

money in his pocket than he had possessed for many a day. As Arnaldo Meschini sank deeper and deeper, the chemist's spirits rose, and he began to assume an air of unwonted prosperity. One of the earliest results of the librarian's degraded condition was that Tiberio Colaisso procured himself a new green smoking cap ornamented profusely with fresh silver lace.

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## CHAPTER XXVII.

Sant' Ilario had guessed rightly that the place of safety and secrecy to which he was to be conveyed was no other than the Holy Office, or prison of the Inquisition. He was familiar with the interior of the building, and knew that it contained none of the horrors generally attributed to it, so that, on the whole, he was well satisfied with the cardinal's choice. The cell to which he was conveyed after dark was a large room on the second story, comfortably furnished and bearing no sign of its use but the ornamented iron grating that filled the window. The walls were not thicker than those of most Roman palaces, and the chamber was dry and airy, and sufficiently warmed by a huge brazier of coals. It was clear from the way in which he was treated that the cardinal relied upon his honour more than upon any use of force in order to keep him in custody. A silent individual in a black coat had brought him in a carriage to the great entrance, whence a man of similar discretion and of like appearance had conducted him to his cell. This person returned soon afterwards, bringing a sufficient meal of fish and vegetables—it was Friday—decently cooked and almost luxuriously served. An hour later the man came back to carry away what was left. He asked whether the prisoner needed anything else for the night.

"I would like to know," said Giovanni, "whether any of my friends will be allowed to see me, if I ask it."

"I am directed to say that any request or complaint

you have to make will be transmitted to his Eminence by a special messenger," answered the man. "Anything," he added in explanation, "beyond what concerns your personal comfort. In this respect I am at liberty to give you whatever you desire, within reason."

"Thank you. I will endeavour to be reasonable," replied Giovanni. "I am much obliged to you."

The man left the room and closed the door softly, so softly that the prisoner wondered whether he had turned the key. On examining the panels he saw, however, that they were smooth and not broken by any latch or keyhole. The spring was on the outside, and there was no means whatever of opening the door from within.

Giovanni wondered why a special messenger was to be employed to carry any request he made directly to the cardinal. The direction could not have been given idly, nor was it without some especial reason that he was at once told of it. Assuredly his Eminence was not expecting the prince to repent of his bargain and to send word that he wished to be released. The idea was absurd. The great man might suppose, however, that Giovanni would desire to send some communication to his wife, who would naturally be anxious about his absence. Against this contingency, however, Sant' Ilario had provided by means of the note he had despatched to her. Several days would elapse before she began to expect him, so that he had plenty of time to reflect upon his future course. Meanwhile he resolved to ask for nothing. Indeed, he had no requirements. He had money in his pockets and could send the attendant to buy any linen he needed without getting it from his home.

He was in a state of mind in which nothing could have pleased him better than solitary imprisonment. He felt at once a sense of rest and a freedom from all responsibility that soothed his nerves and calmed his thoughts. For many days he had lived in a condition bordering on madness. Every interview with Corona was a disappointment, and brought with it a new suffering. Much as he would have dreaded the idea of being separated from her for any length of time, the temporary impossibility of seeing her was now a relief, of which he realised the importance more and more as the hours succeeded

each other. There are times when nothing but a forcible break in the current of our lives can restore the mind to its normal balance. Such a break, painful as it may be at first, brings with it the long lost power of rest. Instead of feeling the despair we expect, we are amazed at our own indifference, which again is succeeded by a renewed capacity for judging facts as they are, and by a new energy to mould our lives upon a better plan.

Giovanni neither reflected upon his position nor brooded over the probable result of his actions. On the contrary, he went to bed and slept soundly, like a strong man tired out with bodily exertion. He slept so long that his attendant at last woke him, entering and opening the window. The morning was fine, and the sun streamed in through the iron grating. Giovanni looked about him, and realised where he was. He felt calm and strong, and was inclined to laugh at the idea that his rashness would have any dangerous consequences. Corona doubtless was already awake too, and supposed that he was in the country shooting wild boar, or otherwise amusing himself. Instead of that he was in prison. There was no denying the fact, after all, but it was strange that he should not care to be at liberty. He had heard of the moral sufferings of men who are kept in confinement. No matter how well they are treated they grow nervous and careworn and haggard, wearing themselves out in a perpetual longing for freedom. Giovanni, on the contrary, as he looked round the bright, airy room, felt that he might inhabit it for a year without once caring to go out into the world. A few books to read, the means of writing if he pleased — he needed nothing else. To be alone was happiness enough.

