

Weird Tales

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WEIRD STORY REPRINT

*The Song of Triumphant Love**

By IVAN TURGENIEFF

This is what I read in an old Italian manuscript:

1

ABOUT the middle of the Sixteenth Century there were living in Ferrara (it was at that time flourishing under the scepter of its magnificent archdukes, the patrons of the arts and poetry) two young men, named Fabio and Muzzio. They were of the same age, and of near kinship, and were scarcely ever apart; the warmest affection had united them from early childhood . . . the similarity of their positions strengthened the bond. Both belonged to old families; both were rich, independent, and without family ties; tastes and inclinations were alike in both. Muzzio was devoted to music. Fabio to painting. They were looked upon with pride by the whole of Ferrara, as ornaments of the court, society and town. In appearance, however, they were not alike, though both were distinguished by a graceful, youthful beauty. Fabio was taller, fair of face and flaxen of hair, and he had blue eyes. Muzzio, on the other hand, had a swarthy face and black hair, and in his dark brown eyes there was not the merry light, nor on his lips the genial smile of Fabio; his thick eyebrows overhung narrow eyelids, while Fabio's golden eyebrows formed delicate half-circles on his pure, smooth brow. In conversation, too, Muzzio was less animat-

ed. For all that, the two friends were both alike looked on with favor by ladies, as well they might be, being models of chivalrous courtliness and generosity.

At the same time there was living in Ferrara a girl named Valeria. She was considered one of the greatest beauties in the town, though it was very seldom possible to see her, as she led a retired life, and never went out except to church, and on great holidays for a walk. She lived with her mother, a widow of noble family, though of small fortune, who had no other children. In everyone whom Valeria met she inspired a sensation of involuntary admiration, and an equally involuntary tenderness and respect, so modest was her mien, so little, it seemed, was she aware of all the power of her own charms. Some, it is true, found her a little pale; her eyes, almost always downcast, expressed a certain shyness, even timidity; her lips rarely smiled, and then only faintly; her voice scarcely anyone had heard. But the rumor went that it was most beautiful, and that, shut up in her own room, in the early morning when everything still slumbered in the town, she loved to sing old songs to the sound of the lute, on which she used to play herself. In spite of her pallor, Valeria was blooming with health; and even old people, as they gazed on her, could not but think, "Oh, how happy the youth for whom that pure maiden bud, still enfolded in its petals, will one day open into full flower!"

* Translated from the Russian.

2

FABIO and Muzzio saw Valeria for the first time at a magnificent public festival, celebrated at the command of the Archduke of Ferrara, Ercole, son of the celebrated Lucrezia Borgia, in honor of some illustrious grandees who had come from Paris on the invitation of the Archduchess, daughter of the French king Louis XII. Valeria was sitting beside her mother on an elegant tribune, built after a design of Palladio, in the principal square of Ferrara, for the most honorable ladies in the town. Both Fabio and Muzzio fell passionately in love with her on that day; and, as they never had any secrets from each other, each of them soon knew what was passing in his friend's heart. They agreed together that both should try to get to know Valeria; and if she should deign to choose one of them, the other should submit without a murmur to her decision. A few weeks later, thanks to the excellent renown they deservedly enjoyed, they succeeded in penetrating into the widow's house, difficult though it was to obtain an entry to it; she permitted them to visit her. From that time forward they were able almost every day to see Valeria and to converse with her; and every day the passion kindled in the hearts of both young men grew stronger and stronger. Valeria, however, showed no preference for either of them, though their society was obviously agreeable to her. With Muzzio, she occupied herself with music but she talked more with Fabio, with him she was less timid. At last, they resolved to learn once for all their fate, and sent a letter to Valeria, in which they begged her to be open with them, and to say to which she would be ready to give her hand. Valeria showed this letter to her mother, and declared that she was willing to remain unmarried, but if her mother considered it time for

her to enter into matrimony, then she would marry whichever one her mother's choice should fix upon. The excellent widow shed a few tears at the thought of parting from her beloved child; there was, however, no good ground for refusing the suitors, she considered both of them equally worthy of her daughter's hand. But as she secretly preferred Fabio, and suspected that Valeria liked him the better, she fixed upon him. The next day Fabio heard of his happy fate, while all that was left for Muzzio was to keep his word, and submit.

And this he did; but to be the witness of the triumph of his friend and rival was more than he could do. He promptly sold the greater part of his property, and collecting some thousands of ducats, he set off on a far journey to the East. As he said farewell to Fabio, he told him that he should not return till he felt that the last traces of passion had vanished from his heart. It was painful to Fabio to part from the friend of his childhood and youth . . . but the joyous anticipation of approaching bliss soon swallowed up all other sensations, and he gave himself up wholly to the transports of successful love.

