

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

than any sister of mercy I know. Won't like to come into your room! Why, you might be talking of the Grassini woman! I needn't leave any directions if she's coming, Martini. Heart alive, it's half-past two; I must be off!"

"Now, Rivarez, take your physic before she comes," said Galli, approaching the sofa with a medicine glass.

"Damn the physic!" The Gadfly had reached the irritable stage of convalescence, and was inclined to give his devoted nurses a bad time. "W-what do you want to d-d-dose me with all sorts of horrors for now the pain is gone?"

"Just because I don't want it to come back. You wouldn't like it if you collapsed when Signora Bolla is here and she had to give you opium."

"My g-good sir, if that pain is going to come back it will come; it's not a t-toothache to be frightened away with your trashy mixtures. They are about as much use as a t-toy squirt for a house on fire. However, I suppose you must have your way."

He took the glass with his left hand, and the sight of the terrible scars recalled Galli to the former subject of conversation.

"By the way," he asked; "how did you get so much knocked about? In the war, was it?"

"Now, didn't I just tell you it was a case of secret dungeons and——"

"Yes, that version is for Signora Grassini's benefit. Really, I suppose it was in the war with Brazil?"

"Yes, I got a bit hurt there; and then hunting in the savage districts and one thing and another."

"Ah, yes; on the scientific expedition. You

can fasten your shirt; I have quite done. You seem to have had an exciting time of it out there."

"Well, of course you can't live in savage countries without getting a few adventures once in a way," said the Gadfly lightly; "and you can hardly expect them all to be pleasant."

"Still, I don't understand how you managed to get so much knocked about unless in a bad adventure with wild beasts—those scars on your left arm, for instance."

"Ah, that was in a puma-hunt. You see, I had fired——"

There was a knock at the door.

"Is the room tidy, Martini? Yes? Then please open the door. This is really most kind, signora; you must excuse my not getting up."

"Of course you mustn't get up; I have not come as a caller. I am a little early, Cesare. I thought perhaps you were in a hurry to go."

"I can stop for a quarter of an hour. Let me put your cloak in the other room. Shall I take the basket, too?"

"Take care; those are new-laid eggs. Katie brought them in from Monte Oliveto this morning. There are some Christmas roses for you, Signor Rivarez; I know you are fond of flowers."

She sat down beside the table and began clipping the stalks of the flowers and arranging them in a vase.

"Well, Rivarez," said Galli; "tell us the rest of the puma-hunt story; you had just begun."

"Ah, yes! Galli was asking me about life in South America, signora; and I was telling him how I came to get my left arm spoiled. It was in Peru. We had been wading a river on a puma-hunt, and when I fired at the beast the powder

wouldn't go off; it had got splashed with water. Naturally the puma didn't wait for me to rectify that; and this is the result."

"That must have been a pleasant experience."

"Oh, not so bad! One must take the rough with the smooth, of course; but it's a splendid life on the whole. Serpent-catching, for instance——"

He rattled on, telling anecdote after anecdote; now of the Argentine war, now of the Brazilian expedition, now of hunting feats and adventures with savages or wild beasts. Galli, with the delight of a child hearing a fairy story, kept interrupting every moment to ask questions. He was of the impressionable Neapolitan temperament and loved everything sensational. Gemma took some knitting from her basket and listened silently, with busy fingers and downcast eyes. Martini frowned and fidgeted. The manner in which the anecdotes were told seemed to him boastful and self-conscious; and, notwithstanding his unwilling admiration for a man who could endure physical pain with the amazing fortitude which he had seen the week before, he genuinely disliked the Gadfly and all his works and ways.

"It must have been a glorious life!" sighed Galli with naïve envy. "I wonder you ever made up your mind to leave Brazil. Other countries must seem so flat after it!"

"I think I was happiest in Peru and Ecuador," said the Gadfly. "That really is a magnificent tract of country. Of course it is very hot, especially the coast district of Ecuador, and one has to rough it a bit; but the scenery is superb beyond imagination."

"I believe," said Galli, "the perfect freedom of

life in a barbarous country would attract me more than any scenery. A man must feel his personal, human dignity as he can never feel it in our crowded towns."

"Yes," the Gadfly answered; "that is——"

Gemma raised her eyes from her knitting and looked at him. He flushed suddenly scarlet and broke off. There was a little pause.

"Surely it is not come on again?" asked Galli anxiously.

"Oh, nothing to speak of, thanks to your s-s-soothing application that I b-b-blasphemed against. Are you going already, Martini?"

"Yes. Come along, Galli; we shall be late."

Gemma followed the two men out of the room, and presently returned with an egg beaten up in milk.

"Take this, please," she said with mild authority; and sat down again to her knitting. The Gadfly obeyed meekly.

For half an hour, neither spoke. Then the Gadfly said in a very low voice:

"Signora Bolla!"

She looked up. He was tearing the fringe of the couch-rug, and kept his eyes lowered.

"You didn't believe I was speaking the truth just now," he began.

"I had not the smallest doubt that you were telling falsehoods," she answered quietly.

"You were quite right. I was telling falsehoods all the time."

"Do you mean about the war?"

"About everything. I was not in that war at all; and as for the expedition, I had a few adventures, of course, and most of those stories are true, but it was not that way I got smashed. You have

detected me in one lie, so I may as well confess the lot, I suppose."

