F. MARION CRAWFORD

THE WHITE SISTER

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CHAPTER I

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'I cannot help it,' said Filmore Durand quietly. 'I paint what I see. If you are not pleased with the likeness, I shall be only too happy to keep it.'

The Marchesa protested. It was only a very small matter, she said, a something in the eyes, or in the angle of the left eyebrow, or in the turn of the throat; she could not tell where it was, but it gave her niece a little air of religious ecstasy that was not natural to her. If the master would only condescend to modify the expression the least bit, all would be satisfactory.

Instead of condescending, Filmore Durand smiled rather indifferently and gave his pallet and brushes to his man, who was already waiting at his elbow to receive them. For the famous American portrait-painter detested all sorts of litter, such as a painting-table, brush-jars, and the like, as much as his great predecessor Lenbach ever did, and when he was at work his old servant brought him a brush, a tube of colour, a knife, or a pencil, as each was needed, from a curtained recess where everything was kept ready and in order.

'I like it as it is,' said Giovanni Severi, resting his hands on the hilt of his sabre, as he sat looking thoughtfully from the portrait to the original.

The young girl smiled, pleased by his approbation of the likeness, which she herself thought good, though it by no means flattered. On the contrary, it made her look older than she was, and much more sad; for though the spring

laughed in her eyes when she looked at the officer to whom people said she was engaged, their counterparts in the portrait were deep and grave. Certain irregularities of feature, too, were more apparent in the painting than in nature. For instance, there was a very marked difference between the dark eyebrows; for whereas the right one made a perfect curve, the other turned up quite sharply towards the forehead at the inner end, as if it did not wish to meet its fellow; and the Marchesa del Prato was quite sure that Angela's delicate nose had not really that aquiline and almost ascetic look which the great master had given it. In fact, the middle-aged woman almost wished that it had, for of all things that could happen she would have been best pleased that her niece should turn out to have a vocation and should disappear into some religious order as soon as possible. This was not likely, and the Marchesa was by no means ready to accept, as an alternative, a marriage with Giovanni Severi, whom she had long looked upon as her own private property.

Filmore Durand glanced from one to another of the three in quick succession, stroked his rather bristly moustache, and lit a cigarette, not because he wanted to smoke, but because he could not help it, which is a very different thing. Then he looked at his picture and forgot that he was not alone with it; and it still pleased him, after a fashion, though he was not satisfied with what he had done.

Great artists and great writers are rarely troubled by theories; one of the chief characteristics of mature genius is that it springs directly from conception to expression without much thought as to the means; a man who has used

the same tools for a dozen years is not likely to take his chisel by the wrong end, nor to hesitate in choosing the right one for the stroke to be made, much less to 'take a sledge-hammer to kill a fly,' as the saying is. His unquiet mind has discovered some new and striking relation between the true and the beautiful; the very next step is to express that relation in clay, or in colour, or in words. While he is doing so he rarely stops to think, or to criticise his own half-finished work; he is too sure of himself, just then, to pause, and, above all, he is too happy, for all the real happiness he finds in his art is there, between the painfully disquieting ferment of the mental chaos that went before and the more or less acute disappointment which is sure to come when the finished work turns out to be less than perfect, like all things human. It is in the race from one point to the other that he rejoices in his strength, believes in his talent, and dreams of undying glory; it is then that he feels himself a king of men and a prophet of mankind; but it is when he is in this stage that he is called vain, arrogant, and self-satisfied by those who do not understand the distress that has gone before, nor the disillusionment which will follow soon enough, when the hand is at rest and cool judgment marks the distance between a perfect ideal and an attainable reality. Moreover, the less the lack of perfection seems to others, the more formidable it generally looks to the great artist himself.

It was often said of Durand that his portraits were prophetic; and often again that his brushes were knives and scalpels that dissected his sitters' characters upon the canvas like an anatomical preparation.

'I cannot help it,' he always said. 'I paint what I see.'

