

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.

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,

leave all hope behind!' How can people be so foolish as to enter into an engagement from which there is no issue? The fools are not all dead yet."

"I am one of them," replied Gouache.

"You will probably have your wish. Providence has evidently preserved you from sudden death in order to destroy you by lingering torture. Is the wedding day fixed?"

"I wish it were."

"And the bride?"

"How can I tell?"

"Do you mean to say that, as an opinion, you would rather be married than not? The only excuse for the folly of marrying is the still greater folly of loving a woman enough to marry her. Of course, a man who is capable of that, is capable of anything. Here comes the bride with her father. Think of being tied to her until a merciful death part you. Think of being son-in-law to that old man, until heaven shall be pleased to remove him. Think of calling that stout English lady, mother-in-law, until she is at last overtaken by apoplexy. Think of calling all those relations brothers and sisters, Ascanio, Onorato, Andrea, Isabella, Bianca, Faustina! It is a day's work to learn their names and titles. She wears a veil—to hide her satisfaction—a wreath of orange flowers, artificial, too, made of paper and paste and wire, symbols of innocence, of course, pliable and easily patched together. She looks down, lest the priest should see that her eyes are laughing. Her father is whispering words of comfort and encouragement into her ear. 'Mind your expression,' he is saying, no doubt—'you must not look as though you were being sacrificed, nor as though you were too glad to be married, for everybody is watching you. Do not say, I will, too loudly nor inaudibly either, and remember that you are my daughter.' Very good advice. Now she kneels down and he crosses to the other side. She bends her head very low. She is looking under her elbow to see the folds of her train. You see—she moves her heel to make the gown fall better—I told you so. A pretty figure, all in white, before the great altar with the lights, and the priest in his robes, and the organ playing, and that Hercules in a black coat for a husband. Now she looks up. The rings

are there on the gold salver upon the altar. She has not seen hers, and is wondering whether it is of plain gold, or a band of diamonds, like the Princess Valdarno's. Now then—ego conjungo vos—the devil, my friend, it is an awful sight!"

"Cynic!" muttered Gouache, with a suppressed laugh.

"There—it is done now, and she is already thinking what it will be like to dine alone with him this evening, and several thousand evenings hereafter. Cynic, you say? There are no more cynics. They are all married, and must turn stoics if they can. Let us be off. No—there is mass. Well then, go down on your knees and pray for their souls, for they are in a bad case. Marriage is Satan's hot-house for poisonous weeds. If anything can make a devil of an innocent girl it is marriage. If anything can turn an honest man into a fiend it is matrimony. Pray for them, poor creatures, if there is any available praying power left in you, after attending to the wants of your own soul, which, considering your matrimonial intentions, I should think very improbable."

Gouache looked at his companion curiously, for Spicca's virulence astonished him. He was not at all intimate with the man and had never heard him express his views so clearly upon any subject. Unlike most people, he was not in the least afraid of the melancholy Italian.

"From the way you talk," he remarked, "one might almost imagine that you had been married yourself."

Spicca looked at him with an odd expression, in which there was surprise as well as annoyance, and instead of making any answer, crossed himself and knelt down upon the marble pavement. Gouache followed his example instinctively.

Half an hour later the crowd moved slowly out of the church, and those who had carriages waited in the huge vestibule while the long line of equipages moved up to the gates. Gouache escaped from Spicca in the hope of getting a sight of Faustina before she drove away with her mother in one of the numerous Montevarchi coaches. Sant' Ilario and Corona were standing by one of the pillars, conversing in low tones.

"Montevarchi looked as though he knew it," said Giovanni.

"What?" asked Corona, quietly.

"That his daughter is the future Princess Saracinesca."

"It remains to be seen whether he is right."

Gouache had been pushed by the crowd into one of the angles of the pilaster while the two speakers stood before one of the four pillars of which it was built up. The words astonished him so much that he forced his way out until he could see the Princess of Sant' Ilario's beautiful profile dark against the bright light of the street. She was still speaking, but he could no longer hear her voice; some acoustic peculiarity of the columns had in all probability been the means of conveying to him the fragment of conversation he had overheard. Avoiding recognition, he slipped away through an opening in the throng and just succeeded in reaching the gate as the first of the Montevarchi carriages drew up. The numerous members of the family were gathered on the edge of the crowd, and Gouache managed to speak a few words with Faustina.

The girl's delicate face lighted up when she was conscious of his presence, and she turned her eyes lovingly to his. They met often now in public, though San Giacinto did his best to keep them apart.

"Here is a secret," said Gouache in a quick whisper. "I have just heard Sant' Ilario telling his wife that your sister is the future Princess Saracinesca. What does it mean?"

Faustina looked at him in the utmost astonishment. It was clear that she knew nothing of the matter at present.

"You must have heard wrong," she answered.

"Will you come to early mass to-morrow?" he asked hurriedly, for he had no time to lose.

"I will try — if it is possible. It will be easier now that San Giacinto is to be away. He knows everything, I am sure."

"San Giacinto?" It was Gouache's turn to be astonished. But explanations were impossible in such a crowd, and Faustina was already moving away.

"Say nothing about what I have told you," Anastase whispered as she left him. She bowed her lovely head in silence and passed on.

