

him with such an insignificant bribe — with the hope of liberating the young girl. She did not understand that he was growing desperate. Had she known what was in his mind she might have made a supreme effort to deceive herself into the belief that he was still to her what he had been so long. But she did not know.

"For the sake of her innocence, Giovanni!" she exclaimed. "Can you let a child like that suffer so? I am sure, if you really would you could manage it, with your influence. Do you not see that I am suffering too, for the girl's sake?"

"Will you say that it is for your sake?"

"For my sake — if you will," she cried almost impatiently.

"For your sake, then," he answered. "Remember that it is for you, Corona."

Before she could answer, he had left the room, without another word, without so much as touching her hand. Corona gazed sadly at the open door, and then returned to Faustina.

An hour later the nun entered the cell, with a bright smile on her face.

"Your carriage is waiting for you — for you both," she said, addressing the princess. "Donna Faustina is free to return to her mother."

### CHAPTER XXIII.

When Giovanni Saracinesca had visited Cardinal Antonelli on the previous evening, he had been as firmly persuaded that Faustina was innocent, as Corona herself, and was at first very much astonished by the view the great man took of the matter. But as the latter developed the case, the girl's guilt no longer seemed impossible, or even improbable. The total absence of any ostensible incentive to the murder gave Faustina's quarrel with her father a very great importance, which was further heightened by the nature of the evidence. There

had been high words, in the course of which the Princess Montevarchi had left the room, leaving her daughter alone with the old man. No one had seen him alive after that moment, and he had been found dead, evidently strangled with her handkerchief. The fact that Faustina had a bruise on her arm and a cut on her lip pointed to the conclusion that a desperate struggle had taken place. The cardinal argued that, although she might not have had the strength to do the deed if the contest had begun when both were on their feet, it was by no means impossible that so old a man might have been overcome by a young and vigorous girl, if she had attacked him when he was in his chair, and was prevented from rising by the table before him. As for the monstrosity of the act, the cardinal merely smiled when Giovanni alluded to it. Had not fathers been murdered by their children before, and in Rome? The argument had additional weight, when Giovanni remembered Faustina's wild behaviour on the night of the insurrection. A girl who was capable of following a soldier into action, and who had spent hours in searching for him after such an appalling disaster as the explosion of the Serristori barracks, might well be subject to fits of desperate anger, and it was by no means far from likely, if her father had struck her in the face from his place at the table, that she should have laid violent hands upon him, seizing him by the throat and strangling him with her handkerchief. Her coolness afterwards might be only a part of her odd nature, for she was undoubtedly eccentric. She might be mad, said the cardinal, shaking his head, but there was every probability that she was guilty. In those days there was no appeal from the statesman's decisions in such matters. Faustina would remain a prisoner until she could be tried for the crime.

His Eminence was an early riser, and was not altogether surprised that Giovanni should come to him at such an hour, especially as he knew that the Princess Sant' Ilario had spent the night with Faustina in the Termini prison. He was altogether taken aback, however, by Giovanni's manner, and by the communication he made.

"I had the honour of telling your Eminence last night,

that Donna Faustina Montevarchi was innocent," began Giovanni, who refused the offer of a seat. "I trusted that she might be liberated immediately, but you have determined otherwise. I am not willing that an innocent person should suffer unjustly. I have come, therefore, to surrender myself to justice in this case."

The cardinal stared, and an expression of unmitigated astonishment appeared upon his delicate olive features, while his nervous hands grasped the arms of his chair.

"You!" he cried.

