F. MARION CRAWFORD

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CHAPTER I

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When the widow of Martino Consalvi married young Corbario, people shook their heads and said that she was making a great mistake. Consalvi had been dead a good many years, but as yet no one had thought it was time to say that his widow was no longer young and beautiful, as she had always been. Many rich widows remain young and beautiful as much as a quarter of a century, or even longer, and the Signora Consalvi was very rich indeed. As soon as she was married to Folco Corbario every one knew that she was thirty-five years old and he was barely twenty-six, and that such a difference of ages on the wrong side was ridiculous if it was not positively immoral. No well-regulated young man had a right to marry a rich widow nine years older than himself, and who had a son only eleven years younger than he.

A few philosophers who said that if the widow was satisfied the matter was nobody's business were treated with the contempt they deserved. Those who, on the contrary, observed that young Corbario had married for money and nothing else were heard with favour, until the man who knew everything pointed out that as the greater part of the fortune would be handed over to Marcello when he came of age, six years hence, Corbario had not made a good bargain and might have done better. It was true that Marcello Consalvi had inherited a delicate constitution of body, it had even been hinted that he was consumptive.

Corbario would have done better to wait another year or two to see what happened, said a cynic, for young people often died of consumption between fifteen and twenty. The cynic was answered by a practical woman of the world, who said that Corbario had six years of luxury and extravagance before him, and that many men would have sold themselves to the devil for less. After the six years the deluge might come if it must; it was much pleasanter to drown in the end than never to have had the chance of swimming in the big stream at all, and bumping sides with the really big fish, and feeling oneself as good as any of them. Besides, Marcello was pale and thin, and had been heard to cough; he might die before he came of age. The only objection to this theory was that it was based on a fiction; for the whole fortune had been left to the Signora by a childless relation.

These amiable and interesting views were expressed with variations by people who knew the three persons concerned, and with such a keen sense of appropriate time and place as made it quite sure that none of the three should ever know what was said of them. The caution of an old fox is rash temerity compared with the circumspection of a first-rate gossip; and when the gossips were tired of discussing Folco Corbario and his wife and her son, they talked about other matters, but they had a vague suspicion that they had been cheated out of something. A cat that has clawed all the feathers off a stuffed canary might feel just what they did.

For nothing happened. Corbario did not launch into wild extravagance after all, but behaved himself with the faultless dulness of a model middle-aged husband. His wife

loved him and was perfectly happy, and happiness finally stole her superfluous years away, and they evaporated in the sunshine, and she forgot all about them. Marcello Consalvi, who had lost his father when he was a mere child, found a friend in his mother's husband, and became very fond of him, and thought him a good man to imitate; and in return Corbario made a companion of the fair-haired boy, and taught him to ride and shoot in his holidays, and all went well.

Moreover, Marcello's mother, who was a good woman, told him that the world was very wicked; and with the blind desire for her son's lasting innocence, which is the most touching instinct of loving motherhood, she entreated him to lead a spotless life. When Marcello, in the excusable curiosity of budding youth, asked his stepfather what that awful wickedness was against which he was so often warned, Corbario told him true stories of men who had betrayed their country and their friends, and of all sorts of treachery and meanness, to which misdeeds the boy did not feel himself at all inclined; so that he wondered why his mother seemed so very anxious lest he should go astray. Then he repeated to her what Corbario had told him, and she smiled sweetly and said nothing, and trusted her husband all the more. She felt that he understood her, and was doing his best to help her in making Marcello what she wished him to be.

The boy was brought up at home; in Rome in the winter, and in summer on the great estate in the south, which his father had bought and which was to be a part of his inheritance.

He was taught by masters who came to the house to give their lessons and went away as soon as the task was over. He had no tutor, for his mother had not found a layman whom she could trust in that capacity, and yet she understood that it was not good for a boy to be followed everywhere by a priest. Besides, Corbario gave so much of his time to his stepson that a tutor was hardly needed; he walked with him and rode with him, or spent hours with him at home when the weather was bad. There had never been a cross word between the two since they had met. It was an ideal existence. Even the gossips stopped talking at last, and there was not one, not even the most ingeniously evil-tongued of all, that prophesied evil.

