

little sadly, and slowly went back to her room by the way she had come. It was all very strange, she thought, but his illness might account for it. She would have liked to consult San Giacinto, but though she was outwardly on good terms with him, and could not help feeling a sort of respect for his manly character, the part he had played in attempting to separate her from Gouache had prevented the two from becoming intimate. She said nothing to any one about her interview with Meschini in the library, and no one even guessed that she had been there.

CHAPTER XXIX.

In spite of his haste to settle all that remained to be settled with regard to the restitution of the property to San Giacinto, Saracinesca found it impossible to wind up the affair in a week as he had intended. It was a very complicated matter to separate from his present fortune that part of it which his cousin would have inherited from his great-grandfather. A great deal of wealth had come into the family since that time by successive marriages, and the management of the original estate had not been kept separate from the administration of the dowries which had from time to time been absorbed into it. The Saracinesca, however, were orderly people, and the books had been kept for generations with that astonishing precision of detail which is found in the great Roman houses, and which surpasses, perhaps, anything analogous which is to be found in modern business. By dint of perseverance and by employing a great number of persons in making the calculations, the notaries had succeeded in preparing a tolerably satisfactory schedule in the course of a fortnight, which both the principal parties agreed to accept as final. The day fixed for the meeting and liquidation of the accounts was a Saturday, a fortnight and two days after the murder of Prince Montevarchi. A question arose concerning the place of meeting.

Saracinesca proposed that San Giacinto and the notaries should come to the Palazzo Saracinesca. He was ready to brave out the situation to the end, to face his fate until it held nothing more in store for him, even to handing over the inventory of all that was no longer his in the house where he had been born. His boundless courage and almost brutal frankness would doubtless have supported him to the last, even through such a trial to his feelings, but San Giacinto refused to agree to the proposal. He repeatedly stated that he wished the old prince to inhabit the palace through his lifetime, and that he should even make every effort to induce him to retain the title. Both of these offers were rejected courteously, but firmly. In the matter of holding the decisive meeting in the palace, however, San Giacinto made a determined stand. He would not on any account appear in the light of the conqueror coming to take possession of the spoil. His wife had no share in this generous sentiment. She would have liked to enjoy her triumph to the full, for she was exceedingly ambitious, and was, moreover, not very fond of the Saracinesca. As she expressed it, she felt when she was with any of them, from the old prince to Corona, that they must be thinking all the time that she was a very foolish young person. San Giacinto's action was therefore spontaneous, and if it needs explanation it may be ascribed to an inherited magnanimity, to a certain dignity which had distinguished him even as a young man from the low class in which he had grown up. He was, indeed, by no means a type of the perfect nobleman; his conduct in the affair between Faustina and Gouache had shown that. He acted according to his lights, and was not ashamed to do things which his cousin Giovanni would have called mean. But he was manly, for all that, and if he owed some of his dignity to great stature and to his indomitable will, it was also in a measure the outward sign of a good heart and of an innate sense of justice. There had as yet been nothing dishonest in his dealings since he had come to Rome. He had acquired a fortune which enabled him to take the position that was lawfully his. He liked Flavia, and had bargained for her with her father, afterwards scrupulously fulfilling the terms of

the contract. He had not represented himself to be what he was not, and he had taken no unfair advantage of any one for his own advancement. In the matter of the suit he was the dupe of old Montevarchi, so far as the deeds were concerned, but he was perfectly aware that he actually represented the elder branch of his family. It is hard to imagine how any man in his position could have done less than he did; and now that it had come to a final settlement he was really anxious to cause his vanquished relations as little humiliation as possible. To go to their house was like playing the part of a bailiff. To allow them to come to his dwelling suggested the journey to Canossa. The Palazzo Montevarchi was neutral ground, and he proposed that the formalities should be fulfilled there. Saracinesca consented readily enough and the day was fixed.