It was not his fault if pretty Donna Angela Chiaromonte had thrown a white veil over her dark hair, just to try the effect of it, the very first time she had been brought to his studio, or that she had been standing beside an early fifteenth century altar and altar-piece which he had just bought and put up at one end of the great hall in which he painted. He was not to blame if the veiling had fallen on each side of her face, like a nun's head-dress, nor if her eyes had grown shadowy at that moment by an accident of light or expression, nor yet if her tender lips had seemed to be saddened by a passing thought. She had not put on the veil again, and he had not meant that a suggestion of suffering ecstatically borne should dim her glad girlhood in his picture; but he had seen the vision once, and it had come out again under his brush, in spite of him, as if it were the necessary truth over which the outward expression was moulded like a lovely mask, but which must be plain in her face to every one who had once had a glimpse of it.

The painter contemplated his work in silence from within an Olympian cloud of cigarette smoke that almost hid him from the others, who now exchanged a few words in Italian, which he only half understood. They spoke English with him, as they would have spoken French with a Frenchman, and probably even German with a German, for modern Roman society has a remarkable gift of tongues and is very accomplished in other ways.

'What I think most wonderful,' said the Marchesa del Prato, who detested her husband's pretty niece, 'is that he

has not made a Carlo Dolce picture of you, my dear. With your face, it would have been so easy, you know!'

Giovanni Severi's hands moved a little and the scabbard of his sabre struck one of his spurs with a sharp clink; for he was naturally impatient and impulsive, as any one could see from his face. It was lean and boldly cut; his cheeks were dark from exposure rather than by nature, there were reddish lights in his short brown hair, and his small but vigorous moustache was that of a rather fair man who has lived much in sun and wind in a hot climate. His nose was Roman and energetic, his mouth rather straight and hard; yet few would have thought his face remarkable but for the eyes, which betrayed his nature at a glance; they were ardent rather than merely bold, and the warm, reddish-brown iris was shot with little golden points that coruscated in the rays of the sun, but emitted a fiery light of their own when his temper was roused. If his look had been less frank and direct, or if his other features had suggested any bad quality, his eyes would probably have been intolerably disagreeable to meet; as it was, they warned all comers that their possessor was one of those uncommon and dangerous men who go to the utmost extremes when they believe themselves in the right and are constitutionally incapable of measuring danger or considering consequences when they are roused. Giovanni Severi was about eight-and-twenty, and wore the handsome uniform of an artillery officer on the Staff. He had not liked the Marchesa's remark, and the impatient little clink of his scabbard against his spur only preceded his answer by a second.

'Happily for Angela,' he said, 'we are not in the studio of a caricaturist.'

The Marchesa, who could be near-sighted on occasion, put up her tortoiseshell-mounted eyeglass and looked at him aggressively; but as he returned her gaze with steadiness, she soon turned away.

'You are extremely rude,' she said coldly.

For she herself made clever caricatures in water-colours, and she knew what Giovanni meant. Angela's mother had been a very devout woman and had died young, but had incurred the hatred of the Marchesa by marrying the very man whom the latter had picked out for herself, namely, the elder of two brothers, and the Marchesa had reluctantly consented to marry the other, who had a much less high-sounding title and a far smaller fortune. She had revenged herself in various small ways, and had often turned her brother-in-law's wife to ridicule by representing her as an ascetic mediæval saint, in contorted attitudes of ecstasy, with sunken cheeks and eyes like saucers full of ink. Like many other people, Giovanni had seen some of these drawings, for the resentful Marchesa had not destroyed them when the Princess Chiaromonte died; but no one had yet been unkind enough to tell Angela of their existence. The girl did not like her aunt by marriage, it was true, but with a singularly simple and happy disposition, and a total absence of vanity, she apparently possessed her mother's almost saintly patience, and she bore the Marchesa's treatment with a cheerful submission which exasperated the elder woman much more than any show of temper could have done.

Just now, seeing that trouble of some sort was imminent, she made a diversion by coming down from the low movable platform, on which her chair had been placed for the sitting, and she spoke to the artist while she studied her own portrait. Durand was a very thin man, and so tall that Angela had to look very high to see his face as she stood beside him.

'I could never be as good as the picture looks,' she said in English, with a little laugh, 'nor so dreadfully in earnest! But it is very nice of you to think that I might!'

'You will never be anything but good,' answered Filmore Durand, 'and it's not necessarily dreadful to be in earnest about it.'