They raised their eyebrows, and the more primitive among them shrugged their shoulders a little, and smiled. If Providence really insisted upon making people so perfect, what was to be done? It was distressing, but there was nothing to be said; they must just lead their lives, and the gossips must bear it. No doubt Corbario had married for money, since he had nothing in particular and his wife had millions, but if ever a man had married for money and then behaved like an angel, that man was Folco Corbario and no other. He was everything to his wife, and all things to his stepson—husband, father, man of business, tutor, companion, and nurse; for when either his wife or Marcello was ill, he rarely left the sick-room, and no one could smooth a pillow as he could, or hold a glass so coaxingly to the feverish lips, or read aloud so untiringly in such a gentle and soothing voice.

No ascendency of one human being over another is more complete than that of a full-grown man over a boy of sixteen, who venerates his elder as an ideal. To find a model, to believe it perfection, and to copy it energetically, is either a great piece of good fortune, or a misfortune even greater; in whatever follows in life, there is the same difference between such development and the normally slow growth of a boy's mind as that which lies between enthusiasm and indifference. It is true that where there has been no enthusiastic belief there can be no despairing disillusionment when the light goes out; but it is truer still that hope and happiness are the children of faith by the ideal.

A boy's admiration for his hero is not always well founded; sometimes it is little short of ridiculous, and it is by no means always harmless. But no one found fault with Marcello for admiring his stepfather, and the attachment was a source of constant satisfaction to his mother. In her opinion Corbario was the handsomest, bravest, cleverest, and best of men, and after watching him for some time even the disappointed gossips were obliged to admit, though without superlatives, that he was a good-looking fellow, a good sportsman, sufficiently well gifted, and of excellent behaviour. There was the more merit in the admission, they maintained, because they had been inclined to doubt the man, and had accused him of marrying out of pure love of money. A keen judge of men might have thought that his handsome features were almost too still and too much like a mask, that his manner was so quiet as to be almost expressionless, and that the soft intonation of

his speech was almost too monotonous to be natural. But all this was just what his wife admired, and she encouraged her son to imitate it. His father had been a man of quick impulses, weak to-day, strong to-morrow, restless, of uncertain temper, easily enthusiastic and easily cast down, capable of sudden emotions, and never able to conceal what he felt if he had cared to do so. Marcello had inherited his father's character and his mother's face, as often happens; but his unquiet disposition was tempered as yet by a certain almost girlish docility, which had clung to him from childhood as the result of being brought up almost entirely by the mother he worshipped. And now, for the first time, comparing him with her second husband, she realised the boy's girlishness, and wished him to outgrow it. Her own ideal of what even a young man should be was as unpractical as that of many thoroughly good and thoroughly unworldly mothers. She wished her son to be a man at all points, and yet she dreamed that he might remain a sort of glorified young girl; she desired him to be well prepared to face the world when he grew up, and yet it was her dearest wish that he might never know anything of the world's wickedness. Corbario seemed to understand her better in this than she understood herself, and devoted his excellent gifts and his almost superhuman patience to the task of forming a modern Galahad. Her confidence in her husband increased month by month, and year by year.

"I wish to make a new will," she said to her lawyer in the third year of her marriage. "I shall leave my husband a life-interest in a part of my fortune, and the reversion of the whole in case anything should happen to my son."

The lawyer was a middle-aged man, with hard black eyes. While he was listening to a client, he had a habit of folding his arms tightly across his chest and crossing one leg over the other. When the Signora Corbario had finished speaking he sat quite still for a moment, and then noiselessly reversed the crossing of his legs and the folding of his arms, and looked into her face. It was very gentle, fair, and thoughtful.

"I presume," answered the lawyer, "that the clause providing for a reversion is only intended as an expression of your confidence in your husband?"

"Affection," answered the Signora, "includes confidence."

The lawyer raised one eyebrow almost imperceptibly, and changed his position a little.

"Heaven forbid," he said, "that any accident should befall your son!"

"Heaven forbid it!" replied the Signora. "He is very strong," she continued, in the tone people use who are anxious to convince themselves of something doubtful. "Yet I wish my husband to know that, after my son, he should have the first right."

