

She sat down in a chair beside him as he stood, and taking his hand she pressed it to her lips. She knew well enough what a strange thing she had asked, and she was indeed grateful to him. He stooped down and kissed her forehead.

"I will always trust you," he said, softly. "Tell me, dear one, has this matter given you pain? Is it a secret that will trouble you?"

"Not now," she answered, frankly.

Giovanni was in earnest when he promised to trust his wife. He knew, better than any living man, how well worthy she was of his utmost confidence, and he meant what he said. It must be confessed that the situation was a trying one to a man of his temper, and the depth of his love for Corona can be judged from the readiness with which he consented to her concealing anything from him. Every circumstance connected with what had happened that evening was strange, and the conclusion, instead of elucidating the mystery, only made it more mysterious still. His cousin's point-blank declaration that Faustina and Gouache were in love was startling to all his ideas and prejudices. He had seen Gouache kiss Corona's hand in a corner of the drawing-room, a proceeding which he did not wholly approve, though it was common enough. Then Gouache and Faustina had disappeared. Then Faustina had been found, and to facilitate the finding it had been necessary that Corona and Gouache should leave the palace together at one o'clock in the morning. Finally, Corona had appealed to his confidence in her and had taken advantage of it to refuse any present explanation whatever of her proceedings. Corona was a very noble and true woman, and he had promised to trust her. How far he kept his word will appear hereafter.

CHAPTER VII.

When San Giacinto heard Corona's explanation of Faustina's disappearance, he said nothing. He did not believe the story in the least, but if every one was satis-

fied there was no reason why he should not be satisfied also. Though he saw well enough that the tale was a pure invention, and that there was something behind it which was not to be known, the result was, on the whole, exactly what he desired. He received the thanks of the Montevarchi household for his fruitless exertions with a smile of gratification, and congratulated the princess upon the happy issue of the adventure. He made no present attempt to ascertain the real truth by asking questions which would have been hard to answer, for he was delighted that the incident should be explained away and forgotten at once. Donna Faustina's disappearance was of course freely discussed and variously commented, but the general verdict of the world was contrary to San Giacinto's private conclusions. People said that the account given by the family must be true, since it was absurd to suppose that a child just out of the convent could be either so foolish or so courageous as to go out alone at such a moment. No other hypothesis was in the least tenable, and the demonstration offered must be accepted as giving the only solution of the problem. San Giacinto told no one that he thought differently.

It was before all things his intention to establish himself firmly in Roman society, and his natural tact told him that the best way to accomplish this was to offend no one, and to endorse without question the opinion of the majority. Moreover, as a part of his plan for assuring his position consisted in marrying Faustina's sister, his interest lay manifestly in protecting the good name of her family by every means in his power. He knew that old Montevarchi passed for being one of the most rigid amongst the stiff company of the strait-laced, and that the prince was as careful of the conduct of his children, as his father had formerly been in regard to his own doings. Ascanio Bellegra was the result of this home education, and already bid fair to follow in his parent's footsteps. Christian virtues are certainly not incompatible with manliness, but the practice of them as maintained by Prince Montevarchi had made his son Ascanio a colourless creature, rather non-bad than good, clothed in a garment of righteousness that fitted him only because his harmless soul had no salient bosses of

goodness, any more than it was disfigured by any reprehensible depressions capable of harbouring evil.

There is a class of men in certain states of society who are manly, but not masculine. There is nothing paradoxical in the statement, nor is it a mere play upon the meanings of words. There are men of all ages, young, middle-aged, and old, who possess many estimable virtues, who show physical courage wherever it is necessary, who are honourable, strong, industrious, and tenacious of purpose, but who undeniably lack something which belongs to the ideal man, and which, for want of a better word, we call the masculine element. When we shall have microscopes so large and powerful that a human being shall be as transparent under the concentrated light of the lenses as the tiniest insect when placed in one of our modern instruments, then, perhaps, the scientist of the future may discover the causes of this difference. I believe, however, that it does not depend upon the fact of one man having a few ounces more of blood in his veins than another. The fact lies deeper hidden than that, and may puzzle the psychologist as well as the professor of anthropology. For us it exists, and we cannot explain it, but must content ourselves with comparing the phenomena which proceed from these differences of organisation. At the present day the society of the English-speaking races seems to favour the growth of the creature who is only manly but not masculine, whereas outside the pale of that strange little family which calls itself "society" the masculinity of man is more striking than among other races. Not long ago a French journalist said that many of the peculiarities of the English-speaking peoples proceeded from the omnipresence of the young girl, who reads every novel that appears, goes to every theatre, and regulates the tone of conversation and literature by her never-absent innocence. Cynics, if there are still representatives of a school which has grown ridiculous, may believe this if they please; the fact remains that it is precisely the most masculine class of men who show the strongest predilection for the society of the most refined women, and who on the whole show the greatest respect for all women in general. The masculine man prefers the company of the other sex by