Shortly after, he celebrated his nuptials with Valeria, and only then learnt the full worth of the treasure it had been his fortune to obtain. He had a charming villa, shut in by a shady garden, a short distance from Ferrara; he moved thither with his wife and her mother. Then a time of happiness began for them. Married life brought out in a new and enchanting light all the perfections of Valeria. Fabio became an artist of distinction—no longer a mere amateur, but a real master. Valeria's mother rejoiced, and thanked God as she looked upon the happy pair.

Four years flew by unperceived, like a delicious dream. One thing only was wanting to the young

couple, one lack they mourned over as a sorrow: they had no children . . . but they had not given up all hope of them. At the end of the fourth year they were overtaken by a great, this time a real sorrow; Valeria's mother died.

Many tears were shed by Valeria; for a long time she could not accustom herself to her loss. But another year went by; life again asserted its rights and flowed along its old channel. And behold, one fine summer evening, unexpected by everyone, Muzzio returned to Ferrara.

3

DURING the whole space of five years that had elapsed since his departure no one had heard anything of him; all talk about him had died away, as though he had vanished from the face of the earth. When Fabio met his friend in one of the streets of Ferrara he almost cried out aloud, first in alarm and then in delight, and he at once invited him to his villa. There happened to be in his garden there a spacious pavilion, apart from the house; he proposed to his friend that he should establish himself in this pavilion. Muzzio readily agreed and moved thither the same day together with his servant, a dumb Malay—dumb but not deaf, and indeed, to judge by the alertness of his expression, a very intelligent man. His tongue had been cut out.

Muzzio brought with him dozens of boxes, filled with treasures of all sorts collected by him in the course of his prolonged travels. Valeria was delighted at Muzzio's return; and he greeted her with cheerful friendliness, but composure; it could be seen in his every action that he had kept the promise given to Fabio. During the day he completely arranged everything in order in his pavilion; aided by his Malay, he unpacked the curiosities he had brought; rugs, silken stuffs, ve-

vet and brocaded garments, weapons, goblets, dishes and bowls, decorated with enamel, things made of gold and silver, and inlaid with pearl and turquoise, carved boxes of jasper and ivory, cut bottles, spices, incense, skins of wild beasts, and feathers of unknown birds, and a number of other things, the very use of which seemed mysterious and incomprehensible. Among all these precious things there was a rich pearl necklace, bestowed upon Muzzio by the king of Persia for some great and secret service; he asked permission of Valeria to put this necklace with his own hand about her neck; she was struck by its great weight and a sort of strange heat in it . . . it seemed to burn to her skin. In the evening after dinner as they sat on the terrace of the villa in the shade of the oleanders and laurels, Muzzio began to relate his adventures. He told of the distant lands he had seen, of cloud-topped mountains and deserts, rivers like seas; he told of immense buildings, and temples, of trees a thousand years old, of birds and flowers of the colors of the rainbow; he named the cities and the peoples he had visited . . . their very names seemed like a fairy-tale. The whole East was familiar to Muzzio; he had traversed Persia, Arabia, where the horses are nobler and more beautiful than any other living creatures; he had penetrated into the very heart of India, where the race of men grow like stately trees; he had reached the boundaries of China and Tibet, where the living god, called the Grand Lama, dwells on earth in the guise of a silent man with narrow eyes.

Marvelous were his tales, and both Fabio and Valeria listened to him as if enchanted. Muzzio's features had really changed very little; his face, swarthy from childhood, had grown darker still, burnt under

the rays of a hotter sun, his eyes seemed more deep-set than before—and that was all; but the expression of his face had become different: concentrated and dignified, it never showed more life when he recalled the dangers he had encountered by night in forests that resounded with the roar of tigers or by day on solitary ways where savage fanatics lay in wait for travelers, to slay them in honor of their iron goddess who demands human sacrifices. And Muzzio's voice had grown deeper and more even; his hands, his whole body had lost the freedom of gesture peculiar to the Italian race. With the aid of his servant, the obsequiously alert Malay, he showed his hosts a few of the feats he had learnt from the Indian Brahmins. Thus for instance, having first hidden himself behind a curtain, he suddenly appeared sitting in the air cross-legged, the tips of his fingers pressed lightly on a bamboo cane placed vertically, which astounded Fabio not a little and positively alarmed Valeria. "Isn't he a sorcerer?" was her thought.

When he proceeded, piping on a little flute, to call some tame snakes out of a covered basket, where their dark flat heads with quivering tongues appeared under a parti-colored cloth, Valeria was terrified and begged Muzzio to put away these loathsome horrors as soon as possible.

