

The Marble Statue

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On a fine summer's evening Florio, a young nobleman, was riding slowly towards the gates of Lucca, enjoying both the delicate fragrance that shimmered over the beautiful landscape and the towers and roofs of the city before him, and the colourful procession of spruce ladies and gentleman which strolled in a merry throng down the avenues of chestnut-trees along both sides of the street.

Then another rider, heading in the same direction on a dainty palfrey, and wearing brightly-coloured clothes, with a golden chain around his neck and a velvet cap with feathers over his dark-brown locks, trotted up to his

side with a friendly greeting. Riding side by side into the darkling evening, the two entered into conversation in no time at all; and the youthful Florio found the stranger's slim figure, his cheerful, jaunty manner, even his merry voice, so extremely charming that he could not take his eyes off him.

“What business brings you to Lucca?” the stranger at last inquired. “Actually, I have no business at all,” Florio answered with a touch of shyness.

“No business at all? – Well, then you must be a poet!” the other said with a merry laugh.

“Not exactly that,” replied Florio, turning red all over. “I have, admittedly, occasionally tried my hand at the happy art of song; but ever since I read the great old Masters, and found all my secret wishes and presentiments there, really there, with flesh and breath, then I have seemed to myself to be a weak little lark's voice, blown away in the wind beneath the vast vault of Heaven.”

“Everyone sings his own hymn to God,” said the stranger, “and a chorus of voices makes the spring.” And his large, intelligent eyes rested with visible pleasure on the handsome youth, who looked out before him with such innocence into the duskening world.

“I have now chosen to travel,” the latter continued in a bolder and more familiar tone, “and I find myself as though delivered from prison; all my old wishes and joys have now, all at once, been set free. Having grown up in seclusion in the country, for how long have I fixed a yearning gaze on the distant blue mountains when Spring passed through our garden like an enchanting minstrel, singing of the wondrous beauty of distant lands and of great, immeasurable joy.”

At these last words the stranger had sunk into deep thought. “Have you ever heard,” he remarked absent-mindedly, yet in deadly earnest, “about the miraculous minstrel whose tune enticed the youths into a magic mountain, from which none of them has returned? Be on your guard!”

Florio did not know what to make of the stranger’s words, nor was he able to question him; for just at that moment, having followed the procession of strollers unnoticed, they had arrived, not at the gates, but in a broad, grassy square, where a merrily resounding realm of music, many-hued palfreys, riders, and strollers, was shimmering back and forth in the fading flush of evening.

“This is a good place to stay,” said the stranger cheerfully, swinging himself down off his palfrey, “see you soon!” And with this he quickly disappeared into the throng.

Florio stood still for a moment in joyous amazement before the unexpected prospect. Then he followed his companion’s example, leaving his horse with his servant and mingling with the lively swarm.

Concealed choirs sent out music from the blooming bushes on all sides; demure ladies walked up and down under the tall trees, surveying the radiant meadow with beautiful eyes, laughing and chatting, their colourful feathers nodding in the mild, golden evening like a flowerbed swaying in the wind. On a bright green plain, several girls were amusing themselves with ball games. The multicoloured, feathered balls fluttered like butterflies, describing dazzling arcs through the blue air; while the girlish forms, gliding up and down at the bottom of the garden, presented the most delightful spectacle. One in particular, with her dainty, almost childlike figure, and the grace of her every movement, attracted Florio’s gaze. She wore a thick, gaily coloured floral wreath in her hair, and she looked just like a merry

picture of spring as she now flew over the turf, now bent forward, now reached up into the clear air with her graceful limbs, moving with such exceeding vivacity. As a result of an error on her opponent's part, her shuttlecock flew off in the wrong direction and fluttered down directly in front of Florio. He picked it up and presented it to the garlanded girl as she came running up in pursuit. She stood, almost frightened, before him, observing him in silence with beautiful large eyes. Then she bowed, blushing, and hurried back to her playmates. However, the great, sparkling stream of carriages and riders, which was moving in slow magnificence along the main avenue, claimed Florio's attention away from that charming game, and he wandered alone for a good hour among the eternally changing scenes.

"There is the singer Fortunato!" he suddenly heard several ladies and cavaliers at his side cry out. Quickly following their pointing fingers, he descried, to his great astonishment, the graceful stranger who had, only a short while before, accompanied him to this place. Standing on the edge of the meadow, leaning against a tree, he was in the centre of a dignified ring of ladies and cavaliers who were listening to his song; from time to time a few voices from the circle would sing a sweet reply. Among their number Florio recognised the beautiful ball-player, who was gazing straight ahead with eyes opened wide in silent joy at the melody.

It was with quite a start that Florio recalled how he had been chatting so familiarly with the famous singer, whom he had long revered on account of his reputation; and he remained shyly standing some distance away, also listening to the delightful contest. He would willingly have stood there throughout the night, for the strains winged towards him bearing such

encouragement; and he was really quite annoyed when Fortunato finished so soon and the entire company rose from the lawn.

Then the songster espied Florio in the background and immediately walked up to him. Cordially taking him by both hands, he led the dazed youth, in spite of his protests, like a favourite prisoner towards the open marquee nearby, where the company had now assembled and prepared a cheerful supper. Everyone greeted him as if they were old acquaintances, and many beautiful eyes rested in astonished joy on the young, blossoming figure.

After a number of jocund conversations, everyone settled down at the round table in the centre of the marquee. Refreshing fruits and wine in brightly-cut glasses sparkled against the dazzling white table-cover; pretty girls' faces peeked out charmingly between the large bunches of flowers which cast forth their scent from silver receptacles; outside, the last lights of evening played in beams of gold on the lawn and the river sliding along as smooth as glass before the marquee. Florio had, almost involuntarily, sat down beside the pretty little ball-player. She recognised him at once and sat there shy and silent; but her long, timorous eyelashes kept but a poor guard over her dark, ardent glances.

It had been arranged that every man would take his turn at toasting his sweetheart with a short, improvised ditty. The light songs, merely flitting like a spring breeze over the surface of life, without immersing life in their depths, made a merry stir with the ring of happy faces around the table. Florio was delighted in his innermost being; all dull apprehension had been removed from his soul, and with an almost dreamy silence of joyous thoughts he looked out before him, between the lights and the flowers, into

the beautiful landscape as it slowly sank in the last embers of evening. And when the turn to toast came round to him, he raised his glass and sang:

*Every man names his heart's own,
Only I stand here alone;
Her I toast will ask, no doubt,
Who does that man sing about?
And so I must, like waves in yonder river, sing
And die away unheard against the banks of spring.*

His beautiful neighbour looked up at him almost roguishly during these words, then quickly lowered her little head on meeting his gaze. But he had sung with such heartfelt emotion, and now he leant across so pressingly, with his fine, pleading eyes, that she willingly allowed him to kiss her quickly on her red, burning lips.

“Bravo, bravo!” cried several gentlemen; a mischievous, but innocent laughter rang out around the table. Florio hastily, confusedly, dashed his glass down; the beautiful kiss-taker, her cheeks burning crimson, stared at her lap, looking indescribably charming beneath her full floral wreath.

In this way each one of the lucky men cheerfully chose a sweetheart from the circle. All except Fortunato, who belonged to everyone or no one, and appeared almost lonely in this agreeable confusion. He was exuberantly merry, and some could perhaps have called him rumbustious – from the way in which he launched himself body and soul into witty, grave, and jocular remarks, darting wildly from one to the other – had his clear, pious eyes not given him all the while an almost miraculous appearance. Florio had firmly resolved to tell him, across the table, of the love and reverence he had long felt for him. But he could not seem to manage this today; all his gentle

attempts bounced off the singer's aloof joviality. He just could not comprehend him.

