

what these papers were. Even if we had known, we should have laughed at them until we discovered that we had a cousin. After all we shall not starve, and what is a title? The Pope will give you another when he knows what has happened. I would as soon be plain Don Giovanni as Prince of Sant' Ilario."

"For that matter, you can call yourself Astrardente."

"I would rather not," said Giovanni, with something like a laugh. "But I must tell Corona this news."

"Wait till she is herself again. It might disturb her too much."

"You do not know her!" Giovanni laughed heartily this time. "If you think she cares for such things, you are very much mistaken in her character. She will bear the misfortune better than any of us. Courage, padre mio! Things are never so black as they look at first."

"I hope not, my boy, I hope not! Go and tell your wife, if you think it best. I would rather be alone."

Giovanni left the room, and Saracinesca was alone. He sank back once more in his chair and folded his strong brown hands together upon the edge of the table before him. In spite of all Giovanni could say, the old man felt keenly the horror of his position. Only those who, having been brought up in immense wealth and accustomed from childhood to the pomp and circumstance of a very great position, are suddenly deprived of everything, can understand what he felt.

He was neither avaricious nor given to vanity. He had not wasted his fortune, though he had spent magnificently a princely income. He had not that small affection for greatness which, strange to say, is often found in the very great. But his position was part of himself, so that he could no more imagine himself plain Don Leone Saracinesca, than he could conceive himself boasting of his ancient titles. And yet it was quite plain to him that he must either cease to be a prince altogether, or accept a new title as a charity from his sovereign. As for his fortune, it was only too plain that the greater part of it had never been his.

To a man of his temperament the sensation of finding himself a mere impostor was intolerable. His first impulse had of course been to fight the case, and had the

attack upon his position come from San Giacinto, he would probably have done so. But his own son had discovered the truth and had put the matter clearly before him, in such a light as to make an appeal to his honour. He had no choice but to submit. He could not allow himself to be outdone in common honesty by the boy he loved, nor could he have been guilty of deliberate injustice, for his own advantage, after he had been convinced that he had no right to his possessions. He belonged to a race of men who had frequently committed great crimes and done atrocious deeds, notorious in history, from motives of personal ambition, for the love of women or out of hatred for men, but who had never had the reputation of loving money or of stooping to dishonour for its sake. As soon as he was persuaded that everything belonged to San Giacinto, he felt that he must resign all in favour of the latter.

One doubt alone remained to be solved. It was not absolutely certain that San Giacinto was the man he represented himself to be. It was quite possible that he should have gained possession of the papers he held, by some means known only to himself; such things are often sold as curiosities, and as the last of the older branch of whom there was any record preserved in Rome had died in obscurity, it was conceivable that the ex-innkeeper might have found or bought the documents he had left, in order to call himself Marchese di San Giacinto. Saracinesca did not go so far as to believe that the latter had any knowledge whatsoever of the main deed which was about to cause so much trouble, unless he had seen it in the hands of Montevarchi, in which case he could not be blamed if he brought a suit for the recovery of so much wealth.

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## CHAPTER XVI.

Giovanni was quite right in his prediction concerning Corona's conduct. He found her in her dressing-room, lying upon the couch near the fire, as he had found her

on that fatal evening three weeks earlier. He sat down beside her and took her hand in his. She had not wholly recovered her strength yet, but her beauty had returned and seemed perfected by the suffering through which she had passed. In a few words he told her the whole story, to which she listened without showing any great surprise. Once or twice, while he was speaking, her dark eyes sought his with an expression he did not fully understand, but which was at least kind and full of sympathy.

"Are you quite sure of all the facts?" she asked when he had finished. "Are you certain that San Giacinto is the man? I cannot tell why, but I have always distrusted him since he first came to us."

"That is the only point that remains to be cleared up," answered Giovanni. "If he is not the man he will not venture to take any steps in the matter, lest he should be exposed and lose what he has."

"What will you do?"

"I hardly know. If he is really our cousin, we must give up everything without a struggle. We are impostors, or little better. I think I ought to tell him plainly how the deed is made out, in order that he may judge whether or not he is in a position to prove his identity."

"Do you imagine that he does not know all about it as well as we ourselves?"

"Probably not—otherwise he would have spoken."

"The papers came back from Montevarchi to-day," said Corona. "It is gratuitous to suppose that the old man has not told his future son-in-law what they contain. Yes—you see it yourself. Therefore San Giacinto knows. Therefore, also, if he is the man he pretends to be, he will let you know his intentions soon enough. I fancy you forgot that in your excitement. If he says nothing, it is because he cannot prove his rights."

