

gest to him that we should be glad of his help here or not?"

"I think," said Fabrizi, "that he might be sounded upon the subject, just to find out whether he would be inclined to think of the plan."

"Oh, he'll be inclined, you may be sure, once it's a case of fighting the Jesuits; he is the most savage anti-clerical I ever met; in fact, he's rather rabid on the point."

"Then will you write, Riccardo?"

"Certainly. Let me see, where is he now? In Switzerland, I think. He's the most restless being; always flitting about. But as for the pamphlet question——"

They plunged into a long and animated discussion. When at last the company began to disperse Martini went up to the quiet young woman.

"I will see you home, Gemma."

"Thanks; I want to have a business talk with you."

"Anything wrong with the addresses?" he asked softly.

"Nothing serious; but I think it is time to make a few alterations. Two letters have been stopped in the post this week. They were both quite unimportant, and it may have been accidental; but we cannot afford to have any risks. If once the police have begun to suspect any of our addresses, they must be changed immediately."

"I will come in about that to-morrow. I am not going to talk business with you to-night; you look tired."

"I am not tired."

"Then you are depressed again."

"Oh, no; not particularly."

CHAPTER II.

"Is the mistress in, Katie?"

"Yes, sir; she is dressing. If you'll just step into the parlour she will be down in a few minutes."

Katie ushered the visitor in with the cheerful friendliness of a true Devonshire girl. Martini was a special favourite of hers. He spoke English, like a foreigner, of course, but still quite respectably; and he never sat discussing politics at the top of his voice till one in the morning, when the mistress was tired, as some visitors had a way of doing. Moreover, he had come to Devonshire to help the mistress in her trouble, when her baby was dead and her husband dying there; and ever since that time the big, awkward, silent man had been to Katie as much "one of the family" as was the lazy black cat which now ensconced itself upon his knee. Pasht, for his part, regarded Martini as a useful piece of household furniture. This visitor never trod upon his tail, or puffed tobacco smoke into his eyes, or in any way obtruded upon his consciousness an aggressive biped personality. He behaved as a mere man should: provided a comfortable knee to lie upon and purr, and at table never forgot that to look on while human beings eat fish is not interesting for a cat. The friendship between them was of old date. Once, when Pasht was a kitten and his mistress too ill to think about him, he had come from England under Martini's care, tucked away in a basket. Since then, long experience had convinced him that this clumsy human bear was no fair-weather friend.

"How snug you look, you two!" said Gemma,

coming into the room. "One would think you had settled yourselves for the evening."

Martini carefully lifted the cat off his knee. "I came early," he said, "in the hope that you will give me some tea before we start. There will probably be a frightful crush, and Grassini won't give us any sensible supper—they never do in those fashionable houses."

"Come now!" she said, laughing; "that's as bad as Galli! Poor Grassini has quite enough sins of his own to answer for without having his wife's imperfect housekeeping visited upon his head. As for the tea, it will be ready in a minute. Katie has been making some Devonshire cakes specially for you."

"Katie is a good soul, isn't she, Pasht? By the way, so are you to have put on that pretty dress. I was afraid you would forget."

"I promised you I would wear it, though it is rather warm for a hot evening like this."

"It will be much cooler up at Fiesole; and nothing else ever suits you so well as white cashmere. I have brought you some flowers to wear with it."

"Oh, those lovely cluster roses; I am so fond of them! But they had much better go into water. I hate to wear flowers."

"Now that's one of your superstitious fancies."

"No, it isn't; only I think they must get so bored, spending all the evening pinned to such a dull companion."

"I am afraid we shall all be bored to-night. The conversazione will be dull beyond endurance."

"Why?"

"Partly because everything Grassini touches becomes as dull as himself."

"Now don't be spiteful. It is not fair when we are going to be a man's guests."

"You are always right, Madonna. Well then, it will be dull because half the interesting people are not coming."

"How is that?"

"I don't know. Out of town, or ill, or something. Anyway, there will be two or three ambassadors and some learned Germans, and the usual nondescript crowd of tourists and Russian princes and literary club people, and a few French officers; nobody else that I know of—except, of course, the new satirist, who is to be the attraction of the evening."

"The new satirist? What, Rivarez? But I thought Grassini disapproved of him so strongly."

