

such weakness when the yielding to it involved the destruction of all that he cared for in life. But the evidence was overwhelming, and no man could be blamed for accepting it. There was no link wanting in the chain, and the denials made by Corona and Anastase could not have influenced any man in his senses. What could a woman do but deny all? What was there for Gouache but to swear that the accusation was untrue? Would not any other man or woman have done as much? There was no denying it. The only person who remained unquestioned was Faustina Montevarchi. Either she was the innocent girl she appeared to be or not. If she were, how could Giovanni explain to her that she had been duped, and made an instrument in the hands of Gouache and Corona? She would not know what he meant. Even if she admitted that she loved Gouache, was it not clear that he had deceived her too, for the sake of making an accomplice of one who was constantly with Corona? Her love for the soldier could not explain the things that had passed between Anastase and Giovanni's wife, which Giovanni had seen with his own eyes. It could not account for the whisperings, the furtive meeting and tender words of which he had been a witness in his own house. It could not do away with the letter and the pin. But if Faustina were not innocent of assisting the two, she would deny everything, even as they had done.

As he thought of all these matters and followed the cruelly logical train of reasoning forced upon him by the facts, a great darkness descended upon Giovanni's heart, and he knew that his happiness was gone from him for ever. Henceforth nothing remained but to watch his wife jealously, and suffer his ills with the best heart he could. The very fact that he loved her still, with a passion that defied all things, added a terrible bitterness to what he had to bear, for it made him despise himself as none would have dared to despise him.

CHAPTER XII.

As Giovanni sat in solitude in his room he was not aware that his father had received a visit from no less a personage than Prince Montevarchi. The latter found Saracinesca very much preoccupied, and in no mood for conversation, and consequently did not stay very long. When he went away, however, he carried under his arm a bundle of deeds and documents which he had long desired to see and in the perusal of which he promised himself to spend a very interesting day. He had come with the avowed object of getting them, and he neither anticipated nor met with any difficulty in obtaining what he wanted. He spoke of his daughter's approaching marriage with San Giacinto, and after expressing his satisfaction at the alliance with the Saracinesca, remarked that his son-in-law had told him the story of the ancient deed, and begged permission to see it for himself. The request was natural, and Saracinesca was not suspicious at any time; at present, he was too much occupied with his own most unpleasant reflections to attach any importance to the incident. Montevarchi thought there was something wrong with his friend, but inasmuch as he had received the papers, he asked no questions and presently departed with them, hastening homewards in order to lose no time in satisfying his curiosity.

Two hours later he was still sitting in his dismal study with the manuscripts before him. He had ascertained what he wanted to know, namely, that the papers really existed and were drawn up in a legal form. He had hoped to find a rambling agreement, made out principally by the parties concerned, and copied with some improvements by the family notary of the time, for he had made up his mind that if any flaw could be discovered in the deed San Giacinto should become Prince Saracinesca, and should have possession of all the immense wealth that belonged to the family. San Giacinto was the heir in the direct line, and although his great-grandfather had relinquished his birthright in the firm expectation of having no children, the existence of his

descendants might greatly modify the provisions of the agreement.

Montevarchi's face fell when he had finished deciphering the principal document. The provisions and conditions were short and concise, and were contained upon one large sheet of parchment, signed, witnessed and bearing the official seal and signature which proved that it had been ratified.

It was set forth therein that Don Leone Saracinesca, being the eldest son of Don Giovanni Saracinesca, deceased, Prince of Saracinesca, of Sant' Ilario and of Torleone, Duke of Barda, and possessor of many other titles, Grandee of Spain of the first class and Count of the Holy Roman Empire, did of his own free will, by his own motion and will, make over and convey to, and bestow upon, Don Orsino Saracinesca, his younger and only brother, the principalities of Saracinesca — here followed a complete list of the various titles and estates — including the titles, revenues, seigneurial rights, appanages, holdings, powers and sovereignty attached to and belonging to each and every one, to him, the aforesaid Don Orsino Saracinesca and to the heirs of his body in the male line direct for ever.

Here there was a stop, and the manuscript began again at the top of the other side of the sheet. The next clause contained the solitary provision to the effect that Don Leone reserved to himself the estate and title of San Giacinto in the kingdom of Naples, which at his death, he having no children, should revert to the aforesaid Don Orsino Saracinesca and his heirs for ever. It was further stated that the agreement was wholly of a friendly character, and that Don Leone bound himself to take no steps whatever to reinstate himself in the titles and possessions which, of his own free will, he relinquished, the said agreement being, in the opinion of both parties, for the advantage of the whole house of Saracinesca.

