

Corona was moved by his sincerity, if not by his arguments. She saw all the strangeness of the situation; how he had been forced to confide in some one, and how it seemed better in his eyes that she should know how Faustina had really behaved, than think that the young girl had agreed to a premeditated meeting. She was touched and her heart relented.

"I believe you," she said. "Forgive me if I have wronged you."

"Thank you, thank you, dear princess!" cried Gouache, taking her hand and touching it with his lips. "I can never thank you as I would. And now, good-bye—I am going. Will you give me your blessing, as my mother would?" He smiled, as he recalled the conversation of the previous evening.

"Good-bye," answered Corona. "May all blessings go with you." He turned away and she stood a moment looking after him as he disappeared in the gloom.

She was sorry for him in her heart and repented a little of having treated him so harshly. And yet, as soon as he was gone she began to doubt again, wondering vaguely whether she had not been deceived. There was an odd fascination about the soldier-artist which somehow influenced her in his favour when he was present, and of which she was not conscious until he was out of her sight. Now that she was alone, she found herself considering how this peculiar charm which he possessed would be likely to affect a young girl like Faustina, and she was obliged to acknowledge that it would account well enough for the latter's foolish doings. She could not look into Gouache's eyes and doubt what he said, but she found it hard afterwards to explain the faith she put in him.

She was roused from her short reflection by her husband who, without being observed by her, had come to her side. Seeing that she did not return to the sitting-room when Gouache was gone he had come in search of her, and by the merest chance had overheard the last words which had passed between her and Anastase, and had seen how the latter fervently kissed her hand. The phrase in which she had wished him good luck rang unpleasantly in his ears and startled the inmost sensi-

bilities of his nature. He remembered how she had blessed him once, in her calm, gentle way, on that memorable night of the Frangipani ball nearly three years before, and there was a similarity between the words she had used then and the simple expression which had now fallen from her lips.

Giovanni stood beside her now and laid his hand upon her arm. It was not his nature to break out suddenly as his father did, when anything occurred to disturb his peace of mind. The Spanish blood he had inherited from his mother had imparted a profound reserve to his character, which gave it depth rather than coldness. It was hard for him to speak out violently when under the influence of emotion, but this very difficulty of finding words and his aversion to using them made him more sincere, more enduring and less forgiving than other men. He could wait long before he gave vent to his feelings, but they neither grew cool nor dull for the waiting. He detested concealment and secrecy more than most people, but his disinclination to speak of any matter until he was sure of it had given him the reputation of being both reticent and calculating. Giovanni now no longer concealed from himself the fact that he was annoyed by what was passing, but he denied, even in his heart, that he was jealous. To doubt Corona would be to upset the whole fabric of his existence, which he had founded upon her love and which had been built up to such great proportions during the past three years. His first impulse was to ask an explanation, and it carried him just far enough to lay his hand on his wife's arm, when it was checked by a multitude of reflections and unconscious arguments which altogether changed his determination.

"I thought he was gone," he said, quietly enough.

"So did I," replied Corona, in a cooler tone than she generally used in speaking to her husband.

She, too, was annoyed, for she suspected that Giovanni had been watching her; and since, on the previous evening he had promised to trust her altogether in this affair, she looked upon his coming almost in the light of an infringement upon the treaty, and resented it accordingly. She did not reflect that it was unlikely that Giovanni should expect her to try to meet Gouache on

his way out, and would therefore not think of lying in wait for her. His accidental coming seemed premeditated. He, on his side, had noticed her marked coldness to Anastase in the sitting-room and thought it contrasted very strangely with the over-friendly parting of which he had chanced to be a witness. Corona, too, knew very well that the last words spoken were capable of misinterpretation, and as she had no intention of telling her husband Faustina's story at present she saw no way of clearing up the situation, and therefore prepared to ignore it altogether.

They turned together and walked slowly back in the direction of the sitting-room, neither speaking a word until they had almost reached the door. Then Giovanni stopped and looked at his wife.

"Is it part of last night's secret?" he asked, almost indifferently.

"Yes," answered Corona. "What could you suppose it was? I met him by accident and we exchanged a few words."

"I know. I heard you say good-bye. I confess I was surprised. I thought you meant to be rude to him when we were all together, but I was mistaken. I hope your blessing will profit him, my dear!" He spoke quite naturally and without effort.

