

# Ombra

By Mrs. Richard S. Greenough

The time had come when it behooved me to leave my home. The pleasant days of childhood lay behind me; I must leave the broad lands and stately castle wherein they had been passed: henceforth my thought must be how to quit me of my *devoir* as a knight, to succor the oppressed, bring comfort to the afflicted, and to die, if need be, in the giant strife of Right against Might. My father gave me, kneeling before him, his blessing; and, though his stately and self-contained demeanor betrayed no emotion, yet I saw his chest heave, and a cloud dim the piercing eyes that still looked forth, falcon keen, from beneath their heavy white eyebrows. My step-mother, fair and fawning, sitting beside him, smiled, and bade me make sure I should be remembered in her daily prayers to the Virgin. And so I left my home.

After leaving the castle, I rode on for some days without meeting any thing worthy of note. The sky was clear, the way was pleasant, and my hopes were high. But, on the seventh afternoon, the sun, which had risen that morning lowering and angry, hid itself behind heavy and ominous clouds; the wind moaned and sobbed in the distance. I saw the birds precipitately seeking shelter, some of them flying in circles high in the air, as if bewildered, and uttering discordant screams; while others were darting close to the ground, their disturbed and hurried flight proclaiming their fears.

I hooked around for refuge, but found none. Not a castle nor tower was in sight. The wind rose higher; its wail was changing into a sullen whisper, prophetic of the coming outburst of its wrath. The clouds had gathered each moment deeper, till now they covered the sky with a uniform sheet of leaden gray, varied here and there with white and ragged ledges, from within which glamed at intervals a phosphorescent light.

I saw at a distance, on a hill-side, what looked like a deserted quarry. Thither I decided to betake myself, in the cheerless hope of finding some cranny wherein I might hide me from the approaching storm. But, ere I had accomplished half the distance, the tempest burst upon me in all its fury. The rain descended in torrents, obscuring my sight of all save the objects nearest me; the lightning glared from every quarter of the heavens at once, and the thunder crashed over my head; while the howling and shrieking of the blast completed the horror of the scene.

I battled on against the storm for some time as best I could; but, as I approached the quarry, I became completely bewildered, and was about relinquishing all hope of finding protection, when a sudden flash of lightning revealed at a little distance a ruinous-looking hut, built against the steep side of the hill. I hastened towards it with all the speed of which my terrified horse was capable; and, springing to the ground, I knocked loudly at the door, which, as well as the window, seemed strongly secured. After a short pause the window-shutter was cautiously opened, and an old woman with a most villanous face peered stealthily out at me. She returned no reply to my urgent request for entrance, but studied my appearance carefully, her eye resting for an unreasonable length of time, as it seemed to me, on the jewelled fastening of my plume. At length she retired from the window; I heard voices within; then the door was opened, but not by her. A girl of about sixteen, of singular beauty, though most sullen expression, appeared on the threshold, and bade me enter while she provided for my steed. I answered her discourteous address gently, and expressed the desire to myself see to the accommodation of the horse. She

turned without speaking; and, following her as she led the way around the foot of a projecting cliff, I found myself in face of the quarry I had been seeking.

She pointed out to me a narrow crevice, which, entering to a considerable depth, would afford protection to my horse against the descending flood. As she stood close to the animal's head, a new flash, of such vividness as to almost blind me, burst from the sky; and the horse, making an abrupt movement of affright, struck the steel barb of his frontlet upon her arm. As I saw the blood start forth, I tore off my dripping scarf and bound it around the injured limb.

The girl stood sullenly mute, not answering a word to my expressions of regret; but, as I released her arm, she raised her eyes and gave me a sudden look,—a look which I did not then comprehend, but whose meaning was soon disclosed to me.

She reconducted me to the hut, the old woman carefully rebarring the door behind me. While the girl employed herself in kindling a fire, I looked around me to examine, as well as the dim twilight which made its way through the crevices of the door and window allowed, what place I had chanced upon.

It seemed but a common peasant's hut, the furniture consisting only of a pallet bed, a large wooden table, and some stools: a large pile of straw was heaped in one corner. I saw nothing to disquiet me; and yet I found, after the first feeling of relief at being sheltered from the storm raging without, a vague sense of insecurity stealing over me. I looked at the old woman, who, seated on a low stool, her hands clasped around her knees, had not ceased to contemplate me since I entered; and from her my eyes turned to the lithe and rounded figure of the girl, and I smiled at myself for my causeless and irrational disquietude: nevertheless, reason with it as I would, it incessantly returned upon me, till I flushed with anger at my own folly, yet yielded to the feeling so far as to retain my armor entire.

The girl, meantime, had prepared for me a most savory meal, such as I had little anticipated from the appearance of the hut. She warmed some rich broth, which she set before me, and produced from a covered shelf the remains of a venison pasty, a half loaf of white bread, and a flask of wine. Then she stood leaning against the wall, her head sunk on her breast, her eyebrows drawn low over her eyes.

I thanked her for her courtesy, and begged of her to seat herself and eat with me. With an abrupt gesture she refused. Nevertheless, she seemed to change her mind; for a few moments later she approached the table as if to alter the disposition of the viands before me; and, standing so as to hide what she did from the old woman, she broke a crumb of bread from the morsel I was eating, and carried it to her mouth. It seemed to me that in a dream I had seen that same motion before.

“Has the young lord good wine? the right wine?” asked the old woman, bending forward and peering at the flask beside me.

“Not yet,” replied the girl; “I keep that for the last.”

And as she spoke she filled my glass anew with wine; then, producing a second flask, she filled another glass, while the old woman watched her covertly.

“This is a better wine,” said the girl, addressing me for the first time since I entered; but, as she spoke, she interposed her figure between the table and the old woman, and adroitly substituted the first glass for the second, which she bore away and deposited upon the shelf.

“A better wine,” repeated the old woman, rubbing her hands together with a low, chuckling laugh.

I drained the glass, then, lowering my visor, threw myself down upon the pallet bed which the girl had been shaking up for me.

“Feign sleep, whatever happens,” she muttered below her breath as she passed near me, bearing away the fragments left from my supper.

I closed my eyes, and lay in no enviable frame of mind. All the strange and sinister tales that I had heard in my childhood returned upon my mind, blending with the wailing of the wind, and slow, continuous falling of the rain without,—for, although the fury of the storm had passed, the elements had not yet sunk to rest,—and with the light step of the girl within as she moved backwards and forwards.

At length I heard the voice of the old woman.

“Go kindle the fire in yonder,” she said. “It is high time, and now there is no danger. It will be long ere he wakes again,” and she laughed. “My fingers itch to handle those rubies. What ailed him to go to sleep in his helmet?” she grumbled querulously. “But I shall not need to wait long.”

As she ended, I heard a rustling, and, looking from between my lids, I saw the girl remove the pile of straw which lay in the corner; and behind it I beheld a large, low aperture in the wall. She stooped and disappeared through it. After a while I saw light shine forth. A long time elapsed; finally the girl returned. As she reappeared, the old woman addressed her.

“Pepita, I am thirsty. Give me the glass of wine you took from the stranger. It will turn sour if it remain there open.”

The girl moved slowly and hesitatingly towards the covered shelf. She took down the glass, but stumbled as she carried it towards the old woman, and the wine was spilt upon the ground.

