his purse, which fell heavily at the fisherman's feet.

"I lent you that rifle to fight with me," cried Gabriel, whom surprise had rooted to the spot.

"Move aside, my lad; you are out of your senses," said the prince, taking a step towards the door.

"So you refuse to defend yourself?" asked Gabriel in a determined voice.

"I have told you already that I cannot fight with you."

"Why not?"

"Because such is the will of God; because you were born to crawl and I to trample you under my feet; because all the blood that I could shed in this island would not purchase one drop of my blood; because a thousand lives of wretches like you are not equal to one hour of mine; because you will kneel at my name that I, am now going to utter; because, in short, you are but a poor fisherman and my name is Prince of Brancaleone."

At this dreaded name, which the young nobleman flung, like a thunderbolt, at his head, the fisherman bounded like a lion. He drew a deep breath, as though he had lifted a weight that had long rested on his heart.

"Ah!" he cried, "you have given yourself into my hands, my lord! Between the poor fisherman and the all-powerful prince there is a debt of blood. You shall pay for yourself and for your father. We are going to settle our accounts, your excellency," he added, rising his axe over the head of the prince, who was aiming at him. "Oh! you were in too great haste to choose: the rifle is not loaded." The prince turned pale.

"Between our two families," Gabriel continued, "there exists a horrible secret which my mother confided to me on the brink of the grave, of which my father himself is unaware, and that no man in the world must learn. You are different, you are going to die."

Nisida

He dragged him into the space outside the house.

"Do you know why my sister, whom you wished to dishonour, was vowed to the Madonna? Because your father, like you, wished to dishonour my mother. In your accursed house there is a tradition of infamy. You do not know what slow and terrible torments my poor mother endured--torments that broke her strength and caused her to die in early youth, and that her angelic soul dared confide to none but her son in that supreme hour and in order to bid me watch over my sister."

The fisherman wiped away a burning tear. "One day, before we were born, a fine lady, richly dressed, landed in our island from a splendid boat; she asked to see my mother, who was as young and beautiful as my Nisida is to-day. She could not cease from admiring her; she blamed the blindness of fate which had buried this lovely jewel in the bosom of an obscure island; she showered praises, caresses, and gifts upon my mother, and after many indirect speeches, finally asked her parents for her, that she might make her her lady-in-waiting. The poor people, foreseeing in the protection of so great a lady a brilliant future for their daughter, were weak enough to yield. That lady was your mother; and do you know why she came thus to seek that poor innocent maiden? Because your mother had a lover, and because she wished to make sure, in this infamous manner, of the prince's indulgence."

"Silence, wretch!"

"Oh, your excellency will hear me out. At the beginning, my poor mother found herself surrounded by the tenderest care: the princess could not be parted from her for a moment; the most flattering words, the finest clothes, the richest ornaments were hers; the servants paid her as much respect as though she were a daughter of the house. When her parents went to see her and to inquire whether she did not at all regret having left them, they found her so lovely and so happy, that they blessed the princess as a good angel sent them from God. Then the prince conceived a remarkable affection for my mother; little by little his manners became more familiar and affectionate. At last the princess went away for a few days, regretting that she could not take with her her dear child, as she called her. Then the prince's brutality knew no further barriers; he no longer concealed his shameful plans of seduction; he spread before the poor girl's eyes pearl necklaces and caskets of diamonds; he passed from the most glowing passion to the blackest fury, from the humblest prayers to the most horrible threats. The poor child was shut up in a cellar where there was hardly a gleam of daylight, and every morning a frightful gaoler came and threw her a bit of black bread, repeating with oaths that it only depended upon herself to alter all this by becoming the prince's mistress. This cruelty continued for two years. The princess had gone on a long journey, and my mother's poor parents believed that their daughter was still happy with her protectress. On her return, having; no doubt fresh sins for which she needed forgiveness, she took my mother from her dungeon, assumed the liveliest indignation at this horrible treatment, about which she appeared to have known nothing, wiped her tears, and by an abominable refinement of perfidy received the thanks of the victim whom she was about to sacrifice.