Outside, meanwhile, the neighbourhood had become more silent; single, solemn stars came out between the tops of the darkling trees, and the river murmured with increased vigour through the cool, refreshing night. And now the final turn to sing had fallen on Fortunato. Jumping quickly to his feet, he swept his hand over his guitar and sang:

*What sounds with such fire
Through spirit and soul?
To clouds and realms higher
It bears me - until?*

*Up where man breathes thinly,
So lonely a place,
I greet long and inly
The world's lovely face.*

*Yes, Bacchus, I know you
For truly divine!
My mind grasps your glow, too,
And restful dreams of wine.*

*Browed with a rose-chaplet,
You beautiful child,
Your eyes flash and clap, yet
Their flames are so mild!*

*It's love? It's awe, that you
Find cause for delight?
All round spring smiles at you
In thought on joy's height.*

*To Venus, Queen, I sing,
The sweetest, soft strain,
In morning's red rising
I glimpse your domain:*

*An enchanted ring set
With sun-covered hills. -
Fresh-faced boys with winglets
Sweep after your will;*

*Like golden dreams falling,
They breeze through the skies,
All gentle souls calling
To where the Queen lies.*

*And knights and their ladies
Swarm over green bowers
And cover the gay leas
Like brilliant flowers.*

*The lovers are strolling
With linked arms along;
A reeling and rolling
And rapturous throng.*

Here he suddenly changed melody and key, continuing:

*The sounds fade, to nought spilled,
The green turns pale cold;
The ladies sit thought-filled,
The knights' looks are bold.*

*And heavenly yearning,
Sky singing to sea,
Makes tears shimmer blurring
Round garden and lea.*

*In the heart of the fest
My eyes catch, how mild!
The most quiet of guests.
And whence, lonely child?*

*He wears a wreath of poppies,
Blooming round the seam,
And a crown of lilies
That shine as a dream.*

*His lips swell for meeting,
So charming and white,
As bringing a greeting
From heavenly light.*

*The torch he bears glows near
And far in the gloam.
He asks, "Who of those here
Desires to go home?"*

*And once in a while, when
He upends his link,
Death looms, deep and violent,
And sound is extinct.*

*And what sank here darkling
As flowers in games,
You see up there sparkling
As stars with cool flames.*

*Oh youth come from Heaven,
How fair-faced art thou!
I'm leaving this steven
To go with you now!*

*For what would I hope, then?
To the sky, ah, the sky!
Now Heaven is open,
Take me, Father, on high!*

Fortunato was now silent, as were all the others; for outside the sounds had indeed trickled away, and the music, the milling mass, and all the magical illusions had gradually ebbed away before the boundless starry sky and the forceful nocturnal song of the streams and woods. Then a tall, slim cavalier, in rich jewellery that shone with a greenish-gold sheen between the lights flickering in the wind, stepped into the marquee. His eyes blazed insanely from deep orbits; his face was handsome, but wan and wild. On his sudden appearance, everyone's thoughts turned, with an involuntary shudder, to the silent guest in Fortunato's song.

After a fleeting bow to the company, he betook himself to the host's buffet and hastily slurped down long draughts of dark-red wine with his pale lips.

Florio gave a sharp start when the newcomer then turned to him before all the others in the group and bade his old acquaintance welcome to Lucca. Astonished, and set in thought, Florio examined him from top to toe, for he definitely could not recall having ever seen him before. Yet the cavalier was exceptionally eloquent, speaking much about various occurrences of Florio's earlier days. Moreover, he had such an exact knowledge of the youth's native region, his garden, and every local spot which had been dear to his heart since olden days, that Florio soon began to reconcile himself to the dark figure.

Among the rest of the company, however, Donati – as the cavalier called himself – did not seem to fit in anywhere. An anxious perturbation,

the cause of which nobody could give a name to, was visible all around. And with night having fully fallen in the meantime, the ring soon broke up.

There now formed a wondrous throng of carriages, horses, servants and long lanterns casting strange reflections on the nearby water, in between the trees and the beautiful, swirling figures. In this wild illumination Donati appeared even paler and eerier than previously. The beautiful maiden with the floral wreath had continually thrown furtive and fearful sidelong glances at him. Now, when he actually walked up to her, to help her on to her palfrey with chivalrous courtesy, she timidly pressed herself towards Florio, who lifted the delightful lady into the saddle with a pounding heart. Everyone was ready to leave by this time; she gave him one last friendly nod from her elegant seat, and soon the entire, shimmering vision had disappeared into the night.

Florio felt quite peculiar on suddenly finding himself so alone with Donati and the singer on the broad, deserted square. His guitar in his arms, the latter walked up and down the riverbank before the marquee; he seemed to be composing new melodies while plucking the occasional note, which drifted with a soothing sound over the quiet meadow. Then he suddenly broke off. A strange displeasure seemed to fly over his features, which were normally so unclouded; he impatiently demanded they be off.

So all three now mounted their horses and rode together to the nearby city. Fortunato spoke not a word on the way; against his silence Donati poured forth a stream of well-worded, refined conversation all the more cordially; Florio, still in the fading echoes of delight, rode between the two as silent as a dreaming girl.

When they arrived at the gate, Donati's horse, which had already shied at a number of passers-by, suddenly reared almost straight up in the air,

and would not enter. A flash of glittering anger passed over the rider's face, almost contorting it, and a furious, half-spoken curse escaped his twitching lips – at which Florio felt no little astonishment, for such behaviour seemed to him to be totally at variance with the cavalier's usual refined and considered respectability. But the latter soon recovered his composure. Turning to Florio: "I wanted to accompany you to the door of your inn," he said smiling, with his accustomed delicacy, "but my horse has other intentions, as you can see. I live in a villa before this town, where I hope to receive you as my guest in the very near future."

And with this he made a bow, and his horse, almost beyond the point of restraint from incomprehensible haste and dread, flew away with him into the darkness as swift as an arrow, the wind whistling in its wake.

"Thank God," exclaimed Fortunato, "that night has engulfed him once more! For he truly reminded me of one of those dun, misshapen moths, flown as from a phantastic dream, who zing through the twilight, their long cat's-whiskers and hideous large eyes appearing to really form a face." Florio, who had already become quite good friends with Donati, expressed his amazement at this harsh judgement. But the singer, whom such astonishing meekness only served to irritate more and more, kept soundly cursing, calling the cavalier – to Florio's secret annoyance – a moonlight hunter, a starveling, a swanking melancholic.

With such conversation they finally arrived at the inn, and each soon betook himself to his appointed chamber.

Florio threw himself down fully-clothed onto the bed, but it was long before he could fall asleep. His soul, agitated by the images of the day, was still surging with echoing song. And as the doors in the house were opened and closed with ever less frequency, and only an occasional voice rang out,

until at last the house, city and countryside sank into deep silence – then he felt as if he were drifting alone with swan-white sails on a moon-illuminated sea. The waves beat gently against the boat, sirens leapt out of the water, every one of them resembling the beautiful maiden with the floral wreath of the past evening. She sang so wonderfully, so sadly, so endlessly, that it seemed he must expire from yearning. The boat began to dip imperceptibly, and sank slowly deeper and deeper.

Then he woke up with a start, afraid.

He jumped out of his bed and opened the window. The house was situated on the edge of the town; it gave the prospect of a wide, silent circle of hills, gardens and valleys, all clearly lit by the moon. And out there the trees and the rivers were full of the lingering echoes and fading sounds of past delight, as if the entire region were softly singing like the sirens he had heard in his slumber. And he could not resist the temptation. Grabbing the guitar that Fortunato had left with him, he walked out of the room and stepped lightly down through the quiet house. The door downstairs was ajar; a servant lay sleeping over the threshold. So he emerged, unnoticed, into the open air, to wander happily between vineyards, through deserted avenues, past huts sunk in slumber, and ever onwards.

He could see out between the vine-trellises to the river in the valley; many shining white castles, scattered here and there, rested like sleeping swans down in the sea of silence. Then he sang with a happy voice:

*How cool, a stroll along the hours of night,
My faithful zither in my hand!
I send forth greetings from the hilltop's height,
To the heavens and the quiet land.*

*How different is the aspect of that combe
In which such happiness was mine!
How still the forest is, but for the moon
Ranging through the lofty hall of pines.*

*The sound of vintners' rejoicing is past,
And gone is all life's motley mell;
All but the silver glances sometimes cast
Up by the rivers winding through the dell.*

*Now nightingales, as from soft dreams, awake,
To pour out honeyed melodies;
And everywhere a secret whisper shakes
The forest with the breath of memories.*

*For joy can not just cease at once to sound,
And from the day's refulgent zest
A song in undertones still holds its ground
Within my most secluded breast.*

*And joyously I make my strings sound out,
Oh maiden, on the far side of yon stream;
You listen and you hear me, I've no doubt,
And recognise the singer from the dream!*

Florio could not help laughing at himself, because in the end he did not know whom he was serenading. For it had long ceased to be the charming little maiden with the floral wreath whom he actually meant. The music by the marquees, the dream in his room, and his heart, in an echoing dream of the strains of his night-vision and of the maiden's dainty figure, had imperceptibly and wondrously transformed her image into one much more beautiful, much larger, much more magnificent, such as he had never seen anywhere before.

