

A PATHETIC TALE

IL CONDE

"Vedi Napoli e poi mori."

The first time we got into conversation was in the National Museum in Naples, in the rooms on the ground floor containing the famous collection of bronzes from Herculaneum and Pompeii: that marvellous legacy of antique art whose delicate perfection has been preserved for us by the catastrophic fury of a volcano.

He addressed me first, over the celebrated Resting Hermes which we had been looking at side by side. He said the right things about that wholly admirable piece. Nothing profound. His taste was natural rather than cultivated. He had obviously seen many fine things in his life and appreciated them: but he had no jargon of a dilettante or the connoisseur. A hateful tribe. He spoke like a fairly intelligent man of the world, a perfectly unaffected gentleman.

We had known each other by sight for some few days past. Staying in the same hotel--good, but not extravagantly up to date--I had noticed him in the vestibule going in and out. I judged he was an old and valued client. The bow of the hotel-keeper was cordial in its deference, and he acknowledged it with familiar courtesy. For the servants he was Il Conde. There was some squabble over a man's parasol--yellow silk with white lining sort of thing--the waiters had discovered abandoned outside the dining-room door. Our gold-laced door-keeper recognized it and I heard him directing one of the lift boys to run after Il Conde with it. Perhaps he was the only Count staying in the hotel, or perhaps he had the distinction of being the Count par excellence, conferred upon him because of his tried fidelity to the house.

Having conversed at the Museo--(and by the by he had expressed his dislike of the busts and statues of Roman emperors in the gallery of marbles: their faces were too vigorous, too pronounced for him)--having conversed already in the morning I did not think I was intruding when in the evening, finding the dining-room very full, I proposed to share his little table. Judging by the quiet urbanity of his consent he did not think so either. His smile was very attractive.

He dined in an evening waistcoat and a "smoking" (he called it so) with a black tie. All this of very good cut, not new--just as these things should be. He was,