

THE WHITE SISTER*

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XXIII

IT was raining when Giovanni and Monsignor Saracinesca rang at the door of the convent. The mother superior had ordered two rush-bottomed chairs to be brought out of the hall and placed under the shelter of the cloister, just on one side of the glass door, for Sister Giovanna was to receive a visit, as she explained, from an officer who had known her father and had business with her.

Such things had happened before in the community, and the lay sister was not surprised. She carried the chairs out and set them in what she considered a proper position, about two yards apart and both facing the garden. The rain fell softly and steadily, the sky was of an even dove-gray, and the smell of the damp earth and the early spring flowers filled the cloister.

Giovanni was a soldier, and would impose his military punctuality upon the prelate, who, like most churchmen, had a clearer idea of eternity than of definite time. As the convent clock was striking, therefore, the mother superior and Sister Giovanna came down the narrow stairs, for they had been together a quarter of an hour, though they had scarcely exchanged half a dozen words. They walked slowly round under the vaulted cloister, the mother on the right, the nun on the left, according to the rigid custom, and they had just turned the last corner and were in sight of the two rush-bottomed chairs when the glass door opened.

Monsignor Saracinesca's voice was heard:

"Remember what I have said. I

trust you, and you know that the cloister is open to every one."

"Yes," Giovanni answered, as both appeared on the threshold.

They saw the two nuns already near, and made a few steps to meet them. Monsignor Saracinesca greeted the mother, who bent her head as she answered him; Giovanni stood still, his eyes fixed on Angela's face. But she looked steadily down at the flagstones, and her hands were hidden under the broad scapular of white cloth that hung straight down from under her gorget to her feet.

There are no awkward silences when churchmen or nuns meet; still less, if the meeting takes place by appointment; for each knows exactly what he or she is expected to say, and says it, deliberately and without hesitation. In less than a minute after they had met, the mother and Monsignor Saracinesca entered the hall together and shut the glass door after them. The soldier and the nun were face to face at last.

As soon as Giovanni heard the door shut he made one step forward and stretched out both his hands, thinking to take hers. She made no movement, but raised her eyes; and when he saw them, they were still and dull. Then she slowly held out her right hand, and it was cold and inert when he took it. She drew back at once and sat down; and he took the other chair, bringing it a little nearer, turning it so that he could see her.

He was cruelly disappointed, but he was the first to speak.

"I thought you were glad to know that I am alive," he said coldly, "but I see that you were only frightened the

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other day. I am sorry to have startled you."

She steadied herself before answering:

"Yes, I was startled. Your letter did not reach me till afterward."

The garden was whirling before her, as if she were being put under ether; and the little twisted columns that upheld the arches of the cloister chased one another furiously, till she thought she was going to fall from her chair. She could not hear what he said next, for a surging roar filled her ears as when the surf breaks at an angle on a long beach and sounds one deep, uninterrupted note. He was explaining why the mail steamer had not reached Italy several days before him, but she did not understand; she only knew when he ceased speaking.

"It is the inevitable—always the inevitable," she said, making a desperate effort, and yet not saying anything she wished to say.

But her tone told him how deeply she was moved, and his fiery energy broke out.

"Nothing is inevitable!" he cried. "There is nothing that cannot be undone, if I can live to undo it."

That was not what she expected, if she expected anything; but it brought back her controlling self, which had been dazed and wandering, and had left her almost helpless. She started and turned her face full to his, but drawing back in her chair.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Angela!"

The appeal of love was in his voice as he bent far forward, but she raised her hand in warning.

"No, 'Sister Giovanna,' please," she said, checking him, though gently.

He felt the slight rebuke, and remembered that the place was public to the community.

"It was not by chance that you took my name with the veil," he said, almost in a whisper. "Did you love me then?"

"I believed that you had been dead two years," answered the nun slowly.

"But did you love me still, when I was dead?"

"Yes."

She did not lower her voice, for she was not ashamed; but she looked down.

He forgot her rebuke, and called her by her old name again, that had meant 'life and hope and everything to him through years of captivity.

"Angela!" He did not heed her gesture now, nor the quick word she spoke. "Yes, I will call you Angela—you love me now—"

She checked him again, with more energy.

"Hush! If you cannot be reasonable, I shall go away."

"Reasonable!"

There was contempt in his tone, but he sat upright again and said no more.

"Listen to me," said Sister Giovanna, finding some strength in the small advantage she had just gained. "I have not let you come here in order to torment you or cheat you, and I mean to tell you the truth. You have a right to know it; and I still have the right to tell it, because there is nothing in it of which I am ashamed. Will you hear me quietly, whatever I say?"

"Yes, I will. But I cannot promise not to answer when you have done."

"There is no answer to what I am going to say. It is to be final."

"We shall see," said Giovanni gravely, though with no conviction.

But the nun was satisfied, for he was clearly willing to listen. The meeting had disturbed her peace even more than she had expected; but she had done her best during several days to prepare herself for it, and had found strength to decide what she must say, and to repeat it over and over again till she knew it by heart.

"You were reported to be dead," she began—"killed with the rest of them. You had your share in the great military funeral; and I, and all the world, believed that you were buried with your comrades. Your name is engraved with theirs upon their tomb, in the roll of honor, as that of a man who perished in his country's service. I went there with Mme. Bernard before I began my novitiate; and I went again, for the last time, before I took the veil. I had loved you living, and I loved you dead."

Giovanni moved as if he were going to speak, but she would not let him.

"No, hear me!" she cried anxiously. "I offered God my life and my strength

for your sake; and if I have done any good here in five years, as novice and nun, it has been in the hope that it might be accepted for you, if your soul needed it. Though you may not believe in such things, do you at least understand me?"

"Indeed I do, and I am grateful—most grateful."

She was a little disappointed by his tone, for he spoke with an evident effort.

"It was gladly given," she said. "But now you have come back to life—"

She hesitated. With all her courage and strength, she could not quite control her memory, and the words she had prepared so carefully were suddenly confused. Giovanni completed the sentence for her in his own way.

"I have come to life to find you dead for me, as I have been dead for you. Is that what you were going to say?"

She was still hesitating.

"Was it that?" he insisted.

"No," she answered at last. "Not dead for you—alive for you."

