

It was certain that if there were a quarrel between husband and wife, and if Giovanni had the smallest show of right on his side, the old man's sympathies would be with him.

Giovanni's sense of honour, on the other hand, prevented him from telling his father what had happened. He did not choose that even his nearest relation should think of Corona as he thought himself, and he would have taken any step to conceal her guilt. Unfortunately for his purpose he was a very truthful man, and had no experience of lying, so that his father detected him at once. Moreover, his pale face and agitated manner told plainly enough that something very serious had occurred, and so soon as the old prince had convinced himself of this his goodwill was enlisted on the side of his son.

"Giovannino," he said at last very gently, "I do not want to pry into your secrets nor to ask you questions which you do not care to answer. I do not believe you are capable of having committed any serious folly which your wife could really resent. If you should be unfaithful to her, I would disown you. If, on the other hand, she has deceived you, I will do all in my power to help you."

Perhaps Giovanni's face betrayed something of the truth at these words. He turned away and leaned against the chimney-piece.

"I cannot tell you — I cannot tell you," he repeated. "I think I am doing what is best. That is all I can say. You may know some day, though I trust not. Let us go away without explanations."

"My dear boy," replied the old man, coming up to him and laying his hand on his shoulder, "you must do as you think best. Go to Saracinesca if you will, and if you can. If not, go somewhere else. Take heart. Things are not always as black as they look."

Giovanni straightened himself as though by an effort, and grasped his father's broad, brown hand.

"Thank you," he said. "Good-bye. I will come down and see you in a few days. Good-bye!"

His voice trembled and he hurriedly left the room. The prince stood still a moment and then threw himself into a deep chair, staring at the lamp and biting his gray

moustache savagely, as though to hide some almost uncontrollable emotion. There was a slight moisture in his eyes as they looked steadily at the bright lamp.

The papers and parchments lay unheeded on the table, and he did not touch them again that night. He was thinking, not of his lonely old age nor of the dishonour brought upon his house, but of the boy he had loved as his own soul for more than thirty years, and of a swarthy little child that lay asleep in a distant room, the warm blood tinging its olive cheeks and its little clinched hands thrown back above its head.

For Corona he had no thought but hatred. He had guessed Giovanni's secret too well, and his heart was hardened against the woman who had brought shame and suffering upon his son.

CHAPTER XI.

San Giacinto had signally failed in his attempt to prevent the meeting between Gouache and Faustina Montevarchi, and had unintentionally caused trouble of a much more serious nature in another quarter. The Zouave returned to his lodging late at night, and of course found no note upon his dressing-table. He did not miss the pin, for he of course never wore it, and attached no particular value to a thing of such small worth which he had picked up in the street and which consequently had no associations for him. He lacked the sense of order in his belongings, and the pin had lain neglected for weeks among a heap of useless little trifles, dingy cotillon favours that had been there since the previous year, stray copper coins, broken pencils, uniform buttons and such trash, accumulated during many months and totally unheeded. Had he seen the pin anywhere else he would have recognised it, but he did not notice its absence. The old woman, Caterina Ranucci, hugged her money and said nothing about either of the visitors who had entered the room during the afternoon. The consequence was that Gouache rose early on

the following morning and went towards the church with a light heart. He did not know certainly that Faustina would come there, and indeed there were many probabilities against her doing so; but in the hopefulness of a man thoroughly in love, Gouache looked forward to seeing her with as much assurance as though the matter had been arranged and settled between them.

The parish church of Sant' Agostino is a very large building. The masses succeed each other in rapid succession from seven o'clock in the morning until midday, and a great crowd of parishioners pass in and out in an almost constant stream. It was therefore Gouache's intention to arrive so early as to be sure that Faustina had not yet come, and he trusted to luck to be there at the right time, for he was obliged to visit the temporary barrack of his corps before going to the church, and was also obliged to attend mass at a later hour with his battalion. On presenting himself at quarters he learned to his surprise that Monte Rotondo had not surrendered yet, though news of the catastrophe was expected every moment. The Zouaves were ordered to remain under arms all day in case of emergency, and it was only through the friendly assistance of one of his officers that Anastase obtained leave to absent himself for a couple of hours. He hailed a cab and drove to the church as fast as he could.