"I hope so too," returned Corona. "You might have added yours, since you were present."

"To tell the truth," said Giovanni, with a short laugh, "I fancy it might not have been so acceptable."

"You talk very strangely, Giovanni!"

"Do I? It seems to me quite natural. Shall we go into the sitting-room?"

"Giovanni — you promised to trust me last night, and I promised to explain everything to you some day. You must keep your promise wholly or not at all."

"Certainly," answered Sant' Ilario, opening the door for his wife and thus forcing the conversation to end suddenly, since old Saracinesca must now hear whatever was said.

He would not allow the situation to last, for fear lest he should say something of which he might repent, for in spite of his words he did not wish to seem suspicious. Unfortunately, Corona's evident annoyance at having

been overheard did more to strengthen the feeling of resentment which was growing in him than what he had heard and seen a few moments earlier. The way in which she had reproached him with not adding his blessing to hers showed plainly enough, he thought, that she was angry at what had occurred. They both entered the room, but before they had been long together Giovanni left his wife and father and retired to his own room under pretext of writing letters until dinner-time.

When he was alone, the situation presented itself to his mind in a very disagreeable light. Corona's assurance that the mystery was a harmless one seemed wholly inadequate to account for her meeting with Gouache and for her kind treatment of him, especially after she had shown herself so evidently cold to him in the presence of the others. Either Giovanni was a very silly fellow, or he was being deceived as no man was ever deceived before. Either conclusion was exasperating. He asked himself whether he were such a fool as to invent a misconstruction upon occurrences which to any one else would have seemed void of any importance whatsoever; and his heart answered that if he were indeed so senseless he must have lost his intelligence very recently. On the other hand to suspect Corona of actually entertaining a secret passion for Gouache was an hypothesis which seemed too monstrous to be discussed. He sat down to think about it, and was suddenly startled by the host of little circumstances which all at once detached themselves from the hazy past and stood out in condemnation of his wife. Gouache, as he himself had acknowledged, had long worshipped the princess in a respectful, almost reverential way. He had taken every occasion of talking with her, and had expressed even by his outward manner a degree of devotion he never manifested to other women. Giovanni was now aware that for some time past, even as far back as the previous winter, he had almost unconsciously watched Corona and Anastase when they were together. Nothing in her conduct had excited his suspicions in the least, but he had certainly suspected that Gouache was a little inclined to idolise her, and had laughed to himself more than once at the idea of the French artist's hopeless passion, with something of

that careless satisfaction a man feels who sees a less favoured mortal in dangerous proximity to a flame which burns only for himself. It was rather a contemptible amusement, and Giovanni had never indulged in it very long. He liked Gouache, and, if anything, pitied him for his hopeless passion. Corona treated the Zouave in her grand, quiet way, which had an air of protection with it, and Giovanni would have scoffed at the thought that she cared for the man. Nevertheless, now that matters had taken such a strange turn, he recollected with surprise that Gouache was undeniably the one of all their acquaintance who most consistently followed Corona wherever they met. The young man was a favourite in society. His great talent, his modesty, and above all what people were pleased to describe as his harmlessness, made everybody like him. He went everywhere, and his opportunities of meeting the princess were almost numberless. Giovanni had certainly watched him very often, though he was hardly conscious of having bestowed so much attention on the French artist-soldier, that he never failed to glance at his wife when Anastase was mentioned.

Now, and all at once, a hundred details rushed to his recollection, and he was staggered by the vista of incidents that rose before his mind. Within the last twenty-four hours, especially, the evidence had assumed terrible proportions. In the first place there had been that scene in the drawing-room, enacted quietly enough and in a corner, while there were twenty persons present, but with the coolness of two people of the world who know what surprising things may be done unobserved in a room full of people. If Anastase had kissed Corona's hand a little differently, and with the evident intention of being seen, the action would have been natural. But there was a look in Gouache's face which Giovanni remembered, and an expression of kindness in Corona's eyes that he had not forgotten; above all they had both seemed as though they were sure that no one was watching them. Indeed, Sant' Ilario now asked himself how he had chanced to see what passed, and the only answer was that he generally watched them when they were together. This was a revelation to himself, and told

much. Then there was her midnight expedition with Gouache, a far more serious matter. After all, he had only Corona's own assurance that Faustina Montevarchi had been in any way concerned in that extraordinary piece of rashness. He must indeed have had faith in his wife to pass over such conduct without a word of explanation. Next came the events of that very afternoon. Corona had been rude to Gouache, had then suddenly left the room, and in passing out had exchanged a few words with him in a low tone. She had met him again by accident, if it had been an accident, and fancying herself unseen had behaved very differently to the young man. There had been a parting which savoured unpleasantly of the affectionate, and which was certainly something more than merely friendly. Lastly, Corona had evidently been annoyed at Giovanni's appearance, a fact which seemed to conclude the whole argument with a terrible certainty.