"Shall you inform him of the nature of your will, Signora?" inquired the lawyer.

"I have already informed him of what I mean to do," replied Signora Corbario.

Again the lawyer's eyebrow moved a little nervously, but he said nothing. It was not his place to express any doubt as to the wisdom of the disposition. He was not an old family adviser, who might have taken such a liberty. There had been such a man, indeed, but he was dead. It was the duty

of the rich woman's legal adviser to hinder her from committing any positive legal mistake, but it was not his place to criticise her judgment of the man she had chosen to marry. The lawyer made a few notes without offering any comment, and on the following day he brought the will for the Signora to sign. By it, at her death, Marcello, her son, was to inherit her great fortune. Her husband, Folco Corbario, was constituted Marcello's sole guardian, and was to enjoy a life-interest in one-third of the inheritance. If Marcello died, the whole fortune was to go to Corbario, without any condition or reservation whatsoever.

When the will was executed, the Signora told her husband that she had done what she intended.

"My dear," said Corbario, gently, "I thank you for the true meaning of it. But as for the will itself, shall we talk of it thirty years hence, when Marcello's children's children are at your knee?"

He kissed her hand tenderly.

CHAPTER II

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Marcello stood at an open window listening to the musical spring rain and watching the changing lights on the city below him, as the dove-coloured cloud that floated over Rome like thin gauze was drawn up into the sunshine. Then there were sudden reflections from distant windows and wet domes, that blazed like white fires for a little while, till the raindrops dried and the waves of changing hues that had surged up under the rain, rising, breaking, falling, and spreading, subsided into a restful sea of harmonious colour.

After that, the sweet smell of the wet earth came up to Marcello's nostrils. A light breeze stirred the dripping emerald leaves, and the little birds fluttered down and hopped along the garden walks and over the leaves, picking up the small unwary worms that had been enjoying a bath while their enemies tried to keep dry under the ilex boughs.

Marcello half closed his eyes and drank the fragrant air with parted lips, his slim white hands resting on the marble sill. The sunshine made his pale face luminous, and gilded his short fair hair, casting the shadow of the brown lashes upon his delicate cheeks. There was something angel-like in his expression—the look of the frescoed angels of Melozzo da Forli in the Sacristy of St. Peter's. They are all that is left of something very beautiful, brought thither broken from the Church of the Holy Apostles; and so, too, one might have fancied that Marcello, standing at the window in the morning sunshine, belonged to a world that had long passed

away—fit for a life that was, fit for a life to come hereafter, perhaps, but not fit for the life that is. There are rare and beautiful beings in the world who belong to it so little that it seems cruelty and injustice to require of them what is demanded of us all. They are born ages too late, or ages too soon; they should not have been born now. Their very existence calls forth our tenderest sympathy, as we should pity a fawn facing its death among wolves.

But Marcello Consalvi had no idea that he could deserve pity, and life looked very bright to him, very easy, and very peaceful. He could hardly have thought of anything at all likely to happen which could darken the future, or even give him reasonable cause for anxiety. There was no imaginative sadness in his nature, no morbid dread of undefined evil, no melancholy to dye the days black; for melancholy is more often an affliction of the very strong in body or mind than of the weak, or of average men and women. Marcello was delicate, but not degenerate; he seemed gentle, cheerful, and ready to believe the world a very good place, as indeed it is for people who are not too unlike their neighbours to enjoy it, or too unlucky to get some of its good things, or too weak to work, fight, and love, or too clever to be as satisfied with themselves as most men are. For plain, common, everyday happiness and contentment belong to plain, average people, who do what others do and have a cheerfully good opinion of themselves. Can a man make a good fight of it if he does not believe himself to be about as good as his adversary?

It had never occurred to Marcello that he might have to fight for anything, and if some one had told him on that

spring morning that he was on the very verge of a desperate struggle for existence against overwhelming odds, he would have turned his bright eyes wonderingly to the prophet of evil, asking whence danger could come, and trying to think what it might be like.

At the first appearance of it he would have been startled into fear, too, as many a grown man has been before now, when suddenly brought face to face with an unknown peril, being quite untried: and small shame to him. He who has been waked from a peaceful sleep and pleasant dreams to find death at his throat, for the first time in his life, knows the meaning of that. Samson was a tried warrior when Delilah first roused him with her cry, "The Philistines are upon thee!"