The notaries arrived at ten o'clock in the morning, accompanied by clerks who were laden with books, inventories and rolls of manuscript. The study had been selected for the meeting, both on account of its seclusion from the rest of the house and because it contained an immense table which would serve for the voluminous documents, all of which must be examined and verified. San Giacinto himself awaited the arrival of the Saracinesca in the great reception-room. He had sent his wife away, for he was in reality by no means so calm as he appeared to be, and her constant talk disturbed him. He paced the long room with regular steps, his head erect, his hands behind him, stopping from time to time to listen for the footsteps of those he expected. It was the great day of his life. Before night, he was to be Prince Saracinesca.

The moments that precede a great triumph are very painful, especially if a man has looked forward to the event for a long time. No matter how sure he is of the result, something tells him that it is uncertain. A question may arise, he cannot guess whence, by which all may be changed. He repeats to himself a hundred times that failure is impossible, but he is not at rest. The uncertainty of all things, even of his own life, appears very clearly before his eyes. His heart beats fast and slow from one minute to another. At the very

instant when he is dreaming of the future, the possibility of disappointment breaks in upon his thoughts. He cannot explain it, but he longs to be beyond the decisive hour. In San Giacinto's existence, the steps from obscurity to importance and fortune had, of late, been so rapidly ascended that he was almost giddy with success. For the first time since he had left his old home in Aquila, he felt as though he had been changed from his own self to some other person.

At last the door opened, and Saracinesca, Giovanni, and Corona entered the room. San Giacinto was surprised to see Giovanni's wife on an occasion when the men alone of the family were concerned, but she explained that she had come to spend the morning with Faustina, and would wait till everything was finished. The meeting was not a cordial one, though both parties regarded it as inevitable. If Saracinesca felt any personal resentment against San Giacinto he knew that it was unreasonable and he had not the bad taste to show it. He was silent, but courteous in his manner. Giovanni, strange to say, seemed wholly indifferent to what was about to take place.

"I hope," said San Giacinto, when all four were seated, "that you will consent to consider this as a mere formality. I have said as much through my lawyers, but I wish to repeat it myself in better words than they used."

"Pardon me," answered Saracinesca, "if I suggest that we should not discuss that matter. We are sensible of your generosity in making such offers, but we do not consider it possible to accept them."

"I must ask your indulgence if I do not act upon your suggestion," returned San Giacinto. "Even if there is no discussion I cannot consent to proceed to business until I have explained what I mean. If the suit has been settled justly by the courts, it has not been decided with perfect justice as regards its consequences. I do not deny, and I understand that you do not expect me to act otherwise, that it has been my intention to secure for myself and for my children the property and the personal position abandoned by my ancestor. I have obtained what I wanted and what was my right, and I have to thank you for the magnanimity you have displayed in not

attempting to contest a claim against which you might have brought many arguments, if not much evidence. The affair having been legally settled, it is for us to make whatever use of it seems better in our own eyes. To deprive you of your name and of the house in which you were born and bred, would be to offer you an indignity such as I never contemplated."

"You cannot be said to deprive us of what is not ours, by any interpretation of the word with which I am acquainted," said Saracinesca in a tone which showed that he was determined to receive nothing.

"I am a poor grammarian," answered San Giacinto gravely, and without the slightest affectation of humility. "I was brought up a farmer, and was only an innkeeper until lately. I cannot discuss with you the subtle meanings of words. To my mind it is I who am taking from you that which, if not really yours, you have hitherto had every right to own and to make use of. I do not attempt to explain my thought. I only say that I will neither take your name nor live in your house while you are alive. I propose a compromise which I hope you will be willing to accept."

"I fear that will be impossible. My mind is made up."

"I propose," continued San Giacinto, "that you remain Prince Saracinesca, that you keep Saracinesca itself, and the palace here in Rome during your lifetime, which I trust may be a long one. After your death everything returns to us. My cousin Giovanni and the Princess Sant' Ilario —"

"You may call me Corona, if you please," said the princess suddenly. Her eyes were fixed on his face, and she was smiling.

