

# THE VISIONARY [THE ASSIGNATION]



*Ich habe gelebt, und geliebet.*

—SCHILLER'S *Wallenstein*.

I have lived, and I have loved.

*Und sterbich denn, so sterbich doch*

*Durch sie—durch sie.* —GOETHE.

And if I die, at least I die

*With her—with her.*

**T**HERE IS A name—a sound—which, above all other music, vibrates upon my ear with a delicious, yet wild and solemn melody. Devoutly admired by the few who read, and by the very few who think, it is a name not as yet, indeed, blazoned in the escutcheon of immortality; but there, nevertheless, heralded in characters of the Tyrian fire hereafter to be rendered legible by the breath of centuries.

It is a name, moreover, which for reasons intrinsically of no weight, yet in fact conclusive, I am determined to conceal. Nor will I, by a fictitious appellation, dishonour the memory of that great dead whose life was so little understood, and the received account of whose melancholy end is a tissue of malevolent blasphemies. I am not of that class of writers who, making some euphonous cognomen the key-stone to the arch of their narrations, can no more conclude without the one than the architect without the other.

Ill-fated and mysterious man!—bewildered in the brilliancy of thine own imagination, and fallen in the flames of thine own youth! Again in fancy I behold thee! Once more thy form hath risen before me!—not—oh not as thou *art*—in the cold valley and shadow—but as thou *shouldst be*—squandering away a life of magnificent meditation in that city of dim visions, thine own Venice—which is a star-beloved city of the sea, and the wide windows of whose Palladian palaces, gleaming with the fires of midnight revelry, look down with a sad and bitter meaning upon the secrets of her silent waters. Yes, I repeat it—as thou *shouldst be*. There are surely other worlds than this—other thoughts than the thoughts of the multitude—I would almost venture to say other speculations than the speculations of the sophist. Who then shall call thy conduct into question? who blame thee for thy visionary hours, or declare those occupations a wasting away of life, which were but the overflowings of thine everlasting energies?

It was at Venice, beneath the covered archway there called the "Ponte di Sospiri," that met me for the third or fourth time the person of whom I speak. It is, however, with a confused recollection that I recall to mind the circumstances of that meeting. Yet I remember—ah! how should I forget?—the deep midnight, the Bridge of Sighs, the beauty of woman, and the Demon of Romance who stalked up and down the narrow canal.

It was a night of unusual gloom. The great clock of the Piazza had sounded the fifth hour of the Italian evening. The square of the Campanile lay silent and deserted, and the lights in the old Ducal Palace were dying fast away. I was returning home from the Piazzetta, by way of the Grand Canal. But as my gondola arrived opposite the mouth of the canal San Marco, a female voice from its recesses burst suddenly upon the night, in one wild, hysterical, and long continued shriek. Startled at the sound, I sprang upon my feet: while my gondolier, letting slip his single oar, lost it in the pitchy darkness beyond a chance of recovery, and we were left at the mercy of the current which here sets from the greater into the smaller channel. Like some huge bird of sable plumage, we were drifting slowly down towards the Bridge of Sighs, when a thousand flambeaux flashing from the windows and down the staircases of the Ducal Palace, turned all at once the deep gloom to a ghastly and supernatural day.

A child, slipping from the arms of its own mother, had fallen from an upper window of the lofty structure into the deep and dim canal. The quiet waters had closed placidly over their victim; and, although my own gondola was the only one in sight, many a stout swimmer, already in the stream, was seeking in vain upon the surface, the treasure which, alas! was only to be found in the abyss.

Upon the broad black marble flagstones at the entrance of the palace, and a few steps above the water, stood a figure which none who then saw can ever since have forgotten. It was the Marchesa Bianca, the adoration of all Venice—the gayest of the gay—the most lovely where all were beautiful—but, alas! the young wife of the old and intriguing Mentoni, and the mother of that fair child, her first and only one, who now, deep beneath the murky water, was thinking in bitterness of heart upon her gentle caresses, and exhausting its little life in struggles to call upon her name.

