

"Oh, that! It's the same sort of thing as what you have on your shoulder—a hit I got from someone stronger than I was."

"Didn't it hurt awfully?"

"Oh, I don't know—not more than other things. There, now, go to sleep again; you have no business asking questions at this time of night."

When the carriage arrived the boy was again asleep; and the Gadfly, without awaking him, lifted him gently and carried him out on to the stairs.

"You have been a sort of ministering angel to me to-day," he said to Gemma, pausing at the door. "But I suppose that need not prevent us from quarrelling to our heart's content in future."

"I have no desire to quarrel with anyone."

"Ah! but I have. Life would be unendurable without quarrels. A good quarrel is the salt of the earth; it's better than a variety show!"

And with that he went downstairs, laughing softly to himself, with the sleeping child in his arms.

CHAPTER VII.

ONE day in the first week of January Martini, who had sent round the forms of invitation to the monthly group-meeting of the literary committee, received from the Gadfly a laconic, pencil-scrawled "Very sorry; can't come." He was a little annoyed, as a notice of "important business" had been put into the invitation; this cavalier treatment seemed to him almost insolent. Moreover, three separate letters containing bad news arrived during the day, and the wind was in the east, so that Martini felt out of sorts and out

of temper; and when, at the group meeting, Dr. Riccardo asked, "Isn't Rivarez here?" he answered rather sulkily: "No; he seems to have got something more interesting on hand, and can't come, or doesn't want to."

"Really, Martini," said Galli irritably, "you are about the most prejudiced person in Florence. Once you object to a man, everything he does is wrong. How could Rivarez come when he's ill?"

"Who told you he was ill?"

"Didn't you know? He's been laid up for the last four days."

"What's the matter with him?"

"I don't know. He had to put off an appointment with me on Thursday on account of illness; and last night, when I went round, I heard that he was too ill to see anyone. I thought Riccardo would be looking after him."

"I knew nothing about it. I'll go round to-night and see if he wants anything."

The next morning Riccardo, looking very pale and tired, came into Gemma's little study. She was sitting at the table, reading out monotonous strings of figures to Martini, who, with a magnifying glass in one hand and a finely pointed pencil in the other, was making tiny marks in the pages of a book. She made with one hand a gesture requesting silence. Riccardo, knowing that a person who is writing in cipher must not be interrupted, sat down on the sofa behind her and yawned like a man who can hardly keep awake.

"2, 4; 3, 7; 6, 1; 3, 5; 4, 1;" Gemma's voice went on with machine-like evenness. "8, 4; 7, 2; 5, 1; that finishes the sentence, Cesare."

She stuck a pin into the paper to mark the exact place, and turned round.

"Good-morning, doctor; how fagged you look! Are you well?"

"Oh, I'm well enough—only tired out. I've had an awful night with Rivarez."

"With Rivarez?"

"Yes; I've been up with him all night, and now I must go off to my hospital patients. I just came round to know whether you can think of anyone that could look after him a bit for the next few days. He's in a devil of a state. I'll do my best, of course; but I really haven't the time; and he won't hear of my sending in a nurse."

"What is the matter with him?"

"Well, rather a complication of things. First of all——"

"First of all, have you had any breakfast?"

"Yes, thank you. About Rivarez—no doubt, it's complicated with a lot of nerve trouble; but the main cause of disturbance is an old injury that seems to have been disgracefully neglected. Altogether, he's in a frightfully knocked-about state; I suppose it was that war in South America—and he certainly didn't get proper care when the mischief was done. Probably things were managed in a very rough-and-ready fashion out there; he's lucky to be alive at all. However, there's a chronic tendency to inflammation, and any trifle may bring on an attack——"

"Is that dangerous?"

"N-no; the chief danger in a case of that kind is of the patient getting desperate and taking a dose of arsenic."

"It is very painful, of course?"

"It's simply horrible; I don't know how he manages to bear it. I was obliged to stupefy him with opium in the night—a thing I hate to do

with a nervous patient; but I had to stop it somehow."

"He is nervous, I should think."

"Very, but splendidly plucky. As long as he was not actually light-headed with the pain last night, his coolness was quite wonderful. But I had an awful job with him towards the end. How long do you suppose this thing has been going on? Just five nights; and not a soul within call except that stupid landlady, who wouldn't wake if the house tumbled down, and would be no use if she did."

"But what about the ballet-girl?"

"Yes; isn't that a curious thing? He won't let her come near him. He has a morbid horror of her. Altogether, he's one of the most incomprehensible creatures I ever met—a perfect mass of contradictions."

He took out his watch and looked at it with a preoccupied face. "I shall be late at the hospital; but it can't be helped. The junior will have to begin without me for once. I wish I had known of all this before—it ought not to have been let go on that way night after night."

"But why on earth didn't he send to say he was ill?" Martini interrupted. "He might have guessed we shouldn't have left him stranded in that fashion."

"I wish, doctor," said Gemma, "that you had sent for one of us last night, instead of wearing yourself out like this."