Finding himself face to face with a conclusion which threatened to destroy his happiness altogether, Giovanni started up from his chair and began to walk backwards and forwards in the room, pausing a moment each time he turned, as though to gather strength, or to shake off an evil thought. In the light of his present reflections an explanation seemed inevitable, but when he thought of that he saw too clearly that any explanation must begin by his accusing his wife, and he knew that if he accused her justly, it would only end in a denial from her. What woman, however guilty, would not deny her guilt when charged with it. What man either, where love was concerned? Giovanni laughed bitterly, then turned pale and sat down again. To accuse Corona of loving Gouache! It was too monstrous to be believed. And yet—what did all those doings mean? There must be a reason for them. If he called her and told her what he felt, and if she were innocent, she would tell him all, everything would be explained, and he would doubtless see that all this damning evidence was no more than the natural outward appearance of perfectly harmless circumstances of which he knew nothing. Ay, but if they were harmless, why should she implore him to ask no questions? Because the honour of some one else was

concerned, of course. But was he, Giovanni Saracinesca, not to be trusted with the keeping of that other person's honour as well as Corona herself? Had they ever had secrets from each other? Would it not have been simpler for her to trust him with the story, if she was innocent, than to be silent and ask him to trust her motives? Far simpler, of course. And then, if only a third person's feelings were at stake, what necessity had there been for such a sentimental parting? She had given Gouache a blessing very like the one she had given Giovanni. Worst of all, were not the circumstances the same, the very same?

Giovanni remembered the Frangipani ball. At that time Corona was married to Astrardente, who had died a few days afterwards. Giovanni had that night told Corona that he loved her, in very passionate terms. She had silenced him, and he had behaved like a gentleman, for he had asked her pardon for what he had done. She had forgiven him, and to show that she bore no malice had spoken a kind of benediction—a prayer that all might be well with him. He knew now that she had loved him even then when she repelled him.

And now that she was married to Giovanni, another had come, and had talked with her, and exchanged words in a low tone even as he himself had once done. And she had treated this man roughly before her husband, and presently afterwards had allowed him to kiss her hand and had sent him away saying that she forgave him—just as she had formerly forgiven Giovanni—and praying that all blessings might go with him. Why was it not possible that she loved this man, too? Because she was so grandly beautiful, and dark and calm, and had such a noble fearlessness in her eyes? Other women had been beautiful and had deceived wiser men than Giovanni, and had fallen. Beauty was no argument for the defence, nor brave eyes, nor the magnificent dignity of movement and speech—nor words either, for that matter.

Suspense was agony, and yet a twofold horror seemed the only issue, the one inevitable, the other possible. First, to accuse this woman whom he loved so dearly, and then, perhaps, to hear her deny the charge boldly

and yet refuse all explanation. Once more Giovanni rose from his deep chair and paced his room with regular strides, though he scarcely saw the carpet under his feet, nor realised any longer where he was. At last he stopped and laughed. The sound was strange and false, as when a man tries to be merry who feels no mirth.

He was making a desperate effort to shake off this nightmare that beset him, to say to himself that he was but a fool, and that there was no cause for all this suffering which he was inflicting on his heart, nor for all these questions he had been asking of his intelligence. It was surely not true! He would laugh now, would laugh heartily within the next half hour with Corona herself, at the mere thought of supposing that she could love Gouache, Gouache, a painter! Gouache, a Zouave! Gouache, a contemptibly good-natured, harmless little foreigner!—and Corona del Carmine, Duchessa d'Astrardente, Principessa di Sant' Ilario, mother of all the Saracinesca yet to come! It was better to laugh, truly, at such an absurd juxtaposition of ideas, of personalities, of high and low. And Giovanni laughed, but the sound was very harsh and died away without rousing one honest echo in the vaulted room.

