GRAZIA DELEDDA

NOSTALGIA

Grazia Deledda

Nostalgia

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

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INTRODUCTION

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Since the days of Latin, to how few authors has it been given to obtain an European reputation!

We English seem exceptionally slow in making ourselves acquainted with the works of foreigners. Dante and Cervantes, Goethe and Dumas, are perhaps no worse known among us than they are in their homes; but we seldom find out a modern writer till he has been the round of all the other countries. We are opinionated in England. We think other folk barbarians, even if we don't call them so; we visit them for the making of comparisons, generally in our own favour; of trying their manners and customs, arts and morals, not by their standard but by ours. We never forget that on the map of Europe there is the big continent, and away in a corner, by themselves, extraneous, cut off, and "very superior," physically and morally isolated and self-contained, are our two not over enormous islands. We don't regret that sea-voyage, literal and metaphorical, which is necessary to transport us to the lands of the barbarians; and though we travel a great deal, I declare I think we all (and especially newspaper correspondents) go about enclosed in a little bubble of our own foggy atmosphere, seeing only the things we intend to see, hearing the things we mean to hear, and already believe. We are poor linguists moreover, and when we talk with the barbarians we only catch half they say and omit all attention to what they hint; we frighten them by our abruptness, our unintentional hortatoriness and unconscious conceit, so that they don't

say to us what they mean, nor tell what they suppose to be true. We come home swollen with false report and evil surmise, and at once commit ourselves to criticism and laudation equally beside the mark. I wonder now do we really understand the errors of Abdul Hamed and Nicholas II as thoroughly as we think we do? and in our long glibness about the Dreyfus case has it never occurred to us we may have been partly deluded?—as the barbarians were deluded when they chattered of us in the time of the Boer War!

Well, we can't help our position in the far-away corner of the map; but perhaps we should become less odd and more sympathetic if we read the barbarian's books a little oftener; books in which he is talking to his brother barbarians, and has not been questioned by an island catechist; books, superior or inferior to our own it matters little, which at least are written from another standpoint, and which by their mere perusal must extend our knowledge, and remind us that "it takes all sorts to make a world."

The best way, of course, is to read foreign books in their original language. Don Quixote was right when he said translation was a bad job at its best. But life is short and the gift of tongues is miraculous; some of us are too busy with our Dante and our Schopenhauer to waste time on a railway novel, and more are lazy and can't be bothered to look out words in a dictionary. The humble translator has his function. If he can succeed in giving any of his author's spirit, he may interest his reader enough to send him to the original itself next time;—in which case the translator will have done a worthy deed, and the author will perhaps forgive a certain mangling of his ideas, spoiling of his best

passages and general rubbing of the bloom from his peach, inevitable in a process scarce easier than changing the skin of an Ethiopian or repainting the spots of a leopard.

Grazia Deledda, the new writer, for not so many years have passed since the publication of her first book, has already conquered not only her fellow-countrymen but many more distant peoples. Several of her novels have been put into French for the *Revue des Deux Mondes* and have appeared in Germany in various magazines and journals. One at least has been published in America, and this particular book, *Nostalgie*, is in process of translation into German, Spanish, Russian, Dutch, Swedish, and French. In England alone—poor, isolated, ignorant England—is the author's name almost unknown.

She is a Sardinian, and most of her books have been about her native island, the simple folk, and quiet histories of a forgotten corner where the tourist has hardly penetrated. But Signora Deledda now lives in Rome, and true to her method she observes and describes the things and places about her, the people among whom her lot is cast. The scene of *Nostalgie* is therefore laid in the capital, but with constant allusion to a district in the north of Italy evidently familiar—her husband's country—which she tells us is dear to her as a second home, and from which she has dated her preface. As a writer she prides herself on her Realism—strange, ill-comprehended, often misapplied word! The realism of the highly imaginative may easily seem romance to the prosaic; and Signora Deledda will pardon us if we say that if only in her pictures of scenery, in her

intimate knowledge of the influence of Nature on the heart and the mind of her votaries, there is something very superior to realism—at least in the common acceptation of the term. Grazia Deledda sees her figures set in a landscape, belonging to it, born of it. Half the tragedy of this book arises from the fact that the heroine having lived alone with Nature is suddenly transplanted to a city where she imagines herself bereaved of the mighty mother. Years have to go over before she realises that the mighty mother never really deserts her children, and that the "still sad music of Humanity" is as much a part of Nature as the sough of the wind, the rustling of the leaves in the poplar-trees, and the unending roll of the river waters.

