CHAPTER XVI

SUSPENSE

Christmas was at hand. There was a heap of maize cobs still unstripped. Alvina sat with Ciccio stripping them, in the corn-place.

"Will you be able to stop here till the baby is born?" he asked her.

She watched the films of the leaves come off from the burning gold maize cob under his fingers, the long, ruddy cone of fruition. The heap of maize on one side burned like hot sunshine, she felt it really gave off warmth, it glowed, it burned. On the other side the filmy, crackly, sere sheaths were also faintly sunny. Again and again the long, red-gold, full ear of corn came clear in his hands, and was put gently aside. He looked up at her, with his yellow eyes.

"Yes, I think so," she said. "Will you?"

"Yes, if they let me. I should like it to be born here."

"Would you like to bring up a child here?" she asked.

"You wouldn't be happy here, so long," he said, sadly.

"Would you?"

He slowly shook his head: indefinite.

She was settling down. She had her room upstairs, her cups and plates and spoons, her own things. Pancrazio had gone back to his old habit, he went across and ate with Giovanni and Maria, Ciccio and Alvina had their meals in their pleasant room upstairs. They were happy alone. Only sometimes the terrible influence of the place preyed on her.

However, she had a clean room of her own, where she could sew and read. She had written to the matron and Mrs. Tuke, and Mrs. Tuke had sent books. Also she helped Ciccio when she could, and Maria was teaching her to spin the white sheep's wool into coarse thread.

This morning Pancrazio and Giovanni had gone off somewhere, Alvina and Ciccio were alone on the place, stripping the last maize. Suddenly, in the grey morning air, a wild music burst out: the drone of a bagpipe, and a man's high voice half singing, half yelling a brief verse, at the end of which a wild flourish on some other reedy wood instrument. Alvina sat still in surprise. It was a strange, high, rapid, yelling music, the very voice of the mountains. Beautiful, in our musical sense of the word, it was not. But oh, the magic, the nostalgia of the untamed, heathen past which

it evoked.

"It is for Christmas," said Ciccio. "They will come every day now."

Alvina rose and went round to the little balcony. Two men stood below, amid the crumbling of finely falling snow. One, the elder, had a bagpipe whose bag was patched with shirting: the younger was dressed in greenish clothes, he had his face lifted, and was yelling the verses of the unintelligible Christmas ballad: short, rapid verses, followed by a brilliant flourish on a short wooden pipe he held ready in his hand. Alvina felt he was going to be out of breath. But no, rapid and high came the next verse, verse after verse, with the wild scream on the little new pipe in between, over the roar of the bagpipe. And the crumbs of snow were like a speckled veil, faintly drifting the atmosphere and powdering the littered threshold where they stood--a threshold littered with faggots, leaves, straw, fowls and geese and ass droppings, and rag thrown out from the house, and pieces of paper.

The carol suddenly ended, the young man snatched off his hat to Alvina who stood above, and in the same breath he was gone, followed by the bagpipe. Alvina saw them dropping hurriedly down the incline between the twiggy wild oaks.

"They will come every day now, till Christmas," said Ciccio. "They go to every house."

And sure enough, when Alvina went down, in the cold, silent house, and out to the well in the still crumbling snow, she heard the sound far off, strange, yelling, wonderful: and the same ache for she knew not what overcame her, so that she felt one might go mad, there in the veiled silence of these mountains, in the great hilly valley cut off from the world.

Ciccio worked all day on the land or round about. He was building a little earth closet also: the obvious and unscreened place outside was impossible. It was curious how little he went to Pescocalascio, how little he mixed with the natives. He seemed always to withhold something from them. Only with his relatives, of whom he had many, he was more free, in a kind of family intimacy.

Yet even here he was guarded. His uncle at the mill, an unwashed, fat man with a wife who tinkled with gold and grime, and who shouted a few lost words of American, insisted on giving Alvina wine and a sort of cake made with cheese and rice. Ciccio too was feasted, in the dark hole of a room. And the two natives seemed to press their cheer on Alvina and Ciccio whole-heartedly.

"How nice they are!" said Alvina when she had left. "They give so freely."

But Ciccio smiled a wry smile, silent.

"Why do you make a face?" she said.

"It's because you are a foreigner, and they think you will go away again," he said.

"But I should have thought that would make them less generous," she said.

"No. They like to give to foreigners. They don't like to give to the people here. Giocomo puts water in the wine which he sells to the people who go by. And if I leave the donkey in her shed, I give Marta Maria something, or the next time she won't let me have it. Ha, they are--they are sly ones, the people here."