He ate his breakfast slowly, and sat down in an old-fashioned chair to smoke a cigarette and bask in the sunshine while it lasted. It was not much like prison, and he did not feel like a man arrested for murder. He was conscious for a long time of nothing but a vague, peaceful contentment. He had given a list of things to be bought, including a couple of novels, to the man who waited upon him, and after a few hours everything was brought. The day passed tranquilly, and when he went to bed he smiled as he blew out the candle, partly at himself and partly at his situation.

"My friends will not say that I am absolutely lacking in originality," he reflected as he went to sleep.

On the morrow he read less and thought more. In the first place he wondered how long he should be left without any communication from the outside world. He wondered whether any steps had been taken towards bringing him to a trial, or whether the cardinal really knew that he was innocent, and was merely making him act out the comedy he had himself invented and begun. He was not impatient, but he was curious to know the truth. It was now the third day since he had seen Corona, and he had not prepared her for a long absence. If he heard nothing during the next twenty-four hours it would be better to take some measures for relieving her anxiety, if she felt any. The latter reflection, which presented itself suddenly, startled him a little. Was it possible that she would allow a week to slip by without expecting to hear from him or asking herself where he was? That was out of the question. He admitted the impossibility of such indifference, almost in spite of himself. He was willing, perhaps, to think her utterly heartless rather than accept the belief in an affection which went no farther than to hope that he might be safe; but his vanity or his intuition, it matters little which of the two, told him that Corona felt more than that. And yet she did not love him. He sat for many hours, motionless in his chair, trying to construct the future out of the past, an effort of imagination in which he failed signally. The peace of his solitude was less satisfactory to him than at first, and he began to suspect that before very long he might even wish to return to the world. Possibly Corona might come to see him. The cardinal would perhaps think it best to tell her what had happened. How would he tell it? Would he let her know all? The light faded from the room, and the attendant brought his evening meal and set two candles upon the table.

Hitherto it could not be said that he had suffered. On the contrary, his character had regained its tone after weeks of depression. Another day was ended, and he went to rest, but he slept less soundly than before, and on the following morning he awoke early. The monot-

ony of the existence struck him all at once in its reality. The fourth day would be like the third, and, for all he knew, hundreds to come would be like the fourth if it pleased his Eminence to keep him a prisoner. Corona would certainly never suspect that he was shut up in the Holy Office, and if she did, she might not be able to come to him. Even if she came, what could he say to her? That he had committed a piece of outrageous folly because he was annoyed at her disbelief in him or at her coldness. He had probably made himself ridiculous for the first time in his life. The thought was the reverse of consoling. Nor did it contribute to his peace of mind to know that if he had made himself a laughing-stock, the cardinal, who dreaded ridicule, would certainly refuse to play a part in his comedy, and would act with all the rigour suitable to so grave a situation. He might even bring his prisoner to trial. Giovanni would submit to that, rather than be laughed at, but the alternative now seemed an appalling one. In his disgust of life on that memorable morning he had cared nothing what became of him, and had been in a state which precluded all just appreciation of the future. His enforced solitude had restored his faculties. He desired nothing less than to be tried for murder, because he had taken a short cut to satisfy his wife's caprice. But that caprice had for its object the liberty of poor Faustina Montevarchi. At all events, if he had made himself ridiculous, the ultimate purpose of his folly had been good, and had been accomplished.

All through the afternoon he paced his room, alternately in a state of profound dissatisfaction with himself, and in a condition of anxious curiosity about coming events. He scarcely touched his food or noticed the attendant who entered half a dozen times to perform his various offices. Again the night closed in, and once more he lay down to sleep, dreading the morning, and hoping to lose himself in dreams. The fourth day was like the third, indeed, as far as his surroundings were concerned, but he had not foreseen that he would be a prey to such gnawing anxiety as he suffered, still less, perhaps, that he should grow almost desperate for a sight of Corona. He was not a man who made any exhibition of his feel-

ings even when he was alone. But the man who served him noticed that when he entered Giovanni was never reading, as he had always been doing at first. He was either walking rapidly up and down or sitting idly in the big chair by the window. His face was quiet and pale, even solemn at times. The attendant was doubtless accustomed to sudden changes of mood in his prisoners, for he appeared to take no notice of the alteration in Giovanni's manner.

