

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

grown up as in his natural element. Giovanni, on the contrary, possessed a goodly share of that indifference that characterises the younger men of the nineteenth century. He was perfectly satisfied with his present situation, and had been so long accustomed to depend upon his personality and his private fortune, for all that he enjoyed or required in life, that he did not desire the responsibilities that weigh heavily upon the head of a great family. Moreover, recent events had turned the current of his thoughts into a different direction. He was in his way as happy as Corona, and he knew that real happiness proceeds from something more than a score of titles and a few millions of money, more or less. He regarded the long morning's work as an intolerable nuisance, which prevented him from spending his time with his wife.

In the middle of the table sat the two notaries, flanked by four clerks, all of them pale men in black, clean shaved, of various ages, but bearing on their faces the almost unmistakable stamp of their profession. The one who was reading the deeds wore spectacles. From time to time he pushed them back upon his bald forehead and glanced first at San Giacinto and then at Prince Saracinesca, after which he carefully resettled the glasses upon his long nose and proceeded with his task until he had reached the end of another set of clauses, when he repeated the former operation with mechanical regularity, never failing to give San Giacinto the precedence of the first look.

For a long time this went on, with a monotony which almost drove Giovanni from the room. Indeed nothing but absolute necessity could have kept him in his place. At last the final deed was reached. It was an act of restitution drawn up in a simple form so as to include, by a few words, all the preceding documents. It set forth that Leone Saracinesca being "free in body and mind," the son of Giovanni Saracinesca deceased, "whom may the Lord preserve in a state of glory," restored, gave back, yielded, and abandoned all those goods, titles, and benefices which he had inherited directly from Leone Saracinesca, the eleventh of that name, deceased, "whom may the Lord preserve in a state of glory," to Giovanni

Saracinesca, Marchese di San Giacinto, who was "free in body and mind," son of Orsino Saracinesca, ninth of that name, deceased, "whom may the Lord, etc." Not one of the quaint stock phrases was omitted. The notary paused, looked round, adjusted his spectacles and continued. The deed further set forth that Giovanni Saracinesca, Marchese di San Giacinto aforesaid, acknowledged the receipt of the aforesaid goods, titles, and benefices, and stated that he received all as the complete inheritance, relinquishing all further claims against the aforesaid Leone and his heirs for ever. Once more the reader paused, and then read the last words in a clear voice —

"Both the noble parties promising, finally, in regard to the present cession, to take account of it, to hold it as acceptable, valid, and perpetual, and, for the same, never to allow it to be spoken of otherwise."

A few words followed, setting forth the name of the notary and the statement that the act was executed in his presence, with the date. When he had finished reading all, he rose and turned the document upon the table so that the two parties could stand opposite to him and sign it. Without a word he made a slight inclination and offered the pen to Saracinesca. The old gentleman pushed back his chair and marched forward with erect head and a firm step to sign away what had been his birthright. From first to last he had acknowledged the justice of his cousin's claims, and he was not the man to waver at the supreme moment. His hair bristled more stiffly than ever, and his dark eyes shot fire, but he took the pen and wrote his great strong signature as clearly as he had written it at the foot of his marriage contract five and thirty years earlier. Giovanni looked at him with admiration.

Then San Giacinto, who had risen out of respect to the old man, came forward and took the pen in his turn. He wrote out his name in straight, firm characters as usual, but at the end the ink made a broad black mark that ended abruptly, as though the writer had put the last stroke to a great undertaking.

"There should be two witnesses," said the notary in the awkward silence that followed. "Don Giovanni can

be one," he added, giving the latter the only name that was now his, with a lawyer's scrupulous exactness.

"One of your clerks can be the other," suggested Saracinesca, who was anxious to get away as soon as possible.

"It is not usual," replied the notary. "Is there no one in the palace? One of the young princes would do admirably."

"They are all away," said San Giacinto. "Let me see — there is the librarian. Will he answer the purpose? He must be in the library at this hour. A respectable man — he has been thirty years in the house. For that matter, the steward is probably in his office, too."

"The librarian is the best person," answered the notary.

"I will bring him at once — I know the way." San Giacinto left the study by the door that opened upon the passage. The others could hear his heavy steps as he went rapidly up the paved corridor. Old Saracinesca walked up and down the room unable to conceal his impatience. Giovanni resumed his seat and waited quietly, indifferent to the last.