natural attraction, and would perhaps rather fight with other men, or at least strive to outdo them in the struggle for notoriety, power, or fame, than spend his time in friendly conversation with them, no matter how interesting the topic selected. This point of view may be regarded as uncivilised, but it may be pointed out that it is only in the most civilised countries that the society of women is accessible to all men of their own social position. No one familiar with Eastern countries will pretend that Orientals shut up their women because they enjoy their company so much as to be unwilling to share the privilege with their friends.

San Giacinto was pre-eminently a masculine man, as indeed were all the Saracinesca, in a greater or less degree. He understood women instinctively, and, with a very limited experience of the world, knew well enough the strength of their influence. It was characteristic of him that he had determined to marry almost as soon as he had got a footing in Roman society. He saw clearly that if he could unite himself with a powerful family he could exercise a directing power over the women which must ultimately give him all that he needed. Through his cousins he had very soon made the acquaintance of the Montevarchi household, and seeing that there were two marriageable daughters, he profited by the introduction. He would have preferred Faustina, perhaps, but he foresaw that he should find fewer difficulties in obtaining her sister for his wife. The old prince and princess were in despair at seeing her still unmarried, and it was clear that they were not likely to find a better match for her than the Marchese di San Giacinto. He, on his part, knew that his past occupation was a disadvantage to him in the eyes of the world, although he was the undoubted and acknowledged cousin of the Saracinesca, and the only man of the family besides old Leone and his son Sant' Ilario. His two boys, also, were a drawback, since his second wife's children could not inherit the whole of the property he expected to leave. But his position was good, and Flavia was not generally considered to be likely to marry, so that he had good hopes of winning her.

It was clear to him from the first that there must be

some reason why she had not married, and the somewhat disparaging remarks concerning her which he heard from time to time excited his curiosity. As he had always intended to consult the head of his family upon the matter he now determined to do so at once. He was not willing, indeed, to let matters go any further until he had ascertained the truth concerning her, and he was sure that Prince Saracinesca would tell him everything at the first mention of a proposal to marry her. The old gentleman had too much pride to allow his cousin to make an unfitting match. Accordingly, on the day following the events last narrated San Giacinto called after breakfast and found the prince, as usual, alone in his study. He was not dozing, however, for the accounts of the last night's doings in the *Osservatore Romano* were very interesting.

"I suppose you have heard all about Montevarchi's daughter?" asked Saracinesca, laying his paper aside and giving his hand to San Giacinto.

"Yes, and I am delighted at the conclusion of the adventure, especially as I have something to ask you about another member of the family."

"I hope Flavia has not disappeared now," remarked the prince.

"I trust not," answered San Giacinto with a laugh. "I was going to ask you whether I should have your approval if I proposed to marry her."

"This is a very sudden announcement," said Saracinesca with some surprise. "I must think about it. I appreciate your friendly disposition vastly, my dear cousin, in asking my opinion, and I will give the matter my best consideration."

"I shall be very grateful," replied the younger man, gravely. "In my position I feel bound to consult you. I should do so in any case for the mere benefit of your advice, which is very needful to one who, like myself, is but a novice in the ways of Rome."

Saracinesca looked keenly at his cousin, as though expecting to discover some touch of irony in his tone or expression. He remembered the fierce altercations he had engaged in with Giovanni when he had wished the latter to marry Tullia Mayer, and was astonished to find

San Giacinto, over whom he had no real authority at all, so docile and anxious for his counsel.