In less than twenty minutes after he had stationed himself at the entrance, Faustina ascended the steps accompanied by a servant. The latter was a middle-aged woman with hard features, clad in black, and wearing a handkerchief thrown loosely over her head after the manner of maids in those days. She evidently expected nothing, for she looked straight before her, peering into the church in order to see beforehand at which chapel there was likely to be a mass immediately. Faustina was a lovely figure in the midst of the crowd of common people who thronged the doorway, and whose coarse dark faces threw her ethereal features into strong relief while she advanced. Gouache felt his heart beat hard, for he had not seen her for five days since they had parted on that memorable Tuesday night at the gate of her father's house. Her eyes met his in a long and loving look, and

the colour rose faintly in her delicate pale cheek. In the press she managed to pass close to him, and for a moment he succeeded in clasping her small hand in his, her maid being on the other side. He was about to ask a question when she whispered a few words and passed on.

"Follow me through the crowd, I will manage it," was what she said.

Gouache obeyed, and kept close behind her. The church was very full and there was difficulty in getting seats.

"I will wait here," said the young girl to her servant. "Get us chairs and find out where there is to be a mass. It is of no use for me to go through the crowd if I may have to come back again."

The hard-featured woman nodded and went away. Several minutes must elapse before she returned, and Faustina with Gouache behind her moved across the stream of persons who were going out through the door in the other aisle. In a moment they found themselves in a comparatively quiet corner, separated from the main body of the church by the moving people. Faustina fixed her eyes in the direction whence her woman would probably return, ready to enter the throng instantly, if necessary. Even where they now were, so many others were standing and kneeling that the presence of the Zouave beside Faustina would create no surprise.

"It is very wrong to meet you in church," said the girl, a little shy, at first, with that timidity a woman always feels on meeting a man whom she has last seen on unexpectedly intimate terms.

"I could not go away without seeing you," replied Gouache, his eyes intent on her face. "And I knew you would understand my signs, though no one else would. You have made me very happy, Faustina. It would have been agony to march away without seeing your face again — you do not know what these days have been without you! Do you realise that we used to meet almost every afternoon? Did they tell you why I could not come? I told every one I met, in hopes you might hear. Did you? Do you understand?"

Faustina nodded her graceful head, and glanced quickly

at his face. Then she looked down, tapping the pavement gently with her parasol. The colour came and went in her cheeks.

"Do you really love me?" she asked in a low voice.

"I think, my darling, that no one ever loved as I love. I would that I might be given time to tell you what my love is, and that you might have patience to hear. What are words, unless one can say all one would? What is it, if I tell you that I love you with all my heart, and soul and thoughts? Do not other men say as much and forget that they have spoken? I would find a way of saying it that should make you believe in spite of yourself——"

"In spite of myself?" interrupted Faustina, with a bright smile while her brown eyes rested lovingly on his for an instant. "You need not that," she added simply, "for I love you, too."

Nothing but the sanctity of the place prevented Anastase from taking her in his arms then and there. There was something so exquisite in her simplicity and earnestness that he found himself speechless before her for a moment. It was something that intoxicated his spirit more than his senses, for it was utterly new to him and appealed to his own loyal and innocent nature as it could not have appealed to a baser man.

"Ah Faustina!" he said at last, "God made you when he made the violets, on a spring morning in Paradise!"

Faustina blushed again, faintly as the sea at dawn.

"Must you go away?" she asked.

"You would not have me desert at such a moment?"

"Would it be deserting—quite? Would it be dishonourable?"

"It would be cowardly. I should never dare to look you in the face again."

"I suppose it would be wrong," she answered with a bitter little sigh.

"I will come back very soon, dearest. The time will be short."

"So long—so long! How can you say it will be short? If you do not come soon you will find me dead—I cannot bear it many days more."

"I will write to you."

"How can you write? Your letters would be seen. Oh no! It is impossible!"

"I will write to your friend—to the Princess Sant' Ilario. She will give you the letters. She is safe, is she not?"

"Oh, how happy I shall be! It will be almost like seeing you—no, not that! But so much better than nothing. But you do not go at once?"

"It may be to-day, to-morrow, at any time. But you shall know of it. Ah Faustina! my own one——"

"Hush! There is my maid. Quick, behind the pillar. I will meet her. Good-bye—good-bye—Oh! not good-bye—some other word——"

"God keep you, my beloved, and make it not 'good-bye'!"

