

CHAPTER XIV.

On the Saturday afternoon preceding the battle of Mentana, Sant' Ilario was alone in his own room, trying to pass the weary hours in the calculation of certain improvements he meditated at Saracinesca. He had grown very thin and careworn during the week, and he found it hard to distract his mind even for a moment from the thought of his misfortunes. Nothing but a strong mental effort in another direction could any longer fix his attention, and though any kind of work was for the present distasteful to him, it was at least a temporary relief from the contemplation of his misfortunes.

He could not bring himself to see Corona, though she grew daily worse, and both the physicians and the attendants who were about her looked grave. His action in this respect did not proceed from heartlessness, still less from any wish to add to her sufferings; on the contrary, he knew very well that, since he could not speak to her with words of forgiveness, the sight of him would very likely aggravate her state. He had no reason to forgive her, for nothing had happened to make her guilt seem more pardonable than before. Had she been well and strong as usual he would have seen her often and would very likely have reproached her again and again most bitterly with what she had done. But she was ill and wholly unable to defend herself; to inflict fresh pain at such a time would have been mean and cowardly. He kept away and did his best not to go mad, though he felt that he could not bear the strain much longer.

As the afternoon light faded from his chamber he dropped the pencil and paper with which he had been working and leaned back in his chair. His face was haggard and drawn, and sleepless nights had made dark circles about his deep-set eyes, while his face, which was naturally lean, had grown suddenly thin and hollow. He was indeed one of the most unhappy men in Rome that day, and so far as he could see his misery had fallen upon him through no fault of his own. It would have been a blessed relief, could he have accused himself of

injustice, or of any misdeed which might throw the weight and responsibility of Corona's actions back upon his own soul. He loved her still so well that he could have imagined nothing sweeter than to throw himself at her feet and cry aloud that it was he who had sinned and not she. He tortured his imagination for a means of proving that she might be innocent. But it was in vain. The chain of circumstantial evidence was complete and not a link was missing, not one point uncertain. He would have given her the advantage of any doubt which could be thought to exist, but the longer he thought of it all, the more sure he grew that there was no doubt whatever.

He sat quite still until it was nearly dark, and then with a sudden and angry movement quite unlike him, he sprang to his feet and left the room. Solitude was growing unbearable to him, and though he cared little to see any of his associates, the mere presence of other living beings would, he thought, be better than nothing. He was about to go out of the house when he met the doctor coming from Corona's apartments.

"I do not wish to cause you unnecessary pain," said the physician, "but I think it would be better that you should see the princess."

"Has she asked for me?" inquired Giovanni, gloomily.

"No. But I think you ought to see her."

"Is she dying?" Sant' Ilario spoke under his breath and laid his hand on the doctor's arm.

"Pray be calm, Signor Principe. I did not say that. But I repeat——"

"Be good enough to say what you mean without repetition," answered Giovanni almost savagely.

The physician's face flushed with annoyance, but as Giovanni was such a very high and mighty personage he controlled his anger and replied as calmly as he could.

"The princess is not dying. But she is very ill. She may be worse before morning. You had better see her now, for she will know you. Later she may not."

Without waiting for more Giovanni turned on his heel and strode towards his wife's room. Passing through an outer chamber he saw one of her women sitting in a corner and shedding copious tears.

She looked up and pointed to the door in a helpless

fashion. In another moment Giovanni was at Corona's bedside.

He would not have recognised her. Her face was wasted and white, and looked ghastly by contrast with the masses of her black hair which were spread over the broad pillow. Her colourless lips were parted and a little drawn, and her breath came faintly. Only her eyes retained the expression of life, seeming larger and more brilliant than he had ever seen them before.

Giovanni gazed on her in horror for several seconds. In his imagination he had supposed that she would look as when he had seen her last, and the shock of seeing her as she was, unstrung his nerves. For an instant he forgot everything that was past in the one strong passion that dominated him in spite of himself. His arms went round her and amidst his blinding tears he showered hot kisses on her death-like face. With a supreme effort, for she was so weak as to be almost powerless, she clasped her hands about his neck and pressed her to him, or he pressed her. The embrace lasted but a moment and her arms fell again like lead.

"You know the truth at last, Giovanni," she said, feebly. "You know that I am innocent or you would not—"

He did not know whether her voice failed her from weakness, or whether she was hesitating. He felt as though she had driven a sharp weapon into his breast by recalling all that separated them. He drew back a little, and his face darkened.

