

IT SNOWS

ENRICO CASTELNUOVO

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IT SNOWS

BY

ENRICO CASTELNUOVO

The Translation by Edith Wharton.

The thermometer marks barely one degree above freezing, the sky is covered with ominous white clouds, the air is harsh and piercing; what can induce Signor Odoardo, at nine o'clock on such a morning, to stand in his study window? It is true that Signor Odoardo is a vigorous man, in the prime of life, but it is never wise to tempt Providence by needlessly risking one's health. But stay I begin to think that I have found a clue to his conduct. Opposite Signor Odoardo's window is the window of the Signora Evelina, and Signora Evelina has the same tastes as Signor Odoardo. She too is taking the air, leaning against the window-sill in her dressing-gown, her fair curls falling upon her forehead and tossed back every now and then by a pretty movement of her head. The street is so narrow that it is easy to talk across from one side to the other, but in such weather as this the only two windows that stand open are those of Signora Evelina and Signor Odoardo.

There is no denying the fact: Signora Evelina, who within the last few weeks has taken up her abode across the way, is a very fascinating little widow. Her hair is of spun gold, her skin of milk and roses, her little turned-up nose, though assuredly not Grecian, is much more attractive than if it were; she has the most dazzling teeth in the most kissable mouth; her eyes are transparent as a cloudless sky, and well, she knows how to use them. Nor is this the sum total of her charms: look at the soft, graceful curves of her agile, well-proportioned figure; look at her little hands and feet! After all, one hardly wonder that Signor Odoardo runs the risk of catching his death of cold, instead of closing the window and warming himself at the stove which roars so cheerfully within. It is rather at Signora Evelina that I wonder; for, though Signer Odoardo is not an ill-looking man, he is close upon forty, while she is but twenty-four. So young, and already a widow poor Signora Evelina! It is true that she has great strength of character; but six months have elapsed since her husband's death, and she is resigned to it already, though the deceased left her barely enough to keep body and soul together. Happily Signora Evelina is not encumbered with a family; she is alone and independent, and with those eyes, that hair, that little upturned nose, she ought to have no difficulty in finding a second husband. In fact, there is no harm in admitting that Signora Evelina has contemplated the possibility of a second marriage, and that if the would-be bridegroom is not in his first youth why, she is prepared to make the best of it. In this connection it is perhaps not uninteresting to note that Signor Odoardo is in comfortable circumstances, and is himself a widower. What a coincidence!

Well, then, why don't they marry that being the customary denouement in such cases?

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Why don't they marry? Well Signor Odoardo is still undecided. If there had been any hope of a love-affair I fear that his indecision would have vanished long ago. Errare humanum est. But Signora Evelina is a woman of serious views; she is in search of a husband, not of a flirtation. Signora Evelina is a person of great determination; she knows how to turn other people's heads without letting her own be moved a jot. Signora Evelina is deep; deep enough, surely, to gain her point. If Signor, Odoardo flutters about her much longer he will! singe his wings; things cannot go on in this; way. Signor Odoardo's visits are too frequent; and now, in addition, there are the conversations from the window. It is time for a decisive step to be taken, and Signor Odoardo is afraid that he may find himself taking the step before he is prepared to; this very day, perhaps, when he goes to call on the widow.

The door of Signor Odoardo's study is directly opposite the window in which he is standing, and the opening of this door is therefore made known to him by a violent draught.

As he turns a sweet voice says:

"Good-bye, papa dear; I'm going to school."

"Good-bye, Doretta," he answers, stooping to kiss a pretty little maid of eight or nine; and at the same instant Signora Evelina calls out from over the way:

"Good-morning, Doretta!"

Doretta, who had made a little grimace on discovering her papa in conversation with his pretty neighbor, makes another as she hears herself greeted, and mutters reluctantly, "Good-morning."

Then, with her little basket on her arm, she turns away slowly to join the maid-servant who is waiting for her in the hall.

"I am SO fond of that child," sighs Signora Evelina, with the sweetest inflexion in her voice, "but she doesn't like me at all!"

"What an absurd idea!...Doretta is a very self-willed child."

Thus Signor Odoardo; but in his heart of hearts he too is convinced that his little daughter has no fondness for Signora Evelina.