Thus in thought, he walked on for a long time, until he unexpectedly arrived at a large lake, encircled by lofty trees. The moon, having just appeared over the tree-tops, clearly illuminated a marble statue of Venus that stood on a stone close to the water's edge, as if the goddess had just this moment surfaced from the waves, and now, herself enchanted, was beholding the reflection of her own beauty radiated by the intoxicated water-surface between the stars that gently blossomed out of the depths. Several swans described their uniform circles around the reflection in silence; a soft rustling passed through the trees.

Florio stood and stared, rooted to the spot, for that statue appeared to him like a loved one, long-sought and suddenly recognised; like a marvellous flower that had grown up out of the spring dawn and dreamy silence of his earliest youth. The longer he looked, the more strongly did he feel that it was slowly opening its soulful eyes, that the lips were about to move with a greeting, that life was blooming like a delightful song, bringing warmth as it rose up the lovely limbs. He kept his eyes shut for a long time with bedazzlement, yearning and delight.

When he looked up, everything suddenly seemed transformed. The moon shone out between clouds with a peculiar light; the wind, increased in strength now, ruffled the lake into filmy waves; the statue of Venus, so dreadfully white and motionless, was giving him an almost terrifying stare with its stone orbits from the boundless silence. Then a horror, deeper than any he had ever known, came over the youth. He quickly left the place and hurried through the gardens and vineyards, running faster and faster, and never pausing for breath, towards the restful town; for the very rustling of the trees struck his ears as an audible, comprehensible whispering, and the

tall, ghostly poplars seemed to be reaching their far-stretching shadows in pursuit.

And so he arrived, visibly disturbed, at the inn. The sleeping servant, still lying on the doorstep, jumped up with a start when the youth brushed past him. Florio quickly closed the door behind him; but not until he had entered his room upstairs did he begin to heave sighs of relief. He paced up and down for a long time before he could calm his mind. Then he threw himself on the bed, finally falling into a sleep full of the strangest dreams.

On the following morning Florio and Fortunato sat together breakfasting under the tall trees before the inn, whose foliage sparkled with the morning sun. Florio looked paler than usual and agreeably worn with waking.

“Morning,” Fortunato cheerfully began, “is a journeyman of rugged beauty, as fit as a fiddle, who descends rejoicing from the highest mountains into the sleeping world, shakes the tears from the flowers and trees, and surges and booms and sings. He does not make an especially great deal of the tender sensations, but coolly grasps you all over and laughs in your long face when you step out before him so bemused, so still wholly immersed in moonlight.”

Florio now felt too ashamed to tell the singer, as he had initially resolved, about the beautiful statue of Venus; and he remained in an embarrassed silence. His nocturnal walk had however been noticed, and probably betrayed, by the servant at the front-door, and Fortunato continued, laughing all the while:

“Well, if you don’t believe it, try it just once, come and stand here and say, for example, ‘Oh fair, beauteous soul, oh moonlight, thou pollen of

loving hearts' etc. – now isn't that hilarious? And yet I would wager that you frequently made such remarks last night, and you doubtless looked dreadfully serious while you did so."

Florio had always imagined Fortunato to be so quiet and meek; the beloved singer's jaunty joviality wounded his innermost soul. He said hurriedly, tears welling up in his soulful eyes: "You are surely saying what you do not feel yourself, and that is something you should never do. But I will not let you confuse me, for there *are* gentle and noble sensations, that are certainly bashful, but have no cause to feel shame; and a quiet bliss, which shuts itself off from the noisy day, only opening its holy cup to the star-studded sky, like a flower that is home to an angel."

Fortunato looked at the youth in amazement, then cried out: "Well really, you are truly and deeply in love!"

In the meantime, a servant had brought Fortunato, who wished to go for a ride, his horse. He warmly stroked the bent neck of his gracefully caparisoned small steed, which stamped the earth with joyful impatience. Then he turned to Florio once more and held out his hand with a good-natured smile. "You know, I feel sorry for you," he said, "there are far too many gentle, good young people, particularly enamoured, who are really hooked on being unhappy. Leave all that – the melancholy, moonlight and the rest of that rubbish – and if events should on occasion take a turn for the worse, just stride out into God's free morning, and once outside, shake off your cares in a prayer born in your heart of hearts; and you will have to be in a bad way for that not to send joy and strength flowing right through you!"

And with these words he quickly swung himself on to his horse and rode away between the vineyards and blooming gardens into the vivid,

echoing land, itself presenting as colourful and joyful a sight as the morning which lay before.

Florio stared after him for a long time, until waves of sparkling light engulfed the distant sea. Then he paced hurriedly up and down under the trees. The phenomena of the night had left a deep, undefined longing in his soul. On the other hand, Fortunato's words had strangely disturbed and bewildered him. Now he himself no longer knew what he wanted, like a sleepwalker suddenly addressed by name. Oft would he stand brooding before the marvellously rich prospect down into the countryside, as if he wanted to make enquiry of the joyfully powerful forces at work out there. But the morning played only the occasional magical light down through the trees into his dreamily glittering heart, which was yet in the grip of another power. For inside there the stars were still continuing around their magical circles, between which the wondrously beautiful statue of Venus lifted her gaze with a fresh, irresistible power.

So he finally decided to return to the lake, and he swiftly took the same path he had walked down during the night.

But how different everything looked there now! Cheerful people bustled around the vineyards, gardens and avenues; children played peacefully on the sunny lawn in front of the huts that, during the night, under the dreamlike trees, had often frightened him like sleeping sphinxes; the moon shone distant and faint in the clear sky; countless birds sang lustily in the wood. He could not comprehend how such a peculiar fear could have fallen over him in this place.

Soon, however, he noticed that he had missed the correct path while absorbed in thought. He attentively examined his surroundings, doubtfully walking now back, now forwards once more, but in vain; the more keenly he

searched, the more unfamiliar and entirely different everything appeared to him.

He had been wandering about in this manner for a long time. The birds were silent now; the ring of hills gradually grew more and more quiet; the midday sun shimmered scorching rays over the whole region, which seemed to be slumbering and dreaming beneath a veil of sultriness. Then he unexpectedly came upon an iron gate with elegantly gilded bars affording a view into an expansive, magnificent pleasance. From this there blew a refreshing stream of scented coolness over the weary youth. The gate not being locked, he gently opened it and stepped inside.

Galleries of tall beeches received him with their solemn shadows, between which golden birds flapped ever and anon like blossoms wafted off in the wind; while large, strange flowers, whose like Florio had never seen, swayed their red and yellow bells back and forth in the gentle breeze as in a dream. Innumerable fountains splashed an unvarying tone, playing with gold-bathed pellets in the absolute solitude. Through the branches could be seen, some distance away, a magnificent, resplendent palace with tall, slender columns. There was no one in sight; all around there reigned a deep silence. Only from time to time would a nightingale awake and sing as if in a sobbing slumber. Florio regarded the trees, fountain and flowers with amazement, for he had the feeling that everything here had sunk away a long time ago, and the river of days was passing over him in light and limpid waves, and underneath lay only the garden, confined, enchanted, and dreaming of life gone by.

