

place, before Giaccone rose with the ring.

"To rush forward and denounce the woman was my first impulse, but I promptly checked it. I remembered the scene, the excitement this would create, also the inevitable spoiling of Madame's great effect of the evening. No—I would save my darling—but she should enjoy her triumph all the same. My plan might ruin my own prospects, such as they were, but I would carry it out nevertheless. With a word of thanks to Giaccone and a piece of silver left in his hand, the Signora had moved away—hid as she was, she doubtless shrank from beholding her work. And, obedient to his cue, Giaccone now stepped on the stage bearing the bowl in his hands. I watched with eager eyes, saw the singer take the bowl from its profferer, and commence the plaintive lay in which she bewailed her fate in dying thus young and innocent, and attempted to summon up resolution to drink the fatal potion. When the first pause ensued in her song, as she hesitated to lift the bowl to her lips, I staggered on the stage with the gait of simulated drunkenness, and, brandishing my halbert, contrived to dash the fatal bowl from the singer's hands; it fell on the stage, and its contents flooded the scene. There was an indignant cry from the audience, but Madame, an experienced actress, promptly picked up the empty bowl, feigned to raise it to her lips, and then burst into the great song of the evening—her expected masterpiece. Instantly the rising tumult was hushed, and the vast audience sat silent and spell-bound as the clear sweet notes thrilled through the theatre.

"I had like the wind; I heard, behind the scenes, the voice of the manager (who had learnt of the accident) raging out threats and imprecations against myself, but I heeded him not; I had still a task to fulfil before my work for that evening was ended. Hurrying down the dark passages, I reached the dressing-room of the Signora, and rapped boldly at the door.

"The Signora can see no one," said the dresser, half opening it.

"I remembered the name of an Italian nobleman which rumour had long coupled with that of the singer.

"From the Marquis——" I whispered, mysteriously, slipping a piece of gold (my last coin of that value) into the woman's hand.

"The largeness of this douceur seemed to convince the janitor of the truth of my story; she smiled and nodded, and, in another moment, I was admitted to the presence of the Signora, her attendant discreetly withdrawing. It was no time to stand upon ceremony; I promptly locked the door and put the key into my pocket.

"You come from the Marquis—— and for what?" asked the Signora, rising from her couch, on which she had been half reclining, and having, I believe, not observed my action. She looked indeed so ghastly that I thought she was about to faint.

"No, Madame," I replied bluntly, speaking in Italian, "I only used the Marquis's name to induce your servant to admit me. I am come to ask you to hand me that little bottle which you have in your back hair—unless you prefer to give it up to the police."

"What bottle?—fellow, are you drunk or mad?" cried the diva furiously.

"The bottle of poison," I went on coolly, "part of which you recently poured into the bowl which Madame—— was to drink out of in the last act."

"A horrible fiendish gleam of triumph came over the wretched woman's face.

"Ah—she has drunk of it!" she cried.

"No she has not," I replied, "I saw what you did and saved her without her knowledge. And she sang her great song like an angel," I went on cruelly, "and to-night's will be the greatest triumph she has yet won. I want that bottle," I proceeded; then—perhaps I acted rather brutally, but I was utterly without pity for the woman, so hardened in her sin. Lying on the couch the Signora had partially disarranged her elaborate coiffure. I detected the gleam of the tiny bottle amid the thick coils of raven hair, and by a sudden dexterous movement I possessed myself of the phial, still half full of a colourless liquid.

"The Signora uttered a half-articulate cry of rage as she saw it in my hand, then recovering herself said, with dignity:

"You shall be severely punished for this outrage and assault upon a lady. As for the bottle, it merely contains a harmless essence, which I sometimes use to revive myself after the fatigues of the performance."

"Of that matter the police—and the chemist who will analyse it, will be the judges," I replied coolly, "but before I call in the law authorities, Signora, you had better consider this matter a little. You are a fiend and a would-be murderess, and I am doing wrong in attempting to keep your guilt secret. But for the sake of the sweet lady—whose voice is as superior to yours as is her pure soul to your sin-stained one' (I was resolved to give her that stab about her voice) 'I am willing to keep this story quiet. Madame—— is ignorant that such creatures as yourself can walk the earth—I would rather not enlighten her in this matter.'

"My resolute tone had cowed the woman; she sat looking at me with widely dilated eyes, and heaving breast.

