

emotions than any which could be caused by worldly loss. He had been with Corona again, had talked with her and had seen that look in her face which he had learned to dread more than he had ever dreaded anything in his life. What was life itself without that which her eyes refused?

CHAPTER XIX.

Prince Montevarchi was very much surprised when he was told that Anastase Gouache wished to see him, and as he was very much occupied with the details of the suit his first impulse was to decline the visit. Although he had no idea that matters had already gone so far between the Zouave and Faustina, he was not, however, so blind as the young girl had supposed him to be. He was naturally observant, like most men who devote their lives to the pursuit of their own interests, and it had not escaped him that Faustina and Gouache were very often to be seen talking together in the world. Had he possessed a sense of humour he might possibly have thought that it would be inexpressibly comical if Gouache should take it into his head to fall in love with the girl; but the Italians are not a humorous people, and the idea did not suggest itself to the old gentleman. He consented to receive Gouache because he thought the opportunity would be a good one for reading the young man a lecture upon the humility of his station, and upon the arrogance he displayed in devoting himself thus openly to the daughter of Casa Montevarchi.

"Good-day, Monsieur Gouache," he said solemnly, as Anastase entered. "Pray be seated. To what do I owe the honour of your visit?"

Anastase had put on a perfectly new uniform for the interview, and his movements were more than usually alert and his manners a shade more elaborate and formal than on ordinary occasions. He felt and behaved as young men of good birth do who are serving their year in the army, and who, having put on their smartest

tunic, hope that in a half light they may be taken for officers.

"Will you allow me to explain my position in the first place?" he asked, seating himself and twisting his cap slowly in his hands.

"Your position? By all means, if you desire to do so. It is an excellent rule in all discourses to put the definition before the argument. Nevertheless, if you would inform me of the nature of the affair, it might help me to understand you better."

"It is very delicate — but I will try to be plain. What I am, I think you know already. I am a painter and I have been successful. For the present, I am a Zouave, but my military service does not greatly interfere with my profession. We have a good deal of time upon our hands. My pictures bring me a larger income than I can spend."

"I congratulate you," observed Montevarchi, opening his small eyes in some astonishment. "The pursuit of the fine arts is not generally very lucrative. For myself, I confess that I am satisfied with those treasures which my father has left me. I am very fond of pictures, it is true; but you will understand that, when a gallery is filled, it is full. You comprehend, I am sure? Much as I might wish to own some of the works of the modern French school, the double disadvantage of possessing already so many canvases, and the still stronger consideration of my limited fortune — yes, limited, I assure you —"

"Pardon me," interrupted Gouache, whose face reddened suddenly, "I had no intention of proposing to sell you a picture. I am not in the habit of advertising myself nor of soliciting orders for my work."

"My dear sir!" exclaimed the prince, seeing that he was on a wrong tack, "have I suggested such a thing? If my words conveyed the idea, pray accept all my excuses. Since you had mentioned the subject of art, my thoughts naturally were directed to my gallery of pictures. I am delighted to hear of your success, for you know how much interest we all feel in him who was the victim of such an unfortunate accident, due doubtless to the carelessness of my men."

"Pray do not recall that! Your hospitality more than repaid me for the little I suffered. The matter concerning which I wish to speak to you is a very serious one, and I hope you will believe that I have considered it well before taking a step which may at first surprise you. To be plain, I come to ask you to confer upon me the honour of Donna Faustina Montevarchi's hand."

Montevarchi leaned back in his chair, speechless with amazement. He seemed to gasp for breath as his long fingers pressed the green table-cover before him. His small eyes were wide open, and his toothless jaw dropped. Gouache feared that he was going to be taken ill.

"You!" cried the old man in a cracked voice, when he had recovered himself enough to be able to speak.