“A thousand curses on you!” exclaimed the old witch. “Such good wine! such excellent wine! and all gone to waste.”

And she berated the girl angrily; but the girl made no reply.

Whilst she was still scolding, I heard the approaching sound of many feet. The girl rapidly untwisted the scarf from her arm and threw it into a corner; then, again passing near me, she muttered,—

“Feign sleep.”

The door was hastily opened in reply to three sharp raps; and, looking as before between my half-closed lids, I saw a band of pilgrims, in brown robes and broad hats with scallop shells, enter. There were twelve of them: one had the swarthy complexion and lustreless black hair of a Moor.

The party suddenly hushed their voices as they came in, and one of them whispered,—

“What’s this, flesh or fowl?”

“You need not whisper,” said the old woman.

“He has had the stirrup cup. He has started on a long journey. He will meet a numerous company. Ha, ha!”

“Perhaps, if he hurries,” rejoined one of the pilgrims, “he may catch up with the Caballero we despatched to find his forefathers this afternoon. But stay, he seems a dainty youth, judging from his array,—he will scarce relish the travel in company with that vinegar-faced gentlewoman who gave her last scream at the same time.”

And the pilgrims laughed in hideous chorus. Then they approached and stood around me as I lay shrouded in my armor.

“Stay, Bernardino,” said one of the burliest of the band, “that armor will serve your turn well. Yours is not so well jointed as it might be. I thought you were done for last week, when that squire’s blade so nearly pinked you under the corselet.”

“Yes,” answered a younger voice, “I shall fit into it like the meat of an egg into its shell. Let’s have it off now, and throw him down at once.”

At this an almost irrepressible impulse rushed over me to spring to my feet and sell my life as dearly as possible; but, as he ended, the girl came forward, and lifted her sullen eyes to his.

“I won’t have any more thrown down until they don’t know what’s done with them. I had bad dreams for a week after the last one. I kept hearing his shriek when he sank under the water. Wait till after supper: that will be time enough.”

The younger pilgrim seemed inclined to dispute; but the rest interfered, and, saying it was of no consequence whether it were done an hour sooner or later, demanded clamorously their supper forthwith; and one by one they passed through the aperture, followed by the old woman, and left me alone.

When thus freed from observation, I turned on my side, and, approaching my eyes to the loosely constructed wall of stone, looked through a crevice that was near me.

I saw a spacious cavern dimly lighted by the blaze of an enormous fire, the smoke of which rose in circling clouds and hung in a thick mass above. Near the fire was a long oaken table, and round it sat the pilgrims. They had thrown aside their robes and hats, and I saw that they were all cased in steel and armed to the teeth. The table was covered with silver, and to my horror I recognized the hallowed dishes and chalices wherein the Holy Sacrament is administered to man.

The girl and the old woman rapidly set before the band the smoking viands, and served them with wine; while the robbers jeered and jested at them, and in coarse and brutal wise bade them hurry.

Then the revel began. Loud and long were their songs; furious was their mirth; too horrible to remember, the deeds they recounted and gloried in. Occasionally a quarrel would burst out between some two or three of them; but to this the others paid no heed, taking it, as it would seem, as a matter of course. Looking again through the crevice, I saw the girl pour out wine to the Moor. He caught her by the wrist.

“Nay, Judas!” shouted the rest of the band, no scruples. Don’t bring your old tricks here. Down with the forbidden drink!”

And with hoots and yells they all rose and precipitated themselves upon the Moor, to force him to drink the wine.

Profiting by the universal clamor and confusion, the girl glided rapidly into the outer hut where I lay. She returned without a word; and I saw, as I peered through the crevice, that she bore back a flask of wine, which she placed in a corner without any one’s seeming to notice her.

At last, their object effected, the tumult was appeased, and the robbers resumed their seats around the table. The girl threw on the fire a fresh armful of brushwood, which, instantly kindling, flamed upward, sending out a shower of sparks. Its light was reflected by the gleaming armor and burnished silver, and played on the desperate and savage faces of the company, distorted by their brawl and reddened by their copious draughts of wine.

“Come, Pepita,” said the oldest of the band, “fill us once more our cups. The master will soon be here, and we must finish betimes.”

At this the girl drew forth the flask from the corner and rapidly filled the chalice beside each robber; then, holding high the consecrated vases, they shouted forth a ribald and impious song. At its close each drained his cup.

But no sooner had they swallowed the wine than they began to mutter incoherently; their heads fell from side to side; they seemed overwhelmed by sudden stupor. Some of them slipped down from their seats and lay along the ground; others sank heavily forward on the dishes that covered the table. The girl stood steadily watching them. I saw by the light of the blaze that her face had turned quite white.

The old woman meantime had stolen into a corner, and was there draining what remained in the flask. But, as she still held it to her lips, I saw her head fall, and she sank back.

In the sudden silence which had succeeded to the wild uproar within, I beheld the girl bend forward and raise her hand to her ear as if to catch a distant sound. I, too, listened, and heard the faint echo of a horse's hoofs. She caught up a small lamp. In an instant she was at my side.

"Up, up!" she said. "Now it all rests with you."

I started to my feet and grasped my sword. The girl unbarred the door.

The sounds came rapidly nearer. I heard the rattling of armor without; a rider springing from his horse; the door was thrown open, and a form of gigantic height entered, clothed in complete panoply of steel.

"Hell-cat!" he shouted, as he crossed the threshold, turning to the girl; and, quick as lightning, he hurled his dagger at her; then, without a moment's pause, he rushed upon me.

The fight was an unequal one. Though perhaps his match in skill, his great height gave him the superiority over me. He constantly overreached my guard; and had not my armor been of proved Milan steel, his sword would have pierced it more than once. At length, pressing me harder and harder, he bore me to my knee, and, shortening his sword, was about to deal what would have been a fatal blow, when, glancing upward, I saw a descending gleam of light; and, with a dying yell, my enemy fell, face forward, a dagger plunged deep in his neck.

The girl stood over him, her hair streaming back, her eyes blazing.

She spurned him with her foot.

"At length, hound!—at length!" she said.

She turned to me.

"Hence!"

And she moved towards the door. I followed her, panting, dizzy, mechanically muttering thanks to God.

The storm had ceased, the rising moon lay peacefully over the landscape without. As I stood, the night wind bore to my ear, faint, yet distinct, the sound of a distant bell.

"Yes, there," said the girl. "But wait, old Juanita,—she must not stay."

And she went back into the hut. I accompanied her, as, bearing the little lamp, she passed the bleeding corpse and returned into the cavern.

The fire had almost gone out. A few brands yet glowed amid the ashes, faintly revealing dark, heavy forms stretched motionless around the table.

"Juanita!" she called, but there was no reply. "The old woman drank also," I said, and pointed to the corner where the prostrate figure was lying. She stood and gazed upon it.

"She beat me when I was a child," she said; "but that was long ago."

Then, addressing me,—

"What is done when Christians die?" she asked.

I told her how their bodies were composed for their last sleep, with closed lids and folded hands, and burning tapers at their feet: and she knelt beside the old woman and arranged her as I had said; then, placing the little lamp at her feet, she turned away.

"Yes, there," she repeated. "How often have I listened to those bells!"