"I, your Eminence. I will explain myself. Yesterday the courts delivered their verdict, declaring that my cousin San Giacinto is Prince Saracinesca, instead of my father, and transferring to him all our hereditary property. The man who found out that there was a case against us, and caused it to be brought to trial, was Prince Montevarchi. You may perhaps understand my resentment against him. If you recollect the evidence which was detailed to you last night you will see that it was quite possible for me to go to him without being observed. The door chanced to be open, and there was no one in the hall. I am perfectly acquainted with the house. Several hours elapsed between the time when Donna Faustina left her father and the moment when he was found dead in his chair. You can understand how I could enter the room unseen, how angry words naturally must have arisen between us, and how, losing my self-control, I could have picked up Donna Faustina's handkerchief which, as she says, lay upon the floor, and knotted it effectually round the old man's neck. What could he do in my hands? The study is far from the other rooms the family inhabit, and is near the hall. To go quietly out would not have been a difficult matter for any one who knew the house. Your Eminence knows as well as I the shallowness of circumstantial evidence."

"And do you tell me, calmly, like this, that you murdered a helpless old man out of revenge?" asked the cardinal, half-indignantly, half-incredulously.

"Would I surrender myself as the murderer, for a caprice?" inquired Giovanni, who was very pale.

The cardinal looked at him and was silent for a few moments. He was puzzled by what he heard, and yet his

common sense told him that he had no course but to liberate Faustina and send Giovanni to prison. He felt, too, that he ought to experience an instinctive repulsion for the man before him, who, by his own showing, had been guilty of such a horrible crime; but he was conscious of no such sensation. He was a man of exceedingly quick and true intuitions, who judged the persons with whom he had business very accurately. There was a lack of correspondence between his intelligence and his feelings which roused his curiosity.

"You have told me a very strange story," he said.

"Less strange than the one your Eminence has believed since last night," returned Giovanni calmly.

"I do not know. It is more easy for me to believe that the girl was momentarily out of her mind than that you, whom I have known all my life, should have done such a thing. Besides, in telling me your story, you have never once positively asserted that you did it. You have only explained that it would have been possible for a man so disposed to accomplish the murder unsuspected."

"Is a man obliged to incriminate himself directly? It seems to me that in giving myself up I have done all that a man's conscience can possibly require—outside of the confessional. I shall be tried, and my lawyer will do what he can to obtain my acquittal."

"That is poor logic. Whether you confess or not, you have accused yourself in a way that must tell against you very strongly. You really leave me no choice."

"Your Eminence has only to do what I request, to liberate Donna Faustina and to send me to prison."

"You are a very strange man," said the cardinal in a musing tone, as he leaned back in his chair and scrutinised Giovanni's pale, impenetrable face.

"I am a desperate man, that is all."

"Will you give me your word of honour that Faustina Montevarchi is innocent?"

"Yes," answered Giovanni without the slightest hesitation, and meeting the gaze of the cardinal's bright eyes unflinchingly.

The latter paused a moment, and then turned in his chair, and taking a piece of paper wrote a few words upon it. Then he rang a little hand-bell that stood

beside him. His servant entered, as he was folding and sealing the note.

"To the Termini prison," he said.

"The messenger had better take my carriage," observed Giovanni. "I shall not need it again."

"Take Prince Sant' Ilario's carriage," added the cardinal, and the man left the room. "And now," he continued, "will you be good enough to tell me what I am to do with you?"

"Send me to the Carceri Nuove, or to any convenient place."

"I will do nothing that can be an injury to you hereafter," answered the statesman. "Something tells me that you have had nothing to do with this dreadful murder. But you must know that though you may deceive me—I am not omniscient—I will not tolerate any contempt of the ways of justice. You have surrendered yourself as the criminal, and I intend to take you at your word."

"I ask for nothing else. Put me where you please, do what you please with me. It matters very little."

"You act like a man who has had an unfortunate love affair," remarked the cardinal. "It is true that you have just lost your fortune, and that may account for it. But I repeat that, whatever your motives may be, you shall not trifle with the law. You wish to be a prisoner. The law will oblige you so far as to comply with your request. I warn you that, after this, you can only obtain your freedom through a proper trial."

"Pray let it be so. My motives can be of no importance. The law shall judge the facts and give its verdict."