At supper Muzzio regaled his friends with wine of Shiraz from a round long-necked flagon; it was of extraordinary fragrance and thickness, of a golden color with a shade of green in it, and it shone with a strange brightness as it was poured into the tiny jasper goblets. In taste it was unlike European wines: it was very sweet and spicy, and, drunk slowly in small drafts, produced a sensation of pleasant drowsiness in all the limbs. Muzzio made both Fabio and Valeria drink

a goblet of it, and he drank one himself. Bending over her goblet he murmured something, moving his fingers as he did so. Valeria noticed this; but as in all Muzzio's doings, in his whole behavior, there was something strange and out of the common, she only thought, "Can he have adopted some new faith in India, or is that the custom there?"

After a short silence she asked him if he had persevered with music during his travels. Muzzio, in reply, bade the Malay bring his Indian violin. It was like those of today, but instead of four strings it had only three, the upper part of it was covered with a bluish snake-skin, and the slender bow of reed was in the form of a half-moon, and on its extreme end glittered a pointed diamond.

Muzzio played first some mournful airs, national songs, as he told them, strange and even barbarous to an Italian ear; the sound of the metallic strings was plaintive and feeble. But when Muzzio began the last song, it suddenly gained force and rang out tunefully and powerfully; the passionate melody flowed out under the wide sweeps of the bow, flowed out, exquisitely twisting and coiling like the snake that covered the violin-top; and such fire, such triumphant bliss glowed and burned in this melody that Fabio and Valeria felt wrung to the heart and tears came into their eyes; while Muzzio, his head bent, and pressed close to the violin, his cheeks pale, his eyebrows drawn together into a single straight line, seemed still more concentrated and solemn; and the diamond at the end of the bow flashed sparks of light as though it, too, were kindled by the fire of the divine song.

When Muzzio had finished, and still keeping fast the violin between his chin and his shoulder, dropped the hand that held the bow, Fabio

cried, "What is that? What is that you have been playing to us?" Valeria uttered not a word—but her whole being seemed echoing her husband's question.

Muzzio laid the violin on the table—and slightly tossing back his hair, he said with a polite smile: "That—that melody . . . that song I heard once in the island of Ceylon. That song is known there among the people as the song of happy, triumphant love." "Play it again," Fabio was murmuring. "No; it can't be played again," answered Muzzio. "Besides, it is now too late. Signora Valeria ought to be at rest; and it is time for me, too. I am weary."

During the whole day Muzzio had treated Valeria with respectful simplicity, as a friend of former days, but as he went out he clasped her hand very tightly, squeezing his fingers on her palm, and looking so intently into her face that though she did not raise her eyelids, she yet felt the look on her suddenly flaming cheeks. She said nothing to Muzzio, but jerked away her hand, and when he was gone, she gazed at the door through which he had passed out. She remembered how she had been a little afraid of him even in old days, and now she was overcome by perplexity. Muzzio went off to his pavilion: the husband and wife went to their bedroom.

4

VALERIA did not quickly fall asleep; there was a faint and languid fever in her blood and a slight ringing in her ears—from that strange wine, as she supposed, and perhaps, too, from Muzzio's stories, from his playing on the violin. Toward morning she did at last fall asleep, and she had an extraordinary dream.

She dreamt that she was going into a large room with a low ceiling. Such a room she had never seen in

her life. All the walls were covered with tiny blue tiles with gold lines on them; slender carved pillars of alabaster supported the marble ceiling; the ceiling itself and the pillars seemed half transparent, and a pale rosy light penetrated from all sides into the room, throwing a mysterious and uniform light on all the objects in it; brocaded cushions lay on a narrow rug in the very middle of the floor, which was smooth as a mirror. In the corners, almost unseen, were smoking lofty censers, of the shape of monstrous beasts; there was no window anywhere; a door hung with a velvet curtain stood dark and silent in a recess in the wall. And suddenly this curtain slowly glided, moved aside, and in came Muzzio. He bowed, opened his arms, laughed. His fierce arms enfolded Valeria's waist; his parched lips burned her all over. . . . She fell backward on the cushions.

Moaning with horror, after long struggles, Valeria awoke. Still not realizing where she was and what was happening to her, she raised herself on her bed, looked around. A tremor ran over her whole body. . . . Fabio was lying beside her. He was asleep; but his face in the light of the brilliant full moon looking in at the window was pale as a corpse's—it was sadder than a dead face. Valeria waked her husband, and directly he looked at her. "What is the matter?" he cried. "I had—I had a fearful dream," she whispered, still shuddering all over.

But at that instant from the direction of the pavilion came floating powerful sounds, and both Fabio and Valeria recognized the melody Muzzio had played to them, calling it the song of blissful, triumphant love. Fabio looked in perplexity at Valeria. She closed her eyes, turned away, and both holding their breath, heard the song out to the end. As the last note died away, the moon passed behind a cloud, it was sud-

denly dark in the room. . . . Both the young people let their heads sink on their pillows without exchanging a word, and neither of them noticed when the other fell asleep.