"They are like that everywhere," said Alvina.

"Yes. But nowhere they say so many bad things about people as here--nowhere where I have ever been."

It was strange to Alvina to feel the deep-bed-rock distrust which all the hill-peasants seemed to have of one another. They were watchful, venomous, dangerous.

"Ah," said Pancrazio, "I am glad there is a woman in my house once more."

"But did nobody come in and do for you before?" asked Alvina. "Why didn't you pay somebody?"

"Nobody will come," said Pancrazio, in his slow, aristocratic English. "Nobody will come, because I am a man, and if somebody should see her at my house, they will all talk."

"Talk!" Alvina looked at the deeply-lined man of sixty-six, "But what will they say?"

"Many bad things. Many bad things indeed. They are not good people here. All saying bad things, and all jealous. They don't like me because I have a house--they think I am too much a signore. They say to me 'Why do you think you are a signore?' Oh, they are bad people, envious, you cannot have anything to do with them."

"They are nice to me," said Alvina.

"They think you will go away. But if you stay, they will say bad things. You must wait. Oh, they are evil people, evil against one another, against everybody but strangers who don't know them--"

Alvina felt the curious passion in Pancrazio's voice, the passion of a man who has lived for many years in England and known the social confidence of England, and who, coming back, is deeply injured by the

ancient malevolence of the remote, somewhat gloomy hill-peasantry. She understood also why he was so glad to have her in his house, so proud, why he loved serving her. She seemed to see a fairness, a luminousness in the northern soul, something free, touched with divinity such as "these people here" lacked entirely.

When she went to Ossona with him, she knew everybody questioned him about her and Ciccio. She began to get the drift of the questions--which Pancrazio answered with reserve.

"And how long are they staying?"

This was an invariable, envious question. And invariably Pancrazio answered with a reserved--

"Some months. As long as they like."

And Alvina could feel waves of black envy go out against Pancrazio, because she was domiciled with him, and because she sat with him in the flat cart, driving to Ossona.

Yet Pancrazio himself was a study. He was thin, and very shabby, and rather out of shape. Only in his yellow eyes lurked a strange sardonic fire, and a leer which puzzled her. When Ciccio happened to be out in the evening he would sit with her and tell her stories of Lord Leighton and Millais and Alma Tadema and other academicians

dead and living. There would sometimes be a strange passivity on his worn face, an impassive, almost Red Indian look. And then again he would stir into a curious, arch, malevolent laugh, for all the world like a debauched old tom-cat. His narration was like this: either simple, bare, stoical, with a touch of nobility; or else satiric, malicious, with a strange, rather repellent jeering.

"Leighton--he wasn't Lord Leighton then--he wouldn't have me to sit for him, because my figure was too poor, he didn't like it. He liked fair young men, with plenty of flesh. But once, when he was doing a picture--I don't know if you know it? It is a crucifixion, with a man on a cross, and--" He described the picture. "No! Well, the model had to be tied hanging on to a wooden cross. And it made you suffer! Ah!" Here the odd, arch, diabolic yellow flare lit up through the stoicism of Pancrazio's eyes. "Because Leighton, he was cruel to his model. He wouldn't let you rest. 'Damn you, you've got to keep still till I've finished with you, you devil,' so he said.
Well, for this man on the cross, he couldn't get a model who would do it for him. They all tried it once, but they would not go again.
So they said to him, he must try Califano, because Califano was the only man who would stand it. At last then he sent for me. 'I don't like your damned figure, Califano,' he said to me, 'but nobody will do this if you won't. Now will you do it? 'Yes!' I said, 'I will.'
So he tied me up on the cross. And he paid me well, so I stood it.
Well, he kept me tied up, hanging you know forwards naked on this cross, for four hours. And then it was luncheon. And after luncheon

he would tie me again. Well, I suffered. I suffered so much, that I must lean against the wall to support me to walk home. And in the night I could not sleep, I could cry with the pains in my arms and my ribs, I had no sleep. 'You've said you'd do it, so now you must,' he said to me. 'And I will do it,' I said. And so he tied me up. This cross, you know, was on a little raised place--I don't know what you call it--"

"A platform," suggested Alvina.

