The Sacrifice;

OR

FOR HER FAMILY'S SAKE.

CHAPTER XXVI.

On Monte Pericio!—and the sun setting over Rome. A sunset in this city is different from any other in the world. Nowhere else does he find it so hard to leave the earth, and nowhere else does he leave behind him such a mellow golden light. Even the atmosphere seems filled with millions of particles of gold dust, and behind St. Peter's immense dome flames up a crown of rays, brilliant, majestic, indiscribably magnificent—enveloping the city below with a halo of glory. The notes of a hundred bells quiver in the air; a soft wind is blowing from the distant mountains and playing about the luxuriant foliage, and these evergreen walks are filled with thousands of visitors, walking up and down. The crowd sways and surges; here are shining eyes in proud Roman faces; there the brilliant blonde faces of lovely English women, and the rosy complexion of the Germans. Bright, gleaming dresses, elegant equipages; among others the scarlet liveries of the queen. There long trains of young priests, in their green, blue and red robes.

Now the music begins, and mingles with the sound of the bells and the plashing of the silver waterfalls, with the chatter and laughter of the throng, who are talking in all the languages of the civilized world; and opposite, rising sharply against the yellow evening sky, the solemn pine woods of the Villa Borghese.

In one of the lonely middle paths an old gentleman in a light spring suit, with a black band on his arm, was walking; by his side a slender, youthful figure is a simple walking costume, but in deep mourning. The delicate tint of health rested on her cheek, and though the manner in which she was gazing at the magnificence of the spring sunset, was not exactly gay, there was in the glance of the liquid eyes a quiet, intense joy in the beauty around her.

"Uncle, how hard it will be to go away," she was just saying.

"Yes, Lorchen, that may well be, but we shall come again."

She laughed out gayly. "Oh, uncle, I? You have always called me poveretta."

"H'm! Lora, shall I try to get something for you out of that ci-devant husband of yours?"

She looked at him with a smile. "Yes, you are just the sort of man to get it out of him, and I am the sort of person to take it."

"You are right, Lorchen."

"As always, uncle," she said gayly; "and now, please, don't say any more about it. Only look, how wonderful! I assure you, uncle, it is good for the health to look at such a sight every day." And she pointed to the picture spread out before them—Rome in the golden light of the sunset.

She took his arm and they walked on in silence. Now and then he cast a proud glance at her, when admiring eyes rested on his beautiful companion.

They sauntered comfortably along, past the French academy down to the Piazza del Popolo, and along the corso. Lora was in a waking dream, in which her good old uncle got a place in her thought to another who was dearer to her than any one else in the world.

That would be happiness indeed to float through this charmed atmosphere with him, to let herself be taught by him, to admire and enjoy everything alone with him in this wonderful land, where not a soul knew them.

She started violently when the general said: "I wonder if we shall find any letters?"

As he spoke he pinched the ear of a saucy little, dark-eyed creature, who had been following them offering violets to sell, and at last had put a bunch into his coat-pocket, and was now clamorously demanding payment for it.

"Heathenish set," he scolded as he put two soldi into the child's basket, and offered the violets to Lora.

"I wonder whether there will be any letters?" he repeated.

"I hope so, uncle; I am sure I hope so. I have not heard from mamma for a week, and I am always anxious lest she should be ill."

"It wouldn't be strange if she were. But you must not fret about it, child. Besides, that monkey, Katie, has got to pass her examination at this time. If she gets through all right, I will give her something. Would you like to drive home, Lora. It is a good way home yet, and I am sure your little feet are as tired as my big ones."

He beckoned to a fiacre, and they drove home through the crowded street.

In the little sitting-room, proudly called a salotto, Gemma, the dark-eyed, but by no means beautiful daughter of the house, had lighted a fire, to keep off the evening chill. On the covered table a lamp was burning, and the flame was lighted under the tea-kettle. Lora took off her hat and jacket, and the general took the paper he had bought on the way home out of his pocket; and seating himself comfortably on the sofa, he said:

"Do you know, Lora, that I never will go travelling again without you? By jove, this is cosey. German tea-table in the heart of Rome."

She looked pleasantly at him, sat down opposite him, and making a delicious salad, replied gayly:

"If you like it, I am quite ready."