5

THE next morning Muzzio came in to breakfast; he seemed happy and greeted Valeria cheerfully. She answered him in confusion—stole a glance at him—and felt frightened at the sight of that serene happy face, those piercing and inquisitive eyes. Muzzio was beginning again to tell some story, but Fabio interrupted him at the first word.

“You could not sleep, I see, in your new quarters. My wife and I heard you playing last night’s song.”

“Yes! Did you hear it?” said Muzzio. “I played it indeed; but I had been asleep before that, and I had a wonderful dream, too.”

Valeria was on the alert. “What sort of dream?” asked Fabio.

“I dreamed,” answered Muzzio, not taking his eyes off Valeria, “I was entering a spacious apartment with a ceiling decorated in Oriental fashion; carved columns supported the roof, the walls were covered with tiles, and though there were neither windows nor lights, the whole room was filled with a rosy light, just as though it were all built of transparent stone. In the corners, Chinese censers were smoking, on the floor lay brocaded cushions along a narrow rug. I went in through a door covered with a curtain, and at another door just opposite appeared a woman whom I once loved. And so beautiful she seemed to me, that I was all aflame with my old love—”

Muzzio broke off significantly. Valeria sat motionless, and only gradually she turned white, and she drew her breath more slowly.

“Then,” continued Muzzio, “I waked up and played that song.”

“But who was that woman?” said Fabio.

“Who was she? The wife of an Indian—I met her in the town of Delhi. She is not alive now—she died.”

“And her husband?” asked Fabio, not knowing why he asked the question.

“Her husband, too, they say is dead. I soon lost sight of them both.”

“Strange!” observed Fabio. “My wife, too, had an extraordinary dream last night”—Muzzio gazed intently at Valeria—“which she did not tell me,” added Fabio.

But at this point Valeria got up and went out of the room. Immediately after breakfast, Muzzio, too, went away, explaining that he had to be in Ferrara on business, and that he would not be back before the evening.

6

A FEW weeks before Muzzio’s return, Fabio had begun a portrait of his wife, depicting her with the attributes of Saint Cecilia. He had made considerable advance in his art; the renowned Luini, a pupil of Leonardo da Vinci, used to come to him at Ferrara, and while aiding him with his own counsels, pass on also the precepts of his great master. The portrait was almost completely finished; all that was left was to add a few strokes to the face, and Fabio might well be proud of his creation.

He saw Muzzio off on his way to Ferrara, then turned into his studio, where Valeria was usually waiting for him; but he did not find her there. He called her; she did not respond. Fabio was overcome by a secret uneasiness; he began looking for her.

She was nowhere in the house. Fabio ran into the garden, and there in one of the more secluded walks he caught sight of Valeria. She was sitting on a seat, her head drooping on to her bosom and her hands folded upon her knees; while behind her,

peeping out of the dark green of a cypress, a marble satyr, with a distorted malignant grin on his face, was putting his pouting lips to a Pan's pipe. Valeria was visibly relieved at her husband's appearance, and to his agitated questions she replied that she had a slight headache, but that it was of no consequence, and she was ready to come to sit to him.

Fabio led her to the studio, posed her, and took up his brush; but to his great vexation, he could not finish the face as he would have liked to. And not because it was somewhat pale and looked exhausted . . . no; but the pure, saintly expression, which he liked so much in it, and which had given him the idea of painting Valeria as Saint Cecilia, he could not find in it that day. He flung down the brush at last, told his wife he was not in the mood for work, and that he would not prevent her from lying down, as she did not look at all well, and put the canvas with its face to the wall. Valeria agreed with him that she ought to rest, and repeating her complaints of a headache, withdrew into her bedroom.

Fabio remained in the studio. He felt a strange confused sensation incomprehensible to himself. Muzzio's stay under his roof, to which he, Fabio, had himself urgently invited him, was irksome to him. And not that he was jealous—could anyone have been jealous of Valeria!—but he did not recognize his former comrade in his friend. All that was strange, unknown and new that Muzzio had brought with him from those distant lands—and which seemed to have entered into his very flesh and blood—all these magical feats, songs, strange drinks, this dumb Malay, even the spiey fragrance diffused by Muzzio's garments, his hair, his breath—all this inspired in Fabio a sensation akin to distrust, possibly

even to timidity. And why did that Malay waiting at table stare with such disagreeable intentness at him, Fabio? Really anyone might suppose that he understood Italian. Muzzio had said of him that in losing his tongue, this Malay had made a great sacrifice, and in return he was now possessed of great power. What sort of power? and how could he have obtained it at the price of his tongue? All this was very strange, very incomprehensible!