She took a brand from the fire to give her light, and went to another side of the cave. Presently she came back, bearing a golden pix.

"It is my entrance gift," she said. "Now hence!"

And we passed out from the cavern with its dead, and forth again into the cool, free air.

Led by her, I proceeded down a rugged way until I arrived at the border of a vast lake. On its opposite side rose the towers and spire of a vast convent, revealed by the soft radiance of the rising moon. We descended to the shore of the lake, and skirted its quiet waters. The girl, bearing the pix, her head sunk on her breast, walked before, without once speaking or looking round. All was still save the plashing of the ripples which broke on the shore beside us.

At length we gained the opposite side, and stood before the convent gate. The girl turned, and raised her eyes to mine.

“Yours is the only voice that has ever spoken to me in kindness, the only hand that has ever been stretched out to do me a good deed. It is for that that you are alive. Now take this. It is the only thing I possess.” And she detached from her neck a small, white carnelian heart fastened to a slender thread of gold. “It is a charm against the evil eye. He threw it to me one night because all the rest were quarrelling for it. With that resting on your heart, you may defy even the eye of Mazitka himself.”

I started at the name of that fell astrologer and necromancer, long since hunted by late-roused justice from the bounds of human habitations. I was about pouring out to the girl my gratitude for all that she had done for me; but, turning from me as abruptly as she had addressed me, she sounded the horn which hung by the gate. Its harsh alarm rang far and wide, disturbing the peaceful echoes amid the surrounding hills.

As the clangor subsided, a voice from the wicket asked our errand. But scarcely was the question uttered than it was followed by a scream of astonishment and joy within.

“The pix! the blessed pix! St. Eloi’s holy pix!”

And then the voice vanished. In a few moments the gate was thrown widely open, and on the threshold appeared the abbess, surrounded by all the nuns, their glad and excited faces crowding the one on the other under the light of the lamp that swung from the archway, their eyes riveted upon the figure of the girl as she stood supporting the golden pix.

The abbess extended her hand in benediction over the head of the girl, and then the nuns advanced and closed around her. They retreated with her in their midst, and I saw her no more.

The abbess remained alone before me.

I told her my title and my story, and expressed my wish to make a rich endowment to the convent in the name of the young girl who, with the Virgin’s aid, had saved me from the peril of a dreadful death. She listened with interest to my tale, and promised that the girl should be gently tended and carefully nurtured in all wisdom and piety. Then she ordered the guest’s chamber, in a small building outside the convent walls, to be prepared for me; and, giving me her blessing, she withdrew.

The next morning, I was roused by the sweet voices of the nuns, floating from the chapel windows, as they sang their matin hymn; and my heart was glad within me as I thought of the homeless one who had found shelter, the lonely one who had found eternal love; and I rose refreshed, and, mounting my horse, I proceeded cheerfully on my way.

I rested at mid-day beside a little brook that ran sparkling down through a shady ravine. I freed my horse’s head from its heavy frontlet, that it might graze at ease; and, throwing myself down on the fresh green sod, spangled with little golden cups and pink-tipped daisies, I gave myself up to pleasurable rest.

As I lay dreamily watching the great white clouds piled in majestic repose upon the deep blue of the sky, I heard faint notes of music stealing softly on the air. I roused myself and looked around. Not a human being was in sight; not a trace of human habitation was visible.

“It is some shepherd’s pipe,” I said. “He gladdens his solitude with these sweet sounds.” And again I lay down and listened. The notes poured low but clear upon the air. They seemed, as I hearkened, to take a beseeching tone. I moved restlessly; my horse stopped grazing, and, his ears bent forward, stood looking intently towards the quarter whence the sounds proceeded. More and more urgent grew the inarticulate tones. Half involuntarily I rose to my feet, and my horse at the same moment moved gently forward. I hastily adjusted his caparisons, and sprang into the saddle. As I did so, the sounds grew sweeter. There was a crystalline joy in them, a happy murmur, as of singing brooks and cooing birds; yet the tones were not those of brooks or birds,—they were human. Whence did they come?

I travelled in their direction all day, and yet they grew no nearer: a rippling stream of delight they passed my ear; hour after hour I pressed on, yet seemed no closer to their source.

The sun went down in purple glory over a swelling horizon of distant hill-tops. The evening star shone clear where the rosy tints of the sky melted into softest blue; yet still the enchanting murmur of the song caressed my ear, and still my steed pressed on to meet the gathering shadows of the coming night. Up the rounded hill-sides, down the grassy valleys, we passed, obedient to the call. The scenery grew wilder as we advanced; the moon, newly risen, showed us the beds of mountain torrents and the sides of barren steeps; yet still we journeyed on. At last, as we passed out from a rugged defile into a plain, the song ceased.

Before me lay the ruins of a city, covering the plain with their irregular masses and broken shadows. High in the centre rose a steep rock crowned with a tower, from whose topmost window streamed a ruddy ray of light.

Much wondering I advanced, threading my way among the ruins, until I reached the foot of the rock. Here I left my horse,—for the path was too precipitous to allow of his ascent,—and began to climb the broken and uneven steps which led upward to the tower. There was something most strange and desolate in the scene about me as I stopped from time to time to contemplate it. The moonlight streamed over the ruined walls, and drew their outlines on the grass beneath. Yawning vaults here and there opened their pitfalls, and broken columns showed where once luxurious homes had been reared. All around the valley was a continuous wall of steep hills, the defiles between them so narrow that one man might guard each against an army.

I marvelled as I beheld the desolation that had fallen upon the city, once so great and so powerful, as the extent of its ruins showed; but a fresher, stronger interest soon chased these reflections, and again I climbed the precipitous ascent. At length I reached the summit. I found myself at the foot of a round tower built of hewn stone. The only aperture on the lower story consisted of a heavy door. At this I knocked. After a long pause I knocked again more loudly. As I lowered my hand, the door was slowly opened, and I saw before me the stooping figure of a man, bent, as it seemed, with study still more than with years. He held the door half-open, and stood as if he expected me to speak my errand and then be gone. A secret reluctance withheld me from mentioning the sounds which I had followed until they had brought me in sight of his tower; and I merely stated that I was a belated traveller, who requested rest for the night.

The old man shook his head, and without further ceremony was about to close the door upon me, when a light step sprang down the winding staircase behind him, a girlish face appeared above his shoulder, and a caressing voice began to whisper earnestly in the ear which he unwillingly inclined towards it. I thought that I heard again the music by the brook.

At the urgent entreaty, the hard brow of the old man relaxed. He opened wide the heavy door, and bade me enter. The girl came forward to my side, and, without speaking, slid her small hand

into mine, and led me up the stairs. So simply and innocently was it done that no tinge of unmaidenly forwardness seemed mingled with the act.

Issuing from the dark and winding staircase, I found myself in a large, circular room. From the lofty ceiling hung a globe of light which showed the discordant and unaccustomed objects around. Ancient bookcases filled with volumes, some bound in worn and tattered shagreen, others enclosed in cases of gold and crystal; stands of narrow shelves, whereon vials of curious shape and design contained liquids of various tints, some dark and turbid, others in restless effervescence, and still others clear and pellucid,—alternated with divans and cushions of rich brocade. High on the walls, as if crawling upward from the richness below, were fastened dried crocodiles and hideous serpents; at intervals dangled enormous eggs, irregularly marked as if with written characters unsteadily traced; musical instruments were strewn here and there, and a cage of brilliant enamel contained a white dove with a rosy crest. But, in ghastly contrast to these indications of girlish occupancy, upon a high pedestal in the centre of the room stood a yellow skeleton, its eyeless glare and fleshless grin mocking as it were the luxury around.