Meanwhile, the cold is growing more intense, and every now and then a flake of snow spins around upon the wind. Short of wishing to be frozen stiff, there is nothing for it but to shut the window.

"It snows," says Signora Evelina, glancing upward.

"Oh, it was sure to come."

"Well I must go and look after my household. Au revoir shall I see you later?"

"I hope to have the pleasure "

"Au revoir, then."

Signora Evelina closes the window, nods and smiles once more through the pane, and disappears.

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Signor Odoardo turns back to his study, and perceiving how cold it has grown, throws some wood on the fire, and, kneeling before the door of the stove, tries to blow the embers into a blaze. The flames leap up with a merry noise, sending bright flashes along the walls of the room.

Outside, the flakes continue to descend at intervals. Perhaps, after all, it is not going to be a snowstorm.

Signor Odoardo paces up and down the room, with bent head and hands thrust in his pockets. He is disturbed, profoundly disturbed. He feels that he has reached a crisis in his life; that in a few days, perhaps in a few hours, his future will be decided. Is he seriously in love with Signora Evelina? How long has he known her? Will she be sweet and good like THE OTHER? Will she know how to be a mother to Doretta?

There is a sound of steps in the hall; Signor Odoardo pauses in the middle of the room. The door re-opens, and Doretta rushes up to her father, her cheeks flushed, her hood falling over her forehead, her warm coat buttoned up to her chin, her hands thrust into her muff.

"It is snowing and the teacher has sent us home."

She tosses off her hood and coat and goes up to the stove.

"There is a good fire, but the room is cold," she exclaims.

As a matter of fact, the window having stood open for half an hour, the thermometer indicates but fifty degrees.

"Papa," Doretta goes on, "I want to stay with you all day long to-day."

"And suppose your poor daddy has affairs of his own to attend to?"

"No, no, you must give them up for to-day."

And Doretta, without waiting for an answer, runs to fetch her books, her doll, and her work. The books are spread out on the desk, the doll is comfortably seated on the sofa, and the work is laid out upon a low stool.

"Ah," she cries, with an air of importance, "what a mercy that there is no school to-day! I shall have time to go over my lesson. Oh, look how it snows!"

It snows indeed. First a white powder, fine but thick, and whirled in circles by the wind, beats with a dry metallic sound against the window-panes; then the wind drops, and the flakes, growing larger, descend silently, monotonously, incessantly. The snow covers the streets like a downy carpet, spreads itself like a sheet over the roofs, fills up the cracks in the walls, heaps itself upon the window-sills, envelops the iron window-bars, and hangs in festoons from the gutters and eaves.

Out of doors it must be as cold as ever, but the room is growing rapidly warmer, and Doretta, climbing on a chair, has the satisfaction of announcing that the mercury has risen eleven degrees.

"Yes, dear," her father replies, "and the clock is striking eleven too. Run and tell them to get breakfast ready."

Doretta runs off obediently, but reappears in a moment.

"Daddy, daddy, what do you suppose has happened? The dining-room stove won't draw, and the room is all full of smoke!"

"Then let us breakfast here, child."

This excellent suggestion is joy to the soul of Doretta, who hastens to carry the news to the kitchen, and then, in a series of journeys back and forth from the dining-room to the study, transports with her own hands the knives, forks, plates, tablecloth, and napkins, and, with the man-servant's aid, lays them out upon one of her papa's tables. How merry she is! How completely the cloud has vanished that darkened her brow a few hours earlier! And how well she acquits herself of her household duties!

Signor Odoardo, watching her with a sense of satisfaction, cannot resist exclaiming: "Bravo, Doretta!"

Doretta is undeniably the very image of her mother. She too was just such an excellent housekeeper, a model of order, of neatness, of propriety. And she was pretty, like Doretta, even though she did not possess the fair hair and captivating eyes of Signora Evelina.

The man-servant who brings in the breakfast is accompanied by a newcomer, the cat Melanio, who is always present at Doretta's meals. The cat Melanio is old; he has known Doretta ever since she was born, and he honors her with his protection. Every morning he mews at her door, as though to inquire if she has slept well; every evening he keeps her company until it is time for her to go to bed. Whenever she goes out he speeds her with a gentle purr; whenever he hears her come in he hurries to meet her and rubs himself against her legs. In the morning, and at the midday meal, when she takes it at home, he sits beside her chair and silently waits for the scraps from her plate. The cat Melanio, however, is not in the habit of visiting Signor Odoardo's study, and shows a certain surprise at finding himself there. Signor Odoardo, for his part, receives his new guest with some diffidence; but Doretta, intervening in Melanio's favor, undertakes to answer for his good conduct.

