

"I devoutly trust that heaven in its mercy may avert such a catastrophe from our house," replied Montevarchi, who, however, seemed to be occupied in adding together certain sums upon his fingers.

San Giacinto understood Flavia better than either of her parents; and although his marriage with her was before all things a part of his plan for furthering his worldly interests, it must be confessed that he had a stronger liking for the girl than her father would have considered indispensable in such affairs. The matter was decided at once, and in a few days the preliminaries were settled between the lawyers, while Flavia exerted the utmost pressure possible upon the parental purse in the question of the trousseau.

It may seem strange that at the time when all Rome was convulsed by an internal revolution, and when the temporal power appeared to be in very great danger, Montevarchi and San Giacinto should have been able to discuss so coolly the conditions of the marriage, and even to fix the wedding day. The only possible explanation of this fact is that neither of them believed in the revolution at all. It is a noticeable characteristic of people who are fond of money that they do not readily believe in any great changes. They are indeed the most conservative of men, and will count their profits at moments of peril with a coolness which would do honour to veteran soldiers. Those who possess money put their faith in money and give no credence to rumours of revolution which are not backed by cash. Once or twice in history they have been wrong, but it must be confessed that they have very generally been right.

As for San Giacinto, his own interests were infinitely more absorbing to his attention than those of the world at large, and being a man of uncommonly steady nerves, it seems probable that he would have calmly pursued his course in the midst of much greater disturbances than those which affected Rome at that time.

CHAPTER VIII.

When Anastase Gouache was at last relieved from duty and went home in the gray dawn of the twenty-third, he lay down to rest expecting to reflect upon the events of the night. The last twelve hours had been the most eventful of his life; indeed less than that time had elapsed since he had bid farewell to Faustina in the drawing-room of the Palazzo Saracinesca, and yet the events which had occurred in that short space had done much towards making him another man. The change had begun two years earlier, and had progressed slowly until it was completed all at once by a chain of unforeseen circumstances. He realised the fact, and as this change was not disagreeable to him he set himself to think about it. Instead of reviewing what had happened, however, he did what was much more natural in his case, he turned upon his pillow and fell fast asleep. He was younger than his years, though he counted less than thirty, and his happy nature had not yet formed that horrible habit of wakefulness which will not yield even to bodily fatigue. He lay down and slept like a boy, disturbed by no dreams and troubled by no shadowy revival of dangers or emotions past.

He had placed a gulf between himself and his former life. What had passed between him and Faustina, might under other circumstances have become but a romantic episode in the past, to be thought of with a certain tender regret, half fatuous, half genuine, whenever the moonlight chanced to cast the right shadow and the artist's mind was in the contemplative mood. The peculiar smell of broken masonry, when it is a little damp, would recall the impression, perhaps; an old wall knocked to pieces by builders would, through his nostrils, bring vividly before him that midnight meeting amid the ruins of the barracks, just as the savour of a certain truffle might bring back the memory of a supper at Voisin's, or as, twenty years hence, the pasty grittiness of rough maize bread would make him remember the days when he was chasing brigands in the Samnite hills. But this was not

to be the case this time. There was more matter for reminiscence than a ray of moonlight on a fair face, or the smell of crumbling mortar.

There was a deep and sincere devotion on both sides, in two persons both singularly capable of sincerity, and both foresaw that the result of this love could never be indifference. The end could only be exceeding happiness, or mortal sorrow. Anastase and Faustina were not only themselves in earnest; each knew instinctively that the other would be faithful, a condition extremely rare in ordinary cases. Each recognised that the obstacles were enormous, but neither doubted for a moment that means would be found to overcome them.

In some countries the marriage of these two would have been a simple matter enough. A man of the world, honourable, successful, beginning to be famous, possessed of some fortune, might aspire to marry any one he pleased in lands where it is not a disgrace to have acquired the means of subsistence by one's own talent and industry. Artists and poets have sometimes made what are called great marriages. But in Rome, twenty years ago, things were very different. It is enough to consider the way in which Montevarchi arranged to dispose of his daughter Flavia to understand the light in which he would have regarded Faustina's marriage with Anastase Gouache. The very name of Gouache would have raised a laugh in the Montevarchi household had any one suggested that a woman of that traditionally correct race could ever make it her own. There were persons in Rome, indeed, who might have considered the matter more leniently. Corona Sant' Ilario was one of these; but her husband and father-in-law would have opened their eyes as wide as old Lotario Montevarchi himself, had the match been discussed before them. Their patriarchally exclusive souls would have been shocked and the dear fabric of their inborn prejudices shaken to its deepest foundations. It was bad enough, from the point of view of potential matrimony, to earn money, even if one had the right to prefix "Don" to one's baptismal name. But to be no Don and to receive coin for one's labour was a far more insurmountable barrier against intermarriage with the patriarchs than hereditary madness, toothless old age, leprosy, or lack of money.