The form of Signora Deledda's novels is almost autobiographical. There is one principal character, hero or heroine as the case may be, and the story develops from his or her point of view. In the book before us, we know all about Regina, we are, as it were, inside her; but the other personages are known to us only in so far as she knows them. We are never admitted to a scene from which she is absent, nor is anything explained to us but in so far as she understood or guessed it herself. The minor characters are little more than sketched; figures in a crowd of which Regina saw the outside and occasionally touched the soul. One *feels* the gracious influence of her mother as she felt it, but we are told little about her and practically never see her in action. The plot is slight, but it hangs together perfectly with unity and focus, never giving a feeling of strain. It is all very un-English; neither the life nor the actors are like ours, nor at all like what is described in our novels. The history and

romance of Rome are sternly omitted. History and romance are already the property of the foreigners "who come down on Rome like a swarm of locusts," who wear "dress fasteners" and "impossible hats," who "resemble a nation of inquisitive children amusing themselves in the desecration of a stupendous sepulchre."

Yet even for the foreigner the supreme interest of Rome must be that it is no mere museum, but a living city still. Busy with churches and temples, statues and paintings, inscriptions and sites, we are apt to overlook the contemporary Romans whom we have not come forth to see. To themselves they must necessarily be the most important part of the Eternal City; and the greater number of them are not princes and dukes with historic names, nor even renowned churchmen, or patriots and kingdom builders, but good, simple, workaday, middle-class persons such as are the backbone of all countries and of all societies.

It is among such unnoticed folk that Grazia Deledda has taken us in *Nostalgie*; and it is not too much to say that her pages have a distinction and a force which recalls, at least in a measure, the *style qui rugit* of the author of *Madame Bovary*.

HELEN HESTER COLVILL.

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

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To my Husband—

Do you remember a young and attractive lady who called on us one day in the course of our first year's residence in Rome? Her visit was surprising; for I did not know the coronet-surmounted name on her card, and at that time few outside our small circle of intimates had discovered our nest in Via Modena, or had courage to climb a century of steps in pursuit of two useless persons unpractised in giving letters of introduction or inditing dedicatory epistles. The lady, whom I will call Regina, explained, however, that she came from your native province and was the bearer of messages from your friends. We talked a long time of that vicinity, dear to me as a second home; then she asked if I did not yearn after my native Sardinia, whose children are reputed always great sufferers from homesickness.

"Not so much," I replied. "I love Rome with all my heart; besides, I am so busy with my work that I have no time for the indulgence of idle phantasies."

"You work so hard? Happy you!" sighed the young lady; and added, "But, no! no! Homesickness is not mere phantasy; nor is it a disease, as so many call it! It is a passion; and, like other passions, can drive one mad if ungratified. During my first months in Rome I suffered from acute and morbid nostalgia; but now I have been home for a while and have come back almost cured."

"I don't know——," I said; "such nostalgia as I have felt has been quite harmless."

"Then there must be several kinds, some harmless, some dangerous," conceded the young lady with a smile; and she continued rather shyly: "but our whole existence is one long chain of nostalgia—don't you think so? The nostalgia of yesterday, the nostalgia of to-morrow; the longing for what is lost, the yearning for what can never be attained——"

After this first visit we saw Regina several times. I liked her, she was so clever and original; but to you she proved unsympathetic. "I can't see clearly into her life," you complained to me more than once.

This much we learned about her. Her husband was far from rich and she had brought him but a slender dowry, yet they rented a handsome Apartment and lived almost luxuriously. We, on the other hand, who worked hard and between us made an income the double of theirs, were content with the modest life of poor artists; gladdened indeed—like the careless existence of the birds building in the laurel below our windows—by the songs of love and the mere joy of living and struggling on in good hope of victory.

Remembering, as I minutely do, the whole simple romance of our early married life—on this day when we have attained to almost all our hopes (a little by my good-will, chiefly by your intelligence and activity, never by stooping to any transaction disapproved by our conscience)—to you, dear comrade of my work and of my life, I dedicate this tale. In it the reader will not find one of those stale themes for which my romances have been unjustly blamed. It is a simple narrative, a transcript from life, from this our modern life, so multiform, so interesting, sometimes so joyous, oftener so sad; beautiful always as an autumn tree

laden with fruit—some of it rotten,—and with leaves—many of them already dead.