Both Saracinesca and Giovanni looked at her in surprise. It seemed strange to them that she should choose such a moment for admitting San Giacinto to a familiarity he had never before enjoyed. But for some time she had felt a growing respect for the ex-innkeeper, which was quickened by his present generosity. San Giacinto's swarthy face grew a shade darker as the blood mounted to his lean cheeks. Corona had given him one of the first sensations of genuine pleasure he had ever experienced in his rough life.

"Thank you," he said simply. "You two, I was going to say, have palaces of your own and cannot have such close associations with the old places as one who has owned them during so many years. You," he continued, turning to the old prince, "will, I hope, accept an arrangement which cannot affect your dignity and which will give me the greatest satisfaction."

"I am very much obliged to you," answered Saracinesca promptly. "You are very generous, but I cannot take what you offer."

"If you feel that you would be taking anything from me, look at it from a different point of view. You would be conferring a favour instead of accepting one. Consider my position, when I have taken your place. It will not be a pleasant one. The world will abuse me roundly, and will say I have behaved abominably towards you. Do you fancy that I shall be received as a substitute for the Prince Saracinesca your friends have known so long? Do you suppose that the vicissitudes of my life are unknown, and that no one will laugh behind my back and point at me as the new, upstart prince? Few people know me in Rome, and if I have any friends besides you, I have not been made aware of the fact. Pray consider that in doing what I ask, you would be saving me from very unpleasant social consequences."

"I should be doing so at the cost of my self-respect," replied the old man firmly. "Whatever the consequences are to you, the means of bearing them will be in your hands. You will have no lack of friends to-morrow, or at least of amiable persons anxious to call themselves by that name. They will multiply this very night, like mushrooms, and will come about you freshly shaved and smiling to-morrow morning."

"I am afraid you do not understand me," said San Giacinto. "I can leave you the title and yet take one which will serve as well. You would call yourself Prince Saracinesca and I should be Saracinesca di San Giacinto. As for the palace and the place in the mountains, they are so insignificant as compared with the rest that it could not hurt your self-respect to live in them. Can you not persuade your father?" He turned to Giovanni who had not spoken yet.

"You are very good to make the proposal," he answered. "I cannot say more than that. I agree with my father."

A silence followed which lasted several minutes. Corona looked from one to the other of the three men, wondering how the matter would end. She understood both parties better than they understood each other. She sympathised with the refusal of her husband and his father. To accept such an offer would put them in a position of obligation towards San Giacinto which she knew they could never endure, and which would be galling to herself. On the other hand she felt sorry for their cousin, who was evidently trying to do what he felt was right and generous, and was disappointed that his advances should be repelled. He was very much in earnest, or he would not have gone so far as to suggest that it would be a favour to him if they took what he offered. He was so simple, and yet so dignified withal, that she could not help liking him. It was not clear to her, however, that she could mend matters by interfering, nor by offering advice to the one or sympathy to the other.

Saracinesca himself was the first to break the silence. It seemed to him that everything had been said, and that nothing now remained but to fulfil the requisite formalities.

"Shall we proceed to business?" he inquired, as though ignoring all the previous conversation. "I believe we have a great deal to do, and the time is passing."

San Giacinto made no reply, but rose gravely and made a gesture signifying that he would show the way to the study. Saracinesca made a show of refusing to go out first, then yielded and went on. San Giacinto waited at the door for Corona and Giovanni.

"I will join you in a moment — I know the way," said the latter, remaining behind with his wife.

When they were alone he led her towards one of the windows, as though to be doubly sure that no one could hear what he was about to say. Then he stood still and looked into her eyes.

"Would you like us to accept such a favour from him?" he asked. "Tell me the truth."

"No," answered Corona without the least hesitation. "But I am sorry for San Giacinto. I think he is really

trying to do right, and to be generous. He was hurt by your father's answer."

"If I thought it would give you pleasure to feel that we could go to Saracinesca, I would try and make my father change his mind."

"Would you?" She knew very well what a sacrifice it would be to his pride.