'You are a moralist. I see.' observed the Marchesa, putting on a sweet smile as she rose and came forward, followed by Giovanni.

'I don't know,' replied the painter. 'What is a moralist?'

'A person who is in earnest about other people's morals,' suggested Angela gaily.

'Really!' cried the Marchesa, with a most emphatic English pronunciation of the word. 'One would think that you had been brought up in a Freemasons' lodge!'

In view of the fact that Angela's father was one of the very last survivors of the 'intransigent' clericals, this was quite the most cutting speech the Marchesa could think of. But Filmore Durand failed to see the point.

'What has Freemasonry to do with morality?' he inquired with bland surprise.

'Nothing at all,' answered the Marchesa smartly, 'for it is the religion of the devil.'

'Dear me!' The artist smiled. 'What strong prejudices you have in Rome!'

'Are you a Freemason?' the noble lady asked, with evident nervousness; and she glanced from his face to Angela, and then at the door.

'Well—no—I'm not,' the painter admitted with a slight drawl, and evidently amused. 'But then I'm not a moralist either, though I suppose I might be both and yet go on painting about the same.'

'I think not,' said the Marchesa so stiffly that Giovanni almost laughed aloud. 'We must be going,' she added, suddenly relaxing to graciousness again. 'It has been such a privilege to see you day after day, my dear Mr. Durand, and to watch you working in your own surroundings. My brother-in-law will come to-morrow. I have no doubt that he will be much pleased with the portrait.'

Filmore Durand smiled indifferently but with politeness as he bowed over the Marchesa's hand. He did not care a straw whether Angela's father liked the picture or not, being in love with it himself, and much more anxious to keep it than to be paid for it.

'When shall I see you again?' Giovanni had asked of Angela, almost in a whisper, while the Marchesa was speaking.

Instead of answering she shook her head, for she could not decide at once, but as her glance met his a delicate radiance tinged her cheeks for a moment, as if the rosy light of a clear dawn were reflected in her face. The young soldier's eyes flashed as he watched her; he drew his breath audibly, and then bit his upper lip as if to check the sound

and the sensation that had caused it. Angela heard and saw, for she understood what moved him, so far as almost childlike simplicity can have intuition of what most touches a strong man. She was less like the portrait now than a moment earlier; her lips, just parting in a little half-longing, half-troubled smile, were like dark rose leaves damp with dew, her eyelids drooped at the corners for an instant, and the translucent little nostrils quivered at the mysterious thrill that stirred her maiden being.

The two young people had not known each other quite a year, for she had never seen Severi till she had left the convent to go out into society and to take her place at her widowed father's table as his only child; but at their first meeting Giovanni had felt that of all women he had known, none but she had ever called his nature to hers with the longing cry of the natural mate. At first she was quite unconscious of her power, and for a long time he looked in vain for the slightest outward sign that she was moved when she saw him making his way to her in a crowded drawing-room, or coming upon her suddenly out of doors when she was walking in the villa with her old governess, the excellent Madame Bernard, or riding in the Campagna with her father. Giovanni's duties were light, and he had plenty of time to spare, and his pertinacity in finding her would have been compromising if he had been less ingeniously tactful. It was by no means easy to meet her in society either, for, in spite of recent social developments, Prince Chiaromonte still clung to the antiquated political mythology of Blacks and Whites, and strictly avoided the families he persisted in calling 'Liberals,' on the ground that

his father had called them so in 1870, when he was a small boy. It was not until he had bored himself to extinction in the conscientious effort to take the girl out, that he appealed to his sister-in-law to help him, though he knew that neither she nor his brother was truly clerical at heart. Even then, if it had been clear to him that Giovanni Severi had made up his mind to marry Angela if he married at all, the Prince would have forced himself to bear agonies of boredom night after night, rather than entrust his daughter to the Marchesa; but such an idea had never entered his head, and he would have scouted the suggestion that Angela would ever dare to encourage a young man of whom he had not formally approved; and while she was meeting Giovanni almost daily, and dancing with him almost every evening, her father was slowly negotiating an appropriate marriage for her with the eldest son of certain friends who were almost as clerical and intransigent as himself. The young man was a limp degenerate, with a pale face, a weak mouth, and an inherited form of debility which made him fall asleep wherever he was, if nothing especial happened to keep his eyes open; he not only always slept from ten at night till nine the next morning with the regularity of an idiot, but he went to sleep wherever he sat down, in church, at dinner, and even when he was driving. Neither his own parents nor Prince Chiaromonte looked upon this as a serious drawback in the matter of marriage. A man who slept all day and all night was a man out of mischief, not likely to grumble nor to make love to his neighbour's wife; he would therefore be a model husband. When he fell asleep in the drawing-room in summer, his consort would sit

