

though I have kept an inn. If it is the custom here to play with swords and such toys I will take a few lessons and we will have it out. But I confess that I would like to know why you are so outrageously angry. How did you come by that letter? It was never meant for you, nor for any of yours. I pinned it upon Gouache's dressing-table with a pin I found there. I took the paper from your wife's table a week ago yesterday. If you want to know all about it I will tell you."

"And whom did you intend for the author of the letter? Whom but my wife?"

"Your wife!" cried San Giacinto in genuine astonishment. "You are out of your mind. Gouache was to meet Faustina Montevarchi on Sunday morning at a church, and I invented the note to prevent the meeting, and put it on his table during the previous afternoon. I am going to marry Donna Flavia, and I do not mean to allow a beggarly Zouave to make love to my future sister-in-law. Since you took the note they must have met after all. I wish you had left it alone."

Giovanni sank into a chair before the table and buried his face in his hands. San Giacinto stood looking at him in silence, beginning to comprehend what had happened, and really distressed that his comparatively harmless stratagem should have caused so much trouble. He looked at things from a lower point of view than Giovanni, but he was a very human man, after all. It was hard for him to believe that his cousin could have really suspected Corona of loving Gouache; but Giovanni's behaviour left no other explanation. On the other hand, he felt that whatever might be thought of his own part in the affair, it was Giovanni's own fault that things had turned out as they had, seeing that he had been guilty of a very serious indiscretion in entering Gouache's rooms unbidden and in reading what was meant for the Zouave.

Giovanni rose and his face was pale again, but the expression had utterly changed in the course of a few seconds. He suffered horribly, but with a pain more easy to bear than that which had tortured him during the past week. Corona was innocent, and he knew it. Every word she had spoken a week ago, when he had

accused her, rang again in his ears, and as though by magic the truth of her statement was now as clear as the day. He could never forgive himself for having doubted her. He did not know whether he could ever atone for the agony he must have caused her. But it was a thousand times better that he should live long years of bitter self-reproach, than that the woman he so loved should have fallen. He forgot San Giacinto and the petty scheme which had brought about such dire consequences. He forgot his anger of a moment ago in the supreme joy of knowing that Corona had not sinned, and in the bitter contrition for having so terribly wronged her. If he felt anything towards San Giacinto it was gratitude, but he stood speechless under his great emotion, not even thinking what he should say.

"If you doubt the truth of my explanation," said San Giacinto, "go to the Palazzo Montevarchi. Opposite the entrance you will see some queer things painted on the wall. There are Gouache's initials scrawled a hundred times, and the words 'Sunday' and 'Mass' very conspicuous. A simple way, too, would be to ask him whether he did not actually meet Faustina last Sunday morning. When a man advertises his meetings with his lady-love on the walls of the city, no one can be blamed for reading the advertisement."

He laughed at the conceit and at his own astuteness; but Giovanni scarcely heeded him or his words.

"Good-bye," said the latter, holding out his hand.

"You do not want to fight any more, then?" asked San Giacinto.

"Not unless you do. Good-bye."

Without another word he left the room and descended into the street. The cold gray dawn was over everything and the air was raw and chilly. There is nothing more dismal than early dawn in a drizzling rain when a man has been up all night, but Giovanni was unconscious of any discomfort, and there were wings under his feet as he hastened homeward along the slippery pavements.

The pallor in his face had given way to a slight flush that gave colour and animation to his cheeks, and though his eyes were bright their expression was more natural than it had been for many days. He was in one of the

strangest humours which can have sway over that unconsciously humorous animal, man. In the midst of the deepest self-abasement his heart was overflowing with joy. The combination of sorrow and happiness is a rare one, not found every day, but the condition of experiencing both at the same time and in the highest degree is very possible.

Giovanni, indeed, could not feel otherwise than he did. Had he suspected Corona and accused her on grounds wholly frivolous and untenable, in the unreasoning outbreak of a foolish jealousy, he could not have been so persuaded of her guilt as to feel the keenest joy on finding her innocent. In that case his remorse would have outweighed his satisfaction. Had he, on the other hand, suspected her without making the accusation, he would have been happy on discovering his mistake, but could have felt little or no remorse. As it was, he had accused her upon evidence which most tribunals would have thought sufficient for a conviction, and on seeing all doubt cleared away he realised with terrible force the extent of the pain he had inflicted. While he had still believed that she had fallen, he had still so loved her as to wish that he could take the burden of her guilt upon his own shoulders. Now that her innocence was proved beyond all doubt, he had no thought but to ask her forgiveness.