"Yes, dear. I would do it for you."

"Giovanni — how good you are!"

"No — I am not good. I love you. That is all. Shall I try?"

"Never! I am sorry for San Giacinto — but I could no more live in the old house, or in Saracinesca, than you could. Do I not feel all that you feel, and more?"

"All?"

"All."

They stood hand in hand looking out of the window, and there were tears in the eyes of both. The grasp of their fingers tightened slowly as though they were drawn together by an irresistible force. Slowly they turned their faces towards each other, and presently their lips met in one of those kisses that are never forgotten. Then Giovanni left her where she was. All had been said; both knew that they desired nothing more in this world, and that henceforth they were all to each other. It was as though a good angel had set a heavenly seal upon the reunion of their hearts.

Corona did not leave the room immediately, but remained a few moments leaning against the heavy frame of the window. Her queenly figure drooped a little, and she pressed one hand to her side. Her dark face was bent down, and the tears that had of old come so rarely made silver lines upon her olive cheeks. There was not one drop of bitterness in that overflowing of her soul's transcendent joy, in that happiness which was so great and perfect that it seemed almost unbearable.

And she had reason to be glad. In the midst of a calamity which would have absorbed the whole nature of many men, Giovanni had not one thought that was not for her. Giovanni, who had once doubted her, who had said such things to her as she dared not remember — Giovanni, suffering under a blow to his pride, that was

worse almost than total ruin, had but one wish, to make another sacrifice for her. That false past, of which she hated to think, was gone like an evil dream before the morning sun; that true past, which was her whole life, was made present again. The love that had been so bruised and crushed that she had thought it dead had sprung up again from its deep, strong roots, grander and nobler than before. The certainty that it was real was overwhelming, and drowned all her senses in a trance of light.

Faustina Montevarchi entered the drawing-room softly, then, seeing no one, she advanced till she came all at once upon Corona in the embrasure of the window. The princess started slightly when she saw that she was not alone.

"Corona!" exclaimed the young girl. "Are you crying? What is it?"

"Oh, Faustina! I am so happy!" It was a relief to be able to say it to some one.

"Happy?" repeated Faustina in surprise. "But there are tears in your eyes, on your cheeks——"

"You cannot understand—I do not wonder—how should you? And besides, I cannot tell you what it is."

"I wish I were you," answered her friend sadly. "I wish I were happy!"

"What is it, child?" asked Corona kindly. Then she led Faustina to a stiff old sofa at one end of the vast room and they sat down together. "What is it?" she repeated, drawing the girl affectionately to her side.

"You know what it is, dear. No one can help me. Oh, Corona! we love each other so very much!"

"I know—I know it is very real. But you must have a little patience, darling. Love will win in the end. Just now, too——" She did not finish the sentence, but she had touched a sensitive spot in Faustina's conscience.

"That is the worst of it," was the answer. "I am so miserable, because I know he never would have allowed it, and now—I am ashamed to tell you, it is so heartless!" She hid her face on her friend's shoulder.

"You will never be heartless, my dear Faustina," said Corona. "What you think, is not your fault, dear. Love is master of the world and of us all."

"But my love is not like yours, Corona. Perhaps

yours was once like mine. But you are married—you are happy. You were saying so just now."

"Yes, dear. I am very, very happy, because I love very, very dearly. You will be as happy as I am some day."

"Ah, that may be—but—I am dreadfully wicked, Corona!"

"You, child? You do not know what it is to think anything bad!"

"But I do. I am so much ashamed of it that I can hardly tell you—only I tell you everything, because you are my friend. Corona—it is horrible—it seems easier, more possible—now that he is gone—oh! I am so glad I have told you!" Faustina began to sob passionately, as though she were repenting of some fearful crime.

"Is that all, darling?" asked Corona, smiling at the girl's innocence, and pressing her head tenderly to her own breast. "Is that what makes you so unhappy?"

"Yes—is it not—very, very dreadful?" A fresh shower of tears accompanied the question.