Gouache had acquired enough knowledge of Roman life to understand this, and nothing short of physical exhaustion would have prevented his spending his leisure in considering the means of overcoming such stupendous difficulties. When he awoke his situation presented itself clearly enough to his mind, however, and occupied his thoughts throughout the remainder of the day. Owing to the insurrection his departure was delayed for twenty-four hours, and his duty was likely to keep him busily engaged during the short time that remained to him. The city was in a state of siege and there would be a perpetual service of patrols, sentries and general maintenance of order. The performance of labours almost mechanical left him plenty of time for reflection, though he found it hard to spare a moment in which to see any of his friends.

He was very anxious to meet the Princess Sant' Ilario, whose conduct on the previous night had seriously alarmed him. It was to her that he looked for assistance in his troubles and the consciousness that she was angry with him was a chief source of distress. In the course of the few words he had exchanged with her, she had made it sufficiently clear to him that although she disapproved in principle of his attachment to Faustina, she would do nothing to hinder his marriage if he should be able to overcome the obstinacy of the girl's parents. He was at first at a loss to explain her severity to him when she had left her house to take Faustina home. Being wholly innocent of any share in the latter's mad course, it did not at first enter his mind that Corona could attribute to him any blame in the matter. On the contrary, he knew that if the girl's visit to the ruined barracks remained a secret, this would be owing quite as much to his own discretion and presence of mind as to the princess's willingness to help him. Not a little, too, was due to good luck, since the least difference in the course of events must have led to immediate discovery.

A little thought led him to a conclusion which wounded his pride while it explained Corona's behaviour. It was evident that she had believed in a clandestine meeting, prearranged between the lovers at the instigation of Gouache himself, and she had probably

supposed this meeting to be only the preliminary to a runaway match. How, indeed, could Faustina have expected to escape observation, even had there been no revolution in Rome, that night? Corona clearly thought that the girl had never intended to come back, that Gouache had devised means for their departure, and that Faustina had believed the elopement possible in the face of the insurrection. Anastase, on finding himself in the small hours of the morning with Faustina on his hands and knowing that discovery must follow soon after day-break, had boldly brought her to the Palazzo Saracinesca and had demanded Corona's assistance.

As the artist thought the matter over, he became more and more convinced that he had understood the princess's conduct, and the reflection made him redden with shame and anger. He determined to seize the first moment that presented itself for an explanation with the woman who had wronged him. He unexpectedly found himself at liberty towards five o'clock in the afternoon and made haste at once to reach the Palazzo Saracinesca. Knowing that no one would be allowed to be in the streets after dark, he felt sure of finding Corona without visitors, and expected the most favourable opportunity for talking over the subject which distressed him.

After waiting several minutes in one of the outer halls he was ushered in, and to his extreme annoyance found himself in the midst of a family party. He had not counted upon the presence of the men of the household, and the fact that the baby was also present did not facilitate matters. Old Saracinesca greeted him warmly; Sant' Ilario looked grave; Corona herself looked up from her game with little Orsino, nodded and uttered a word of recognition, and then returned to her occupation.

Conversation under these circumstances was manifestly impossible, and Gouache wished he had not had the unlucky idea of calling. There was nothing to be done, however, but to put on a brave face and make the best of it.

"Well, Monsieur Gouache," inquired the old prince, "and how did you spend the night?"

He could scarcely have asked a question better cal-

culated to disturb the composure of every one present except the baby. Anastase could not help looking at Corona, who looked instinctively at her husband, while the latter gazed at Gouache, wondering what he would say. All three turned a shade paler, and during a very few seconds there was an awkward silence.

"I spent the night very uncomfortably," replied Anastase, after hesitating a little. "We were driven from pillar to post, repelling attacks, doing sentry duty, clearing the streets, marching and countermarching. It was daylight when I was relieved."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Sant' Ilario. "I had supposed that you had remained all night at the Porta San Paolo. But there are many contradictory accounts. I was in some anxiety until I was assured that you had not been blown up in that infernal plot."