"One evening--I have just finished, my lord--the princess chose to sup alone with her lady-in-waiting: the rarest fruits, the most exquisite dishes, and the most delicate wines were served to my poor mother, whose prolonged privations had injured her health and weakened her reason; she gave way to a morbid gaiety. Diabolical philtres were poured into her cup; that is another tradition in your family. My mother felt uplifted, her eyes shone with feverish brilliance, her cheeks were on fire. Then the prince came in--oh! your excellency will see that God protects the poor. My darling mother, like a frightened dove, sheltered herself in the bosom of the princess, who pushed her away, laughing. The poor distraught girl, trembling, weeping, knelt down in the midst of that infamous room. It was St. Anne's Day; all at once the house shook, the

Nisida

walls cracked, cries of distress rang out in the streets. My mother was saved. It was the earthquake that destroyed half Naples. You know all about it, my lord, since your old palace is no longer habitable."

"What are you driving at?" cried Brancaleone in terrible agitation.

"Oh, I merely wish to persuade you that you must fight with me," answered the fisherman coldly, as he offered him a cartridge. "And now," he added, in an excited tone, "say your prayers, my lord; for I warn you, you will die by my hand; justice must be done."

The prince carefully examined the powder and shot, made sure that his rifle was in good condition; loaded it, and, eager to make an end, took aim at the fisherman; but, either because he had been so much disturbed by his opponent's terrible tale, or, because the grass was wet from the storm, at the moment when he put forward his left foot to steady his shot, he slipped, lost his balance and fell on one knee. He fired into the air.

"That does not count, my lord," cried Gabriel instantly, and handed him a second charge.

At the noise of the report Solomon had appeared at the window, and, understanding what was going on, had lifted his hands to heaven, in order to address to God a dumb and fervent prayer. Eligi uttered a frightful imprecation, and hastily reloaded his rifle; but, struck by the calm confidence of the young man, who stood motionless before him, and by the old man, who, impassive and undisturbed, seemed to be conjuring God in the name of a father's authority, disconcerted by his fall, his knees shaking and his arm jarred, he felt the chills of death running in his veins. Attempting, nevertheless, to master his emotion, he took aim a second time; the bullet whistled by the fisherman's ear and buried itself in the stem of a poplar.

The prince, with the energy of despair, seized the barrel of his weapon in both hands; but Gabriel was coming forward with his axe, a terrible foe, and his first stroke carried away the butt of the rifle. He was still hesitating, however, to kill a defenceless man, when two armed servants appeared at the end of the pathway. Gabriel did not see them coming; but at the moment when they would have seized him by the shoulders, Solomon uttered a cry and rushed to his son's assistance.

"Help, Numa! help, Bonaroux! Death to the ruffians! They want to murder me."

"You lie, Prince of Brancaleone!" cried Gabriel, and with one blow of the axe he cleft his skull.

The two bravoos who were coming to their master's assistance, when they saw him fall, took flight; Solomon and his son went up to Nisida's room. The young girl had just shaken off her heavy slumber; a slight perspiration moistened her brow, and she opened her eyes slowly to the dawning day.

"Why are you looking at me in that way, father?" she said, her mind still wandering a little and she passed her hand over her forehead.

The old man embraced her tenderly.

"You have just passed through a great danger, my poor Nisida," said he; "arise, and let us give thanks to the Madonna."

Then all three, kneeling before the sacred image of the Virgin, began to recite litanies. But at that very instant a noise of arms sounded in the enclosure, the house was surrounded by soldiers, and a lieutenant of gendarmes, seizing Gabriel, said in a loud voice, "In the name of the law, I arrest you for the murder that you have just committed upon the person of his excellency and illustrious lordship, the Prince of

Nisida

Brancaleone."

Nisida, struck by these words, remained pale and motionless like a marble statue kneeling on a tomb; Gabriel was already preparing to make an unreasoning resistance, when a gesture from his father stopped him.

"Signor tenente," said the old man, addressing himself to the officer, "my son killed the prince in lawful defence, for the latter had scaled our house and made his way in at night and with arms in his hand. The proofs are before your eyes. Here is a ladder set up against the window; and here," he proceeded, picking up the two pieces of the broken blade, "is a dagger with the Brancaleone arms. However, we do not refuse to follow you."

The last words of the fisherman were drowned by cries of "Down with the sbirri! down with the gendarmes!" which were repeated in every direction. The whole island was up in arms, and the fisher-folk would have suffered themselves to be cut up to the last man before allowing a single hair of Solomon or of his son to be touched; but the old man appeared upon his threshold, and, stretching out his arm with a calm and grave movement that quieted the anger of the crowd, he said, "Thanks, my children; the law must be respected. I shall be able, alone, to defend the innocence of my son before the judges."