"A platform. Now one day when he came to do something to me, when I was tied up, he slipped back over this platform, and he pulled me, who was tied on the cross, with him. So we all fell down, he with the naked man on top of him, and the heavy cross on top of us both. I could not move, because I was tied. And it was so, with me on top of him, and the heavy cross, that he could not get out. So he had to lie shouting underneath me until some one came to the studio to untie me. No, we were not hurt, because the top of the cross fell so that it did not crush us. 'Now you have had a taste of the cross,' I said to him. 'Yes, you devil, but I shan't let you off,' he said to me.

"To make the time go he would ask me questions. Once he said, 'Now, Califano, what time is it? I give you three guesses, and if you guess right once I give you sixpence.' So I guessed three o'clock. 'That's one. Now then, what time is it? 'Again, three o'clock.

'That's two guesses gone, you silly devil. Now then, what time is it? 'So now I was obstinate, and I said Three o'clock. He took out his watch. 'Why damn you, how did you know? I give you a shilling--' It was three o'clock, as I said, so he gave me a shilling instead of sixpence as he had said--"

It was strange, in the silent winter afternoon, downstairs in the black kitchen, to sit drinking a cup of tea with Pancrazio and hearing these stories of English painters. It was strange to look at the battered figure of Pancrazio, and think how much he had been crucified through the long years in London, for the sake of late Victorian art. It was strangest of all to see through his yellow, often dull, red-rimmed eyes these blithe and well-conditioned painters. Pancrazio looked on them admiringly and contemptuously, as an old, rakish tom-cat might look on such frivolous well-groomed young gentlemen.

As a matter of fact Pancrazio had never been rakish or debauched, but mountain-moral, timid. So that the queer, half-sinister drop of his eyelids was curious, and the strange, wicked yellow flare that came into his eyes was almost frightening. There was in the man a sort of sulphur-yellow flame of passion which would light up in his battered body and give him an almost diabolic look. Alvina felt that if she were left much alone with him she would need all her English ascendancy not to be afraid of him.

It was a Sunday morning just before Christmas when Alvina and Ciccio and Pancrazio set off for Pescocalascio for the first time. Snow had fallen--not much round the house, but deep between the banks as they climbed. And the sun was very bright. So that the mountains were dazzling. The snow was wet on the roads. They wound between oak-trees and under the broom-scrub, climbing over the jumbled hills that lay between the mountains, until the village came near. They got on to a broader track, where the path from a distant village joined theirs. They were all talking, in the bright clear air of the morning.

A little man came down an upper path. As he joined them near the village he hailed them in English:

"Good morning. Nice morning."

"Does everybody speak English here?" asked Alvina.

"I have been eighteen years in Glasgow. I am only here for a trip."

He was a little Italian shop-keeper from Glasgow. He was most friendly, insisted on paying for drinks, and coffee and almond biscuits for Alvina. Evidently he also was grateful to Britain.

The village was wonderful. It occupied the crown of an eminence in the midst of the wide valley. From the terrace of the high-road the

valley spread below, with all its jumble of hills, and two rivers, set in the walls of the mountains, a wide space, but imprisoned. It glistened with snow under the blue sky. But the lowest hollows were brown. In the distance, Ossona hung at the edge of a platform. Many villages clung like pale swarms of birds to the far slopes, or perched on the hills beneath. It was a world within a world, a valley of many hills and townlets and streams shut in beyond access.

Pescocalascio itself was crowded. The roads were sloppy with snow. But none the less, peasants in full dress, their feet soaked in the skin sandals, were trooping in the sun, purchasing, selling, bargaining for cloth, talking all the time. In the shop, which was also a sort of inn, an ancient woman was making coffee over a charcoal brazier, while a crowd of peasants sat at the tables at the back, eating the food they had brought.

Post was due at mid-day. Ciccio went to fetch it, whilst Pancrazio took Alvina to the summit, to the castle. There, in the level region, boys were snowballing and shouting. The ancient castle, badly cracked by the last earthquake, looked wonderfully down on the valley of many hills beneath, Califano a speck down the left, Ossona a blot to the right, suspended, its towers and its castle clear in the light. Behind the castle of Pescocalascio was a deep, steep valley, almost a gorge, at the bottom of which a river ran, and where Pancrazio pointed out the electricity works of the village, deep in the gloom. Above this gorge, at the end, rose the long

slopes of the mountains, up to the vivid snow--and across again was the wall of the Abruzzi.

They went down, past the ruined houses broken by the earthquake. Ciccio still had not come with the post. A crowd surged at the post-office door, in a steep, black, wet side-street. Alvina's feet were sodden. Pancrazio took her to the place where she could drink coffee and a strega, to make her warm. On the platform of the high-way, above the valley, people were parading in the hot sun. Alvina noticed some ultra-smart young men. They came up to Pancrazio, speaking English. Alvina hated their Cockney accent and florid showy vulgar presence. They were more models. Pancrazio was cool with them.