Marcello was no youthful Samson, yet he was not an unmanly boy, for all his bringing up. So far as his strength would allow he had been accustomed to the exercises and sports of men: he could ride fearlessly, if not untiringly; he was a fair shot; he had hunted wild boar with his stepfather in the marshy lands by the sea; he had been taught to fence and was not clumsy with weapons, though he had not yet any great skill. He had always been told that he was delicate and must be careful, and he knew that he was not strong; but there was one good sign in that his weakness irritated him and bred at least the desire for strength, instead of the poor-spirited indolence that bears bodily infirmity as something inevitable, and is ready to accept pity if not to ask for it.

The smell of the damp earth was gone, and as the sun shone out the air was filled with the scent of warm roses

and the faintly sweet odour of wistaria. Marcello heard a light footstep close to him, and met his mother's eyes as he turned.

Even to him, she looked very young just then, as she stood in the light, smiling at him. A piece of lace was drawn half over her fair hair, and the ends went round her throat like a scarf and fell behind her. Its creamy tints heightened the rare transparency of her complexion by faint contrast. She was a slight woman and very graceful.

"I have looked for you everywhere," she said, and she still smiled, as if with real pleasure at having found him.

"I have been watching the shower" Marcello answered, drawing her to the window. "And then the earth and the roses smelt so sweet that I stayed here. Did you want me, mother?"

"I always like to know where you are."

She passed her arm through his with a loving pressure, and looked out of the window with him. The villa stood on the slope of the Janiculum, close to the Corsini gardens.

"Do I run after you too much?" the mother asked presently, as if she knew the answer. "Now that you are growing up, do I make you feel as if you were still a little boy? You are nearly nineteen, you know! I suppose I ought to treat you like a man."

Marcello laughed, and his hand slipped into hers with an almost childish and nestling movement.

"You have made a man of me," he answered.

Had she? A shadow of doubt crossed her thoughtful face as she glanced at his. He was so different from other young men of his age, so delicately nurtured, so very gentle; there

was the radiance of maidenly innocence in his look, and she was afraid that he might be more like a girl than a man almost grown.

"I have done my best," she said. "I hope I have done right."

He scarcely understood what she meant, and his expression did not change.

"You could not do anything that was not right," he answered.

Perhaps such a being as Marcello would be an impossibility anywhere but in Italy. Modern life tears privacy to tatters, and privacy is the veil of the temple of home, within which every extreme of human development is possible, good and bad. Take privacy away and all the strangely compound fractions of humanity are soon reduced to a common denomination. In Italy life has more privacy than anywhere else west of Asia. The Englishman is fond of calling his home his castle, but it is a thoroughfare, a market-place, a club, a hotel, a glass house, compared with that of an average Italian. An Englishman goes home to escape restraint: an Italian goes out. But the northern man, who lives much in public, learns as a child to conceal what he feels, to be silent, to wear an indifferent look; whereas the man of the south, who hides nothing when the doors of his house are shut, can hide but little when he meets his enemy in the way. He laughs when he is pleased, and scowls when he is not, threatens when he is angry, and sheds tears when he is hurt, with a simplicity that too often excites the contempt of men accustomed to suffer or enjoy without moving a muscle.

Privacy favours the growth of individual types, differing widely from each other; the destruction of it makes people very much alike. Marcello's mother asked herself whether she had done well in rearing him as a being apart from those amongst whom he must spend his life.

And yet, as she looked at him, he seemed to be so nearly the ideal of which she had dreamt throughout long years of loving care that she was comforted, and the shadow passed away from her sweet face. He had answered that she could do nothing that was not right; she prayed that his words might be near the truth, and in her heart she was willing to believe that they were almost true. Had she not followed every good impulse of her own good heart? Had she not tried to realize literally for him the most beautiful possibilities of the Christian faith? That, at least, was true, and she could tell herself so without any mistaken pride. How, then, had she made any mistake? The boy had the face of a young saint.

"Are you ready, my dear?" she asked suddenly, as a far-off clock struck.

"Yes, mother, quite ready."