On a table near the window was placed a telescope, and beside it were maps and charts covered with figures and signs.

All this my eye took in at a glance; then it turned and rested upon the old man and the girl: it rested, and was riveted.

The old man had returned to the occupation which my summons had apparently interrupted, and, seated behind the telescope, was already absorbed in study of the stars. His robe and cap of black velvet were bordered with purple fur, such as I had never before seen, and his drapery was held about him by a broad belt of some curious, semi-transparent material, in texture like very thin leather.

His profile was turned towards me, and I could study it without danger of the discourtesy of attracting his attention. His forehead was high and narrow, furrowed with lines that ran transversely towards the centre. His eyes and eyebrows, cat-like, followed the same line, which gave a look of singular cunning and perfidy to his face. His nose was long and aquiline; and the nostrils, though thin, curved widely outward at the base, as though perpetually distended by evil intention. His mouth was small and meagre, its outlines hard and unyielding. The lips closed but partially, showing rat-like teeth within. But something which is quite indescribable was the expression which animated those features. A look so diabolical, of such suppressed yet exultant wickedness, played over them, fusing their lines as with a glow of hell, that I felt my very soul shrink aghast from the contemplation; and I half resolved to leave the tower at once, and trust myself to the hospitality of the open air and the crumbling ruins without. But, as I turned my look upon the maiden, my resolve flickered like the flame of a candle in a sudden breeze, and died out. I had never seen, even in dreams, any thing so marvellous as her beauty, set off as it was by her strange and costly dress.

Her features and figure were of exquisite symmetry; her hair fell in golden waves down to her very feet; her eyes were of deep, transparent blue, soft and pure as a summer lake when not a cloud dims the sky. She was arrayed in some light, fleecy material, as if froth of the sea had been woven and bordered with crimson and gold; and her feet were shod with jewelled sandals, leaving their delicate surfaces bare. Over her whole appearance rested as it were a mist. I looked at her half-blinded, as though I beheld her through the shining spray of a waterfall. Her outlines seemed shifting and unsteady; the only things permanent about her were her deep, soft eyes and the glory of her hair.

She smiled as I looked upon her, and, drawing me to a seat, she unlaced my helmet and bore it away. I could no more resist her than I could have resisted a little child. Then, bringing a small casket, she drew forth some delicious perfume, which she poured upon my hair and my feet. As I inhaled the fragrance, a sense of repose and strength, a quick gayety, ran through me. I felt my color rise and my eyes sparkle.

“Yes, it is so,” she said, nodding gently her head. “Now you are no longer tired, you need neither food nor rest. You never inhaled that odor before. It pleases you well.”

And, so saying, she drew forward a cushion and seated herself before me, gazing at me with an expression of gentle gladness. She sat some time silent, examining my face with a look of innocent curiosity. At length, “I am glad you have it,” she said; and, sinking her voice, she added, “Always keep it, close on your heart.”

I gazed at her in amazed wonder. How did this maiden know what had chanced?

“Surely,” she answered to my thought, “I know it all.”

“How?” I still internally queried.

She replied, “That is very simple. I see when I look; I hear when I listen.”

As I gazed at her lovely, shifting face, with its still, sweet eyes, my attention was drawn by a motion in the skeleton behind her. It turned half round on its pedestal, raised its bony hand, and pointed towards a closed window.

“Look there,” I said, my eyes fixed upon the fleshless form.

She did not move her head, but replied, “Some one is coming.”

Then, rising, she approached the old man. “My father, the slave warns you,” she said.

“Who is it?” replied the astrologer, without removing his eye from the telescope.

Looking at her, I then saw a singular change take place in her appearance. All the color died out of her face and figure. She stood thus an instant; then she raised her lids, and the vapory tints returned.

“Rise to meet her,” she said. “It is a noble lady from afar.”

Unwillingly the old man quitted his telescope, and drew his robe more closely about him, as he prepared to descend.

“Stay, Ombra,” he said, turning as he reached the door. “You must not remain here with this brave gallant.” And a sneer writhed his wrinkled features as his eye rested for an instant upon me. “When I return, you must be hence.”

As he withdrew, Ombra silently unclosed the barred window, through which the skeleton had pointed, and signed to me to follow. She led me up a flight of steps cut in the exterior wall, to the flat roof of the tower. The moonlight fell, still and mournful, on the ruins, drawing a silver veil of beauty over their decay. Ombra stood beside me, her crossed hands hanging before her, her radiant eyes upturned towards the stars. As I gazed upon her wonderful, unreal beauty, a thought, a question, arose in my mind. She answered it gently.

“Yes, it was I that called you.”

“Wherefore?” I asked.

“The stars bade me,” she replied, still gazing at them.

“But the stars are silent,” I said.

“Nay, their voices fill all space. Do you not hear them?”

And she raised her hand in the attitude of one listening.

“What say they to you, O maiden?” I said in a hushed tone, for I perceived that she heard them.

“Their song may not be framed into mortal speech,” she replied. “They tell of the mysteries that were before the world began, that are, and that ever shall be. Each in its measure, in its

appointed place, lifts up its voice and sings of the glory of God, of the marvels of those secret laws by which Beauty is spread through the breadth of Creation, and by which Love fills the loneliness of Space.”

She ceased and stood as before, her eyes fixed on the depths of the sky. I gazed on her and wondered.

“Who, what are you, beautiful one?” I questioned.

“I am Ombra,” she answered.

“Your kindred,—where are they?”

“The clouds of the morning, the spray of the waterfall, the dewdrops on the grass, the ripples that sparkle on the sea,—they are my kindred.”

“Wherefore dwell you not with them?”

“Because he loves me.”

“Is there none else for him to love?”

“None else would dare to love him.”

“Wherefore?”

A look of ineffable pity crossed her lovely, shifting face. She turned towards me and said, slowly,—

“*It is Mazitka.*”

At the echo of the dreaded name of that arch enemy of humankind, a chill of horror invaded my every sense. I closed my eyes for an instant. I felt the strength forsaking my members, as if the deadly spell of his eye had been already cast over me. A movement of indignation mingled with and chased my terror as I remembered the witching strain by which I had been enticed to the vicinity of that hoary demon. I turned to my lovely companion with words of reproach upon my lips; but I saw nothing save a form of mist by my side. As I watched, the color returned. She met my indignant look with a gaze of pitying tenderness.

“Listen,” she said. “Beside Mazitka sits a woman, tall and fair. Her hair is red and waved, her eyes are black and small, her nose is high and arched, her lips are thin and, ruddy. On her right cheek is a crimson mole. Know ye her?”

I felt my flesh creep anew. What horrible mystery lay before me?

“It is my step-mother,” I said. “Wherefore comes she hither?”

“It was for this the kindly stars called you,” she replied.

And, as she spoke, again her life faded from my sight, and again the mist-like figure stood by me in the silence of the moonlight, and the desolation of ruin around.