He would have caught at a straw, and the joy came into his face as he quickly held out his hand to her; but she would not take it—hers were both hidden under her white cloth scapular, and she shrank from him. The light went out of his eyes.

"I might have known," he said deeply disappointed. "You do not mean it. I suppose you will explain that you are alive to pray for me."

"You promised to listen quietly, whatever I might say."

"Yes." He controlled himself. "I will," he added, after a moment. "Go on."

"I am not changed," said Sister Giovanna, "but my life is. That is what I meant by the inevitable. No person can undo what I have done." Giovanni moved impatiently. "No power can loose me from my vows."

In spite of himself, the man's temper broke out.

"You are mad," he answered roughly, "or else you do not know that you can be free."

"Hush!" cried the nun, trying once more to check him. "Your promise—remember it."

"I break it! I will not listen meekly to such folly. Before you took the vow,

you had given me your word—as I gave you mine—that we would be man and wife; and, since I am not dead, no promise or oath made after that is binding. I know that you love me still, as you did then; and if you will not try to free yourself, then by all you believe, and by all I honor, I will set you free."

It was a challenge, if it was not a threat, and Sister Giovanna defended herself as she could. But she was painfully conscious that something in her responded with a thrill to the cry of the pursuer. Nevertheless, she answered with a firm refusal.

"You cannot make me do what I will not," she said.

"I can and I will," he retorted vehemently. "It is monstrous that you should be bound by a promise, made in ignorance, under a wretched mistake, on a false report that I was dead."

"We were not even formally betrothed—"

"We loved each other," interrupted Giovanni, "and we had told each other so. That is enough. We belong to each other just as truly as if we were man and wife—"

"Even if we were," said the nun, interrupting him in her turn, "if I had taken my vows in the belief that my husband had been dead for years, I would not ask to be released."

He stared at her, his temper suddenly chilled in amazement.

"But if it were a mistake," he objected, "if the Pope offered you a dispensation, would you refuse it?"

Sister Giovanna was prepared, for she had thought of that.

"If you had given a man your word of honor to pay a debt you owed him, would you break your promise if you suddenly found that you could use the money in another way, which would give you the keenest pleasure?"

"That is quite different. How can you ask such an absurd question?"

"It is not absurd, and the case is not so different as you think. I have given my word to God in heaven, and I must pay my debt."

Giovanni was indignant again, and rebelled.

"You used to tell me that your God was just!"

"And I have heard you say that your only god was honor!" retorted the nun.

"Yes!" he answered hotly. "It is! Honor teaches that the first promise given must be fulfilled before all others!"

"I have been taught that vows made to God must not be broken."

She rose, as if the speech were final. Though they had been talking only a few minutes, she already felt that she could not bear much more.

"Surely you are not going already!" he cried, starting to his feet.

Sister Giovanna turned so that she was face to face with him.

"What is there left to say?" she asked with a great effort.

"Everything! I told you that I would answer when you had finished, and now that you have nothing left to say, you must hear me! You said you would—"

"I said that there could be no answer." Nevertheless she waited, motionless.

"But there is! The answer is that I will free you from the slavery to which you have sold your soul! The answer is, I love you, and it is yourself I love, the woman you are now, not the memory of your shadow from long ago, but you, you, your very self!"

Half out of his mind, he tried to seize her by the arm, to draw her to him; but he only caught her sleeve, and dropped it as she sprang back with a lightness and maiden grace that almost drove him mad. She drew herself up, offended and hurt.

"Remember what I am, and where you are!"

Giovanni's manner changed so suddenly that she would have been suspicious, if she had not been too much disturbed to reason. She fancied that she still controlled him.

"You are right," he said; "I beg your pardon. Only tell me when I may see you again."

"Not for a long time—not till you can give me your word that you will control yourself. Till then, we must say good-by."

He was so quiet, all at once, that it was easier to say the word than she had expected.

"No," he answered, "not good-by, for even if you will not see me, I shall be near you."

"Near? Where?"

"I am living in my brother's rooms at the powder-magazine. I am in charge till he gets well. On the day I arrived I asked the minister himself for permission to take Ugo's place."

"You have taken his place!" She could not keep her anxiety out of her voice.

"Yes, and I hope to get a shot at the fellow who wounded Ugo. But the post suits me, for the upper part of this house is in sight of my windows. If you look out toward the river, you can see where I live."

He spoke so gently that she lingered instead of leaving him at once, as she had meant to do.

"And besides," he went on in the same tone, "I shall come here every day until my brother can go home. I may meet you at any moment, in going to his room. You will not refuse to speak to me, will you?"

He smiled. He seemed quite changed within a few moments. But she shook her head.

"You will not see me here again," she answered, "for my week's turn as supervising nurse will be over this evening, and I am going to nurse a private case."

"To-night?" Giovanni asked with a little surprise.

"Yes, to-night."

"Do you mean to say that you do not even have a day's rest after being on duty a whole week? What a life! But they must at least give you a few hours, surely! What time do you go off duty, and at what time do you go to your new patient? I suppose they send for you?"

"Yes, at about eight o'clock. That is the usual time, but I never know long beforehand. Arrangements of that sort are all made by the mother superior."

It did not seem unnatural that he should ask questions about her occupation, now that he was calmer, nor could she think it wrong to answer them. Any one might have listened to what they were saying.

"I dare say you do not even know

where you are going this evening?" Giovanni said.

She thought that he was talking only to keep her with him a little longer. Overstrained as she had been, it was a relief to exchange a few words quietly before parting from him.

"It is true," she answered after a moment's thought. "I dare say the mother superior mentioned the name of the family, but if she did I have forgotten it. I shall get my instructions before I leave the house, as usual. I only know that it is a new case."

"Yes," Giovanni said as if it did not interest him further. "All the same, it is a shame that you should be made to work so hard! Before I go, tell me that you have forgiven me for losing my head just now. I think you have, but I want to hear you say so. Will you?"

It seemed little enough to forgive. Sister Giovanna felt so much relieved by his change of manner that she was even able to smile faintly. If he would always be as gentle, she could ask leave to see him again perhaps in six months. Now that the storm was over, it was a pure and innocent happiness to be with him.

"You will not do it again, I am quite sure," she said simply. "Of course I forgive you."

"Thank you. It is all I can expect, since you have told me that I was asking the impossible. You see Mme. Bernard sometimes, do you not?"