It seemed as though the day would never end. To a man of his active strength to walk about a room is not exercise; it hardly seems like motion at all, and yet Giovanni found it harder and harder to sit still as the hours wore on. After an interval of comparative peace, his love for Corona had overwhelmed him again, and with tenfold force. To be shut up in a cell without the possibility of seeing her, was torture such as he had never dreamt of in his whole life. By a strange revulsion of feeling it appeared to him that by taking her so suddenly at her word he had again done her an injustice. The process of reasoning by which he arrived at this conclusion was not clear to himself, and probably could not be made intelligible to any one else. He had assuredly sacrificed himself unhesitatingly, and at first the action had given him pleasure. But this was destroyed by the thought of the possible consequences. He asked whether he had the right to satisfy her imperative demand for Faustina's freedom by doing that which might possibly cause her annoyance, even though it should bring no serious injury to any one. The time passed very slowly, and towards evening he began to feel as he had felt before he had taken the fatal step which had placed him beyond Corona's reach, restless, miserable, desperate. At last it was night, and he was sitting before his solitary meal, eating hardly anything, staring half unconsciously at the closed window opposite.

The door opened softly, but he did not look round, supposing the person entering to be the attendant. Suddenly, there was the rustle of a woman's dress in the room, and at the same moment the door was shut. He sprang to his feet, stood still a moment, and then uttered a cry of surprise. Corona stood beside him,

very pale, looking into his eyes. She had worn a thick veil, and on coming in had thrown it back upon her head — the veils of those days were long and heavy, and fell about the head and neck like a drapery.

"Corona!" Giovanni cried, stretching out his hands towards her. Something in her face prevented him from throwing his arms round her, something not like her usual coldness and reproachful look that kept him back.

"Giovanni — was it kind to leave me so?" she asked, without moving from her place.

The question corresponded so closely with his own feelings that he had anticipated it, though he had no answer ready. She knew all, and was hurt by what he had done. What could he say? The reasons that had sent him so boldly into danger no longer seemed even sufficient for an excuse. The happiness he had anticipated in seeing her had vanished almost before it had made itself felt. His first emotion was bitter anger against the cardinal. No one else could have told her, for no one else knew what he had done nor where he was. Giovanni thought, and with reason, that the great man might have spared his wife such a blow.

"I believed I was doing what was best when I did it," he answered, scarcely knowing what to say.

"Was it best to leave me without a word, except a message of excuse for others?"

"For you — was it not better? For me — what does it matter? Should I be happier anywhere else?"

"Have I driven you from your home, Giovanni?" asked Corona, with a strange look in her dark eyes. Her voice trembled.

"No, not you," he answered, turning away and beginning to walk up and down by the force of the habit he had acquired during the last two or three days. "Not you," he repeated more than once in a bitter tone.

Corona sank down upon the chair he had left, and buried her face in her hands, as though overcome by a great and sudden grief. Giovanni stopped before her and looked at her, not clearly understanding what was passing in her mind.

"Why are you so sorry?" he asked. "Has a separation of a few days changed you? Are you sorry for me?"

"Why did you come here?" she exclaimed, instead of answering his question. "Why here, of all places?"

"I had no choice. The cardinal decided the matter for me."

"The cardinal? Why do you confide in him? You never did before. I may be wrong, but I do not trust him, kind as he has always been. If you wanted advice, you might have gone to Padre Filippo —"

"Advice? I do not understand you, Corona."

"Did you not go to the cardinal and tell him that you were very unhappy and wanted to make a retreat in some quiet place where nobody could find you? And did he not advise you to come here, promising to keep your secret, and authorising you to stay as long as you pleased? That is what he told me."

"He told you that?" cried Giovanni in great astonishment.

"Yes — that and nothing more. He came to see me late this afternoon. He said that he feared lest I should be anxious about your long absence, and that he thought himself justified in telling me where you were and in giving me a pass, in case I wanted to see you. Besides, if it is not all as he says, how did you come here?"

"You do not know the truth? You do not know what I did? You do not guess why I am in the Holy Office?"

"I know only what he told me," answered Corona, surprised by Giovanni's questions.

But Giovanni gave no immediate explanation. He paced the floor in a state of excitement in which she had never seen him, clasping and unclasping his fingers nervously, and uttering short, incoherent exclamations. As she watched him a sensation of fear crept over her, but she did not ask him any question. He stopped suddenly again.

"You do not know that I am in prison?"

"In prison!" She rose with a sharp cry and seized his hands in hers.

"Do not be frightened, dear," he said in an altered tone. "I am perfectly innocent. After all, you know it is a prison."

"Ah, Giovanni!" she exclaimed reproachfully, "how could you say such a dreadful thing, even in jest?" She

had dropped his hands again, and drew back a step as she spoke.

"It is not a jest. It is earnest. Do not start. I will tell you just what happened. It is best, after all. When I left you at the Termini, I saw that you had set your heart on liberating poor Faustina. I could not find any way of accomplishing what you desired, and I saw that you thought I was not doing my best for her freedom. I went directly to the cardinal and gave myself up in her place."