"Yes," answered Anastase, who was beginning to feel very nervous as he observed the first results of his proposal. He had never before quite realised how utterly absurd the match would seem to Montevarchi. "Yes," he repeated. "Is the idea so surprising? Is it inconceivable to you that I should love your daughter? Can you not understand——"

"I understand that you are wholly mad!" exclaimed the prince, still staring at his visitor in blank astonishment.

"No, I am not mad. I love Donna Faustina——"

"You! You dare to love Faustina! You, a painter, a man with a profession and with nothing but what you earn! You, a Zouave, a man without a name, without——"

"You are an old man, prince, but the fact of my having made you an honourable proposition does not give you the right to insult me." The words were spoken in a sharp, determined voice, and brought Montevarchi to his senses. He was a terrible coward and would rather go to a considerable expense than face an angry man.

"Insult you, my dear sir? I would not think of it!" he answered in a very different tone. "But my dear Monsieur Gouache, I fear that this is quite impossible! In the first place, my daughter's marriage is already arranged. The negotiations have been proceeding for some time——she is to marry Frangipani——you must have heard it. And, moreover, with all due respect for the

position you have gained by your immense talent——immense, my dear friend, I am the first to say it——the instability of human affairs obliges me to seek for her a fortune, which depends upon the vulgar possession of wealth rather than upon those divine gifts of genius with which you are so richly endowed."

The change from anger to flattery was so sudden that Gouache was confounded and could not find words in which to answer what was said to him. Montevarchi's eyes had lost their expression of astonishment, and a bland smile played about the corners of his sour mouth, while he rubbed his bony hands slowly together, nodding his head at every comma of his elaborate speech. Anastase saw, however, that there was not the slightest hope that his proposal would ever be entertained, and by his own sensations he knew that he had always expected this result. He felt no disappointment, and it seemed to him that he was in the same position in which he had been before he had spoken. On the other hand he was outraged by the words that had fallen from Montevarchi's lips in the first moments of anger and astonishment. A painter, a man with a profession, without a name! Gouache was too human not to feel the sting of each truth as it was uttered. He would have defined himself in very much the same way without the least false pride; but to hear his own estimate of himself, given by another person as the true one, was hard to bear. A painter, yes——he was proud of it. A man with a profession, yes——was it not far nobler to earn money by good work than to inherit what others had stolen in former times? A man without a name——was not his own beginning to be famous, and was it not better to make the name Gouache glorious by his own efforts than to be called Orsini because one's ancestors had been fierce and lawless as bears, or Sciarra because one's progenitor had slapped the face of a pope? Doubtless it was a finer thing to be great by one's own efforts in the pursuit of a noble art than to inherit a greatness originally founded upon a superior rapacity, and a greater physical strength than had characterised the ordinary men of the period. Nevertheless, Gouache knew with shame that at that moment he wished that his name could be changed to

Frangipani, and the fabric of his independence, of which he had so long been proud, was shaken to its foundations as he realised that in spite of all fame, all glory, all genius, he could never be what the miserly, cowardly, lying old man before him was by birth—a Roman prince. The conclusion was at once inexpressibly humiliating and supremely ludicrous. He felt himself laughable in his own eyes, and was conscious that a smile was on his face, which Montevarchi would not understand. The old gentleman was still talking.

"I cannot tell you," he was saying, "how much I regret my total inability to comply with a request which evidently proceeds from the best motives, I might almost say from the heart itself. Alas! my dear friend, we are not all masters of our actions. The cares of a household like mine require a foresight, an hourly attention, an unselfish devotion which we can only hope to obtain by constant——"

He was going to say "by constant recourse to prayer," but he reflected that Gouache was probably not of a religious turn of mind, and he changed the sentence.

"——by constant study of the subject. Situated as I am, a Roman in the midst of Romans, I am obliged to consider the traditions of my own people in respect of all the great affairs of life. Believe me, I entreat you, that, far from having any prejudice against yourself, I should rejoice sincerely could I take you by the hand and call you my son. But how can I act? What can I do? Go to your own country, dear Monsieur Gouache, think no more of us, or of our daughters, marry a woman of your own nation, and you will not be disappointed in your dreams of matrimonial felicity!"