"The law will certainly do so. In the meantime, you will spend the day in a room of my apartments, and this evening, when it is dark, you will be quietly transferred to a place of safety—and secrecy. If the real murderer is ever found, I do not wish your life to have been ruined by such a piece of folly as I believe you are committing. You say you are a desperate man, and you are acting, I think, as though you were. Your family affairs may have led to this state, but they do not concern me. You will, however, be good enough to swear,

here, solemnly, laying your hand upon this book, that you will not attempt to destroy yourself."

"I swear," said Giovanni, touching the volume which the cardinal presented to him.

"Very good. Now follow me, if you please, to the room where you must spend the day."

Giovanni found himself in a small chamber which contained only a large writing-table and a couple of chairs, and which seemed to have been destined for some sort of office. The cardinal closed the door, and Giovanni heard him turn the key and remove it from the lock. Then, for the first time, he reflected upon what he had done. He had spoken the truth when he had said that he was desperate. No other word could describe his state. A sort of madness had taken possession of him while he was talking with Corona, and he was still under its influence. There had been something in her manner which had seemed to imply that he was not doing his best to liberate Faustina, and indeed, when he remembered that the girl's innocence was by no means clear to him, he ought not to have been surprised at Corona's imputation. And yet, he had now pledged his word to the cardinal that Faustina had not done the deed. Corona's unwillingness to admit that it was for her own sake she asked his help had driven him nearly out of his mind, and when she had at last said it, even reluctantly, he had immediately resolved to show her what he was willing to do for one word of hers when she chose to speak it. He had from that moment but one thought, to free Faustina at any cost, and no plan suggested itself to him but to surrender himself in the girl's place. As a matter of fact, he could not have accomplished his purpose so quickly or surely in any other way, and perhaps he could not have otherwise accomplished it at all. It had been quite clear to him from the first that the cardinal was prejudiced against Faustina, owing, no doubt, to the representations of the prefect of police. Giovanni had carried the evidence against her clearly in his mind, and as soon as he thought of the expedient he saw how it would have been quite possible for himself, or for any other man who knew the house, to commit the murder. As for the detail concerning the doors being open, there

was nothing improbable in it, seeing that there were many servants in the establishment, and that each one would suspect and accuse one of his companions of the carelessness. Nothing was easier than to construct the story, and he had supposed that nothing would be simpler than to make the cardinal believe it. He had been surprised to find himself mistaken upon this point, but he felt a thrill of triumph that more than repaid him for what he had done, when he saw the messenger leave the room with the order to liberate Faustina. Corona had spoken, had asked him to do a hard thing for her sake, and her caprice was satisfied, it mattered little at what cost. She had given him an opportunity of showing what he would do for her, and that opportunity had not been thrown away.

But as he sat alone in the little room the cardinal had assigned to him, he began to realise the magnitude of what he had been doing, and to see how his actions would be judged by others. He had surrendered himself as a murderer, and was to be treated as one. When the time came for the trial, might it not happen with him as with many another innocent man who has put himself into a false position? Might he not be condemned? Nothing that he could say hereafter could remove the impression created by his giving himself up to justice. Any denial hereafter would be supposed to proceed from fear and not from innocence. And if he were condemned, what would become of Corona, of his father, of little Orsino? He shuddered at the thought.

What, he asked himself, would be the defence? Yesterday afternoon he had been out of the house during several hours, and had walked alone, he hardly remembered where. Since the crisis in his life which had separated him from Corona in fact, if not in appearance, he often walked alone, wandering aimlessly through the streets. Would any of his acquaintance come forward and swear to having seen him at the time Montevarchi was murdered? Probably not. And if not, how could it be proved, in the face of his own statement to the cardinal, that he might not have gone to the palace, seeking an opportunity of expending his wrath on the old prince, that he might not have lost his self-control in a fit of

anger and strangled the old man as he sat in his chair? As he himself had said, there was far more reason to believe that the Saracinesca had killed Montevarchi out of revenge, than that a girl like Faustina should have strangled her own father because he had interfered in her love affairs. If the judges took this view of the case, it was clear that Giovanni would have little chance of an acquittal. The thing looked so possible that even Corona might believe it—even Corona, for whose sake he had rushed madly into such desperate danger.