She stood alone. Her small, bare and silvery feet gleamed in the black mirror of marble beneath. Her hair, partly loosened for the night from its ball-room array, clustered, amid a shower of diamonds, round and round her classical head, in curls like the young hyacinth. A snowy-white and gauze-like drapery seemed to be nearly the sole covering to her delicate form; but the mid-summer and midnight air was hot, sullen, and still, and no motion—no shadow of motion in that statue-like form itself, stirred even the folds of that raiment of very vapor which hung around it as the heavy marble hangs around the weeping Niobe. Yet—strange to say!—her large lustrous eyes were not bent downwards to the grave wherein her dearest hope lay buried—but rivetted—ah! strange to say! in a widely different direction! The prison of the city is, I think, the fairest building in all Venice—but how *could* that lady gaze so fixedly upon it, when her only child lay stifling at her feet? Yon dark, gloomy niche, too, yawns right opposite her chamber window—what, then, *could* there possibly be in its shadows—in its architecture—in its ivy-wreathed and solemn cornices—that the Marchesa di Mentoni had not wondered at a thousand times before? Nonsense!—Who does not remember that, at such a time as this, the eye, like a shattered mirror, multiplies the images of its sorrow, and sees in a million far off places, the woe which is close at hand?

Many steps above the Marchesa, and within the arch of the water-gate, stood, in full dress, the Satyr-like figure of Mentoni himself. He was occasionally occupied in thrumming a guitar, and seemed ennuied to the very death, as at intervals he gave directions for the recovery of his child. Stupefied and bewildered, I had no power to move from the upright position I had assumed upon first hearing the shriek, and must have presented to the eyes of the agitated group a spectral and ominous appearance, as with my pale countenance and rigid limbs, I drifted down among them in that funeral gondola.

All efforts were in vain. Many of the most energetic in the search were relaxing their endeavors, and yielding to a gloomy sorrow. There seemed but little hope for the child; (how much less than for

the mother!) but now, from the dark niche which has been before mentioned as forming part of the Old Republican prison, as fronting the lattice of the Marchesa, a figure, muffled in a cloak, stepped out within reach of the light, and, pausing a moment upon the verge of the giddy height, plunged headlong into the canal. As, in an instant afterwards, he stood with the still living and breathing child within his grasp, upon the marble flagstones by the side of the Marchesa, his cloak, heavy with the water, became unfastened, and, falling in folds about his feet, discovered to the wonderstricken spectators the graceful person of a very young man, with whose name the greater part of Europe was then ringing.

No word spoke the stranger. But the Marchesa! She will now receive her child—she will press it to her heart—she will cling to its little form, and smother it with her caresses. Alas! another's arms have taken it away, and borne it afar off, unnoticed, into the palace! And the Marchesa! a tear is gathering into her eyes—those eyes which, like Pliny's own acanthus, are "soft and almost liquid." Her lip—her beautiful lip trembles; the entire woman thrills throughout the soul, and the statue has started into life! The pallor of the marble countenance, the swelling of the marble bosom, the very purity of the marble feet, is suddenly flushed over with a tide of ungovernable crimson; and a slight shudder quivers about the entire frame, like a soft wind at Napoli about the rich silver lilies in the grass.

Why *should* that lady blush! To this demand there is no answer—except that, having left, in the eager haste and terror of a mother's heart, the privacy of her own *boudoir*, she has neglected to enthrall her feet in their tiny slippers, and utterly forgotten to throw over her Venetian shoulders that drapery which is their due. What other possible cause could there have been for her so blushing?—for the glance of those large appealing eyes? for the unusual tumult of that throbbing bosom?—for the convulsive pressure of that trembling hand?—that hand which fell, as Mentoni turned into the palace, accidentally, upon the hand of the stranger. What reason could there have been for the low—the singularly low tone of those unmeaning words which the lady uttered hurriedly in bidding him adieu? "Thou hast conquered," she said, or the murmurs of the water deceived me; "thou hast conquered—one hour after sunrise—we shall meet—so let it be!"

The tumult had subsided, the lights had died away within the Piazza, and the stranger, whom I now recognised, stood alone upon the flags. He shook with inconceivable agitation, and his eye glanced around in search of a gondola. I could do not less than offer him the service of my own; in a hurried manner he accepted my

civility. An oar was obtained at the water-gate, and as we passed together to his residence, he rapidly recovered his self-possession, and spoke of our former slight acquaintance in terms of great apparent cordiality.