Tossed and bewildered as was my mind by the unexpected and sinister events which had befallen me, there was yet one conviction which rose clear and strong upon me,—belief in Ombra, in her will and power to protect and save me. But one dearer than myself,—had she power to protect and save him also, that noble and honored father, too lofty to think suspicion, too loyal to dream distrust? As I stood, the past rose menacing before my memory. I recalled the majestic presence of my father, his lonely life as he mourned for the young wife who had died in bringing me into the world; the hush of the melancholy palace in which my early years had been spent, and on which the sun never seemed to shine. Again I saw the figure of my father’s ward, left orphan and penniless by the death of her only parent, accompanied by her duenna, come gliding by my father’s side up the broad staircase of his palace, the sunbeams that stole timidly through the heavy windows reflected from her snowy neck and seeking a prison in the dusky glow of her curling auburn hair. Again I saw her cat-like tread as she passed through the stately rooms, the wily grace with which, as she reached the suite prepared for her, she thanked him for

his hospitality, and raised his spare, strong hand to her soft, red lips. And I recalled the look of furious, smothered hate which she cast on me a little later, when she heard me say to my father that Donna Pasquita was not half so beautiful as the picture of my mother, hanging in the great saloon.

Ombra's voice broke the chain of my troubled memories. Turning her face towards the east, again she breathed forth the sweet notes with their persuasive, irresistible charm. Soon a low, rushing sound came from the distance. I saw the trees on the hill-tops which lay to the eastward, bending and swaying. Then I felt the sweep of the wind upon me. It circled around the tower; and it brought to my ear, sharp and distinct, the voices of the speakers within.

"And therefore, fearing this, I would rid myself of him," said my step-mother's voice.

"You have reason," replied Mazitka.

"Butt no common means will serve me; else I had not travelled so far to seek you," continued my step-mother. "His leech is a crafty and silent man. He doubts me. No drug which may leave any trace must be employed. It must seem some natural disease."

"And the more sudden, the better," rejoined Mazitka.

"The more sudden, the better," repeated my step-mother. And there was silence.

Although as yet no word had revealed it, I felt assured it was my father's death that they were conspiring. I clutched my dagger, and was about to rush in upon them, when Ombra's hand was laid upon mine, and she whispered,—

"Not so. No earthly weapon can harm Mazitka."

"But the woman!" I replied.

"Her hour is not yet come," my companion returned.

Nevertheless, I would have disobeyed her injunction, such was the passion of rage and indignation that possessed me, and the next moment would have seen my dagger deep in the breast of my father's wife, had not Ombra lifted her hand. Immediately I felt myself pinioned by an invisible force that pressed upon me from every side. I could move neither hand nor foot.

"Listen," she said again.

And again I hearkened to the air-borne words.

"A swift paralysis, benumbing brain and members, that shall leave no time for question or misgiving, that shall smite him down even in the midst of his friends, and send him in funeral pomp to join his forefathers."

"It is that, Mazitka: give me that!" she eagerly exclaimed.

"Yes, these are precious drops," he said slowly, after a pause. "Wiser than doctors of law, of physic, and of divinity, they cure all ills alike. The needy heir forgets his stolen birthright; the fevered soldier pines no longer for the sound of the trumpet and the turmoil of the affray; the cowering wretch shrinks no more from the black gulf of the hereafter. In this one pellucid drop there lies the cure for all."

"And it is this!" she said, in a lower tone. "And there is no antidote to be feared, no remedy which may call back life?" she questioned jealously.

"Fear not," he answered. "The drops are distilled from honey. Speedier, deadlier are they than the powder of Trophonius, or the cordial of Lianté; nay, subtler even than the essential vapor of Coryatra. For these left traces recognizable by a practised eye,—black spots, or sudden convulsions, or foaming frenzies. But this silent servant works faithfully and discreetly. No grim contortion stiffens the falling corpse; no discourteous blotches betray the secret of the forced obstruction of the vital currents; no telltale drops moisten the forehead of him who is no longer needed. They all die stricken with paralysis,—all,—and they are many."

“And there is no antidote?” she questioned anxiously again.

“None that can avail.”

“But I must be safe. I will not tempt fate. I will have no resurrection to destroy me.”

“Dread nothing, O courageous lady!” he sneered. “The secret of the antidote is in the keeping of Malaloul. I know it not myself. Fear not that any will go to question her where she sits amid the dead. Now for my counsel. Give it not in secrecy. Spies may dog you; servants may betray you; the leech may come upon you when you are least aware. The only safety is in open hall, ‘mid feasting and music and joyful converse. There the light-footed Death can with one fingertip summon its partner; and all shall see him depart of his own free will and pleasure, regardless of the lamentations of his inconsolable spouse.” And the air shuddered with his mocking laugh.

“On the eighth day there is a great festival to celebrate the birthday of my son,” she returned. “Search in the horoscope, Mazitka. See if the stars promise favorably for that day.”

For a while I heard nothing; then the wind brought to me anew the sound of Mazitka’s voice.

“The influences are balanced. All depends on your own firm will and steady brow.”

“Then farewell, O Duke Alonso de Guatamarra!” she slowly replied.

It was my father’s name!

I listened in vain for more. No further word came to my straining ear.

Presently I saw a veiled figure issue from the shadow of the tower. A man came forth from one of the ruins holding a mule, upon which the woman mounted; and they disappeared in one of the ruined streets which led towards the south.

I looked up to the heavens, half expecting that some sudden bolt of vengeance would fall upon this monster in woman’s form; but the stars gazed silently down, registering all in their mysterious archives, but giving no sign.

“Now depart,” said Ombra, her deep-blue eyes shining upon me from her lovely, shifting face. “Seek Malaloul. The way lies before you on the west. Pass between the two hills which rise like a cleft cone on the left. Beyond them you will see a mountain, its summit covered with snow. Skirt its base until you come to a cliff on whose brink stands a withered pine-tree. Follow the direction in which it points. You will see a mosque. Enter, and stand in the centre. You will find Malaloul. Say to her, ‘Mazitka is at work.’ It will be enough.”

As she spoke, the astrologer’s voice was heard from within calling upon her. As I caught the tone, I wondered mentally why God permitted such an incarnation of fiendish malignity to profane the face of his fair earth.

“He is not all evil,” Ombra whispered; “he loves me.”

She entered the tower. I followed her. The astrologer smiled as she approached and stood beside him. He cast his arm around her, and drew her nearer. The contact of that fair purity seemed sweet to the mighty wizard.

“My father, the guest must depart,” said Ombra.

“What! are you wearied of him already?” queried Mazitka, glancing at me askance.

“He must depart,” repeated Ombra. “He waits to say farewell.”

Mazitka rose, and turned so as to face me. As his eye fell upon me, the expression of his face abruptly changed. He launched at me a glance which seemed to pierce my very brain; then, with a sudden movement, he leaned forward and caught up my right hand. As he fastened his eye upon the lines of the palm, he uttered a low laugh; then, dropping it, he removed the fur cap from his head, and bowed his tall figure with a gesture of humility which contrasted strangely with the sneering glance that accompanied it.

“Had I known, O puissant young brd, whom it was that I had the honor to receive in my poor dwelling, I should have offered you a different entertainment. But since you must needs depart, I wish you good speed on the long journey that lies before you.”