beside him and brush away the flies; in winter she would be careful to cover him up lest he should catch cold; at mass she could prick him with a hat-pin to keep him awake; as for the rest, she would bear one of the oldest names in Europe, her husband would be a strictly religious and moral person, and she would be very rich. What more could any woman ask? Evidently nothing, and Prince Chiaromonte therefore continued to negotiate the marriage in the old-fashioned manner, without the least intention of speaking about it to Angela till everything was altogether settled between the family lawyers, and the wedding could take place in six weeks. It was not the business of young people to fathom the intentions of their all-wise parents, and meanwhile Angela was free to go to parties with her aunt, and her intended husband was at liberty to sleep as much as he liked. The negotiations would probably occupy another two or three months, for the family lawyers had disagreed as to the number of times that Angela should be allowed to take the carriage out every day, and this had to be stipulated in the marriage contract, besides the number of dishes there were to be at luncheon and dinner and the question whether, if Angela took coffee after her meals, it should be charged to her husband, who took none, or against the income arising from her dowry. The family lawyers were both very old men and understood these difficult matters thoroughly, but neither would have felt that he was doing his duty to his client if he had not quarrelled with the other over each point. From week to week each reported progress to his employer, and on the whole the two fathers felt that matters were going on well, without any undue delay.

But the Fates frowned grimly on the marriage and on all things connected with it, for on the very morning during which Filmore Durand finished Angela's portrait, and before she had left his studio in the Palazzo Borghese, something happened which not only put a stop to the leisurely labours of the two lawyers, but which profoundly changed Angela's existence, and was the cause of her having a story quite different from that of a good many young girls who are in love with one man but are urged by their parents to marry another. The interest of this tale, if it has any, lies in no such simple conflict of forces as that, and it is enough to know that while her father had been busy over her marriage, Angela Chiaromonte had fallen in love with Giovanni Severi, and had, indeed, as much as promised to marry him; and that a good many people, including the Marchesa del Prato, already suspected this, though they had not communicated their suspicions to the girl's father, partly because he was not liked, and partly because he hardly ever showed himself in the world. The situation is thus clearly explained, so far as it was known to the persons concerned at the moment when the Great Unforeseen flashed from its hiding-place and hurled itself into their midst.

As Filmore Durand went with the Marchesa towards the entrance hall, followed by the young people, he called his man to open the outer door, but almost at the same moment he heard his voice at the telephone; the servant was a Swiss who spoke German, English, and Italian, and had followed the artist for many years. He was evidently answering an inquiry about the Marchesa just as he heard her step.

'The lady is here,' he said. 'She is coming to the telephone herself.'

He looked round as the four approached, for the instrument was placed on the right side of the large door that opened upon the landing.

'Some one for your ladyship,' he said in English, holding out the receiver to the Marchesa.

She took it and put it to her ear, repeating the usual Italian formula.

'Ready—with whom am I speaking? Yes. I am the Marchesa del Prato, she herself. What is it?'

There was a pause while she listened, and then Angela saw her face change suddenly.

'Dead?' she shrieked into the telephone. 'Half-an-hour ago?'

She still held the receiver to her ear, but she was stretching out her left hand as if she needed support. Durand took her by the arm and elbow, prepared to hold her up if she showed signs of fainting. Angela was already on her other side.

'Who is dead?' the girl asked quietly enough, but with evident anxiety.

'Your father,' answered the Marchesa, with such sudden and brutal directness that Giovanni started forward, and Durand stared in surprise, for he knew enough Italian to understand as much as that.

Angela made two steps backwards, slowly and mechanically, like a blind man who has unexpectedly run against a wall; like the blind, too, she held out her hands before her, as if to assure herself that she was getting out of

reach of the obstacle. Her face had turned white and her eyes were half closed.