There are some subjects upon which I take pleasure in being minute. The person of the stranger—let me call him by that title, who to all the world was still a stranger—the person of the stranger is one of these subjects. In height he might have been below rather than above the medium size: although there were moments of intense passion when his frame actually *expanded* and belied the assertion. The light, almost slender symmetry of his figure, promised more of that ready activity which he evinced at the Bridge of Sighs, than of that Herculean strength which he has been known to wield without an effort, upon occasions of more dangerous emergency. With the mouth and chin of a deity—a nose like those delicate creations of the mind to be found only in the medallions of the Hebrew, full eyes, whose shadows varied from pure hazel to intense and brilliant jet—and a profusion of glossy black hair, from which a forehead rather low than otherwise gleamed forth at intervals all light and ivory—his were features than which I have seen none more classically regular, except, perhaps, the marble ones of the Emperor Commodus. Yet his countenance was, nevertheless, one of those which all men have seen at some period of their lives, and have never afterwards seen again. It had no peculiar—I wish to be perfectly understood—no settled predominant expression to be fastened upon the memory; a countenance seen and instantly forgotten—but forgotten with a vague, intense, and never-ceasing desire of recalling it to mind. Not that the spirit of each rapid passion failed, at any time, to throw its own distinct image upon the mirror of that face—but that the mirror, mirror-like, retained no vestige of the passion, when the passion had departed.

Upon parting from him on the night of our adventure, he solicited me in an urgent manner, to call upon him very early the next morning. Shortly after sunrise, I found myself accordingly at his Palazzo, one of those huge piles of gloomy, yet fantastic grandeur which tower above the waters of the Great Canal in the vicinity of the Rialto. I was shown up a broad winding staircase of mosaics, into an apartment whose unparalleled splendor burst through the opening door with an actual glare, making me sick and dizzy with luxuriousness.

I knew my acquaintance to be wealthy. Report had spoken of his possessions in terms which I had even ventured to call terms of ridiculous exaggeration. But as I gazed about me, I could with difficulty bring myself to believe that the wealth of any subject in Europe could have supplied the far more than imperial magnificence which burned and blazed around.

Although, as I say, the sun had risen, yet the room was still brilliantly lighted up, and I judged, from this circumstance, as well as from an air of apparent exhaustion in the countenance of my friend, that he had not retired to bed during the whole of the preceding night. In the architecture and embellishments of the chamber, the evident design was to dazzle and astound. Little attention had been paid to the *decora* of what is technically called "keeping," or to the proprieties of nationality. The eye wandered from object to object, and rested upon none—neither the "grotesques" of the Greek painters, nor the sculptures of the best Italian days, nor the huge carvings of untutored Egypt. Rich draperies in every part of the room trembled to the vibrations of low, melancholy music, whose unseen origin undoubtedly lay in the recesses of the red coral trellice-work which tapestried the ceiling. The senses were oppressed by mingled and conflicting perfumes, reeking up from strange Arabesque censers, together with multitudinous flaring and flickering tongues of emerald and violet fire which seemed actually endued with a monstrous vitality as their particoloured fires writhed up and down and around about their extravagant proportions. The rays of the rising sun poured in upon the whole, through windows formed each of a single huge pane of crimson-tinted glass, and glancing to and fro, in a thousand reflections, from curtains which rolled from their cornices like streams of molten silver, mingled at length fitfully with the artificial light, and lay weltering subdued upon a carpet of rich, liquid-looking cloth of gold.

Here then had the hand of genius been at work.—A wilderness—a chaos of beauty was before me; a sense of dreamy and incoherent grandeur took possession of my soul, and I remained speechless.

"Ha! ha! ha!"—laughed the proprietor, pointing me to a seat, and throwing himself back upon an ottoman. There was, I thought, a tincture of bitterness in the laugh, and I could not immediately reconcile myself to the *bienséance* of so singular a welcome.

"Ha! ha! ha!—ha! ha! ha!" continued he. "I see you are surprised at my apartment—my statues—my pictures—my originality of conception in architecture—in upholstery! absolutely drunk with my magnificence? Ha! ha! ha! pardon me—I must laugh or die—perhaps both," continued he, after a pause. "Do you know, however," said he, musingly, "that at Sparta (which is now Palæochori,) at Sparta, I say, to the west of the citadel, among a chaos of scarcely visible ruins, is a kind of socle, upon which are still visible the letters ΛΑΣΜ. They are, I verily believe, part of ΤΕΛΑΣΜΑ. How many divinities had altars at Sparta, and how strange that that of Laughter should be found alone surviving! But just now, to be sure, I have no right to be surprized at your astonishment. Europe—the world, can-

not rival this my regal cabinet. My other apartments, however, are mere matters of fact—ultras of fashionable insipidity. This is better than fashion—is it not? Yet this has but to be seen to become the rage—that is, to say, with those who could afford it at the expense of their entire patrimony. But I have guarded against any such profanation, with one exception”—(here the pallor of death rapidly overspread his countenance, and as rapidly spread away)—“with one exception, you are the only human being besides myself, who has ever set foot within its imperial precincts.”