"I am not," she answered with a little laugh. "And Folco is waiting, and I hear the carriage driving up."

She slipped from Marcello's side and left the room quickly, for they were going to drive down to the sea, to a little shooting-lodge that belonged to them near Nettuno, a mere cottage among the trees by the Roman shore, habitable only in April and May, and useful only then, when the quail migrate along the coast and the malarious fever is not yet to be feared. It was there that Marcello had first

learned to handle a gun, spending a week at a time there with his stepfather; and his mother used to come down now and then for a day or two on a visit, sometimes bringing her friend the Contessa dell' Armi. The latter had been very unhappy in her youth, and had been left a widow with one beautiful girl and a rather exiguous fortune. Some people thought that it was odd that the Signora Corbario, who was a saint if ever there was one, should have grown so fond of the Contessa, for the latter had seen stormy days in years gone by; and of course the ill-disposed gossips made up their minds that the Contessa was trying to catch Marcello for her daughter Aurora, though the child was barely seventeen.

This was mere gossip, for she was quite incapable of any such scheme. What the gossips did not know was something which would have interested them much more, namely, that the Contessa was the only person in Rome who distrusted Folco Corbario, and that she was in constant fear lest she should turn out to be right, and lest her friend's paradise should be suddenly changed into a purgatory. But she held her tongue, and her quiet face never betrayed her thoughts. She only watched, and noted from month to month certain small signs which seemed to prove her right; and she should be ready, whenever the time should come, by day or night, to help her friend, or comfort her, or fight for her.

If Corbario guessed that the Contessa did not trust him, he never showed it. He had found her installed as his wife's friend, and had accepted her, treating her with much courtesy and a sort of vicarious affection; but though he tried his best he could not succeed in reaching anything like

intimacy with her, and while she seemed to conceal nothing, he felt that she was hiding her real self from him. Whether she did so out of pride, or distrust, or jealousy, he could never be sure. He was secretly irritated and humiliated by her power to oppose him and keep him at a distance without ever seeming to do so; but, on the other hand, he was very patient, very tenacious of his purpose, and very skilful. He knew something of the Contessa's past, but he recognised in her the nature that has known the world's worst side and has done with it for ever, and is lifted above it, and he knew the immense influence which the spectacle of a blameless life exercises upon the opinion of a good woman who has not always been blameless herself. Whatever he had been before he met his wife, whatever strange plans had been maturing in his brain since he had married her, his life had seemed as spotless from that day as the existence of the best man living. His wife believed in him, and the Contessa did not; but even she must in time accept the evidence of her senses. Then she, too, would trust him. Why it was essential that she should, he alone knew, unless he was merely piqued by her quiet reserve, as a child is when it cannot fix the attention of a grown-up person.

The Contessa and her daughter were to be of the party that day, and the carriage stopped where they lived, near the Forum of Trajan. They appeared almost directly, the Contessa in grey with a grey veil and Aurora dressed in a lighter shade, the thick plaits of her auburn hair tied up short below her round straw hat, on the theory that she was still a school-girl, whose skirt must not quite touch the

ground, who ought not to wear a veil, and whose mind was supposed to be a sensitive blank, particularly apt to receive bad impressions rather than good ones. In less than a year she would be dancing all night with men she had scarcely heard of before, listening to compliments of which she had never dreamt—of course not—and to declarations which no right-minded girl one day under eighteen could under any circumstances be thought to expect. Such miracles as these are wrought by the eighteenth birthday.

Corbario's eyes looked from the mother to the daughter, as he and Marcello stood on the pavement to let them get in. The Contessa touched his outstretched hand without restraint but without cordiality, smiling just as much as was civil, and less readily than would have been friendly. Aurora glanced at him and laughed prettily without any apparent reason, which is the privilege of very young girls, because their minds are supposed to be a blank. Also because her skirt must not quite touch the ground, one very perfect black silk ankle was distinctly visible for a moment as she stepped into the carriage. Note that from the eve of her eighteenth birthday till she is old enough to be really wicked no well-regulated young woman shows her ankles. This also is one of the miracles of time.