Fabio went into his wife's room; she was lying on the bed, dressed, but was not asleep. Hearing his steps, she started, then again seemed delighted to see him just as in the garden. Fabio sat down beside the bed, took Valeria by the hand, and after a short silence, asked her what was the extraordinary dream that had frightened her so the previous night. And was it the same sort at all as the dream Muzzio had described? Valeria crimsoned and said hurriedly: "Oh! no! no! I saw—a sort of monster which was trying to tear me to pieces."

"A monster in the shape of a man?" asked Fabio. "No, a beast—a beast!" Valeria turned away and hid her burning face in the pillows.

Fabio held his wife's hand some time longer; silently he raised it to his lips, and withdrew.

Both the young people passed that day with heavy hearts. Something dark seemed hanging over their heads, but what it was, they could not tell. They wanted to be together, as though some danger threatened them; but what to say to one another they did not know. Fabio made an effort to take up the portrait, and to read Ariosto, whose poem had appeared not long before in Ferrara, and was now making a noise all over Italy; but nothing was of any use.

Late in the evening, just at supper-time, Muzzio returned.

7

HE SEEMED composed and cheerful—but he told them little; he devoted himself rather to questioning Fabio about their common acquaintances, about the German war, and the Emperor Charles: he spoke of his own desire to visit Rome, to see the new Pope. He again offered Valeria some Shiraz wine, and on her refusal, observed as though to himself, "Now it's not needed, to be sure."

Going back with his wife to their room, Fabio soon fell asleep; and waking up an hour later, felt a conviction that no one was sharing his bed; Valeria was not beside him. He got up quickly and at the same instant saw his wife in her night attire coming out of the garden into the room. The moon was shining brightly, though not long before a light rain had been falling. With eyes closed, with an expression of mysterious horror on her immovable face, Valeria approached the bed, and feeling for it with her hands stretched out before her, lay down hurriedly and in silence. Fabio turned to her with a question, but she made no reply; she seemed to be asleep. He touched her, and felt on her dress and on her hair drops of rain, and on the soles of her bare feet, little grains of sand. Then he leapt up and ran into the garden through the half-open door. The crude brilliance of the moon wrapt every object in light. Fabio looked about him, and perceived on the sand of the path prints of two pairs of feet—one pair were bare; and these prints led to a bower of jasmine, on one side, between the pavilion and the house. He stood still in perplexity, and suddenly once more he heard the strains of the song he had listened to the night before.

Fabio shuddered, ran into the pavilion. Muzzio was standing in the middle of the room playing on the violin. Fabio rushed up to him.

"You have been in the garden, your clothes are wet with rain."

"No . . . I don't know . . . I think . . . I have not been out . . ." Muzzio answered slowly, seeming amazed at Fabio's entrance and his excitement.

Fabio seized him by the hand. "And why are you playing that melody again? Have you had a dream again?"

Muzzio glanced at Fabio with the same look of amazement, and said nothing.

"Answer me!"

"The moon stood high like a round shield . . .
Like a snake, the river shines . . .
The friend's awake, the foe's asleep . . .
The bird is in the falcon's clutches . . .
Help!"

muttered Muzzio, humming to himself as though in delirium.

Fabio stepped back two paces, stared at Muzzio, pondered a moment, and went back to the house, to his bedroom.

Valeria, her head sunk on her shoulder and her hands hanging lifelessly, was in a heavy sleep. He could not quickly awaken her—but directly she saw him, she flung herself on his neck, and embraced him convulsively. She was trembling all over.

"What is the matter, my precious, what is it?" Fabio kept repeating, trying to soothe her. But she still lay lifeless on his breast.

"Ah, what fearful dreams I have!" she whispered, hiding her face against him. Fabio would have questioned her, but she only shuddered. The window-panes were flushed with the early light of morning when at last she fell asleep in his arms.

8

THE next day Muzzio disappeared from early morning, while Valeria informed her husband that she intended to go away to a neighbor-

ing monastery, where lived her spiritual father, an old and austere monk, in whom she placed unbounded confidence. To Fabio's inquiries she replied that she wanted by confession to relieve her soul, which was weighed down by the exceptional impressions of the last few days. As he looked upon Valeria's sunken face, and listened to her faint voice, Fabio approved of her plan; the worthy Father Lorenzo might give her valuable advice, and might dispense her doubts.

Under the escort of four attendants, Valeria set off to the monastery, while Fabio remained at home, and wandered about the garden till his wife's return, trying to comprehend what had happened to her, and a victim to constant fear and wrath, and the pain of undefined suspicions. More than once he went up to the pavilion; but Muzzio had not returned and the Malay gazed at Fabio like a statue, obsequiously bowing his head, with a well-dissembled—so at least it seemed to Fabio—smile on his bronzed face.