"My terms are these," I went on. "You return to your house this evening, and you do not venture to cross its threshold again till Madame—— and her party have left Italy—which we do in another fortnight. If you consent to do this, I will forbear to communicate with the authorities, though I shall keep this little witness," and I touched the bottle, "as evidence in case it is wanted."

"My engagements—it is ruin to break them," murmured the Signora.

"You can say you are ill, or invent any other lie you choose," I remarked, "and remember, Signora," I added blandly, "that you will find it equally difficult to keep faith with your manager when you are the inmate of the convict establishment, to which I promise myself the pleasure of assisting to consign you if you refuse my terms. Recollect your attempted crime is not against an obscure personage, but against a celebrity and a British subject. I observe that His Excellency the English Ambassador is in the house to-night. I intend requesting his presence, as well as that of the manager and of the police, to listen to the little story which I shall have to relate in this room in a few minutes unless you accept my terms. I have no doubt that Sir—— will see that due justice is done upon the would-be murderess of his countrywoman."

"As I had expected, this last threat cowed the woman, whose ignorance I had traded upon. There was an awful vagueness about the possible powers of the English Ambassador which

alarmed her, as I intended it to do. Sulkily, and glaring at me like a wounded tigress in a trap, the Signora signified her willingness to do as I desired.

"Swear it upon the crucifix," I said, knowing that the woman's superstition was as great as her sense of religion was small.

"The woman sullenly took the oath which I dictated, then fury got the upper hand of fear and she began to abuse me with all the volubility of the low-born Neapolitan that she was. For in truth the Signora's voice had raised her from the gutter.

"Adieu, Signora," I said with a polite bow. "You will be able to amuse yourself in your seclusion by reading the accounts of Madame's theatrical triumphs," and I quitted the apartment as the Signora fell on her couch in a tempest of wild hysterics.

"I wended my way back towards the stage, being, however, intercepted in my way thither by the irate manager, who, in language scarcely less forcible than that of the Signora herself, flung the balance of my week's salary at my head and bade me clear off the premises with all expedition. I complied with his orders in silence. I had saved my dear lady. What mattered my own fate? Next morning, however, I received a little note from Madame—perhaps I have that bit of paper about me now—bidding me call on her at her lodgings, and there the sweet woman—who only knew me as the supposed drunken brute who had nearly spoiled her great scene the night before—explained that she had interceded with the manager for my pardon and reinstatement, and then went on in her soft, gentle voice to speak so kindly, so wisely, that I think, if I had been the tipsy wretch she thought me, I would have turned over a new leaf on the spot. Why did I not tell her the truth then? Ah, sir, you don't understand what a sensitive, excitable race are our great artistes! If Madame had learnt the truth of that horrible story the shock and the excitement would infallibly have affected that beautiful, delicate organ, her voice, in her next performance. At all events it might have done so, and nerve agitation might have injured her full perfection of tone. And what was the reputation, or even the life, of a worthless super like myself compared to the peace of mind of that dear lady. As I have told you, I loved her, and would have died to remove the slightest annoyance from her path. The newspapers next day announced that the Signora was lying dangerously ill of brain fever. I thought this a mere

device of hers at first, but it proved to be true. The woman really was seriously ill for a long time, and though she recovered her health at length her illness left permanent traces upon her voice. It was not utterly ruined, and she made a fair second-rate performer for years, but she sank entirely out of her old rank of a diva.

"As for Madame, her career is a well known one. Was she not for many years the most admired and popular songstress in Europe? When she died—many years ago now—crowned heads sent wreaths to place upon the coffin, and towns made public signs of mourning. As with the rest of us, her life had its shadows as well as its sunshine. Like many other artistes she was not fortunate in her marriage. They said, as you know, that her husband gambled and drank and robbed her. She never complained, but such things were whispered abroad. Sometimes I wonder if she would have been a happier woman if she had married a poor super who would have worshipped the very ground she trod upon. Well, it is fifty years ago now, and it seems strange that a pauper in the X— Union should be linking himself even in thought with the greatest singer of this century; but I often look back upon the secret I've kept for so many years, the secret that, but for me, that nightingale voice would have been silenced in the grave many, many years before death did still it. I sometimes wonder, now that she is singing in heaven, if the angels have ever whispered her my secret."

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