Marcello blushed faintly as he sat down beside Aurora. There were now five in the big carriage, so that she was between the two men; and though there was enough room Marcello felt the slight pressure of her arm against his. His mother saw his colour change, and looked away and smiled. The idea of marrying the two in a few years had often crossed her mind, and she was pleased whenever she saw

that Marcello felt a little thrill of emotion in the girl's presence. As for Aurora, she looked straight before her, between the heads of the two elder women, and for a long time after they had started she seemed absorbed in watching the receding walls of the city and the long straight road that led back to it. The Contessa and her friend talked quietly, happy to be together for a whole day. Corbario now and then looked from one to the other, as if to assure himself that they were quite comfortable, and his still face wore an unchanging look of contented calm as his eyes turned again to the sunlit sweep of the low Campagna. Marcello looked steadily away from Aurora, happily and yet almost painfully aware that her arm could not help pressing against his. The horses' hoofs beat rhythmically on the hard high road, with the steady, cheerful energy which would tell a blind man that a team is well fed, fresh from rest, and altogether fit for a long day's work. The grey-haired coachman sat on his box like an old dragoon in the saddle; the young groom sat bolt upright beside him with folded arms, as if he could never tire of sitting straight. The whole party looked prosperous, harmonious, healthy, and perfectly happy, as if nothing in the least unpleasant could possibly happen to them, still less anything terrible, that could suddenly change all their lives.

One of fate's favourite tricks is to make life look particularly gay and enjoyable, and full of sunshine and flowers, at the very moment when terror wakes from sleep and steps out of the shadow to stalk abroad.

The cottage where the party were going to spend the next few days together was built like an Indian bungalow,

consisting of a single story surrounded by a broad, covered verandah, and having a bit of lawn in front. It was sheltered by trees, and between it and the beach a bank of sand from ten to fifteen feet high ran along the shore, the work of the southwest gales during many ages. In many places this bank was covered with scrub and brushwood on the landward side.

A little stream meandered down to the sea on the north side of the cottage, ending in a pool full of tall reeds, amongst which one could get about in a punt. The seashore itself is very shelving at that place, and there is a bar about a cable's length out, over which the sea breaks with a tremendous roar during westerly storms. Two hundred yards from the cottage, a large hut had been built for the men-servants and for the kitchen; near by it there was a rough coach-house and a stable with room for a dozen horses. The carriage usually went back to Rome on the day after every one had arrived, and was sent for when wanted; but there were a number of rough Campagna horses in the stable, such as are ridden by the cattle herders about Rome, tough little beasts of fairly good temper and up to a much heavier weight than might be guessed by a stranger in the country. In the morning the men of the party usually went shooting, if the wind was fair, for where quail are concerned much depends on that. Dinner was in the middle of the day, and every one was supposed to go to sleep after it. In the late afternoon the horses were saddled, and the whole party went for a gallop on the sands, or up to classic Ardea, or across the half-cultivated country, coming back to supper when it was dark. A particularly fat and quiet pony was kept

for Marcello's mother, who was no great rider, but the Contessa and Aurora rode anything that was brought them, as the men did. To tell the truth, the Campagna horse is rarely vicious, and, even when only half broken, can be ridden by a lady if she be an average horsewoman.

Everything happened as usual. The party reached the cottage in time for a late luncheon, rested afterwards, and then rode out. But the Signora Corbario would not go.

"Your pony looks fatter and quieter than ever," said Maddalena dell' Armi with a smile. "If you do not ride him, he will turn into a fixture."

"He is already a very solid piece of furniture," observed Folco, looking at the sleek animal.

"He is very like the square piano I practise on," said Aurora. "He has such a flat back and such straight thick legs."

"More like an organ," put in Marcello, gravely. "He has a curious, half-musical wheeze when he tries to move, like the organ in the church at San Domenico, when the bellows begin to work."

"It is a shame to make fun of my horse," answered the Signora, smiling. "But really I am not afraid of him. I have a little headache from the drive, that is all."

"Take some phenacetine," said Corbario with concern. "Let me make you quite comfortable before we start."