Hardly three months have elapsed since the day upon which we first beheld the old fisherman of Nisida sitting before the door of his dwelling, irradiated by all the happiness that he had succeeded in creating around him, reigning like a king, on his throne of rock, and blessing his two children, the most beautiful creatures in the island. Now the whole existence of this man, who was once so happy and so much envied, is changed. The smiling cottage, that hung over the gulf like a swan over a transparent lake, is sad and desolate; the little enclosure, with its hedges of lilac and hawthorn, where joyous groups used to come and sit at the close of day, is silent and deserted. No human sound dares to trouble the mourning of this saddened solitude. Only towards evening the waves of the sea, compassionating such great misfortunes, come to murmur plaintive notes upon the beach.

Gabriel has been condemned. The news of the high-born Prince of Brancaleone's death, so young, so handsome, and so universally adored, not only fluttered the aristocracy of Naples, but excited profound indignation in all classes of people. He was mourned by everybody, and a unanimous cry for vengeance was raised against the murderer.

The authorities opened the inquiry with alarming promptness. The magistrates whom their office called to judge this deplorable affair displayed, however, the most irreproachable integrity. No consideration outside their duty, no deference due to so noble and powerful a family, could shake the convictions of their conscience. History has kept a record of this memorable trial; and has, no reproach to make to men which does not apply equally to the imperfection of human laws. The appearance of things, that fatal contradiction which the genius of evil so often here on earth gives to truth, overwhelmed the poor fisherman with the most evident proofs.

Trespolo, in whom fear had destroyed all scruples, being first examined, as having been the young prince's confidant, declared with cool impudence that, his master having shown a wish to escape for a few days from the importunities of a young married lady whose passion was beginning to tire him, had followed him to the island with three or four of his most faithful servants, and that he himself had adopted the disguise of a pilgrim, not wishing to betray his excellency's incognito to the fisher-people, who would certainly have tormented so powerful a person by all sorts of petitions. Two local watch men, who had happened to be on the hillside at the moment of the crime, gave evidence that confirmed the valet's lengthy statement; hidden by some under wood, they had seen Gabriel rush upon the prince, and had distinctly heard the last words of the dying man; calling "Murder!" All the witnesses, even those

Nisida

summoned at the request of the prisoner, made his case worse by their statements, which they tried to make favourable. Thus the court, with its usual perspicacity and its infallible certainty, succeeded in establishing the fact that Prince Eligi of Brancaleone, having taken a temporary dislike to town life, had retired to the little island of Nisida, there to give himself up peaceably to the pleasure of fishing, for which he had at all times had a particular predilection (a proof appeared among the documents of the case that the prince had regularly been present every other year at the tunny-fishing on his property at Palermo); that when once he was thus hidden in the island, Gabriel might have recognised him, having gone with his sister to the procession, a few days before, and had, no doubt, planned to murder him. On the day before the night of the crime, the absence of Gabriel and the discomposure of his father and sister had been remarked. Towards evening the prince had dismissed his servant, and gone out alone, as his custom was, to walk by the seashore. Surprised by the storm and not knowing the byways of the island, he had wandered round the fisherman's house, seeking a shelter; then Gabriel, encouraged by the darkness and by the noise of the tempest, which seemed likely to cover the cries of his victim, had, after prolonged hesitation, resolved to commit his crime, and having fired two shots at the unfortunate young man without succeeding in wounding him, had put an end to him by blows of the axe; lastly, at the moment when, with Solomon's assistance, he was about to throw the body into the sea, the prince's servants having appeared, they had gone up to the girl's room, and, inventing their absurd tale, had cast themselves on their knees before the Virgin, in order to mislead the authorities. All the circumstances that poor Solomon cited in his son's favour turned against him: the ladder at Nisida's window belonged to the fisherman; the dagger which young Brancaleone always carried upon him to defend himself had evidently been taken from him after his death, and Gabriel had hastened to break it, so as to destroy, to the best of his power, the traces of his crime. Bastiano's evidence did not receive a minute's consideration: he, to destroy the idea of premeditation, declared that the young fisherman had left him only at the moment when the storm broke over the island; but, in the first place, the young diver was known to be Gabriel's most devoted friend and his sister's warmest admirer, and, in the second, he had been seen to land at Torre during the same hour in which he had affirmed that he was near to Nisida. As for the prince's passion for the poor peasant girl, the magistrates simply shrugged their shoulders at the ridiculous assertion of that, and especially at the young girl's alleged resistance and the extreme measures to which the prince was supposed to have resorted to conquer the virtue of Nisida. Eligi of Brancaleone was so young, so handsome, so seductive, and at the same time so cool amid his successes, that he had never been suspected of violence, except in getting rid of his mistresses. Finally, an overwhelming and unanswerable proof overthrew all the arguments for the defence: under the fisherman's bed had been found a purse with the Brancaleone arms, full of gold, the purse which, if our readers remember, the prince had flung as a last insult at Gabriel's feet.