Alvina sat apart from the crowd of peasants, on a chair the old crone had ostentatiously dusted for her. Pancrazio ordered beer for himself. Ciccio came with letters--long-delayed letters, that had been censored. Alvina's heart went down.

The first she opened was from Miss Pinnegar--all war and fear and anxiety. The second was a letter, a real insulting letter from Dr. Mitchell. "I little thought, at the time when I was hoping to make you my wife, that you were carrying on with a dirty Italian organ-grinder. So your fair-seeming face covered the schemes and vice of your true nature. Well, I can only thank Providence which spared me the disgust and shame of marrying you, and I hope that,

when I meet you on the streets of Leicester Square, I shall have forgiven you sufficiently to be able to throw you a coin--"

Here was a pretty little epistle! In spite of herself, she went pale and trembled. She glanced at Ciccio. Fortunately he was turning round talking to another man. She rose and went to the ruddy brazier, as if to warm her hands. She threw on the screwed-up letter. The old crone said something unintelligible to her. She watched the letter catch fire--glanced at the peasants at the table--and out at the wide, wild valley. The world beyond could not help, but it still had the power to injure one here. She felt she had received a bitter blow. A black hatred for the Mitchells of this world filled her.

She could hardly bear to open the third letter. It was from Mrs. Tuke, and again, all war. Would Italy join the Allies? She ought to, her every interest lay that way. Could Alvina bear to be so far off, when such terrible events were happening near home? Could she possibly be happy? Nurses were so valuable now. She, Mrs. Tuke, had volunteered. She would do whatever she could. She had had to leave off nursing Jenifer, who had an excellent Scotch nurse, much better than a mother. Well, Alvina and Mrs. Tuke might yet meet in some hospital in France. So the letter ended.

Alvina sat down, pale and trembling. Pancrazio was watching her curiously.

"Have you bad news?" he asked.

"Only the war."

"Ha!" and the Italian gesture of half-bitter "what can one do?"

They were talking war--all talking war. The dandy young models had left England because of the war, expecting Italy to come in. And everybody talked, talked, talked. Alvina looked round her. It all seemed alien to her, bruising upon the spirit.

"Do you think I shall ever be able to come here alone and do my shopping by myself?" she asked.

"You must never come alone," said Pancrazio, in his curious, benevolent courtesy. "Either Ciccio or I will come with you. You must never come so far alone."

"Why not?" she said.

"You are a stranger here. You are not a contadina--" Alvina could feel the oriental idea of women, which still leaves its mark on the Mediterranean, threatening her with surveillance and subjection. She sat in her chair, with cold wet feet, looking at the sunshine outside, the wet snow, the moving figures in the strong light, the

men drinking at the counter, the cluster of peasant women bargaining for dress-material. Ciccio was still turning talking in the rapid way to his neighbour. She knew it was war. She noticed the movement of his finely-modelled cheek, a little sallow this morning.

And she rose hastily.

"I want to go into the sun," she said.

When she stood above the valley in the strong, tiring light, she glanced round. Ciccio inside the shop had risen, but he was still turning to his neighbour and was talking with all his hands and all his body. He did not talk with his mind and lips alone. His whole physique, his whole living body spoke and uttered and emphasized itself.

A certain weariness possessed her. She was beginning to realize something about him: how he had no sense of home and domestic life, as an Englishman has. Ciccio's home would never be his castle. His castle was the piazza of Pescocalascio. His home was nothing to him but a possession, and a hole to sleep in. He didn't live in it. He lived in the open air, and in the community. When the true Italian came out in him, his veriest home was the piazza of Pescocalascio, the little sort of market-place where the roads met in the village, under the castle, and where the men stood in groups and talked, talked, talked. This was where Ciccio belonged: his active, mindful

self. His active, mindful self was none of hers. She only had his passive self, and his family passion. His masculine mind and intelligence had its home in the little public square of his village. She knew this as she watched him now, with all his body talking politics. He could not break off till he had finished. And then, with a swift, intimate handshake to the group with whom he had been engaged, he came away, putting all his interest off from himself.

She tried to make him talk and discuss with her. But he wouldn't. An obstinate spirit made him darkly refuse masculine conversation with her.

"If Italy goes to war, you will have to join up?" she asked him.

"Yes," he said, with a smile at the futility of the question.