"Yes. Almost every week."

"She will give me news of you. I suppose I must not send you a message by her. That would be against the rules!"

"The message might be!" Sister Giovanna actually smiled again. "But if it is not, there is no reason why she should not bring me a greeting from you."

"But not a letter?"

"No. I would not take it from her. It would have to be given to the mother superior. If she were willing to receive it at all, it would be her duty to read it, and she would judge whether it should be given to me or not."

"Is that the rule?" Giovanni asked, more indifferently than she had expected.

"Yes. It is the rule in our order. If

it were not, who could prevent any one from writing to a nun?"

"I was not finding fault with it. I must not keep you standing here any longer. If you will not sit down and talk a little more, I had better be going."

"Yes. You have been here long enough, I think."

He did not press her. He was so submissive that if he had begged permission to stay a few minutes more she would have consented, and she wished he would, when she saw him holding out his hand to say good-by; but she was too well pleased at having dominated his wild temper to make a suggestion which might betray weakness in herself.

She took his hand, and was a little surprised to find it as cold as hers had been when he came; but his face was not pale—she forgot that five years of Africa had bronzed it too much for paleness—and he was very quiet and collected. She went to the door of the hall with him, and opened it before he could do so for himself.

They parted almost like mere acquaintances, he bowing on the step, she bending her head. The mother superior and Monsignor Saracinesca had been sitting by the table, talking, but both had risen and come forward as soon as the pair appeared outside the glass door. It all passed off very satisfactorily, and the mother superior gave a little sigh of relief when the churchman and the soldier went away together, leaving her and Sister Giovanna standing in the hall. She felt that Monsignor Saracinesca had been right, after all, in approving the meeting, and that she had been mistaken in thinking that it must endanger the nun's peace.

She said nothing, but she was quietly pleased, and a rare, sweet smile softened her marble features. She asked no questions about what had passed, being quite sure that all was well, and that if there had ever been anything to fear, it was gone.

XXIV

THE prelate and Giovanni walked along the quiet street in silence for some distance; then Severi stopped suddenly, as many Italians do when they are going to say something important.

"You will help me, I am sure," he said, speaking impetuously from the first. "Though I never knew you well in old times, I always felt that you were friendly. You will not allow her to ruin both our lives, will you?"

"What sort of help do you want from me?" asked the tall churchman, bending his eyes to the energetic young face.

"The simplest thing in the world!" Giovanni answered. "We were engaged to be married when I left with that ill-fated expedition. She thought me dead. She must be released from her vows at once! That is all."

"It is out of the question," answered Monsignor Saracinesca with supernal calm.

"Out of the question?" Giovanni frowned angrily. "Do you mean that it cannot be done? But it is only common justice! She is as much my wife as if you had married us and I had left her at the altar to go to Africa! You cannot be in earnest!"

"I am. In the first place, there is no ground for granting a dispensation."

"No ground?" cried Severi indignantly. "We loved each other, we meant to marry! Is that no reason?"

"No. You were not even formally betrothed, either before your parish priest or the mayor. Without a solemn promise in the proper form and before witnesses, there is no binding engagement to marry. That is not only canonical law, but Italian common law, too."

"We had told each other," Giovanni objected. "That was enough."

"You are wrong," answered Monsignor Saracinesca gently. "The church will do nothing that the law would not do, and the law would not release Sister Giovanna, or any one else, from a legal obligation taken under the same circumstances as the religious one she has assumed."

"What do you mean?"

"This. If, instead of becoming a nun, Angela had married another man after you were lost, Italian law would not annul the marriage in order that she might become your wife."

"Of course not!"

"Then why should the church annul an obligation which is quite as solemn as marriage?"

Giovanni thought he had caught the churchman in a fallacy.

"I beg your pardon," he replied. "I was taught as a boy that marriage is a sacrament, but I never heard that taking the veil was one!"

"Quite right, in principle. In reality, it is considered, for women, the equivalent of ordination, and, therefore, as being of the nature of a sacrament."

"I am not a theologian, to discuss equivalents," retorted Giovanni roughly.

"Very true, but a man who knows nothing of mathematics may safely accept the statement of a mathematician about a simple problem. That is not the point, however. If you remember, I said that 'under the same circumstances' the church would not do what the law would not. The church considers a nun's final vows to be as binding under its regulations as the law considers that any civil contract is. The 'circumstances' are therefore exactly similar."

Giovanni was no match for his cool antagonist in an argument. He cut the discussion short by a direct question.

"Is it in the Pope's power to release Sister Giovanna from her vows, or not?"

"Yes. It is—in principle."

"Then put your principles into practice and make him do it?" cried the soldier rudely.

Monsignor Saracinesca was unmoved by this attack, which he answered with calm dignity.

"My dear captain," he said, "in the first place, no one can 'make' the Pope do things. That is not a respectful way of speaking."

Giovanni was naturally courteous, and he felt that he had gone too far.

"I beg your pardon," he answered. "I mean no disrespect to the Pope, though I tell you frankly that I do not believe in much, and not at all in his authority. What I ask is common justice and your help as a friend. I ask you to go to him and lay the case before him fairly, as before a just man, which I heartily believe him to be. You will see that he will do what you admit is in his power and give Sister Giovanna her dispensation."

"If you and she had been married before your disappearance," argued the churchman, "his holiness would assur-

edly not refuse. If you had been solemnly betrothed before your parish priest as well as legally promised in marriage at the Capitol, he might make an exception, though a civil betrothal is valid only for six months, under Italian law. But there was no marriage and no such engagement."

Giovanni found himself led into argument again.

"We had intended to bind ourselves formally," he objected. "I have heard it said by priests that everything depends on the intention, and that without it the most solemn sacrament is an empty show. Will you doubt our intention if I give you my word that it was mine, and if Sister Giovanna assures you that it was hers?"

"Certainly not! The Pope would not doubt you either, I am sure."

"Then, in the name of all that is just and right, what is the obstacle? If you admit that the intention is the one important point, and that it existed, what ground have you left?"

"That is begging the question, captain. It is true that without the intention a sacrament is an empty show, but the intention without the sacrament is of no more value than intention without performance would be in law. Less, perhaps. There is another point, however, which you have quite overlooked. If a request for a dispensation were even to be considered, it would have to come from Sister Giovanna herself."