A simple narrative, I say; so simple that criticism deeming it a test of my literary powers, hitherto devoted only to the passions and sorrows of a primitive society, may deem that I have failed. But such judgment will not disturb me. This novel has not been written as a test; and criticism resembles the Exchequer which almost always taxes us on capital greater than what we really possess.

Alas! that we cannot contest its terrible authority! nor make it understand that our patrimony, though small, is at least our own! If we forced ourselves to give all it has the audacity to demand, we should not only ruin ourselves, but to the last remain unsuccessful in appeasing our creditor.

GRAZIA.

RONCADELLO (CASALMAGGIORE). *October, 1904.*

PART I

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NOSTALGIA

CHAPTER I

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Rome was near.

The November moon illuminated the Campagna—an immense mother-o'-pearl moon, clear and sad. The violence of the express train was met by the violence of a raging wind.

Regina dozed and was dreaming herself still at home; the rumble of the train seemed the clatter of the mill upon the Po. Suddenly Antonio's hand pressed hers and she awoke with a start.

"We are near arriving," said the young husband.

Regina sat up, leaned towards the closed window and looked out. The glass reflected the interior of the compartment—the lamp, her own figure wrapped in a long, light-coloured cloak, her face wan with weariness. She half-closed her large, short-sighted eyes, and in the misty moonlight, against the grey background caused by the reflection of her cloak, she made out the landscape—bluish undulations fleeting by, a mysterious pathway, a tree with silver leaves lashed by the wind, and in the distance a long line of aqueducts, the arches of which disappeared into the moonlight and seemed like a row of immense inhospitable doors. This of the aqueducts was no doubt optical illusion; but Regina, who had little confidence in her eyes yet was obstinate in refusing spectacles, felt none the less excited by the sublime visions she believed herself seeing in the dimness of the wind-swept window-pane. Rome! she was filled with childish joy at the mere thought that Rome was

near. Rome! the long-dreamed-of wonder city, the world's metropolis, the home of all splendours, all delight—Rome, which was now to become her own! She forgot everything else; fatigue, mourning for the dear things lost, trepidation as to her future, fear of the strangers awaiting her, the embarrassments of the first days of marriage, all sadness, disappointment, delusion—all disappeared in the realisation of her long dream so ardently indulged.

Antonio got up and joined her at the window, which reflected his fine person—tall, fair, easy in attitude, dominant in manner. Regina saw—still in the glass—his long grey eyes looking at her caressingly, his well-shaped mouth smiling and suggesting a kiss, and she felt happy, happy, happy!

"Think!" said Antonio, bending over her as if to confide a secret; "think, my queen! We are at Rome!"

She did not reply. "Are you thinking of it?" he insisted.

"Of course I am!"

"Does your heart beat?"

Regina smiled, a trifle contemptuously, not choosing to let him see all her excitement and delight.

Antonio looked at his watch.

"A quarter of an hour more. If there wasn't such a wind, I'd make you look out."

"I will. Put down the glass."

"I tell you there's too much wind."

"I'll look out all the same," she said, with the obstinacy of a spoilt child.

Antonio tried to open the window, but the wind was really too strong, and Regina changed her mind.

"Shut it up! Shut it up!" she cried.

He obeyed.

"But think! think!" he repeated, "you are at Rome! *They* will be just starting for the station," he observed gravely, and advised her to put on her hat and get herself ready. "Settle your hair," he said; "and where have you put the powder?"

"Am I very hideous?" asked Regina, passing her hand over her face.

She sat down, opened her dressing-bag, smoothed her hair, powdered her face; then again put on the grey cloak which Antonio held for her, and buttoned it up. Her little face emerged from its sable collar as from a cup. It was pale and tired, all lips and eyes, reminding one of the pretty little face of a kitten.

"That's all right!" said Antonio, surveying her adoringly.

Again she rose and leaned against the door. A long wall was fleeting past the train; then came houses, hedges, gardens, canes bending under the wind, now and then lamps flaring yellow in the great whiteness of the autumn moon.

"San Paolo! The Tiber!" said Antonio, still at Regina's side.

San Paolo! The Tiber! Regina just perceived the sheen of the river and her heart beat strongly. Yet, as often happened to her, after the first moment's wild delight, a shadow of melancholy diffidence stole over her soul.