The Marchesa no longer seemed to be in need of support and watched her.

'My poor child!' she cried, in a tone of conventional sympathy. 'I should have broken the news to you gradually ——'

'You should indeed!' answered Giovanni with stern emphasis.

He was already leading Angela to one of the nearest of the high-backed chairs that stood ranged against the dark-green wall of the hall. She sat down, steadying herself by his arm.

'Run over by a motor car almost at his own door,' said the Marchesa, in a lower tone and in English, as she turned slightly towards Durand. 'Killed on the spot! It is too awful! My poor brother-in-law!'

'Get some brandy and some cold water,' said the artist to his man, watching the girl's pale face and twitching hands.

'Yes,' said Giovanni, who was bending over her anxiously. 'Bring something quickly! She is going to faint.'

But Angela was not fainting, nor even half-unconscious. She had felt as if something hard had struck her between the eyes, without quite stunning her. She attempted to get up, but realised her weakness and waited a moment before trying again. Then she rose to her feet with an effort and stood straight and rigid before her aunt, her eyes quite open now.

'Come!' she said, almost imperiously, and in a voice unlike her own.

In a moment they were gone, and the artist was standing before the portrait he had finished, looking into its eyes as if it were alive. He had been deeply shocked by what had just happened, and was sincerely sorry for Angela, though he had not the least idea whether she had loved her father or not, but his face was calm and thoughtful again, now that she was gone, and expressed a quiet satisfaction which had not been there before. For it seemed to him that the picture was a precious reality, and that the young girl who had sat for it was only nature's copy, and not perfect at that; and perhaps the reality would not be taken from him, now, since Prince Chiaromonte had come to an untimely end; and the prospect of keeping the canvas was exceedingly pleasing to Filmore Durand. He had never painted anything that had disappointed him less, or that he was less willing to part with, and during the last day or two he had even thought of making a replica of it for the Prince in order to keep the original, for no copy, though it were made by himself most conscientiously, could ever be quite so good. But now that the Prince was dead, it was possible that the heirs, if there were any besides Angela, would be glad to be excused from paying a large sum for a picture they did not want. He was sure from the young girl's manner that she would no more care to possess a portrait of herself than a coloured postcard of the Colosseum or a plaster-cast of one of Canova's dancing-girls. This was not flattering to the artist, it was true, but in the present case he would rather keep his own painting than have it appreciated ever so highly by any one else.

Late in the afternoon he stopped before the closed gateway of the Palazzo Chiaromonte and pushed the little postern that stood ajar. The big porter was within, standing dejectedly before the door of his lodge, and already dressed in the deep mourning which is kept in readiness in all the great Roman houses. The painter asked in broken Italian if the bad news was true, and the man nodded gravely, pointing to the gates. They would not be shut unless the master were dead. Durand asked after Donna Angela, but the porter was not communicative. She had come in with her aunt and both were upstairs; he suspected the painter of being a foreign newspaper correspondent and would say nothing more.

The American thanked him and went away; after all, he had come to make sure that the Prince was really dead, and he was conscious that his wish to keep the portrait was the only motive of his inquiry.

He strolled away through the crowded streets, blowing such clouds of cigarette smoke about him that people looked at him in surprise. It was almost sunset, in February, and it was just before Lent. Rome is at her gayest then, though the old Carnival is as dead and gone as Pio Nono, Garibaldi, the French military occupation, the hatred of the Jesuits, and all that made the revival of Italy in the nineteenth century the most thrilling romance that ever roused Italian passion and stirred the world's sympathy. Durand was not old enough to remember those times, and he had never been in Rome at all till he was nearly thirty years of age and on the first wave of his high success; but he had read about the past, and to his unspoiled sight and

vivid imagination Rome was still romantic and the greatest city in the world, ancient or modern; and somehow when he thought of his picture and of Angela's face, and remembered the scene at the telephone, he felt that he was himself just within the sphere of some mysterious and tragic action which he could not yet understand, but which might possibly affect his own life.