"It is true," replied Giovanni, "I did not think of that. Nevertheless I would like to be beforehand. I wish him to know that we shall make no opposition. It is a point of honour."

"Which a woman cannot understand, of course," added Corona, calmly.

"I did not say that. I do not mean it."

"Well—do you want my advice?"

"Always."

The single word was uttered with an accent implying more than mere trust, and was accompanied by a look full of strong feeling. But Corona's expression did not change. Her eyes returned the glance quietly, without affectation, neither lovingly nor unlovingly, but indifferently. Giovanni felt a sharp little pain in his heart as he realised the change that had taken place in his wife.

"My advice is to do nothing in the matter. San Giacinto may be an impostor; indeed, it is not at all unlikely. If he is, he will take advantage of your desire to act generously. He will be forewarned and forearmed and will have time to procure all the proofs he wants. What could you say to him? 'If you can prove your birth, I give you all I possess.' He will at once see that nothing else is necessary, and if he is a rogue he will succeed. Besides, as I tell you, he knows what that deed contains as well as you do, and if he is the man he will bring an action against your father in a week. If he does not, you gain the advantage of having discovered that he is an impostor without exposing yourself to be robbed."

"It goes against the grain," said Giovanni. "But I suppose you are right."

"You will do as you think best. I have no power to make you follow my advice."

"No power? Ah, Corona, do not say that!"

A short silence followed, during which Corona looked placidly at the fire, while Giovanni gazed at her dark face and tried to read the thoughts that were passing in her mind. She did not speak, however, and his guesswork was inconclusive. What hurt him most was her indifference, and he longed to discover by some sign that it was only assumed.

"I would rather do as you think best," he said at last.

She glanced at him and then looked back at the blazing logs.

"I have told you what I think," she answered. "It is for you to judge and to decide. The whole matter affects you more than it does me."

"Is it not the same?"

"No. If you lose the Saracinesca titles and property we shall still be rich enough. You have a fortune of

your own, and so have I. The name is, after all, an affair which concerns you personally. I should have married you as readily had you been called anything else."

The reference to the past made Giovanni's heart leap, and the colour came quickly to his face. It was almost as though she had said that she would have loved him as well had he borne another name, and that might mean that she loved him still. But her calmness belied the hasty conclusion he drew from her words. He thought she looked like a statue, as she lay there in her magnificent rest, her hands folded upon her knees before her, her eyes so turned that he could see only the drooping lids.

"A personal affair!" he exclaimed suddenly, in a bitter tone. "It was different once, Corona."

For the first time since they had been talking her face betrayed some emotion. There was the slightest possible quiver of the lip as she answered.

"Your titles were never anything but a personal affair."

"What concerns me concerns you, dear," said Giovanni, tenderly.

"In so much that I am very sorry — sincerely sorry, when anything troubles you." Her voice was kind and gentle, but there was no love in the words. "Believe me, Giovanni, I would give all I possess to spare you this."

"All you possess — is there not a little love left in your all?"

The cry came from his heart. He took her hand in both of his, and leaned forward towards her. Her fingers lay passively in his grasp, and the colour did not change in her dark cheeks. A moment ago there had been in her heart a passionate longing for the past, which had almost betrayed itself, but when he spoke of present love his words had no power to rouse a responsive echo. And yet she could not answer him roughly, for he was evidently in earnest. She said nothing, therefore, but left her hand in his. His love, which had been as fierce and strong as ever, even while he had doubted her faith, began to take new proportions of which he had never dreamt.

He felt like a man struggling with death in some visible and tangible shape.

"Is it all over? Will you never love me again?" he asked hoarsely.

Her averted face told no tale, and still her fingers lay inert between his broad hands. She knew how he suffered, and yet she would not soothe him with the delusive hope for which he longed so intensely.

"For God's sake, Corona, speak to me! Is there never to be any love again? Can you never forgive me?"

"Ah, dear, I have forgiven you wholly — there is not an unkind thought left in my heart for you!" She turned and laid the hand that was free upon his shoulder, looking into his face with an expression that was almost imploring. "Do not think it is that, oh, not that! I would forgive you again, a thousand times —"

"And love me?" he cried, throwing his arms round her neck, and kissing her passionately again and again. But suddenly he drew back, for there was no response to his caresses. He turned very pale as he saw the look in her eyes. There were tears there, for the love that had been, for his present pain, perhaps, but there was not one faint spark of the fire that had burned in other days.

"I cannot say it!" she answered at last. "Oh, do not make me say it, for the sake of all that was once!"