"Yes!" she thought, "Rome! the capital, the wonder city; where there is no fog, which is full of sunshine and flowers! But what is there in store for me there? Young, happy, loved,

I have come to throw myself into the arms of Rome as I have thrown myself into the arms of Antonio. What will Rome be able to give me? We are not rich, and the great city is like—like *people*, who give little to and care little for those who are not rich. But we aren't poor either!" she concluded, comforting herself.

The engine whistled, and Regina started involuntarily. Behind a wind-blown hedge, straight before her in the moonlight and the glare of the lamps which now had multiplied in number, a small house started into sight for a moment, and vanished as if by magic.

"It might be my home!" she told herself sadly, remembering the dear maternal nest, planted pleasantly on the high bank of the Po.

The train shrieked again, beginning to slacken speed.

"Here we are!" said Antonio; and Regina's recollections dissolved as the apparition of the house had dissolved a moment before.

After this, notwithstanding her resolution not to be upset, not to be surprised, but to make calm study of her own impressions, she became hopelessly bewildered and saw everything as through a veil.

Antonio was pulling the light luggage down from the rack; he overturned the bonnet-box containing the bride's beautiful white hat; she stooped to pick it up, flushed with dismay, then returned to the window and rearranged her cloak and fur collar. Lines of monstrous houses, orange against the velvety blue of the sky, fleeted by rapidly; the wind abated, the lamps became innumerable, golden, white, violet—their crude rays vanquishing the melancholy

moonlight. The glare grew and grew, became magnificent, pervaded an enclosure into which the train rushed with deafening roar.

Rome!

Hundreds of intent egotistic faces, illuminated by the violet brilliance of the electric light, passed before Regina's agitated gaze. Here and there she distinguished a few figures, a lady with red hair, a man in a check suit, a pale girl with a picture hat, a bald gentleman, a raised stick, a fluttering handkerchief—but she saw nothing distinctly; she had a strange fancy that this unnamed alien crowd was a deputation sent to welcome her—not over-kindly—by the great city to which she was giving herself.

The carriage doors were thrown violently open, a babel of human voices resounded above the whistles and the throbbing of the engines; on the platform people were running about and jostling each other.

"Roma—a—a!"

"Porter—r—r!"

Antonio was collecting the hand luggage, but Regina stood gazing at the scene. Many smiling, curious, anxious persons were still standing in groups before the carriage doors; others had already escaped and were disappearing out of the station exit.

"There's no one for us, Antonio," said Regina, a little surprised; but she had no sooner spoken than she perceived a knot of persons returning along the platform, and understood that these were *they*. She jumped out and looked harder. Yes, it was they—three men, one in a light-coloured overcoat; two women, one short and stout, the

other very tall, very thin, her face hidden in the shadow of her great black hat. The thin lady held a bouquet of flowers, and her strange figure, tightly compressed in a long coat of which the mother-o'-pearl buttons could be seen a mile off, struck Regina at once. This must be Arduina, her sister-in-law, editress of a Woman's Rights paper, who had written her two or three extraordinary letters.

"Mother!" cried Antonio, flinging himself from the carriage.

Regina found herself on the fat lady's panting bosom; then she felt the pressure of the buttons she had seen from afar; in one hand she was holding the bouquet, the other was clasped by a plump, soft, masculine hand.

The slightly amused voice of Antonio was introducing—

"My brother Mario, clerk in the Board of Control; my brother Gaspare, clerk at the War Office; my brother Massimo, junior clerk at the War Office——"

"That's enough," said the last, bowing graciously. All smiled, but Antonio went on—

"And this is Arduina, the crazy one——"

"Joking as usual!" cried the latter.

"Well, here is Regina, my wife! Here she is! How are you, Gaspare?"

"Pretty fit. And you? Hungry?"

"Are you very tired, my dear?" asked the trembling voice of the old lady, her face close to Regina's.