"And you will never allow her to ask for her freedom?" cried Giovanni angrily. "That settles it, I suppose! Oh, the tyranny of the church!"

Monsignor Saracinesca's calm was not in the least disturbed by this outbreak, and he answered with unruffled dignity.

"That is easily said, captain. You have just been speaking with Sister Giovanna, and I dare say you talked of this. What was her answer?"

"She is under the influence of her surroundings, of course. What could I expect?"

But the churchman had a right to a more direct reply.

"Did she refuse to listen to your suggestion that she should leave her order?" he asked.

Giovanni did not like to admit the

fact, and paused a moment before answering; but he was too truthful to quibble.

"Yes, she did."

"What reason did she give for refusing?"

"None."

"Did she merely say, 'No, I will not'?"

"You are cross-examining me?" Giovanni fancied that he had a right to be offended.

"No," protested Monsignor Saracinesca; "or at least not with the intention of catching you in your own words. You made an unfair assertion; I have a right to ask a fair question. If I were not a priest, but simply Ippolito Saracinesca, and if you accused me or my family of unjust dealings, you would be glad to give me an opportunity of defending my position, as man to man. But because I am a priest, you deny me that right. Are you just?"

"I did not accuse you personally," argued the younger man. "I meant that the church would never allow Sister Giovanna to ask for her freedom."

"The greater includes the less," replied the other. "The church is my family, it includes myself, and I claim the right to defend it against an unjust accusation. Sister Giovanna is as free to ask for a dispensation as you were to resign from the army when you were ordered to join an expedition in which you nearly lost your life."

"You say so?" Severi was incredulous.

"It is the truth. Sister Giovanna has devoted herself to a cause in which she, too, may risk her life."

"The risk a nurse runs nowadays is not great."

"You are mistaken. If she carries out her intention, she will be exposed to a great danger."

"What intention?" asked Giovanni, instantly filled with anxiety.

"She has asked permission to join two other sisters of the order who are going out to Rangoon to nurse the lepers there."

"To nurse lepers!" Severi's features were convulsed with horror. "She, nurse lepers! It is not possible. It is certain death!"

"No, it is not certain death, by any means, but you will admit the risk."

Giovanni was beside himself in an instant.

"She shall not go!" he cried furiously. "You shall not make her kill herself, make her commit suicide, for your glorification—that what you call your church may add another martyr to its death-roll! You shall not, I say! Do you hear me?" He grasped the prelate's arm roughly. "If you must have martyrs, go yourselves. Risk your own lives for your own glory, instead of sacrificing women on your altars—women who should live to be wives and mothers, an honor to mankind."

"You are utterly unjust—"

"No, I am human, and I will not tolerate your human sacrifice. I am a man, and I will not let the woman I love be sent to a horrible death, to delight your Moloch of a God!"

"Captain Severi, you are raving."

Giovanni's fiery rage leapt from invective to sarcasm.

"Raving! That is your answer, that is the sum of your churchman's argument. A man who will not let you make a martyr of the woman he adores is raving. Do you find that in St. Thomas Aquinas, or in St. Augustine, or in St. Jerome?" He dropped his voice and suddenly spoke with cold deliberation: "She shall not go. I swear that I will make it impossible."

Monsignor Saracinesca shook his head.

"If that is an oath," he said, "it is a foolish one. If it is a threat, it is unworthy of you."

"Take it how you will. It is my last word."

"May you never regret it," answered the prelate, lifting his three-cornered hat; for Giovanni was saluting, with the evident intention of leaving him at once.

So they parted.

XXV

THE carriage came early for Sister Giovanna that evening, and the footman sent in a message by the portress. The patient was worse, he said, and the doctor hoped that the nurse would come as soon as she conveniently could.

She came down in less than five minutes, in her wide black cloak, carrying

her little black bag in her hand. It was raining heavily, and she drew the hood up over her head before she left the threshold, though the servant was holding up a large umbrella.

The portress had asked the usual questions of him as soon as he presented himself, but Sister Giovanna repeated them. Was the carriage from the Villino Barini? It was. To take the nurse who was wanted for Baroness Barini? Yes; the *signora baronessa* was worse, and that was why the carriage had come half an hour earlier.

The door of the brougham was shut with a sharp snap, the footman sprang to the box with more than an average flunky's agility, and the nun was driven rapidly away. Knowing that the house she was going to was one of those little modern villas on the slope of the Janiculum which have no arched entrance, and often have no particular shelter at the front door, she did not take the trouble to push her hood back, as she would need it again so soon.

In about ten minutes the carriage stopped, the footman jumped down with his open umbrella in his hand, and let her into the house. Before she could ask whether she had better leave her cloak in the hall, the man was leading the way up-stairs. It was rather dark, but she felt that the carpet under her feet was thick and soft.

She followed lightly, and a moment later she was admitted to a well-lighted room that looked like a man's library. The footman disappeared and shut the door, and the latch made a noise as if the key were being turned. As she supposed such a thing to be out of the question, however, she was ashamed to go and try the lock.

She thought she was in the study of the master of the house, and that some one would come for her at once, and she stood still in the middle of the room. Setting down her bag on a chair, she pushed the hood back from her head carefully, as nuns do, in order not to discompose the rather complicated arrangement of the veil and head-band.

She had scarcely done this when, as she expected, a door at the end of the room was opened. But it was not a stranger that entered; to her unspeakable

amazement, it was Giovanni Severi. In a flash she understood that by some trick she had been brought to his brother's dwelling. She was alone with him, and the door was locked on the outside.

She laid one hand on the back of the nearest chair, to steady herself, wondering whether she were not really lying ill in her bed and dreaming in the delirium of a fever. But it was no dream; he was standing before her, looking into her face, and his own was stern and dark as an Arab's. When he spoke at last his voice was low and determined:

"Yes. You are in my power."

Her tongue was loosed, with a cry of indignation.

"If you are not a madman, let me go!"

"I am not mad."

His eyes terrified her, and she backed away from him toward the locked door. She almost shrieked for fear.

"If you have a spark of human feeling, let me out."

"I am human," he answered grimly, but he did not move to follow her.

"By whatever you hold sacred, let me go!" She was wrenching at the lock in despair with both hands, but sideways, while she kept her eyes on his.

"I hold you sacred—nothing else."