It is long since Doretta has eaten with so much appetite. When she has finished her breakfast, she clears the table as deftly and promptly as she had laid it, and in a few moments Signor Odoardo's study has resumed its wonted appearance. Only the cat Melanio remains, comfortably established by the stove, on the understanding that he is to be left there as long as he is not troublesome.

The continual coming and going has made the room grow colder. The mercury has dropped perceptibly, and Doretta, to make it rise again, empties nearly the whole wood-basket into the stove.

How it snows, how it snows! No longer in detached flakes, but as though an openwork white cloth were continuously unrolled before one's eyes. Signor Odoardo begins to think that it will be impossible for him to call on Signora Evelina. True, it is only a step, but he would sink into the snow up to his knees. After all, it is only twelve o'clock. It may stop snowing later. Doretta is struck by a luminous thought:

"What if I were to answer grandmamma's letter?"

In another moment Doretta is seated at her father's desk, in his arm-chair, two cushions raising her to the requisite height, her legs dangling into space, the pen suspended in her hand, and her eyes fixed upon a sheet of ruled paper, containing thus far but two words: Dear Grandmamma.

Signor Odoardo, leaning against the stove, watches his daughter with a smile.

It appears that at last Doretta has discovered a way of beginning her letter, for she re-plunges the pen into the inkstand, lowers her hand to the sheet of paper, wrinkles her forehead and sticks out her tongue.

After several minutes of assiduous toil she raises her head and asks:

"What shall I say to grandmamma about her invitation to go and spend a few weeks with her?"

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"Tell her that you can't go now, but that she may expect you in the spring."

"With you, papa?"

"With me, yes," Signor Odoardo answers mechanically.

Yet if, in the meantime, he engages himself to Signora Evelina, this visit to his mother-in-law will become rather an awkward business.

"There I've finished!" Doretta cries with an air of triumph.

But the cry is succeeded by another, half of anguish, half of rage.

"What's the matter now?"

"A blot!"

"Let me see?...You little goose, what HAVE you done?...You've ruined the letter now!"

Doretta, having endeavored to remove the ink-spot by licking it, has torn the paper.

"Oh, dear, I shall have to copy it out now," she says, in a mortified tone.

"You can copy it this evening. Bring it here, and let me look at it...Not bad, not bad at all. A few letters to be added, and a few to be taken out; but, on the whole, for a chit of your size, it's fairly creditable. Good girl!"

Doretta rests upon her laurels, playing with her doll Nini. She dresses Nini in her best gown, and takes her to call on the cat, Melanio.

The cat, Melanio, who is dozing with half-open eyes, is somewhat bored by these attentions. Raising himself on his four paws, he arches his flexible body, and then rolls himself up into a ball, turning his back upon his visitor.

"Dear me, Melanio is not very polite to-day," says Doretta, escorting the doll back to the sofa. "But you mustn't be offended; he's very seldom impolite. I think it must be the weather; doesn't the weather make you sleepy too, Nini? ...Come, let's take a nap; go by-bye, baby, go by-bye."

Nini sleeps. Her head rests upon a cushion, her little rag and horse-hair body is wrapped in a woollen coverlet, her lids are closed; for Nini raises or lowers her lids according to the position of her body.

Signor Odoardo looks at the clock and then glances out of the window. It is two o'clock and the snow is still falling.

Doretta is struck by another idea.

"Daddy, see if I know my La Fontaine fable: Le corbeau et le renard."

"Very well, let's hear it," Signor Odoardo assents, taking the open book from the little girl's hands.

Doretta begins:

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"Maitre corbeau, sur un arbre perche,
Tenait en son bec un fromage;
Maitre...maitre...maitre..."

"Go on."

"Maitre..."

"Maitre renard."

"Oh, yes, now I remember:

Maitre renard, par l'odeur alleche,
Lui tint a peu pres ce langage:
He! bonjour..."