Meanwhile, Valeria had in confession told everything to her priest, not so much with shame as with horror. The priest heard her attentively, gave her his blessing, absolved her from her involuntary sin, but to himself he thought: "Sorcery, the arts of the devil—the matter can't be left so," and he returned with Valeria to her villa, as though with the aim of completely pacifying and reassuring her.

At the sight of the priest, Fabio was thrown into some agitation; but the experienced old man had thought out beforehand how he must treat him. When he was left alone with Fabio, he did not of course betray the secrets of the confessional, but he advised him if possible to get rid of the guest they had invited to their house, as by his stories, his songs, and his whole behavior he was troubling the imagination of Valeria.

Moreover, in the old man's opinion, Muzzio had not, he remembered, been very firm in the faith in former days, and having spent so long a time in lands unenlightened by the truths of Christianity, he might well have brought thence the contagion of false doctrine, might even have become conversant with secret magic arts; and, therefore, though long friendship had indeed its claims, still a wise prudence pointed to the necessity of separation.

Fabio fully agreed with the excellent monk. Valeria was even joyful when her husband reported to her the priest's counsel; and sent on his way with the cordial good-will of both the young people, loaded with good gifts for the monastery and the poor, Father Lorenzo returned home.

Fabio intended to have an explanation with Muzzio immediately after supper; but his strange guest did not return to supper. Then Fabio decided to defer his conversation with Muzzio until the following day; and both the young people retired to rest.

9

VALERIA soon fell asleep; but Fabio could not sleep. In the stillness of the night, everything he had seen, everything he had felt presented itself more vividly; he put to himself still more insistently questions to which as before he could find no answer. Had Muzzio really become a sorcerer, and had he not already poisoned Valeria? She was ill—but what was her disease? While he lay, his head in his hand, holding his feverish breath, and given up to painful reflection, the moon rose again upon a cloudless sky; and together with its beams, through the half-transparent window-panes, there began, from the direction of the pavilion—or was it Fabio's fancy?—to come a breath, like a light, fragrant current; then an urgent, passionate murmur was heard, and at

that instant he observed that Valeria was beginning faintly to stir. He started, looked; she rose up, slid first one foot, then the other out of the bed, and like one bewitched of the moon, her sightless eyes fixed lifelessly before her, her hands stretched out, she began moving toward the garden! Fabio instantly ran out of the other door of the room, and running quickly round the corner of the house, bolted the door that led into the garden. He had scarcely time to grasp at the bolt, when he felt someone trying to open the door from the inside, pressing against it . . . again and again . . . and then there was the sound of piteous passionate moans . . .

"But Muzzio has not come back from the town," flashed through Fabio's head, and he rushed to the pavilion.

Coming toward him, along the path dazzlingly lighted up by the moon's rays, was Muzzio, he too moving like one moonstruck, his hands held out before him, and his eyes open but unseeing. Fabio ran up to him, but he, not heeding him, moved on, treading evenly, step by step, and his rigid face smiled in the moonlight like the Malay's. Fabio would have called him by his name, but at that instant he heard, behind him in the house, the creaking of a window. He looked round.

Yes, the window of the bedroom was open from top to bottom, and putting one foot over the sill, Valeria stood in the window. Her hands seemed to be seeking Muzzio—she seemed striving all over toward him. . . .

Unutterable fury filled Fabio's breast with a sudden inrush. "Accursed sorcerer!" he shrieked furiously, and seizing Muzzio by the throat with one hand, with the other he felt for the dagger in his girdle, and plunged the blade into his side up to the hilt.

Muzzio uttered a shrill scream,

and clapping his hand to the wound, ran staggering back to the pavilion. But at the very same instant when Fabio stabbed him, Valeria screamed just as shrilly, and fell to the earth like grass before the scythe.

Fabio flew to her, raised her up, carried her to the bed, began to speak to her. . . .

She lay a long time motionless, but at last she opened her eyes, heaved a deep, broken, blissful sigh, like one just rescued from imminent death, saw her husband, and twining her arms about his neck, crept close to him.

"You, you, it is you," she faltered. Gradually her hands loosened their hold, her head sank back, and murmuring with a blissful smile, "Thank God, it is all over. . . . But how weary I am!" she fell into a sound but not heavy sleep.