He arranged a long straw chair for her in a sheltered corner of the verandah, with cushions and a rug and a small table beside it, on which Marcello placed a couple of new books that had been brought down. Then Folco went in and got a little glass bottle of tablets from his wife's travelling-

bag and gave her one. She was subject to headaches and always had the medicine with her. It was the only remedy she ever carried or needed, and she had such confidence in it that she felt better almost as soon as she had swallowed the tablet her husband gave her.

"Let me stay and read to you," he said. "Perhaps you would go to sleep."

"You are not vain of your reading, my dear," she answered with a smile. "No, please go with the others."

Then the Contessa offered to stay, and the good Signora had to use a good deal of persuasion to make them all understand that she would much rather be left alone. They mounted and rode away through the trees towards the beach, whence the sound of the small waves, breaking gently under the afternoon breeze, came echoing softly up to the cottage.

The two young people rode in front, in silence; Corbario and the Contessa followed at a little distance.

"How good you are to my wife!" Folco exclaimed presently, as they emerged upon the sand. "You are like a sister to her!"

Maddalena glanced at him through her veil. She had small and classic features, rather hard and proud, and her eyes were of a dark violet colour, which is very unusual, especially in Italy. But she came from the north. Corbario could not see her expression, and she knew it.

"You are good to her, too," she said presently, being anxious to be just. "You are very thoughtful and kind."

Corbario thought it wiser to say nothing, and merely bent his head a little in acknowledgment of what he instinctively

felt to be an admission on the part of a secret adversary. Maddalena had never said so much before.

"If you were not, I should never forgive you," she added, thinking aloud.

"I don't think you have quite forgiven me as it is," Folco answered more lightly.

"For what?"

"For marrying your best friend."

The little speech was well spoken, so utterly without complaint, or rancour, or suggestion of earnestness, that the Contessa could only smile.

"And yet you admit that I am not a bad husband," continued Folco. "Should you accept me, or, say, my exact counterpart, for Aurora, in a year or two?"

"I doubt whether you have any exact counterpart," Maddalena answered, checking the sharp denial that rose to her lips.

"Myself, then, just for the sake of argument?"

"What an absurd question! Do you mind tightening the girth for me a little? My saddle is slipping."

She drew rein, and he was obliged to submit to the check. As he dismounted he glanced at Aurora's graceful figure, a hundred yards ahead, and for one instant he drew his eyelids together with a very strange expression. He knew that the Contessa could not see his face.

Marcello and Aurora had been companions since they were children, and just now they were talking familiarly of the place, which they had not seen since the previous year. All sorts of details struck them. Here, there was more sand than usual; there, a large piece of timber had been washed

ashore in the winter gales; at another place there was a new sand-drift that had quite buried the scrub on the top of the bank; the keeper of the San Lorenzo tower had painted his shutters brown, though they had always been green; here was the spot where Aurora had tumbled off her pony when she was only twelve years old—so long ago! And here—they looked at each other and then quickly at the sea, for it was here that Marcello, in a fit of boyish admiration, had once suddenly kissed her cheek, telling her that she was perfectly beautiful. Even now, he blushed when he thought of it, and yet he longed to do it again, and wondered inwardly what would happen if he did.

As for Aurora, though she looked at the sea for a moment, she seemed quite self-possessed. It is a strange thing that if a boy and a girl are brought up in just the same way, by women, and without many companions, the boy should generally be by far the more shy of the two when childhood is just past.

"You are very fond of your stepfather, are you not?" asked Aurora, so suddenly that Marcello started a little and hesitated slightly before he answered.

"Yes," he said, almost directly, "of course I am! Don't you like him, too?"

"I used to," answered Aurora in a low voice, "but now his eyes frighten me—sometimes. For instance, though he is a good way behind, I am sure he is looking at me now, just in that way."

Marcello turned his head instinctively, and saw that Folco had just dismounted to tighten the girth of the Contessa's saddle. It was exactly while Aurora was speaking that he

had drawn his eyelids together with such a strange expression—a mere coincidence, no doubt, but one that would have startled the girl if she could have suddenly seen his face.

They rode on without waiting for the others, at an even canter over the sand.

"I never saw anything in Folco's eyes that could frighten anybody," Marcello said presently.

"No," answered Aurora. "Very likely not."

Marcello had always called Corbario by his first name, and as he grew up it seemed more and more natural to do so. Folco was so young, and he looked even younger than he was.