In his emotion Giovanni slipped from the low chair and knelt beside his wife, one arm still around her. The shock of disappointment, in the very moment when he thought she was yielding, was almost more than he could bear. Had not her heart grown wholly cold, the sight of his agonised face would have softened her. She was profoundly moved and pitied him exceedingly, but she could not do more.

"Giovanni — do not look at me so! If I could! If I only could —"

"Are you made of stone?" he asked, in a voice choking with pain.

"What can I do!" she cried in despair, sinking back and hiding her face in her hands. She was in almost as great distress as he himself.

"Love me, Corona! Only love me, ever so little! Remember that you loved me once —"

"God knows how dearly! Could I forget it, I might love you now——"

"Oh, forget it then, beloved! Let it be undone. Let the past be un-lived. Say that you never loved me before, and let the new life begin to-day—can you not? Will you not? It is so little I ask, only the beginning. I will make it grow till it shall fill your heart. Sweet love, dear love! love me but enough to say it——"

"Do you think I would not, if I could? Ah, I would give my whole life to bring back what is gone, but I cannot. It is dead. You—no, not you—some evil thing has killed it. Say it? Yes, dear, I would say it—I will say it if you bid me. Giovanni, I love you—yes, those are the words. Do they mean anything? Can I make them sound true? Can I make the dead alive again? Is it anything but the breath of my lips? Oh, Giovanni, my lost love, why are you not Giovanni still?"

Again his arms went round her and he pressed her passionately to his heart. She turned pale, and though she tried to hide it, she shrank from his embrace, while her lips quivered and the tears of pain started in her eyes. She suffered horribly, in a way she had never dreamed of as possible. He saw what she felt and let her fall back upon the cushions, while he still knelt beside her. He saw that his mere touch was repugnant to her, and yet he could not leave her. He saw how bravely she struggled to bear his kisses, and how revolting they were to her, and yet the magic of her beauty held his passionate nature under a spell, while the lofty dignity of her spirit enthralled his soul. She was able to forgive, though he had so injured her, she was willing to love him, if she could, though he had wounded her so cruelly; it was torture to think that she could go no further, that he should never again hear the thrill of passion in her voice, nor see the whole strength of her soul rise in her eyes when his lips met hers.

There was something grand and tragic in her suffering, in her realisation of all that he had taken from her by his distrust. She sank back on her couch, clasping her hands together so tightly that the veins showed clearly beneath the olive skin. As she tried to overcome her emotion, the magnificent outline of her face was enno-

bled by her pain, the lids closed over her dark eyes, and the beautiful lips set themselves sternly together, as though resolved that no syllable should pass them which could hurt him, even though they could not formulate the words he would have given his soul to hear.

Giovanni knelt beside her, and gazed into her face. He knew she had not fainted, and he was almost glad that for a moment he could not see her eyes. Tenderly, timidly, he put out his hand and laid it on her clasped fingers, then drew it back again very quickly, as though suddenly remembering that the action might pain her. Her heavy hair was plaited into a thick black coil that fell upon the arm of the couch. He bent lower and pressed his lips upon the silken tress, noiselessly, fearing to disturb her, fearing lest she should even notice it. He had lost all his pride and strength and dominating power of character and he felt himself unworthy to touch her.

But he was too strong a man to continue long in such a state. Before Corona opened her eyes, he had risen to his feet and stood at some distance from her, resting his arm upon the chimney-piece, watching her still, but with an expression which showed that a change had taken place in him, and that his resolute will had once more asserted itself.

"Corona!" he said at last, in a voice that was almost calm.

Without changing her position she looked up at him. She had been conscious that he had left her side, and she experienced a physical sensation of relief.

"Corona," he repeated, when he saw that she heard him, "I do not complain. It is all my fault and my doing. Only, let it not be hate, dear. I will not touch you, I will not molest you. I will pray that you may love me again. I will try and do such things as may make you love me as you did once. Forgive me, if my kisses hurt you. I did not know they would, but I have seen it. I am not a brute. If I were, you would put something of the human into my heart. It shall never happen again, that I forget. Our life must begin again. The old Giovanni was your husband, and is dead. It is for me to win another love from you. Shall it be so, dear? Is it not to be all different—even to my very name?"

"All, all different," repeated Corona in a low voice. "Oh, how could I be so unkind! How could I show you what I felt?"

Suddenly, and without the least warning, she sprang to her feet and made two steps towards him. The impulse was there, but the reality was gone. Her arms were stretched out, and there was a look of supreme anguish in her eyes. She stopped short, then turned away once more, and as she sank upon the couch, burying her face in the cushions, the long restrained tears broke forth, and she sobbed as though her heart must break.