Arnoldo Meschini was in the library, as San Giacinto had anticipated. He was seated at his usual place at the upper end of the hall, surrounded by books and writing materials which he handled nervously without making any serious attempt to use them. He had lost all power of concentrating his thoughts or of making any effort to work. Fortunately for him no one had paid any attention to him during the past ten days. His appearance was dishevelled and slovenly, and he was more bent than he had formerly been. His eyes were bleared and glassy as he stared at the table before him, assuming a wild and startled expression when, looking up, he fancied he saw some horrible object gliding quickly across the sunny floor, or creeping up to him over the polished table. All his former air of humility and shabby respectability was gone. His disordered dress, his straggling grayish hair that hung from beneath the dirty black skullcap around his mis-shapen ears, his face, yellow in parts and irregularly flushed in others, as though it were beginning to be scorched from within, his unwashed hands, every detail of his appearance, in short, proclaimed his

total degradation. But hitherto no one had noticed him, for he had lived between his attic, the deserted library and the apothecary's shop on the island of Saint Bartholomew. His mind had almost ceased to act when he was awake, except in response to the fear which the smallest circumstances now caused him. If he had dreams by night, he saw visions also in the day, and his visions generally took the shape of San Giacinto. He had not really seen him since he had met him when the prince lay in state, but the fear of him was, if anything, greater than if he had met him daily. The idea that the giant was lying in wait for him had become fixed, and yet he was powerless to fly. His energy was all gone between his potations and the constant terror that paralysed him.

On that morning he had been as usual to the Ponte Quattro Capi and had returned with the means of sleep in his pocket. He had no instinct left but to deaden his sensations with drink during the hours of light, while waiting for the time when he could lie down and yield to the more potent influence of the opium. He had therefore come back as usual, and by force of habit had taken his place in the library, the fear of seeming to neglect his supposed duties forbidding him to spend all his time in his room. As usual, too, he had locked the door of the passage to separate himself from his dread of a supernatural visitation. He sat doubled together in his chair, his long arms lying out before him upon the books and papers.

All at once he started in his seat. One, two, one two — yes, there were footsteps in the corridor — they were coming nearer and nearer — heavy, like those of the dead prince — but quicker, like those of San Giacinto — closer, closer yet. A hand turned the latch once, twice, then shook the lock roughly. Meschini was helpless. He could neither get upon his feet and escape by the other exit, nor find the way to the pocket that held his weapon. Again the latch was turned and shaken, and then the deep voice he dreaded was heard calling to him.

"Signor Meschini!"

He shrieked aloud with fear, but he was paralysed in every limb. A moment later a terrible crash drowned his cries. San Giacinto, on hearing his agonised scream,

had feared some accident. He drew back a step and then, with a spring, threw his colossal strength against the line where the leaves of the door joined. The lock broke in its sockets, the panels cracked under the tremendous pressure, and the door flew wide open. In a moment San Giacinto was standing over the librarian, trying to drag him back from the table and out of his seat. He thought the man was in a fit. In reality he was insane with terror.

"An easy death, for the love of heaven!" moaned the wretch, twisting himself under the iron hands that held him by the shoulders. "For God's sake! I will tell you all — do not torture me — oh! oh! — only let it be easy — and quick — yes, I tell you — I killed the prince — oh, mercy, mercy, for Christ's sake!"

San Giacinto's grip tightened, and his face grew livid. He lifted Meschini bodily from the chair and set him against the table, holding him up at arm's length, his deep eyes blazing with a rage that would soon be uncontrollable. Meschini's naturally strong constitution did not afford him the relief of fainting.

"You killed him — why?" asked San Giacinto through his teeth, scarcely able to speak.

"For you, for you — oh, have mercy — do not —"

"Silence!" cried the giant in a voice that shook the vault of the hall. "Answer me or I will tear your head from your body with my hands! Why do you say you killed him for me?"

Meschini trembled all over, and then his contorted face grew almost calm. He had reached that stage which may be called the somnambulism of fear. The perspiration covered his skin in an instant, and his voice sank to a distinct whisper.

"He made me forge the deeds, and would not pay me for them. Then I killed him."

"What deeds?"

"The deeds that have made you Prince Saracinesca. If you do not believe me, go to my room, the originals are in the cupboard. The key is here, in my right-hand pocket."