"Sacred!" Her anger began to out-brave her terror now. "Sacred, and you have trapped me by a vile trick!"

"Yes," he answered. "I admit that."

He had not moved again, and there was a window near her. She sprang to it and thrust the curtains aside, hoping to open the frame before he could stop her. But though she moved the fastenings easily, she could do no more, with all her strength, and Giovanni still stood motionless, watching her.

"You cannot open that window," he said quietly. "If you scream, no one will hear you. Do you think I would have brought you to a place where you could get help merely by crying out for it? The risk was too great. I have made sure of being alone with you as long as I choose."

The nun drew herself up against the red curtains.

"I did not know that you were a coward," she said.

"I am what you have made me—

brave, cowardly, desperate—anything you choose to call it. But such as I am, you must hear me to the end this time, for you have no choice."

Sister Giovanna understood that there was no escape, and she stood quite still; but he saw that her lips moved a little.

"God is not here," he said, in a hard voice, for he knew that she was praying.

"God is here," she answered, crossing her hands on her breast.

He came a step nearer and leaned on the back of a chair. He was evidently controlling himself, for his movements were studiously deliberate, though his voice was beginning to shake ominously.

"If God is with you, Angela, then He shall hear that I love you and that you are mine, not His! He shall listen while I tell you that I will not give you up to be murdered by priests for His glory! Do what He will, He shall not have you. I defy Him!"

The nun shrank against the curtain, not from the man, but at the words.

"At least, do not blaspheme!"

"I must, if it is blasphemy to love you!"

"Yours is not love. Would to Heaven it were, as I thought it was to-day. Love is gentle, generous, tender—"

"Then be all three to me; for you love me, in spite of everything!"

"You have taught me to forget that I ever did," she answered.

"Learn to remember that you did, to realize that you do, and forget only that I have used a trick to bring you here—a harmless trick, one carriage for another, my brother's orderly for a servant. I found out from Mme. Bernard where you were going, and I sent for you before the hour. You are as safe here as if you were praying in your chapel; in a few minutes the carriage will take you back, you will say you got into the wrong one by mistake, which is quite true, and the right one will take you where you are to go; you will be scarcely half an hour late, and no one will ever know anything more about it."

Sister Giovanna had listened patiently to his explanation, and believed what he said. He had always been impulsive to rashness, but now that her first surprise had subsided she was less afraid. He had evidently yielded to a strong tempta-

tion with the idea of forcing her to listen to him. She could not believe that he would hurt her or bring any disgrace upon her.

"If you are in earnest," she said, when he had finished, "then let me go at once."

"Presently," he answered. "This afternoon you made me promise to hear quietly what you had to say, and I did my best. I could not help your being frightened just now, I suppose—after all, I have carried you off from the door of your convent, and I meant you to understand that you were helpless, and must listen. I ought to have put it differently, but I am not clever at such things. All I ask is that you will hear me. After all, that is what you asked of me to-day."

He had begun to walk up and down before her, while he was speaking; but he did not come near her, for the chair stood between her and the line along which he was pacing backward and forward. Something in his way of speaking reassured her, as he jerked out the rather disconnected sentences.

Women often make the mistake of thinking that when we men begin to stumble away from the straight chalk-line of that logic in which we are supposed by them to take such pride, our purpose is wavering, whereas the opposite is often the case. Men capable of sudden, direct, and strong action are often poor talkers, particularly when they are just going to spring or strike. A little hesitation is more often the sign of a near outbreak than of any inward weakening. But Sister Giovanna was deceived.

"I shall be forced to listen, if you insist," she said, moving half a step forward from the curtain; "but how can I trust you, while I am your prisoner?"

"You can trust me, if you will be generous," Giovanni answered.

"I do not know what you mean by the word," replied the nun cautiously. "If I am not generous, as you mean it, what then?"

Severi stopped in his walk; his face began to darken again, and his voice was rough and hard.

"What then? Why, then, remember what I am and where you are!"

Sister Giovanna drew back again.

"I would rather trust in God than

trust you when you speak in that tone," she said.

He had used the very words she had spoken in the cloister when he had tried to take her by the arm, but they had a very different meaning now; his dangerous temper was rising again, and he was threatening her. Yet her answer produced an effect she was far from expecting. He turned to the writing-table near him, opened one of the drawers, and took out an army revolver.

Sister Giovanna watched him. If he was only going to kill her she was not afraid.

"I will force you to trust me," he said, quickly examining the charge as he came toward her.

"By threatening me with that thing?" she asked with contempt. "You are mistaken!"

He was close to her, but he offered her the butt-end of the weapon.

"No," he said, "I am not mistaken. It is I who fear death, as long as you are alive, and here it is, in your hand." But she would not take the revolver from him. "You will not take it? Well, there it is." He laid it on the chair, which he placed beside her. "If I come too near you, or try to touch even your sleeve, you can use it. The law will acquit you, and even praise you for defending yourself in need."

"There must be no need," she answered, looking at him fixedly. "Say quickly what you have to say."

"Will you not sit down, then?"

"No, thank you. I would rather not."

It would have seemed like consenting to be where she was; and, besides, the revolver lay on the nearest available chair, and she would not touch it, much less hold it in her hand if she sat down to listen. Giovanni leaned back against the heavy table at some distance from her, resting his hands on the edge, one on each side of him.

"After I left you to-day," he began, "I had a long talk with Monsignor Saracinesca in the street. I asked him questions about obtaining a dispensation for you! He made it look impossible, of course—that was to be expected! But I got one point from him, which is important. He made it quite clear to me that the request to be released from your

vows must come from you, if it is to be considered at all. You understand that, do you not?"

"Is it possible that you yourself do not yet understand?" Sister Giovanna asked, as quietly as she could. "Did I not tell you to-day that no power could loose me from my vows?"

"You were mistaken. There is a power that can; and that rests with the Pope, and he shall exercise it."

"I will not ask for a dispensation. I have told you that it is an impossibility—"

"There is no such thing as impossibility for men and women who love," Giovanni answered. "Have you forgotten the last words you said to me before I sailed for Africa?" He spoke gently now, and Sister Giovanna turned her face from him. "You said, 'I will wait for you forever.' Do you remember?"

"Yes. I remember."

"Did you 'wait forever,' Angela?"