The old man did not lose heart at this fabric of lies; after the pleadings of the advocates whose ruinous eloquence he had bought with heavy gold, he defended his son himself, and put so much truth, so much passion, and so many tears into his speech, that the whole audience was moved, and three of the judges voted for an acquittal; but the majority was against it, and the fatal verdict was pronounced.

The news at once spread throughout the little island, and caused the deepest dejection there. The fishers who, at the first irruption of force, had risen as one man to defend their comrade's cause, bowed their heads without a murmur before the unquestioned authority of a legal judgment. Solomon received unflinchingly the stab that pierced his heart. No sigh escaped his breast; no tear came to his eyes; his wound did not bleed. Since his son's arrest he had sold all he possessed in the world, even the little silver cross left by his wife at her death, even the pearl necklace that flattered his fatherly pride by losing its whiteness against his dear Nisida's throat; the pieces of gold gained

Nisida

by the sale of these things he had sewn into his coarse woollen cap, and had established himself in the city. He ate nothing but the bread thrown to him by the pity of passers-by, and slept on the steps of churches or at the magistrates' door.

To estimate at its full value the heroic courage of this unhappy father, one must take a general view of the whole extent of his misfortune. Overwhelmed by age and grief, he looked forward with solemn calmness to the terrible moment which would bear his son, a few days before him, to the grave. His sharpest agony was the thought of the shame that would envelop his family. The first scaffold erected in that gently mannered island would arise for Gabriel, and that ignominious punishment tarnish the whole population and imprint upon it the first brand of disgrace. By a sad transition, which yet comes so easily in the destiny of man, the poor father grew to long for those moments of danger at which he had formerly trembled, those moments in which his son might have died nobly. And now all was lost: a long life of work, of abnegation, and of good deeds, a pure and stainless reputation that had extended beyond the gulf into distant countries, and the traditional admiration, rising almost to worship, of several generations; all these things only served to deepen the pit into which the fisherman had fallen, at one blow, from his kingly height. Good fame, that divine halo without which nothing here on earth is sacred, had disappeared. Men no longer dared to defend the poor wretch, they pitied him. His name would soon carry horror with it, and Nisida, poor orphan, would be nothing to anyone but the sister of a man who had been condemned to death. Even Bastiano turned away his face and wept. Thus, when every respite was over, when poor Solomon's every attempt had failed, people in the town who saw him smile strangely, as though under the obsession of some fixed idea, said to one another that the old man had lost his reason.

Gabriel saw his last day dawn, serenely and calmly. His sleep had been deep; he awoke full of unknown joy; a cheerful ray of sunlight, falling through the loophole, wavered over the fine golden straw in his cell; an autumn breeze playing around him, brought an agreeable coolness to his brow, and stirred in his long hair. The gaoler, who while he had had him in his charge had always behaved humanely, struck by his happy looks, hesitated to announce the priest's visit, in fear of calling the poor prisoner from his dream. Gabriel received the news with pleasure; he conversed for two hours with the good priest, and shed sweet tears on receiving the last absolution. The priest left the prison with tears in his eyes, declaring aloud that he had never in his life met with a more beautiful, pure, resigned, and courageous spirit.

