

THE YELLOW MASK.

IN TWELVE CHAPTERS.

CHAPTER II.

The studio of the Master-Sculptor, Luca Lomi, was composed of two large rooms, unequally divided by a wooden partition, with an arched doorway cut in the middle.

While the minuteness of the Gobroni establishment were undistinguishable at first sight, the studio of Luca Lomi's workshop, in their way, quite as hard at work, showed marble and clay. In the smaller of the two rooms the young noblemen, only addressed in the studio by his Christian name of Fabio, was busily engaged on his bust, with Nannina sitting before him as a model. His was one of those traditional Italian faces from which the skin and suspira are slow to respond to touch, and the colour of the young nobleman, watching the progress he made with his bust. Occasionally she took the modelling tool out of his hand, and showed him, with her sweetest smile, that she too, a sculptor's daughter, understood something of the sculptor's art, and now and then interposed in the course of the conversation, when her interest was especially intense in Fabio's work, she suffered her hand to drop idly on his shoulder, or stooped forward so close to him that her hair mingled for a moment with his. Moving the glass an inch or two so as to bring it well under his eye, Father Rocco found that he contrasted in the estimation of these two persons, by the immediate effect which they produced on the girl's face and manner. Whenever Madeline so much as touched the young nobleman—no matter what she did so by premeditation, or really by accident—his features contracted into pale chisel-like paper, the fingers nervously twisted and untwisted the loose ends of the ribbon fastened round her waist.

"Jealous," thought Father Rocco; "I suspected it weeks ago."

He turned away, and gave his whole attention, for a minute, to the casting of the plaster. When he took back again at the glazier, he was just in time to witness the slight accident which suddenly changed the relative positions of the three persons in the inner room.

He saw Madeline take up a modelling-tool, which lay on a table near her, and begin to help Fabio in altering the arrangement of the hair in his bust. The young man watched what was done, evidently enough for his amusement; then his attention wandered away to Nannina. She looked at him reproachfully, and he answered by a sign which brought a smile to her face directly. Madeline surprised him at the instant of the change; and following the direction of her eyes, easily discovered at whom the smile was directed. The bust remained employed was Dr. De Jongh's Cod Liver Oil, in Consumption.

At the opposite side of the room, Nannina was taking a cast from a statue of the Madonna; while Madalen Lomi, the sculptor's daughter, released herself from sitting for Minerva's bust, walked about the two rooms and watched the busts.

There was a strong resemblance of a certain kind between father, brother, and daughter. All three were tall, handsome, dark-haired, and dark-eyed; nevertheless, they differed, in expression, strikingly as they resembled one another in feature. Madalen Lomi's face betrayed strong passion, but was ungraceful; her eyes were full of fire, and the indications of a violent temper, had some sinister lines about the mouth and forehead which suggested anything rather than an open disposition. Father Rocco's countenance, on the other hand, looked like the personification of absolute calmness and invincible composure. His manner, which in the first view was so full of deliberate, assisted in carrying out the impression produced by his face.

The daughter seemed as if she could fly into a passion at a moment's notice. The father, appearing to be just as irritable, had something in his face which said as plainly as in words, "Anger me, and I never forgive." The bust looked as if it had never been called on to look for vengeance, nor to grant it, for the double reason that he could irritate nobody else, and that nobody else could irritate him.

"Rocco," said Luca, looking at the face of his Minerva, which was now finished; "this statue of mine will make a sensation."

"I am glad to hear it," rejoined the priest.

"It is a new thing in art," continued Luca enthusiastically. "Other sculptors, with a classical subject like mine, limit themselves to the ideal classical face, and never think of aiming at individual character. Now I do precisely the same, as far as Madalen is concerned. Madalen, to sit for Minerva, and I make an exact likeness of her. I may lose in ideal beauty, but I gain in individual character. People may accuse me of disregarding established rules—but my answer is, that I make my own rules. My daughter looks like a Minerva, and there she is exactly as she looks."

"It is certainly a wonderful likeness," said Father Rocco, approaching the statue.

"It is the girl herself," cried the other. "Exactly her expression, and exactly her features. Measure Madalen, and measure Minerva, and from forehead to chin, you will find hair's breadth of difference between them."

"But how about the bust and arms of the figure, now the face is done?" asked the priest, returning as he spoke, to his own work.

"I may have the very model I want for the busts now. Little Nannina has just given me the strongest message. What do you think of a mysterious lady-admirer who offers to sit for the bust and arms of my Minerva?"

"Are you going to accept the offer?" inquired the priest.

"I am going to see her to-morrow; and if it is really true that she is the height of Madalen, and a stout and arms worth modelling, of course I shall accept her offer; for she will be the very sister I have been looking after for weeks past. Who can she be?" That's the mystery I want to find out. Which do you say, Rocco—an enthusiast or an adventurer?"

"It is a new thing in art," continued Luca enthusiastically. "Other sculptors, with a classical subject like mine, limit themselves to the ideal classical face, and never think of aiming at individual character. Now I do precisely the same, as far as Madalen is concerned. Madalen, to sit for Minerva, and I make an exact likeness of her. I may lose in ideal beauty, but I gain in individual character. People may accuse me of disregarding established rules—but my answer is, that I make my own rules. My daughter looks like a Minerva, and there she is exactly as she looks."

"She is in Fabio's room," answered Father Rocco, softly. "Shall I call her?"

"No! no!" returned Luca. He stopped, picked round at his workmen, who were chiselling and smoothing the bust of despair, then advanced close to the priest, with a smiling face, and continued in a whisper: "If Madalen can only get from Fabio's room here to Fabio's palace over the way, on the Arno—come, come, Rocco, don't shake your head. If I brought her up to your parochial door, out of these days, and got a poor friar to let her in, and she had enough to take the rest of the business off my hands, and make her Fabio d'Ascoli's wife. You are a very bold Rocco, but you know the difference between the clink of the money-bag and the clink of the chisel, for that all!"

"I'm sorry to find, Luca," returned the priest coolly, "that you allow yourself to talk of the most delusive of all the coarsest way. This is one of the minor sins of the tongue which is growing on you. When we are alone in the studio I will endeavour to lead you into speaking of the young man in the next room and of your daughter in terms more becoming to you, to me, and to them. Until that time, allow me to go on with my work."

Luca shugged his shoulders, and went back to his statue. Father Rocco, who had been engaged during the last ten minutes in the wet plaster to the right composition, next, the partition removed from it a cheval-glass which stood there. He lifted it away gently, while his brother's bust was turned, carried it close to the table at which he had been at work, and then resumed his employment of mixing the plaster. Having thus prepared the composition for him, he laid it over the exposed half of the statuette with a neatness and dexterity which showed him to be a practised hand at cast-taking. Just as he had covered the necessary extent of surface, Luca turned round from his statue.

"How are you getting on with the cast?" he asked. "Do you want any help?"

"None, brother. I thank you," answered the priest. "Do not distract either yourself or your workmen on my account."

Luca turned again to the statue; and, at the same moment, Father Rocco, who had been engaged during the last ten minutes in the wet plaster to the right composition, next, the partition removed from it a cheval-glass which stood there. He lifted it away gently, while his brother's bust was turned, carried it close to the table at which he had been at work, and then resumed his employment of mixing the plaster. Having thus prepared the composition for him, he laid it over the exposed half of the statuette with a neatness and dexterity which showed him to be a practised hand at cast-taking. Just as he had covered the necessary extent of surface, Luca turned round from his statue.

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