10

FABIO sank down beside her bed, and never taking his eyes off her pale and sunken, but already calmer, face, began reflecting on what had happened, and also on how he ought to act now. What steps was he to take? If he had killed Muzzio—and remembering how deeply the dagger had gone in, he could have no doubt of it—it could not be hidden. He would have to bring it to the knowledge of the archduke, of the judges—but how explain, how describe such an incomprehensible affair? He, Fabio, had killed in his own house his own kinsman, his dearest friend! They will inquire, "What for? on what grounds?" But if Muzzio were not dead? Fabio could not endure to remain longer in uncertainty, and satisfying himself that Valeria was asleep, he cautiously got up from his chair, went out of the house, and made his way to the pavilion. Everything was still in it; only in one window a light was visible.

With a sinking heart he opened the outer door (there was still the print of blood-stained fingers on it, and there were black drops of gore on the sand of the path), passed through the first dark room—and stood still on the threshold, overwhelmed with amazement.

In the middle of the room, on a Persian rug, with a brocaded cushion under his head, and all his limbs stretched out straight, lay Muzzio, covered with a wide, red shawl with a black pattern on it. His face, yellow as wax, with closed eyes and bluish eyelids, was turned toward the ceiling. No breathing could be discerned: he seemed a corpse. At his feet knelt the Malay, also wrapt in a red shawl. He was holding in his left hand a branch of some unknown plant, like a fern, and bending slightly forward, was gazing fixedly at his master. A small torch fixed on the floor burnt with a greenish flame, and was the only light in the room. The flame did not flicker nor smoke.

The Malay did not stir at Fabio's entry, he merely turned his eyes upon him, and again bent them upon Muzzio. From time to time he raised and lowered the branch, and waved it in the air, and his dumb lips slowly parted and moved as though uttering soundless words. On the floor between the Malay and Muzzio lay the dagger with which Fabio had stabbed his friend; the Malay struck one blow with the branch on the blood-stained blade. A minute passed . . . another.

Fabio approached the Malay, and stooping down to him, asked in an undertone, "Is he dead?" The Malay bent his head from above downward, and disentangling his right hand from his shawl, he pointed imperiously to the door. Fabio would have repeated his question, but the gesture of the commanding hand was repeated, and Fabio went out,

indignant and wondering, but obedient.

He found Valeria sleeping as before, with an even more tranquil expression on her face. He did not undress, but seated himself by the window, his head in his hand, and once more sank into thought. The rising sun found him still in the same place. Valeria had not waked up.

11

FABIO intended to wait till she awakened, and then to set off to Ferrara, when suddenly someone tapped lightly at the bedroom door. Fabio went out, and saw his old steward, Antonio. "*Signor*," began the old man, "the Malay has just informed me that Signor Muzzio has been taken ill, and wishes to be moved with all his belongings to the town; and that he begs you to let him have servants to assist in packing his things; and that at dinner-time you would send pack-horses, and saddle-horses, and a few attendants for the journey. Do you allow it?" "The Malay informed you of this?" asked Fabio. "In what manner? Why, he is dumb." "Here, *Signor*, is the paper on which he wrote all this in our language, and very correctly." "And Muzzio, you say, is ill?" "Yes, he is very ill, and can see no one." "Have they sent for a doctor?" "No. The Malay forbade it." "And was it the Malay who wrote you this?" "Yes, it was he." Fabio did not speak for a moment. "Well, then, arrange it all," he said at last. Antonio withdrew.

Fabio looked after his servant in bewilderment. "Then, he is not dead," he thought, and he did not know whether to rejoice or to be sorry. "Ill?" But a few hours ago it was a corpse he had looked upon!

Fabio returned to Valeria. She waked up and raised her head. The husband and wife exchanged a long look full of significance. "He is

gone?" Valeria said suddenly. Fabio shuddered. "How gone? Is he gone away?" she continued.

A load fell from Fabio's heart. "Not yet; but he is going today." "And I shall never, never see him again?" "Never." "And these dreams will not come again?" "No."

Valeria heaved a sigh of relief; a blissful smile once more appeared on her lips. She held out both hands to her husband. "And we will never speak of him, never, do you hear, my dear one? And I will not leave my room till he is gone. And do you now send me my maids. But stay: take away that thing!" she pointed to the pearl necklace, lying on a little bedside table, the necklace given her by Muzzio, "and throw it at once into our deepest well. Embrace me. I am your Valeria; and do not come in to me till—he has gone."

Fabio took the necklace and did as his wife had directed. Then he fell to wandering about the garden, looking from a distance at the pavilion, about which the bustle of preparations for departure was beginning. Servants were bringing out boxes, loading the horses—but the Malay was not among them. An irresistible impulse drew Fabio to look once more upon what was taking place in the pavilion. He recollected that there was at the back a secret door, by which he could reach the inner room where Muzzio had been lying in the morning. He stole round to this door, found it unlocked, and, parting the folds of a heavy curtain, turned a faltering glance upon the room within.