"In other words, you refuse altogether to listen to my proposal?" By this time Gouache was able to put the question calmly.

"Alas, yes!" replied the prince with an air of mock regret that exasperated the young man beyond measure. "I cannot think of it, though you are indeed a most sympathetic young man."

"In that case I will not trespass upon your time any longer," said Gouache, who was beginning to fear lest his coolness should forsake him.

As he descended the broad marble stairs his detestation of the old hypocrite overcame him, and his wrath broke out.

"You shall pay me for this some day, you old scoundrel!" he said aloud, very savagely.

Montevarchi remained in his study after Gouache had gone. A sour smile distorted his thin lips, and the expression became more and more accented until the old man broke into a laugh that rang drily against the vaulted ceiling. Some one knocked at the door, and his merriment disappeared instantly. Arnaldo Meschini entered the room. There was something unusual about his appearance which attracted the prince's attention at once.

"Has anything happened?"

"Everything. The case is won. Your Excellency's son-in-law is Prince Saracinesca."

The librarian's bright eyes gleamed with exultation and there was a slight flush in his cheeks that contrasted oddly with his yellow skin. A disagreeable smile made his intelligent face more ugly than usual. He stood half-way between the door and his employer, his long arms hanging awkwardly by his sides, his head thrust forward, his knees a little bent, assuming by habit a servile attitude of attention, but betraying in his look that he felt himself his master's master.

Montevarchi started as he heard the news. Then he leaned eagerly across the table, his fingers as usual slowly scratching the green cloth.

"Are you quite sure of it?" he asked in a trembling voice. "Have you got the verdict?"

Meschini produced a tattered pocket-book, and drew from it a piece of stamped paper, which he carefully unfolded and handed to the prince.

"There is an attested note of it. See for yourself."

Montevarchi hastily looked over the small document, and his face flushed slowly till it was almost purple, while the paper quivered in his hold. It was clear that everything had succeeded as he had hoped, and that his most sanguine expectations were fully realised. His thoughts suddenly recurred to Gouache, and he laughed again at the young man's assurance.

"Was Saracinesca in the court?" he asked presently.

"No. There was no one connected with the case except the lawyers on each side. It did not amount to a trial. The Signor Marchese's side produced the papers proving his identity, and the original deed was submitted. The prince's side stated that his Excellency was convinced of the justice of the claim and would make no opposition. Thereupon the court granted an order to the effect that the Signor Marchese was the heir provided for in the clause and was entitled to enjoy all the advantages arising from the inheritance; but that, as there was no opposition made by the defendants, the subsequent transactions would be left in the hands of the family, the court reserving the power to enforce the transfer in case any difficulty should arise hereafter. Of course, it will take several months to make the division, as the Signor Marchese will only receive the direct inheritance of his great-grandfather, while the Saracinesca retain all that has come to them by their marriages during the last four generations."

"Of course. Who will be employed to make the division?"

"Half Rome, I fancy. It will be an endless business."

"But San Giacinto is prince. He will do homage for his titles next Epiphany."

"Yes. He must present his ten pounds of wax and a silver bowl—cheap!" observed Meschini with a grin.

It may be explained here that the families of the Roman nobility were all subject to a yearly tribute of merely nominal value, which they presented to the Pope at the Feast of the Epiphany. The custom was feudal, the Pope having been the feudal lord of all the nobles until 1870. The tribute generally consisted of a certain weight of pure wax, or of a piece of silver of a specified value, or sometimes of both. As an instance of the survival of such customs in other countries, I may mention the case of one great Irish family which to this day receives from another a yearly tribute, paid alternately in the shape of a golden rose and a golden spur.