He let himself in with a latch-key and ran up the dim stairs. A second key opened the polished door into the dark vestibule, and in a moment more he was in the ante-chamber of Corona's apartment. Two or three women, pale with watching, were standing round a table, upon which something was heating over a spirit lamp. Giovanni stopped and spoke to them.

"How is she?" he asked, his voice unsteady with anxiety.

The women shook their heads, and one of them began to cry. They loved their mistress dearly and had little hope of her recovery. They had been amazed, too, at Giovanni's apparent indifference during the whole week, and seemed surprised when he went towards the door. One motioned to him to make no noise. He turned the latch very gently and advanced into the darkened chamber.

Corona was lying as he had seen her on the previous evening, and there seemed to be little or no change in her state. Her eyes were closed and her breathing was scarcely perceptible. A nurse was nodding in a chair near the night light and looked up as Giovanni entered. He pointed to the door and she went out. All was so exactly as it had been twelve hours earlier that he could hardly realise the immense change that had taken place in his own heart during the interval. He stood looking at his wife, scarcely breathing for fear of disturbing her and yet wishing that she might wake to hear what he had to say. But she did not move nor show any signs of consciousness. Her delicate, thin hand lay upon the coverlet. He stooped down very slowly and cautiously, and kissed the wasted fingers. Then he drew back quickly and noiselessly as though he had done something wrong. He thought she must be asleep, and sat down in the chair the nurse had vacated. The stillness was profound. The little night light burned steadily without flickering and cast queer long shadows from the floor upwards over the huge tapestries upon the wall. The quaint figures of heroes and saints, that had seen many a Saracinesca born and many a one die in the ancient vaulted room, seemed to take the expressions of old friends watching over the suffering woman. A faint odour like that of ether pervaded the still air, an odour Giovanni never forgot during his life. Everything was so intensely quiet that he almost thought he could hear the ticking of his watch in his pocket.

Corona stirred at last, and slowly opening her eyes, turned them gradually till they met her husband's gaze. At the first movement she made he had risen to his feet and now stood close beside her.

"Did you kiss my hand—or did I dream it?" she asked faintly.

"Yes, darling." He could not at once find words to say what he wanted.

"Why did you?"

Giovanni fell on his knees by the bedside and took her hand in both his own.

"Corona, Corona—forgive me!" The cry came from his heart, and was uttered with an accent of despair that

there was no mistaking. She knew, faint and scarcely conscious though she was, that he was not attempting to deceive her this time. But he could say no more. Many a strong man would in that moment have sobbed aloud and shed tears, but Giovanni was not as other men. Under great emotion all expression was hard for him, and the spontaneity of tears would have contradicted his nature.

Corona wondered what had happened, and lay quite still, looking at his bent head and feeling the trembling touch of his hands on hers. For several seconds the stillness was almost as profound as it had been before. Then Giovanni spoke out slowly and earnestly.

"My beloved wife," he said, looking up into her face, "I know all the truth now. I know what I have done. I know what you have suffered. Forgive me if you can. I will give my whole life to deserve your pardon."

For an instant all Corona's beauty returned to her face as she heard his words. Her eyes shone softly, the colour mounted to her pale cheeks, and she breathed one happy sigh of relief and gladness. Her fingers contracted and closed round his with a tender pressure.

"It is true," she said, scarcely audibly. "You are not trying to deceive me in order to keep me alive?"

"It is true, darling," he answered. "San Giacinto wrote the letter. It was not even meant to seem to come from you. Oh, Corona—can you ever forgive me?"

She turned so as to see him better, and looked long into his eyes. The colour slowly faded again from her face, and her expression changed, growing suddenly sad.

"I will forgive you. I will try to forget it all, Giovanni. You should have believed me, for I have never lied to you. It will be long before I am strong again, and I shall have much time to think of it."