As I stood, my glance riveted upon him, I saw a singular change take place. His right eye grew lustreless and dim; its eyelid drooped; while, at the same instant, the left eye suddenly expanded and sent forth a blinding bolt. It struck full upon me. My heart seemed to stop. A sensation of deadly coldness spread through my every vein. I felt my vital forces failing. But immediately I perceived a current of warmth proceed from the little carnelian heart that rested upon my breast. It flowed, cheering and invigorating, throughout my frame, chasing the cold damps that had begun to settle upon my forehead, and sending ruddy life to every pore. I breathed again.

Ombra, standing beside the astrologer, smiled upon me, and with her transparent hand motioned me farewell. I gazed one instant upon her sweet face, with its radiant eyes and changeful outlines framed in the shining gold of her long hair, and then I turned away.

I descended the steep and broken steps, and, mounting my horse, proceeded through the desolate, grass-grown streets, with their long series of ruined colonnades, their sculptured façades and fallen gateways, until, leaving the silent city, I passed through the cloven cone of the western hills.

Beyond, glittering in the moonlight, rose the solitary, snow-crowned mountain. I gained its foot, and, skirting its base, I came at length to the broken cliff on whose topmost verge stood the withered pine-tree. Black and riven it towered aloft, and stretched forth a giant arm, pointing across the desert plain. Turning, I obeyed its mute command.

The sandy waste stretched before me as far as my eye could reach. I dismounted and proceeded, leading my horse, which sank above the fetlock in the fine, glittering sand at every step. For several hours we thus toiled on with difficulty. Finally I descried a distant dome before me. With renewed courage I cheered my weary steed, and pressed onward.

As I came nearer, I perceived a Moorish mosque. At a little distance was a graveyard, the sculptured turbans on its tombstones shining brightly in the moonlight. Contrary to the usual Moslem custom, there were no solemn cypresses nor fragrant rose-trees around. Neglect had probably destroyed them long ago.

I ascended the steps, and entered the circular hall within. The delicate arabesques and mouldings of sculptured stone were fresh as if they had just left the cutter's chisel; yet all breathed an air of deep antiquity, of changeless repose. The echo of my own steel-clad footsteps startled me as they resounded from the moonlit vault above. They seemed a profanation of the weird slumber of Time.

In the centre of the hall lay a large, black marble slab. I advanced and stood upon the stone. It instantly began to sink. I grasped my cross-hilted sword tightly upon my breast, and glanced around. I was sinking into utter darkness. I could see nothing save the fast-receding moonlight above me.

The stone was at length arrested in its descent. I reached out my hands, and groped in the surrounding obscurity. A narrow passage was before me. I moved onward until I reached its extremity. Facing me was what seemed a solid wall of stone. I passed my hand over its surface. As far as I could judge, it was formed of one enormous block. Exerting all my strength, I pushed violently against its opposing mass. It yielded, and, slowly revolving upon some hidden pivot, revealed the entrance to a chamber within.

The sight before me was not of a reassuring character. I found myself in a low but spacious crypt, dimly lighted by a lamp of bronze which hung from the arched ceiling. In niches around

were placed stone coffins. At the upper end of the vault stood a dark sarcophagus. What looked like a heap of loosely piled drapery lay beside it on the ground. I looked around in vain for the sorceress. No human being was to be seen. I called upon her name. There was no answer. Again I called. Nothing but silence replied.

My look unconsciously rested upon the loosely piled heap of drapery, as I stood pondering what was to be my next step. Suddenly I started violently. Two eyes were gazing fixedly at me from out the shapeless mass. As I remained staring upon them like one fascinated, a harsh voice came through the heavy stillness, saying,—

“Wherefore come ye to disturb me, watching beside my dead?”

The words that Ombra had dictated rose responsive to my lips.

“Mazitka is at work,” I replied.

A long, fierce cry broke from the sorceress’s lips, and rang circling through the crypt. Each close-sealed coffin seemed to find a voice to echo back that wrathful shriek. She sprang to her feet. Foam flew from her quivering lips; her eyes darted forth flashes of vengeful light. She shook with the passion of her rage, as a pine-tree trembles in the fury of the storm.

“Ye do well to seek me,” she said, when at last her passion began to calm itself. “Now tell me wherein I may defeat his projects, and bring his hated name to shame and scorn.”

I briefly recounted to her all. When I had finished, she turned toward the sarcophagus.

“Hearest thou, my father?” she said. “Now shall the faithless fox, the poisonous adder, who crept into thy life, be confounded. Again will I foil him. Again shall thy dead lips smile.”

She turned to me.

“Come hither,” she said. “Stand where you can see your image reflected in the polished stone. Whatever you may behold, move not, speak not, until the charm be completed.”

With that, she placed me so that, reflected on the polished side of the sarcophagus, I saw my own steel-clad figure, illumined by the lamp which hung above.

Malaloul raised her hands above her head, and began to speak rapidly words that I knew not. As she spoke, I beheld my image gradually fading from the mirror. It dimmed before my sight until it had totally vanished. Then she ceased the unknown speech, and said to me,—

“Look on your left hand, but speak not yet.”

I looked, and saw myself. Every line of my features, every contour of my limbs, every dint on my armor, every glittering link of mail, all were there. It was my very self. But the eyes were lustreless, and no breath heaved the shirt of mail.

“Stretch out your arm,” she said. And, baring my wrist, she punctured a small vein. As the blood sprang forth, she caught it and sprinkled it upon the form.

“Life, give life,” she said. And light came to the visionless eyes, and the still lips parted with the living breath.

I stood amazed at what this might portend, but found no words for speech.

Malaloul approached me, and put a little crystal box into my hand.

“Hark to my words,” she said. “Journey to the southern border of the plain. This spectre will accompany you. Follow the little river that you will find there, for two days, southward. On the second day you will see, stretched dead beside the water’s brink, a monk. Take off his robe, and clothe yourself in it. Then let the spectre mount your horse and precede you. Follow and watch.”

“But my father?” I questioned.

“Fear not for any whom Malaloul protects,” she answered. “This little box contains a vapor. Let him but inhale it, and the deadly poison wrought from honey shall prove as harmless as water from summer brooks. Life shall return to your father, though he were three times dead; for this

that I give to you is the spirit of that precious fluid for the possession of which kings have offered their diadems, and sages through long centuries have toiled in darkness and stillness in vain.”

I would have thanked the sorceress, but she imposed silence upon me with a gesture of her hand.

“Thus much do I,” she said; “and now, in my turn, I lay a charge upon you. The days of Mazitka are shrunken to a span. He is about to sever the golden cord whereon his life has hung. Long have I waited, sitting beside my dead. Long have I studied the star-woven web of fate. I have questioned the serpent of Vishnu, coiled deep in the fiery waters under the middle earth; I have asked of the tortoise of Odin, in the ice-ribbed caverns beneath the midnight pole; and the unwearying elephant of Simathin, beneath his everlasting burden, has listened to my voice, and spoken the words of wisdom to my ear. The time draws near. That love which has protected and saved him hitherto is dying out. Soon he will stand defenceless. The hour of vengeance approaches, and then be ye not far off. I give to you the life ye ask of me, and ye will repay. Of days a score and one must pass; then, at the ninth hour, stand at the door of the tower. Open; the charm will no longer close the portal against an unfriendly hand. Ascend the staircase. The slave will give no sign. Wait and watch. See that your sword be sharp, and that your arm be strong.”

