

SHE LISTENED, WRAPPED up in her furs and leaning back against the outside of the cabin, her large pensive eyes staring into the vague shadows of the sea. The stars glittered above their heads, and no sound was heard around them save the heavy throb of the engines, and the moan of the waves that lost themselves upon the boundless horizon. In the bows, behind them, somebody was softly humming a popular song, to the accompaniment of the accordion.

Perhaps she was thinking of the hot emotions she had felt the previous evening at the theater of San Carlo in Naples, or of the Chiaia foreshore blazing with light, which they had left behind them. She had loosely taken his arm, with the abandon of that isolation in which they found themselves, and had gone to lean on the ship's rail, looking at the phosphorescent stripe

that the steamer made, deep under which the screw broke open unexplored abysses, as if she wanted to fathom the mystery of other unknown existences. On the opposite side, toward the land above which Orion sloped over, other unknown, almost mysterious lives quivered and suffered who knows what poor joys, poor sorrows, how like to those he was telling! The woman was thinking of them vaguely, with compressed lips, her eyes fixed on the darkness of the horizon.

Before they separated they remained awhile in the cabin doorway in the wavering glimmer of the swinging lamp. The steward, tired out, was squatted asleep on the stairs, dreaming perhaps of his little home in Genoa. In the poop the compass light faintly lit up the muscular figure of the man at the helm, who was motionless, his eyes fixed on the quadrant and his mind who knows where. From the bows all the while came the sad Sicilian folksong, telling in its own way of joys and sorrows, or of humble hopes, amid the monotonous moaning of the sea and the regular, impassive beat of the piston rod.

It was as if the woman could not bring herself to let go his hand. At last she raised her eyes and smiled sadly at him.

"Tomorrow!" she sighed.

He nodded his head without speaking.

"You will never forget this last evening?"

He did not answer.

"I never shall," added the woman.

At dawn they met again on deck. Her delicate small face seemed quenched with insomnia. The breeze lifted her soft black hair. Already Sicily was rising like a cloud out of the far horizon. Then Etna all at once lit up with gold and ruby, and the paling coast broke here and there into gulfs and obscure promontories. On board the crew began to busy themselves about the first morning work. Passengers came up one by one

on deck, pale, dazed, wrapped up in various ways, chewing a cigar and staggering about. The crane began to screech, and the song heard through the night was silent as if dismayed and lost in all that bustle. On the gleaming blue sea great spreading sails passed by the stern, swaying their large hulls that seemed as if they were empty, the few men on board shading their eyes to see the proud steamer go by. In the distance were other still smaller boats, like black dots, and the coast swatched in foam; on the left Calabria, and on the right the sandy Pharos Headland, Charybdis stretching her white arms toward rocky, lofty Sicily.

Unexpectedly, in the long line of the shore that seemed all one, you perceived the Straits like a blue river, and beyond, the sea again widening out once more, boundless. The woman uttered an exclamation of wonder. Then she wanted him to point out to her the mountains of Licodia and the Plain of Catania, or the Lake of Lentini with its flat shores. He showed her far away, beyond the blue mountains, the long, melancholy lines of the whitish plain, the soft slopes gray with olives, the harsh rocks with the cactus thickets, and scented, many-planted little mountain roads. It was as if all those places were peopled with people out of a legend, as he pointed them out to her one by one. Thereabouts the malaria; on that slope of Etna the village where Liberty burst out like a vendetta; below, beyond, the humble dramas of the Mystery Play, and the ironic justice of Don Licciu Papa. As she listened she even forgot the quivering drama in which they two were acting, while Messina was drawing toward them with the vast semi-circle of its palace fronts. All at once she started and murmured, "There he is!"

From the land a rowboat was advancing, and in it a white handkerchief waving salutes like a white gull in a storm.

"Good-bye!" murmured the young man.

The woman did not answer, and bent her head. Then she clasped his hand fast under her furs and took a stride away from him.

“No good-bye! Au revoir!”

“When?”

“I don’t know. But not good-bye.”

And he saw her offer her lips to the man who had come to meet her in the boat. Sinister visions passed through his mind, ghosts of the people in his stories, with crooked frown and knife in hand.

Her blue veil disappeared toward the shore, amid the crowd of boats and anchor chains.

The months passed by. At last she wrote to him that he could come to her. “In a lonely little house among the vines — there will be a cross chalked on the door. I shall come by the path between the fields. Wait for me. Don’t let anybody notice you, or I am lost.”

It was still autumn, but it rained and blew like winter. Hidden behind the door, with his heart thudding inside him, he eagerly watched for the strokes of rain that struck furrows past the window hole to thin down. The dry leaves whirled behind the threshold like the rustle of a dress. What was she doing? Would she come? The clock always answered no, no, every quarter of an hour, from the neighboring village. At last a ray of sun came through a broken tile. All the country shone. The carob trees above the roof rustled loudly, and beyond, behind the dripping avenues, the footpath opened out blossoming with yellow and white marguerites. It was there her little white umbrella should appear, down there, above the low wall on the right. A wasp buzzed in the golden ray that penetrated through the cracks, and bumped against the window frame saying: Come! Come! All at once somebody roughly pushed open the garden door on the left. Like a stroke through

the blood! It was she! White, all white, from her dress to her pale face. The moment she saw him she fell into his arms, with her mouth against his mouth.