The fisherman was still under the influence of this consoling emotion when his sister entered. Since the day when she had been carried, fainting, from the room where her brother had just been arrested, the poor girl, sheltered under the roof of an aunt, and accusing herself of all the evil that had befallen, had done nothing but weep at the feet of her holy protectress. Bowed by grief like a young lily before the storm, she would spend whole hours, pale, motionless, detached from earthly things, her tears flowing silently upon her beautiful clasped hands. When the moment came to go and embrace her brother for the last time, Nisida arose with the courage of a saint. She wiped away the traces of her tears, smoothed her beautiful black hair, and put on her best white dress. Poor child, she tried to hide her grief by an angelic deception. She had the strength to smile! At the sight of her alarming pallor Gabriel felt his heart wrung, a cloud passed over his eyes; he would have run to meet her, but, held back by the chain which fettered him to a pillar of his prison, stepped back sharply and stumbled. Nisida flew to her brother and upheld him in her arms. The young girl had understood him; she assured him that she was well. Fearing to remind him of his terrible position, she spoke volubly of all manner of things--her aunt, the weather, the Madonna. Then she stopped suddenly, frightened at her own words, frightened at her own silence; she fixed her burning gaze upon her brother's brow as though to fascinate him. Little by little animation returned to her; a faint colour tinted her hollowed cheeks, and Gabriel, deceived by the maiden's super human efforts, thought her

Nisida

still beautiful, and thanked God in his heart for having spared this tender creature. Nisida, as though she had followed her brother's secret thoughts, came close to him, pressed his hand with an air of understanding, and murmured low in his ear, "Fortunately our father has been away for two days; he sent me word that he would be detained in town. For us, it is different; we are young, we have courage!"

The poor young girl was trembling like a leaf.

"What will become of you, my poor Nisida?"

"Bah! I will pray to the Madonna. Does she not watch over us?" The girl stopped, struck by the sound of her own words, which the circumstances so cruelly contradicted. But looking at her brother, she went on in a low tone: "Assuredly she does watch over us. She appeared to me last night in a dream. She held her child Jesus on her arm, and looked at me with a mother's tenderness. She wishes to make saints of us, for she loves us; and to be a saint, you see, Gabriel, one must suffer."

"Well, go and pray for me, my kind sister; go away from the view of this sad place, which will eventually shake your firmness, and perhaps mine. Go; we shall see each other again in heaven above, where our mother is waiting for us--our mother whom you have not known, and to whom I shall often speak of you. Farewell, my sister, until we meet again!"

And he kissed her on the forehead.

The young girl called up all her strength into her heart for this supreme moment; she walked with a firm step; having reached the threshold, she turned round and waved him a farewell, preventing herself by a nervous contraction from bursting into tears, but as soon as she was in the corridor, a sob broke from her bosom, and Gabriel, who heard it echo from the vaulted roof, thought that his heart would break.

Then he threw himself on his knees, and, lifting his hands to heaven, cried, "I have finished suffering; I have nothing more that holds me to life. I thank Thee, my God! Thou hast kept my father away, and hast been willing to spare the poor old man a grief that would have been beyond his strength."

It was at the hour of noon, after having exhausted every possible means, poured out his gold to the last piece, and embraced the knees of the lowest serving man, that Solomon the fisherman took his way to his son's prison. His brow was so woebegone that the guards drew back, seized with pity, and the gaoler wept as he closed the door of the cell upon him. The old man remained some moments without advancing a step, absorbed in contemplation of his son. By the tawny gleam of his eye might be divined that the soul of the man was moved at that instant by some dark project. He seemed nevertheless struck by the beauty of Gabriel's face. Three months in prison had restored to his skin the whiteness that the sun had turned brown; his fine dark hair fell in curls around his neck, his eyes rested on his father with a liquid and brilliant gaze. Never had this head been so beautiful as now, when it was to fall.

"Alas, my poor son!" said the old man, "there is no hope left; you must die."

"I know it," answered Gabriel in a tone of tender reproach, "and it is not that which most afflicts me at this moment. But you, too, why do you wish to give me pain, at your age? why did you not stay in the town?"

"In the town," the old man returned, "they have no pity; I cast myself at the king's feet, at everybody's feet; there is no pardon, no mercy for us."

"Well, in God's name, what is death to me? I meet it daily on the sea. My greatest, my only torment is the pain that they are causing you."

Nisida

"And I, do you think, my Gabriel, that I only suffer in seeing you die? Oh, it is but a parting for a few days; I shall soon go to join you. But a darker sorrow weighs upon me. I am strong, I am a man." He stopped, fearing that he had said too much; then drawing near to his son, he said in a tearful voice, "Forgive me, my Gabriel; I am the cause of your death. I ought to have killed the prince with my own hand. In our country, children and old men are not condemned to death. I am over eighty years old; I should have been pardoned; they told me that when, with tears, I asked pardon for you; once more, forgive me, Gabriel; I thought my daughter was dead; I thought of nothing else; and besides, I did not know the law."