He had not advanced far when he heard the strains of a lute, now rising in volume, now softly dying away below the murmuring of the fountains. He stood still, listening; the sound came nearer and nearer, when

suddenly a tall, slender lady of wondrous beauty stepped out from among the trees into the quiet arcade, walking slowly, her eyes cast downwards. In her arms she held a marvellous lute, adorned with golden reliefs; and she plucked the strings one at a time, as if immersed in profound thought. Her long, golden hair fell in showering curls over almost bare, dazzlingly-white shoulders; her long, wide sleeves, which looked like they had been woven from lily-blossom, were held in place by dainty golden bangles; her superb figure was enwrapped in a sky-blue robe, embroidered all around at the ends with colourfully glowing and wonderfully intertwined flowers. Just at that moment a bright sunbeam, straying through an opening in the arcade, sharply illuminated the blooming form. Florio felt something stop inside: her features were unmistakably those of the beautiful statue of Venus he had seen by the lake on the previous night.

She sang, not noticing the stranger:

*Ah Spring, why wake me again to this musing,
Resurrecting those forgotten desires,
The land with wondrous wafts suffusing,
And trembling my limbs with tingling fires.*

*A thousand songs hail fair Mother, so sweet in
Her bride's wreath; once more her youth-time arrives;
The forests will speak, the rivers flow greeting,
A song of naiads leaps and dives.*

*From its green cell I see the rose rise swelling,
And, stirred by the amorous breezes,
Spread its blush across the river burning.*

*And so you call me from my quiet dwelling -
I smile with spring, and smiling my mouth freezes,
Sinking under sound and scent with yearning.*

So singing, she strolled onwards, now disappearing into the foliage, now coming into view once more, further and further away, until at last she was lost to sight in the vicinity of the palace. Now all was silent again but for the trees rustling and the fountains murmuring as before. Florio stood lost in flowering dreams; he felt as though he had known the beautiful lute-player for a long time – he had merely forgotten and lost her through life’s distractions –, as though she were now sinking from melancholy among the burbling springs and incessantly calling to him to follow her.

Deeply moved, he rushed deeper into the garden, to the area in which she had disappeared. There he arrived, under ancient trees, at a dilapidated stone building, on which the occasional beautiful fresco could still be half distinguished. At the base of the wall, on shattered marble blocks and plinths, between which a lush profusion of high grass and flowers shot up, there lay stretched-out a sleeping man. Florio, amazed, recognised the cavalier Donati. But his facial features seemed strangely altered in sleep; he almost resembled a dead man. This sight sent a secret shudder down the youth’s spine. He vigorously shook the sleeper. Donati opened his eyes slowly, and his first look was so strange, vacant and fierce that Florio was truly horrified. Moreover, still between sleep and waking, he mumbled several dark words that the youth did not understand. When he had at last thoroughly roused himself, he sprang to his feet and looked at Florio, so it seemed, with great amazement. “Where am I,” the latter hurriedly cried, “who is the noble lady that lives in this lovely garden?”

“How did you come,” Donati asked in deadly earnest, “into this garden?” Florio gave a brief account of the course of events, which plunged the cavalier into deep reflection. The youth thereupon pressingly repeated his previous questions, and Donati absent-mindedly replied: “The lady is a

relative of mine, rich and powerful, her estates are spread far over the land. –You will find her now here, now there – she also visits the city of Lucca from time to time.” These casually dropped words struck Florio’s heart strangely, for what had previously brushed his mind in passing now became clearer and clearer, namely that he had seen the lady somewhere in his earliest youth, but by no manner of means could he catch the memory.

In the meantime, moving forward with rapid strides, they had arrived unseen at the gilded, barred garden-gate. It was not the same gate Florio had entered through a short while before. In astonishment he swept his gaze over the unfamiliar district; far away over the fields the towers of the city lay in bright sunshine. Donati’s horse stood, tied to the bars, snorting and pawing the ground.

Florio now shyly expressed the wish to see the beautiful owner of the garden again some time in the future. Donati, who had been lost in thought all this time, only now seemed to suddenly collect his wits. “The lady,” he said with his habitual circumspect courteousness, “will be pleased to make your acquaintance. Today, however, we would disturb her, and I am also summoned home by urgent business. Perhaps I can call for you tomorrow.” And hereupon he took his leave of the youth with well-turned words, mounted his horse, and had soon disappeared among the hills.

Florio followed him with his eyes for a long time, then rushed to the town like a drunken man. There the muggy air still kept all living creatures in houses behind dark, cool jalousies. The alleys and squares were all deserted; Fortunato had not yet returned. The happy youth felt stifled by the doleful solitude. Quickly mounting his horse, he rode back out into the country.

“Tomorrow, tomorrow!” The word rang continually around his soul. He felt indescribably happy. The beautiful statue of Venus had come to life and climbed down off her pedestal into the Spring; the calm lake was suddenly transformed into an immense landscape, its stars into flowers, and all of Spring was an image of the beautiful goddess.

And dreaming thus he roamed for hours through the lovely valleys around Lucca, passing by successions of resplendent villas, cascades and grottoes, until the red waves of evening broke over the joyful wanderer.

The stars were out and clear in the sky by the time he slowly passed through the silent alleys to his inn. In one of the lonely squares there stood a large, handsome house, brightly illuminated by the moon. An upstairs window was open, at which he could see, through some artificial flowers, two female figures who appeared to be engrossed in animated conversation. To his amazement he distinctly heard his name mentioned several times. He also believed that he recognised, in the scattered, incoherent words the breeze wafted his way, the voices of the marvellous chanteuse. But he could not clearly distinguish anything for the trembling of the leaves and blossoms in the moonlight. He stopped in order to hear more. Then both ladies noticed him and all above fell suddenly silent.

Unsatisfied, Florio rode on; but as he was turning the street corner, he saw one of the ladies lean out between the flowers, throwing another glance at him, and quickly close the window.

On the following morning, when Florio, having just shaken off the blossomed visions of his dreams, was looking cheerfully out of his window over the towers and domes of the city as they flashed in the morning sun, the cavalier Donati unexpectedly walked into the room. He was dressed all in

black, and looked, on this day, unusually disturbed and hasty, and almost wild. Florio jumped for joy on catching sight of him, for he immediately thought of the beautiful woman. “Can I see her?” he promptly cried at the newcomer. Donati shook his head and said, sadly staring down at the ground, “today is Sunday.”

Then he hurriedly continued, regaining his courage at once: “But I came to fetch you for the hunt.”

“The hunt?” Florio replied in deep wonderment, “today, on the Sabbath-day?”

“Now really,” the cavalier interrupted, laughing irefully and abominably, “don’t tell me you want to stroll to church, arm-in-arm with your paramour, and kneel down on a hassock in the corner and say ‘Bless you!’ raptly when your aunt sneezes.”

“I don’t quite grasp your meaning,” said Florio, “and you may laugh at me to your heart’s content, but I could not go hunting today. When out there all labour is at rest and the forest and fields are wearing such gorgeous adornment in honour of the Lord, as if angels were winging over them through the azure and into the distance – how calm, how festive, how full of grace is this time!”

Donati stood in thought at the window, and Florio imagined he saw the cavalier furtively shudder as he looked out into the Sunday stillness of the fields.

Meanwhile a ringing of bells had arisen from the town spires, passing with the sound of praying through the clear air. This seemed to frighten Donati; he grabbed his hat and urged Florio, almost with anxiety, to accompany him; who however persistently refused. “Away from here, out!” the cavalier finally cried in a low voice rising from the innermost depths of a

cramped breast, and squeezing the astonished youth's hand he rushed out of the house and away.

After that, Florio felt quite at ease when the fresh, bright singer Fortunato stepped into his room like a harbinger of peace. He brought an invitation to a villa before the town for the following evening. "Just prepare yourself," he added, "you will meet an old lady-friend there!" Florio gave quite a start and hurriedly asked: "Who?" But Fortunato jovially refused to furnish any explanation and soon took his leave. 'Could it be the beautiful songstress?' Florio thought to himself; and his heart beat madly.

Then he betook himself to church, but he could not hold his hands in prayer; his mind was too happily elsewhere. He ambled idly through the alleys. Everything there looked so clean and festive; handsomely apparelled ladies and gentlemen made their merry, shimmering way to the churches. But alas! the fair one was not among them!

This recalled to his mind the adventure he had had while returning to the inn the previous evening. He sought out the alley and soon found the large, handsome house again; but, strange to say, the door was locked, and all windows were tightly shut; there was no sign of life inside.