"My dear lady, I wanted to send round to Galli; but Rivarez got so frantic at the suggestion that I didn't dare attempt it. When I asked him whether there was anyone else he would like fetched, he looked at me for a minute, as if he

were scared out of his wits, and then put up both hands to his eyes and said: 'Don't tell them; they will laugh!' He seemed quite possessed with some fancy about people laughing at something. I couldn't make out what; he kept talking Spanish; but patients do say the oddest things sometimes."

"Who is with him now?" asked Gemma.

"No one except the landlady and her maid."

"I'll go to him at once," said Martini.

"Thank you. I'll look round again in the evening. You'll find a paper of written directions in the table-drawer by the large window, and the opium is on the shelf in the next room. If the pain comes on again, give him another dose—not more than one; but don't leave the bottle where he can get at it, whatever you do; he might be tempted to take too much."

When Martini entered the darkened room, the Gadfly turned his head round quickly, and, holding out to him a burning hand, began, in a bad imitation of his usual flippant manner:

"Ah, Martini! You have come to rout me out about those proofs. It's no use swearing at me for missing the committee last night; the fact is, I have not been quite well, and——"

"Never mind the committee. I have just seen Riccardo, and have come to know if I can be of any use."

The Gadfly set his face like a flint.

"Oh, really! that is very kind of you; but it wasn't worth the trouble. I'm only a little out of sorts."

"So I understood from Riccardo. He was up with you all night, I believe."

The Gadfly bit his lip savagely.

"I am quite comfortable, thank you, and don't want anything."

"Very well; then I will sit in the other room; perhaps you would rather be alone. I will leave the door ajar, in case you call me."

"Please don't trouble about it; I really shan't want anything. I should be wasting your time for nothing."

"Nonsense, man!" Martini broke in roughly. "What's the use of trying to fool me that way? Do you think I have no eyes? Lie still and go to sleep, if you can."

He went into the adjoining room, and, leaving the door open, sat down with a book. Presently he heard the Gadfly move restlessly two or three times. He put down his book and listened. There was a short silence, then another restless movement; then the quick, heavy, panting breath of a man clenching his teeth to suppress a groan. He went back into the room.

"Can I do anything for you, Rivarez?"

There was no answer, and he crossed the room to the bed-side. The Gadfly, with a ghastly, livid face, looked at him for a moment, and silently shook his head.

"Shall I give you some more opium? Riccardo said you were to have it if the pain got very bad."

"No, thank you; I can bear it a bit longer. It may be worse later on."

Martini shrugged his shoulders and sat down beside the bed. For an interminable hour he watched in silence; then he rose and fetched the opium.

"Rivarez, I won't let this go on any longer; if you can stand it, I can't. You must have the stuff."

The Gadfly took it without speaking. Then he turned away and closed his eyes. Martini sat down again, and listened as the breathing became gradually deep and even.

The Gadfly was too much exhausted to wake easily when once asleep. Hour after hour he lay absolutely motionless. Martini approached him several times during the day and evening, and looked at the still figure; but, except the breathing, there was no sign of life. The face was so wan and colourless that at last a sudden fear seized upon him; what if he had given too much opium? The injured left arm lay on the coverlet, and he shook it gently to rouse the sleeper. As he did so, the unfastened sleeve fell back, showing a series of deep and fearful scars covering the arm from wrist to elbow.

"That arm must have been in a pleasant condition when those marks were fresh," said Riccardo's voice behind him.

"Ah, there you are at last! Look here, Riccardo; ought this man to sleep forever? I gave him a dose about ten hours ago, and he hasn't moved a muscle since."

Riccardo stooped down and listened for a moment.

"No; he is breathing quite properly; it's nothing but sheer exhaustion—what you might expect after such a night. There may be another paroxysm before morning. Someone will sit up, I hope?"

"Galli will; he has sent to say he will be here by ten."

"It's nearly that now. Ah, he's waking! Just see the maidservant gets that broth hot. Gently

—gently, Rivarez! There, there, you needn't fight, man; I'm not a bishop!"

The Gadfly started up with a shrinking, scared look. "Is it my turn?" he said hurriedly in Spanish. "Keep the people amused a minute; I—— Ah! I didn't see you, Riccardo."

He looked round the room and drew one hand across his forehead as if bewildered. "Martini! Why, I thought you had gone away. I must have been asleep."

"You have been sleeping like the beauty in the fairy story for the last ten hours; and now you are to have some broth and go to sleep again."

"Ten hours! Martini, surely you haven't been here all that time?"

"Yes; I was beginning to wonder whether I hadn't given you an overdose of opium."

The Gadfly shot a sly glance at him.

"No such luck! Wouldn't you have nice quiet committee-meetings? What the devil do you want, Riccardo? Do for mercy's sake leave me in peace, can't you? I hate being mauled about by doctors."

"Well then, drink this and I'll leave you in peace. I shall come round in a day or two, though, and give you a thorough overhauling. I think you have pulled through the worst of this business now; you don't look quite so much like a death's head at a feast."

"Oh, I shall be all right soon, thanks. Who's that—Galli? I seem to have a collection of all the graces here to-night."

"I have come to stop the night with you."