"Yes; but once the man is here and is sure to be talked about, of course Grassini wants his house to be the first place where the new lion will be on show. You may be sure Rivarez has heard nothing of Grassini's disapproval. He may have guessed it, though; he's sharp enough."

"I did not even know he had come."

"He only arrived yesterday. Here comes the tea. No, don't get up; let me fetch the kettle."

He was never so happy as in this little study. Gemma's friendship, her grave unconsciousness of the charm she exercised over him, her frank and simple comradeship were the brightest things for him in a life that was none too bright; and whenever he began to feel more than usually depressed he would come in here after business hours and sit with her, generally in silence, watching her as she bent over her needlework or poured out tea. She never questioned him about his troubles or expressed any sympathy in words; but he always

went away stronger and calmer, feeling, as he put it to himself, that he could "trudge through another fortnight quite respectably." She possessed, without knowing it, the rare gift of consolation; and when, two years ago, his dearest friends had been betrayed in Calabria and shot down like wolves, her steady faith had been perhaps the thing which had saved him from despair.

On Sunday mornings he sometimes came in to "talk business," that expression standing for anything connected with the practical work of the Mazzinian party, of which they both were active and devoted members. She was quite a different creature then; keen, cool, and logical, perfectly accurate and perfectly neutral. Those who saw her only at her political work regarded her as a trained and disciplined conspirator, trustworthy, courageous, in every way a valuable member of the party, but somehow lacking in life and individuality. "She's a born conspirator, worth any dozen of us; and she is nothing more," Galli had said of her. The "Madonna Gemma" whom Martini knew was very difficult to get at.

"Well, and what is your 'new satirist' like?" she asked, glancing back over her shoulder as she opened the sideboard. "There, Cesare, there are barley-sugar and candied angelica for you. I wonder, by the way, why revolutionary men are always so fond of sweets."

"Other men are, too, only they think it beneath their dignity to confess it. The new satirist? Oh, the kind of man that ordinary women will rave over and you will dislike. A sort of professional dealer in sharp speeches, that goes about the world with a lackadaisical manner and a handsome ballet-girl dangling on to his coat-tails."

"Do you mean that there is really a ballet-girl, or simply that you feel cross and want to imitate the sharp speeches?"

"The Lord defend me! No; the ballet-girl is real enough and handsome enough, too, for those who like shrewish beauty. Personally, I don't. She's a Hungarian gipsy, or something of that kind, so Riccardo says; from some provincial theatre in Galicia. He seems to be rather a cool hand; he has been introducing the girl to people just as if she were his maiden aunt."

"Well, that's only fair if he has taken her away from her home."

"You may look at things that way, dear Madonna, but society won't. I think most people will very much resent being introduced to a woman whom they know to be his mistress."

"How can they know it unless he tells them so?"

"It's plain enough; you'll see if you meet her. But I should think even he would not have the audacity to bring her to the Grassinis'."

"They wouldn't receive her. Signora Grassini is not the woman to do unconventional things of that kind. But I wanted to hear about Signor Rivarez as a satirist, not as a man. Fabrizi told me he had been written to and had consented to come and take up the campaign against the Jesuits; and that is the last I have heard. There has been such a rush of work this week."

"I don't know that I can tell you much more. There doesn't seem to have been any difficulty over the money question, as we feared there would be. He's well off, it appears, and willing to work for nothing."

"Has he a private fortune, then?"

"Apparently he has; though it seems rather odd—you heard that night at Fabrizi's about the state the Duprez expedition found him in. But he has got shares in mines somewhere out in Brazil; and then he has been immensely successful as a feuilleton writer in Paris and Vienna and London. He seems to have half a dozen languages at his finger-tips; and there's nothing to prevent his keeping up his newspaper connections from here. Slanging the Jesuits won't take all his time."

"That's true, of course. It's time to start, Cesare. Yes, I will wear the roses. Wait just a minute."

She ran upstairs, and came back with the roses in the bosom of her dress, and a long scarf of black Spanish lace thrown over her head. Martini surveyed her with artistic approval.

"You look like a queen, Madonna mia; like the great and wise Queen of Sheba."

"What an unkind speech!" she retorted, laughing; "when you know how hard I've been trying to mould myself into the image of the typical society lady! Who wants a conspirator to look like the Queen of Sheba? That's not the way to keep clear of spies."