And, as she ceased, she again took her place on the ground beside the stone sarcophagus, and resumed her watch beside the dead.

Side by side with the spectre I passed out into the subterranean gallery, and the heavy door closed behind me. I walked on in darkness, but I heard the measured breathing of the spectre and the sound of his mail-clad footsteps ever by my side.

At the extremity of the passage the stone still lay upon the ground. Looking up, I saw the daylight shining like a star far overhead. I took my stand with the spectre upon the slab; and immediately it rose, bearing us upward. We reached the level of the mosque. The stone became motionless beneath our feet, fixed firmly in its place.

As I looked around, my head swam, and my feet refused to support me. The sunlight which streamed through the perforations of the dome seemed blazing into my brain; the many-hued arabesques danced before my sight in wavering circles. Then for a while there was blackness.

When I again unclosed my eyes, they rested on the spectre of myself, standing with its face turned towards the south, steadily gazing forward. Then all that lay before rushed upon me; and I arose, and, descending the solitary steps, mounted my horse, and took my way towards the border of the plain. The spectre walked beside me, its eyes ever fixed upon the south.

Strange though it may appear, this unreal companionship had nothing horrible in it. It seemed my settled purpose, clothed with flesh, and become apparent to my sense. It was my *will* that walked beside me over the burning sands, its unswerving look upon the distant south.

At nightfall we reached the border of the plain, and came upon a little, fast-flowing river. Two days more we proceeded, and at sunset we found the monk lying under a thorn-tree close by the murmuring waters. His hands, still warm, were folded on his breast; the breath had but recently left his frame.

I scooped a grave for him beneath the thorn-tree, and buried him there, after I had drawn from the shoulders which no longer needed its protection the heavy monastic robe.

I clothed myself with it; and, when I had done so, the spectre mounted my horse, and we again journeyed on, the spectre preceding me some twenty stones' cast, silent and steadfast, its face ever turned towards the south.

On the eighth day we entered a deep and gloomy wood, clothing the side of a mountain. The road shrank and became narrow and winding. The sunlight broke but at intervals through the knotted branches above my head; and, as I glanced into the dim recesses on either hand, my eye lost itself in the obscure confusion of black and gray trunks.

I saw by the prints of the horse's hoofs that I was following the spectre of myself; but so dark and so winding was the path that I soon lost sight of both steed and rider.

After some hours of difficult ascent, I suddenly heard a faint cry, as of some animal in distress. At first I paid no heed, but it continued until, moved by compassion, I turned aside to trace it. I found, at a little distance, snared among the bushes, a milk-white kid. It was not struggling. It did not seem frightened, but stood looking about it inquiringly with its large, dark eyes, and at intervals uttering its quavering cry.

I loosed the little creature, which immediately bounded away and vanished amid the woven wilderness of trees. Then I sought to find again the path, but I searched in vain. I wandered till I was weary. At last I saw a broader light, and, making my way towards it, found that I had reached the border of the wood. I stood on a mountain top. Far in the distance lay my native city, beside the silver waters from which it takes its name. I looked eagerly around for the spectre. "Surely it must long ere this have emerged from the wood," I thought.

The road lay level and long before me, descending the mountain side; but no horse or rider was there. As I stood gazing, I saw three armed men of ill-favored aspect issue from the wood, and hurry towards the city. I quickened my pace, and approached them so nearly that I could catch their words. My presentiments had not deceived me. Mazitka had warned my stepmother. These were, in truth, the assassins who had been set to watch for me, to shed my blood almost in sight of my father's house. They were exulting over the rich reward that awaited them, now that their mission was fulfilled.

A shuddering compassion crept over me, an unreasoning rage. The faithful companion brought into being, as I now perceived, to receive the death-stroke aimed at my own life, lay foully murdered within the dark recesses of that treacherous wood, while I stood whole and unharmed, the living tide rushing quick in my veins, the sun shining bright upon me, the sound of the summer wind in my ears. I felt as one whose twin-brother has been traitorously done to death. I clutched the sword that hung beneath the folds of my monkish robe, and was about to rush upon the three murderers before me, when suddenly the air about me seemed to become vocal, repeating my step-mother's words,—

"On the eighth day, at even-tide."

I dropped my sword. I had a nearer mission than to avenge my own wrongs. I clasped the little crystal box, and hurried on amain.

The road turned at the foot of the mountain, and led through verdant meadows and fertile fields, past smiling gardens and cool, still groves. The murderers, more lightly armed, had outstripped me. I lost trace of them in the windings of the road; but, as I followed on, a taint of blood left by their footsteps seemed to poison the flower-scented air, and ever before me I saw a still, dead face,—the face of the spectre, solemn and steadfast as in its unreal life. My head seemed turning. The words, "On the eighth day, at even-tide," went ringing in my ears. I prayed to the Blessed Virgin, I implored the saints, and still I hurried on amain.

The sun went down behind the soft, green hills; the heavens flamed in purple and gold, then faded into the dimness of twilight. The lights of the city glimmered before me like a giant diadem, sparkling on the ground. I felt neither hunger nor thirst nor weariness, but still pressed on amain.

I reached the city gates. I redoubled my speed as I threaded the streets, swarming with joyous crowds, all swaying in one direction. I heard my father's name on every side. I caught that he feasted that day all the nobles of the city and five hundred poor, in honor of the birthday of his second son. The Duchess, they said, and they blessed her,—had but the day before returned from her pilgrimage to pray for the Duke her husband's health. And chattering, laughing, and prating, the joyous crowd pressed on towards the palace where that daughter of Sin and Death sat throned beside her trusting lord,—the lord against whose sacred life she was at that instant, perchance, raising her accursed hand.

The crowd gave way before me as I strode on. My religious habit imposed respect; none hindered me, none sought to stay me in my impetuous speed. Panting and breathless, I reached the open square before the palace. It was one blaze of light, one surging sea of human life. I forced my way through its compact mass, and ascended the broad steps, on either side of which blazed great torches above the heads of the assembled lackeys of the guests within. I stood in the great entrance-hall. None knew me in my father's house. Servants were hurrying to and *fro*, bearing silver and golden platters; the sound of music and feasting came from the banqueting-hall within, and through the open doorway I beheld the gallant array of guests seated around my father's board, whilst from the court-yard below arose a clamorous din, the mirth and rejoicing of the poor as they feasted.

I advanced with rapid strides towards the glittering hall. The seneschal held out his wand to bar my passage.

"The Duke," I said hoarsely, and sought to put aside the wand.

"To-morrow, good father,—to-morrow," replied the seneschal, for he knew me not. "Tonight the Duke and Duchess feast their friends. The revel is at the highest. Ye can have no entrance now."

The words were still on his lips when, sudden and sinister, a many-voiced cry broke from within, and through the blazing portal I beheld the revellers start to their feet in dismay.

I sprang forward. I saw my father fallen back in his chair of state, his face ghastly, his eyes closed. Over him hung my step-mother. The guests were crowding towards him. Cries of affright and lamentation resounded through the hall.

I burst my way through the confused ranks of the revellers; I stood beside my father, and raised that dear head upon my breast; then, holding the crystal box before his nostrils, I crushed it in my hand.