"As a hostage—a surety?" asked Corona, breathlessly.

"No. He would not have accepted that, for he was prejudiced against her. I gave myself up as the murderer."

He spoke quite calmly, as though he had been narrating a commonplace occurrence. For an instant she stood before him, dumb and horror-struck. Then with a great heart-broken cry she threw her arms round him and clasped him passionately to her breast.

"My beloved! My beloved!"

For some moments she held him so closely that he could neither move nor see her face, but the beating of his heart told him that a great change had in that instant come over his life. The cry had come from her soul, irresistibly, spontaneously. There was an accent in the two words she repeated which he had never hoped to hear again. He had expected that she would reproach him for his madness. Instead of that, his folly had awakened the love that was not dead, though it had been so desperately wounded.

Presently she drew back a little and looked into his eyes, a fierce deep light burning in her own.

"I love you," she said, almost under her breath.

A wonderful smile passed over his face, illuminating the dark, stern lines of it like a ray of heavenly light. Then the dusky eyelids slowly closed, as though by their own weight, his head fell back, and his lips turned white. She felt the burden of his body in her arms, and but for her strength he would have fallen to the floor. She reeled on her feet, holding him still, and sank down until she knelt and his head rested on her knee. Her

heart stood still as she listened for the sound of his faint breathing. Had his unconsciousness lasted longer she would have fainted herself. But in a moment his eyes opened again with an expression such as she had seen in them once or twice before, but in a less degree.

"Corona—it is too much!" he said softly, almost dreamily. Then his strength returned in an instant, like a strong steel bow that has been bent almost to breaking. He scarcely knew how it was that the position was changed so that he was standing on his feet and clasping her as she had clasped him. Her tears were flowing fast, but there was more joy in them than pain.

"How could you do it?" she asked at length, looking up. "And oh, Giovanni! what will be the end of it? Will not something dreadful happen?"

"What does anything matter now, darling?"

At last they sat down together, hand in hand, as of old. It was as though the last two months had been suddenly blotted out. As Giovanni said, nothing could matter now. And yet the situation was far from clear. Giovanni understood well enough that the cardinal had wished to leave him the option of telling his wife what had occurred, and, if he chose to do so, of telling her in his own language. He was grateful for the tact the statesman had displayed, a tact which seemed also to show Giovanni the cardinal's views of the case. He had declared that he was desperate. The cardinal had concluded that he was unhappy. He had said that he did not care what became of him. The cardinal had supposed that he would be glad to be alone, or at all events that it would be good for him to have a certain amount of solitude. If his position were in any way dangerous, the great man would surely not have thought of sending Corona to his prisoner as he had done. He would have prepared her himself against any shock. And yet he was undeniably in prison, with no immediate prospect of liberty.

"You cannot stay here any longer," said Corona when they were at last able to talk of the immediate future.

"I do not see how I am to get out," Giovanni answered, with a smile.

"I will go to the cardinal——"

"It is of no use. He probably guesses the truth, but he is not willing to be made ridiculous by me or by any one. He will keep me here until there can be a trial, or until he finds the real culprit. He is obstinate. I know him."

"It is impossible that he should think of such a thing!" exclaimed Corona indignantly.

"I am afraid it is very possible. But, of course, it is only a matter of time—a few days at the utmost. If worst comes to worst I can demand an inquiry, I suppose, though I do not see how I can proclaim my own innocence without hurting Faustina. She was liberated because I put myself in her place—it is rather complicated."

"Tell me, Giovanni," said Corona, "what did you say to the cardinal? You did not really say that you murdered Montevarchi?"

"No. I said I gave myself up as the murderer, and I explained how I might have done the deed. I did more, I pledged my honour that Faustina was innocent."

"But you were not sure of it yourself——"

"Since you had told me it was true, I believed it," he answered simply.

"Thank you, dear——"

"No. Do not thank me for it. I could not help myself. I knew that you were sure—are you sure of something else, Corona? Are you as certain as you were of that?"

"How can you ask? But you are right—you have the right to doubt me. You will not, though, will you? Hear me, dear, while I tell you the whole story."

She slipped from her chair and knelt before him, as though she were to make a confession. Then she took his hands and looked up lovingly into his face. The truth rose in her eyes.

"Forgive me, Giovanni. Yes, you have much to forgive. I did not know myself. When you doubted me, I felt as though I had nothing left in life, as though you would never again believe in me. I thought I did not love you. I was wrong. It was only my miserable vanity that was wounded, and that hurt me so. I felt that my love was dead, that you yourself were dead and

that another man had taken your place. Ah, I could have helped it! Had I known you better, dear, had I been less mistaken in myself, all would have been different. But I was foolish—no, I was unhappy. Everything was dark and dreadful. Oh, my darling, I thought I could tell what I felt—I cannot! Forgive me, only forgive me, and love me as you did long ago. I will never leave you, not if you stay here for ever, only let me love you as I will!"