Giovanni rose to his feet, still clasping her hand. Something told him that she was not a woman who could either forgive or forget such an injury, and her tone was colder than he had hoped. The expiation had begun and he was already suffering the punishment of his unbelief. He bore the pain bravely. What right had he to expect that she would suddenly become as she had been before? She had been, and still was, dangerously

ill, and her illness had been caused by his treatment of her. It would be long before their relations could be again what they had once been, and it was not for him to complain. She might have sent him away in anger; he would not have thought her too unkind. But when he remembered her love, he trembled at the thought of living without it. His voice was very gentle as he answered her, after a short pause.

"You shall live to forget it all, Corona. I will make you forget it. I will undo what I have done."

"Can you, Giovanni? Is there no blood upon your hands?" She knew her husband well, and could hardly believe that he had refrained from taking vengeance upon Gouache.

"There is none, thank God," replied Giovanni. "But for a happy accident I should have killed the man a week ago. It was all arranged."

"You must tell him that you have been mistaken," said Corona simply.

"Yes, I will."

"Thank you. That is right."

"It is the least I can do."

Giovanni felt that words were of very little use, and even had he wished to say more he would not have known how to speak. There was that between them which was too deep for all expression, and he knew that henceforth he could only hope to bring back Corona's love by his own actions. Besides, in her present state, he guessed that it would be wiser to leave her, than to prolong the interview.

"I will go now," he said. "You must rest, darling, and be quite well to-morrow."

"Yes. I can rest now."

She said nothing about seeing him again. With a humility almost pathetic in such a man, he bent down and touched her hand with his lips. Then he would have gone away, but she held his fingers and looked long into his eyes.

"I am sorry for you, dear," she said, and paused, not taking her eyes from his. "Kiss me," she added at last, with a faint smile.

A moment later, he was gone. She gazed long at the door through which he had left the room, and her expres-

sion changed more than once, softening and hardening again as the thoughts chased each other through her tired brain. At last she closed her eyes, and presently fell into a peaceful sleep.

Giovanni waited in his room until his father was awake and then went to tell him what had happened. The old gentleman looked weary and sad, but his keen sight noticed the change in his son's manner.

"You look better," he said.

"I have been undeceived," answered Giovanni. "I have been mistaken, misled by the most extraordinary set of circumstances I have ever heard of."

Saracinesca's eyes suddenly gleamed angrily and his white beard bristled round his face.

"You have made a fool of yourself," he growled.

"You have made your wife ill and yourself miserable in a fit of vulgar jealousy. And now you have been telling her so."

"Exactly. I have been telling her so."

"You are an idiot, Giovanni. I always knew it."

"I have only just found it out," answered the younger man.

"Then you are amazingly slow at discovery. Why do you stand there staring at me? Do you expect any sympathy? You will not get it. Go and say a litany outside your wife's door. You have made me spend the most horrible week I ever remember, just because you are not good enough for her. How could you ever dare to suspect that woman? Go away. I shall strangle you if you stay here!"

"That consideration would not have much weight," replied Giovanni. "I know how mad I have been, much better than you can tell me. And yet, I doubt whether any one was ever so strangely mistaken before."

"With your intelligence the wonder is that you are not always mistaken. Upon my soul, the more I think of it, the more I am amazed at your folly. You acted like a creature in the theatre. With your long face and your mystery and your stage despair, you even made a fool of me. At all events, I shall know what to expect the next time it happens. I hope Corona will have the sense to make you do penance."

To tell the truth Giovanni had not expected any better treatment from his father than he actually received, and he was not in a humour to resent reproaches which he knew to be well deserved. He had only intended to tell the prince the result of what had occurred, and he relaxed nothing of his determination, even though he might have persuaded the old gentleman that the accumulated evidence had undoubtedly justified his doubts. With a short salutation he left the room and went out, hoping that Gouache had not accompanied the expedition to Mentana, improbable as that seemed.