"It must be your imagination," Marcello said.

"Women," said Aurora, as if she were as near thirty as any young woman would acknowledge herself, "women have no imagination. That is why we have so much sense," she added thoughtfully.

Marcello was so completely puzzled by this extraordinary statement that he could find nothing to say for a few moments. Then he felt that she had attacked his idol, and that Folco must be defended.

"If you could find a single thing, however small, to bring against him, it would not be so silly to say that his eyes frighten you."

"There!" laughed Aurora. "You might as well say that because at this moment there is only that one little cloud near the sun, there is no cloud at all!"

"How ridiculous!" Marcello expressed his contempt of such girlish reasoning by putting his rough little horse to a

gallop.

"Men always say that," retorted Aurora, with exasperating calm. "I'll race you to the tower for the first choice of oranges at dessert. They are not very good this year, you know, and you like them."

"Don't be silly!" Marcello immediately reined his horse back to a walk, and looked very dignified.

"It is impossible to please you," observed Aurora, slackening her pace at once.

"It is impossible, if you abuse Folco."

"I am sure I did not mean to abuse him," Aurora answered meekly. "I never abuse anybody."

"Women never do, I suppose," retorted Marcello, with a little snort of dissatisfaction.

They were little more than children yet, and for pretty nearly five minutes neither spoke a word, as their horses walked side by side.

"The keeper of the tower has more chickens this year," observed Aurora. "I can see them running about."

This remark was evidently intended as an overture of reconciliation. It acted like magic upon Marcello, who hated quarrelling, and was moreover much more in love with the girl than he knew. Instinctively he put out his left hand to take her right. They always made peace by taking hands.

But Aurora's did not move, and she did not even turn her head towards him.

"Take care!" she said quickly, in a low tone. "They are watching us."

Marcello looked round and saw that the others were nearer than he had supposed, and he blushed foolishly.

"Well, what harm would there be if you gave me your hand?" he asked. "I only meant—"

"Yes, I understand," Aurora answered, in the same tone as before. "And I am glad you like me, Marcello—if you really do."

"If I do!" His tone was full of youthful and righteous indignation.

"I did not mean to doubt it," she said quickly. "But it is getting to be different now, you know. We are older, and somehow everything means more, even the little things."

"Oh!" ejaculated Marcello. "I begin to see. I suppose," he added, with what seemed to him reckless brutality, "that if I kissed you now you would be furious."

He glanced uneasily at Aurora's face to note the effect of this terrible speech. The result was not exactly what he had expected. A faint colour rose in her cheeks, and then she laughed.

"When you do," she said, "I would rather it should not be before people."

"I shall try to remember that," answered Marcello, considerably emboldened.

"Yes, do! It would be so humiliating if I boxed your ears in the presence of witnesses."

"You would not dare," laughed Marcello.

From a distance, as Aurora had guessed, Folco was watching them while he quietly talked to the Contessa; and as he watched, he understood what a change had taken place since last year, when he had seen Marcello and Aurora riding over the same stretch of sand on the same little

horses. He ventured a reflection, to see what his companion would answer.

"I daresay many people would say that those two young people were made for each other."

Maddalena looked at him inquiringly and then glanced at her daughter.

"And what do you say?" she asked, with some curiosity.

"I say 'no.' And you?"

"I agree with you. Aurora is like me—like what I was. Marcello would bore her to death in six months, and Aurora would drive him quite mad."

Corbario smiled.

"I had hoped," he said, "that women with marriageable-daughters would think Marcello a model husband. But of course I am prejudiced. I have had a good deal to do with his bringing up during the last four years."

"No one can say that you have not done your duty by him," Maddalena answered. "I wish I could feel that I had done as well by Aurora—indeed I do!"

"You have, but you had quite a different nature to deal with."

"I should think so! It is my own."

Corbario heard the little sigh as she turned her head away, and being a wise man he said nothing in answer. He was not a Roman, if indeed he were really an Italian at all, but he had vaguely heard the Contessa's story. She had been married very young to a parliamentary high-light, who had made much noise in his day, had spent more than half of her fortune after getting rid of his own, and had been forgotten on the morrow of his premature death. It was said