At this point Doretta, seeing that her father is not listening to her, breaks off her recitation. Signor Odoardo has, in fact, closed the book upon his forefinger, and is looking elsewhere.

"Well, Doretta," he absently inquires, "why don't you go on?"

"I'm not going to say any more of it," she answers sullenly.

"Why, you cross-patch! What's the matter?"

The little girl, who had been seated on a low stool, has risen to her feet and now sees why her papa has not been attending to her. The snow is falling less thickly, and the fair head of Signora Evelina has appeared behind the window-panes over the way.

Brave little woman! She has actually opened the window, and is clearing the snow off the sill with a fire-shovel. Her eyes meet Signor Odoardo's; she smiles and shakes her head, as though to say: What hateful weather!

He would be an ill-mannered boor who should not feel impelled to say a word to the dauntless Signor Evelina. Signor Odoardo, who is not an ill-mannered boor, yields to the temptation of opening the window for a moment.

"Bravo, Signora Evelina! I see you are not afraid of the snow."

"Oh, Signor Odoardo, what fiendish weather!...But, if I am not mistaken, that is Doretta with you...How do you do, Doretta?"

"Doretta, come here and say how do you do to the lady."

"No, no let her be, let her be! Children catch cold so easily you had better shut the window. I suppose there is no hope of seeing you to-day?"

"Look at the condition of the streets!"

"Oh, you men...you men!...The stronger sex...but no matter. Au revoir!"

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"Au revoir."

The two windows are closed simultaneously, but this time Signora Evelina does not disappear. She is sitting there, close to the window, and it snows so lightly now that her wonderful profile is outlined as clearly as possible against the pane. Good heavens, how beautiful she is!

Signer Odoardo walks up and down the room, in the worst of humors. He feels that it is wrong not to go and see the fascinating widow, and that to go and see her would be still more wrong. The cloud has settled again upon Doretta's forehead, the same cloud that darkened it in the morning.

Not a word is said of La Fontaine's fable. Instead, Signor Odoardo grumbles irritably:

"This blessed room is as cold as ever."

"Why shouldn't it be," Doretta retorts with a touch of asperity, "when you open the window every few minutes?"

"Oho," Signer Odoardo says to himself, "it is time to have this matter out."

And, going up to Doretta, he takes her by the hand, leads her to the sofa, and lifts her on his knee.

"Now, then, Doretta, why is it that you are so disagreeable to Signora Evelina?"

The little girl, not knowing what to answer, grows red and embarrassed.

"What has Signora Evelina done to you?" her father continues.

"She hasn't done anything to me."

"And yet you don't like her."

Profound silence.

"And SHE likes you so much!"

"I don't care if she does!"

"You naughty child!...And what if, one of these days, you had to live with Signora Evelina?"

"I won't live with her I won't live with her!" the child bursts out.

"Now you are talking foolishly," Signor Odoardo admonishes her in a severe tone, setting her down from his knee.

She bursts into passionate weeping.

"Come, Doretta, come...Is this the way you keep your daddy company?...Enough of this, Doretta."

But, say what he pleases, Doretta must have her cry. Her brown eyes are swimming in tears, her little breast heaves, her voice is broken by sobs.

"What ridiculous whims!" Signer Odoardo exclaims, throwing his head back against the sofa cushions.

Signor Odoardo is unjust, and, what is worse, he does not believe what he is saying. He knows that this is no whim of Doretta's. He knows it better than the child herself, who would probably find it difficult to explain what she is undergoing. It is at once the presentiment of a new danger and the renewal of a bygone sorrow. Doretta was barely six years old when her mother died, and yet her remembrance is indelibly impressed upon the child's mind. And now it seems as though her mother were dying again.

"When you have finished crying, Doretta, you may come here," Signor Odoardo says.

Doretta, crouching in a corner of the room, cries less vehemently, but has not yet finished crying. Just like the weather outside, it snows less heavily, but it still snows.

Signor Odoardo covers his eyes with his hand.

How many thoughts are thronging through his head, how many affections are contending in his heart! If he could but banish the vision of Signora Evelina but he tries in vain. He is haunted by those blue eyes, by that persuasive smile, that graceful and harmonious presence. He has but to say the word, and he knows that she will be his, to brighten his solitary home, and fill it with life and love. Her presence would take ten years from his age, he would feel as he did when he was betrothed for the first time. And yet no; it would not be quite like the first time.