How many hours passed by in that rough, smoky little room! How many things they said to one another! The changeless insentient woodworm continued gnawing the beams of the roof. The clock in the neighboring village let fall the hours one by one. Through a hole in the wall they could see the reflection of the shaken leaves outside, shadow alternating with green light as at the bottom of a lake.

Such is life. All at once she was as if bewildered, she passed her hand over her lips, then opened the door to see the setting sun. Then resolutely she threw her arms around his neck, saying, "I won't leave you anymore."

Arm in arm they walked together to the little station not far off, lost in the deserted plain. Not to part anymore! What boundless and trembling joy! To go clasped one against the other, silent, as if dazed, through the still country, in the mingled hour of evening.

Insects were buzzing about the ridge of the footpath. From the crumbled earth a heavy, confused mist arose. Not a human voice, not a dog that barked. Far away a lonely light twinkled in the shadows. At last the train came, plumed and puffing. They set off together; to go far away, far away, into those mysterious mountains of which he had spoken to her, so that she seemed to know them already.

For ever!

For ever. They rose at daybreak, rambled around the fields, in the first dews, they sat at midday in the thick of the plants, or in the shadow of the poplars whose white leaves trembled without a wind, happy at feeling themselves alone, in the great stillness. They lingered on till late evening, to see the day die on the tips of the mountains, when the window panes suddenly

took fire and revealed the far-off cabins. Darkness rose along the little roads of the valley, which now took on a melancholy air; then a gold-colored beam rested for an instant on a bush that grew on top of the low wall. This bush also had its hour, and its ray of sun. Tiny insects hummed around, in the tepid light. When winter came the bush would disappear, and sun and night would alternate once more upon gloomy bare stones, wet with rain. So had disappeared the hut of the lime burner, and the inn of "Killwife" on the top of the little deserted hill. Only the crumbling ruins showed themselves black in the crimson of sunset. The lake spread always the same in the background of the plain, like a tarnished mirror. Nearer at hand the vast fields of Mazzaro, the thick gray olive-groves on which the sunset came down more darkly, the endless parturage that disappeared into the glory of the west, on the crowns of the hills; and other people appeared in the doorways of the farms as big as villages, to see other travelers pass by. Nobody knew anything more about Cirino, or about Neighbor Carmine, or the rest. The phantoms had passed away. Only the solemn and changeless landscape remained, with its large eastward spaces and its hot, robust tones. Mysterious sphinx, representing the passing phantoms with a character of fatal necessity. In the village the children of the victims had made peace with the blind, bloody instruments of Liberty; Shepherd Arcangelo dragged out a late old age at the expense of the young master; one of Neighbor Santo's daughters had gone as bride into the home of Master Cola. At the inn by the Lake of Lentini a hairless, half-blind old dog that had been forgotten at the door by the various innkeepers as they succeeded one another, still barked gloomily at the rare travelers passing by.

Then the bush also went colorless, and the owl began to hoot in the distant wood.

Farewell, sunsets of the distant land. Farewell, solitary poplars, in whose shade she has so often listened to the stories he told, which have seen so many people pass, and the sun rise and set so often away down there. Farewell! She too is far away.

One day ill news came from the city. One word was enough, from a distant man whom she could not hear mentioned without going pale and bending her head. In love, young, rich, the pair of them, both of them having said that they wanted to be together forever, and yet a word from that man had been enough to part them. It wasn't need of bread, such as had made Pino the Tome fall, nor was it the sharp knife of a jealous man. It was something subtler and stronger that parted them. It was the life in which they lived and by which they had been formed. The lovers became dumb and bowed their heads to the will of the husband. Now she seemed as if she feared the other one, and wanted to flee away from him. At the moment of parting from him she wept her many tears, which he greedily drank up; but she went all the same. Who knows how often they recall that time, in the midst of their diverse excitements, at their feverish balls and parties, in the swirling succession of events, in the harsh necessities of life? How many times has she called to mind that far-off little village, that desert in which they were alone with their love, that old stump in whose shade she had lain with her head on his shoulder, saying to him with a smile, "Shade for the Camelias."

There were plenty of Camelias, and superb ones, in the splendid conservatory where the merry sounds of the feast arrived faintly, long afterward, when another had plucked her a crimson blossom red as blood, and had put it in her hair. Farewell, far-off sunsets of the far-off countryside! And he too, when he raised his tired head to gaze into the aureole of his lonely lamp, at the phantoms of the past, what numerous

images he saw, what memories came back! one place or another in the world, in the solitude of the fields, in the whirlpool of the great cities. How many things had come to pass! and how much they had lived through, those two hearts now separated far apart!