'This is a serio-comic world,' he said to himself as he slowly made his way down the Corso, watching the faces of the people he passed, because he never passed a face in the street without glancing at it, stopping now and then to look into a shop window where there was nothing to see that he had not seen a thousand times elsewhere, smoking cigarettes without number, thinking of Angela's portrait, and mechanically repeating his little epigram over and over again, to a sort of tune in his head, with variations and transpositions that meant nothing at all.

'This is a serio-comic world. This is a comico-serious world. This world is a serious comico-serial. This is a worldly-serious comedy.' And so forth, and so on; and a number of more or less good-looking women of the serio-comic world, whose portraits he had painted, and several more or less distinguished men who had sat to him, passed the man of genius and greeted him as if they were rather pleased to show that they knew him; but they would have been shocked if they could have heard the silly words the great painter was mechanically repeating to himself as he idled along the pavement, musing on the picture he hoped to keep, and already regarded as his masterpiece and chief treasure.

CHAPTER II

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The excellent Madame Bernard had been Angela's governess before the child had been sent to the convent, on the Trinità dei Monti, and whenever she was at home for the holidays, and also during the brief interval between her leaving school and going into society; and after that, during the winter which preceded Prince Chiaromonte's death, she had accompanied the motherless girl to concerts and had walked with her almost daily in the mornings. She was one of those thoroughly trustworthy, sound-minded, well-educated Frenchwomen of the middle class of whom many are to be found in the provinces, though the type is rare in Paris; nearly fifty years of age, she had lived twenty years in Rome, always occupying the same little apartment in a respectable street of Trastevere, where she had a spare room which she was glad to let to any French or English lady of small means who came to Rome for a few months in the winter and spring.

Angela sent her maid for Madame Bernard on the day of the catastrophe, since her aunt neither offered to take her in at once nor seemed inclined to suggest any arrangement for the future. The Marchesa did, indeed, take charge of everything in the Palazzo Chiaromonte within an hour of her brother-in-law's death; she locked the drawers of his private desk herself, sent for the notary and had the customary seals placed on the doors of the inner apartments 'in the name of the heirs'; she spoke with the undertaker and made every arrangement for the customary lying in state of the body during the following night and day; saw to the erection

of the temporary altar at which masses for the dead would be celebrated almost without interruption from midnight to noon by sixteen priests in succession; gave full instructions to the effect that the men-servants should take their turn of duty in regular watches, day and night, until the funeral; and finally left the palace, after showing herself to be an exceedingly practical woman.

When she went away, she was holding her handkerchief to her eyes with both hands and she forgot her parasol; but she remembered it as she was just going out by the postern, her carriage being outside because the gates were shut, and she sent her footman back for it and for the little morocco bag in which she carried her handkerchief and card-case. It was a small matter, but the porter, the footman, and the butler upstairs all remembered it afterwards, and the footman himself, while coming down, took the trouble to look into the little wallet, and saw that the card-case was there, but nothing else; for the Marchesa sometimes carried certain little cigarettes in it, which the man had found particularly good. But to-day there was not even one.

Madame Bernard arrived in tears, for she was a warm-hearted woman, and was overcome with sympathy for the lonely girl. She found Angela sitting by a small fire in her own little morning-room on the upper floor. A tray with something to eat had been set beside her, she knew not by whom, but she had not tasted anything. Her eyes were dry, but her hands were burning and when she was conscious of feeling anything she knew that her head ached. She had forgotten that she had sent for the governess, and looked at her with a vaguely wondering expression as if she took the

kindly Frenchwoman in black for a new shadow in her dream.

But presently mechanical consciousness returned, though without much definite sensation, and she let Madame Bernard have her way in everything, not making the slightest resistance or offering the smallest suggestion; she even submitted to being fed like a little child, with small mouthfuls of things that had no taste whatever for her.

By and by there was a dressmaker in the room, with an assistant, and servants brought a number of big bandboxes with lids covered with black oilcloth; and Angela's maid was there, too, and they tried one thing after another on her, ready-made garments for the first hours of mourning. Then they were gone, and she was dressed in black, and the room was filled with the unmistakable odour of black crape, which is not like anything else in the world.

Again time passed, and she was kneeling at a faldstool in the great hall downstairs; but a dark screen had been placed so that she could not be seen by any one who came in to kneel at the rail that divided the upper part of the hall from the lower; and she saw nothing herself—nothing but a Knight of Malta, in his black cloak with the great white Maltese cross on his shoulder, lying asleep on his back; and on each side of him three enormous wax torches were burning in silver candlesticks taller than a tall man.