He could not move to get it, for San Giacinto held him fast, and watched every attempt he made at a movement.

His own face was deathly pale, and his white lips were compressed together.

"You forged them altogether, and the originals are untouched?" he asked, his grasp tightening unconsciously till Meschini yelled with pain.

"Yes!" he cried. "Oh, do not hurt me — an easy death —"

"Come with me," said San Giacinto, leaving his arms and taking him by the collar. Then he dragged and pushed him towards the splintered door of the passage. At the threshold, Meschini writhed and tried to draw back, but he could no more have escaped from those hands that held him than a lamb can loosen the talons of an eagle when they are buried deep in the flesh.

"Go on!" urged the strong man, in fierce tones. "You came by this passage to kill him — you know the way."

With a sudden movement of his right hand he launched the howling wretch forward into the corridor. All through the narrow way Meschini's cries for mercy resounded, loud and piercing, but no one heard him. The walls were thick and the distance from the inhabited rooms was great. But at last the shrieks reached the study.

Saracinesca stood still in his walk. Giovanni sprang to his feet. The notaries sat in their places and trembled. The noise came nearer and then the door flew open. San Giacinto dragged the shapeless mass of humanity in and flung it half way across the room, so that it sank in a heap at the old prince's feet.

"There is the witness to the deeds," he cried savagely. "He forged them, and he shall witness them in hell. He killed his master in this very room, and here he shall tell the truth before he dies. Confess, you dog! And be quick about it, or I will help you."

He stirred the grovelling creature with his foot. Meschini only rolled from side to side and hid his face against the floor. Then the gigantic hands seized him again and set him on his feet, and held him with his face to the eight men who had all risen and were standing together in wondering silence.

"Speak!" shouted San Giacinto in Meschini's ear. "You are not dead yet — you have much to live through, I hope."

Again that trembling passed over the unfortunate man's limbs, and he grew quiet and submissive. It was all as he had seen it in his wild dreams and visions, the secret chamber whence no sound could reach the outer world, the stern judges all in black, the cruel strength of San Giacinto ready to torture him. The shadow of death rose in his eyes.

"Let me sit down," he said in a broken voice.

San Giacinto led him to a chair in the midst of them all. Then he stood before one of the doors, and motioned to his cousin to guard the other. But Arnaldo Meschini had no hope of escape. His hour was at hand, and he knew it.

"You forged the deeds which were presented as originals in the court. Confess it to those gentlemen." It was San Giacinto who spoke.

"The prince made me do it," answered Meschini in low tones. "He promised me twenty thousand scudi for the work."

"To be paid — when? Tell all."

"To be paid in cash the day the verdict was given."

"You came to get your money here?"

"I came here. He denied having promised anything definite. I grew angry. I killed him." A violent shudder shook his frame from head to foot.

"You strangled him with a pocket handkerchief?"

"It was Donna Faustina's?"

"The prince threw it on the ground after he had struck her. I saw the quarrel. I was waiting for my money. I watched them through the door."

"You know that you are to die. Where are the deeds you stole when you forged the others?"

"I told you — in the cupboard in my room. Here is the key. Only — for God's sake —"

He was beginning to break down again. Perhaps, by the habit of the past days he felt the need for drink even in that supreme moment, for his hand sought his pocket as he sat. Instead of the bottle he felt the cold steel barrel of the revolver, which he had forgotten. San Giacinto looked towards the notary.

"Is this a full confession, sufficient to commit this man to trial?" he asked. But before the notary could

answer, Meschini's voice sounded through the room, not weak and broken, but loud and clear.

"It is! It is!" he cried in sudden and wild excitement. "I have told all. The deeds will speak for themselves. Ah! you would have done better to leave me amongst my books!" He turned to San Giacinto. "You will never be Prince Saracinesca. But I shall escape you. You shall not give me a slow death — you shall not, I say —"

San Giacinto made a step towards him. The proximity of the man who had inspired him with such abject terror put an end to his hesitation.

"You shall not!" he almost screamed. "But my blood is on your head — Ah!"