"I suppose you would like to know something about her fortune," he said at last. "Montevarchi is rich, but miserly. He could give her anything he liked."

"Of course it is important to know what he would like to give," replied San Giacinto with a smile.

"Of course. Very well. There are two daughters already married. They each had a hundred thousand scudi. It is not so bad, after all, when you think what a large family he has — but he could have given more. As for Flavia, he might do something generous for the sake of —"

The old gentleman was going to say, for the sake of getting rid of her, and perhaps his cousin thought as much. The prince checked himself, however, and ended his sentence rather awkwardly.

"For the sake of getting such a fine fellow for a husband," he said.

"Why is she not already married?" inquired San Giacinto with a very slight inclination of his head, as an acknowledgment of the flattering speech whereby the prince had helped himself out of his difficulty.

"Who knows!" ejaculated the latter enigmatically.

"Is there any story about her? Was she ever engaged to be married? It is rather strange when one thinks of it, for she is a handsome girl. Pray be quite frank — I have taken no steps in the matter."

"The fact is that I do not know. She is not like other girls, and as she gives her father and mother some trouble in society, I suppose that young men's fathers have been afraid to ask for her. No. I can assure you that there is no story connected with her. She has a way of stating disagreeable truths that terrifies Montevarchi. She was delicate as a child and was brought up at home, so of course she has no manners."

"I should have thought she should have better manners for that," remarked San Giacinto. The prince stared at him in surprise.

"We do not think so here," he answered after a moment's pause. "On the whole, I should say that for a hundred and twenty thousand you might marry her, if

you are so inclined — and if you can manage her. But that is a matter for you to judge.”

“The Montevarchi are, I believe, what you call a great family?”

“They are not the Savelli, nor the Frangipani — nor the Saracinesca either. But they are a good family — good blood, good fortune, and what Montevarchi calls good principles.”

“You think I could not do better than marry Donna Flavia, then?”

“It would be a good marriage, decidedly. You ought to have married Tullia Mayer. If she had not made a fool of herself and an enemy of me, and if you had turned up two years ago — well, there were a good many objections to her, and stories about her, too. But she was rich — eh! that was a fortune to be snapped up by that scoundrel Del Ferice!”

“Del Ferice?” repeated San Giacinto. “The same who tried to prove that your son was married by copying my marriage register?”

“The same. I will tell you the rest of the story some day. Then at that time there was Bianca Valdarno — but she married a Neapolitan last year; and the Rocca girl, but Onorato Cantalupo got her and her dowry — Montevarchi’s second son — and — well, I see nobody now, except Flavia’s sister Faustina. Why not marry her? It is true that her father means to catch young Frangipani, but he will have no such luck, I can tell him, unless he will part with half a million.”

“Donna Faustina is too young,” said San Giacinto, calmly. “Besides, as they are sisters and there is so little choice, I may say that I prefer Donna Flavia, she is more gay, more lively.”

“Vastly more, I have no doubt, and you will have to look after her, unless you can make her fall in love with you.” Saracinesca laughed at the idea.

“With me!” exclaimed San Giacinto, joining in his cousin’s merriment. “With me, indeed! A sober widower, between thirty and forty! A likely thing! Fortunately there is no question of love in this matter. I think I can answer for her conduct, however.”

“I would not be the man to raise your jealousy!”

remarked Saracinesca, laughing again as he looked admiringly at his cousin’s gigantic figure and lean stern face. “You are certainly able to take care of your wife. Besides, I have no doubt that Flavia will change when she is married. She is not a bad girl — only a little too fond of making fun of her father and mother, and after all, as far as the old man is concerned, I do not wonder. There is one point upon which you must satisfy him, though — I am not curious, and do not ask you questions, but I warn you that glad as he will be to marry his daughter, he will want to drive a bargain with you and will inquire about your fortune.”

San Giacinto was silent for a few moments and seemed to be making a calculation in his head.

“Would a fortune equal to what he gives her be sufficient?” he asked at length.

“Yes. I fancy so,” replied the prince looking rather curiously at his cousin. “You see,” he continued, “as you have children by your first marriage, Montevarchi would wish to see Flavia’s son provided for, if she has one. That is your affair. I do not want to make suggestions.”