With one furtive touch of the hand, one long last look, they separated, Faustina to mingle in the crowd, Gouache to follow at a long distance until he saw her kneeling at her chair before one of the side altars of the church. Then he stationed himself where he could see her, and watched through the half hour during which the low mass lasted. He did not know when he should see her again, and indeed it was as likely as not that they should not meet on this side of eternity. Many a gallant young fellow marched out in those days and was picked off by a bullet from a red-shirted volunteer. Gouache, indeed, did not believe that his life was to be cut short so suddenly, and built castles in the air with that careless delight in the future which a man feels who is not at all afraid. But such accidents happened often, and though he might be more lucky than another, it was just as possible that an ounce of lead should put an end to his soldiering, his painting and his courtship within another week. The mere thought was so horrible that his bright nature refused to harbour it, and he gazed on Faustina Montevarchi as she knelt at her devotions, wondering, indeed, what strange chances fate had in store for them both, but never once doubting that she should one day be his. He waited until she passed him in the crowd, and gave him one more look before going away. Then, when he had seen her disappear at the turning of the street, he sprang into his cab and was driven back to the barracks where he must remain on duty all day.

As he descended he was surprised to see Sant' Ilario

standing upon the pavement, very pale, and apparently in a bad humour, his overcoat buttoned to his throat, and his hands thrust in the pockets. There was no one in the street, but the sentinel at the doorway, and Giovanni walked quickly up to Gouache as the latter fumbled for the change to pay his driver. Anastase smiled and made a short military salute. Sant' Ilario bowed stiffly and did not extend his hand.

"I tried to find you last night," he said coldly. "You were out. Will you favour me with five minutes' conversation?"

"Willingly," answered the other, looking instinctively at his watch, to be sure that he had time to spare.

Sant' Ilario walked a few yards up the street, before speaking, Gouache keeping close to his side. Then both stopped, and Giovanni turned sharply round and faced his enemy.

"It is unnecessary to enter into any explanations, Monsieur Gouache," he said. "This is a matter which can only end in one way. I presume you will see the propriety of inventing a pretext which may explain our meeting before the world."

Gouache stared at Sant' Ilario in the utmost amazement. When they had last met they had parted on the most friendly terms. He did not understand a word of what his companion was saying.

"Excuse me, prince," he said at length. "I have not the least idea what you mean. As far as I am concerned this meeting is quite accidental. I came here on duty."

Sant' Ilario was somewhat taken aback by the Zouave's polite astonishment. He seemed even more angry than surprised, however; and his black eyebrows bent together fiercely.

"Let us waste no words," he said imperiously. "If I had found you last night, the affair might have been over by this time."

"What affair?" asked Gouache, more and more mystified.

"You are amazingly slow of comprehension, Monsieur Gouache," observed Giovanni. "To be plain, I desire to have an opportunity of killing you. Do you understand me now?"

"Perfectly," returned the soldier, raising his brows, and then breaking into a laugh of genuine amusement. "You are quite welcome to as many opportunities as you like, though I confess it would interest me to know the reason of your good intentions towards me."

If Gouache had behaved as Giovanni had expected he would, the latter would have repeated his request that a pretext should be found which should explain the duel to the world. But there was such extraordinary assurance in the Zouave's manner that Sant' Ilario suddenly became exasperated with him and lost his temper, a misfortune which very rarely happened to him.

"Monsieur Gouache," he said angrily, "I took the liberty of visiting your lodgings yesterday afternoon, and I found this letter, fastened with this pin upon your table. I presume you will not think any further explanation necessary."

Gouache stared at the objects which Sant' Ilario held out to him and drew back stiffly. It was his turn to be outraged at the insult.

"Sir," he said, "I understand that you acted in the most impertinent manner in entering my room and taking what did not belong to you. I understand nothing else. I found that pin on the Ponte Sant' Angelo a month ago, and it was, I believe, upon my table yesterday. As for the letter I know nothing about it. Yes, if you insist, I will read it."

There was a pause during which Gouache ran his eyes over the few lines written on the notepaper, while Giovanni watched him very pale and wrathful.

"The pin is my wife's, and the note is written on her paper and addressed to you, though in a feigned hand. Do you deny that both came from her, were brought by her in person, for yourself?"

"I deny it utterly and categorically," answered Gouache. "Though I will assuredly demand satisfaction of you for entering my rooms without my permission, I give you my word of honour that I could receive no such letter from the princess, your wife. The thing is monstrously iniquitous, and you have been grossly deceived into injuring the good name of a woman as innocent as an angel. Since the pin is the property of the princess, pray return