And to-day she would not see him; very possibly she would not know where he was. And to-morrow? And the next day? And all the days after that? He supposed that he would be allowed to write to her, perhaps to see her, but it would be hard to explain his position. She did not love him any longer, and she would not understand. He wondered how much she would care, if she really cared at all, beyond a discreet anxiety for his safety. She would certainly not comprehend a love like his, which had chosen such a sacrifice, rather than allow her wish to remain ungratified. How could she, since she did not love him? And yet, it was imperatively necessary that she should be informed of what had happened. She might otherwise suppose, naturally enough, that some accident had befallen him, and she would in that case apply to the police, perhaps to the cardinal himself, to find out where he was. Such a contingency must be prevented, by some means, before night. Until then, she would not be frightened by his absence. There would be time, perhaps, when he was removed to the prison—to the place of safety and secrecy, of which the cardinal had spoken, and which in all probability was the Holy Office. No questions were asked there.

There were writing materials on the broad table, and Giovanni began a letter to his wife. After a few minutes, however, he stopped, for he saw from what he had written that he was in no condition to attempt such a task. The words came quickly and fluently, but they expressed what he had no intention of telling Corona again. His love for her was still uppermost in his mind, and instead of trying to explain what had occurred, he found himself setting down phrases that told of nothing

but a mad passion. The thought of her cold face when she should read the lines arrested his hand, and he threw down the pen impatiently, and returned to his meditations for a while. What he wanted to do was to tell her in the fewest possible words that he was alive and well. What else should he tell her? The statement would allay any anxiety she might feel, and his absence would doubtless be a relief to her. The thought was bitter, but he knew that nothing exasperates a woman like the constant presence of a man she has loved, who loves her more than ever, and for whom she no longer feels anything. At last he took another sheet of paper and tried again.

"Dear Corona— When you get this, Faustina will be at liberty, according to your wish. Do not be anxious if you do not see me for a few days, as I am called away on urgent business. Tell my father, and any of our friends who ask about me, that I am at Saracinesca, superintending the removal of such effects as are not to go to San Giacinto. I will let you know when I am coming back— Your affectionate  
GIOVANNI."

He read the note over twice, and then folded it, addressing it to his wife. His face expressed the most profound dejection when he had finished his task, and for a long time he leaned back in his chair, gazing at the morning sunlight that slowly crept across the floor, while his hands lay folded passively upon the table. The end of his love seemed very bitter as he thought of the words he had written. A few weeks ago to leave Corona thus unexpectedly would have caused her the greatest pain. Now, he felt that he need say nothing, that it would be useless to say anything, more than he had said. It was nothing to her, whether he stayed in Rome or went to the ends of the earth; indeed, he suspected that she would be glad to be left alone— unless she should discover why he had gone, and whither. This last consideration recalled to him his situation, and for a moment he was horrified at his own rashness. But the thought did not hold him long, and presently he asked himself apathetically what it could matter in the end. The hours passed slowly, and still he sat motionless by the table, the folded letter lying before him.

The cardinal had scarcely returned to his study when

a second card was brought to him. The gentleman, said the servant, had assured him that his Eminence would receive him, as he had important information to give concerning the murder of Prince Montevarchi. The cardinal could not repress a smile as he read the name of Anastase Gouache.

The young man entered the room, and advanced in obedience to the cardinal's friendly gesture. He was as pale as death, and his soft dark eyes had an expression of despair in them such as the great man had rarely seen. For the rest, he wore his uniform, and was as carefully dressed as usual.