What could he do? She was dying and it would be diabolically cruel to undeceive her. In that moment he would have given his soul to be able to lie, to put on again the expression that was in his face when he had kissed her a moment before. But the suffering of which she reminded him was too great, the sin too enormous, and though he tried bravely he could not succeed. But he made the effort. He tried to smile, and the attempt was horrible. He spoke, but there was no life in his words.

"Yes, dear," he said, though the words choked him like hot dust, "I know it was all a mistake. How can I ever ask your forgiveness?"

Corona saw that it was not the truth, and with a despairing cry she turned away and hid her face in the pillow. Giovanni felt an icy chill of horror descending to his heart. A more terrible moment could scarcely be imagined. There he stood beside his dying wife, the conviction of her sin burnt in upon his heart, but loving her fiercely still, willing in that supreme crisis to make her think she was forgiven, striving to tell the kind lie that nevertheless would not be told, powerless to deceive her who had so horribly betrayed him.

Once more he bent over her and laid his hand on hers. The touch of her wasted fingers brought the tears to his eyes again, but the moment of passion was past. He bent down and would have comforted her had he known how, but not a word would form itself upon his lips. Her face was turned away and he could see that she was determined not to look at him. Only now and then a passionate sob shook her and made her tremble, like a thing of little weight shaken by the wind.

Giovanni could bear it no longer. Once more he kissed her heavy hair and then quickly went out, he knew not whither. When he realised what he was doing he found himself leaning against a damp wall in the street. He pulled himself together and walked away at a brisk pace, trying to find some relief in rapid motion. He never knew how far he walked that night, haunted by the presence of Corona's deathly face and by the sound of that despairing cry which he had no power to check. He went on and on, challenged from time to time by the sentinels to whom he mechanically showed his pass. Striding up hill and down through the highways and through the least frequented streets of the city, it was all the same to him in his misery, and he had no consciousness of what he saw or heard. At eight o'clock in the evening he was opposite Saint Peter's; at midnight he was standing alone at the desolate cross-roads before Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, beyond the Lateran, and only just within the walls. From place to place he wandered, feeling no fatigue, but only a burning fever in his head and an icy chill in his heart. Sometimes he would walk up and down some broad square twenty or thirty times; then again he followed a long thoroughfare

throughout its whole length, and retraced his steps without seeing that he passed twice through the same street.

At last he found himself in a great crowd of people. Had he realised that it was nearly three o'clock in the morning the presence of such a concourse would have astonished him. But if he was not actually ill and out of his mind, he was at all events in such a confused state that he did not even ask himself what was the meaning of the demonstration.

The tramp of marching troops recalled the thought of Gouache, and suddenly he understood what was happening. The soldiers were leaving Rome to attack the Garibaldians, and he was near one of the gates. By the light of flaring torches he recognised at some distance the hideous architecture of the Porta Pia. He caught sight of the Zouave uniform under the glare and pressed forward instinctively, trying to see the faces of the men. But the crowd was closely packed and he could not obtain a view, try as he might, and the darkness was so thick that the torches only made the air darker around them.

He listened to the tramp of feet and the ring of steel arms and accoutrements like a man in an evil dream. Instead of passing quickly, the time now seemed interminable, for he was unable to move, and the feeling that among those thousands of moving soldiers there was perhaps that one man for whose blood he thirsted, was intolerable. At last the tramping died away in the distance and the crowd loosened itself and began to break up. Giovanni was carried with the stream, and once more it became indifferent to him whither he went. All at once he was aware of a very tall man who walked beside him, a man so large that he looked up, sure that the giant could be none but his cousin San Giacinto.

"Are you here, too?" asked the latter in a friendly voice, as he recognised Giovanni by the light of a lamp, under which they were passing.

"I came to see them off," replied Sant' Ilario, coldly. It seemed to him as though his companion must have followed him.

"So did I," said San Giacinto. "I heard the news late last night, and only lay down for an hour or two."

"What time is it?" asked Giovanni, who supposed it was about midnight.

"Five o'clock. It will be daylight, or dawn at least, in an hour."

Giovanni was silent, wondering absently where he had been all night. For some time the two walked on without speaking.

"You had better come and have coffee with me," said San Giacinto as they passed through the Piazza Barbarini. "I made my man get up so that I might have some as soon as I got home."

Giovanni assented. The presence of some one with whom he could speak made him realise that he was almost exhausted for want of food. It was morning, and he had eaten nothing since the preceding midday, and little enough then. In a few minutes they reached San Giacinto's lodging. There was a lamp burning brightly on the table of the sitting-room, and a little fire was smouldering on the hearth. Giovanni sank into a chair, worn out with hunger and fatigue, while the servant brought the coffee and set it on the table.

