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To-morrow, when it comes, will know its daily task, its daily care; But not till then will ever show Our needed act, our needed prayer— Then to the present be thou true: To that let thought and act be given; So shalt thou find a vigor new To take the next sure step to Heaven.

THE PORPHYRY CASKET.

In the boudoir of the Signora di Carnese, inasmall, beautifully decorated shrine affixed to the wall, is a singular object which has excited the curiosity of all who have seen it. It is a small Porphyry casket, oblong in shape and fastened with chased gold bands. It was made, it is said, at the Signora's order, by one of the most famous artists in Rome, and is no less quaint in design than exquisite in finish. On one side, cut into the stone, is the single word amor, and a date.

For what purpose it was made, what it contains and why it is placed in the shrine as if it were a sacred relic, few or none of the Signora's acquaintances know. She has been asked these questions many times, and her only reply is—"Something more valuable to me than all my other possessions put together,"—and the Signora is a very rich woman.

She has never been known to open the casket, and, indeed, it is so banded and bolted together that it would require extraordinary effort to break it apart. No one is allowed to touch it. The Signora dusts and cares for it with her own hands, and it has been observed that at such times her ordinary haughty air gives place to one of mournful humility, mingled with almost religious reverence.

This is the story of the Porphyry Casket.

The gossip of society said that Olivia Anfedi had resolved either to marry into a royal family, or die single. Sons of noble Roman families, merchant princes, foreign ambassadors, diplomats and soldiers had sued for her favor and failed. She had refused offers, the very thought of which had embittered the soul of many a Roman beauty with the gall of envy. For all the emotion she had exhibited at the passionate pleading of her suitors, she might have been a statue of ice.

She was the only daughter of an ancient ducal family of Rimini, and the pride and beauty of her race had descended to her undiminished. Her hair, slightly waving, was of a glistening black, save when the sunlight touched it, when faint coppery tints and red gleams flickered in its glossy depths. Her eyes, in her calm moments, were dark violet, but changed with her moods from cold steel gray to glowing dusk, like the sky in a moonless August night.

In the very height of her reign, when, to use scarcely too extravagant a metaphor, all Rome was at her feet, there came to the city a poor student from the old university of Padua. Marco Carnese had the dark, handsome features, the brilliant black eyes, the little figure and the fiery passion of the Sicilians. His fine talents had won him some fame and a fellowship in his college.

It seemed the merest irony that Marco should meet Olivia Anfedi and fall madly in love with her. But so it was. She, too, had noticed the handsome student, with his mournful expression and reserved air; and had been of her own grade of life, it is possible that she might have looked upon his love with favorable eyes.

He was not blind to the wide gulf between their respective stations; nor to the utter helplessness of his passion. But he did not pause to reflect; he could think of nothing but that he worshipped her with a worship that was like a consuming flame. He could not keep away from her. It seemed as if he drew his life from her presence; and yet the sight of her beautiful face, so near and yet so utterly removed from him, was a torture.

Denied her house, he followed her at a distance in the street; always with the same mute, imploring look. He managed to introduce himself into the dwellings where she visited; and often at night, glancing about the drawing-room, she met his dark, mournful eyes resting upon her in passionate adoration.

He had ventured to address her, in low, trembling tones. She had replied with a freezing reserve that would have changed the love of most men into hatred. With Marco Carnese it merely added fuel to the flame.

One night he followed her into the orangery of a mansion where they were both guests, hardly knowing what he wished or meant to do. Seeing her there alone, he approached her, and suddenly throwing himself upon his knees at her feet he poured out his passion in a torrent of words which would have swept away the resistance of many women. She only looked down at him with a curling lip.

"You are mad, signor," she said. "Yes," he exclaimed, "I am mad—you, so noble, rich and honored; I, so poor, humble and unknown! It is madness. But, ah, how gladly I would die for one smile, one look of love from you, beautiful one!"

"You are offensive, signor," she said, with exasperating calmness. "Either leave me, or permit me to pass."

He arose with flaming cheek, and stood with bent head as she swept haughtily by him as if he had been an impertinent menial. He had made himself ridiculous in her eyes! She despised him!

Any other man would have been utterly overwhelmed by such a rebuff. But as he had said, he was mad. For a few days he buried himself in the seclusion of his garret, suffering only as such natures can suffer. Then he emerged, and again was seen, with his melancholy eyes and appealing expression, haunting Olivia Anfedi, like an importunate and irrepressible phantom.

Everybody in Rome knew of the hopeless passion of the threadbare Sicilian for the noble lady. But it was little to him if they made a mock of his love. In all the world he saw only her, thought only of her. A glimpse of her beautiful face, albeit cold as marble to him, was food and drink, life itself to the poor scholar. All else was less than nothing in his thoughts.