Notwithstanding the scent of the flowers, Regina could have wished her mother-in-law's lips further off, and she shuddered involuntarily. In that strange place, at that late hour, under that metallic, unpleasantly glaring, electric

splendour, all these people, pressed upon the bride, speaking in an unfamiliar accent and staring at her with ill-concealed curiosity. She conceived a dislike to them all. Even Antonio, who at that moment was more taken up with them than with his wife, seemed unlike himself, a stranger, a man of a different race from hers. She felt completely alone, lost, confused; had presently the sensation of being carried away, borne along in a wave of the crowd. Outside she saw a mountain of enormous vehicles drawn up in line on the shining wood pavement; it seemed to her made of blue tiles, and on the damp air she fancied the scent of a forest. The electric light blinded her short-sighted eyes; she thought she saw the forest in the distance, a line of trees black against the steely sky; and the violet globes of the lamps suggested in the heart of those black trees some sort of miraculous burning fruit. There was magic in the late hour, in the vastness of the enclosure bounded by the imaginary wood; the people silently lost themselves and disappeared as into a wet and shining morass.

"Let's walk—it's quite close," said Antonio, taking her arm. "Well! it's pretty big, isn't it, this station yard?"

"It *is* big!" she responded, genuinely astonished; "but it's been raining here, hasn't it? How lovely it all is!"

Regina felt happy again, at Antonio's side, squeezed up against him by the large and panting person of her mother-in-law. Yes, certainly! Rome was the dream-city, full of gardens, fountains, sublime buildings; a city great and splendid by day and by night! She felt joyous as if she had drunk wine; she chattered with feverish animation. Never afterwards did she succeed in remembering what she said in

that first hour of arrival; she did remember that her pleasure was marred by the panting and sighing of her mother-in-law, by Arduina's silly laughter, by the talk of the brothers who stepped just behind her, arguing about trifles.

Antonio had requested his family not to announce his arrival to the more distant relations; however, no sooner had they got to Via Torino and the great palace in which the Venutellis lived on the fourth and fifth floors, than the panting old lady confessed—

"Clara and her girl are here. They came in to spend the evening, and we couldn't get rid of them. They guessed, you see."

"The deuce!" said Antonio; "never mind, I'll soon pack them off for you!"

The gas was lighted, and Regina was impressed by the grand entrance hall and the marble staircase, which seemed continuation of the splendours she had found in *piazza* and street.

"Courage, my queen!" said Antonio; "this is a veritable Jacob's ladder! Go on in front, you fellows!"

The three men and Arduina pressed forward with the nimbleness of habit; Regina herself tried to run, but she soon got tired and out of breath.

"These stairs are the death of me!" sighed the mother-in-law; "ah! my dear child, I did not always live on a fourth floor!"

Regina was not listening. Cries, laughter, exclamations, a merry uproar, rang from the top of the stair;—then came a whirlwind, a rustle, a whiff of scent, a vision of flounces,

chains, lace, yellow hair, which overwhelmed and nearly overturned the bride, the bridegroom, and the old lady.

"Mind you don't break your neck, Claretta, my dear!" cried Antonio.

The lovely being clasped Regina tight in her fragrant arms, covering her with impassioned kisses.

"Dearest! Welcome! Welcome, dearest! A thousand good wishes and congratulations! Mamma is up there waiting for you!"

"Pray reserve some kisses for me!" said Antonio, dryly.

Claretta, without ado, kissed him rapidly on the cheek; then again seized Regina's hand, and drew her up and up, shouting and laughing, tall, rustling, fragrant, elegant. Regina followed, a little envious, even jealous, but childishly bewitched by so much easy loveliness. Claretta, filling the whole stair with her cries and peals of laughter, almost carried the bride, brought her into the drawing-room, threw her on the soft bosom of fat Aunt Clara, and then herself dragged her through the whole Apartment on a tour of inspection. The rooms were lighted by gas, and all the furniture was polished and smelly with paraffin: space everywhere was narrow and choked up with furniture, coarse draperies, jute carpets, crochet work, great cushions embroidered in wool, Japanese fans and umbrellas. In some of the rooms it was impossible to move. Regina's throat was caught by a feeling of suffocation. The remembrance of her beautiful country home, of its large rooms, so sunny and so simple, assailed her with an anguish of tenderness. To comfort herself she had to say to Claretta—

"We shall only stay here till we've found a nice Apartment for ourselves. That'll be easy, won't it?"

"Not so very easy. The foreigners come down on Rome like a swarm of locusts."

This was the discouraging reply of the cousin, who stopped before every mirror to admire herself, bending this way and that, and talking loud that the young men in the dining-room might hear her.

"Here! this is your own room, your *nid d'amour*, you birds of passage!" she said, taking Regina into a corner room, where they found Antonio, his mother, Arduina, the maid-servant, and the portmanteaux.