"Yes; you would soon be declining with thanks," he laughed. "No no; no promises, Lora, or you will be breaking your word."

The smile lingered on her face. She felt so free to-day, as light as a bird escaped from its cage; like a flour when it feels the first sunshine, after a long period of rain; as only a young heart can feel when flattered with delicious hope, after a time of heavy sorrow.

When the general had gone to his room, after tea, she stepped out upon the tiny balcony, which hung, like a swallow's nest, over the little court. And involuntarily the sweet dreams came back, as she listened to the plashing of the fountain below. Far, far away from Rome, in her distant home, her thoughts were busy; she could see it so plainly, the house with the clear gable window. And he would pardon her; he would be sure to, when she told him what had separated them before. She was certain of it, perfectly certain. He could not forget her anymore than she could forget him, for their love was too true, too real. Ah, happy future, what will you bring?

Gemma's soft voice called her back to the present. She was excusing herself, she had quite forgotten, she said, that a letter had come for the signora; here it was, and she also wished to know if the signora would wish to go to bed at once. She, German, wished to know, for she wanted to go to the theatre—she had had a ticket given her by the Signor Inglese on the first floor—and "if the signora does not wish for anything more this evening—"

"Oh, to be sure, you can go," replied Lora pleasantly, going toward the lamp with the letter.

The girl quickly cleared the table, giving stolen glances at the lovely face of the fair woman who held the letter thoughtfully in her hand, and thought it must be from the distant sposo. It was a pity that they were going away so soon, the old eccellenza, they were such quiet lodgers, giving so little trouble—not half so troublesome as the Inglesi, downstairs. She left the room with a pleasant felice-notte.

Lora shut the door behind her then came back to the table, nestled down in the sofa, and opened her letter.

All at once she turned deathly pale, and sat bolt upright. She sat motionless for awhile, her eyes fixed on vacancy, her hands pressed tightly together on her lap.

The letter lay on the table; it contained only a few hurried lines.

Lora's face twitched convulsively. A smile still lingered about her mouth, but in terrible contrast were the livid lips, and the eyes, which seemed absolutely sunken for the moment. She got up at length slowly and heavily, like an old woman, crept to her room and shut the door behind her. The lamp in the deserted room flickered in the cool night wind, which streamed in from the balcony. It blew off the table cover, and swept down the letter which had brought the news of Katie's engagement. It fluttered across to the door, behind which Lora had disappeared, as if it would penetrate even here with its message.

It was still as death; only once there sounded something like a cry of pain from the next room.

"Good heavens, child, how you look!" cried the general next day, as he entered the salatto, at the usual hour.

She looked beyond him as she gave him her hand, and asked how he had slept.

"That would—if you should get the fever! For Heaven's sake—Gemma shall go for the doctor—"

"Thank you, uncle, but I am quite well."

"Nay, nay," muttered the old gentleman, suspiciously; "don't try to make yourself out stronger than you are, and I beg of you don't go home sick."

"Before that I shall be quite well, uncle."

"Yes, my dear; but we can go very soon, now." The old general smiled slyly, and took a letter out of his pocket. "Look! That a found, last night, on the table by my bed. It is the act of divorce. You are free, Lorchen."

She nodded slightly.

"I am glad, uncle," she said wearily. "I thank you very much; you havetaken so much trouble for me."

What should she do with her freedom?

The general turned red. He was vexed at this indifference. Yesterday she could hardly wait for the document to come which should release her from the bonds of her hated marriage.

"Then we will go away at once," he grumbled. "I have stayed here longer than I intended. We will go Saturday, and then I shall be in Berlin in a week, so I can go to the first bowling-match at my club."

Lora poured out the tea.

"Just as you like, uncle; we shall go, then."

"If I only knew what is the matter with you, Lora?"

"With me?" She laughed shortly and threw back her head. "What is the matter with me? Where shall we go to-day, uncle?"

"We will go to the Palatine again and to the Coliseum, if you like."

"Oh, certainly."

She drank her tea in little sips, and crumbled up her bread with her fingers.

"But aren't you glad in the least because the confounded thing is over?" he asked, at length.

"Oh, immensely, uncle; and I was going to tell you," she continued, rising and opening the balcony door, "Katie is engaged."