In vain did he roam around the region all the next day, looking to obtain more detailed information about his unknown lady-love. It was as if her palace, as well as the garden he had found by chance that noon, had been swallowed up by the ground; nor could he descry Donati anywhere. Therefore his heart was beating impatiently with joy and anticipation that evening when he at last, in response to the invitation, rode out of the gate with Fortunato, who was acting with a constant air of mystery, towards the villa.

It was completely dark by the time they arrived. In the middle of a garden, as it seemed, there lay a graceful villa with slender columns, above which a second garden, of oranges and all kinds of flowers, hazily rose from the merlons. Large chestnut-trees stood around, boldly stretching their giant, strangely-illuminated arms through the lights that thrust from the windows and out into the night. The master of the house, a refined, cheerful man in middle life, who Florio however could not recall ever having seen before, warmly received the singer and friend on his threshold and led them up a set of wide steps into the ballroom.

There they were met by a ringing wave of merry dance-music; a numerous company wove elegantly and colourfully in and out between one another in the sheen of countless candles that hovered, like circles of stars, in crystal chandeliers over the joyful swarm. Some danced, others regaled themselves with lively conversation; many were masked, their strange appearance often unthinkingly giving the graceful diversion a deep, almost eerie significance.

Florio stood still, bedazzled, himself resembling a graceful picture between the beautiful roving images. Then a graceful maiden walked up to him, lightly holding a gathered-up Greek robe, her beautiful hair woven into plaits. A domino concealed half of her face, thereby making the lower half look all the rosier and more charming. She gave a fleeting bow, handed him a rose and was quickly lost in the swarm.

The latter, astonished, now wandered through the glittering crowd. Nowhere could he find what he had secretly hoped for, and he was close to reproaching himself for having so thoughtlessly followed merry Fortunato onto this sea of joy that now seemed to be bearing him further and further away from that lonely, majestic figure. All the while the ranging waves

washed light-heartedly, with teasing flattery, round the pensive figure, imperceptibly taking the place of his thoughts. Dance-music, even if it does unsettle our innermost being and turn everything upside-down, comes over us with the light and forceful touch of Spring; its chords enchantingly feel for the depths like the first glances of summer, wakening all the songs that sleep bound below, and springs and flowers and ancient memories; and life, in its frozen, heavy, faltering entirety, becomes a smooth, limpid river on which the heart happily rides, once more, with streaming pennants, towards its long relinquished wishes. In this way had the general merriment infected Florio too in next to no time; his heart felt so light, as if all the mysteries that weighed him down so oppressively must soon resolve themselves.

His curiosity aroused, he now sought the pretty little Greek. He found her engaged in lively conversation with other masks, but he clearly saw that her eyes were wandering off to the side, searching, throughout the conversation, and that she had descried him from afar. He asked her to dance. She made a friendly bow, but her agile vivacity seemed broken when he touched her hand and held it fast. She followed him in silence with lowered head; whether in mischief or sadness, it was impossible to tell. The music struck up, and he could not take his eyes off the beautiful enchantress who glided around him like the magical figures on old, fabulous paintings. "You do know me," she told him, in a barely audible whisper, at a fleeting moment during the dance when their lips almost touched.

The dance was finally at an end, the music suddenly stopped; then Florio thought that he saw his beautiful dancer again at the far end of the ballroom. It was the same garb, the same colour of dress, the same hair-decoration. The lovely image seemed to be gazing fixedly at him, and stood stone-still among the swarm of dancers who were now scattering all over, in

the way that a bright star will now set among light, flying clouds, now reappear in all its charming loveliness. The dainty Greekess seemed not to notice this figure, or not to pay any attention to it, but without saying a word, and giving his hand a gentle, hurried squeeze, she hastily left her dancing companion.

The ballroom had largely emptied in the meantime. Everyone had swarmed down into the garden to take the mild air; that strange double had also disappeared. Florio followed the train of people and ambled, wrapped in thought, through the tall arcades. The host of lanterns cast an enchanting light between the trembling leaves. In this uncertain illumination, the masks, with their disguised, shrill voices and wonderful decoration, took on an even stranger, almost sinister, appearance as they roamed to and fro.

He had just wandered off somewhat from the company, having unthinkingly taken a lonely path, when he heard a delightful voice singing among the bushes:

*It comes as greetings from afar,
Over the glittering mountain-pass;
The tree-tops shake their crown of stars
And bow a whispering kiss.*

*How gentle he is, how fair!
Voices sound across night's deep,
And softly sing his form and air -
Ah, how glad the wake I keep!*

*Do not burble so loudly, you springs!
It must not come to morning's light
That I sink silent joy and sufferings
Into the balmy waves of moon-touched night.*

Florio followed the song and came upon an open, circular lawn, in the middle of which a fountain was sporting merrily with sparks of moonlight. The Greekess sat on the stone basin like a beautiful naiad. She had removed her domino and was pensively playing with the reflection of a rose in the shimmering water. The moonlight swept caressing beams up and down her dazzlingly white nape; her face was hidden from view, for she had her back turned to him.

When she heard branches rustling behind her, the beautiful image sprang to her feet, put her domino on and fled with the speed of a startled deer back to the company.

Florio now mingled once more with the colourful ranks of strollers. Many a tender, loving word echoed softly through the mild air; the moonlight had woven its invisible threads into a golden net of love entangling every figure, with many a peculiar hole rent by the masks and their impersonal parodies. Fortunato, in particular, had donned various fancy-dress costumes during the course of the evening, constantly enacting oddly changing, meaningful charades, ever new and unrecognised, and often taking himself by surprise with the boldness and deep significance of his play; so that on occasions he would suddenly fall into a melancholic silence while the others were killing themselves with laughter.

The beautiful Greekess, however, was nowhere to be seen; she seemed to be deliberately avoiding another encounter with Florio.

The Master of the House, on the other hand, had thoroughly monopolised him. This man artfully plied the youth with long-winded, wide-ranging questions about his early years, his travels, and plans for his future life. All this while Florio could not, by any means, find a familiar footing; for Pietro, as his host was called, looked so unceasingly watchful, as

if behind all the elegant expressions there lurked a particular intrigue. In vain did he rack his mind to trace the cause of this intrusive curiosity.

He had just managed to free himself from his host when, following a curving corner into an avenue, he ran into a company of masques, among whom he unexpectedly recognised the Greekess. The masques spoke much, and with a strange synchronicity; he felt that he knew one of the voices, but he could not bring its owner to mind. Soon afterwards the figures began to fade away one by one, until finally, and before he had fully realised what was happening, he found himself alone with the maiden. She stood in still hesitation, looking at him in silence for some moments. The domino was off, but a short, lily-white veil, embellished with all kinds of wondrous, gold-embroidered figures, covered her face. He was surprised that she, so shy, so alone, should remain with him.

“You eavesdropped on my song,” she said at last in a cordial tone. These were the first words he had heard her say out loud. The melodic ring of her voice pierced his soul; it seemed to stir memories of all the love, beauty and happiness he had experienced in his life. Asking her to excuse his boldness, he spoke confusedly about the loneliness that had enticed him, about his absent-mindedness, the murmuring of the fountains... Meanwhile several voices approached the lawn. The maiden looked timidly around then hastened into the further depths of the night. She seemed to take pleasure in watching Florio follow her.

Bolder now, and more familiar, he asked her not to hide herself any longer, or at least to give her name, so that her delightful appearance would not be lost among the thousand bewildering images of that day. “Leave that be,” she replied wistfully, “take life’s flowers as the moment yields them and be happy; do not search for the roots, for down below all is joyless and

still.” Florio looked at her in amazement; he did not understand how such mysterious words could pass the cheerful maiden’s lips. Moonlight was falling between the trees in sweeping rays upon her figure. Then it seemed to him that she was now taller, more slender, and nobler than she had been at the dance and by the fountain.

By this time they had arrived at the garden-exit. No lamp was burning here any longer; ever and anon a voice could be heard dying into the distance. Out there the broad arc of the surrounding region rested, still and solemn, in the magnificent moonlight. In a meadow lying ahead, Florio noticed a weaving jumble of horses and people, half-visible in the twilight.