"Your Eminence has doubtless heard of this dreadful murder?" began Gouache, forgetting all formality in the extremity of his excitement.

"Yes," said the cardinal, sitting down. "You have something to communicate concerning it, I understand."

"Donna Faustina Montevarchi has been charged with the crime, and is in the prison of the Termini," answered the Zouave, speaking hurriedly. "I am here to ask your Eminence to order her release without delay —"

"On what grounds?" inquired the statesman, raising his eyebrows a little as though surprised by the way in which the request was made.

"Because she is innocent, because her arrest was due to the mistake of the prefect of police—the evidence was against her, but it was absurd to suppose that she could have done it —"

"The prefect of police received my approval. Have you any means of showing that she is innocent?"

"Showing it?" repeated Gouache, who looked dazed for a moment, but recovered himself immediately, turning white to the lips. "What could be easier?" he exclaimed. "The murderer is before you—I saw the prince, I asked him for his daughter's hand in marriage, he insulted me. I left the room, but I returned soon afterwards. I found him alone, and I killed him—I do not know how I did it —"

"With Donna Faustina's handkerchief," suggested the cardinal. "Perhaps you do not remember that it was lying on the floor and that you picked it up and knotted it —"

"Yes, yes! Round his neck," cried Gouache nervously. "I remember. But I saw red, everything swam, the details are gone. Here I am—your Eminence's prisoner—I implore you to send the order at once!"

The cardinal had hitherto maintained a grave expression. His features suddenly relaxed and he put out his hand.

"My dear Monsieur Gouache, I like you exceedingly," he said. "You are a man of heart."

"I do not understand——" Anastase was very much bewildered, but he saw that his plan for freeing Faustina was on the point of failure.

"I appreciate your motives," continued the statesman. "You love the young lady to distraction, she is arrested on a capital charge, you conceive the idea of presenting yourself as the murderer in her place——"

"But I assure your Eminence, I swear——"

"No," interrupted the other, raising his hand. "Do not swear. You are incapable of such a crime. Besides, Donna Faustina is already at liberty, and the author of the deed has already confessed his guilt."

Anastase staggered against the projecting shelf of the bookcase. The blood rushed to his face and for a moment he was almost unconscious of where he was. The cardinal's voice recalled him to himself.

"If you doubt what I tell you, you need only go to the Palazzo Montevarchi and inquire. Donna Faustina will return with the Princess Sant' Ilario. I am sorry that circumstances prevent me from showing you the man who has confessed the crime. He is in my apartments at the present moment, separated from us only by two or three rooms."

"His name, Eminence?" asked Gouache, whose whole nature seemed to have changed in a moment.

"Ah, his name must for the present remain a secret in my keeping, unless, indeed, you have reason to believe that some one else did the murder. Have you no suspicions? You know the family intimately, it seems. You would probably have heard the matter mentioned, if the deceased prince had been concerned in any quarrel—in any transaction which might have made him an object of hatred to any one we know. Do you

recall anything of the kind? Sit down, Monsieur Gouache. You are acquitted, you see. Instead of being a murderer you are the good friend who once painted my portrait in this very room. Do you remember our charming conversations about Christianity and the universal republic?"

"I shall always remember your Eminence's kindness," answered Gouache, seating himself and trying to speak as quietly as possible. His nervous nature was very much unsettled by what had occurred. He had come determined that Faustina should be liberated at any cost, overcome by the horror of her situation, ready to lay down his life for her in the sincerity of his devotion. His conduct had been much more rational than Giovanni's. He had nothing to lose but himself, no relations to be disgraced by his condemnation, none to suffer by his loss. He had only to sacrifice himself to set free for ever the woman he loved, and he had not hesitated a moment in the accomplishment of his purpose. But the revulsion of feeling, when he discovered that Faustina was already known to be innocent, and that there was no need for his intervention, was almost more than he could bear. The tears of joy stood in his eyes while he tried to be calm.

