



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

—*Whosoever Shall Offend*

THE COMPLETE WORKS OF
F. MARION CRAWFORD

In Thirty-two Volumes - Authorized Edition

Whosoever
Shall Offend

BY

F. MARION CRAWFORD

WITH FRONTISPIECE

" 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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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 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 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