I bowed in acknowledgement—for the unexpected eccentricity of his address and manner, had filled me with amazement, and I could not express in words my appreciation of what I might have construed into a compliment.

“Here,” said he, arising and leaning upon my arm as he sauntered around the apartment, “here are paintings of all ages, from the Greek painters to Cimabue, and from Cimabue to the present hour. Many are chosen, as you see, with little deference to the opinions of Virtu. Here, too, are some *chefs d’œuvre* of the unknown great; and here, unfinished designs by men, celebrated in their day, whose very names the perspicacity of the academies has left to silence and to me. What think you,” said he, turning as he spoke—“what think you of this Madonna della Pietà?”

“It is Guido’s own!” I said, with all the enthusiasm of my nature, for I had been poring intently over its surpassing loveliness. “It is Guido’s own!—how *could* you have obtained it? she is undoubtedly in painting what the Venus is in sculpture.”

“Ha!” said he, thoughtfully, “the Venus—the beautiful Venus?—the Venus of Venuses!—the Venus de Medicis!—the work of Cleomenes, the son of the Athenian! as much as it is the work of mine own hands!—part of the left arm, and all the right, are restorations; and in the coquetry of that right arm lies, I think, the quintessence of affectation. The Apollo too!—you spoke of Apollo!—it is a copy; there can be no reasonable doubt of it. Sir, I will not bow to falsity, although begrimed with age—there is *no* inspiration in the boasted Apollo, and the Antinous is worth a dozen of it. After all, there is much in the saying of Socrates—‘that the statuary found his statue in the block of marble.’ Michel Angelo was not original in his

*‘Non ha l’ottimo artista alcun concetto  
Che un marmo solo in se non circonscriva.’ ”*

[Even the greatest artist never has an idea

That a single block of marble does not contain within itself].’ ”

It has been, or should be remarked, that, in the manner of the true gentleman, we are always aware of a difference from the bearing of

the vulgar, without being at once precisely able to determine in what such difference consists. Allowing the remark to have applied in its full force to the outward demeanor of my friend, I felt it, on that eventful morning, still more fully applicable to his moral temperament and character. Nor could I better define that peculiarity of spirit which seemed to place him so essentially apart from all other human beings, than by calling it a habit of intense and continual thought, pervading even his most trivial actions—intruding upon his moments of dalliance—and interweaving itself into his very flashes of merriment—like the adders which writhe from out the eyes of the grinning masks in the cornices around the temples of Cybele.

I could not help, however, repeatedly observing, through the mingled tone of levity and solemnity with which he rapidly descanted on matters of little importance, a certain air of trepidation—a nervous inquietude of manner, which appeared to me unaccountable, and at times even filled me with alarm. Frequently pausing in the middle of a sentence whose commencement he had apparently forgotten, he seemed to be listening in the deepest attention, as if either in expectation of a visiter, or to sounds which must have had existence in imagination alone.

It was during one of these apparent reveries or pauses of abstraction, that, in turning over a page of Politian's beautiful tragedy, *The Orfeo*, which lay near upon an ottoman, I found a passage underlined in pencil. It is a passage near the conclusion of the third act—a passage of heart-stirring pathos—a passage which, divested of its impurity, no man could read without a thrill—no maiden without a sigh. The whole page was blotted with fresh tears; and, upon the opposite interleaf, were the following lines written, as I now write them in English; but in a hand so very different from the peculiar and bold characters of my acquaintance, that I had difficulty in recognising it as his own:—

### [TO ONE IN PARADISE]

Thou wast that all to me, love,  
For which my soul did pine—  
A green isle in the sea, love,  
A fountain and a shrine,  
All wreathed round with flowers,  
And all the flowers were mine.

But the dream—it could not last!  
Young Hope! thou did'st arise  
Only to be overcast!



A voice from out the Future cries,  
 "Onward!" while o'er the Past  
 (Dim gulf!) my spirit hovering lies  
 Mute, motionless, aghast!

Like the murmur of the breaking sea  
 To sands on the sea-shore,  
 A voice is whispering unto me,  
 "The day is past"; and never more  
 Shall bloom the thunder-blasted tree,  
 Or the stricken eagle soar!

Alas! for that accursed time  
 They bore thee o'er the billow  
 From me—to titled age and crime,  
 And an unholy pillow—  
 From Love, and from our misty clime  
 Where weeps the silver willow!

And all my hours are trances,  
 And all my nights are dreams  
 Of where thy grey eye glances,  
 And where thy footstep gleams—  
 In the maze of flashing dances,  
 By the slow Italian streams.