He is not the same man that he was then, and she, THE OTHER, ah, how different SHE was from the Signora Evelina! How modest and shy she was! How girlishly reserved, even in the expression of her love! How beautiful were her sudden blushes, how sweet the droop of her long, shyly-lowered lashes! He had known her first in the intimacy of her own home, simple, shy, a good daughter and a good sister, as she was destined to be a good wife and mother. For a while he had loved her in silence, and she had returned his love. One day, walking beside her in the garden, he had seized her hand with sudden impetuosity, and raising it to his lips had said, "I care for you so much!" and she, pale and trembling, had run to her mother's arms, crying out, "Oh, how happy I am!"

Ah, those dear days those dear days! He was a poet then; with the accent of sincerest passion he whispered in his love's ear:

"I love thee more than all the world beside,
My only faith and hope thou art,
My God, my country, and my bride
Sole love of this unchanging heart!"

Very bad poetry, but deliciously thrilling to his young betrothed. Oh, the dear, dear days! Oh, the long hours that pass like a flash in delightful talk, the secrets that the soul first reveals to itself in revealing them to the beloved, the caresses longed for and yet half feared, the lovers' quarrels, the tears that are kissed away, the shynesses, the simplicity, the abandonment of a pure and passionate love who may hope to know you twice in a lifetime?

No, Signora Evelina can never restore what he has lost to Signor Odoardo. No, this self-possessed widow, who, after six months of mourning, has already started on the hunt for a second husband, cannot inspire him with the faith that he felt in THE OTHER. Ah, first-loved women, why is it that you must die? For the dead give no kisses, no caresses, and the living long to be caressed and kissed.

Who talks of kisses? Here is one that has alit, all soft and warm, on Signor Odoardo's lips, rousing him with a

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start. Ah!...Is it you, Doretta? It is Doretta, who says nothing, but who is longing to make it up with her daddy. She lays her cheek against his, he presses her little head close, lest she should escape from him. He too is silent what can he say to her?

It is growing dark, and the eyes of the cat Melanio begin to glitter in the corner by the stove. The man-servant knocks and asks if he is to bring the lamp.

"Make up the fire first," Signor Odoardo says.

The wood crackles and snaps, and sends up showers of sparks; then it bursts into flame, blazing away with a regular, monotonous sound, like the breath of a sleeping giant. In the dusk the firelight flashes upon the walls, brings out the pattern of the wall-paper, and travels far enough to illuminate a corner of the desk. The shadows lengthen and then shorten again, thicken and then shrink; everything in the room seems to be continually changing its size and shape. Signor Odoardo, giving free rein to his thoughts, evokes the vision of his married life, sees the baby's cradle, recalls her first cries and smiles, feels again his dying wife's last kiss, and hears the last word upon her lips, DORETTA. No, no, it is impossible that he should ever do anything to make his Doretta unhappy! And yet he is not sure of resisting Signora Evelina's wiles; he is almost afraid that, when he sees his enchantress on the morrow, all his strong resolves may take flight. There is but one way out of it.

"Doretta," says Signor Odoardo.

"Father?"

"Are you going to copy out your letter to your grandmamma this evening?"

"Yes, father."

"Wouldn't you rather go and see your grandmamma yourself?"

"With whom?" the child falters anxiously, her little heart beating a frantic tattoo as she awaits his answer.

"With me, Doretta."

"With YOU, daddy?" she exclaims, hardly daring to believe her ears.

"Yes, with me; with your daddy."

"Oh, daddy, DADDY!" she cries, her little arms about his neck, her kisses covering his face. "Oh, daddy, my own dear daddy! When shall we start?"

"To-morrow morning, if you're not afraid of the snow."

"Why not now? Why not at once?"

"Gently gently. Good Lord, doesn't the child want her dinner first?"

And Signor Odoardo, gently detaching himself from his daughter's embrace, rises and rings for the lamp. Then, instinctively, he glances once more towards the window. In the opposite house all is dark, and Signora Evelina's profile is no longer outlined against the pane. The weather is still threatening, and now and then a snowflake falls. The servant closes the shutters and draws the curtains, so that no profane gaze may penetrate

into the domestic sanctuary.

"We had better dine in here," Signor Odoardo says. "The dining-room must be as cold as Greenland."