He discovered that she went on foot every afternoon to attend vespers at the Church of St. Lucia, in the Via Trajana. At first he contented himself with watching her from the shadow of a pillar, and following her homeward at a distance. In the church,

no saint depicted upon its walls, or shrined above its altars received such homage from those who worshipped there, as did the beautiful devotee from the unhappy lover. Whether she knew it or not was impossible to discover from her impassive face, a hundred times more impassive than usual when she detected the sorrowful eyes fixed upon her as she knelt.

One evening, when she had lingered longer than usual and the few worshippers had departed, leaving her alone with him in the church, he accosted her.

He began by a stammering appeal for pardon for his boldness; but surveying him with a look of haughty surprise, she would have passed out of the church without a word, had he not placed himself before her.

"You shall listen to me," he said, hotly. "I love you. I am dying for you. God did not give you such beauty that you might destroy those who adore you with cruelty. Have you no word of kindness for me, no pity?"

"Allow me to pass," was her reply, "or I will call the sacristan."

"Have you no heart?" he cried violently.

"Am I to listen to the ravings of every adventurer who crosses my path?" she said in the same cold tone.

"Adventurer!" he gasped, his face flushing a deep crimson with rage and shame, "I an adventurer!"

"What else?" she replied calmly. "How should you dare—a beggar in rags—speak of love to me?"

If she had meant to insult and exasperate him she had succeeded but too well. With his eyes starting from his head, and the foam on his lips, he glared at her a moment; then lifting his hand he struck her. It was an act of frenzy, the concentration of his long suffering and despair in one supreme moment of utter abandon.

The next instant he was groveling upon the ground, kissing the hem of her garment, bathing it in tears, and sobbing prayers for pardon, self-accusations, curses upon his own brutality; while she, towering above him in her outraged pride, gazed down at him with white face and flashing eyes. "Coward!" she said, in a slow, deep tone, "coward!"

"Yes, yes," he cried, still kneeling, "worse than a coward! a villain, a dog! Oh, that I, who would have died for you, should have done this! Blasted be the hand that was raised against you! But you shall be revenged. Yes, I myself will revenge you."

She made no reply, but pushing him aside with her foot, went out of the church, leaving him kneeling upon the floor, weeping and calling imprecations down upon his own head.

The next morning, before she had arisen, her maid brought her a parcel which had been left at the door by a messenger. Supposing it to be some article from a tradesman, she untied the wrapping and found beneath a small wooden box. Removing the lid, she gazed within, and dropped the box with a cry of horror.

There, at the bottom of the box, its fingers contracted, as with the agony of the blow, was a man's hand severed at the wrist! A bit of paper lay beside it, on which were written these words:

"The infamous hand that desecrated love. Your are revenged."

For a long time she lay silent and thoughtful, with the strange parcel beside her. Gradually the cold, proud expression of her features gave place to a look never seen there before. At last she arose, and, gazing at the severed hand for some moments, lifted it from the box and kissed the lifeless fingers.

All that day she remained at home, in the seclusion of her chamber; and all day a curious struggle seemed to be going on in her mind. Now she passed to and fro in an agitated way; again she sat in her chair with her cheek resting upon her hand, buried in profound meditation.

At nightfall she suddenly arose, dressed herself in a plain walking costume, and, putting on a thick veil, left the house alone. There was no hesitation in her step as she went along the darkened streets toward the commoner quarter of the city.

Arriving before a large, gloomy building, whose tenants were evidently of the poorer class, she spoke to the concierge:

"You have a sick gentleman among your lodgers?"

"Signor Carnese?" replied the man. "Oh, yes, poor young gentleman. He is badly wounded. He will not say how, but—"

"Show me his room."

Whatever questions he might have felt inclined to ask were effectually silenced by the piece of gold thrust into his hand. Leading the way to the very top of the house, he pointed to a door; and, saying, "That is his room, signora," took himself downstairs again.

She entered the apartment cautiously. The poor scholar was lying upon his bed with his face to the wall—she could see, even in the darkened chamber, how haggard and white it was. Outside of the coverlet rested his right arm, bandaged at the wrist. As she approached him he stirred and moaned:

"Water."

She found a glass upon the stand near at hand, and placed it to his lips. She removed her veil, and as she bent over him, he saw her face.

"You!" he said, striving to rise. But she pressed him gently back upon the pillow.

"Yes," she answered softly, "it is I."

"Ah," he sighed, "now I can die happy."

"On the contrary," she replied, "you must live—for my sake, Marco."

Poor Marco's chief danger now was that he might indeed die of pure happiness. But he did not die; for seldom has a man been nursed in illness and pain as he was nursed by the woman who had once scorned him, but in the sudden awakening of her own heart had discovered the worth of such love as his.

"Yes," she said, when he was convalescent at last, and able to sit up in his chair by the window, "when I saw that poor hand, something in my heart seemed to melt and give way, and I knew that I loved you, Marco."

It is her husband's right hand, the hand that smote her in the Church of St. Lucia, the hand of the man she loved as few men have been loved, that is kept in the porphyry casket in the boudoir of the Signora Carnese.

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