Quite at the end of the hall, five paces from the Knight's motionless head, three priests in black and silver vestments were kneeling before a black altar, reciting the Penitential Psalms in a quiet, monotonous voice, verse and verse, the one in the middle leading; and Angela automatically joined

the two assistants in responding, but so low that they did not hear her.

The Knight bore a resemblance to her father, that was all. Perhaps it was only a waxen image she saw, or a wraith in that long dream of hers, of which she could not quite remember the beginning. She knew that she was nothing to the image, and that it was nothing to her. While her lips repeated the grand dirge of the King-poet in Saint Jerome's noble old Latin words, her thoughts followed broken threads, each cut short by a question that lacks an answer, by the riddle man has asked of the sky and the sea and the earth since the beginning: What does it mean?

What could it mean? The senseless facts were there, plain enough. That morning she had seen her father, she had kissed his hand in the old-fashioned way, and he had kissed her forehead, and they had exchanged a few words, as usual. She remembered that for the thousandth time she had wished that his voice would soften a little and that he would put his arms round her and draw her closer to him. But he had been just as always, for he was bound and stiffened in the unwieldy armour of his conventional righteousness. Angela had read of the Puritans in history, and an Englishman might smile at the thought that she could not fancy the sternest of them as more thoroughly puritanical than her father, who had been brought up by priests from his childhood. But such as he was, he had been her father that morning. The motionless figure of the Knight of Malta on the black velvet pall was not he, nor a likeness of him, nor anything human at all. It was the outward visible presence of death, it was a dumb thing that knew the

answer to the riddle but could not tell it; in a way, it was the riddle itself.

While her half-stunned intelligence stumbled among chasms of thought that have swallowed up transcendent genius, her lips unconsciously said the Penitential Psalms after the priests at the altar. At the convent she had been a little vain of knowing them by heart better than the nuns themselves, for she had a good memory, and she had often been rebuked for taking pride in her gift. It was not her fault if the noble poetry meant nothing to her at the most solemn hour of her life, though its deep human note had appealed profoundly to her the last time she had repeated the words. Nothing meant anything now, in the face of the unanswered riddle; nothing but the answer could have any meaning.

The great apostle of modern thought asked three questions: What can I know? As a reasoning being what is it my duty to do in life? What may I dare to hope hereafter? Angela had never even heard of Kant; she only asked what it all meant; and the Knight of Malta was silent under the steady yellow light of the six wax torches. Perhaps the white cross on his cloak was the answer, but the emblem was too far from words for mere humanity to understand it. She wished they would take him away, for he was not her father, and she would be far better able to pray alone in her own room than in the stately presence of that one master whom all living things fear, man and bird and beast, and whatsoever has life in the sea.

To pray, yes; but for what? Rebellious against outward things, the girl's prime intuition told her that her father was quite separated from his mortal symbol now, having

suddenly left that which could change to become a part of the unknown truth, which must be unchangeable if it is true; invisible, without form or dimension, 'being' not 'living,' 'conscious' not 'aware,' 'knowing' not 'seeing,' 'eternal' not 'immortal.' That might be the answer, but it meant too much for a girl to grasp, and explained too little to be comforting. The threads of thought broke short off again, and Angela's lips went on making words, while she gazed unwinking on the Knight's expressionless face.

Suddenly her mind awoke again in a sort of horror of darkness, and her lips ceased from moving for a while, for she was terrified.

Was there anything beyond? Was it really God who had taken her father from her in an instant, or was it a blind force that had killed him, striking in the dark? If that was the answer, what was there left?

The sensitive girl shivered. Perhaps no bodily danger could have sent that chill through her. It began in her head and crept quickly to her hands and then to her feet, for it was not a fear of death that came upon her, nor of anything outward. To lose life was nothing, if there was heaven beyond; pain, torture, martyrdom would be nothing if God the good was standing on the other side. All life was but one long opportunity for sinning, and to lose it while in grace was to be safe for ever; so much she had been taught and until now she had believed it. But what loss could be compared with losing God? There were unbelievers in the world, of course, but she could not understand how they could still live on, and laugh, and seek pleasure and feel it keenly. What had they to fill the void of their tremendous

loss? Surely, not to believe was not to hope, to be for ever without hope was the punishment of the damned, and to live hopeless in the world was to suffer the pains of hell on earth.