Here his companion suddenly halted. “It will give me pleasure,” she said, “to see you at my home some day. Our friend will escort you there. – Farewell!”

With these words she threw back her veil, and Florio started with shock. She was the wonderful beauty whose song he had eavesdropped on in that garden with the sultriness of midday. But her face, brightly lit by the moon, seemed pale and motionless, almost like the marble statue by the lake.

He now watched her passing over the meadow, being received by several richly-adorned servants, and mounting a snow-white palfrey in a shimmering hunting-cloak that was quickly thrown over her shoulders. Spellbound by amazement, delight and a surreptitious horror that crept over his deepest self, he stood, not moving a muscle, until horses, riders, the whole peculiar apparition had disappeared into the night.

The sound of someone calling from the garden finally woke him from his reveries. Recognising Fortunato’s voice, he hurried to reach his friend, who had long noticed his absence and had been seeking him in vain. No sooner did Fortunato see the youth than he began to sing to him:

*In still skies
See it flower,
Gently rise
From scent's bower,
Darling cries,
Sweetheart cars
Through the skies;
Grasps at stars,
Sighs and cries,
Heart is low,
Scent half-dies,
Time is slow,
Scent moon sighs,
Skies on skies,
Love and beloved remain as they were!*

“But where have you been floating around for so long?” he finally concluded, with a laugh. –Florio could not have revealed his secret at any price. “Long?” he simply replied, himself astonished. For the garden had indeed completely emptied in between whiles; all the lights had gone out, but for a few lamps that still flickered uncertainly to and fro like will-o’-the-wisps in the wind.

Fortunato did not press the youth any further, and they walked in silence up the steps into the now quiet house.

“Now I am keeping my word,” said Fortunato, as they arrived on the terrace on the villa roof, where a small company was yet assembled under the brightly star-studded sky. Florio immediately recognised several faces he had seen at the marquee on that first, merry evening. In their midst he espied his beautiful neighbour once more. But today the chaplet of flowers was missing from her hair; without ribbons, without ornaments, the lovely locks flowed around her head and dainty neck. He stood still, almost taken

aback by the sight. The memory of that evening flitted through him with a strangely wistful force. It seemed to him that it lay far back in the past, so complete was the change that had since taken place.

The maiden was called Bianca and was introduced to him as Pietro's niece. She seemed quite intimidated when he approached her, and hardly ventured to lift her gaze to his. He expressed his amazement at not having seen her all evening. "You have seen me on occasion," she said quietly, and he thought that he recognised that whisper. –Meanwhile she caught sight of the rose on his breast, which he had been given by the Greekess, and cast down her eyes, blushing. Florio perceived this clearly; and it brought to his mind the remembrance that he had seen the Greek girl in double after the dance. 'My God!' he thought, bewildered: 'so who was *that*?'

"It is really strange," she broke the silence, "to step so suddenly out of noisy pleasure into the open night. Just look – the clouds are drifting in such dreadfully changing forms across the sky, that you would go out of your mind if you watched them for long; now like enormous mountains of the moon with yawning chasms and terrible jagged peaks, now really like faces, and now like dragons, suddenly stretching out long necks; while beneath, the river secretly rushes like a golden serpent through the darkness, and the white house over there resembles a silent marble statue."

"Where?" Florio cried, violently startled out of his thoughts by these words. The maiden looked at him in amazement, and they were both silent for some moments.

"You will be leaving Lucca?" she said at last, hesitantly and quietly, as if she feared his answer. "No," Florio replied absent-mindedly, "but yes, yes, soon, very very soon!" She seemed about to say something more, but suddenly, repressing the words, turned her face away into the darkness.

Finally he could bear the oppression no longer. His heart was so full, so constricted, and yet so blissfully rapturous. Taking a hasty leave, he rushed down the steps and rode, without Fortunato or any other companion, back to the town.

The window in his room was open; he threw a fleeting glance outside. The countryside lay unrecognisable and still, like a wonderfully interwoven hieroglyph in the magical moonlight. In a state not far from fear, he closed the window and threw himself down on the bed, where he sank like a man in the grip of fever into the oddest dreams.

Bianca remained seated on the open terrace for a long while. Everyone else had repaired to their beds; now and then some larks awoke and floated high through the calm air with uncertain song; the tree-tops began to brush against one another, and rays of dun dawn light flew between the negligent surging of her released locks and across her overwatched face.

It is said that a girl who falls asleep wearing a garland woven from nine types of flowers will be visited in a dream by her future husband. Falling asleep in this fashion after that evening at the marquee, Bianca had seen Florio in a dream.

Now all was a lie; he was so distracted, so cold and so strange.

She plucked the deceitful flowers she had been preserving like a bridal-wreath to pieces. Then she rested her brow on the cold railing and cried from the depths of her heart.

Several days had passed when, one afternoon, Florio found himself with Donati at the latter's country house before the town. At a table laid with fruits and cool wine, they passed the sultry hours in graceful conversation until the setting sun was low in the sky. In the meantime,

Donati had his servant play the guitar; this man knew how to coax the most delightful sounds from its strings. The large, wide windows were open; through them the mild evening breezes wafted in the fragrance of the manifold flowers on the sill. Outside, the town lay in a coloured haze between the gardens and vineyards, from which a joyful sound rose through the window. Florio was happy to the heart, for he was constantly thinking about the lovely lady.

Meanwhile bugles could be heard out in the distance. Now nearer, now further away, they gave one another an incessant, charming reply from the green hills. Donati walked to the window. "It is the lady," he said, "whom you have seen in the beautiful garden; she is just this moment returning to her castle from the hunt." Florio looked out. He saw the lady riding on a handsome palfrey across the bottom of the meadow. A falcon, fastened to her girdle by a golden string, sat on her hand; a jewel on her breast, caught by the evening sun, cast golden-green rays of light across the mead. She looked up and gave him a friendly nod.

"The lady is at home but seldom," said Donati, "if it was pleasing to you, we could visit her this very day." At these words Florio was joyfully jolted out of the wistful gazing in which he was standing immersed; he could have flung his arms around the cavalier's neck.

And in little time they were both outside, sitting in the saddle.

They had not been riding for long when the palace rose before them in its clear magnificence of columns, surrounded by the beautiful garden as by a merry floral wreath. From time to time jets of water soared up from the numerous fountains, rejoicing over the tops of the bushes, and sparkling brightly in the gold of the evening sun. Florio wondered how he had never

been able to retrace his steps to the garden. His heart beat loudly with delight and anticipation as they finally arrived at the palace.

Several servants hurried over to take their horses. The palace itself was entirely of marble, and was built in a strange style, almost like a pagan temple. The harmonious proportions of every part, the columns that strove towards the sky like the thoughts of youth, the artistic decorations representing complete stories from a happy world that sank long since, finally the beautiful marble statues of gods standing in niches all around – everything regaled the soul with an indescribable delight. They now entered the broad gallery that ran the length of the palace. The garden shone and wafted a sweet scent towards them between the lofty columns as they passed.

On the wide, highly polished steps leading down to the garden, they at last met the beautiful Lady of the Palace, who bade them welcome with perfect grace. She was resting, between lying and sitting, on a bed of exquisite sheets. She had removed the hunting-habit; a sky-blue gown, held together by a wonderfully dainty girdle, enfolded her lovely limbs. A maid, kneeling by her side, was holding a richly-ornamented mirror up to her, while several others were engaged in adorning their graceful mistress with roses. At her feet, a ring of maidens were lying on the lawn and singing in turn to the strains of a lute, now with a captivating gaiety, now descanting a gentle lament, like nightingales answering one another on warm summer nights.

In the garden itself, refreshing breezes and showers were everywhere visible. Many unknown ladies and gentlemen strolled up and down, in courteous conversation, between the rose-bushes and fountains. Pages in rich raiment served out wine and silver bowls containing oranges or fruits bedecked with flowers. In the further distance, as the music of the lute and

the evening rays glided away over the blooming fields, beautiful maidens rose here and there, as if awaking from midday dreams, shook their dark curls out of their faces, washed their eyes in the clear fountains, and then mingled with the merry swarm.