As it shivered in my grasp, a soft, pale flame mounted upward; a faint, delicious perfume spread around; and, blessed be *Ombra* for ever, the life which had forsaken my father's frame returned. He slowly opened his eyes, sighing deeply, and gazed as in astonishment at the disorder around.

As the glad and wondering exclamations of the guests re-echoed on every side, I raised myself and stood erect beside my father. I turned my face towards my step-mother, and cast from off my armor the shrouding monkish robe. Silence fell upon all around. Friends and kindred stood motionless, expectant, scarcely drawing their breath. All felt that some dark tragedy was to be unravelled then and there.

As she beheld me, the Duchess stretched out her palms as if to repel a sight too dreadful to be endured. She shrank back until she reached the wall, and stood there, her eyes, dilated with horror unspeakable, fixed upon me, her white face and marble lips showing in strange and fearful contrast with her flashing jewels and gorgeous robes.

I raised my hand and pointed at her. I knew not my own voice, so hoarse, so deep had it become.

“Pasquita, Duchess of Guatamarra, thrice-perjured wife, unnatural step-mother, I denounce you before God and before the world as murderess and accomplice of Mazitka!”

As I ended, she remained a space motionless in the deathlike silence around; then, slowly sinking to her knees, she fell forward upon her face. No one stirred; no one approached her as she lay, struck down by the revelation of her monstrous guilt. At length, my father, who had so loved her, ordered her women to be summoned. Shuddering, they raised her, and carried her away.

At midnight, cowed forms knocked heavily at the outer gate. It opened. They spoke no word, but silently ascended the broad staircase, and turned towards the Duchess’s apartments. When they descended, they bore with them a woman. Never from that time was the name of my father’s wife breathed within the walls of the palace; never did she emerge from that midnight into the light of day.

Slowly, in the shrouded gloom of the palace, rolled on the hours until the appointed time of Malaloul’s revenge drew near. Then, craving my father’s permission, again I took my way towards the ruined city, the home of the astrologer, the dwelling-place of that fair vision who called herself his child. Eight days I travelled on, ever straining my ear to catch the remembered music which had erst called me thither; but silence lay over the blue heavens and over the soft, green earth. No winning murmur rippled past my ear. Ombra’s voice was mute.

The time was come. On the ninth hour I stood at the foot of the tower. The moon, red and lowering, hung in the western sky. It cast an angry and foreboding glare upon the dark summit of the tower. A something fearful was in the air. It seemed to choke me. I looked upward. All was dark.

Climbing the broken steps, I reached the heavily clasped portal. It yielded to my touch. A narrow beam shone from a loop-hole, and struck upon the stone wall of the staircase. I stayed not to question it, but sprang noiselessly upward to the circular room. I gently unclosed the door. Within all was changed. Mazitka no longer sat beside the table, studying the mystic circles of the stars. Dust covered the heavy volumes on which I had seen him so intent. The skeleton, with pendant arms and bowed head, stood motionless upon its pedestal. The globe of light above had waned; it shed a faint, uncertain twilight around. The creeping monsters which clung to the walls had roused from their torpor; their flattened and venomous heads were moving restlessly; a pale light was flickering from their eyes.

Ombra was seated on a cushion beside the wizard’s former place. Her golden hair lay sweeping the ground; her face rested on her clasped hands. A fainter glow shimmered from the shifting hues of her raiment; the light of her eyes was veiled as though by tears.

I looked around in vain, seeking Mazitka. The room was empty of his hated presence. Suddenly I recalled the beam of light below. I retraced my steps; and, gazing through the loop-hole, unseen, beheld him whom I sought. In a narrow cell, Mazitka stood bending over a roll of ancient parchment. All around him were things ghastly and forbidden, such as my flesh crept to look upon. He had rifled the secret places of the earth; he had disturbed the repose of those great monsters who died before the Flood; he had sought in the caverns of Death for the secret of deathless life; he had ransacked the treasury of prohibited knowledge for that revelation in the search of which he was casting aside his only hold upon existence.

He rose from his stooping posture, and, shaking his head impatiently, turned again to the ancient manuscript. He studied it for a time with a perplexed and frowning brow. Then I saw him

carefully examine the margin of the page. As if struck by a sudden thought, he rose hastily, and, seeking a small vial, poured a few drops upon the vacant space. By the pale light of the lamp beside him I saw some hitherto invisible characters gradually detach themselves from the yellow parchment.

As they formed themselves into words, the necromancer's face grew livid. His white hair bristled around his forehead. Then "Ombra!" broke like a groan from his convulsed, heaving chest. With an abrupt motion he hurled the roll from him, sank into his chair, and pressed his clenched hands before his eyes. Presently he removed them, and sat staring at the empty air before him.

"Avaunt, Death!" he hissed, while he trembled in every limb. "My hour is not yet come." He paused and cowered away, his eyes still fixed as if upon some bodiless presence. A hoarse, rattling sound came from his throat. He shrank as it were into himself until his head was sunk deep between his shoulders. His every feature sharpened as if wrung by some internal spasm. Then, starting to his feet, he cried in a piercing tone that rose into a shriek, "Nor ever shall come!"

With quivering hand he took from the table an object at sight of which my blood froze with horror. It was a sacrificial knife of stone.

He cast his eyes stealthily around him. He bent his ear as if to catch any wandering sound. Then, drawing the folds of his robe closely about him, the monster crept towards a small door, which, opening, revealed a narrow staircase leading upward to the room where Ombra sat.

I bounded up the stone stairway I had descended. I stood again at the door of the circular hall. The dimness of conscious horror brooded within. A pulseless silence weighed on all around. The dying lamp glimmered faintly.

I looked where I had seen Ombra. A fading, mist-like shadow alone met my eye. As I gazed upon it, a little door stole slowly open, and Mazitka crept forth, the fatal knife of stone uplifted in his hand.

The link was severed. The mystic bond gave way. And as Mazitka's footstep, bound on its fell intent, crossed the dark threshold, Ombra, that spirit of light and love, faded before his guilty sight, was resolved into surrounding space, and left him to his doom.

I sprang upon the wizard. My sword was sharp, my arm was strong. I plunged the good steel deep in his accursed heart.

A yell, horrid and drear, broke upon the air. The dying lamp went out; the foundations of the tower heaved and shook beneath me; and from the distance breathed a long, faint sigh.

I raised me from where I bent in the darkness above the lifeless mass that had been Mazitka.

"Ombra!" I called; but no voice replied.

She had vanished utterly and for ever,—vanished to be beheld no more save in the glory of the sunlight, the shimmer of the falling rain, the midnight beauty of the stars: there shall I see her ever, Ombra, fair shadow of a shade.

I quitted the murky blackness of the tower, and remounted my steed. As I left the plain, I turned and looked back. The moon had sunk below the horizon; the stars shone peacefully down over the stillness below; the summer wind rustled softly amid the foliage that clothed the mountain side; the tinkling of a little brook rose from beside my horse's feet. I gazed incredulously around. Had that silent tower ever known an earthly habitant? Had Mazitka been but a delusion? Was Ombra but a dream? And I who have told these tales,—what am I also, save a phantom, unreal, fast fleeting, vanishing even as I speak these words?