













"SUDDENLY HE HEARD AN ITALIAN VOICE VERY NEAR TO HIM, CALLING HIM BY NAME, IN A TONE OF SURPRISE"

WHOSOEVER SHALL OFFEND

BY

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WITH EIGHT ILLUSTRATIONS

DRAWN IN ROME WITH THE AUTHOR'S SUGGESTIONS

BY

HORACE T. CARPENTER

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*"Whosoever shall offend one of these little ones which believe in Me, it were better for him that a mill stone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea"*



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## ILLUSTRATIONS

"Suddenly he heard an Italian voice very near to him, calling him by name, in a tone of surprise"

"I call it the sleeping death,' answered the Professor"

"He flushed again, very angry this time, and he moved away to leave her, without another word"

" ... the door was darkened, and the girl stood there with a large copper 'conca' ..."

"He moved a step towards the bed, and then another, forcing himself to go on"

"Ercole left his home after sunset that evening"

"Regina made a steady effort, lifting fully half Aurora's weight with her"

"She sat there like a figure of grief outlined in black against the moonlight on the great wall"



## WHOSOEVER SHALL OFFEND

### CHAPTER I

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 Cor-

bario 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 ascendancy 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

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.