Giovanni wished that his own suffering could find such an outlet, but there was no such relief possible for his hardy masculine nature. He could not bear the sight of her grief, and yet he knew that he could not comfort her, that to lay his hand upon her forehead would only add a new sting to the galling wound. He turned his face away and leaned against the heavy chimney-piece, longing to shut out the sound of her sobs from his ears, submitting to a torture that might well have expiated a greater misdeed than his. The time was past when he could feel that an unbroken chain of evidence had justified him in doubting and accusing Corona. He knew the woman he had injured better now than he had known her then, for he understood the whole depth and breadth of the love he had so ruthlessly destroyed. It was incredible to him, now, that he should ever have mistrusted a creature so noble, so infinitely grander than himself. Every tear she shed fell like molten fire upon his heart, every sob that echoed through the quiet room was a reproach that racked his heart-strings and penetrated to the secret depths of his soul. He could neither undo what he had done nor soothe the pain inflicted by his actions. He could only stand there, and submit patiently to the suffering of his expiation.

The passionate outburst subsided at last, and Corona lay pale and silent upon her cushions. She knew what he felt, and pitied him more than herself.

"It is foolish of me to cry," she said presently. "It cannot help you."

"Help me?" exclaimed Giovanni, turning suddenly.

"It is not I, it is you. I would have died to save you those tears."

"I know it—would I not give my life to spare you this? And I will. Come and sit beside me. Take my hand. Kiss me—be your own self. It is not true that your kisses hurt me—it shall not be true——"

"You do not mean it, dear," replied Giovanni, sadly. "I know how true it is."

"It shall not be true. Am I a devil to hurt you so? Was it all your fault? Was I not wrong too? Indeed——"

"No, my beloved. There is nothing wrong in you. If you do not love me——"

"I do. I will, in spite of myself."

"You mean it, darling—I know. You are good enough, even for that. But you cannot. It must be all my doing, now."

"I must," cried Corona, passionately. "Unless I love you, I shall die. I was wrong, too, you shall let me say it. Was I not mad to do the things I did? What man would not have suspected? Would a man be a man at all, if he did not watch the woman he loves? Would love be love without jealousy when there seems to be cause for it? Should I have married you, had I thought that you would be so careless as to let me do such things without interfering? Was it not my fault when I came back that night and would not tell you what had happened? Was it not madness to ask you to trust me, instead of telling you all? And yet," she turned her face away, "and yet, it hurt me so!"

"You shall not blame yourself, Corona. It was all my fault."

"Come and sit here, beside me. There—take my hand. Does it tremble? Do I draw it away? Am I not glad that it should rest in yours? Look at me—am I not glad? Giovanni—dear husband—true love! Look into my eyes. Do you not see that I love you? Why do you shake your head and tremble? It is true, I tell you."

Suddenly the forced smile faded from her face, the artificial expression she tried so pathetically to make real, disappeared, and gave place to a look of horror and fear. She drew back her hand and turned desperately away.

"I am lying, lying — and to you!" she moaned. "Oh God! have mercy, for I am the most miserable woman in the world!"

Giovanni sat still, resting his chin upon his hand and staring at the fire. His hopes had risen for a moment, and had fallen again, if possible more completely than before. Every line of his strongly-marked face betrayed the despair that overwhelmed him. And yet he was no longer weak, as he had been the first time. He was wondering at the hidden depths of Corona's nature which had so suddenly become visible. He comprehended the magnitude of a passion which in being extinguished could leave such emotions behind, and he saw with awful distinctness the beauty of what he had lost and the depth of the abyss by which he was separated from it. Only a woman who had loved to distraction could make such desperate efforts to revive an affection that was dead; only a woman capable of the most lofty devotion could sink her pride and her own agony, in the attempt to make the man she had loved forgive himself. He could have borne her reproaches more easily than the sight of her anguish, but she would not reproach him. He could have borne her hatred almost better than such unselfish forgiveness, and yet she had forgiven him. For the first time in his life he wished that he might die — he, who loved life so dearly. Perhaps it would be easier for her to see him dead at her feet than to feel that he must always be near her and that she could not love him.

"It is of no use, dear," he said, at last. "I was right. The old Giovanni is dead. We must begin our life again. Will you let me try? Will you let me do my best to live for you and to raise up a new love in your heart?"

"Can you? Can we go back to the old times when we first met? Can you? Can I?"

"If you will —"

"If I will? Is there anything I would not do to gain that?"

"Our lives may become so different from what they now are, as to make it more easy," said Giovanni. "Do you realise how everything will be changed when we have given up this house? Perhaps it is better that it should be so, after all."

"Yes — far better. Oh, I am so sorry for you!"

"Who pities, may yet love," he said in low tones.