"It is not for me to forgive, sweetheart," said Giovanni, bending down and kissing her sweet dark hair. "It is for you——"

"But I would so much rather think it my fault, dear," she answered, drawing his face down to hers. It was a very womanly impulse that made her take the blame upon herself.

"You must not think anything so unreasonable, Corona. I brought all the harm that came, from the first moment."

He would have gone on to accuse himself, obstinate and manlike, recapitulating the whole series of events. But she would not let him. Once more she sat beside him and held his hand in hers. They talked incoherently and it is not to be wondered at if they arrived at no very definite conclusion after a very long conversation. They were still sitting together when the attendant entered and presented Giovanni with a large sealed letter, bearing the Apostolic arms, and addressed merely to the number of Giovanni's cell.

"There is an answer," said the man, and then left the room.

"It is probably the notice of the trial, or something of the kind," observed Giovanni, suddenly growing very grave as he broke the seal. He wished it might have come at any other time than the present. Corona held her breath and watched his face while he read the lines written upon one of the two papers he took from the envelope. Suddenly the colour came to his cheeks and his eyes brightened with a look of happiness and surprise.

"I am free!" he cried, as he finished. "Free if I will sign this paper! Of course I will! I will sign anything he likes."

The envelope contained a note from the cardinal, in his own hand, to the effect that suspicion had fallen upon another person and that Giovanni was at liberty to return to his home if he would sign the accompanying document. The latter was very short, and set forth that Giovanni Saracinesca bound himself upon his word to appear in the trial of the murderer of Prince Montevarchi, if called upon to do so, and not to leave Rome until the matter was finally concluded and set at rest.

He took the pen that lay on the table and signed his name in a broad firm hand, a fact the more notable because Corona was leaning over his shoulder, watching the characters as he traced them. He folded the paper and placed it in the open envelope which accompanied it. The cardinal was a man of details. He thought it possible that the document might be returned open for lack of the means to seal it. He did not choose that his secrets should become the property of the people about the Holy Office. It was a specimen of his forethought in small things which might have an influence upon great ones.

When Giovanni had finished, he rose and stood beside Corona. Each looked into the other's eyes and for a moment neither saw very clearly. They said little more, however, until the attendant entered again.

"You are at liberty," he said briefly, and without a word began to put together the few small things that belonged to his late prisoner.

Half an hour later Giovanni was seated at dinner at his father's table. The old gentleman greeted him with a half-savage growl of satisfaction.

"The prodigal has returned to get a meal while there is one to be had," he remarked. "I thought you had gone to Paris to leave the agreeable settlement of our affairs to Corona and me. Where the devil have you been?"

"I have been indulging in the luxury of a retreat in a religious house," answered Giovanni with perfect truth.

Corona glanced at him and both laughed happily, as they had not laughed for many days and weeks. Saracinesca looked incredulously across the table at his son.

"You chose a singular moment for your devotional

exercises," he said. "Where will piety hide herself next, I wonder? As long as Corona is satisfied, I am. It is her business."

"I am perfectly satisfied, I assure you," said Corona, whose black eyes were full of light.

Giovanni raised his glass, looked at her and smiled lovingly. Then he emptied it to the last drop and set it down without a word.

"Some secret, I suppose," said the old gentleman gruffly.

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## CHAPTER XXVIII.

Arnoldo Meschini was not, perhaps, insane in the ordinary sense of the word; that is to say, he would probably have recovered the normal balance of his faculties if he could have been kept from narcotics and stimulants, and if he could have been relieved from the distracting fear of discovery which tormented him when he was not under the influence of one or the other. But the latter condition was impossible, and it was the extremity of his terror which almost forced him to keep his brain in a clouded state. People have been driven mad by sudden fright, and have gradually lost their intellect through the constant presence of a fear from which there is no escape. A man who is perpetually producing an unnatural state of his mind by swallowing doses of brandy and opium may not be insane in theory; in actual fact, he may be a dangerous madman. As one day followed another Meschini found it more and more impossible to exist without his two comforters. The least approach to lucidity made him almost frantic. He fancied every man a spy, every indifferent glance a look full of meaning. Before long the belief took possession of him that he was to be made the victim of some horrible private vengeance. San Giacinto was not the man, he thought, to be contented with sending him to the galleys for life. Few murderers were executed in those days, and it would be a small satisfaction to the Monte-