"And I shall have to stay here?"

He nodded, rather gloomily.

"Do you want to go?" she persisted.

"No, I don't want to go."

"But you think Italy ought to join in?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then you do want to go--"

"I want to go if Italy goes in--and she ought to go in--"

Curious, he was somewhat afraid of her, he half venerated her, and half despised her. When she tried to make him discuss, in the masculine way, he shut obstinately against her, something like a child, and the slow, fine smile of dislike came on his face. Instinctively he shut off all masculine communication from her, particularly politics and religion. He would discuss both, violently, with other men. In politics he was something of a Socialist, in religion a freethinker. But all this had nothing to do with Alvina. He would not enter on a discussion in English.

Somewhere in her soul, she knew the finality of his refusal to hold discussion with a woman. So, though at times her heart hardened with indignant anger, she let herself remain outside. The more so, as she felt that in matters intellectual he was rather stupid. Let him go to the piazza or to the wine-shop, and talk.

To do him justice, he went little. Pescocalascio was only half his own village. The nostalgia, the campanilismo from which Italians suffer, the craving to be in sight of the native church-tower, to

stand and talk in the native market place or piazza, this was only half formed in Ciccio, taken away as he had been from Pescocalascio when so small a boy. He spent most of his time working in the fields and woods, most of his evenings at home, often weaving a special kind of fishnet or net-basket from fine, frail strips of cane. It was a work he had learned at Naples long ago. Alvina meanwhile would sew for the child, or spin wool. She became quite clever at drawing the strands of wool from her distaff, rolling them fine and even between her fingers, and keeping her bobbin rapidly spinning away below, dangling at the end of the thread. To tell the truth, she was happy in the quietness with Ciccio, now they had their own pleasant room. She loved his presence. She loved the quality of his silence, so rich and physical. She felt he was never very far away: that he was a good deal a stranger in Califano, as she was: that he clung to her presence as she to his. Then Pancrazio also contrived to serve her and shelter her, he too, loved her for being there. They both revered her because she was with child. So that she lived more and more in a little, isolate, illusory, wonderful world then, content, moreover, because the living cost so little. She had sixty pounds of her own money, always intact in the little case. And after all, the high-way beyond the river led to Ossona, and Ossona gave access to the railway, and the railway would take her anywhere.

So the month of January passed, with its short days and its bits of snow and bursts of sunshine. On sunny days Alvina walked down to the desolate river-bed, which fascinated her. When Pancrazio was

carrying up stone or lime on the ass, she accompanied him. And Pancrazio was always carrying up something, for he loved the extraneous jobs like building a fire-place much more than the heavy work of the land. Then she would find little tufts of wild narcissus among the rocks, gold-centred pale little things, many on one stem. And their scent was powerful and magical, like the sound of the men who came all those days and sang before Christmas. She loved them. There was green hellebore too, a fascinating plant--and one or two little treasures, the last of the rose-coloured Alpine cyclamens, near the earth, with snake-skin leaves, and so rose, so rose, like violets for shadowiness. She sat and cried over the first she found: heaven knows why.

In February, as the days opened, the first almond trees flowered among grey olives, in warm, level corners between the hills. But it was March before the real flowering began. And then she had continual bowl-fuls of white and blue violets, she had sprays of almond blossom, silver-warm and lustrous, then sprays of peach and apricot, pink and fluttering. It was a great joy to wander looking for flowers. She came upon a bankside all wide with lavender crocuses. The sun was on them for the moment, and they were opened flat, great five-pointed, seven-pointed lilac stars, with burning centres, burning with a strange lavender flame, as she had seen some metal burn lilac-flamed in the laboratory of the hospital at Islington. All down the oak-dry bankside they burned their great exposed stars. And she felt like going down on her knees and bending

her forehead to the earth in an oriental submission, they were so royal, so lovely, so supreme. She came again to them in the morning, when the sky was grey, and they were closed, sharp clubs, wonderfully fragile on their stems of sap, among leaves and old grass and wild periwinkle. They had wonderful dark stripes running up their cheeks, the crocuses, like the clear proud stripes on a badger's face, or on some proud cat. She took a handful of the sappy, shut, striped flames. In her room they opened into a grand bowl of lilac fire.