"So we have won everything!" exclaimed Montevarchi after a pause, looking hard at the librarian, as though trying to read his thoughts. "We have won everything,

and the thanks are due to you, my good friend, to you, the faithful and devoted companion who has helped me to accomplish this act of true justice. Ah, how can I ever express to you my gratitude!"

"The means of expression were mentioned in our agreement," answered Meschini with a servile inclination. "I agreed to do the work for your Excellency at a certain fixed price, as your Excellency may remember. Beyond that I ask nothing. I am too humble an individual to enjoy the honour of Prince Montevarchi's personal gratitude."

"Yes, of course, but that is mere money!" said the old gentleman somewhat hastily, but contemptuously withal. "Gratitude proceeds from the heart, not from the purse. When I think of all the work you have done, of the unselfish way in which you have devoted yourself to this object, I feel that money can never repay you. Money is sordid trash, Meschini, sordid trash! Let us not talk about it. Are we not friends? The most delicate sensibilities of my soul rejoice when I consider what we have accomplished together. There is not another man in Rome whom I would trust as I trust you, most faithful of men!"

"The Signor Principe is too kind," replied Meschini.

"Nevertheless, I repeat that I am quite unworthy of such gratitude for having merely performed my part in a business transaction, especially in one wherein my own interests were so deeply concerned."

"My only regret is that my son-in-law can never know the share you have had in his success. But that, alas, is quite impossible. How, indeed, would it be practicable to inform him! And my daughter, too! She would remember you in all her innocent prayers, even as I shall do henceforth! No, Meschini, it is ordained that I, and I alone, should be the means of expressing to you the heartfelt thanks of those whom you have so highly benefited, but who unfortunately can never know the name of their benefactor. Tell me now, did the men of the law look long at the documents? Did they show any hesitation? Have you any reason to believe that their attention was roused, arrested by—by the writing?"

"No, indeed! I should be a poor workman if a parcel of lawyers could detect my handwriting!"

"It is a miracle!" exclaimed Montevarchi, devoutly. "I consider that heaven has interposed directly to accomplish the ends of justice. An angel guided your hand, my dear friend, to make you the instrument of good!"

"I am quite ready to believe it. The transaction has been as providential for me as for the Signor Marchese."

"Yes," answered the prince rather drily. "And now, my dear Meschini, will you leave me for a time? I have appointed this hour to see my last remaining daughter concerning her marriage. She is the last of those fair flowers! Ah me! How sad a thing it is to part with those we love so well! But we have the consolation of knowing that it is for their good, that consolation, that satisfaction which only come to us when we have faithfully done our duty. Return to your library, therefore, Meschini, for the present. The consciousness of good well done is yours also to-day, and will soothe the hours of solitude and make your new labours sweet. The reward of righteousness is in itself and of itself. Good-bye, my friend, good-bye! Thank you, thank you——"

"Would it be agreeable to your Excellency to let me have the money now?" asked the librarian. There was a firmness in the tone that startled Montevarchi.

"What money?" he inquired with a well-feigned surprise. "I do not understand."

"Twenty thousand scudi, the price of the work," replied Meschini with alarming bluntness.

"Twenty thousand scudi!" cried the prince. "I remember that there was some mention of a sum—two thousand, I think I said. Even that is enormous, but I was carried away in the excitement of the moment. We are all liable to such weakness——"

"You agreed to pay me twenty thousand scudi in cash on the day that the verdict was given in favour of your son-in-law."

"I never agreed to anything of the kind. My dear friend, success has quite turned your head! I have not so much money at my disposal in the whole world."

"You cannot afford to make a fool of me," cried Meschini, making a step forward. His face was red

with anger, and his long arms made odd gestures. "Will you pay me the money or not?"

"If you take this tone with me I will pay you nothing whatever. I shall even cease to feel any sense of gratitude——"

"To hell with your gratitude!" exclaimed the other fiercely. "Either you pay me the money now, or I go at once to the authorities and denounce the whole treachery."

"You will only go to the galleys if you do."