"Perhaps I am very bad, too," said Corona. "But I do not call that wickedness."

"Oh no! You are good. I wish I were like you!"

"No, do not wish that. But, I confess, it seems to me natural that you should think as you do, because it is really true. Your father, Faustina, may have been mistaken about your future. If—if he had lived, you might perhaps have made him change his mind. At all events, you can hope that he now sees more clearly, that he understands how terrible it is for a woman to be married to a man she does not love—when she is sure that she loves another."

"Yes—you told me. Do you remember? It was the other day, after Flavia had been saying such dreadful things. But I know it already. Every woman must know it."

There was a short pause, during which Corona wondered whether she were the same person she had been ten days earlier, when she had delivered that passionate warning. Faustina sat quite still, looking up into the princess's face. She was comforted and reassured and the tears had ceased to flow.

"There is something else," she said at last. "I want

to tell you everything, for I can tell no one else. I cannot keep it to myself either. He has written to me, Corona. Was it very wrong to read his letter?" This time she smiled a little and blushed.

"I do not think it was very wrong," answered her friend with a soft laugh. She was so happy that she would have laughed at anything.

"Shall I show you his letter?" asked the young girl shyly. At the same time her hand disappeared into the pocket of her black gown, and immediately afterwards brought out a folded piece of paper which looked as though it had been read several times.

Corona did not think it necessary to express her assent in words. Faustina opened the note, which contained the following words, written in Gouache's delicate French handwriting:—

"*MADemoiselle* — When you have read these lines, you will understand my object in writing them, for you understand me, and you know that all I do has but one object. A few days ago it was still possible for us to meet frequently. The terrible affliction which has fallen upon you, and in which none can feel deeper or more sincere sympathy than I, has put it out of your power and out of mine to join hands and weep over the present, to look into each other's eyes and read there the golden legend of a future happiness. To meet as we have met, alone in the crowded church—no! we cannot do it. For you, at such a time, it would seem like a disrespect to your father's memory. For myself, I should deem it dishonourable, I should appear base in my own eyes. Did I not go to him and put to him the great question? Was I not repulsed—I do not say with insult, but with astonishment—at my presumption? Shall I then seem to take advantage of his death—of his sudden and horrible death—to press forward a suit which he is no longer able to oppose? I feel that it would be wrong. Though I cannot express myself as I would, I know that you understand me, for you think as I do. How could it be otherwise? Are we not one indivisible soul, we two? Yes, you will understand me. Yes, you will know that it is right. I go therefore, I leave Rome immediately. I cannot inhabit the same city and not see you. But I cannot quit the Zouaves in this time of danger. I am therefore going to Viterbo, whither I am sent through the friendly assistance of one of our officers. There I shall stay until time has soothed your grief and restored your mother to health. To her we will turn when the moment has arrived. She will not be insensible to our tears and entreaties. Until then good-bye—ah! the word is less terrible than it looks, for our souls will be always together. I leave you but for a short space—no! I leave your sweet eyes, your angel's face, your dear hands that I adore, but yourself I do not leave. I bear you with me in a heart that loves you—God knows how tenderly."

Corona read the letter carefully to the end. To her older appreciation of the world, such a letter appeared at first to be the forerunner of a definite break, but a little reflection made her change her mind. What he said was clearly true, and corresponded closely with Faustina's own view of the case. The most serious obstacle to the union of the lovers had been removed by Prince Montevarchi's death, and it was inconceivable that Gouache should have ceased to care for Faustina at the very moment when a chance of his marrying her had presented itself. Besides, Corona knew Gouache well, and was not mistaken in her estimate of his character. He was honourable to Quixotism, and perfectly capable of refusing to take what looked like an unfair advantage. Considering Faustina's strange nature, her amazing readiness to yield to first impulses, and her touching innocence of evil, it would have been an easy matter for the man she loved to draw her into a runaway match. She would have followed him as readily to the ends of the earth as she had followed him to the Serristori barracks. Gouache was not a boy, and probably understood her peculiarities as well as any one. In going away for the present he was undoubtedly acting with the greatest delicacy, for his departure showed at once all the respect he felt for Faustina, and all that devotion to an ideal honour which was the foundation of his being. Though his epistle was not a model of literary style it contained certain phrases that came from the heart. Corona understood why Faustina was pleased with it, and why instead of shedding useless tears over his absence, she had shown such willingness to let her friend read Gouache's own explanation of his departure. She folded the sheet of paper again and gave it back to the young girl.