12

MUZZIO was not now lying on the rug. Dressed as though for a journey, he sat in an armchair, but seemed a corpse, just as on Fabio's first visit. His torpid head fell back on the chair, and his outstretched hands hung lifeless, yellow and rigid

on his knees. His breast did not heave. Near the chair on the floor, which was strewn with dried herbs, stood some flat bowls of dark liquid, which exhaled a powerful, almost suffocating, odor, the odor of musk. Around each bowl was coiled a small snake of brazen hue, with golden eyes that flashed from time to time; while directly facing Muzzio, two paces from him, rose the long figure of the Malay, wrapt in a mantle of many-colored brocade, girt round the waist with a tiger's tail, with a high hat of the shape of a pointed tiara on his head. But he was not motionless: at one moment he bowed down reverently, and seemed to be praying, at the next he drew himself up to his full height, even rose on tiptoe; then, with a rhythmic action, threw wide his arms, and moved them persistently in the direction of Muzzio, and seemed to threaten or command him, frowning and stamping with his foot. All these actions seemed to cost him great effort, even to cause him pain: he breathed heavily, the sweat streamed down his face. All at once he sank down to the ground, and drawing in a full breath, with knitted brow and immense effort, drew his clenched hands toward him, as though he were holding reins in them—and to the indescribable horror of Fabio, Muzzio's head slowly left the back of the chair, and moved forward, following the Malay's hands. The Malay let them fall, and Muzzio's head fell heavily back again; the Malay repeated his movements, and obediently the head repeated them after him. The dark liquid in the bowls began boiling; the bowls themselves began to resound with a faint bell-like note, and the brazen snakes coiled freely about each of them. Then the Malay took a step forward, and raising his eyebrows and opening his eyes immensely wide, he bowed his head to Muzzio . . . and the eyelids of the

dead man quivered, parted uncertainly, and under them could be seen the eyeballs, dull as lead. The Malay's face was radiant with triumphant pride and delight, a delight almost malignant; he opened his mouth wide, and from the depths of his chest there broke out with effort a prolonged howl. Muzzio's lips parted, too, and a faint moan quivered on them in response to that inhuman sound. . . .

But at this point Fabio could endure it no longer; he imagined he was present at some devilish incantation! He too uttered a shriek and rushed out, running home as quickly as possible, without looking round, repeating prayers and crossing himself as he ran.

13

THREE hours later, Antonio came to him with the announcement that everything was ready, the things were packed, and Signor Muzzio was preparing to start. Without a word in answer to his servant, Fabio went out on to the terrace, whence the pavilion could be seen. A few pack-horses were grouped before it; a powerful raven horse, saddled for two riders, was led up to the steps, where servants were standing bareheaded, together with armed attendants. The door of the pavilion opened, and supported by the Malay, who wore once more his ordinary attire, appeared Muzzio. His face was deathlike, and his hands hung like a dead man's, but he walked—yes, positively walked—and, seated on the charger, he sat upright and felt for and found the reins. The Malay put his feet in the stirrups, leaped up behind him on the saddle, put his arm round him, and the whole party started. The horses moved at a walking pace, and when they turned round before the house, Fabio fancied that in Muzzio's dark face there gleamed two spots of white. Could it be he had turned his eyes upon him? Only the Malay

bowed to him—ironically, as ever.

Did Valeria see all this? Her window-blinds were drawn—but it may be she was standing behind them.

14

AT DINNER-TIME she came into the dining room, and was very quiet and affectionate; she still complained, however, of weariness. But there was no agitation about her now, none of her former constant bewilderment and secret dread; and when, the day after Muzzio's departure, Fabio set to work again on her portrait, he found in her features the pure expression, the momentary eclipse of which had so troubled him, and his brush moved lightly over the canvas.

The husband and wife took up their old life again. Muzzio vanished for them as though he had never existed. Fabio and Valeria were agreed, as it seemed, not to utter a syllable referring to him, not to learn anything of his later days; his fate remained, however, a mystery for all. Muzzio did actually disappear, as though he had sunk into the earth. Fabio one day thought it his duty to tell Valeria exactly what had taken place on that fatal night, but she probably divined his intention, and she held her breath, half-shutting her eyes, as though she were expecting a blow. Fabio understood her; and he did not inflict that blow upon her.

One fine autumn day, Fabio was putting the last touches to his picture of his Cecilia; Valeria sat at the organ, her fingers straying at random over the keys. Suddenly, without her knowing it, from under her hands came the first notes of that song of triumphant love which Muzzio had once played; and at the same instant, for the first time since her marriage, she felt within her the throb of a new palpitating life. . . . Valeria started, stopped. . . .

What did it mean? Could it be—

At this word the manuscript ended.