Robert Herrick



The Conscript Mother

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HEN I met the signora at the tram station that May morning she was evidently troubled about something which was only partly explained by her murmured excuse, "a sleepless night." We were to cross the Campagna to one of the little towns in the Albanian hills, where young Maironi was temporarily stationed with his regiment. If we had good luck and happened upon an indulgent officer, the mother might get sight of her boy for a few minutes. All the way over [Pg 2]the flowering Campagna, with the blue hills swimming on the horizon before us, the signora was unusually taciturn, seemingly indifferent to the beauty of the day, and the wonderful charm of the Italian spring, to which she was always so lyrically responsive on our excursions. When a great dirigible rose into the blue air above our heads, like a huge silver fish, my companion gave a slight start, and I divined what was in her mind—the imminence of war, which had been threatening to engulf Italy for many months. It was that fear which had destroyed her customary gayety, the indomitable cheerfulness of the true Latin mother that she was.

"It is coming," she sighed, glancing up at the dirigible. "It will not be long now before we shall know—only a few days."

And to the ignorant optimism of my protest she smiled sadly, with the fatalism that women acquire in countries of conscription. It was futile to combat with mere theory and