Florio's eyes wandered, as if bedazzled, over each colourful scene, always to return freshly intoxicated to the beautiful Lady of the Palace. The latter was not to be disturbed in her minor, graceful activity. Now improving some aspect of the plaiting of her dark, fragrant locks, now regarding herself in the mirror once more, she spoke continually to the youth, sweetly playing with indifferent matters in delicate words. Occasionally, she would suddenly turn round and give him such a delightful look from under the wreath of roses that it pierced his innermost soul.

Night had now begun to fall, in between the flying evening lights; the merriment that rang through the garden gradually softened to amorous whispers; the moonlight settled with enchanting rays over the beautiful scene. Then the lady rose from her flowery seat and cordially took Florio's hand to lead him into the interior of the palace, of which he had spoken with admiration. Many of the others followed. They walked up and down several steps; meanwhile the entire company dispersed amid merry laughter and jests through the manifold colonnades; Donati was also lost in the swarm, and soon Florio found himself alone with the lady in one of the palace's most magnificent chambers.

Here his beautiful conductress lay down on several silk cushions that had been strewn on the ground. In the process she threw her broad, lily-white veil in various directions, now revealing, now loosely concealing, ever more beautiful features in delicate succession. Florio watched her with blazing eyes. Then all at once, out in the garden, a beautiful song began. It

was an old, pious song, which he had often heard in his childhood days and, since then, almost forgotten under the changing images of travel. He was totally distracted, for it at once seemed to him to be Fortunato's voice.

“Do you know the singer?” he hastily asked the lady. She seemed thoroughly frightened and uttered a confused denial. Then she sat still for a long time in silent reflection.

This gave Florio time and freedom to examine the wondrous ornamentation in the chamber. It was illumined but dimly by a few candles held in two immense arms that projected from the wall. Tall, exotic flowers, which stood around in decorated pots, spread an intoxicating fragrance. Opposite was an old row of marble statues, over whose charming forms the fluctuating lights roved lasciviously. The other walls were filled with exquisite arras of silk-woven stories containing life-size figures of exceptional freshness.

To his amazement, Florio thought that he clearly recognised, in all the ladies he saw in these last depictions, the beautiful Lady of the House. Now she appeared, falcon on hand, as he had previously seen her riding to the hunt with a young cavalier; now she was portrayed in a splendid rose-garden, another handsome page on his knees at her feet.

Then the feeling suddenly flew through him, as if borne on the strains of the song outside, that at home, in the days of early childhood, he had oftentimes seen such a picture: a wonderfully beautiful lady in those very clothes, a cavalier at her feet, behind her a broad garden with many fountains and landscaped avenues, exactly the same in appearance as the garden outside. He also remembered seeing illustrations of Lucca and other famous cities there.

He recounted this, not without deep emotion, to the lady. “At that time,” he said, lost in reminiscence, “when I stood, on sultry afternoons, in the secluded summerhouse in our garden, before the old pictures, looking at the bridges and avenues, where magnificent coaches rattled by and stately cavaliers rode along, greeting the ladies in the carriages – then I did not think that all of this would some day come to life around me. My father often walked up beside me and related many an amusing adventure that had happened to him in this, in that, painted city on his youthful travels in the army. Then he would habitually walk up and down the quiet garden, in deep thought, for a long time. – While I threw myself into the tallest grass and lay for hours, watching the clouds drift over the sultry country and away. The grass and flowers swayed gently back and forth over me, as though they wished to weave strange dreams; in between, bees buzzed incessantly, so summerly – ah! all is like a sea of silence, in which the heart could founder from melancholy.”

“Oh, let that be!” the lady said distractedly, “every man believes he has seen me before, for my image dawns and blooms together with the growth of all the dreams of youth.” While saying this, she soothingly stroked the handsome youth’s brown curls away from his clear brow.

Florio stood up, his heart was too full, too deeply moved; he walked to the open window. Outside the trees rustled; here and there a nightingale sang; in the distance lightning flashed ever and anon. All the while the song passed over the quiet garden and into the distance like a clear, cool river whose surface was broken by youth’s rising dreams. The force of the melody had plunged his entire soul into deep thought; all at once he felt such a stranger here, he felt as if he had lost himself. Even the lady’s last words, which he did not rightly know how to interpret, alarmed him strangely –

then he said, softly, from the bottommost depths of his soul: "Lord God, do not let me lose my way in the world!" Hardly had he pronounced these words to himself than a sombre wind arose outside, from the approaching thunderstorm, and blew tousling through his hair. At the same moment he noticed, on the window-sill, grass and clumps of weeds, such as were to be found on ancient ruins. A snake shot out of them with a hiss and plunged, wriggling its golden-greenish tail, into the abyss.

Startled, Florio left the window and returned to the lady. She sat motionless, as if she were listening. Then she swiftly stood up, walked to the window and scolded in a graceful voice out into the night. But Florio could not understand anything, for the storm immediately tore the words into its path and away.

Meanwhile the thunderstorm seemed to be coming ever nearer; the wind, between whose gusts a solitary strain of the song would fly up and rend the heart all the while, swept whistling through all of the house, threatening to extinguish the wildly flickering candles. The next moment, a lengthy flash of lightning illuminated the duskening chamber. Then Florio suddenly started back a few steps, for it seemed to him that the lady was standing before him, rigid, eyes shut, with extremely white countenance and arms.

However, this frightful face disappeared as it had arisen, with the fleeting flashes of lightning. The familiar twilight filled the chamber once more; the lady looked at him with smiling eyes as before, but silently, melancholically, as if with the arduous suppression of tears.

Florio, staggering back in alarm, had bumped into one of the stone statues that stood around against the wall. At that very moment it began to move, this movement quickly communicated itself to the others, and then all

the statues were rising in terrible silence from their pedestals. Florio drew his rapier and flung an uncertain glance at the lady. When he noticed, however, that she was growing ever paler and paler as the strains of the song in the garden swelled with ever increasing power, like a sinking sunset, in which at last even her delightfully twinkling orbs seemed to wane, then he was seized by a deadly horror. For now the tall flowers in planters had begun to hideously wind and intertwine like colourfully-spotted rearing snakes; every cavalier on the arras suddenly looked like him and gave him a malicious smile; both of the arms that held the candles strained and stretched themselves longer and longer, as if a giant were struggling to work his way out of the wall; the hall filled up more and more, the flames of lightning threw horrible lights among the forms, through which through Florio saw the stone statues thrusting for him with such violence that his hair stood on end. Terror overwhelmed his every sense; bewildered, he dashed out of the room and down through the desolate, echoing chambers and colonnades.

Below in the garden there lay, to the side, the still lake he had seen on that first night, with the marble statue of Venus. – The singer Fortunato, so it seemed to him, was sailing in a skiff in the middle of the lake, standing bolt upright, his gaze averted, plucking single notes from his guitar. – But Florio took this apparition to be an illusion of the night, and meant to disorder the mind; and he rushed ever away, without looking around, until lake, garden and palace had all sunk far behind him. The town lay resting before him, brightly illumed by the moon. From far away on the horizon came the sound of a thunderstorm dying; it was a marvellous, clear summer's night.

The occasional streak of light was flying over the morning sky by the time he arrived at the gates. There he vigorously sought Donati's dwelling,

to take him to task over the events of that night. The country-house was situated on one of the highest points, with a prospect over the town and the whole surrounding area. Consequently he found the charming spot again in little time. But instead of the graceful villa he had been in on the previous day, there was only a lowly hut, completely overgrown with vine leaves and enclosed by a small garden. Pigeons, gleaming in the first rays of morning, walked cooing back and forth on the roof; all around there reigned a deep, serene peace. Just at that moment a man with a spade on his shoulder came out of the house and sang:

*The gloomy night is done, and gone
With cheats and spells the evil one;
To work! lights dawn's arousing chord,
Look sharp, who wants to praise the Lord!*

He broke off his song abruptly when he saw the stranger flying towards him, so wan and with tousled hair. Utterly bewildered, Florio asked for Donati. But the gardener did not know the name and seemed to take the querist for a madman. His daughter stretched up her arms on the doorstep in the cool morning air and cast a fresh, dew-clear gaze on the stranger with wide, wondering eyes.