"Father, father!" cried Gabriel, touched, "what are you saying? I would have given my life a thousand times over to purchase one day of yours. Since you are strong enough to be present at my last hour, fear not; you will not see me turn pale; your son will be worthy of you."

"And he is to die, to die!" cried Solomon, striking his forehead in despair, and casting on the walls of the dungeon a look of fire that would fain have pierced them.

"I am resigned, father," said Gabriel gently; "did not Christ ascend the cross?"

"Yes," murmured the old man in a muffled voice, "but He did not leave behind a sister dishonoured by His death."

These words, which escaped the old fisherman in spite of himself, threw a sudden and terrible light into the soul of Gabriel. For the first time he perceived all the infamous manner of his death: the shameless populace crowding round the scaffold, the hateful hand of the executioner taking him by the hair, and the drops of his blood besprinkling the white raiment of his sister and covering her with shame.

"Oh, if I could get a weapon!" cried Gabriel, his haggard eyes roaming around.

"It is not the weapon that is lacking," answered Solomon, carrying his hand to the hilt of a dagger that he had hidden in his breast.

"Then kill me, father," said Gabriel in a low tone, but with an irresistible accent of persuasion and entreaty; "oh yes, I confess it now, the executioner's hand frightens me. My Nisida, my poor Nisida, I have seen her; she was here just now, as beautiful and as pale as the Madonna Dolorosa; she smiled to hide from me her sufferings. She was happy, poor girl, because she believed you away. Oh, how sweet it will be to me to die by your hand! You gave me life; take it back, father, since God will have it so. And Nisida will be saved. Oh, do not hesitate! It would be a cowardice on the part of both of us; she is my sister, she is your daughter."

And seeing that his powerful will had subjugated the old man, he said, "Help! help, father!" and offered his breast to the blow. The poor father lifted his hand to strike; but a mortal convulsion ran through all his limbs; he fell into his son's arms, and both burst into tears.

"Poor father!" said Gabriel. "I ought to have foreseen that. Give me that dagger and turn away; I am young and my arm will not tremble."

"Oh no!" returned Solomon solemnly, "no, my son, for then you would be a suicide! Let your soul ascend to heaven pure! God will give me His strength. Moreover, we have time yet."

And a last ray of hope shone in the eyes of the fisherman.

Then there passed in that dungeon one of those scenes that words can never reproduce. The poor father sat down on the straw at his son's side

Nisida

and laid his head gently upon his knees. He smiled to him through his tears, as one smiles to a sick child; he passed his hand slowly through the silky curls of his hair, and asked him countless questions, intermingled with caresses. In order to give him a distaste for this world he kept on talking to him of the other. Then, with a sudden change, he questioned him minutely about all sorts of past matters. Sometimes he stopped in alarm, and counted the beatings of his heart, which were hurriedly marking the passage of time.

"Tell me everything, my child; have you any desire, any wish that could be satisfied before you die? Are you leaving any woman whom you loved secretly? Everything we have left shall be hers."

"I regret nothing on earth but you and my sister. You are the only persons whom I have loved since my mother's death."

"Well, be comforted. Your sister will be saved."

"Oh, yes! I shall die happy."

"Do you forgive our enemies?"

"With all the strength of my heart. I pray God to have mercy on the witnesses who accused me. May He forgive me my sins!"

"How old is it that you will soon be?" the old man asked suddenly, for his reason was beginning to totter, and his memory had failed him.

"I was twenty-five on All Hallows' Day."

"True; it was a sad day, this year; you were in prison."

"Do you remember how, five years ago, on that same day I got the prize in the regatta at Venice?"

"Tell me about that, my child."

And he listened, his neck stretched forward, his mouth half open, his hands in his son's. A sound of steps came in from the corridor, and a dull knock was struck upon the door. It was the fatal hour. The poor father had forgotten it.

The priests had already begun to sing the death hymn; the executioner was ready, the procession had set out, when Solomon the fisherman appeared suddenly on the threshold of the prison, his eyes aflame and his brow radiant with the halo of the patriarchs. The old man drew himself up to his full height, and raising in one hand the reddened knife, said in a sublime voice, "The sacrifice is fulfilled. God did not send His angel to stay the hand of Abraham."

The crowd carried him in triumph!

[The details of this case are recorded in the archives of the Criminal Court at Naples. We have changed nothing in the age or position of the persons who appear in this narrative. One of the most celebrated advocates at the Neapolitan bar secured the acquittal of the old man.]