"You will go with me."

"Not at all. Have you any proof that I have had anything to do with the matter? I tell you that you are quite mad. If you wanted to play this trick on me you should have made me sign an agreement. Even then I would have argued that since you had forged the documents you had, of course, forged the agreement also. But you have nothing, not so much as a scrap of paper to show against me. Be reasonable and I will be magnanimous. I will give you the two thousand I spoke of in the heat of anticipation——"

"You will give me the twenty thousand you solemnly promised me," said Meschini, with concentrated anger.

Montevarchi rose slowly from his chair and rang the bell. He knew that Meschini would not be so foolish as to expose himself, and would continue to hope that he might ultimately get what he asked.

"I cannot argue with a madman," he said calmly.

He was not in the least afraid of the librarian. The idea never entered his mind that the middle-aged, round-shouldered scholar could be dangerous. A single word from Gouache, a glance of the artist's eye had cowed him less than an hour ago; but Meschini's fury left him indifferent. The latter saw that for the present there was nothing to be done. To continue such a scene before a servant would be the worst kind of folly.

"We will talk the matter over at another time," he said sullenly, as he left the study by a small door which opened upon a corridor in communication with the library.

Montevarchi sent the servant who answered the bell with a message begging Donna Faustina to come to the

study at once. Since it was to be a day of interviews he determined to state the case plainly to his daughter, and bid her make ready to comply with his will in case the match with Frangipani turned out to be possible. He seemed no more disturbed by Meschini's anger than if the affair had not concerned him in the least. He had, indeed, long foreseen what would occur, and even at the moment when he had promised the bribe he was fully determined never to pay it. The librarian had taken the bait greedily, and it was his own fault if the result did not suit him. He had no redress, as Montevarchi had told him; there was not so much as a note to serve as a record of the bargain. Meschini had executed the forgery, and he would have to ruin himself in order to bring any pressure to bear upon his employer. This the latter felt sure that he would not do, even if driven to extremities. Meschini's nature was avaricious and there was no reason to suppose that he was tired of life, or ready to go to the galleys for a bit of personal vengeance, when, by exercising a little patience, he might ultimately hope to get some advantage out of the crime he had committed. Montevarchi meant to pay him what he considered a fair price for the work, and he did not see that Meschini had any means of compelling him to pay more. Now that the thing was done, he began to regret that he himself had not made some agreement with San Giacinto, but a moment's reflection sufficed to banish the thought as unworthy of his superior astuteness. His avarice was on a large scale and was merging into ambition. It might have been foreseen that, after having married one of his two remaining daughters to a man who had turned out to be Prince Saracinesca, his determination to match Faustina with Frangipani would be even stronger than it had been before. Hence his sudden wish to see Faustina and to prepare her mind for what was about to take place. All at once it seemed as though he could not act quickly enough to satisfy his desire of accomplishment. He felt as an old man may feel who, at the end of a busy life, sees countless things before him which he would still do, and hates the thought of dying before all are done. A feverish haste to complete this last step in the aggrandisement of his family,

overcame the old prince. He could not understand why he had submitted to wasting his time with Gouache and Meschini instead of busying himself actively in the accomplishment of his purpose. There was no reason for waiting any longer. Frangipani's father had already half-agreed to the match, and what remained to be done involved only a question of financial details.