“My God! And where have I been for so long?” Florio said to himself in an undertone, and he fled back through the gate and the yet deserted alleys into the inn.

Here he locked himself in his room and sank, body and soul, into staring reflection. The lady's indescribable beauty, as she had paled so slowly before him and her lovely eyes had set, had left such an endless

melancholy in the depths of his heart that he felt the irresistible yearning to die here.

He remained lost in such unhappy brooding and daydreams for the whole day and throughout the following night.

The first light of dawn found him on his horse before the city gates. The untiring persuasion of his loyal servant had finally moved him to the resolution to leave this region entirely. Slowly, wrapped in thought, he now made his way down the lovely road leading from Lucca out into the land, between the darkening trees, in which the birds were yet sleeping. Then, at no great distance from the town, three other riders joined him. Not without a secret shudder did he recognise one of them as the singer Fortunato. The second was the young lady Bianca's uncle, in whose country-residence Florio had danced on that fateful night. He was accompanied by a boy who rode silent, seldom lifting his gaze, at his side. All three had fixed on the resolve of wandering together through the beautiful land of Italy, and they cordially invited Florio to join their company. But he bowed in silence, neither consenting nor refusing, and persistently took but little interest in their conversations.

Meanwhile the morning sun rose ever higher and cooler over the gorgeous landscape before them. Then the merry Pietro said to Fortunato: "Just look at how strangely the twilight is playing over the walls of the old ruin on that mountain! How often did I climb around it, as a little boy, with curiosity, amazement, and a furtive fear! You have knowledge of so many legends: could you perhaps give us information on the origin and decline of this castle, about which such wondrous rumours run through the land?"

Florio threw a glance at the mountain. In deep seclusion there lay old, dilapidated ruins; beautiful pillars half-sunken in the ground and skilfully sculpted stones, all covered with a lushly blossoming wilderness of intertwined green tendrils, hedges and tall weeds. A lake was situated beside them; over it rose a partly wrecked marble statue, glowing brightly in the morning. It was clearly the same area, the same place, in which he had seen the beautiful garden and the lady. Every fibre of his being shuddered at the sight.

Fortunato said: "I know an old song about it, if that will suffice." And herewith, without hesitation, he sang with his clear, happy voice out into the morning air:

*A heap of rubble riving
Arcanely sculptured rooms,
Beneath a garden thriving
With lush, eye-catching blooms.*

*A realm in sunken seating,
The heavens near and far
Send other kingdoms' greetings –
That is Italia!*

*When spring wafts slow convection
Fair over the green dales,
A quiet resurrection
Arises in the vales.*

*And something starts to judder,
Down where gods lie at rest;
Man feels it with a shudder,
Deep in the pit of his breast.*

*Voices, confusedly turning,
Pass in and out the trees;
A dream awake with yearning
Drifts over the blue seas.*

*As springtide stirs with flowers
Under a scented veil,
The ancient, magic powers
Weave in secret wassail.*

*Frau Venus hears the chorus
Of birds' bright, coaxing call,
And rises, gladly nervous,
As clothing flowers fall.*

*She seeks the well-known places,
Her airy, columned hall;
And with a smile she faces
The waves that blow spring's call.*

*But they lie in abandon,
The columns harbour hush;
The wind lays draughty hand on
The threshold green and lush.*

*Where now are all her cronies?
Dian sleeps under forest skies;
And in the frigid, echo-lonely
Ocean-castle, Neptune lies.*

*Just sirens, on occasion,
Emerge from coral plains,
A sorrowful invasion
Of weird and wildered strains.*

*And she must stand and wonder,
So pale in spring's light grown;
Her setting eyes go under,
Her fair form turns to stone.*

*Above land-sigh and sea-moan,
In soft and quiet tears,
The rainbow's shining keystone,
Another lady appears.*

*An infant, cradled on her knee,
The wonderful lady holds;
And God's infinite mercy
The whole wide world enfolds.*

*And up among the bright air,
The human child awakes;
And all the shades of nightmare
Swift from his head he shakes.*

*From pits, like rising lark-song,
Of sultry faery night,
The soul struggles through dark song
To reach the morning light.*

All had fallen silent at the song.

“That ruin,” said Pietro at last, “would therefore be a former temple of Venus, if I understand you aright?”

“Certainly,” replied Fortunato, “as far as can be deduced from the overall arrangement and the decorations that yet remain. Rumour also has it that the spirit of the beautiful pagan goddess has not found rest. Every spring, the remembrance of earthly desire bids her rise from the terrible silence of the grave to the green solitude of her dilapidated home and use

diabolical illusion to exercise the old seduction on young, carefree souls, who then, having departed this life without being admitted to the peace of the dead, wander around between wild desire and dreadful remorse, lost in body and soul, having been consumed by the most appalling delusion. Frequently people have claimed to have experienced temptations by spirits on that very spot, where now a lady of wondrous beauty, now several handsome cavaliers, appear and lead the passing wanderer into an imaginary garden and palace presented to the eye.”

“Have you ever been up there?” Florio asked hurriedly, waking from his thoughts.

“The evening before last, for the first time,” replied Fortunato.

“And did you not see anything alarming?”

“Nothing,” said the singer, “but the calm lake, the mysterious white stone in the diffused moonlight, and the boundless, star-studded sky overhead. I sang an old, devout song, one of those original songs that pass through the paradisaal garden of our childhood like memories and echoes from a home world, and constitute a true symbol, by which all poetic souls are sure to recognise one another later in life’s age. Believe me: an honest poet can dare a great deal, for art, being free from pride and sin, tames and exorcises the wild earth-spirits that reach for us from the depths.”

All were silent; the sun was that moment rising before them and throwing her sparkling light over the Earth. Then Florio shook himself all over, galloped a stretch ahead of the others, and sang in a clear voice:

*I’m here, my lord! I greet the light
That through the sultry fullness
Of weary breasts inflows with might
And strict, refreshing coolness.*

*Now I am free! Is this head mine?
Has someone yet to wake me?
Oh Father, thou knowst me for thine,
And thou wilt not forsake me!*

After every intense emotion that shakes through our entire being, there comes a calm, clear serenity over the soul, just as fields breathe out more deeply and blossom with brighter hue after a storm. In this way did Florio feel himself refreshed to his innermost self; once more, he looked stoutly around him and, his mind at rest, waited for his companions, who came slowly following through the verdure.

In the meantime, the dainty boy who accompanied Pietro had raised his little head, like flowers to dawn's first rays. –Then, to his amazement, Florio recognised the young lady, Bianca. He was startled at her looking so much paler than on that evening when he had seen her, for the first time, in charmingly high spirits among the marquees. The poor girl, in the middle of her children's games, had been taken unawares by the force of first love. And when, after this, the fervently loved Florio, following the dark powers, became so distant, moving ever further away until she at last had to give him up for utterly lost, she sank into a deep melancholy, the secret behind which she did not dare entrust to anyone. But wise Pietro knew it well, and decided to take his niece far away to foreign lands and different climes, if not to cure, at least to divert and sustain her. To be able to travel with less hindrance, and at the same time to shed the memory of recent events, she had had to don a boy's garb.

Florio's eyes rested with pleasure on the lovely face. Hitherto a strange blindness had enveloped his eyes like a magic mist. Now he was astounded at seeing just how beautiful she was. There she was, taken

completely unawares by her unexpected happiness, and in joyful humility, as if she did not deserve such grace, riding in silence beside him, her eyes cast down. Only occasionally did she look up at him from under long, black lashes; all of her clear soul lay in that look, as if she were pleading: “Do not betray me again!”

By this time they had reached a dizzy height; behind them the city of Lucca sank with its dark towers into the shimmering haze. Then Florio, having turned towards Bianca, said: “I feel like a new man; I sense that everything will turn out aright, now that I have found you again.”

Instead of replying, Bianca looked at him, almost questioningly, with an uncertain, still half-suppressed delight; and she exactly resembled a serene angel against the background of the matutinal sky. Morning shone straight towards them, shooting long, golden rays over the ground. The trees stood warm with light; countless larks sang as they whizzed through the clear air. And so the happy wanderers passed joyfully, through resplendent leas, down into Milan in bloom.