She looked at him again; and then came forward a little, drawn by an impulse she could not resist.

"Did I love another man, that you reproach me?" she asked. "Such as my life has been, have I lived it as a woman lives who has forgotten? I know I have not. Yes, Giovanni, I have waited, but as one waits who hopes to meet in heaven the dear one who is dead on earth. Do you still find fault with me? Would you rather have had me go back to the world and to society after mourning you as long as a girl of nineteen could mourn for a man to whom she had not been openly engaged? Was I wrong? If you had really been dead, and could have seen me, would you have wished that I were living differently?"

For a moment he was moved. He held out one hand toward her, hoping that she would come nearer.

"No," he answered; "no, dear—"

"But that was the only question," she said earnestly, "and you have answered it."

She would not take his hand, and Giovanni dropped his own with a gesture of disappointment.

"No," he replied in a colder tone, "it is not the question, for you have not told me all the truth. If I had not been

gone five years, if I had come back the day before you took the last vows, would you have taken them?"

"No, indeed."

"If I had come the very next day after, would you not have done your best to be set free?"

There was an instant's pause before she spoke; then the answer came, clear and distinct:

"No."

Severi turned from her with an impatient movement of his compact head, and tapped the carpeted floor with his heel. His answer broke from his lips harshly:

"You never loved me!"

She would have done wisely if she had been silent then; but she could not, for his words denied the truth that had ruled her life.

"Better than I knew," she said.

"Better than I knew, even then."

"Even then?" The words had hope in them. "And now?" He was suddenly breathless.

"Yes, even now!" The tide of truth lifted her from her feet and swept her onward, helpless. "Giovanni! Giovanni! Do you think it costs me nothing to keep my word with God?"

But he had been disappointed too often now, and he could not believe at once.

"It costs you less than it would to keep your faith with me," he answered.

"It is not true! Indeed, it is not true!"

"Then let the truth win, dear. All the rest is fable."

He was at her side now. She had tried to resist; but not long, and her hand was in his, though her face was turned away.

"No—no—" she faltered, but he would not let her speak.

"All a fable of sorrow and a dream of parting, sweetheart. And now we have waked to meet again, your hand in my hand, my heart to your heart—your lips to mine—"

She almost shrieked aloud in terror, then; and threw herself back bodily, as from the edge of a precipice. She might have fallen if he had not still held her hand, and as she recovered herself she tried to withdraw it. In her distress,

words came that she regretted to her dying day.

"Do you think that only you are human of us two?" she cried in passionate protest against passion itself—against him, against life—but still twisting her wrist in his grip and trying to wrench it away. "For the love of Heaven, Giovanni—"

"No—for love of me—"

She broke from him, for when he felt that he was hurting her his fingers relaxed. But she could not stay her own words.

"Yes, I love you," she cried, almost fiercely, as she stepped backward. "Right or wrong, I cannot unmake myself; and as for lying to you, I will not. God is my witness that I mean to love you living as I have loved you dead, without one thought of earth or one regret for what might have been. But, oh, may God forgive me, too, if I wish that we were side by side in one grave, at peace forever!"

"Dead! Why? With life before us—"

"No!" She interrupted him with rising energy. "No, Giovanni, no! I was weak for a moment, but I am strong again. I can wait for you, and you will find strength to wait for me. You are so brave, Giovanni; you can be so generous when you will. You will wait, too."

"For what?"

"For the end that will be the beginning, for God's great To-morrow, when you will come to be with me forever and ever, beyond the world, and all parting and all pain!"

There was a deep appeal to higher things in her words, and in her voice, too; but it did not touch him. He only knew that at the very moment when she had seemed to be so near to yielding, the terrible conviction of her soul had come once more between himself and her.

"There is no beyond," he answered, chilled and sullen again. "You live in a lying beyond; your life is a fable, and your sacrifice is a crime."

The cruel words struck her tormented heart as icy hailstones bruise the half-clad body of a starving child out in the storm.

"You hurt me very much," she said in a low voice.

"Forgive me!" he cried quickly. "I did not mean to. I forget that you believe your dreams, for I cannot live in visions as you do. I only see a blind force, striking in the dark, a great injustice done to us both—a wrong I will undo, come what may."

"You know my answer to that. You can undo nothing."

"I am not answered yet. You say you love me—prove it!"

"Only my life can," said the nun. "Only our two lives can prove our love, for we can live for each other still, perhaps we shall be allowed to die for each other, and in each other shall find strength to resist—"

"Not to resist love itself, Angela."

"No, not to resist all that is good and true in love."

"I cannot see what you see," he answered. "Nothing human is beyond my comprehension, good or bad, but you cannot make a monk of me, still less a saint—a St. Louis of Gonzaga, who was too modest to look his own mother in the face."

He laughed roughly, but checked himself at once, fearing to hurt her again.

She turned to him with a look of gentle authority.

"In spite of what you have done to-night," she said, "you are such a manly man, that you can be the man you will. Listen! If another woman tried to get your love, could you resist her? Would you, for love of me?"

"She would have small chance. You know that well enough."

"There is another woman in me, Giovanni. Resist her."

"I do not understand."

"You must try. There is another woman in me, or what is left of her, and she is quite different from my real self. Resist her for my sake, as I am fighting her with all my strength. It was she who tempted you to bring me here by a trick of which you are ashamed already; it was she that made me weak, just now; but she is not the woman you love, she is not Angela, she is not worthy of you; and as for me, I hate her, with all my soul!"

Severi had said truly that he could not

understand, and instead of responding to her appeal, he turned impatient again.

"You choose your words well enough," he answered, "but women's fine speeches persuade women, not men. No man was ever really moved to change his mind by a woman's eloquence, though we will risk our lives for a look of yours, for a touch—for a kiss!"

XXVI

SISTER GIOVANNA sighed and turned from him. The razor-edge of extremest peril was passed, for the words that left him cold and unbelieving had brought back conviction to her soul. She could live for him, pray for him, die for him, but she would not sin for him nor lift a hand to loose the vows that bound her to the religious life.

Yet she did not see that she was slowly driving him to a state of temper in which he might break all barriers. Very good women rarely understand men well until it is too late, because men very rarely make any appeal to what is good in woman, whereas they lie in wait for all her weaknesses. It is almost a proverbial truth that men of the most lawless nature—are often loved by saintly women, perhaps because the true saint sees some good in every one and believes that those who have least of it are the ones who need help most.