The room was large, but had an oppressively low ceiling, painted grey with vulgar blue arabesques; three windows, one close to the foot of the bed, were smothered in heavy draperies, and the massive bed itself was burdened with huge pillows and counterpanes. The bridal trunks and portmanteaux completed the barricade, and Regina's sense of asphyxia perceptibly increased. Silent and sad she surveyed the ugly room; she seemed lost in some painful dream, in some strange prison where everything fettered and mortally oppressed her. Oh dear! all these people! These women, who surrounded, crushed, smothered her! Tired and sleepy, her physical irritability made itself almost morbidly felt at the touch of all these unknown, inquisitive, cruel people. She was yearning for solitude and repose; at any rate she wanted to wash, dress, rearrange her hair. They did not leave her a moment alone. Claretta had no notion of forsaking the looking-glass; Arduina, on the look

out for copy, catechised her about her impressions; the mother-in-law never stopped staring with lachrymose eyes.

Regina took off her hat and cloak; her little face, all eyes and lips, seemed pale and frightened under the waves of her hair, black, abundant and curly. Antonio was paying no heed to his bride; he arranged the luggage, and asked his mother news of this one and that. The old lady puffed and sighed, and answered his questions, but never took her eyes off the new daughter-in-law.

"Where shall I wash my hands?" asked Regina. Her warm brown eyes, generally velvety and sweet, were now drooping with fatigue, and in expression almost wild.

"Here!" cried Arduina, precipitating herself on the washstand, "you'll find everything here, dear! soap, powder, comb—What sort of soap do you like?"

Regina did not answer. Mechanically she washed herself, accepting the towel which her sister-in-law presented, and smoothed her hair, stooping to look in the low looking-glass.

"Sit down," said Arduina, setting a chair, "you can't see like that."

"No, I can't see sitting; I'm short-sighted," said Regina, with increasing irritation.

This piece of news plunged the ladies into consternation. Claretta actually turned her back on the glass; Signora Anna, who was examining the lining of Regina's cloak, looked up almost in tears; Arduina studied her sister-in-law's beautiful orbs with astonishment.

"Short-sighted? With such lovely eyes! and so young!" exclaimed the old lady.

"Have you eye-glasses?" asked Claretta.

"Yes, but they're no good. I hate them."

"They're very *chic* though," said Arduina. "My dear, do loosen your hair at your temples—it's too dragged. What splendid hair you have! I'll do it for you to-morrow. Wait a moment—" and she raised her hand; but the bride's little head, which seemed so small and insignificant, shook itself fiercely.

"No, no. It will do well enough," she said.

Her tone admitted of no reply; and the authoress understood that Regina was a commanding creature of a superior race. For this reason she looked at her with pitying tenderness and compassionate admiration. Struck by this look, Regina for the first time noticed her sister-in-law, whom Antonio had described as a fool. Arduina was tall, with a narrow chest and a countenance of yellowish wood. She had small, colourless, frightened eyes, thin lips with discoloured teeth, and three curls of pale hair. She was singularly plain, and now Regina perceived further that she was melancholy and enslaved. But this produced no pity in the bride, rather a sense of malicious consolation. In this odious world into which she had stepped through the door of the Apartment, there were victims like Arduina, in comparison with whom she was an empress! All this passed through her mind during the few minutes in which she was settling her hair in the presence of the three staring women.

Antonio at last noticed his bride's annoyance, and sent the ladies away, pushing his cousins out familiarly.

"Be so kind as to take yourselves off. I don't require your assistance at *my* toilette. Go away. Make haste. We want rest."

"You can sleep all to-morrow. It's going to rain," said his mother.

"Let us hope not."

"I expect it will."

"Bother the weather prophets!" said Regina.

At last the women were gone; and in an instant Antonio was by Regina's side, kissing her, leaning his face against her troubled one, and saying in his caressing voice—

"Cheer up; don't be so depressed! You shall just eat a mouthful and then get at once to bed. To-morrow we'll escape—we'll go out by ourselves. We won't let them bore us. Cheer up!"

He put his arm round her and drew her to the dining-room, humming a merry tune—

> "Mousey doesn't care for cream,
> Mousey wants to marry the Queen;
> If the King won't let her go,
> Mousey'll break his bones, you know."

But Regina had no smiles left.