March was a lovely month. The men were busy in the hills. She wandered, extending her range. Sometimes with a strange fear. But it was a fear of the elements rather than of man. One day she went along the high-road with her letters, towards the village of Casa Latina. The high-road was depressing, wherever there were houses. For the houses had that sordid, ramshackle, slummy look almost invariable on an Italian high-road. They were patched with a hideous, greenish mould-colour, blotched, as if with leprosy. It frightened her, till Pancrazio told her it was only the copper sulphate that had sprayed the vines hitched on to the walls. But none the less the houses were sordid, unkempt, slummy. One house by itself could make a complete slum.

Casa Latina was across the valley, in the shadow. Approaching it were rows of low cabins--fairly new. They were the one-storey dwellings commanded after the earthquake. And hideous they were. The

village itself was old, dark, in perpetual shadow of the mountain. Streams of cold water ran round it. The piazza was gloomy, forsaken. But there was a great, twin-towered church, wonderful from outside.

She went inside, and was almost sick with repulsion. The place was large, whitewashed, and crowded with figures in glass cases and ex voto offerings. The lousy-looking, dressed-up dolls, life size and tinselly, that stood in the glass cases; the blood-streaked Jesus on the crucifix; the mouldering, mumbling, filthy peasant women on their knees; all the sense of trashy, repulsive, degraded fetish-worship was too much for her. She hurried out, shrinking from the contamination of the dirty leather door-curtain.

Enough of Casa Latina. She would never go there again. She was beginning to feel that, if she lived in this part of the world at all, she must avoid the inside of it. She must never, if she could help it, enter into any interior but her own--neither into house nor church nor even shop or post-office, if she could help it. The moment she went through a door the sense of dark repulsiveness came over her. If she was to save her sanity she must keep to the open air, and avoid any contact with human interiors. When she thought of the insides of the native people she shuddered with repulsion, as in the great, degraded church of Casa Latina. They were horrible.

Yet the outside world was so fair. Corn and maize were growing green and silken, vines were in the small bud. Everywhere little grape

hyacinths hung their blue bells. It was a pity they reminded her of the many-breasted Artemis, a picture of whom, or of whose statue, she had seen somewhere. Artemis with her clusters of breasts was horrible to her, now she had come south: nauseating beyond words. And the milky grape hyacinths reminded her.

She turned with thankfulness to the magenta anemones that were so gay. Some one told her that wherever Venus had shed a tear for Adonis, one of these flowers had sprung. They were not tear-like. And yet their red-purple silkiness had something pre-world about it, at last. The more she wandered, the more the shadow of the by-gone pagan world seemed to come over her. Sometimes she felt she would shriek and go mad, so strong was the influence on her, something pre-world and, it seemed to her now, vindictive. She seemed to feel in the air strange Furies, Lemures, things that had haunted her with their tomb-frenzied vindictiveness since she was a child and had pored over the illustrated Classical Dictionary. Black and cruel presences were in the under-air. They were furtive and slinking. They bewitched you with loveliness, and lurked with fangs to hurt you afterwards. There it was: the fangs sheathed in beauty: the beauty first, and then, horribly, inevitably, the fangs.

Being a great deal alone, in the strange place, fancies possessed her, people took on strange shapes. Even Ciccio and Pancrazio. And it came that she never wandered far from the house, from her room, after the first months. She seemed to hide herself in her room.

There she sewed and spun wool and read, and learnt Italian. Her men were not at all anxious to teach her Italian. Indeed her chief teacher, at first, was a young fellow called Bussolo. He was a model from London, and he came down to Califano sometimes, hanging about, anxious to speak English.

Alvina did not care for him. He was a dandy with pale grey eyes and a heavy figure. Yet he had a certain penetrating intelligence.

"No, this country is a country for old men. It is only for old men," he said, talking of Pescocalascio. "You won't stop here. Nobody young can stop here."

The odd plangent certitude in his voice penetrated her. And all the young people said the same thing. They were all waiting to go away. But for the moment the war held them up.

Ciccio and Pancrazio were busy with the vines. As she watched them hoeing, crouching, tying, tending, grafting, mindless and utterly absorbed, hour after hour, day after day, thinking vines, living vines, she wondered they didn't begin to sprout vine-buds and vine stems from their own elbows and neck-joints. There was something to her unnatural in the quality of the attention the men gave to the wine. It was a sort of worship, almost a degradation again. And heaven knows, Pancrazio's wine was poor enough, his grapes almost invariably bruised with hail-stones, and half-rotten instead of

ripe.

The loveliness of April came, with hot sunshine. Astonishing the ferocity of the sun, when he really took upon himself to blaze. Alvina was amazed. The burning day quite carried her away. She loved it: it made her quite careless about everything, she was just swept along in the powerful flood of the sunshine. In the end, she felt that intense sunlight had on her the effect of night: a sort of darkness, and a suspension of life. She had to hide in her room till the cold wind blew again.