Had Corona seen his face at that moment, or had she guessed what was passing in his mind, she would have sacrificed Faustina's secret ten times over rather than let Giovanni suffer a moment longer as he was suffering now. But Corona had no idea that he could put such a construction upon her doings. He had shown her nothing of what he felt, except perhaps a slight annoyance at not being put in possession of the secret. It was natural, she thought, that he should be a little out of temper, but as she saw no way of remedying the trouble except by exposing to him the innocent girl whom she had undertaken to protect, she held her peace and trusted that her husband's displeasure would soon be past. Had there been more time for reflection on the previous evening, in the interval between her learning from the porter that Giovanni knew of her absence, and her being confronted with Giovanni himself, she might have resolved to act differently; but having once made up her mind that he ought not to know the truth for the

present, opposition only strengthened her determination. There was nothing wrong in the course she was pursuing, or her conscience would have spoken and bidden her speak out. Her nature was too like Giovanni's own, proud, reserved, and outwardly cold, to yield any point easily. It was her instinct, like his, to be silent rather than to speak, and to weigh considerations before acting upon them. This very similarity of temper in the two rendered it certain that if they were ever opposed to each other the struggle would be a serious one. They were both too strong to lead a life of petty quarrelling; if they ceased to live in perfect harmony they were only too sure to come to open hostility. There is nothing which will wound pride and raise anger so inevitably as finding unexpected but determined opposition in those who very closely resemble ourselves. In such a case a man cannot fall back upon the comfortable alternative of despising his enemy, since he has an intimate conviction that it would be paramount to despising himself; and if he is led into a pitched battle he will find his foe possessed of weapons which are exactly like his own.

Giovanni and Corona were very evenly matched, as nearly resembling each other as is possible for a man and a woman. Corona was outwardly a little the colder, Giovanni a little the more resentful of the two. Corona had learned during the years of her marriage with Astradente to wear a mask of serene indifference, and the assumed habit had at last become in some degree a part of her nature. Giovanni, whose first impulses had originally been quicker than they now were, had learned the power of waiting by constant intercourse with his father, whose fiery temper seemed to snatch at trifles for the mere pleasure of tearing them to pieces, and did injustice to the generous heart he concealed under his rough exterior.

Under these circumstances it was not probable that Sant' Ilario would make any exhibition of his jealousy for some time to come. As he paced the floor of his room, the bitterness of his situation slowly sank from the surface, leaving his face calm and almost serene. He forced himself to look at the facts again and again, trying bravely to be impartial and to survey them as

though he were the judge and not the plaintiff. He admitted at last that there was undoubtedly abundant matter for jealousy, but Corona still stood protected as it were by the love he bore her, a love which even her guilt would be unable to destroy. His love indeed, must outlast everything, all evil, all disgrace, and he knew it. He thought of that Latin poet who, writing to his mistress, said in the bitterness of his heart that though she were to become the best woman in the world he could never again respect her, but that he could not cease to love her, were she guilty of all crimes. He knew that if the worst turned out true that must be his case, and perhaps for the first time in his life he understood all the humanity of Catullus, and saw how a man might love even what he despised.

Happily matters had not yet come to that. He knew that he might be deceived, and that circumstantial evidence was not always to be trusted. Even while his heart grew cold with the strongest and most deadly passion of which man is capable, with jealousy which is cruel as the grave, the nobility of his nature rose up and made him see that his duty was to believe Corona innocent until she were proved unfaithful. The effort to quench the flame was great, though fruitless, but the determination to cover it and hide it from every one, even from Corona herself, appealed to all that was brave and manly in his strong character. When at last he once more sat down, his face betrayed no emotion, his eyes were quiet, his hands did not tremble. He took up a book and forced his attention upon the pages for nearly an hour without interruption. Then he dressed himself, and went and sat at table with his father and his wife as though nothing had occurred to disturb his equanimity.

Corona supposed that he had recovered from his annoyance at not being admitted to share the secret for which she was unconsciously sacrificing so much. She had expected this result and was more than usually cheerful. Once old Saracinesca mentioned Gouache, but both Corona and Giovanni hastened to change the subject. This time, however, Giovanni did not look at his wife when the name was pronounced. Those days were over now.