She felt them now. 'The pains of hell gat hold upon me,' she moaned, heedless of the priest's recitation. Darkness rose like a flood-tide all round her and she shut her eyes to keep it out, for her will fought for hope, as her body would have struggled against drowning. It was no longer a mere question that assailed her, but imminent destruction itself.

It passed away this first time and she grew calm again. Not to believe was sin, and against all sin, prayer and steadfast will must be availing. The will, she had; she could remember many prayers, too, and say them earnestly, and was thankful for her memory which held orisons in readiness for every circumstance of daily duty or spiritual life. From her childhood she had found a gentle delight in the Church's liturgies and hymns, and now, as she prayed with the forms of language she had always loved, habit brought back belief to lighten her darkness. She still felt the bitter cold of the outer night that was very near her; but she kept it off now, and warmed her poor little soul in the fervour of her praying till she felt that she was coming again to life and hope.

She opened her eyes at last and saw that nothing was changed. The Knight of Malta slept on, as he was to sleep for ever; the priests knelt motionless before the black altar; their quiet, monotonous voices went on with the Penitential Psalms as priests had said them for at least fifteen centuries. Angela listened till she caught the words and then

began to respond again, and once more her thoughts followed broken threads.

Surely, by all she had been taught, her father was in heaven already. It was not possible that any human being should obey every written and unwritten ordinance of his religion more strictly than he had done ever since she could remember him. He had been severe, almost to cruelty, but he had been quite as unyieldingly austere in dealing with himself. He had fasted rigidly, not only when fasts were ordered, but of his free will when others only abstained, he had never begun a day without hearing mass nor a week without confession and communion, he had retired into spiritual retreat in Lent, he had prayed early and late; in his dealings with men, he had not done to others what he would not have had them do to him, he had not said of his neighbour what he would not have said of himself, he had wronged no man; he had given much to charity and more to the 'imprisoned' head of the Church. He had so lived that no confessor could justly find fault with him, and he had never failed to pray for those in whom he discerned any shortcoming.

Who would condemn such a just person? Not God, surely. Therefore when his life had ended so suddenly that morning, his soul had been taken directly to heaven.

Such righteousness as his had venial sins to expiate, what hope was there left for men of ordinary earthly passions and failings?

It was a consolation to think of that, Angela told herself, now that the tide of darkness had ebbed back to the depth of terror whence it had risen; and when at last the long

dream slowly dissolved before returning reality the lonely girl's eyes overflowed with natural tears at the thought that her father's motionless lips would never move again, even to reprove her, and that she was looking for the last time on all that earth still held of him who had given her life.

CHAPTER III

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Three days later Angela sat alone in her morning-room, reading a letter from Giovanni Severi. All was over now—the lying in state, the funeral at the small parish church, the interment in the cemetery of San Lorenzo, where the late Prince had built a temporary tomb for himself and his family, under protest, because modern municipal regulations would not allow even such a personage as he to be buried within the walls, in his own family vault, at Santa Maria del Popolo. But he had been confident that even if he did not live to see the return of the Pope's temporal power, his remains would soon be solemnly transferred to the city, to rest with those of his fathers; and he had looked forward to his resurrection from a sepulchre better suited to his earthly rank and spiritual worth than a brick vault in a public cemetery, within a hundred yards of the thrice-anathematised crematorium, and of the unhallowed burial-ground set aside for Freemasons, anarchists, Protestants, and Jews. But no man can be blamed fairly for wishing to lie beside his forefathers, and if Prince Chiaromonte had failed to see that the destiny of Italy had out-measured the worldly supremacy of the Vatican in the modern parallelogram of forces, that had certainly been a fault of judgment rather than of intention. He had never wavered in his fidelity to his ideal, nor had he ever voluntarily submitted to any law imposed by the 'usurper.'

'That excellent Chiaromonte is so extremely clerical,' Pope Leo the Thirteenth had once observed to his secretary