Three deafening reports shook the air in rapid succession, and all that was left of Arnaldo Meschini lay in a shapeless heap upon the floor. While a man might have counted a score there was silence in the room. Then San Giacinto came forward and bent over the body, while the notaries and their clerks cowered in a corner. Saracinesca and Giovanni stood together, grave and silent, as brave men are when they have seen a horrible sight and can do nothing. Meschini was quite dead. When San Giacinto had assured himself of the fact, he looked up. All the fierce rage had vanished from his face.

"He is dead," he said quietly. "You all saw it. You will have to give your evidence in half an hour when the police come. Be good enough to open the door."

He took up the body in his arms carefully, but with an ease that amazed those who watched him. Giovanni held the door open, and San Giacinto deposited his burden gently upon the pavement of the corridor. Then he turned back and re-entered the room. The door of the study closed for ever on Arnaldo Meschini.

In the dead silence that followed, San Giacinto approached the table upon which the deed lay, still waiting to be witnessed. He took it in his hand and turned to Saracinesca. There was no need for him to exculpate himself from any charge of complicity in the abominable fraud which Montevarchi had prepared before he died. Not one of the men present even thought of suspecting him. Even if they had, it was clear that he would not

have brought Meschini to confess before them a robbery in which he had taken part. But there was that in his brave eyes that told his innocence better than any evidence or argument could have proclaimed it. He held out the document to Saracinesca.

"Would you like to keep it as a memento?" he asked. "Or shall I destroy it before you?"

His voice never quavered, his face was not discomposed. Giovanni, the noble-hearted gentleman, wondered whether he himself could have borne such a blow so bravely as this innkeeper cousin of his. Hopes, such as few men can even aspire to entertain, had been suddenly extinguished. A future of power and wealth and honour, the highest almost that his country could give any man, had been in a moment dashed to pieces before his eyes. Dreams, in which the most indifferent would see the prospect of enormous satisfaction, had vanished into nothing during the last ten minutes, almost at the instant when they were to be realised. And yet the man who had hoped such hopes, who had looked forward to such a future, whose mind must have revelled many a time in the visions that were already becoming realities—that man stood before them all, outwardly unmoved, and proposing to his cousin that he should keep as a remembrance the words that told of his own terrible disappointment. He was indeed the calmest of those present.

"Shall I tear it to pieces?" he asked again, holding the document between his fingers. Then the old prince spoke.

"Do what you will with it," he answered. "But give me your hand. You are a braver man than I."

The two men looked into each other's eyes as their hands met.

"It shall not be the last deed between us," said Saracinesca. "There shall be another. Whatever may be the truth about that villain's work you shall have your share —"

"A few hours ago, you would not take yours," answered San Giacinto quietly. "Must I repeat your own words?"

"Well, well—we will talk of that. This has been a terrible morning's work, and we must do other things before we go to business again. That poor man's body is outside the door. We had better attend to that mat-

ter first, and send for the police. Giovanni, my boy, will you tell Corona? I believe she is still in the house."

Giovanni needed no urging to go upon his errand. He entered the drawing-room where Corona was still sitting beside Faustina upon the sofa. His face must have been pale, for Corona looked at him with a startled expression.

"Is anything the matter?" she asked.

"Something very unpleasant has occurred," he answered, looking at Faustina. "Meschini, the librarian, has just died very suddenly in the study where we were."

"Meschini?" cried Faustina in surprise and with some anxiety.

"Yes. Are you nervous, Donna Faustina? May I tell you something very startling?" It was a man's question.

"Yes—what is it?" she asked quickly.

"Meschini confessed before us all that it was he who was the cause—in fact that he had murdered your father. Before any one could stop him, he had shot himself. It is very dreadful."

With a low cry that was more expressive of amazement than of horror, Faustina sank into a chair. In his anxiety to tell his wife the whole truth Giovanni forgot her at once. As soon as he began to speak, however, Corona led him away to the window where they had stood together a few hours earlier.

"Corona—what I told her is not all. There is something else. Meschini had forged the papers which gave the property to San Giacinto. Montevarchi had promised him twenty thousand scudi for the job. It was because he would not pay the money that Meschini killed him. Do you understand?"

"You will have everything after all?"

"Everything—but we must give San Giacinto a share. He has behaved like a hero. He found it all out and made Meschini confess. When he knew the truth he did not move a muscle of his face, but offered my father the deed he had just signed as a memento of the occasion."

"Then he will not take anything, any more than you would, or your father. Is it quite sure, Giovanni? Is there no possible mistake?"