He was, of course, disappointed, for while he was making inquiries Gouache was actually on the way to the battle with his corps, as has been already seen. Giovanni spent most of the day in the house, constantly inquiring after Corona, and trying to occupy his mind in reading, though with little success. The idea that Gouache might be killed without having learned the truth began to take possession of him and caused him an annoyance he could not explain. It was not that he felt any very profound remorse for having wronged the man. His nature was not so sensitive as that. It was rather, perhaps, because he regarded the explanation with Anastase as a part of what he owed Corona, that he was so anxious to meet him alive. Partly, too, his anxiety arose from his restlessness and from the desire for action of some sort in which to forget all he had suffered, and all he was still suffering.

Towards evening he went out and heard news of the engagement. It was already known that the enemy had fallen back upon Mentana, and no one doubted the ultimate result of the day's fighting. People were already beginning to talk of going out to take assistance to the wounded. The idea struck Giovanni as plausible and he determined to act upon it at once. He took a surgeon and several men with him, and drove out across the Campagna to the scene of the battle.

As has been told, he found Gouache at last, after a long and difficult search. The ground was so broken and divided by ditches, walls and trees, that some of the wounded were not found until the middle of the next day. Unless Giovanni had undertaken the search Anastase

might have escaped notice for a long time, and it was no wonder if he expressed astonishment on waking up to find himself comfortably installed in Saracinesca's carriage, tended by the man who a few days earlier had wanted to take his life.

CHAPTER XV.

Gouache's wound was by no means dangerous, and when he had somewhat recovered from the combined effects of loss of blood and excessive fatigue he did not feel much the worse for having a ball in his shoulder. Giovanni and the doctor gave him food and a little wine in the carriage, and long before they reached the gates of the city the Zouave was well enough to have heard Sant' Ilario's explanation. The presence of the surgeon, however, made any intimate conversation difficult.

"I came to find you," said Giovanni in a low voice, "because everything has been set right in your absence, and I was afraid you might be killed at Mentana without receiving my apology."

Gouache looked at his companion in some surprise. He knew very well that Sant' Ilario was not a man to make excuses without some very extraordinary reasons for such a step. It is a prime law of the code of honour, however, that an apology duly made must be duly accepted as putting an end to any quarrel, and Anastase saw at once that Giovanni had relinquished all intention of fighting.

"I am very glad that everything is explained," answered Gouache. "I confess that I was surprised beyond measure by the whole affair."

"I regret having entered your rooms without your permission," continued Giovanni who intended to go to the end of what he had undertaken. "The pin was my wife's, but the letter was written by another person with a view to influencing your conduct. I cannot explain here, but you shall know whatever is necessary when we are alone. Of course, if you still desire any satisfaction, I am at your service."

"Pray do not suggest such a thing. I have no further feeling of annoyance in the matter."

Gouache insisted on being taken to his own lodgings, though Sant' Ilario offered him the hospitality of the Palazzo Saracinesca. By four o'clock in the morning the ball was extracted and the surgeon took his leave, recommending sleep and quiet for his patient. Gouache, however, would not let Giovanni go without hearing the end of the story.

"The facts are very few," said the latter after a moment's hesitation. "It appears that you had arranged to meet a lady on Sunday morning. A certain person whom I will not name discovered your intention, and conceived the idea of preventing the meeting by sending you a note purporting to come from the lady. As he could get none of her note-paper he possessed himself of some of my wife's. He pinned the note on your table with the pin you had chanced to find. I was foolish enough to enter your room and I recognised the pin and the paper. You understand the rest."

Gouache laughed merrily.

"I understand that you did me a great service. I met the lady after all, but if I had received the note I would not have gone, and she would have waited for me. Do you mind telling me the name of the individual who tried to play me the trick?"

"If you will excuse my discretion, I would rather not. He knows that his plan failed. I should not feel justified in telling you his name, from other motives."

"As you please," said Gouache. "I daresay I shall find him out."

So the interview ended and Giovanni went home to rest at last, almost as much worn out as Gouache himself. He was surprised at the ease with which everything had been arranged, but he was satisfied with the result and felt that a weight had been taken from his mind. He slept long and soundly and awoke the next morning to hear that Corona was much better.

The events of Saturday and Sunday had to all appearances smoothed many difficulties from the lives of those with whom my history is concerned. Corona and Giovanni were once more united, though the circumstances