And so the Marchese di San Giacinto took Flavia Montevarchi for his wife, and all Rome looked on and smiled, and told imaginary stories of his former life, acknowledging, nevertheless, that Flavia had done very well — the stock phrase — since there was no doubt whatever but that the gigantic bridegroom was the cousin of the Saracinesca, and rich into the bargain. Amidst all the gossip and small talk no one, however, was found who possessed enough imagination to foretell what in reality was very imminent, namely, that the Marchese might turn out to be the prince.

The last person to suspect such a revelation was San Giacinto himself. He had indeed at one time entertained some hopes of pushing forward a claim which was certainly founded upon justice if not upon good law; but since Montevarchi had kept the documents relating to the case for many days, and had then returned them without mentioning the subject to his future son-in-law, the latter had thought it wiser to let the matter rest for the present, shrewdly suspecting that such a man as Montevarchi would not readily let such an opportunity of enriching his own daughter slip through his fingers. It has been already seen that Montevarchi purposely prevented San Giacinto from seeing the papers in order that he might be in reality quite innocent of any complicity in the matter when the proceedings were instituted, a point very important for the success of the suit.

Half an hour afterwards San Giacinto was closeted with the old prince in the latter's study, which looked more than usually dismal by contrast with the brilliant assemblage in the drawing-rooms.

"Now that we are alone, my dear son," began Montevarchi, who for a wonder had not changed his coat since the ceremony, "now that you are really my son, I have an important communication to make."

San Giacinto sat down and any one might have seen from the expression of his square jaw and determined mouth that he was prepared for battle. He did not trust his father-in-law in the least, and would not have been surprised if he had made an attempt to get back the money he had paid into the lawyer's hands as Flavia's dowry. But San Giacinto had taken all precautions and

knew very well that he could not be cheated. Montevarchi continued in a bland voice.

"I have kept the matter as a surprise for you," he said. "You have of course been very busy during these last weeks in making your preparations for the solemn ceremony at which we have just assisted. It was therefore impossible for you to attend to the multifarious details which it has been my care, my privilege, to sift and examine. For it is a privilege we should value highly to labour for those we love, for those with whom we share our dearest affections. I am now about to communicate to you an affair of the highest importance, which, when brought to a successful termination will exercise a tremendous influence over all your life. Let me say beforehand, however, and lest you should suspect me of any unworthy motives, that I expect no thanks, nor any share in the immense triumph in store for you. Do not be surprised if I use somewhat strong language on such an occasion. I have examined everything, preserved everything, taken the best legal advice, and consulted those without whose spiritual counsel I enter upon no weighty undertaking. My dear son, you, and none other, are the real and rightful Prince Saracinesca."

The climax to the long preamble was so unexpected that San Giacinto uttered a loud exclamation of surprise.

"Do not be amazed at what I have told you," said Montevarchi. "The documents upon which the claims of the Saracinesca rest were drawn up by a wise man. Although he had not at that time any intention of marrying, he was aware that with heaven all things are possible, and introduced a clause to the effect that if he should marry and leave heirs direct of his body, the whole deed was to be null, void and ineffectual. I do not know enough of your family history to understand why neither he nor his son nor his grandson ever made any attempt to recover their birthright, but I know enough of law to affirm that the clause is still good. It is identical"—the prince smiled pleasantly—"it is identical in the original and in the copy preserved in the Chancery archives. In my opinion you have only to present the two documents before a competent court, in order to obtain a unanimous verdict in your favour."

San Giacinto looked hard from under his overhanging brows at the old man's keen face. Then, suddenly, he stuck his heavy fist into the palm of his left hand, and rose from his chair, a gleam of savage triumph in his eyes. For some time he paced the room in silence.

"I wish Giovanni no ill, nor his father either," he said at last.

"Heaven forbid!" exclaimed Montevarchi, crossing himself. "And besides, as the property is all yours, that would be of no use."

San Giacinto stared a minute, and then his deep voice rang out in a hearty laugh. He had an intimate conviction that his devout father-in-law was quite capable, not only of wishing evil to his neighbour, but of putting his wishes into execution if his interests could be advanced thereby.

"No," he said, when his merriment had subsided, "I wish them no evil. But, after all, they must know what is contained in the papers they have in their possession, and they must know that I am the prince, and that they have kept me out of my inheritance. I will go and tell them so. Since there is no doubt about the case, I do not see why I should wait."

"Nor I," answered Montevarchi, with the air of a man who has done his part and expects others to finish what he has begun.

"It is fortunate that we have decided to go to Frascati instead of making a journey to the end of Europe. Not but that, as I have never seen Paris, I would have liked the trip well enough."

"You will find Paris pleasanter when you are Prince Saracinesca."

"That is true," replied San Giacinto, thoughtfully. There was the deep light of anticipated triumph in his eyes. "Will you see that the proper preliminary steps are taken?" he asked presently.

"I will engage lawyers for you. But you will have to do the rest yourself. The lawyers might go out and talk it over with you in Frascati. After all, you are a young man of good sense, and will not have any sentiment about being alone with your wife."

"For the matter of that, I anticipate much pleasure in