Meanwhile the declaration of war drew nearer, and became inevitable. She knew Ciccio would go. And with him went the chance of her escape. She steeled herself to bear the agony of the knowledge that he would go, and she would be left alone in this place, which sometimes she hated with a hatred unspeakable. After a spell of hot, intensely dry weather she felt she would die in this valley, wither and go to powder as some exposed April roses withered and dried into dust against a hot wall. Then the cool wind came in a storm, the next day there was grey sky and soft air. The rose-coloured wild gladioli among the young green corn were a dream of beauty, the morning of the world. The lovely, pristine morning of the world, before our epoch began. Rose-red gladioli among corn, in among the rocks, and small irises, black-purple and yellow blotched with brown, like a wasp, standing low in little desert places, that would seem forlorn but for this weird, dark-lustrous magnificence. Then

there were the tiny irises, only one finger tall, growing in dry places, frail as crocuses, and much tinier, and blue, blue as the eye of the morning heaven, which was a morning earlier, more pristine than ours. The lovely translucent pale irises, tiny and morning-blue, they lasted only a few hours. But nothing could be more exquisite, like gods on earth. It was the flowers that brought back to Alvina the passionate nostalgia for the place. The human influence was a bit horrible to her. But the flowers that came out and uttered the earth in magical expression, they cast a spell on her, bewitched her and stole her own soul away from her.

She went down to Ciccio where he was weeding armfuls of rose-red gladioli from the half-grown wheat, and cutting the lushness of the first weedy herbage. He threw down his sheaves of gladioli, and with his sickle began to cut the forest of bright yellow corn-marigolds. He looked intent, he seemed to work feverishly.

"Must they all be cut?" she said, as she went to him.

He threw aside the great armful of yellow flowers, took off his cap, and wiped the sweat from his brow. The sickle dangled loose in his hand.

"We have declared war," he said.

In an instant she realized that she had seen the figure of the old

post-carrier dodging between the rocks. Rose-red and gold-yellow of the flowers swam in her eyes. Ciccio's dusk-yellow eyes were watching her. She sank on her knees on a sheaf of corn-marigolds. Her eyes, watching him, were vulnerable as if stricken to death. Indeed she felt she would die.

"You will have to go?" she said.

"Yes, we shall all have to go." There seemed a certain sound of triumph in his voice. Cruel!

She sank lower on the flowers, and her head dropped. But she would not be beaten. She lifted her face.

"If you are very long," she said, "I shall go to England. I can't stay here very long without you."

"You will have Pancrazio--and the child," he said.

"Yes. But I shall still be myself. I can't stay here very long without you. I shall go to England."

He watched her narrowly.

"I don't think they'll let you," he said.

"Yes they will."

At moments she hated him. He seemed to want to crush her altogether. She was always making little plans in her mind--how she could get out of that great cruel valley and escape to Rome, to English people. She would find the English Consul and he would help her. She would do anything rather than be really crushed. She knew how easy it would be, once her spirit broke, for her to die and be buried in the cemetery at Pescocalascio.

And they would all be so sentimental about her--just as Pancrazio was. She felt that in some way Pancrazio had killed his wife--not consciously, but unconsciously, as Ciccio might kill her. Pancrazio would tell Alvina about his wife and her ailments. And he seemed always anxious to prove that he had been so good to her. No doubt he had been good to her, also. But there was something underneath--malevolent in his spirit, some caged-in sort of cruelty, malignant beyond his control. It crept out in his stories. And it revealed itself in his fear of his dead wife. Alvina knew that in the night the elderly man was afraid of his dead wife, and of her ghost or her avenging spirit. He would huddle over the fire in fear. In the same way the cemetery had a fascination of horror for him--as, she noticed, for most of the natives. It was an ugly, square place, all stone slabs and wall-cupboards, enclosed in four-square stone walls, and lying away beneath Pescocalascio village obvious as if it were on a plate.

"That is our cemetery," Pancrazio said, pointing it out to her, "where we shall all be carried some day."

And there was fear, horror in his voice. He told her how the men had carried his wife there--a long journey over the hill-tracks, almost two hours.

These were days of waiting--horrible days of waiting for Ciccio to be called up. One batch of young men left the village--and there was a lugubrious sort of saturnalia, men and women alike got rather drunk, the young men left amid howls of lamentation and shrieks of distress. Crowds accompanied them to Ossona, whence they were marched towards the railway. It was a horrible event.