Doretta, meanwhile, is convulsing the kitchen with the noisy announcement of the impending journey. At first she is thought to be joking, but when she establishes the fact that she is speaking seriously, it is respectfully pointed out to her that the master of the house must be crazy. To start on a journey in the depth of winter, and in such weather! If at least they were to wait for a fine day!

But what does Doretta care for the comments of the kitchen? She is beside herself with joy. She sings, she dances about the room, and breaks off every moment or two to give her father a kiss. Then she pours out the fulness of her emotion upon the cat Melanio and the doll Nini, promising the latter to bring her back a new frock from Milan.

At dinner she eats little and talks incessantly of the journey, asking again and again what time it is, and at what time they are to start.

"Are you afraid of missing the train?" Signor Odoardo asks with a smile.

And yet, though he dissembles his impatience, it is as great as hers. He longs to go away, far away. Perhaps he may not return until spring. He orders his luggage packed for an absence of two months.

Doretta goes to bed early, but all night long she tosses about under the bed-clothes, waking her nurse twenty times to ask: "Is it time to get up?"

Signor Odoardo, too, is awake when the man-servant comes to call him the next morning at six o'clock.

"What sort of a day is it?"

"Very bad, sir just such another as yesterday. In fact, if I might make the suggestion, sir, if it's not necessary for you to start to-day "

"It is, Angelo. Absolutely necessary."

At the station there are only a few sleepy, depressed-looking travellers wrapped in furs. They are all grumbling about the weather, about the cold, about the earliness of the hour, and declaring that nothing but the most urgent business would have got them out of bed at that time of day. There is but one person in the station who is all liveliness and smiles Doretta.

The first-class compartment in which Signor Odoardo and his daughter find themselves is bitterly cold, in spite of foot-warmers, but Doretta finds the temperature delicious, and, if she dared, would open the windows for the pleasure of looking out.

"Are you happy, Doretta?"

"Oh, SO happy!"

Ten years earlier, on a pleasanter day, but also in winter, Signor Odoardo had started on his wedding-journey. Opposite him had sat a young girl, who looked as much like Doretta as a woman can look like a child; a pretty, sedate young girl, oh, so sweetly, tenderly in love with Signor Odoardo. And as the train started he had asked her the same question:

"Are you happy, Maria?"

And she had answered:

"Oh, so happy!" just like Doretta.

The train races and flies. Farewell, farewell, for ever, Signora Evelina.

And did Signora Evelina die of despair?

Oh, no; Signora Evelina has a perfect disposition and a delightful home. The perfect disposition enables her not to take things too seriously, the delightful home affords her a thousand distractions. Its windows do not all look towards Signor Odoardo's residence. One of them, for example, commands a little garden belonging to a worthy bachelor who smokes his pipe there on pleasant days. Signora Evelina finds the worthy bachelor to her taste, and the worthy bachelor, who is an average-adjuster by profession, admires Signora Evelina's eyes, and considers her handsomely and solidly enough put together to rank A No. 1 on Lloyd's registers.

The result is that the bachelor now and then looks up at the window, and the Signora Evelina now and then looks down at the garden. The weather not being propitious to out-of-door conversation, Signora Evelina at length invites her neighbor to come and pay her a visit. Her neighbor hesitates and she renews the invitation. How can one resist such a charming woman? And what does one visit signify? Nothing at all. The excellent average-adjuster has every reason to be pleased with his reception, the more so as Signora Evelina actually gives him leave to bring his pipe the next time he comes. She adores the smell of a pipe. Signora Evelina is an ideal woman, just the wife for a business man who had not positively made up his mind to remain single. And as to that, muses the average-adjuster, have I ever positively made up my mind to remain single, and if I have, who is to prevent my changing it?

And so it comes to pass that when, after an absence of three months, Signor Odoardo returns home with Doretta, he receives notice of the approaching marriage of Signora Evelina Chiocci, widow Ramboldi, with Signor Archimede Fagiuolo.

"Fagiuolo!" shouts Doretta, "FAGIUOLO!" [Footnote: Fagiuolo: a simpleton.]

The name seems to excite her unbounded hilarity; but I am under the impression that the real cause of her merriment is not so much Signora Evelina's husband as Signora Evelina's marriage.