"He bound himself, not his descendants," remarked Montevarchi at last, as he again bent his head over the document and examined the last clause. "And he says 'having no children' — in Latin the words may mean in case he had none, being in the ablative absolute. Having no children, to Orsino and his heirs for ever — but

since he had a son, the case is altered. Ay, but that clause in the first part says to Orsino and his heirs for ever, and says nothing about Leone having no children. It is more absolute than the ablative. That is bad."

For a long time he pondered over the writing. The remaining documents were merely transfers of the individual estates, in each of which it was briefly stated that the property in question was conveyed in accordance with the conditions of the main deed. There was no difficulty there. The Saracinesca inheritance depended solely on the existence of this one piece of parchment, and of the copy or registration of it in the government offices. Montevarchi glanced at the candle that stood before him in a battered brass candlestick, and his old heart beat a little faster than usual. To burn the sheet of parchment, and then deny on oath that he had ever seen it — it was very simple. Saracinesca would find it hard to prove the existence of the thing. Montevarchi hesitated, and then laughed at himself for his folly. It would be necessary first to ascertain what there was at the Chancery office, otherwise he would be ruining himself for nothing. That was certainly the most important step at present. He pondered over the matter for some time and then rose from his chair.

As he stood before the table he glanced once more at the sheet. As though the greater distance made it more clear to his old sight, he noticed that there was a blank space, capable of containing three lines of writing like what was above, while still leaving a reasonable margin at the bottom of the page. As the second clause was the shorter, the scribe had doubtless thought it better to begin afresh on the other side.

Montevarchi sat down again, and took a large sheet of paper and a pen. He rapidly copied the first clause to the end, but after the words "in the male line direct for ever" his pen still ran on. The deed then read as follows:—

" . . . In the male line direct for ever, provided that the aforesaid Don Leone Saracinesca shall have no son born to him in wedlock, in which case, and if such a son be born, this present deed is wholly null, void and ineffectual."

Montevarchi did not stop here. He carefully copied the remainder as it stood, to the last word. Then he put away the original and read what he had written very slowly and carefully. With the addition it was perfectly clear that San Giacinto must be considered to be the lawful and only Prince Saracinesca.

"How well those few words would look at the bottom of the page!" exclaimed the old man half aloud. He sat still and gloated in imagination over the immense wealth which would thus be brought into his family.

"They shall be there — they must be there!" he muttered at last. "Millions! millions! After all it is only common justice. The old reprobate would never have disinherited his son if he had expected to have one."

His long thin fingers crooked themselves and scratched the shabby green baize that covered the table, as though heaping together little piles of money, and then hiding them under the palm of his hand.

"Even if there is a copy," he said again under his breath, "the little work will look as prettily upon it as on this — if only the sheets are the same size and there is the same space," he added, his face falling again at the disagreeable reflection that the duplicate might differ in some respect from the original.

The plan was simple enough in appearance, and provided that the handwriting could be successfully forged, there was no reason why it should not succeed. The man who could do it, if he would, was in the house at that moment, and Montevarchi knew it. Arnaldo Meschini, the shrivelled little secretary and librarian, who had a profound knowledge of the law and spent his days as well as most of his nights in poring over crabbed manuscripts, was the very person for such a piece of work. He understood the smallest variations in handwriting which belonged to different periods, and the minutest details of old-fashioned penmanship were as familiar to him as the common alphabet. But would he do it? Would he undertake the responsibility of a forgery of which the success would produce such tremendous responsibilities, of which the failure would involve such awful disgrace? Montevarchi had reasons of his own for believing that Arnaldo Meschini would do

anything he was ordered to do, and would moreover keep the secret faithfully. Indeed, as far as discretion was concerned, he would, in case of exposure, have to bear the penalty. Montevarchi would arrange that. If discovered it would be easy for him to pretend that being unable to read the manuscript he had employed his secretary to do so, and that the latter, in the hope of reward, had gratuitously imposed upon the prince and the courts of law before whom the case would be tried.