The old general stared at her with his mouth open. "That little snip! By Jove, who to?" he stammered at length.

Lora arranged the cheap curtains before the door, which was pulled aside. His name is Doctor Schonberg; he is a teacher in the Academy at Westenberg," was the reply.

"What sort of a fellow is he? Do you know him?"

"Yes; he—he is like all the rest, uncle."

"H'm!"

She turned away; she looked almost as badly as she had done the day before the news came.

"At least," said the general, who was busily stirring his tea, "I hope he has some fortune."

"No," said Lora.

"It seems to be a Tollen peculiarity to plunge headlong into marriage without regard to the consequences," grumbled the general. "They never shut the stable door till after the horse is stolen, and then it is too late."

She had never heard her uncle speak so crossly. She felt that the reproach was intended for her, for whom he had taken so much trouble, but she did not care, today; everything was so indifferent to her. She got ready to go out, and then walked with him through the crowded streets, flooded with the morning light.

They entered at length the huge ampitheatre of the Coliseum. They had not spoken a word on the way. Here they separated; the old gentleman, accompanied by a guide, went up the steps, to get the view from this height.

Lora walked along the arena, on the sunny side, with drooping head and as one of the great blocks of stone that lay scattered about offered a convenient seat, she sat down and looked at the old wall before her. No one was here at this early hour, and the stillness was impressive. Only a flock of screaming birds were flying over her head, in the deep blue sky, and before her were the rows of seats from which, formerly, a hundred thousand men had looked upon the games below. Here, for the amusement of these hundred thousand, numberless men and animals had been slain in a horrible manner. She experienced, even, to-day, a great horror of this past, and she felt so small, so exceedingly small, in this world, not greater than a grain of dust whirled about by the wind. What was her small grief; her poor, little, feeble destiny? Some such thing happens to every one at times, perhaps even worse. She would live out her life, and she would be swept away, as millions before her had been, in the stream of time. And she would live! How? Well, that was her affair.

She lifted her head proudly.

She felt a wonderful courage, as if she had drunk strong wine which had excited her nerves, and yet had made her ill. She felt bold to face the future, and yet trembled before the horrible desert which this future appeared to her.

"Avanti!" she said aloud, as she got up.

The general, who looked like a mere dot above her, waved his handkerchief. She returned the greeting and walked slowly toward the entrance, to wait for him.

"Avanti!" he also said, as he came and offered her his arm.

"I can walk alone," she replied. "I must get accustomed to that, uncle, and her voice sounded hard.

As she was packing her trunk the next morning, the general came in with a letter.

"It seems to be epidemic with you," he said, laying a paper of bon bons down before Lora; "here is Rudolph's announcement of his engagement; haven't you heard?"

"Yes," she replied, pointing to an unopened letter, "from mamma."

"You have not read it yet?"

"No, uncle."

"And what do you say to the news? Your mother is in luck for once, this Maikat o' Katz, or whatever the future Frau von Tollen may be called?"

Lora nodded. "It is to be hoped so."

"Then you will soon be alone with your mother, Lorchen?"

"Yes," she replied huskily.

"Won't you read your letter, child?"

"By and by, uncle. You see I want to finish packing first."

"I say, Lorchen, you don't take offence at the stupid thing I said yesterday, that you all got married haphazard? I did not mean anything by it. I only thought Katie—don't be offended, child—was not very well suited to be the wife of a teacher—you understand? The girl seems to be so wild, so—so—well, in a word, I can better fancy her on horseback than in the kitchen or nursery. If it had been you, Lora, now, I could—"

She looked at him with an expression like that of a wounded deer.

He stopped in dismay and took her head in both his hands.

"I did not mean to offend you, really, my child. It is all right I suppose. Better a good husband than for the madcap to go out as a governess. Oh, it will all come out right in the end, eh?"

And he stroked her pale face.

She nodded pleasantly and continued her packing; then she took her mother's letter and went to her room with it, and she stayed there a long time. In the meantime the general went to sleep. He did not wake up till Gemma came to set the table; then Lora also came back.

"What did your mother write?" he asked.

She flushed deeply.

"Mamma sends her love," she said; but the truth was she had not yet found courage to read the letter.

(To be Continued.)

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