Sister Giovanna was not a saint yet, but she was winning her way as she gained ground in the struggle that had been forced upon her that night so cruelly against her will; and having got the better of a temptation, her charity made her think that Giovanni Severi was farther from it than he was. Outward danger was near at hand, just when inward peril was passed.

As if he were weary of the contest of words, he left the writing-table, sat down in a big chair farther away, and stared at the pattern in the carpet.

"You are forcing me to extremities," he said, after a long pause, and rather slowly. "Unless you consent to appeal to the Pope for your freedom, I will not let you leave this house. You are in my power here, and here you shall stay."

She was more surprised and offended than indignant at what she took for an

empty threat, and she was not at all frightened. Women never are, when one expects them to be. She drew her long cloak round her with simple dignity, crossed the room without haste, and stopped before the locked door, turning her head to speak to him.

"It is time for me to go," she said gravely. "Open the door at once, please."

She could not believe that he would refuse to obey her, but he did not move; he did not even look up, as he answered:

"If I keep you a prisoner, there will be a search for you. You may stay here a day, a week, or a month, but in the end you will be found here, in my rooms."

"And set free," the nun answered, from the door, with some contempt.

"Not as you think. You will be expelled from your order for scandalous behavior in having spent a night, or a week, or a month in an officer's lodging. What will you do then?"

"If such a thing were possible, I would tell the truth, and I should be believed." But her anger was already awake.

"The thing is very possible," Giovanni answered, "and no one will believe you. It will be out of the question for you to go back to your convent, even for an hour. Even if the mother superior were willing, it could not be done. In the Middle Ages you would have been sent to a prison for penitents for the rest of your life; nowadays you will simply be turned out of your order with public disgrace, the papers will be full of your story, your aunt will make Rome ring with it—"

"What do you mean by all this?" cried the sister, breaking out at last. "Are you trying to frighten me?"

"No. I wish you to know that I will let nothing stand between you and me—nothing, absolutely nothing." He repeated the word with cold energy. "When it is known that you have been here for twenty-four hours, you will be forced to marry me. Nothing else can save you from infamy. Even Mme. Bernard will not dare to give you shelter, for she will lose every pupil she has if it is found out that she is harboring a nun who has broken her vows, a vulgar bad character who has been caught in an officer's lodgings! That is what they will call you!"

At first she had not believed that he was in earnest, but she could not long mistake the tone of a man determined to risk much more than life and limb for his desperate purpose. Her just anger leaped up like a flame.

"Are you an utter scoundrel, after all? Have you no honor left? Is there nothing in you to which a woman can appeal? You talk of being human! You prate of your man's nature! And in the same breath you threaten an innocent girl with public infamy if she will not disgrace herself of her own free will! Is that your love? Did I give you mine for that? Shame on you! And shame on me for being so deceived!"

Her voice rang like steel and the thrusts of her deadly reproach pierced deep. He was on his feet, in the impulse of self-defense, before she had half done, trying to silence her—he was at her side, calling her by her name, but she would not hear him.

"No; I believed in you!" she went on. "I trusted you! I loved you—but I have loved a villain and believed a liar, and I am a prisoner under a coward's roof!" Beseeching, he tried to lay his hand upon her sleeve; she mistook his meaning. "Take care!" she cried, and suddenly the revolver was in her hand. "Take care, I say! A nun is only a woman, after all!"

He threw himself in front of her in an instant, his arms wide out, and as the muzzle came close against his chest, he gave the familiar word of command in a loud, clear tone:

"Fire!"

Their eyes met, and they were both mad.

"If you despise me for loving you beyond honor and disgrace, then fire; for I would rather die by your hand than live without you! I am ready! Let the end be here, this instant!"

He believed that she would do it, and for one awful moment she had felt that she was going to kill him. Then she lowered the weapon and laid it on the chair beside her with slow deliberation, though her hand shook so much that she almost dropped it. As if no longer seeing him, she turned to the door, folded her hands on the panel, and leaned her forehead against them.

He heard her voice, low and trembling:

"Forgive us our sins, as we forgive them that trespass against us!"

His own hand was on the revolver to do what she had refused to do. As when the cyclone whirls on itself, just beyond the still storm-center, and strikes all aback the vessel it has driven before it for hours, so the man's passion had turned to destroy him. But the holy words stayed his hand.

"Angela! Forgive me!" he cried in agony.

The nun heard him, raised her head, and turned. His suffering was visible and appalling to see; but she found speech to soothe it.

"You did not know what you were saying."

"I knew what I said."

He could hardly speak.

"You did not mean to say it, when you brought me here." She was prompting him gently.

"No." He almost whispered the one word, and then he regretted it. "I hardly know what I meant to say," he went on more firmly; "but I know what I meant to accomplish. That is the truth, such as it is. I saw this afternoon that I should never persuade you to ask for your freedom unless I could talk to you alone where you must hear me. The chance came unexpectedly, and I took it, for it would never have come again. I had no other place; I had not thought of what I should say; but I was ready to risk everything, all for all—as I have done—"

"You have, indeed," the nun said slowly, while he hesitated.

"And I have failed. Forgive me if you can. It was for love of you and for your sake."

"For my sake, you should be true and brave and kind," answered the sister. "But you ask forgiveness, and I forgive you, and I will try to forget, too. If I cannot do that, I can at least believe that you were mad, for no man in his senses would think of doing what you threatened! If you wish to live so that I may tell God in my prayers that I would have been your wife if I could, and that I hope to meet you in heaven—then, for my sake, be a man, and not a weakling

willing to stoop to the most contemptible villainy to cheat a woman. Your brother was nearly killed in doing his duty here, and you have taken his place. Make it your true calling, as I have made it mine to nurse the sick. At any moment either of us may be called to face danger till we die; we can feel that we are living the same life, for the same hope. Is that nothing?"

"The same life? A nun and a soldier?"

"Why not, if we risk it that others may be safe?"

"And in the same hope? Ah, no, Angela! That is where it all breaks down!"

"No. You will live to believe it is there that all begins. Now let me go."

Severi shook his head sadly; she was so unapproachably good, he thought—what chance had a mere man like himself of really understanding her splendid, saintly delusion?