"You'll never be able to personate the stupid society woman if you try for ever. But it doesn't matter, after all; you're too fair to look upon for spies to guess your opinions, even though you can't simper and hide behind your fan like Signora Grassini."

"Now Cesare, let that poor woman alone! There, take some more barley-sugar to sweeten your temper. Are you ready? Then we had better start."

Martini had been quite right in saying that the *conversazione* would be both crowded and dull. The literary men talked polite small-talk and looked hopelessly bored, while the "nondescript crowd of tourists and Russian princes" fluttered up and down the rooms, asking each other who were the various celebrities and trying to carry on intellectual conversation. Grassini was receiving his guests with a manner as carefully polished as his boots; but his cold face lighted up at the sight of Gemma. He did not really like her and indeed was secretly a little afraid of her; but he realized that without her his drawing room would lack a great attraction. He had risen high in his profession, and now that he was rich and well known his chief ambition was to make of his house a centre of liberal and intellectual society. He was painfully conscious that the insignificant, overdressed little woman whom in his youth he had made the mistake of marrying was not fit, with her vapid talk and faded prettiness, to be the mistress of a great literary salon. When he could prevail upon Gemma to come he always felt that the evening would be a success. Her quiet graciousness of manner set the guests at their ease, and her very presence seemed to lay the spectre of vulgarity which always, in his imagination, haunted the house.

Signora Grassini greeted Gemma affectionately, exclaiming in a loud whisper: "How charming you look to-night!" and examining the white cashmere with viciously critical eyes. She hated her visitor rancourously, for the very things for which Martini loved her; for her quiet strength of character; for her grave, sincere directness; for the steady balance of her mind; for the very

expression of her face. And when Signora Grassini hated a woman, she showed it by effusive tenderness. Gemma took the compliments and endearments for what they were worth, and troubled her head no more about them. What is called "going into society" was in her eyes one of the wearisome and rather unpleasant tasks which a conspirator who wishes not to attract the notice of spies must conscientiously fulfil. She classed it together with the laborious work of writing in cipher; and, knowing how valuable a practical safeguard against suspicion is the reputation of being a well-dressed woman, studied the fashion-plates as carefully as she did the keys of her ciphers.

The bored and melancholy literary lions brightened up a little at the sound of Gemma's name; she was very popular among them; and the radical journalists, especially, gravitated at once to her end of the long room. But she was far too practised a conspirator to let them monopolize her. Radicals could be had any day; and now, when they came crowding round her, she gently sent them about their business, reminding them with a smile that they need not waste their time on converting her when there were so many tourists in need of instruction. For her part, she devoted herself to an English M. P. whose sympathies the republican party was anxious to gain; and, knowing him to be a specialist on finance, she first won his attention by asking his opinion on a technical point concerning the Austrian currency, and then deftly turned the conversation to the condition of the Lombardo-Venetian revenue. The Englishman, who had expected to be bored with small-talk, looked askance at her, evidently fearing that

he had fallen into the clutches of a blue-stocking; but finding that she was both pleasant to look at and interesting to talk to, surrendered completely and plunged into as grave a discussion of Italian finance as if she had been Metternich. When Grassini brought up a Frenchman "who wishes to ask Signora Bolla something about the history of Young Italy," the M. P. rose with a bewildered sense that perhaps there was more ground for Italian discontent than he had supposed.

Later in the evening Gemma slipped out on to the terrace under the drawing-room windows to sit alone for a few moments among the great camellias and oleanders. The close air and continually shifting crowd in the rooms were beginning to give her a headache. At the further end of the terrace stood a row of palms and tree-ferns, planted in large tubs which were hidden by a bank of lilies and other flowering plants. The whole formed a complete screen, behind which was a little nook commanding a beautiful view out across the valley. The branches of a pomegranate tree, clustered with late blossoms, hung beside the narrow opening between the plants.

In this nook Gemma took refuge, hoping that no one would guess her whereabouts until she had secured herself against the threatening headache by a little rest and silence. The night was warm and beautifully still; but coming out from the hot, close rooms she felt it cool, and drew her lace scarf about her head.

Presently the sounds of voices and footsteps approaching along the terrace roused her from the dreamy state into which she had fallen. She drew back into the shadow, hoping to escape notice and get a few more precious minutes of silence before