At last they met again in the wild excitement of Carnival. He had gone to the festival to see her, with his soul weary and his heart wrung with anguish. She was there, dazzling, surrounded by a thousand flatteries. But she had a tired face too, and a sad, absent smile. Their eyes met and flashed. Nothing more. Late in the evening they found themselves as if by chance near to one another, in the shade of the big, motionless palms. "Tomorrow!" she said to him. "Tomorrow, at such and such a time, in such and such a place. Let happen what may! I want to see you!" Her white delicate bosom was in storm beneath the transparent lace, and her fan trembled in her hands. Then she bent her head, with her eyes fixed and abstracted, while light and fleeting blushes passed over the nape of her neck that was of the color of a magnolia. How hard his heart was beating! How exquisite and fearful the joy of that moment! But when they saw each other the next day, it wasn't the same anymore. Why not, who can tell? They had tasted the poisonous fruit of worldly knowledge; the refined pleasure of the look and the word exchanged in secret in the midst of two hundred people, of a promise that is worth more than the reality, because it is murmured behind a fan and amid the scent of flowers, to the glitter of gems and the excitation of music. So that when they threw themselves into one another's arms, when they said with their mouths that they loved one another, they were both of them thinking with regretful, keen desire about the rapid moment of the previous evening, when they had said to each other in a low voice, without looking at one another, almost without words, that both their hearts were



in a whirl in their breasts at being near to one another again. When they parted once more, and were holding hands on the threshold, they were both gloomy, and not simply because they had to say good-bye — but as if something were missing from them. Still they held each other by the hand, and to each of them came the impulse to ask, “Do you remember?” But they dared not ask it. She had said she was leaving the next day by the first train, and he let her go.

He saw her go away down the deserted avenue, and he stood there, with his forehead against the laths of that venetian blind. Evening fell, a hand organ played in the distance at the door of a public house.

She left the next day by the first train. She had said to him, “I must go with *him!*” He too had received a telegram that called him far away. On that leaf she had written: *For ever*, and a date. But life took them both again, one this way and one that, inexorably. The following evening he also was at the station, sad and alone. People were embracing and saying good-bye; husbands and wives were parting smiling; a mother, a poor old woman of the peasantry trailed weeping after her boy, a stout young fellow in bersagliere’s uniform, with his sack on his shoulder, who went from door to door looking for the way out.

The train started. First the city passed by, the streets swarming with lights, the suburb lively with merry companions. Then it began to pass like lightning through the lonely country, the open fields, the streams that glittered in the shade. From time to time a hamlet smoking, people gathered in front of a doorway. On the low wall of a little station where the train had stopped for a moment puffing, two lovers had left their obscure names written in big charcoal letters. He was thinking that she too had passed that way in the morning, and had seen those names.

Far, far away, long after, in the immense misty and gloomy city, he still recalled at times those two humble, unknown names, amidst all the crowded, hurrying throng, and the incessant noise, and the fever of immense general activity, exhausting and inexorable; among the luxurious carriages, and men who must walk through the mud bearing two boards covered with advertisements, and in front of the splendid shop windows glittering with gems, or beside squalid slum-shops that displayed human skulls and old boots spread out in rows. From time to time he heard the whistling of a train passing under earth or through the air overhead, rushing to disappear in the distance, toward the pale horizon, as if it longed for the country of the sun. Then again came into his mind the names of those two unknown folk who had written the story of their humble joys on the wall of a house in front of which so many people must pass. Two blond, calm young creatures were walking slowly through the wide avenues of the garden, hand in hand; the youth had given the girl a little bunch of crimson roses for which he had bargained anxiously for a quarter of an hour with a ragged, miserable old woman; the girl, with her roses in her bosom like a queen, was disappearing along with him far from the crowd of amazons and superb carriages. When they were alone under the big trees of the waterside, they sat down side by side, talking together in low tones, in the calm expansion of their affection.

The sun sank in the vivid west, and even there, down the deserted avenues, came the sound of the hand organ with which a beggar from faraway villages was going around begging his bread in an unknown tongue.

Farewell, sweet melancholy of sunset, silent shadows and wide, lonely horizons of our known country. Farewell, scented lanes where it was so lovely to walk together arm in arm.

Farewell, poor, ignored people who opened your eyes so wide, seeing the two happy ones pass by.

Sometimes, when the sweet sadness of those memories came over him, he thought again of the humble actors in the humble dramas, with a vague, unconscious inspiration of peace and of forgetting, and of that date and of those two words — *for ever* — which she had left with him in a moment of anguish, a moment that had remained more living in heart and mind than any of the feverish joys. And then he would have liked to set her name on a page or on a stone, like those two unknown lovers who had written the record of their love on the wall of a faraway railway station.