Scarcely was she seated on one of the comfortless Vienna chairs which surrounded the overburdened table than she felt her back broken and her eyelids weighed down by the whole fatigue of the journey. Again she seemed in a bad dream, looking through a veil at a picture of vulgar figures. Yes, vulgar the face of her mother-in-law—fat, red, puffy, outlined by the hard line of hair, over-shiny and over-black for nature; vulgar that of Mario, which was much like his mother's, with the same small blue eyes, the same mouth hanging half-open as he breathed slowly and noisily;

vulgar, again, the face of Gaspare—rosy all over, hairless below the shining line of his bald forehead; and that of Massimo, who was dandified but decadent, something like Antonio, but with long, reddish, oily hair and bold grey eyes. Claretta herself was vulgar; the very type of a *bourgeois* beauty. Without understanding why, Regina remembered the crowds half-seen at the passing stations and on the Roman platform; the faces now surrounding her stood out from the confusion of those unnoticed ones, but themselves belonged to the crowd, and were no better than the crowd. A whole world separated her from them.

Notwithstanding the hour and Antonio's promise of dispatch, the supper lasted an immense time. It was served by a strapping, fair-haired girl in a pink blouse, who never took her astonished eyes from the bride's face, and every moment tripped and stumbled, as if determined to break something.

This figure which came and went seemed the principal one of the picture. Every one watched the girl and talked to her. Signora Anna started every time she opened the door.

Even Antonio addressed her.

"Well, Marina, and how are all the sweethearts?" he asked; and added, indicating Regina, "are you satisfied? Which is the prettier, she or Signora Arduina?"

Marina blushed, giggled, ran away, and did not return.

Presently Gaspare rose gravely, threw his napkin over his shoulder, and went in search of her. An altercation was heard in the kitchen. Then Gaspare returned, wrathful and very red.

"Mother, the mutton is burnt!" he announced tragically; "you must go and see after it."

The old lady groaned, got up, went out, came back—and did not stay quiet for another moment!

"Mother!" implored Antonio, "do sit down!"

"Mother!" urged Gaspare, still wrathful, "go and look after her!"

"Oh, these servants!" said the mother-in-law, turning to Regina, "one shouldn't mention them, I know, but they're the ruin of families. I'll tell you afterwards——"

"It's one of the gravest of social problems," said Massimo, sarcastically, looking straight before him.

"But one can't live without servants," cried Gaspare.

"Yet the servants are the death of you?"

"Oh, I'll be the death of them if they don't do their business," said Gaspare, and they all laughed.

Notwithstanding the old lady's irruptions into the kitchen the courses were a long time coming. Talk grew animated. Massimo chattered with the cousin; Signora Anna expatiated to Signora Clara on the delinquencies of the maid.

"How are you getting on with your Gigione?" Antonio asked Gaspare; and his brother replied, abusing his chief as he had abused Marina.

"Did you get my last letter?" Arduina demanded of Regina, under cover of the general noise.

"Which?"

"The one in which I asked information about the state of private benevolence in Mantua."

"Oh, pray leave her in peace," interrupted Antonio testily.

Regina thought of her old home, of the beautiful picture seen through the window of the great dining-parlour, the woods, the silver river sparkling in the summer sunshine—all lost! The actual picture of the woods, and the painted picture above the chimneypiece, a river scene by Baratta, showing the green banks of the Parma, and white boats against a violet sky—all vanished—vanished for ever! Seated on this back-breaking chair, among all these people who chattered of vulgar things, dismay again invaded her soul, the dismay felt by the condemned at the thought of association with his fellow-prisoners. Antonio paid her little attention; he was sucked into the current of his brothers' talk and had become a stranger to her. Again he made some jest at Arduina's expense; the maid looked at the ladies and laughed. Indeed, they all laughed. Why did they laugh? Was happiness making Antonio cruel? His brother Mario—a man no longer young, who seldom spoke, but always reddened when he heard his thought expressed by somebody else—detested, as they all knew, his wife's scribbling mania. So Antonio persisted in questioning his sister-in-law about her newspaper, *The Future of Woman*.

"It has reached a circulation of three copies," said Massimo, "and it's clearly anxious to provoke quarrels, for it has printed a sonnet from a Calabrian paper without leave."

"My goodness! how witty you are!" cried Arduina, laughing, but her whole face expressed a vague terror.

Sor Mario, his eyes on his plate, grunted and munched like an angry bullock. There followed a perfect explosion of childish cruelty towards the poor creature, who, even to Regina, suggested a caricature.