Corona did not make any answer, but for many minutes lay watching the dancing flames. Giovanni knew that it would be wiser to say nothing more which could recall the past, and when he spoke again it was to ask her opinion once more concerning the best course to pursue in regard to the property.

"I still think," answered Corona, "that you had better do nothing for the present. You will soon know what San Giacinto means to do. You may be sure that if he has any rights he will not forget to press them. If it comes to the worst and you are quite sure that he is the man you — that is to say, your father — can give up everything without a suit. It is useless to undertake the consequences of a misfortune which may never occur. It would be reckless to resign your inheritance without a struggle, when San Giacinto, if he is an honest man, would insist upon the case being tried in law."

"That is true. I will take your advice. I am so much disturbed about other things that I am inclined to go to all extremes at once. Will you dine with us this evening?"

"I think not. Give me one more day. I shall be stronger to-morrow."

"I have tired you," exclaimed Giovanni in a tone of self-reproach. Corona did not answer the remark, but held out her hand with a gentle smile.

"Good-night, dear," she said.

An almost imperceptible expression of pain passed quickly over Giovanni's face as he touched her fingers with his lips. Then he left the room without speaking again.

In some respects he was glad that he had induced Corona to express herself. He had no illusions left, for he knew the worst and understood that if his wife was ever to love him again there must be a new wooing. It is not necessary to dwell upon what he felt, for in the course of the conversation he had not been able to conceal his feelings. Disappointment had come upon him very suddenly, and might have been followed by terrible consequences, had he not foreseen, as in a dream of the

future, a possibility of winning back Corona's love. The position in which they stood with regard to each other was only possible because they were exceptional people and had both loved so well that they were willing to do anything rather than forego the hope of loving again. Another man would have found it hard to own himself wholly in the wrong; a woman less generous would have either pretended successfully that she still loved, or would not have acknowledged that she suffered so keenly in finding her affection dead. Perhaps, too, if there had been less frankness there might have been less difficulty in reviving the old passion, for love has strange ways of hiding himself, and sometimes shows himself in ways even more unexpected.

A profound student of human nature would have seen that a mere return to the habit of pleasant intercourse could not suffice to forge afresh such a bond as had been broken, where two such persons were concerned. Something more was necessary. It was indispensable that some new force should come into play, to soften Corona's strong nature and to show Giovanni in his true light. Unfortunately for them such a happy conclusion was scarcely to be expected. Even if the question of the Saracinesca property were decided against them, an issue which, at such a time, was far from certain, they would still be rich. Poverty might have drawn them together again, but they could not be financially ruined. Corona would have all her own fortune, while Giovanni was more than well provided for by what his mother had left him. The blow would tell far more heavily upon Giovanni's pride than upon his worldly wealth, severe as the loss must be in respect of the latter. It is impossible to say whether Corona might not have suffered as much as Giovanni himself, had the prospect of such a catastrophe presented itself a few weeks earlier. At present it affected her very little. The very name of Saracinesca was disagreeable to her hearing, and the house she lived in had lost all its old charm for her. She would willingly have left Rome to travel for a year or two rather than continue to inhabit a place so full of painful recollections; she would gladly have seen another name upon the cards she left at her friends' houses — even the once

detested name of Astrardente. When she had married Giovanni she had not been conscious that she became richer than before. When one had everything, what difference could a few millions more bring into life? It was almost a pity that they could not become poor and be obliged to bear together the struggles and privations of poverty.

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## CHAPTER XVII.

San Giacinto and Flavia were married on Saturday the thirtieth of November, thereby avoiding the necessity of paying a fee for being united during Advent, much to the satisfaction of Prince Montevarchi. The wedding was a brilliant affair, and if the old prince's hospitality left something to be desired, the display of liveries, coaches and family silver was altogether worthy of so auspicious an occasion. Everybody was asked, and almost everybody went, from the Saracinesca to Anastase Gouache, from Valdarno to Arnaldo Meschini. Even Spicca was there, as melancholy as usual, but evidently interested in the proceedings. He chanced to find himself next to Gouache in the crowd.

"I did not expect to see you here," he remarked.

"I have been preserved from a variety of dangers in order to assist at the ceremony," answered the Zouave, with a laugh. "At one time I thought it more likely that I should be the person of importance at a funeral."

"So did I. However, it could not be helped." Spicca did not smile.

"You seem to regret it," observed Gouache, who knew his companion's eccentric nature.

"Only on general principles. For the rest, I am delighted to see you. Come and breakfast with me when this affair is over. We will drink to the happiness of two people who will certainly be very unhappy before long."

"Ourselves?"

"No. The bride and bridegroom. 'Ye, who enter,