"Does it not seem to you rather a waste of energy to invent so many falsehoods?" she asked. "I should have thought it was hardly worth the trouble."

"What would you have? You know your own English proverb: 'Ask no questions and you'll be told no lies.' It's no pleasure to me to fool people that way, but I must answer them somehow when they ask what made a cripple of me; and I may as well invent something pretty while I'm about it. You saw how pleased Galli was."

"Do you prefer pleasing Galli to speaking the truth?"

"The truth!" He looked up with the torn fringe in his hand. "You wouldn't have me tell those people the truth? I'd cut my tongue out first!" Then with an awkward, shy abruptness: "I have never told it to anybody yet; but I'll tell you if you care to hear."

She silently laid down her knitting. To her there was something grievously pathetic in this hard, secret, unlovable creature, suddenly flinging his personal confidence at the feet of a woman whom he barely knew and whom he apparently disliked.

A long silence followed, and she looked up. He was leaning his left arm on the little table beside him, and shading his eyes with the mutilated hand, and she noticed the nervous tension of the fingers and the throbbing of the scar on the wrist. She came up to him and called him softly by name. He started violently and raised his head.

"I f-forgot," he stammered apologetically. "I was g-going to t-tell you about——"

"About the—accident or whatever it was that caused your lameness. But if it worries you——"

"The accident? Oh, the smashing! Yes; only it wasn't an accident, it was a poker."

She stared at him in blank amazement. He pushed back his hair with a hand that shook perceptibly, and looked up at her, smiling.

"Won't you sit down? Bring your chair close, please. I'm so sorry I can't get it for you. R-really, now I come to think of it, the case would have been a p-perfect t-treasure-trove for Riccardo if he had had me to treat; he has the true surgeon's love for broken bones, and I believe everything in me that was breakable was broken on that occasion—except my neck."

"And your courage," she put in softly. "But perhaps you count that among your unbreakable possessions."

He shook his head. "No," he said; "my courage has been mended up after a fashion, with the rest of me; but it was fairly broken then, like a smashed tea-cup; that's the horrible part of it. Ah—— Yes; well, I was telling you about the poker."

"It was—let me see—nearly thirteen years ago, in Lima. I told you Peru was a delightful country to live in; but it's not quite so nice for people that happen to be at low water, as I was. I had been down in the Argentine, and then in Chili, tramping the country and starving, mostly; and had come up from Valparaiso as odd-man on a cattle-boat. I couldn't get any work in Lima itself, so I went down to the docks,—they're at Callao, you know,—to try there. Well of course in all those shipping-ports there are low quarters where the sea-faring people congregate; and after some time

I got taken on as servant in one of the gambling hells there. I had to do the cooking and billiard-marking, and fetch drink for the sailors and their women, and all that sort of thing. Not very pleasant work; still I was glad to get it; there was at least food and the sight of human faces and sound of human tongues—of a kind. You may think that was no advantage; but I had just been down with yellow fever, alone in the outhouse of a wretched half-caste shanty, and the thing had given me the horrors. Well, one night I was told to put out a tipsy Lascar who was making himself obnoxious; he had come ashore and lost all his money and was in a bad temper. Of course I had to obey if I didn't want to lose my place and starve; but the man was twice as strong as I—I was not twenty-one and as weak as a cat after the fever. Besides, he had the poker."

He paused a moment, glancing furtively at her; then went on:

"Apparently he intended to put an end to me altogether; but somehow he managed to scamp his work—Lascars always do if they have a chance; and left just enough of me not smashed to go on living with."

"Yes, but the other people, could they not interfere? Were they all afraid of one Lascar?"

He looked up and burst out laughing.

"*The other people?* The gamblers and the people of the house? Why, you don't understand! They were negroes and Chinese and Heaven knows what; and I was their servant—their *property*. They stood round and enjoyed the fun, of course. That sort of thing counts for a good joke out there. So it is if you don't happen to be the subject practised on."

She shuddered.

"Then what was the end of it?"

"That I can't tell you much about; a man doesn't remember the next few days after a thing of that kind, as a rule. But there was a ship's surgeon near, and it seems that when they found I was not dead, somebody called him in. He patched me up after a fashion—Riccardo seems to think it was rather badly done, but that may be professional jealousy. Anyhow, when I came to my senses, an old native woman had taken me in for Christian charity—that sounds queer, doesn't it? She used to sit huddled up in the corner of the hut, smoking a black pipe and spitting on the floor and crooning to herself. However, she meant well, and she told me I might die in peace and nobody should disturb me. But the spirit of contradiction was strong in me and I elected to live. It was rather a difficult job scrambling back to life, and sometimes I am inclined to think it was a great deal of cry for very little wool. Anyway that old woman's patience was wonderful; she kept me—how long was it?—nearly four months lying in her hut, raving like a mad thing at intervals, and as vicious as a bear with a sore ear between-whiles. The pain was pretty bad, you see, and my temper had been spoiled in childhood with overmuch coddling."

"And then?"

"Oh, then—I got up somehow and crawled away. No, don't think it was any delicacy about taking a poor woman's charity—I was past caring for that; it was only that I couldn't bear the place any longer. You talked just now about my courage; if you had seen me then! The worst of the pain used to come on every evening, about dusk;