Pica had locked the door on the outside and had taken out the key, obeying his orders; but Giovanni had another like it in his pocket, and now unlocked and opened the door. The nun went out, drawing her black hood quite over her head so that it concealed her face, and Giovanni followed her down-stairs, and held an umbrella over her while she got into the carriage, for it was still raining.

"Good night," he said as Pica shut the door.

He did not hear her answer, and the brougham drove away. When he could no longer see the lights, he went upstairs again; and, after he had shut the door, he stood a long time just where she had stood last.

The revolver was still on the chair under the bright electric light. He fancied that the peculiar faint odor of her heavy cloth cloak, just damped by the few drops of rain that had reached it,

still hung in the air. With the slightest effort of memory, her voice came back to his ears—now gentle, now gravely reproachful—but at last ringing like steel on steel in her generous anger. She had been present in that room, in his power, during more than twenty minutes, and now she was gone and would never come again.

He had done the most rash, inconsequent, and uselessly bad deed that had ever suggested itself to his imagination; and, now that all was over, he wondered how he could have been at once so foolish, so brutal, and so daring. Perhaps five years of slavery in Africa had unsettled his mind. He had heard of several similar cases, and his own might be another. He had read of officers who had lost all sense of responsibility after months of fighting in the tropics, perhaps from having borne too much responsibility: who had come back after doing brave and honorable work, to find themselves morally crippled for civilized life, and no longer able to distinguish right from wrong or truth from falsehood.

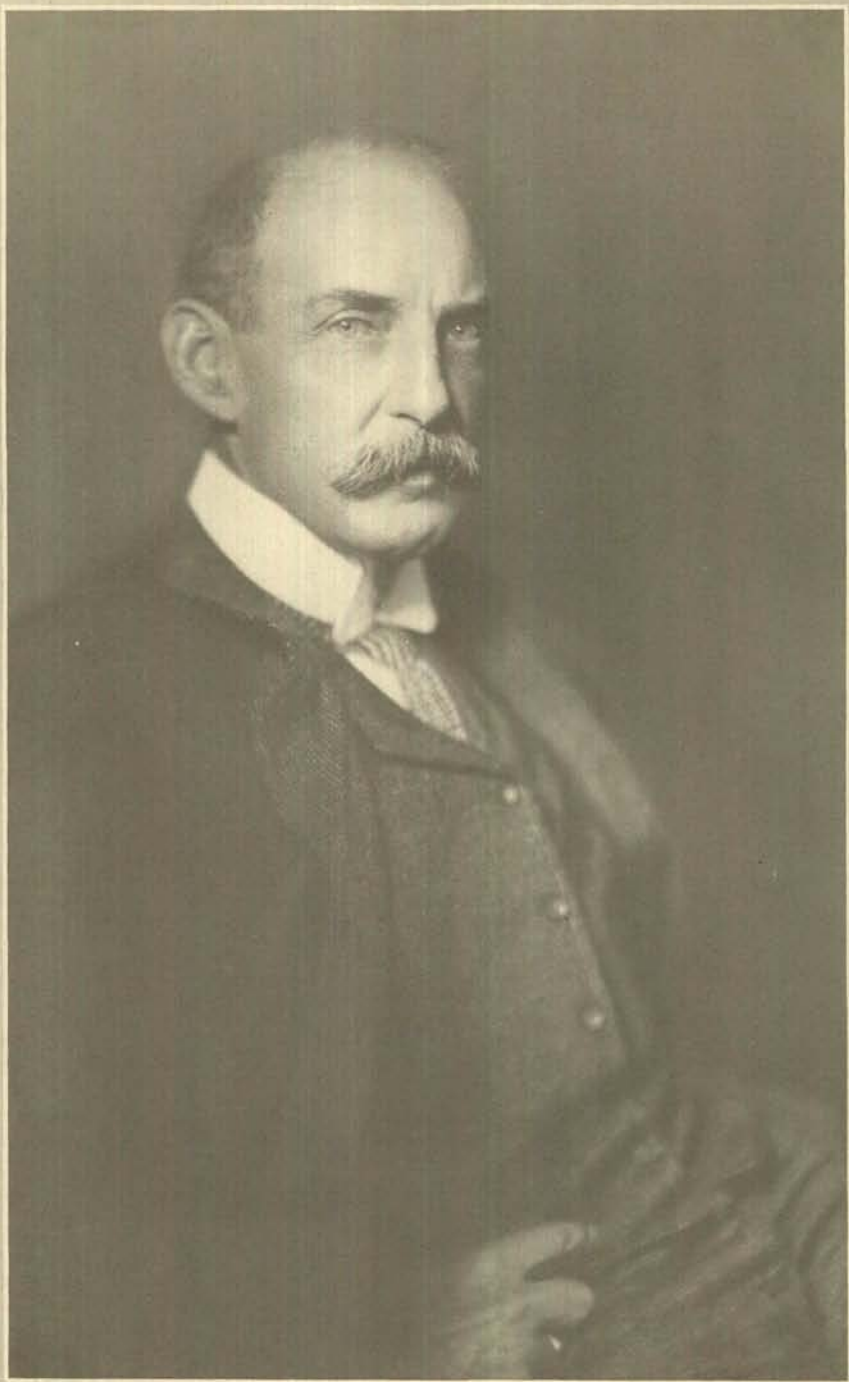
It had all happened quickly, but illogically, as events follow one another in dreams, from the moment when he had gone to the convent hospital with Monsignor Saracinesca till the brougham drove away in the dark, taking Angela back. He understood for the first time how men whom every one supposed to be of average uprightness could commit atrocious crimes; he shuddered to think what must have happened if a mere chance had not changed his mood, making him ask Angela's forgiveness and prompting him to let her go. She had touched him, that was all. If her voice had sounded only a little differently at the great moment, if her eyes had not looked at him with just that expression, if her attitude had been a shade less resolute, what might not have happened?

(To be continued)

MOODS

VARIED the moods are of the mighty sea,
And of that ancient wayfarer, the wind,
Yet few compared with that infinity
Of moods—the human mind!

Archibald Crombie



FRANCIS MARION CRAWFORD, THE FAMOUS AMERICAN NOVELIST

BORN AUGUST 2, 1854—DIED APRIL 9, 1909

From a photograph—copyright, 1903, by Pirie MacDonald, New York

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