Gouache was on the point of asking who had told Giovanni that he had escaped, but fortunately checked himself, and endeavoured to turn the conversation to the disaster at the barracks. Thereupon old Saracinesca, whose blood was roused by the atrocity, delivered a terrible anathema against the murderous wretches who had ruined the building, and expressed himself in favour of burning them alive, a fate, indeed, far too good for them. Anastase profited by the old gentleman's eloquence to make advances to the baby. Little Orsino, however, struck him a vigorous blow in the face with his tiny fist and yelled lustily.

"He does not like strangers," remarked Corona, coldly. She rose with the child in her arms and moved towards the door, Gouache following her with the intention of opening it for her to go out. The prince was still thundering out curses against the conspirators, and Anastase attempted to say a word unobserved as Corona passed him.

"Will you not give me a hearing?" he asked in a low tone, accompanying his words with an imploring look.

Corona raised her eyebrows slightly as though surprised, but his expression of genuine contrition softened her heart a little and rendered her answer perhaps a trifle less unkind than she had meant it to be.

"You should be satisfied — since I keep your secret," she said, and passed quickly out.

When Gouache turned after closing the door he was aware that Sant' Ilario had been watching him, by the fixed way in which he was now looking in another direction. The Zouave wished more and more fervently that he had not come to the house, but resolved to prolong his visit in the hope that Corona might return. Sant' Ilario was unaccountably silent, but his father kept up a lively conversation, needing only an occasional remark from Gouache to give a fillip to his eloquence.

This situation continued during nearly half an hour, at the end of which time Anastase gave up all hope of seeing Corona again. The two men evidently did not expect her to return, for they had made themselves comfortable and had lighted their cigarettes.

"Good-bye, Monsieur Gouache," said the old prince, cordially shaking him by the hand. "I hope we shall see you back again alive and well in a few days."

While he was speaking Giovanni had rung the bell for the servant to show the visitor out, an insignificant action, destined to produce a rather singular result. Sant' Ilario himself, feeling that after all he might never see Gouache alive again, repented a little of his coldness, and while the latter stood ready to go, detained him with a question as to his destination on leaving the city. This resulted in a lively discussion of Garibaldi's probable movements, which lasted several minutes.

Corona in the meantime had taken Orsino back to his nurse, and had bidden her maid let her know when the visitor in the drawing-room was gone. The woman went to the hall, and when Giovanni rang the bell, returned to inform her mistress of the fact, supposing that Gouache would go at once. Corona waited a few minutes, and then went back to the sitting-room, which was at the end of the long suite of apartments. The result was that she met Anastase in one of the rooms on his way out, preceded by the footman, who went on towards the hall after his mistress had passed. Corona and Gouache were left face to face and quite alone in the huge dim drawing-room. Gouache had found his opportunity and did not hesitate.

"Madame," he said, "I beg your pardon for trespassing on your time, but I have a serious word to say. I

am going to the frontier and am as likely to be killed as any one else. On the faith of a man who may be dead to-morrow, I am wholly innocent of what happened last night. If I come back I will prove it to you some day. If not, will you believe me, and not think of me unkindly?"

Corona hesitated and stood leaning against the heavy curtain of a window for a moment. Though the room was very dim, she could see the honest look in the young man's eyes and she hesitated before she answered. She had heard that day that two of her acquaintances had fallen fighting against the Garibaldians and she knew that Anastase was speaking of a very near possibility when he talked of being killed. There were many chances that he was telling the truth, and she felt how deeply she should regret her unbelief if he should indeed meet his fate before they met again.

"You tell me a strange thing," she said at last. "You ask me to believe that this poor girl, of her own free will and out of love for you, followed you out of this room last night into the midst of a revolution. It is a hard thing to believe——"

"And yet I implore you to believe it, princess. A man who should love her less than I, would be the basest of men to speak thus of her love. God knows, if things had been otherwise, I would not have let you know. But was there any other way of taking her home? Did I not do the only thing that was at all possible to keep last night's doings a secret? I love her to such a point that I glory in her love for me. If I could have shielded her last night by giving up my life, you know that I would have ended my existence that very moment. It would have done no good. I had to confide in some one, and you, who knew half my secret, since I had told you I loved her, were the only person who could be allowed to guess the remainder. If it could profit her that you should think me a villain, you might think me so—even you, whom I reverence beyond all women save her. But to let you think so would be to degrade her, and that you shall not do. You shall not think that she has been so foolish as to pin her faith on a man who would lead her to destruction—ah! if I loved her less I could tell you better what I mean."