A shiver of horror and death went through the valley. In a lugubrious way, they seemed to enjoy it.

"You'll never be satisfied till you've gone," she said to Ciccio. "Why don't they be quick and call you?"

"It will be next week," he said, looking at her darkly. In the twilight he came to her, when she could hardly see him.

"Are you sorry you came here with me, Allaye?" he asked. There was malice in the very question.

She put down the spoon and looked up from the fire. He stood shadowy, his head ducked forward, the firelight faint on his enigmatic, timeless, half-smiling face.

"I'm not sorry," she answered slowly, using all her courage. "Because I love you--"

She crouched quite still on the hearth. He turned aside his face. After a moment or two he went out. She stirred her pot slowly and sadly. She had to go downstairs for something.

And there on the landing she saw him standing in the darkness with his arm over his face, as if fending a blow.

"What is it?" she said, laying her hand on him. He uncovered his face.

"I would take you away if I could," he said.

"I can wait for you," she answered.

He threw himself in a chair that stood at a table there on the broad landing, and buried his head in his arms.

"Don't wait for me! Don't wait for me!" he cried, his voice muffled.

"Why not?" she said, filled with terror. He made no sign. "Why not?" she insisted. And she laid her fingers on his head.

He got up and turned to her.

"I love you, even if it kills me," she said.

But he only turned aside again, leaned his arm against the wall, and hid his face, utterly noiseless.

"What is it?" she said. "What is it? I don't understand." He wiped his sleeve across his face, and turned to her.

"I haven't any hope," he said, in a dull, dogged voice.

She felt her heart and the child die within her.

"Why?" she said.

Was she to bear a hopeless child?

"You have hope. Don't make a scene," she snapped. And she went downstairs, as she had intended.

And when she got into the kitchen, she forgot what she had come for.

She sat in the darkness on the seat, with all life gone dark and still, death and eternity settled down on her. Death and eternity were settled down on her as she sat alone. And she seemed to hear him moaning upstairs--"I can't come back. I can't come back." She heard it. She heard it so distinctly, that she never knew whether it had been an actual utterance, or whether it was her inner ear which had heard the inner, unutterable sound. She wanted to answer, to call to him. But she could not. Heavy, mute, powerless, there she sat like a lump of darkness, in that doomed Italian kitchen. "I can't come back." She heard it so fatally.

She was interrupted by the entrance of Pancrazio.

"Oh!" he cried, startled when, having come near the fire, he caught sight of her. And he said something, frightened, in Italian.

"Is it you? Why are you in the darkness?" he said.

"I am just going upstairs again."

"You frightened me."

She went up to finish the preparing of the meal. Ciccio came down to Pancrazio. The latter had brought a newspaper. The two men sat on the settle, with the lamp between them, reading and talking the news.

Ciccio's group was called up for the following week, as he had said. The departure hung over them like a doom. Those were perhaps the worst days of all: the days of the impending departure. Neither of them spoke about it.

But the night before he left she could bear the silence no more.

"You will come back, won't you?" she said, as he sat motionless in his chair in the bedroom. It was a hot, luminous night. There was still a late scent of orange blossom from the garden, the nightingale was shaking the air with his sound. At times other, honey scents wafted from the hills.

"You will come back?" she insisted.

"Who knows?" he replied.

"If you make up your mind to come back, you will come back. We have our fate in our hands," she said.

He smiled slowly.

"You think so?" he said.

"I know it. If you don't come back it will be because you don't want to--no other reason. It won't be because you can't. It will be because you don't want to."

"Who told you so?" he asked, with the same cruel smile.

"I know it," she said.

"All right," he answered.

But he still sat with his hands abandoned between his knees.

"So make up your mind," she said.

He sat motionless for a long while: while she undressed and brushed her hair and went to bed. And still he sat there unmoving, like a corpse. It was like having some unnatural, doomed, unbearable presence in the room. She blew out the light, that she need not see him. But in the darkness it was worse.

At last he stirred--he rose. He came hesitating across to her.

"I'll come back, Allaye," he said quietly. "Be damned to them all." She heard unspeakable pain in his voice.

"To whom?" she said, sitting up.

He did not answer, but put his arms round her.

"I'll come back, and we'll go to America," he said.

"You'll come back to me," she whispered, in an ecstasy of pain and relief. It was not her affair, where they should go, so long as he really returned to her.

"I'll come back," he said.

"Sure?" she whispered, straining him to her.