That these lines were written in English—a language with which I did not believe their author acquainted—afforded me little matter for surprise. I was too well aware of the variety of his acquirements, as well as the strange pleasure he took in hiding them from the world to be astonished at any similar discovery. But I must confess that the date of the M.S. appeared to me singular. It had been written "London," and afterwards carefully overscored—although not so effectually as to conceal the word from a scrutinizing eye. I repeat that this appeared to me singular—for I well remembered having asked him if he had ever met with, some person—I think, the Marchesa di Mentoni, who resided in England some years before her marriage—if he had, at any time, met with her in London; and his answer led me to understand that he had never visited Great Britain. I must here add that I have more than once heard, but, of course, never gave credit to a report involving so much improbability—that the person of whom I write, was not only by birth, but in education an Englishman.

"There is one painting," said he, turning to me with evident emotion, as I replaced the volume upon the ottoman—"there is still one

painting which you have not seen." And throwing aside a drapery, he discovered a full-length portrait of the Marchesa di Mentoni.

Human art could have done no more in the accurate delineation of her superhuman beauty. The same sylph-like figure which stood before me the preceding night upon the steps of the Ducal Palace, stood before me once again. But in the expression of her countenance, which was beaming all over with smiles, there still lurked that incomprehensible strain of melancholy which is, I do believe, inseparable from the perfection of the beautiful. On a scroll which lay at her feet were these words—"I am waiting but for thee." Her right arm was folded across her bosom, and with the left she pointed downwards to a curiously fashioned vase. One small, fairy foot, alone visible, barely touched the earth; and, scarcely discernible in the brilliant atmosphere which seemed to encircle and enshrine her loveliness, floated a pair of delicately imagined silvery wings. I glanced from the painting to the figure of my friend, and the powerful words of Chapman's *Bussy D'Ambois*, quivered instinctively upon my lips:

*"I am up  
Here like a Roman statue! I will stand  
'Till Death hath made me marble!"*

"Come," he said at length, approaching a table of richly massy silver, upon which were some beautifully dyed and enamelled goblets, together with two large Etruscan vases, filled with what I took to be Vin de Barac, and fashioned in the same extraordinary model as the vase in the foreground of the portrait. "Come," he said, abruptly, "let us drink! It is early—but let us drink. It is indeed early," he continued, as a cherub with a heavy golden hammer made the chamber ring with the first hour after sunrise: "it is *indeed* early—but what matters it? let us drink! Let us pour out, like true Persians, an offering to that solemn sun which the lamps and censers are struggling to overpower." Here, having made me pledge him in a bumper, he swallowed in rapid succession several goblets of the wine.

"To dream," continued he, resuming the tone of his desultory conversation, as he held up to the rich light of a censer one of the magnificent vases—"to dream has been the business of my life, and I have therefore decked out for myself, as you see, a bower of dreams. Here, in the heart of Venice, could I have erected a better? You behold around you, it is true, a medley of architectural embellishments. The chastity of Ionia is offended by antediluvian devices, and the sphynxes of Egypt are stretching upon cloth of gold. Yet the effect is incongruous to the timid alone. Proprieties of place,

especially of time, are the bugbears which terrify mankind from the contemplation of the magnificent. Once I was myself a decorator; but that sublimation of folly has palled upon my soul. All this is now the fitter for my purpose. Like these Arabesque censers, my spirit is writhing in fire, and the whirling delirium of this scene is fashioning me for the wilder visions of that land of real dreams whither I am rapidly departing." He here paused abruptly, bent his head to his bosom, and seemed to listen to a sound which I could not hear. At length, erecting his frame, he looked upwards, and ejaculated the lines of the Bishop of Chichester:

*"Stay for me there! I will not fail  
To meet thee in that hollow vale."*

Thus saying, he confessed the power of the wine, and threw himself at full-length upon a *chaise-longue*.

A quick step was now heard upon the staircase, and a loud knock at the door rapidly succeeded. I hurried to anticipate a second disturbance, when a page of the Marchesa di Mentoni burst into the room, and, in a voice choking with emotion, faltered out the incoherent words, "My mistress!—Bianca!—poison! horrible! horrible!"

Bewildered, I flew to the ottoman, and endeavored to arouse the sleeper to a sense of startling intelligence. But his lips were livid—his form was rigid—his beautiful eyes were riveted in death. I staggered back towards the table—my hand fell upon a cracked and blackened goblet—and a consciousness of the entire and terrible truth flashed suddenly over my soul.

[January, 1834]