"Have you any suspicions?" asked the cardinal again, in his gentle voice.

"None, Eminence. The only thing approaching to a quarrel, of which I have heard, is the suit about the title of the Saracinesca. But of course that can have nothing to do with the matter. It was decided yesterday without opposition."

"It could have nothing to do with the murder, you think?" inquired the statesman with an air of interest.

"No. How could it?" Gouache laughed at the idea. "The Saracinesca could not murder their enemies as they used to do five hundred years ago. Besides, your Eminence has got the murderer and must be able to guess better than I what were the incentives to the crime."

"That does not follow, my friend. A man who confesses a misdeed is not bound to incriminate any one else, and a man whose conscience is sensitive enough to make him surrender himself naturally assumes the blame. He suffers remorse, and does not attempt any defence,

excepting such as you yourself just now gave me, when you said that the prince had insulted you. Enough to give a semblance of truth to the story. By the bye, is that true?"

"It is and it is not," answered Gouache, blushing a little. "The poor man, when I began to explain my position, thought—how shall I say? He thought I wanted to sell him a picture. It was not his fault."

"Poor man!" sighed the cardinal. "He had not much tact. And so, Monsieur Gouache, you think that the great Saracinesca suit has had nothing to do with the murder?"

"It seems to me impossible. It looks rather as though he had been murdered by a servant, out of spite. It is hard to believe that any one not belonging to the house could have done it."

"I think the public will agree with you. I will occupy myself with the matter. Perhaps I have got the man safe in that room, but who knows? If you had come first, you might have gone to the Carceri Nuove instead of him. After all, he may be in love too."

The cardinal smiled, but Gouache started at the suggestion, as though it hurt him.

"I doubt that," he said quickly.

"So do I. It would be a strange coincidence, if two innocent men had accused themselves of the same crime, out of love, within twenty-four hours of its being committed. But now that you are calm—yes, you were beside yourself with excitement—I must tell you that you have done a very rash thing indeed. If I had not chanced to be a friend of yours, what would have become of you? I cannot help liking your courage and devotion—you have shown it in sterner matters, and in the face of the enemy—but you might have destroyed yourself. That would have been a great sin."

"Is there no case in which a man may destroy himself deliberately?"

"You speak of suicide? It was almost that you contemplated. No. The church teaches that a man who takes his own life goes straight to hell. So does Mohammed, for that matter."

"In any case?"

"In any case. It is a mortal sin."

"But," objected Gouache, "let us suppose me a very bad man, exercising a destroying influence on many other people. Suppose, in short, for the sake of argument, that my life caused others to lose their own souls, and that by killing myself I knew that they would all become good again. Suppose then, that I suddenly repented and that there was no way of saving these people but by my own suicide. Would it not be more honourable in me to say, 'Very well, I will submit to damnation rather than send all those others to eternal flames?' Should I not be justified in blowing out my brains?"

The cardinal did not know whether to smile or to look grave. He was neither a priest nor a theologian, but a statesman.

"My dear friend," he answered at last. "The ingenuity of your suppositions passes belief. I can only say that, when you find yourself in such a bad case as you describe, I will submit the matter for you to the Holy Father himself. But I would strongly advise you to avoid the situation if you possibly can."

Gouache took his leave with a light heart, little guessing as he descended the great marble staircase that Giovanni Saracinesca was the prisoner of whom the cardinal had spoken so mysteriously, still less that he, too, had falsely accused himself of having killed poor old Montevarchi. He wondered, as he walked rapidly along the streets in the bright morning sunshine, who the man was, and why he had done such a thing, but his thoughts were really with Faustina, and he longed to see her and to hear from her own lips the true version of what had happened.

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#### CHAPTER XXIV.

Arnoldo Meschini was fully conscious of what he had done when he softly closed the door of the study behind him and returned to the library; but although he knew and realised that he had murdered his employer, he could