"You look tired," remarked San Giacinto. "One lump or two?"

Giovanni drank the beverage without tasting it, but it revived him, and the warmth of the room comforted his chilled and tired limbs. He did not notice that San Giacinto was looking hard at him, wondering indeed what could have produced so strange an alteration in his appearance and manner.

"How is the princess?" asked the big man in a tone of sympathy as he slowly stirred the sugar in his coffee.

"Thank you—she is very well," answered Giovanni, mechanically. In his mind the secret which he must conceal was so closely connected with Corona's illness that he almost unconsciously included her state among the things of which he would not speak. But San Giacinto looked sharply at him, wondering what he meant.

"Indeed? I thought she was very ill."

"So she is," replied Sant' Ilario, bluntly. "I forgot—I do not know what I was thinking of. I fear she is in a very dangerous condition."

He was silent again, and sat leaning upon the table absently looking at the objects that lay before him, an open portfolio and writing materials, a bit of sealing-

wax, a small dictionary, neatly laid in order upon the dark red cloth. He did not know why he had allowed himself to be led to the place, but he felt a sense of rest in sitting there quietly in silence. San Giacinto saw that there was something wrong and said nothing, but lighted a black cigar and smoked thoughtfully.

"You look as though you had been up all night," he remarked after a long pause.

Giovanni did not answer. His eyes did not look up from the red blotting-paper in the open portfolio before him. As he looked down San Giacinto almost believed he was asleep, and shook the table a little to see whether his cousin would notice it. Instantly Giovanni laid his hand upon the writing book, to steady it before him. But still he did not look up.

"You seem to be interested," said San Giacinto, with a smile, and he blew a cloud of smoke into the air.

Giovanni was indeed completely absorbed in his studies, and only nodded his head in answer. After a few minutes more he rose and took the portfolio to a dingy mirror that stood over the chimney-piece of the lodging, and held up the sheet of red blotting-paper before the reflecting surface. Apparently not satisfied with this, he brought the lamp and set it upon the shelf, and then repeated the process.

"You are an infernal scoundrel," he said in a low voice, that trembled with wrath, as he turned and faced San Giacinto.

"What do you mean?" inquired the latter with a calmness that would have staggered a less angry man.

Giovanni drew from his pocket-book the note he had found in Gouache's room. For a week he had kept it about him. Without paying any further attention to San Giacinto he held it in one hand and again placed the blotting-paper in front of the mirror. The impression of the writing corresponded exactly with the original. As it consisted of but a very few words and had been written quickly, almost every stroke had been reproduced upon the red paper in a reversed facsimile. Giovanni brought the two and held them before San Giacinto's eyes. The latter looked surprised but did not betray the slightest fear.

"Do you mean to tell me that you did not write this note?" asked Giovanni, savagely.

"Of course I wrote it," replied the other coolly.

Giovanni's teeth chattered with rage. He dropped the portfolio and the letter and seized his cousin by the throat, burying his fingers in the tough flesh with the ferocity of a wild animal. He was very strong and active and had fallen upon his adversary unawares, so that he had an additional advantage. But for all that he was no match for his cousin's giant strength. San Giacinto sprang to his feet and his great hands took hold of Giovanni's arms above the elbow, lifting him from the ground and shaking him in the air as easily as a cat worries a mouse. Then he thrust him into his chair again and stood holding him so that he could not move.

"I do not want to hurt you," he said, "but I do not like to be attacked in this way. If you try it again I will break some of your bones."

Giovanni was so much astonished at finding himself so easily overmatched that he was silent for a moment. The ex-innkeeper relinquished his hold and picked up his cigar, which had fallen in the struggle.

"I do not propose to wrestle with you for a match," said Giovanni at last. "You are stronger than I, but there are other weapons than those of brute strength. I repeat that you are an infernal scoundrel."

"You may repeat it as often as you please," replied San Giacinto, who had recovered his composure with marvellous rapidity. "It does not hurt me at all."

"Then you are a contemptible coward," cried Giovanni, hotly.

"That is not true," said the other. "I never ran away in my life. Perhaps I have not much reason to avoid a fight," he added, looking down at his huge limbs with a smile.

Giovanni did not know what to do. He had never had a quarrel with a man who was able to break his neck, but who would not fight like a gentleman. He grew calmer, and could have laughed at the situation had it been brought about by any other cause.

"Look here, cousin," said San Giacinto, suddenly and in a familiar tone, "I am as good a gentleman as you,