“I think,” said San Giacinto after another short interval of silence, “that I could agree to settle something upon any children which may be born. Do you think some such arrangement would satisfy Prince Montevarchi?”

“Certainly, if you can agree about the terms. Such things are often done in these cases.”

“I am very grateful for your advice. May I count upon your good word with the prince, if he asks your opinion?”

“Of course,” answered Saracinesca, readily, if not very cordially.

He had not at first liked his cousin, and although he had overcome his instinctive aversion to the man, the feeling was momentarily revived with more than its former force by the prospect of being perhaps called upon to guarantee, in a measure, San Giacinto’s character as a suitable husband for Flavia. He had gone too far already however, for since he had given his approval to the scheme it would not become him to withhold his co-

operation, should his assistance be in any way necessary in order to bring about the marriage. The slight change of tone as he uttered the last words had not escaped San Giacinto, however. His perceptions were naturally quick and were sharpened by the peculiarities of his present position, so that he understood Saracinesca's unwillingness to have a hand in the matter almost better than the prince understood it himself.

"I trust that I shall not be obliged to ask your help," remarked San Giacinto. "I was, indeed, more anxious for your goodwill than for any more material aid."

"You have it, with all my heart," said Saracinesca warmly, for he was a little ashamed of his coldness.

San Giacinto took his leave and went away well satisfied with what he had accomplished, as indeed he had good cause to be. Montevarchi's consent to the marriage was not doubtful, now that San Giacinto was assured that he was able to fulfil the conditions which would be asked, and the knowledge that he was able to do even more than was likely to be required of him gave him additional confidence in the result. To tell the truth, he was strongly attracted by Flavia; and though he would assuredly have fought with his inclination had it appeared to be misplaced, he was pleased with the prospect of marrying a woman who would not only strengthen his position in society, but for whom he knew that he was capable of a sincere attachment. Marriage, according to his light, was before all things a contract entered into for mutual advantage; but he saw no reason why the fulfilment of such a contract should not be made as agreeable as possible.

The principal point was yet to be gained, however, and as San Giacinto mounted the steps of the Palazzo Montevarchi he stopped more than once, considering for the last time whether he were doing wisely or not. On the whole he determined to proceed, and made up his mind that he would go straight to the point.

Flavia's father was sitting in his study when San Giacinto arrived, and the latter was struck by the contrast between the personalities and the modes of life of his cousin whom he had just left and of the man to whom he was about to propose himself as a son-in-law. The Sara-

cinesca were by no means very luxurious men, but they understood the comforts of existence better than most Romans of that day. If there was massive old-fashioned furniture against the walls and in the corners of the huge rooms, there were on the other hand soft carpets for the feet and cushioned easy-chairs to sit in. There were fires on the hearths when the weather was cold, and modern lamps for the long winter evenings. There were new books on the tables, engravings, photographs, a few objects of value and beauty not jealously locked up in closets, but looking as though they were used, if useful, or at least as if some one derived pleasure from looking at them. The palace itself was a stern old fortress in the midst of the older part of the city, but within there was a genial atmosphere of generous living, and, since Sant' Ilario's marriage with Corona, an air of refinement and good taste such as only a woman can impart to the house in which she dwells.

The residence of the Montevarchi was very different. Narrow strips of carpet were stretched in straight lines across cold marble floors, from one door to another. Instead of open fires in the huge chimney-places, pans of lighted charcoal were set in the dim, empty rooms. Half a dozen halls were furnished alike. Each had three marble tables and twelve straight-backed chairs ranged against the walls, the only variety being that some were covered with red damask and some with green. Vast old-fashioned mirrors, set in magnificent frames built into the wall, reflected vistas of emptiness and acres of cold solitude. Nor were the rooms where the family met much better. There were more tables and more straight-backed chairs there than in the outer halls, but that was all. The drawing-room had a carpet, which for many years had been an object of the greatest concern to the prince, who never left Rome for the months of August and September until he had assured himself that this valuable object had been beaten, dusted, peppered, and sewn up in a linen case as old as itself, that is to say, dating from a quarter of a century back. That carpet was an extravagance to which his father had been driven by his English daughter-in-law; it was the only one of which he had ever been guilty, and the present head of