As he sat waiting for Faustina a great horror of death rose suddenly and clearly before him. He was not a very old man and he would have found it hard to account for the sensation. It is a notable fact, too, that he feared death rather because it might prevent him from carrying out his intentions, than because his conscience was burdened with the recollection of many misdeeds. His whole existence had been passed in such an intricate labyrinth of duplicity towards others and towards himself that he no longer distinguished between the true and the untrue. Even in this last great fraud he had so consistently deceived his own sense of veracity that he almost felt himself to be the instrument of justice he assumed to be. The case was a delicate one, too, for the most unprejudiced person could hardly have escaped feeling sympathy for San Giacinto, the victim of his ancestor's imprudence. Montevarchi found it very easy to believe that it was permissible to employ any means in order to gain such an end, and although he might have regarded the actual work of the forgery in the light of a crime, venial indeed, though contrary to the law, his own share in the transaction, as instigator of the deed itself, appeared to be defensible by a whole multitude of reasons. San Giacinto, by all the traditions of primogeniture dear to the heart of the Roman noble, was the head of the family of Saracinesca. But for a piece of folly, hardly to be equalled in Montevarchi's experience, San Giacinto would have been in possession of the estates and titles without opposition or contradiction since the day of his father's death. The mere fact that the Saracinesca had not defended the case proved that they admitted the justice of their cousin's claims. Had old Leone foreseen the contingency of a marriage in his old age, he would either never have signed the deed at all, or else he would have introduced just such a conditional clause as had

been forged by Meschini. When a great injustice has been committed, through folly or carelessness, when those who have been most benefited by it admit that injustice, when to redress it is merely to act in accordance with the spirit of the laws, is it a crime then to bring about so much good by merely sacrificing a scruple of conscience, by employing some one to restore an inheritance to its rightful possessor with a few clever strokes of the pen? The answer seemed so clear to Montevarchi that he did not even ask himself the question. Indeed it would have been superfluous to do so, for he had so often satisfied all objections to doubtful courses by a similar sophistry that he knew beforehand what reply would present itself to his self-inquiry. He did not even experience a sense of relief as he turned from the contemplation of what he had just done to the question of Faustina's marriage, in which there was nothing that could torment his conscience. He was not even aware that he ought to recognise a difference between the two affairs. He was in great haste to settle the preliminaries, and that was all. If he should die, he thought, the princess would have her own way in everything, and would doubtless let Faustina throw herself away upon some such man as Gouache. The thought roused him from his reverie, and at the same time brought a sour smile to his face. Gouache, of all people! He looked up and saw that Faustina had entered and was standing before him, as though expecting him to speak. Her delicate, angelic features were pale, and she held her small hands folded before her. She had discovered by some means that Gouache had been with her father and she feared that something unpleasant had happened and that she was about to be called to account. The vision of Frangipani, too, was present in her mind, and she anticipated a stormy interview. But her mind was made up; she would have Anastase or she would have nobody. The two exchanged a preliminary glance before either spoke.

CHAPTER XX.

Montevarchi made his daughter sit beside him and took her hand affectionately in his, assuming at the same time the expression of sanctimonious superiority he always wore when he mentioned the cares of his household or was engaged in regulating any matter of importance in his family. Flavia used to imitate the look admirably, to the delight of her brothers and sisters. He smiled meaningly, pressed the girl's fingers, and smiled again, attempting in vain to elicit some response. But Faustina remained cold and indifferent, for she was used to her father's ways and did not like them.

"You know what I am going to say, I am sure," he began. "It concerns what must be very near your heart, my dear child."

"I do not know what it can be," answered Faustina, gravely. She was too well brought up to show any of the dislike she felt for her father's way of doing things, but she was willing to make it as hard as possible for him to express himself.

"Cannot you guess what it is?" asked the old man, with a ludicrous attempt at banter. "What is it that is nearest to every girl's heart? Is not that little heart of yours already a resort of the juvenile deity?"

"I do not understand you, papa."

"Well, well, my dear — I see that your education has not included a course of mythology. It is quite as well, perhaps, as those heathens are poor company for the young. I refer to marriage, Faustina, to that all-important step which you are soon to take."

"Have you quite decided to marry me to Frangipani?" asked the young girl with a calmness that somewhat disconcerted her father.

"How boldly you speak of it!" he exclaimed with a sigh of disapproval. "I will not, however, conceal from you that I hope —"

"Pray talk plainly with me, papa!" cried Faustina suddenly looking up. "I cannot bear this suspense."