"Nonsense! I don't want anyone. Go home, all the lot of you. Even if the thing should come

on again, you can't help me; I won't keep taking opium. It's all very well once in a way."

"I'm afraid you're right," Riccardo said. "But that's not always an easy resolution to stick to."

The Gadfly looked up, smiling. "No fear! If I'd been going in for that sort of thing, I should have done it long ago."

"Anyway, you are not going to be left alone," Riccardo answered drily. "Come into the other room a minute, Galli; I want to speak to you. Good-night, Rivarez; I'll look in to-morrow."

Martini was following them out of the room when he heard his name softly called. The Gadfly was holding out a hand to him.

"Thank you!"

"Oh, stuff! Go to sleep."

When Riccardo had gone, Martini remained a few minutes in the outer room, talking with Galli. As he opened the front door of the house he heard a carriage stop at the garden gate and saw a woman's figure get out and come up the path. It was Zita, returning, evidently, from some evening entertainment. He lifted his hat and stood aside to let her pass, then went out into the dark lane leading from the house to the Poggio Imperiale. Presently the gate clicked and rapid footsteps came down the lane.

"Wait a minute!" she said.

When he turned back to meet her she stopped short, and then came slowly towards him, dragging one hand after her along the hedge. There was a single street-lamp at the corner, and he saw by its light that she was hanging her head down as though embarrassed or ashamed.

"How is he?" she asked without looking up.

"Much better than he was this morning. He has been asleep most of the day and seems less exhausted. I think the attack is passing over."

She still kept her eyes on the ground.

"Has it been very bad this time?"

"About as bad as it can well be, I should think."

"I thought so. When he won't let me come into the room, that always means it's bad."

"Does he often have attacks like this?"

"That depends—— It's so irregular. Last summer, in Switzerland, he was quite well; but the winter before, when we were in Vienna, it was awful. He wouldn't let me come near him for days together. He hates to have me about when he's ill."

She glanced up for a moment, and, dropping her eyes again, went on:

"He always used to send me off to a ball, or concert, or something, on one pretext or another, when he felt it coming on. Then he would lock himself into his room. I used to slip back and sit outside the door—he would have been furious if he'd known. He'd let the dog come in if it whined, but not me. He cares more for it, I think."

There was a curious, sullen defiance in her manner.

"Well, I hope it won't be so bad any more," said Martini kindly. "Dr. Riccardo is taking the case seriously in hand. Perhaps he will be able to make a permanent improvement. And, in any case, the treatment gives relief at the moment. But you had better send to us at once, another time. He would have suffered very much less if we had known of it earlier. Good-night!"

He held out his hand, but she drew back with a quick gesture of refusal.

"I don't see why you want to shake hands with his mistress."

"As you like, of course," he began in embarrassment.

She stamped her foot on the ground. "I hate you!" she cried, turning on him with eyes like glowing coals. "I hate you all! You come here talking politics to him; and he lets you sit up the night with him and give him things to stop the pain, and I daren't so much as peep at him through the door! What is he to you? What right have you to come and steal him away from me? I hate you! I hate you! I *hate* you!"

She burst into a violent fit of sobbing, and, darting back into the garden, slammed the gate in his face.

"Good Heavens!" said Martini to himself, as he walked down the lane. "That girl is actually in love with him! Of all the extraordinary things——"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE Gadfly's recovery was rapid. One afternoon in the following week Riccardo found him lying on the sofa in a Turkish dressing-gown, chatting with Martini and Galli. He even talked about going downstairs; but Riccardo merely laughed at the suggestion and asked whether he would like a tramp across the valley to Fiesole to start with.

"You might go and call on the Grassinis for a change," he added wickedly. "I'm sure madame

would be delighted to see you, especially now, when you look so pale and interesting."

The Gadfly clasped his hands with a tragic gesture.

"Bless my soul! I never thought of that! She'd take me for one of Italy's martyrs, and talk patriotism to me. I should have to act up to the part, and tell her I've been cut to pieces in an underground dungeon and stuck together again rather badly; and she'd want to know exactly what the process felt like. You don't think she'd believe it, Riccardo? I'll bet you my Indian dagger against the bottled tape-worm in your den that she'll swallow the biggest lie I can invent. That's a generous offer, and you'd better jump at it."

"Thanks, I'm not so fond of murderous tools as you are."

"Well, a tape-worm is as murderous as a dagger, any day, and not half so pretty."

"But as it happens, my dear fellow, I don't want the dagger and I do want the tape-worm. Martini, I must run off. Are you in charge of this obstreperous patient?"

"Only till three o'clock. Galli and I have to go to San Miniato, and Signora Bolla is coming till I can get back."

"Signora Bolla!" the Gadfly repeated in a tone of dismay. "Why, Martini, this will never do! I can't have a lady bothered over me and my ailments. Besides, where is she to sit? She won't like to come in here."

"Since when have you gone in so fiercely for the proprieties?" asked Riccardo, laughing. "My good man, Signora Bolla is head nurse in general to all of us. She has looked after sick people ever since she was in short frocks, and does it better