"I am glad he wrote that letter," she said after a moment's pause. "I always believed in him, and now—well, I think, he is almost worthy of you, Faustina."

Faustina threw her arms around Corona's neck, and kissed her again and again.

"I am so glad you know how good he is!" she cried. "I could not be happy unless you liked him, and you do."

All through the morning the two friends sat together in the great drawing-room talking, as such women can

talk to each other, with infinite grace about matters not worth recording, or if they spoke of things of greater importance, repeating the substance of what they had said before, finding at each repetition some new comment to make, some new point upon which to agree, after the manner of people who are very fond of each other. The hours slipped by, and they were unconscious of the lapse of time. The great clocks of the neighbouring church towers tolled eleven, twelve, and one o'clock, and yet they had more to say, and did not even notice the loud ringing of the hundred bells. The day was clear, and the bright sunlight streamed in through the high windows, telling the hour with a more fateful precision than the clocks outside. All was peace and happiness and sweet intercourse, as the two women sat there undisturbed through the long morning. They talked, and laughed, and held their hands clasped together, unconscious of the rest of the world. No sound penetrated from the rest of the house to the quiet, sunlit hall, which to Faustina's mind had never looked so cheerful before since she could remember it. And yet within the walls of the huge old palace strange things were passing, things which it was well that neither of them should see.

Before describing the events which close this part of my story, it is as well to say that Faustina has made her last appearance for the present. From the point of view which would have been taken by most of her acquaintances, her marriage with Gouache was a highly improbable event. If any one desires an apology for being left in uncertainty as to her fate, I can only answer that I am writing the history of the Saracinesca and not of any one else. There are certain stages in that history which are natural halting-places for the historian himself, and for his readers if he have any; and it is impossible to make the lives of a number of people coincide so far as to wind them up together, and yet be sure that they will run down at the same moment like the clocks of his Majesty Charles the Fifth. If it were, the world would be a very different place.

CHAPTER XXX.

The scene in the study, while the notary read through the voluminous documents, is worth describing. At one end of the large green table sat San Giacinto alone, his form, even as he sat, towering above the rest. The mourning he wore harmonised with his own dark and massive head. His expression was calm and thoughtful, betraying neither satisfaction nor triumph. From time to time his deep-set eyes turned towards Saracinesca with a look of inquiry, as though to assure himself that the prince agreed to the various points and was aware that he must now speak for the last time, if he spoke at all. At the other end of the board the two Saracinesca were seated side by side. The strong resemblance that existed between them was made very apparent by their position, but although, allowing for the difference of their ages, their features corresponded almost line for line, their expressions were totally different. The old man's gray hair and pointed beard seemed to bristle with suppressed excitement. His heavy brows were bent together, as though he were making a great effort to control his temper, and now and then there was an angry gleam in his eyes. He sat square and erect in his seat, as though he were facing an enemy, but he kept his hands below the table, for he did not choose that San Giacinto should see the nervous working of his fingers. Giovanni, on the other hand, looked upon the proceedings with an indifference that was perfectly apparent. He occasionally looked at his watch, suppressed a yawn, and examined his nails with great interest. It was clear that he was not in the least moved by what was going on. It was no light matter for the old nobleman to listen to the documents that deprived him one by one of his titles, his estates, and his other wealth, in favour of a man who was still young, and whom, in spite of the relationship, he could not help regarding as an inferior. He had always considered himself as the representative of an older generation, who, by right of position, was entitled to transmit to his son the whole mass of those proud traditions in which he had