One thing was necessary. San Giacinto must never see the documents until they were produced as evidence. In the first place it was important that he, who was the person nearest concerned, should be in reality perfectly innocent, and should be himself as much deceived as any one. Nothing impresses judges like real and unaffected innocence. Secondly, if he were consulted, it was impossible to say what view he might take of the matter. Montevarchi suspected him of possessing some of the hereditary boldness of the Saracinesca. He might refuse to be a party in a deception, even though he himself was to benefit by it, a consideration which chilled the old man's blood and determined him at once to confide the secret to no one but Arnaldo Meschini, who was completely in his power.

The early history of this remarkable individual was uncertain. He had received an excellent education and it is no exaggeration to call him learned, for he possessed a surprising knowledge of ancient manuscripts and a great experience in everything connected with this branch of archæology. It was generally believed that he had been bred to enter the church, but he himself never admitted that he had been anything more than a scholar in a religious seminary. He had subsequently studied law and had practised for some time, when he had suddenly abandoned his profession in order to accept the ill-paid post of librarian and secretary to the father of the present Prince Montevarchi. Probably his love of mediæval lore had got the better of his desire for money, and during the five and twenty years he had spent in the palace he had never been heard to complain of his condition. He lived in a small chamber in the attic and passed his days in the library, winter and summer alike,

perpetually poring over the manuscripts and making endless extracts in his odd, old-fashioned handwriting. The result of his labours was never published, and at first sight it would have been hard to account for his enormous industry and for the evident satisfaction he derived from his work. The nature of the man, however, was peculiar, and his occupation was undoubtedly congenial to him, and far more profitable than it appeared to be.

Arnoldo Meschini was a forger. He was one of that band of manufacturers of antiquities who have played such a part in the dealings of foreign collectors during the last century, and whose occupation, though slow and laborious, occasionally produces immense profits. He had not given up his calling with the deliberate intention of resorting to this method of earning a subsistence, but had drifted into his evil practices by degrees. In the first instance he had quitted the bar in consequence of having been connected with a scandalous case of extortion and blackmailing, in which he had been suspected of constructing forged documents for his client, though the crime had not been proved against him. His reputation, however, had been ruined, and he had been forced to seek his bread elsewhere. It chanced that the former librarian of the Montevarchi died at that time and that the prince was in search of a learned man ready to give his services for a stipend about equal to the wages of a footman. Meschini presented himself and got the place. The old prince was delighted with him and agreed to forget the aforesaid disgrace he had incurred, in consideration of his exceptional qualities. He set himself systematically to study the contents of the ancient library, with the intention of publishing the contents of the more precious manuscripts, and for two or three years he pursued his object with this laudable purpose, and with the full consent of his employer.

One day a foreign newspaper fell into his hands containing an account of a recent sale in which sundry old manuscripts had brought large prices. A new idea crossed his mind, and the prospect of unexpected wealth unfolded itself to his imagination. For several months he studied even more industriously than before, until, having made up his mind, he began to attempt the

reproduction of a certain valuable writing dating from the fourteenth century. He worked in his own room during the evening and allowed no one to see what he was doing, for although it was rarely that the old prince honoured the library with a visit, yet Meschini was inclined to run no risks, and proceeded in his task with the utmost secrecy.

Nothing could exceed the care he showed in the preparation and use of his materials. One of his few acquaintances was a starving, but clever chemist, who kept a dingy shop in the neighbourhood of the Ponte Quattro Capi. To this poor man he applied in order to obtain a knowledge of the ink used in the old writings. He professed himself anxious to get all possible details on the subject for a work he was preparing upon mediæval calligraphy, and his friend soon set his mind at rest by informing him that if the ink contained any metallic parts he would easily detect them, but that if it was composed of animal and vegetable matter it would be almost impossible to give a satisfactory analysis. At the end of a few days Meschini was in possession of a recipe for concocting what he wanted, and after numerous experiments, in the course of which he himself acquired great practical knowledge of the subject, he succeeded in producing an ink apparently in all respects similar to that used by the scribe whose work he proposed to copy. He had meanwhile busied himself with the preparation of parchment, which is by no means an easy matter when it is necessary to give it the colour and consistency of very ancient skin. He learned that the ligneous acids contained in the smoke of wood could be easily detected, and it was only through the assistance of the chemist that he finally hit upon the method of staining the sheets with a thin broth of untanned leather, of which the analysis would give a result closely approaching that of the parchment itself. Moreover, he made all sorts of trials of quill pens, until he had found a method of cutting which produced the exact thickness of stroke required, and during the whole time he exercised himself in copying and recopying many pages of the manuscript upon common paper, in order to familiarise himself with the method of forming the letters.